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(Front cover)  
Yvonne Thomas,  
*To the Forest* (1960),  
oil on linen, 45" x 38".  
Courtesy Berry Campbell  
Gallery, New York.

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During this unprecedented time of a worldwide pandemic, the editors of *Woman's Art Journal* join with our writers to acknowledge the role of visual artists. Those who create fill our lives with hope for the future and preserve the beauty of our world. Women artists, like those featured here, give expression to a range of experiences and emotions shared by all mankind.

We are delighted to present the paintings of Yvonne Thomas (1913–2009), an artist who was active during the early recognition of Abstract Expressionism and continued her career into the twenty-first century. Thomas studied at the famed Subjects of the Artists in New York City and with Hans Hofmann in Provincetown. She attended events at The Club and participated in many group exhibitions at the Stable Gallery during the 1950s. Like the majority of women associated with Abstract Expressionism, she learned that the movement was defined in terms of the Modern Man after 1960. Although women artists were often excluded from Abstract-Expressionist exhibitions at the time, Thomas continued her creation of stunning abstract paintings.

Vittorio Colaizzi weaves a commentary of Yvonne Thomas's decades of artistic production and documents the critical response to her paintings and works on paper. Her art continues to excite collectors and curators, including a recent acquisition by the National Gallery of Art. Prof. Colaizzi writes about our cover image, Thomas's 1960 painting, *To the Forest*: "[G]estural passages in blue, rust, and green begin to atomize into patient hatchings, giving a sense of the rhythmic approach to come. Attention to this aspect can begin to give a truer sense of how art history progresses, not in the sense of advancement towards a goal, but in the sense that changes occur gradually through problems emerging and being dealt with in the studio."

Much has been written about the art of Eva Hesse (1936–70). The study presented here holds special importance for its approach to her 1966 *Laocoon*, using the methods of classical reception theory. Authors Alison Poe, a specialist on classical antiquity, and Aliza Edelman, an expert on modern and contemporary art, document Hesse's visit to the renowned *Laocoön* in the Vatican Museum, as well as her study of the ancient world, and that work in particular, with art historians at Yale University. Exploring both Hesse's related sketches as well as her monumental *Laocoon*, fashioned from plastic tubing, rope, and wire, the authors observe: "Under the rubric *Laocoonism*, Eva Hesse found a way to mitigate the pain imbued in the sculpture from classical antiquity, visualized and redirected through subsequent male histories on the "suffering male prototype" by feminizing it, thereby resisting a heroic masculinity to communicate with her contemporaries and problematizing her position as a women artist in the 1960s."

Those of us attending the opening of *The Dinner Party* at the Brooklyn Museum in 1980, remember the crowds and the comments. Judy Chicago (b. 1939) had introduced her feminist imagery throughout the US, with visits to college campuses, appearances before women's organizations, and articles in feminist publications. Sally Brown Deskins describes Chicago's elaborate preparations to "curate" *The Dinner Party*, her signature installation, which was replete with a complex

history of great women of the past and a nod to the multitude of volunteers who brought her vision to fruition. The dramatic installation was meant to be as effective as a theatrical performance (as well as self-promotional). Now on permanent display at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, this work remains a prime example of how women artists can take the lead in curating exhibitions of their work. As Chicago wrote to Deskins, "In the 1970s it became clear to me that there was no context for female-centered art, at least not yet. As a result, I began to experiment with installation of my exhibitions, writing on the walls, controlling the color and lighting. It wasn't something I wanted to do but rather, something that I felt compelled to do in order to help viewers understand my intentions as any artist."

Then and now, the installation and accompanying banners and documentation demonstrate the confidence and tenacity women need to promote their work and career. Deskins is hopeful that "strategies and feminist innovations outlined here might be integrated into contemporary feminist curatorial discourse and practice."

A century earlier, Tina Blau (1845–1916) set a remarkable precedent for women artists with her own confidence and tenacity. She was a plein-air painter in Austria, at a time when long, heavy skirts, bulky hats, and other attire impeded women's exploration of the great outdoors. Blau endured rejection by her male contemporaries at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, but, nonetheless, persevered to become a well-regarded plein-air painter. Her achievements remind us that there were many women artists who sought subjects beyond the home and the studio, who grasped the subject of everyday life. Using a converted baby carriage to ferry her canvases to the outdoor settings she preferred, Blau acknowledged her attraction to the Dutch Masters but updated their images with her frank depictions of late-nineteenth-century realities, including laborers and burgeoning industrialization. Author Julie Johnson writes that "Blau cultivate[d] ... the solid, layered, experienced hand of the old master, imposing architectonic clarity onto her encounter with modernity and the changing boundaries between urbanization and the natural world."

Our book editor (also article author) Aliza Edelman has again brought together an impressive array of reviews, a dozen in all. Among them are recent exhibition catalogues documenting shows of works by the intrepid multimedia artist Martha Rosler (b. 1943), the fascinating transcendentalist painter Agnes Pelton (1881–1961), the Harlem Renaissance sculptor Augusta Savage (1892–1962), and under-represented Indigenous North American Native women artists. Two books on women of the Bauhaus, celebrating its centennial, are reviewed, as well as two books on artists reacting to sexual assault with performance and other forms of art.

As *WAJ* begins its fifth decade, we would like to thank Ian Mellanby, Guy Griffiths, and everyone at Old City Publishing, and Rutgers University for their years of support of the journal.

Joan Marter and Margaret Barlow  
Editors, *Woman's Art Journal*

# YVONNE THOMAS

## THE “SINGLENESS OF THE POETRY”

By Vittorio Colaizzi

Writing in 1981 of paintings made between 1955 and 1962, critic Theodore F. Wolff claimed that the work of Abstract Expressionist painter Yvonne Thomas (1913–2009) “reminds us that good painting is good painting regardless of the form it takes.”<sup>1</sup> Wolff’s assertion must make the sober and disinterested scholar a little queasy, but it is typical, if somewhat strident, of criticism of Thomas’s work, in that it combines an appeal to quality with an acknowledgement of historical contingency. In this way it demonstrates the problem that Thomas’s work poses for educated viewers. Criticism of the last half century has tended to homogenize and dismiss gestural abstraction as an embodiment of inadvisably idealistic values, and as a foil to or baseline for the performative, sculptural, or photographic work that repudiated or grew from this kind of painting—consider for example the work of Carolee Schneemann (1939–2019). While painting itself currently enjoys wide and varied manifestations, and claims about Thomas’s sheer quality proliferate, a certain familiar aspect to her abstraction, as is evident in *Summer Fantasy* (1954; Pl. 1), was noticed in published criticism as early as 1956. This did not prevent Dore Ashton from attributing to her “genuinely fresh insights,” nor Donald Judd from excepting her from his near-universal condemnation of gestural abstraction with a positive review in 1960.<sup>2</sup>

Born Yvonne Navello in Nice, France, in 1913, she moved to Boston with her family in 1926. She showed an interest and aptitude for art from an early age, and following studies at the Cooper Union began a career in commercial art in the 1930s. She married Leonard Thomas in 1938 (they lived in Newport, Rhode Island, during the war), and maintained close ties with the New York art world throughout her life (Fig. 1). She attended the Art Students League in 1940, and studied with Vaclav Vytacil. She also had private lessons with Dimitri Romanovsky (a Russian artist specializing in nudes and portraiture), and attended the Ozenfant School of Art.

Nearly every published account of Thomas’s work mentions her participation in the innovative and short-lived painting workshop entitled “The Subjects of the Artists,” which ran from 1948 to 1949 and was initiated but abandoned by Clyfford Still and taken up by Mark Rothko, Robert Motherwell, William Baziotis, and David Hare. Barnett Newman joined in the second year. These sessions were an avenue for the five burgeoning Abstract Expressionists to share with an equal number of interested students, Thomas among them, their incipient methods of free painting, bidden by one’s



Fig.1. Yvonne Thomas (c. 1942). Photographer unknown. Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

inclinations in the face of the materials and presumably conditioned by the subconscious mind. Ten years later and throughout her life, this sense of freedom remained in her paintings and works on paper, as a small but expansive gouache shows (Fig. 2; 1959). The aim, as Robert Hobbs and Barbara Cavaliere have shown in their landmark 1977 article, “Against a Newer Laocoon,” was to allow a less literary, less illustrative surrealism to take root.<sup>3</sup>

In 1950 she enrolled in one of Hans Hofmann’s summer classes, and in the next decade was included in group exhibitions of artists identified with Abstract Expressionism, including those at New York’s Stable Gallery, from 1953 to 1957. The—only relative—belatedness with which Thomas came to Abstract Expressionism, the stylistic variety she pursued, and the nuanced and revealing critical account that exists, together resonate with contemporary concerns about painting’s viability that are rooted in midcentury abstraction and its reception.

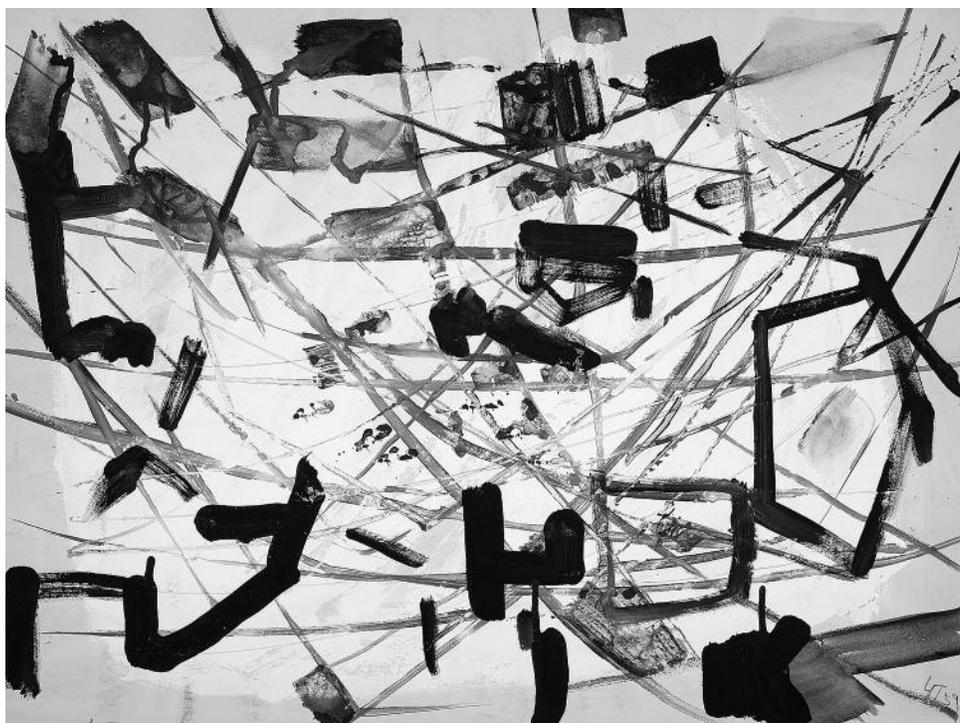


Fig. 2. Yvonne Thomas, *Untitled* (1959), gouache on paper, 18" x 24". Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

The linear paradigm, whereby styles are expected to retire and dissipate forever as they are replaced by new ones, persists among critics. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's famous position on Gerhard Richter's abstract paintings of the 1980s is that the German painter outwardly presents an appearance of "second-rate and third-generation Abstract-Expressionist painting," thus demonstrating the "dilemma of a latecomer and virtuoso simultaneously: to have mastered a craft and a skill at a moment in history when the practices of meaning production have already moved on to other necessities ... " More recently, David Geers castigated painters for "repealing established taboos" by indulging in modernist visual languages, and critic and historian Isabelle Graw has expressed a predilection for "inauthentic gestures, make-believe, index-effects and pretentious poses ... ," taking a position in favor of "painting that repudiates its supposed essence [instead of] one that keeps within its allotted boundaries and has unbroken faith in itself."<sup>4</sup> However, such stark and unbending polarities do not reflect the reality of working artists. The practices of Howardena Pindell (b. 1943) and Louise Fishman (b. 1939) among many others show that once established, a given style remains fertile and adaptable to individual voices.

Although recent exhibitions have privileged her work of the 1950s and early 1960s, Thomas lived a long and productive life as a painter and explored many idioms, all resulting from her drive to accentuate color and its judicious placement. After her auspicious beginnings, Thomas painted her way through hard-edged yet organic and monumental ribbon-like forms in the late 1960s, followed by a series of slightly more geometric tondos. In the 1970s came a curious series of folded

paper constructions adorned with gentle pastel color that enhanced both their rigor and whimsy. In the late 1980s she returned, with her *Vistas* series, to a kind of controlled gesturalism that is held in a diamond-like emblematic stasis, and from 1999 through 2003 she produced a series of abstract landscapes that are as assured and inventive as the revitalized abstraction being made today.

Thomas's paintings of the 1950s are difficult to summarize; as she herself pointed out, they lack a single image in the manner of Rothko,<sup>5</sup> but works such as *Highway* (1957; Pl. 2) are usually graced with an energetic but somehow architectonic surface. Loose but deft strokes traverse the space and begin to define geometric figures that emphatically face the plane. These shapes are just as likely to dissolve into a flurry of marks that suggests rather than clearly states an underlying structure. An almost

impressionistic light suffuses the paintings, as bits of ground sometimes peek through saturated and sometimes lurid tube colors alongside mellow neutral mixtures of grey, green, and brown. When describing any kind of gestural painting, viewers often fall back on references to Willem De Kooning, as did Roberta Smith in 2019 when she called Thomas's work "a de Kooning-infused form of Abstract Expressionism, albeit sensitive in its paint-handling and palette."<sup>6</sup> However, as Thomas's *Early Morning* (1956; Pl. 3) shows, she established an independent touch. For while De Kooning fused academic anatomical studies with the biomorphic surrealism of Miro and 1930s Picasso, Thomas conducts a performative encounter with the plane and the material while remaining closer to cubist roots and executing a more abrupt gesture with the occasional emphatic scrub. She reports that De Kooning himself told her that her works had a "geometric thinking foundation."<sup>7</sup> Certainly this foundation also appears in *Collage* (Fig. 3; 1959), one of many in which the exuberant gesture of tearing is underpinned by a tendency towards firm orientation to the picture plane's framing edges.

As noted, Thomas was no novice but already an expert painter and the veteran of an abandoned career in commercial illustration when she entered the Subjects of the Artists School. She had painted seascapes and portraits, studied modernism with George Grosz and Amédée Ozenfant, and painted, as she called them "fake Braques and Picassos."<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it must have been a great act of courage to adopt the automatist methods espoused at the school, even though she claims that she "became alive [and] felt wonderfully at home in that ambiance."<sup>9</sup> Given that the art of painting consists of subtle knowledge of an array of tools, substances, and properties

accumulated through experience, such a drastic change in motor habits required by the action-painting technique (*avant la lettre*, as Harold Rosenberg's article was published in 1952) could only come about through confidence, which was in Thomas's case backed up by a reserve of skill. Encouraged by Motherwell, with whom she continued studying in 1949 and whose influence she recounts as "more of a spirit,"<sup>10</sup> as well as the others, she struck out into an unknown realm but was already thoroughly grounded in the discipline of painting.

Lawrence Campbell observed as much in 1956, when he wrote, "She is a painter with much technical equipment and although some of it has been thrown overboard in a search for immediacy, it is not really lost. It still shows in tasteful glazes and transparencies, and in her whites which are like veils settling gently upon the canvas."<sup>11</sup> Such veils appear in *Untitled* (1954; Pl. 4). Similarly, reviewing a 1981 show of Thomas's works from 1955 to 1962, Margaret Sheffield noted an assured cubist structure guiding painterly improvisations and a variety of carefully deployed painterly techniques that convinced her that Thomas "knows how to construct a painting" without "dim[ming] the emotional impact of her works."<sup>12</sup> Thomas has recalled working on glazes under Ozenfant "like old masters," and that the atmosphere of his school was "clinical" and "stilted," but "inventive." Regarding her traditionalist training, she has also reflected, "Now with time, I can say that I believe it was good; Knowledge and discipline better to discard than [*sic*] not to know and old rules are indispensable."<sup>13</sup>

In his book *Techne Theory*, Henry Staten advocates a consideration of painting and other arts from the point of view of the practitioners. As he puts it, "The trick for the viewer is to see what the artisan sees when looking at a conjuncture of techne-forces—to see, for example, what Picasso saw when he looked at the techniques of his early Cubist works and worked out from them to the techniques of his later work. The already existing work is a set of structures that represent actualized potentialities of the techne, and which contain, for the eye or ear or hand of the skilled artisan, potentialities, *dynameis*, for new structures."<sup>14</sup> If the reader substitutes abstraction or even Minimalism for realism in the following passage from Staten, it becomes apparent how each of Thomas's paintings functions as developments in her technical exploration of painting that began even before her encounter with *Subjects of the Artists*, but which continued and intensified throughout her career: "A painting, no matter how much it is a depiction of something, even to the point of the most precise realism, is also at the same time a movement of that painter's work ... , and at the same time as it does this within the individual painter's work, it does it also at the level of the techne as a collective, historical unfolding."<sup>15</sup>

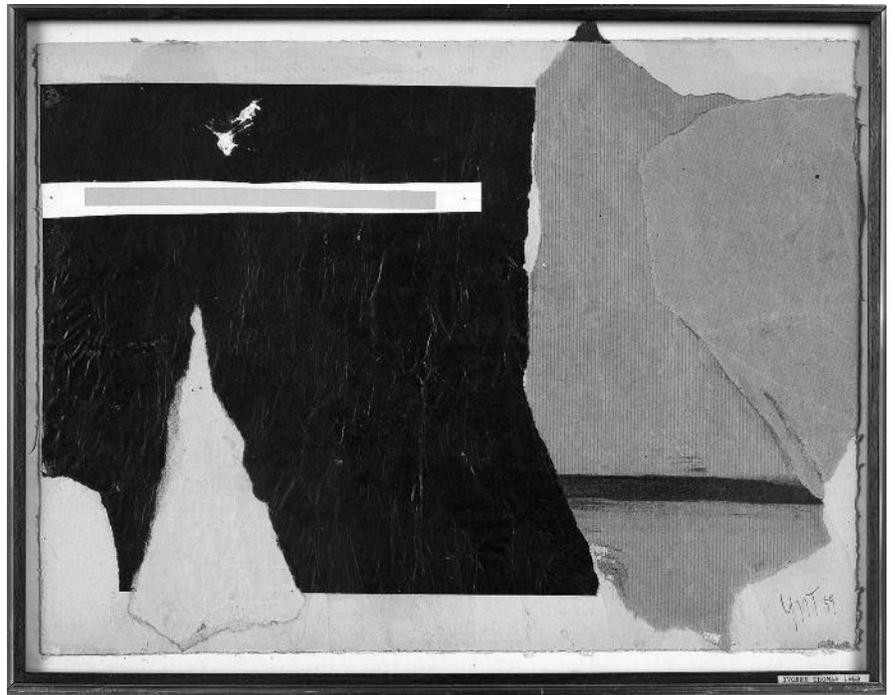


Fig. 3. Yvonne Thomas, *Collage* (1959), collage, 11 3/4" x 15 3/4". Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

In this way, new work emerges from the act of making in thoughtful consideration of the technical challenges proposed by recent work, but it does so according to a different temporal scale from the flippant descriptions of some critics. As J. Bowyer Bell wrote of Thomas and her milieu: "Those who belonged to the second generation of Abstract Expressionism enjoyed a short but intense half-life, dominating the New York scene, the art world, for a decade from 1950 to 1960, and then they disappeared, if not without a trace, certainly with dispatch."<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, Thomas's account of her own change of the early 1960s, visible, among other paintings, in *Blue Star* (1963; Fig. 4), shows its occurrence at the technical level, as she describes tools and methods that are inextricable from the emotional tenor of the work: "In Abstract Expressionism the brush practically becomes a continuation of one's nervous system; the feeling of being one with the painting. Now a new distance is created, having the work on the floor, so the paint will not drip .... The accident becomes less important. Calligraphic symbols, existing in the former paintings, isolated and intensified in color become the subject."<sup>17</sup>

Before she made these changes, however, Thomas produced a large body of more orthodox but, as critics have noted, accomplished Abstract Expressionist works. Thomas credits Hans Hofmann, with whom she studied briefly in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1950, with giving her an awareness of the plane. "A new understanding about the surface of the painting is made clear and very exciting." Hofmann's tutelage also gave her "the courage to assert my overwhelming feeling for color, structuring new



Fig. 4. Yvonne Thomas, *Blue Star* (1963), oil on linen, 20" x 24". Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

form in expressing nature and inner experiences."<sup>18</sup> Painted just two years after her summer with Hofmann, *Summer Day* (1952; Pl. 5) exhibits these qualities, as loosened and pitched quadrangles seem infused with sunlight. Similarly, another *Collage* (1959; Fig. 5) sets blazing yellow against muted violet in a frank declaration of the plane.

Her experience in the Subjects of the Artists School was primarily one of technique, albeit one infused with meaningfulness, inextricable from other aspects of life. She described her time there as one of "[f]resh genuinely felt plastic experience [that] revealed a conduit of emotions for me. Emotions I had not experienced before."<sup>19</sup> This plasticity, that of the brush freed from objects, liberated her, instilling "very deep transformation" and "a constant inner smile."<sup>20</sup> Although Thomas recalled Motherwell claiming, "The more intense the feeling, only formal relations can express it," their encounters evidently were anything but "formalist," as they involved "lively discussions in all aspects of life, from the Montauk Highway, to divorce, to Marilyn Monroe."<sup>21</sup>

Motherwell has also emphasized technical processes in principle as he reflected upon the 1940s and his mission, in collaboration with Bazziotes, of sharing the idea of automatism among artists. "[W]hat was needed was a creative principle. It is never enough to learn merely from pictures.... The essential thing was to let the brush take its head and take whatever we could use from the results."<sup>22</sup> While this seems to be the very opposite of craft, it is crucially a method that is tied into engagement with the medium's tools. Such a method of course will guarantee nothing. It is the application of judicious

restraint, editing, sensitive modulation of one's tool during the painting process, and careful if rapid choices as to color and value that can lead to the sensations of light, air, and energy that Thomas's critics report. Thomas's own educational background and innate skill allowed her to mold this method into a deft repertoire of picture-making. As critic Nike Hale saw: "[Y]ou feel the controlled discipline of a formal training. Her planes of color are not splashed across the canvas in random indifference. They grow together to sustain the sense of a central presence,"<sup>23</sup> as in, for example, *The Game* (1960; Pl. 6). Hale finds geometric structure with intimations of landscape, and restless but not frenetic energy in Thomas's work. Utilizing terms such as "risk," "intimacy," and "freedom," Hale does not dismiss as mannerisms or clichés the possible meanings of Abstract Expressionist marks.

As indicated with regard to Wolff above, criticism of Yvonne Thomas often reflects an anxiety, almost a guilt, or else a sense of vindication over the pleasure to be obtained from her work amid

concerns over the codes of reproduction, interpretation, and construal that have been prominent in art since the 1980s. In a review from 1986 that hums with unspoken equivocation, Gerrit Henry extolls the "rich and ripe" colors that "stop a writer in his tracks" and "beggar description." He praises Thomas's commitment and champions the allegorical lessons one can glean from commitment, revision, flexibility, sensitivity, etc.; but the occasional "last" or "these days" places the artist in the historical critical context of Pictures, Neo-Geo, and other hyper-conscious idioms that thrived in the 1980s.<sup>24</sup>

Robert C. Morgan, writing in 2000, subtly but unmistakably places her work in relation to the pressure on abstract painting to locate itself amid a field of references, noting appreciatively, "When I view these paintings, I don't have to chase after referents." He writes perceptively about the subtle skill Thomas displays: "It is not so easy to discover form through gesture. Color is not an effect in these paintings, but a necessary, incalculable ingredient—a quality that must sing and offer proper tension in order for the painting to pull together."<sup>25</sup> In this, he echoes the observations of other critics, that a sense of structure is suggested, not explicated, but nevertheless palpable, through her active brushwork.

Morgan continues, "The paintings don't try to be anything more than what they are, namely, damn good painting (to appropriate a phrase from the Cedar bar)." Contrasting sharply with Barnett Newman's ambition of a "self-evident [image] of revelation, real and concrete, that can be understood by anyone who will look at it without the nostalgic glasses of history,"<sup>26</sup> the phrase "damn good painting" seems to be an

abdication of ambition. It is instead an audacious reworking of the terms, as Thomas, like most dedicated artists, immersed herself in the pressures and problems of making satisfying work, rather than fretting over historical priority. Still, revolutionary fervor ebbs and flows, and the phrase “damn good painting” entails a more-than-implicit recognition of the traditional values still to be found in the radical re-structuring of painting. One can hardly imagine Motherwell and Bazziotes, in the proselytizing missions described by Hobbs and Cavaliere of drumming up support for automatism as a path to atavistic yet urgently relevant truths in a society ravaged by war and depression, calling for “damn good painting.”

Helen Molesworth has shown how the manipulation of quality and skill are effective tools in feminist artistic practice and art history in a study of pioneering feminist artists of subsequent generations to Thomas: Mary Heilmann (b. 1940), Joan Snyder (b. 1940), and Howardena Pindell deliberately undercut what had counted as good painting in order to claim a space for themselves.<sup>27</sup> Yvonne Thomas, on the other hand, enjoyed the privilege of sanction from the apex of the avant-garde, although it must be recalled they had not yet been canonized when she took the leap with them into a new form of painting. So while Molesworth rightly credits Pindell, Heilmann, and others for activating the question of what counts as a good painting, Thomas relies on her expertise of touch, color, and scale. As the diminutive but energetic *Memory* (1960; Pl. 7) shows, she fully integrated the Abstract Expressionist ethos of attributing constructive, rather than cosmetic importance to each mark. She makes Abstract Expressionism into a traditional art that convinces with its constructive abruptness, demanding a re-evaluation of the tenacious criteria of innovation.

Despite his own uncompromising work, Donald Judd in his criticism had little patience for the notion of irrevocable stylistic sequences, stating, “A realistic history would not be a linear one of form, although that enters in.”<sup>28</sup> After complaining that Thomas’s paintings are “placed too neatly in the New York style and verge on being a compendium of its more adaptable techniques,” he quickly notes that she “implements a personal, fresh, clear and uncomplicated lyricism . . .”<sup>29</sup> Within the corpus of critical literature on Yvonne Thomas, his praise is unremarkable, but a glance at Judd’s writing shows that he is not easily impressed. Of Richards Ruben he writes, “This is good, solid, honest painting, all of which are condemnatory adjectives.”<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, he scrupulously and repeatedly denied a universal and linear condition that mandated this or any style’s exhaustion. “The general declaration that Abstract Expressionism, and loose painting generally, is dead is presumptuous. It seems so now with so much poor work around, but history, while it does move, does not move that fast. Anyway, that history is a consensus, an abstraction.”<sup>31</sup>

Turning to Thomas’s paintings, Judd observed, “Wide brush-strokes and sweeps of color glissade to the plane of the bare canvas. The paint and canvas are identified with one another, continued into each other, and the consequent speed and thinness of the surface engender the clarity and singleness

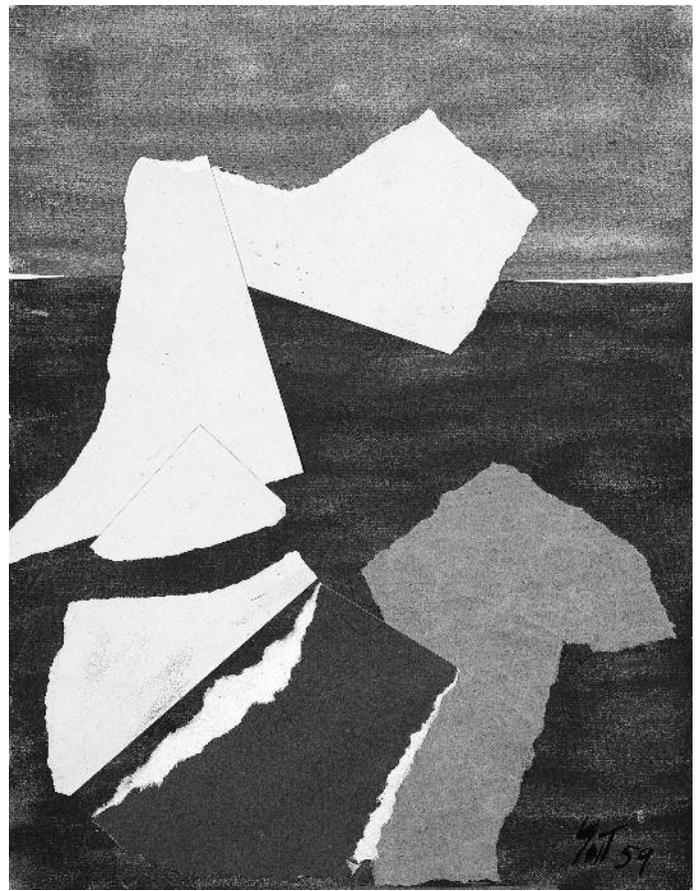


Fig. 5. Yvonne Thomas, *Collage* (1959), collage, 12 1/4" x 9 1/4".  
Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

of the poetry.” He also described a passage where “wet green and tan scud across the surface and coalesce into crumpled triangles.” His scrutiny of her surface treatment is notable and seems to be a direct response to her technique. For other painters he did not linger quite as much, calling Michael Goldberg’s texture “somewhat interesting,” Hofmann’s touch “glib,” and Jack Tworkov’s work “rather freely and freshly painted” but still “rudimentary.” After condemning Stephen Pace’s “patches” for “just float[ing] about sluggishly,” Judd went on to pine for “good expressionist painting,” adding “The debacle is a sad thing.”<sup>32</sup>

Judd’s words are worth parsing because in this brief text, two relatively distinct sets of aesthetic generations meet and find common ground. “Glissade” is a particularly metaphorical term, as it describes a dancer sliding across the stage or a skier gliding sideways down a hill. Applied to painting, it suggests skillful speed and grace and a reserve of embodied knowledge that does not often figure in critical discussions concerned with historical sequences of styles. Judd’s critique is on the level of *techne*. The curious phrase “singleness of the poetry” seems to valorize the quality of ambiguity, but ambiguity within specific parameters—that of paint’s properties deliberately handled. He then re-emphasizes this speed and thinness with another declaration:

"This is the distinctive aspect." He doubles down on this point because, as much of the rest of his criticism shows, without some distinctive aspect, an artist's merit is very much in doubt. And in Thomas's case, because of the "inescapable criticism" of being "placed too neatly in the New York style," this distinctive aspect, the singleness of the poetry, the definitiveness of the composition and the commitment and clarity of the color and mark, may be missed.

As a contrasting example, Judd wrote of George McNeil's paintings, "Nothing in it is devised to produce a particular quality. A generalized strength is not sufficient. The most inclusive complaint is that McNeil has mixed Abstract Expressionism and pictured space. The frontality usual to Expressionistic work is consequently too inexact to be particular. The color is brightened naturalistic color, which is always indefinite in meaning. The brushwork is equally Expressionistic and conventional."<sup>33</sup>

"[T]oo inexact to be particular" seems to be a tautological complaint but is indicative of Judd's criteria—particularity, which he finds in Thomas; a commitment to decisions of stroke, composition, placement, scale, color, even perhaps speed, as in the implied speed of the application. Judd finds this elsewhere lacking. If "naturalistic color" is "always indefinite in meaning," then "meaning" to Judd seems not to reside in a symbolic system but rather an intensity that is itself meaningful because of and through its uncompromising nature.

Thomas also not only finds meaningfulness in formal qualities but sees them continuing into one another. She once explained: "For me, color expresses space, structure, form, intent ... also passion, mystery, and tension."<sup>34</sup> This continuity of what is commonly separated into form and content appears in Judd's later comment on Barnett Newman's *Shining Forth (To George)* (1961), where, according to Judd, "The marks along the white stripe are even more intimately on the canvas than the black stripes."<sup>35</sup> While this might be reduced to a technical concern, a matter of the difference between a crisp thin column and the continuity of the feathery strokes leading up to the remainder of removed tape, Judd finds the human feeling of intimacy in these differences.

While in 1944, Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb (and perhaps to a lesser extent Newman, who was struggling with his biomorphic watercolors and pastel drawings) asserted the presence of subject matter because it was directly evident in their paintings, by the time of the Subjects of the Artists school, it was more of a strategic insistence on their intentions, which were less evident in the work they produced. The need for unfettered and immediate subjects led to formal innovations. While some of Motherwell's writings demonstrate the technical approach that Thomas adopted, one in which freedom is in a way forced upon oneself by painting without a direct referent, Newman's own aesthetic ruminations also shed light on Thomas's mature paintings.

Newman railed against extraneous and aestheticizing embellishments, whether geometric or expressive, and advocated for a direct, and transparently manufactured approach with the material, practicing a certain ethics of mark-

making and pictorial construction. Even as his color could be sumptuous, he was loathe to spend excessive manual refinement upon the surface, and his paintings, drawings, and prints are full of economic moves. Thomas recalls that during the Subjects of the Artists sessions, he "urged us to simplify as much as possible." This did not mean he preached a reductionist style, but rather, as Thomas continued: "Stay on one canvas and [do] not resort to all sorts of different media."<sup>36</sup> This was not long after Newman made a series of austere yet complex drawings with only black ink, and had just painted *Onement I*, reportedly on his birthday in January 1948.

Something of this trust in instinct is visible in works such as *The Valley* (1960; Pl. 8), where Thomas's mastery of touch is evident as she translates Newman's ethics to an almost courtly elaboration of layers without sacrificing the high stakes of each mark as it touches the surface. While she maintained exuberant form, her application was always terse and confident. Perhaps following Newman's advice—and it is notable that she recalled it after all those years—Thomas simplified her approach to a degree of tactility and singularity of stroke that caught Judd's eye amid the overabundance of gestural painting. The criteria are technical, and from this technique comes feeling and content. In *Flight* (1953; Pl. 9), for example, the entire plane is activated according to cubist orthodoxy and the surface suitably agitated as midcentury codes of sincerity demand, but rectangular planes jut out of alignment, proposing and then undercutting a sense of order. The red zigzag in the lower left quadrant further disrupts the relatively serene vista, a serenity that is ultimately poignant in its artificiality as other bits of color interrupt the surprisingly appealing dull yellow tone. The painting reveals itself to be an expert construction of two fleeting and already-cultured states: spontaneity and repose. Thomas could orchestrate an all-over composition and also, as the fifties transitioned into the early sixties, divide the composition into monumental yet dynamic zones that lost none of the energy, seeming, nevertheless, to articulate the arbitrariness or at least conventionality of the action painting idiom while finding continued value in its discoveries and pleasures. *Untitled*, (1956; Pl. 10) contains increasingly definitive outlines that contend with brushy passages, seeming to prefigure the organic yet distinct shapes that would populate her paintings in the late 1960s and recur throughout her life.

On the occasion of a retrospective at the Aspen Art Museum—Aspen, Colorado, is where she spent her summers (Fig. 6)—John Yau linked Thomas's work of the mid-1960s to contemporaneous developments. "Thomas' use of the grid and restricted palette suggests she was fully aware of Minimalist art of the 1960s...." Yau continued, "Thomas' ability to absorb what might be thought of as a Minimalist format ... into a kind of painting we associate with Abstract Expressionism ... forces us to rethink our definitions of each style."<sup>37</sup> Certainly Yau is correct about the value of rethinking styles, but rather than an absorption of Minimalism as if she was perpetually catching up, it seems likely that Thomas, like painters who, in the hopeful words of Judd, would "derive something new from Abstract Expressionism,"<sup>38</sup> followed

through on certain implications of its visual precepts and found it fruitful to emphasize its properties and units of color and form, “isolated and intensified in color” as she put it above. But unlike the Minimalists, Thomas retained a compositional, coloristic, and painterly touch. As Lisa N. Peters put it, “The result is a sense of control, but not rigidity.”<sup>39</sup> She affirmed rather than denied, choosing not to eliminate or radicalize her vision. Certainly the intuitive and intellectual foundations of minimalism also condition her paintings and collages of the mid-1960s, such as *Untitled* (1965; Pl. 11), that consist of separate and patient rows of colored blocks against similarly intense but rewardingly distinct backgrounds. It should be noted that Minimalism is an unfortunate term that all but guarantees misunderstanding because it implies an absolute that can never be achieved, and which is quite foreign to artists’ projects of emphasizing salient elements.

The distinct strokes and squares of the 1960s, as in *Blue Green No. II* (1963; Pl. 12) were preceded by a few small paintings and pastels in which two major rounded squares or squarish ovals, sometimes sporting appendages, encounter one another within an agitated painterly atmosphere. In paintings like *No. 3* (1961; Pl. 13), something elemental seems at work, as if Thomas is attempting to actualize a universal condition in pictorial terms, one of conflict, dialogue, support, or in any case, mutual interaction, perhaps of the picture and viewer, or painter and canvas. This patient exploration of gestural painting’s language that renounces none of its nuanced effects or emotional resonance suggests an alignment with what Achim Hochdörfer has termed in his article of the same name, “A Hidden Reserve.” For Hochdörfer, a host of painters including Joan Mitchell (1925–92) and Joan Snyder who performed analyses of painting’s constituent components, most notably the brushstroke, were unfairly forgotten or consigned to a category of late-expressionism. He sees the key debate of the 1960s as “between literalism and transcendence, painterly substance and optical immateriality, objecthood and art.”<sup>40</sup> While Thomas never leaned hard on raw objecthood, neither did she factionalize towards the transcendent, but remained pragmatic about her ambitions, joys, and self-analysis, telling a reporter in 1962: “My statement is getting simpler. I am narrowing, simplifying. Color is turning from sober, controlled tones to more exuberant ones. The inner symbols and ideas are becoming the subject. I am discovering, as I go along, interest in the periphery of the painting space rather than in the center.”<sup>41</sup>

In keeping with both Staten and Hochdörfer, Thomas made a subject out of the technical problems of putting together a painting. This is acutely visible in *To the Forest* (1960; front cover), where, again, intuitively painted zones, including two audaciously unfinished-seeming pale zones to the left and lower right, incline tantalizingly towards the geometric. In addition, gestural passages in blue, rust, and green begin to atomize into patient hatchings, giving a sense of the rhythmic



Fig. 6. Yvonne Thomas, Aspen studio (c. early 1960s). Photo: Ferenc Berko. Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

approach to come. Attention to this aspect can begin to give a truer sense of how art history progresses, not in the sense of advancement towards a goal, but in the sense that changes occur gradually through problems emerging and being dealt with in the studio. In 1999, Thomas mused, “I don’t think there’s much progress in art. There are changes. One gets skillful, that’s true. It’s many things. Imagination. Intelligence. Memory. The nervous system. There’s so much going on when you do a painting. I suppose as you get older, it seems to me the intellect is stronger than the emotion.”<sup>42</sup>

The claim of “good painting” by itself is untenable. Scholarship cannot count quality as a fixed evidentiary property, but it can conglomerate the consensus of experience among those who report it and enumerate properties of the objects it examines. Richard Shiff suggests that unquantifiable factors of feeling can figure in art historical analyses because they are concrete phenomena that are fully in keeping with and truthful to the objects under study. As Shiff put it, “Rather than cultivating sensitivity to the randomness of sensation, we detect new hierarchies within a semiotics of sensory experience. Questioning ‘red,’ we seek its meaning as symbol, while neglecting to feel the color itself.”<sup>43</sup> Scholarly disinterest prevents one from fawning, but a certain responsibility to one’s object is in order.

Despite an unsavory dismissal of an entire branch of creativity as “pleasant play of nonobjective pattern [made by] women basketweavers,” Newman nevertheless identified a vitality in abstract picture-making that remained at work in Thomas’s paintings: “[A] shape [is] a living thing, a vehicle for an abstract thought-complex, a carrier of the awesome feelings [the artist] felt before the terror of the unknowable.”<sup>44</sup> Yvonne Thomas did not seek terror, the unknowable, or anything so grave as Motherwell’s *Elegies*, but she put into action the Subjects of the Artists ideal of creative adventure. She made the subject over into form, but a form infused with

significance. This was, of course, the point—that abstract form, if it had issued from genuine inquiry, was already full of human feeling. •

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## Notes

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10. Hillary Stunda, "At 86 Thomas is still an 'exceptional artist,'" *Aspen Times* Saturday-Sunday, Oct. 16–17, 1999, 9-B.
11. Lawrence Campbell, "Yvonne Thomas," *Art News* 55, no. 6 (Oct. 1956): 9.
12. Margaret Sheffield, "Yvonne Thomas," *Art in America* 69, no. 8 (Oct. 1981): 142–43.
13. "Like old masters" comes from "Yvonne Thomas: Chronological Biography," a typewritten and scanned document that stops at 1979, p. 3, courtesy Berry Campbell Gallery. The other quotations in this paragraph come from a printed document labeled "Talk at the Studio School, Spring 1996," 1–2, courtesy Thomas McCormick Gallery.
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15. *Ibid.*, 141. I am grateful to Joseph Marioni for drawing my attention to this text.
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# EVA HESSE'S *LAOCOON*

## MITIGATED ANTIQUITY AND SPECTERS IN SPACE

By Alison C. Poe and Aliza Edelman

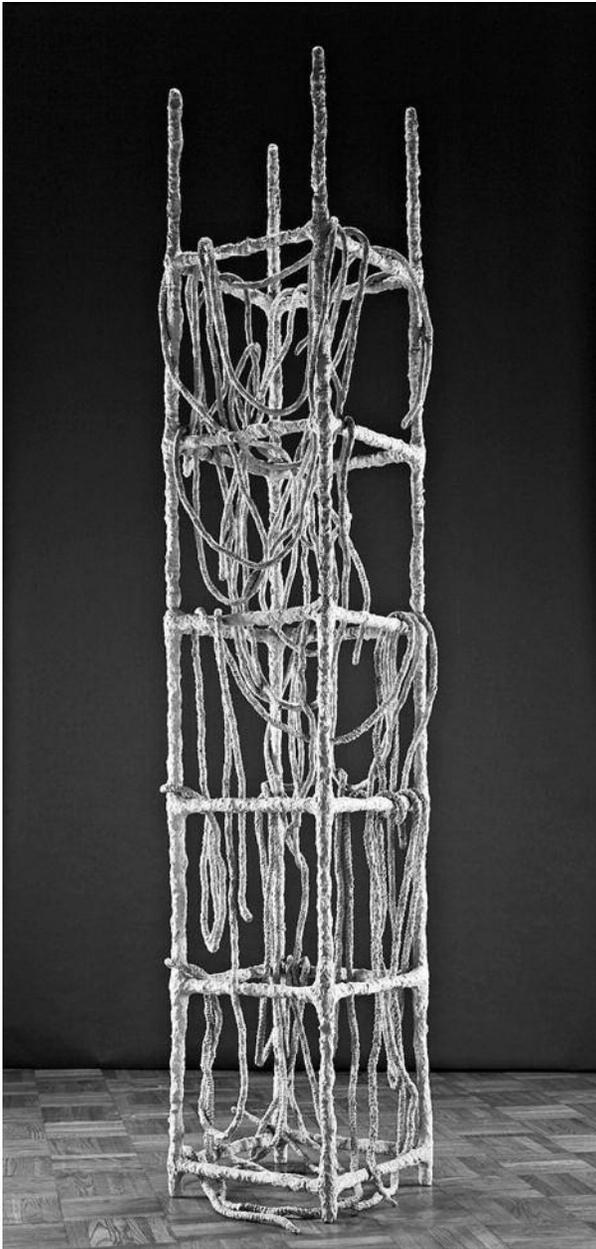


Fig. 1. Eva Hesse, *Laocoon* (1966), plastic tubing, rope, wire, papier-mâché, cloth, and paint, overall 130" x 23 1/4" x 23 1/4", each cube 23 1/4" x 23 1/4" x 23 1/4". Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio; Fund for Contemporary Art, and gift from the artist and Fischbach Gallery, 1970.70.32. © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth.



Fig. 2. Hagesandros, Polydoros, and Athenodoros of Rhodes?, *Laocöon and His Sons* (between c. 40 BCE and c. 70 CE), marble, 6' 10" x 5' x 4" x 3' 8". Cortile Ottagono, Vatican Museums.

Using the relatively new methods of classical reception theory, this study considers the dialogue between Eva Hesse's 1966 *Laocoon* (Fig. 1 and Pl. 14) and its famous namesake, the ancient marble *Laocöon and His Sons* in the Vatican Museums (Fig. 2).<sup>1</sup> The interaction between these two works, we argue, affects the relationship of Hesse's *Laocoon* to a number of her other sculptures and to a work by the German-born Venezuelan artist Gego that was installed in New York three years later. Hesse's *Laocoon*, we argue, reconstitutes the iconic suffering body of Laocöon as a void that conjures the memories or specters not only of the missing marble figures but also of the many men whom Hesse knew to have shaped the long history of the classical *Laocöon* group before 1966. Indexically, moreover, Hesse's work summons a vision of the artist's own body at work on the piece. The *Laocoon* thus embeds Hesse into the previously masculine art-historical pedigree of the ancient *Laocöon* and raises contrasts between Laocöon as tormented victim and Hesse as skillful artist.

Classical reception theory addresses all engagements with ancient Greek and Roman culture since antiquity from the premise that all receptions construct these cultures in new ways. Eva Hesse (1936–1970) had encountered the ancient *Laocöon and His Sons* in

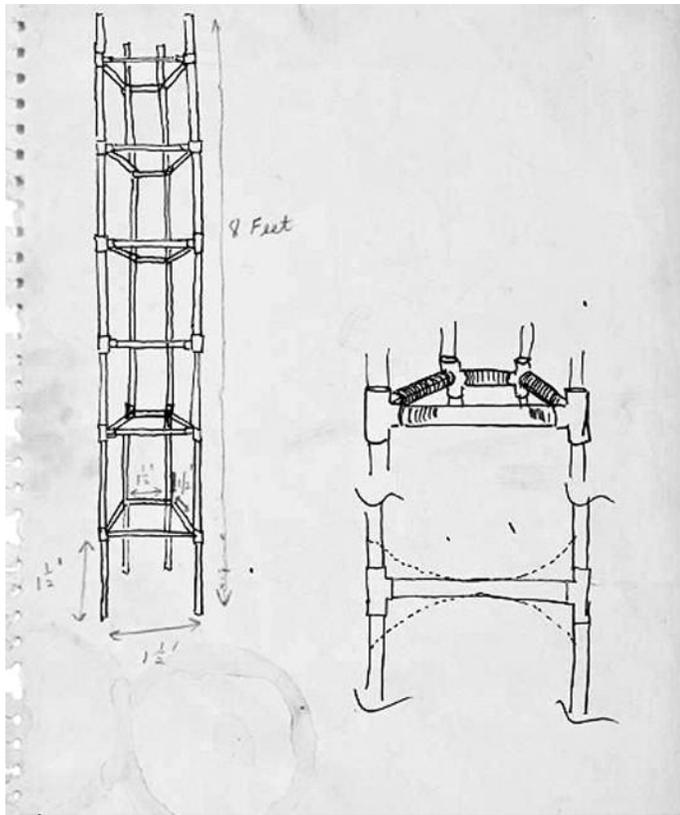


Fig. 3. Eva Hesse, Study for *Laocoon* (1966), pen and ink with graphite, 17" x 8 1/2". Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio, gift of Helen Hesse Charash, 1977.52.1. © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth.

multiple contexts before embarking on her own *Laocoon* in late 1965. The Vatican work is a nearly seven-foot-tall white marble sculpture comprising the powerfully muscular, nude, bearded figure of the legendary Trojan priest Laocoön and the smaller bodies of his two young sons, all straining fruitlessly against two enormous serpents that entwine them atop a draped altar. Both the textbook and Hesse's lecture notes from her 1958–59 course on Greek art at Yale with Vincent Scully mention the *Laocoön*. In the former, distinguished classical art historians J. D. Beazley and Bernard Ashmole identify the sculptors as "Hagesandros, Athanadoros, and Polydoros of Rhodes."<sup>2</sup> They relay that first-century Roman encyclopedist Pliny "ranked [the *Laocoön*] unhesitatingly as the greatest work of art in the world" and praise the sculpture's "unsurpassed technical skill, even when we are asking ourselves what there is besides," noting that the modern viewer feels "detached ... from its horror."<sup>3</sup> In one of his course lectures, according to Hesse's notes, Scully mentioned the *Laocoön*'s "struggle of bodies," "physical pain but not knowledge," and "absol. collapse of body," describing the work as "expressive in the Hellenistic sense."<sup>4</sup> From these male authorities, then, Hesse learned that the *Laocoön* was a major sculpture by three male artists who had evoked profound male physical and emotional suffering, epitomizing a horrific "collapse," albeit in a manner that left some twentieth-century audiences cold.

Hesse likely viewed the *Laocoön* first-hand during her visit to the Vatican Museums on September 19, 1964, where it was (and is) displayed in the prominent Cortile Ottagono.<sup>5</sup> While visiting the Uffizi in Florence later that month, she may have seen Baccio Bandinelli's 1520s copy of the statue.<sup>6</sup> She may also have heard or read—whether in Italy, back at Yale, or sometime else in her studies or career—about some of the other illustrious men strongly associated with the ancient statue: the Roman epic poet Virgil, whose *Aeneid* contains the best-known version of the Laocoön story; Michelangelo, who visited the sculpture's excavation site in Rome in 1506, and whose own oeuvre profoundly reflects its impact; and Pope Julius II, a patron of Michelangelo's, who acquired the work for the Vatican.<sup>7</sup>

Hesse had studied Johann Joachim Winckelmann at Yale and may well have been familiar with his seminal analysis of the *Laocoön*, which lauds the priest figure's nobility and forbearance in suffering.<sup>8</sup> She may have known the famous essay by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing adducing the Vatican sculpture as the basis for a *paragone*, a comparison between two media, in this case between the visual arts and poetry.<sup>9</sup> Lessing's argument that the limitations of sculpture prevent Laocoön from screaming has colored many subsequent receptions of the work.<sup>10</sup> Hesse may have been acquainted as well with Clement Greenberg's noted 1940 essay, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," positing modern abstraction as the rightful successor to the classical style.<sup>11</sup> At the absolute least, Hesse connected the Vatican sculpture with its three male subjects, its three male sculptors, the male author Pliny, her male professor of Greek art, and the two men who had written her textbook, and she probably knew of several other prominent men involved in the sculpture's long history of display, documentation, discovery, restoration, copying, adaptation, and critique. When Hesse produced her own *Laocoon*, she was inserting a woman's voice into what she knew to be an overwhelmingly patriarchal object narrative.

Hesse may also have perceived the *Laocoön* as an unstable form ripe for dismantling, and may have chosen the subject in part for this reason. In her Yale textbook, the only reproduction of the *Laocoön* presents an incomplete plaster cast, cut off just beyond the priest's left shoulder.<sup>12</sup> In her classroom, Hesse was presumably shown the sculpture with its sixteenth-century restorations, most notably the priest's extended right arm, possibly by Michelangelo himself, more likely by an assistant, Giovanni Montorsoli.<sup>13</sup> At the Vatican, Hesse would have seen the recently restored version with the more strongly flexed original right arm (see Fig. 2).<sup>14</sup> For Hesse, Laocoön's body may have seemed especially susceptible to fragmentation, dismemberment, even annihilation.

Hesse began her own *Laocoon* in her New York Bowery studio in late 1965, less than a year after her first experiments with sculpture.<sup>15</sup> Her first large-scale freestanding work in this medium, it consists of plastic tubes arranged as a 10.8-foot-tall latticework, square in plan, modular in elevation, planned in a schematic preparatory drawing (Fig. 3).<sup>16</sup> Hesse coated the armature in papier-mâché and draped its interior with wire-bound ropes (see Fig. 1). She altered the design

somewhat as she worked: The sculpture in progress had exposed pipes and fewer cords, their colors graded from almost black to almost white (Fig. 4).<sup>17</sup> In the final version, cloth wrappings on the pipes and a single shade of light gray paint unify the work, and the ropes—which Hesse explicitly deemed “snakes”—hang limply in an even thicker tangle. Hesse completed the sculpture in March of 1966, as recorded on a page of one of her notebooks, which dates the piece “March 66” and gives the title as “Laocoon,” written in lighter ink above the scribbled-out words “‘Structural’” “snakes”—probably, per Lippard, an earlier title (Fig. 5).<sup>18</sup>

In his 1966 essay “Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space,” Robert Smithson explicitly contrasted Hesse’s sculpture, which he illustrated in its earlier version, with the ancient *Laocoön* group.<sup>19</sup> Smithson observed in Hesse’s *Laocoön* “an absence of ‘pathos’ and a deliberate avoidance of the anthropomorphic.” Smithson characterized the ropes as “vestigial and devitalized snakes” and the modular structure as a “dry, skeletal tower that goes nowhere.” Overall, he judged, “everything ‘classical’ and ‘romantic’ has been mitigated and undermined” [*sic*].<sup>20</sup>

Rather than “avoiding the anthropomorphic,” though, Hesse has more accurately removed the human body, and specifically the male body: She has extracted Laocoön and his sons from the *Laocoön and His Sons*, replacing their corporeal forms with empty space. Inside the armature of this “non-work” are only snake-like ropes and a void. The continuity of this void with the viewer’s spatial environment affects one’s experience of the work. In the absence of the famous suffering Laocoön, the spectator becomes more aware that one’s understanding of this body has always been mitigated by its reception history.<sup>21</sup> Laocoön and his myriad influential receivers, all male as of 1965-66, dwell in and around Hesse’s *Laocoön* as *manes*, the shades of deceased ancestors.

Counteracting these presences is the phantasm of Hesse’s body.<sup>22</sup> The sculpture shows the marks of her hand, both in the idiosyncratic draping of the ropes and in the rough texture of the papier-mâché and painted cloth (Pl. 15). These signs of facture invite the viewer to form a mental image of Hesse making the work—wrapping the tubes, arranging and rearranging the “snakes.” One can imagine her as in the video shot by Dorothy Beskind after the completion of the *Laocoön*: Standing on a ladder, Hesse extends her arms into the lattice to adjust the ropes.<sup>23</sup>

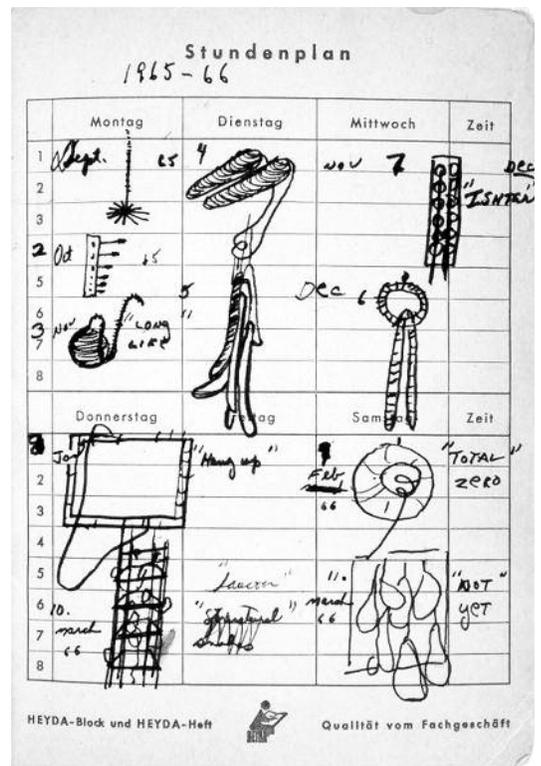
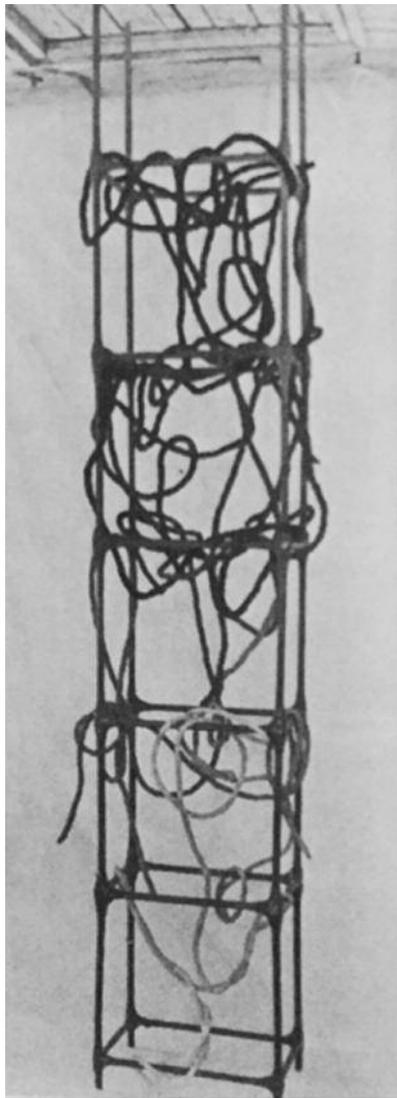


Fig. 5. (above) Eva Hesse, *Stundenplan*, page from a notebook (1965-66), pen and ink, 8 1/4" x 5 7/8". Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio, gift of Helen Hesse Charash, 1977.52.27. © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth.

Fig. 4. (left) Eva Hesse, *Laocoön*, photograph of first version, begun late 1965.

Smithson attributes an absence of pathos to Hesse’s piece, and Alex Potts deems Hesse’s sculpture a “modernist satire” on its ancient namesake, characterized by “jokey incisiveness” in its “undoing of heroic virility.”<sup>24</sup> Still, because Hesse’s *Laocoön* bears the name of a famously tormented body, the work is haunted by the memory or ghost of that *exemplum doloris*.<sup>25</sup> By replacing this body with emptiness, Hesse’s sculpture brings the story to its tragic close, enacting the priest’s death. The limp “snakes” are spent after fulfilling their purpose.<sup>26</sup> The viewer may well feel empathy for the remembered suffering figure, now annihilated altogether.

In contrast to Laocoön’s, the specter of Hesse’s body is dynamic and capable. She has handled her materials adeptly; she has mastered the snakes. One should therefore hesitate to interpret her *Laocoön* through the lens of “Hesse-as-wound” that dominates so much of the literature on this artist.<sup>27</sup> While Hesse’s diaries from early 1966 do reflect serious emotional distress, not least from the dissolution of her marriage, Hesse’s sculpture reflects her action and agency as an artist rather than the immobility and helplessness of her invoked subject.<sup>28</sup>

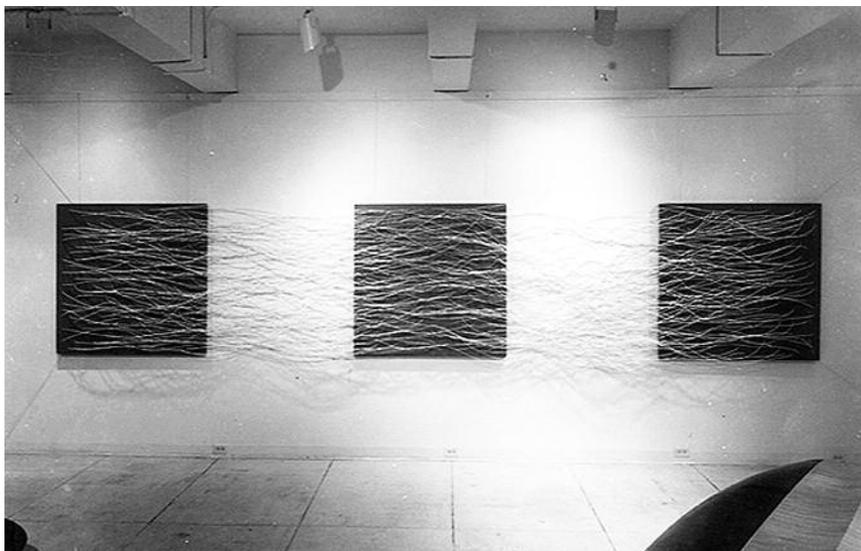


Fig. 6. Installation view of Eva Hesse, *Metronomic Irregularity II* (1966), in the exhibition *Eccentric Abstraction*, Fischbach Gallery, New York, 1966. Painted wood and cotton-covered wire, 48" x 240". Whereabouts unknown.

While Hesse was making *Laocoon*, Sol LeWitt would later recall, the two artists “would talk about contrasts, things playing off each other.”<sup>29</sup> Hesse’s finished sculpture encompasses a number of oppositions: between mass and void; between a central focus and a diffuseness that extends outward to envelop the viewer; between the Trojan priest’s frozen death throes and Hesse’s deft movements in space and time. It conjures a woman artist’s capable body in place of the Vatican’s celebrated suffering one. All of these oppositions resonate with Hesse’s continuing struggle during 1965–66 to establish herself as a woman artist, to move from periphery to center in a New York art scene dominated by heroized men making—ostensibly, at least—non-corporeal art.

In her own milieu, Hesse’s *Laocoon* introduces historically specific problems on the making and reception of postwar sculpture, then at the very height of Minimalist proposals in the sixties on spatial-temporality and the object’s “structural integrity.”<sup>30</sup> Particularly, her physical encounter or, rather, confrontation with the materiality of the ancient sculpture, and subsequent inversion of the *Laocoön*’s presence as a male body into a “non-work” or “unknown quantity,” draws further parallels with Minimalism’s intrinsically complex and hostile debates over the terms embodiment and anthropomorphism.<sup>31</sup>

For Hesse, the year 1966 was a uniquely experimental and consequential one. She had recently returned from her fifteen-month residency in Germany.<sup>32</sup> By January 1966, Hesse had completed *Hang Up*, a work that humorously embraced the painterly potential for three-dimensionality in its release and retraction of an embowed metal rod from a “dependence” on a wrapped and framed support. That spring, Minimalism took central stage in New York City, formally orchestrated across town in pivotal gallery and museum exhibitions, or pitched casually in makeshift lofts and shared studios along the Bowery. The Jewish Museum’s *Primary Structures: Younger*

*American and British Sculptors* (April–June 1966) installed monolithically scaled and industrially fabricated sculptures by forty-two artists (only three of whom were women) in multiple orientations throughout the museum, serving as a “spatial dislocation” for the uninitiated in the audience.<sup>33</sup> Donald Judd called attention to his cantilevered and grounded galvanized metal boxes as “specific situations”; Robert Morris’s L-beams framed the viewer’s field of vision through “gravitational force”; and Carl Andre’s horizontally-placed priapic sculpture conducted the viewer to walk over or bypass 137 “neutral geometric” bricks.<sup>34</sup> Whether or not one reads the male heroic signifier in such literal objects, it is in the “negation and reinstatement” of *sculptural presence*, or the repositioning of “bodily empathies,” to use Briony Fer’s term, that problematizes Minimalism’s contractual engagement with and renunciation of the anthropomorphic.<sup>35</sup>

This perceptual act of corporeal displacement was determined summarily by the affective behavior of seriality and modularity, and by the artist’s desire for control, as it was mediated by the viewer’s spectatorial position, an encounter of such theatrical “monstrosity” that it inspired Michael Fried’s critical 1967 term “latent anthropomorphism.”<sup>36</sup> Yet it is this mutual act of negation in Hesse’s formative sculptures, in dialogue with Minimalism’s implicit anthropomorphism, that frames our reading of pathos—and classical resistance—in those works, characterized as they are by the potential for material *undoing* and for the pliant and unresolved boundaries that disrupt the spectator’s enhanced experience of the sculpture’s objecthood.<sup>37</sup>

Lucy Lippard’s curatorial debut, *Eccentric Abstraction*, was realized that September at the uptown Fischbach Gallery as a calibrated response to *Primary Structures*’ “dead-set Minimalism” and “rigours of structural art,” while undoubtedly covering similar terrain.<sup>38</sup> Featuring Hesse, Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), Alice Adams (b. 1930), Bruce Nauman, and Keith Sonnier, among other artists, Lippard intended to “blur boundaries between Minimalism and something more sensuous and sensual” and give prominence to abstraction’s “erotic alternatives” and its “complementary” oppositions.<sup>39</sup> Hesse initially wanted to show her *Laocoon* but dismissed the idea after viewing the gallery’s unfavorably low ceiling.<sup>40</sup> In its place, Hesse fabricated the twenty-foot-long wall relief *Metronomic Irregularity II* (1966; Fig. 6), a complicated installation that required the assistance of Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner, whose failure at estimating the weight of its three separate grey painted-wood panels resulted in Hesse’s stressful onsite reconstruction. In the same building, only two floors below, LeWitt had co-organized, along with Morris and Smithson, the exhibition *Ten* at the Dwan Gallery—ten works by ten artists—displaying his own painted-aluminum, open cube. Later, LeWitt recalled *Metronomic*



Fig. 7. Eva Hesse, *Untitled* ("Rope Piece") (1969–70), latex, rope, string, and wire, dimensions variable. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchase, with funds from Eli and Edythe L. Broad, the Mrs. Percy Urus Purchase Fund, and the Painting and Sculpture Committee. Photo: Sheldon C. Collins. © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth.

*Irregularity II* as an early example of "proto-installation," having observed Hesse laboriously reshape and rethread the panels connected by cotton-covered wires and sculpmetal, and noting its "variability" and "unpredictability."<sup>41</sup> For her part, Lippard was admittedly disappointed and even surprised at this piece's "precision."<sup>42</sup> And perhaps *Metronomic Irregularity's* proverbial frontality, hanging like painting against the wall, had failed, in Lippard's view, to convey the organic dimensionality of "operatic control," a tenuous balance of topographical extremes that Hesse had earlier observed in her notes on the ancient *Laocoön's* immobility. Even so, Bochner gave his own incisive portrayal in his *Arts Magazine* review of November 1966: "The result ... is not chaos but a structured order.... It is a fabrication of entanglement.... Regular, remote, and lifeless.... The lacerated shiny surfaces have a detached presence which is real."<sup>43</sup>

As though Bochner and Smithson were privately conversing, Smithson, in the very same journal, addressed Hesse's *Laocoön* [sic] as "vertiginous and wonderfully dismal," "a cosmic dereliction ... only to reveal an empty center. Nothing is incarnated into nothing. Human decay is nowhere in evidence."<sup>44</sup> Their unified appraisal of Hesse's *nullifying* classicism, particularly for Smithson, resisted the dominant biological metaphors of linear art history and its temporal order, proffered, for instance, in Greenberg's 1940 "Towards a Newer

*Laocoön*," which traced a teleological evolution from the naturalism of Greek art to the formalist "modern sensibility" and pure abstraction of his day.<sup>45</sup> By the same token, Smithson returns Hesse's devitalized snakes and vestigial *Laocoön* to the excavation site of the original, which for him was, misleadingly, a funerary chamber.<sup>46</sup> As our sensibilities toward Hesse's mechanisms of pathos diverge from Smithson's entropic cast, we find that her corporeal evacuation projects spatial specters and emotional experiences in *other* bodies, whether the artist's or the viewer's, thus mutually inhabiting the void, the marginal, and the interstitial.

Hesse's diary entry soon after the *Laocoön's* completion notes the psychic and structural presence in her studio of cords and their later purposefulness: "Cords every where. will do one that does not come from a form, that is endlessly totally encroaching + irrational. With its own rationale, even if it looks chaotic."<sup>47</sup> This orientation was realized a few years later in her *Right After* of 1969 (Pl. 16) by the hanging of more than one-hundred-foot lengths of woven fiberglass cord dipped in polyester resin, draped via S-shaped clothing hangers, and in turn elevated along nylon filaments and metal hooks. As Mark Godfrey has observed, *Right After* "holds the memory of a weight no longer a part of it."<sup>48</sup> Here, alongside her *Laocoön*, and unlike that sculpture's ancient marble forbear, Hesse

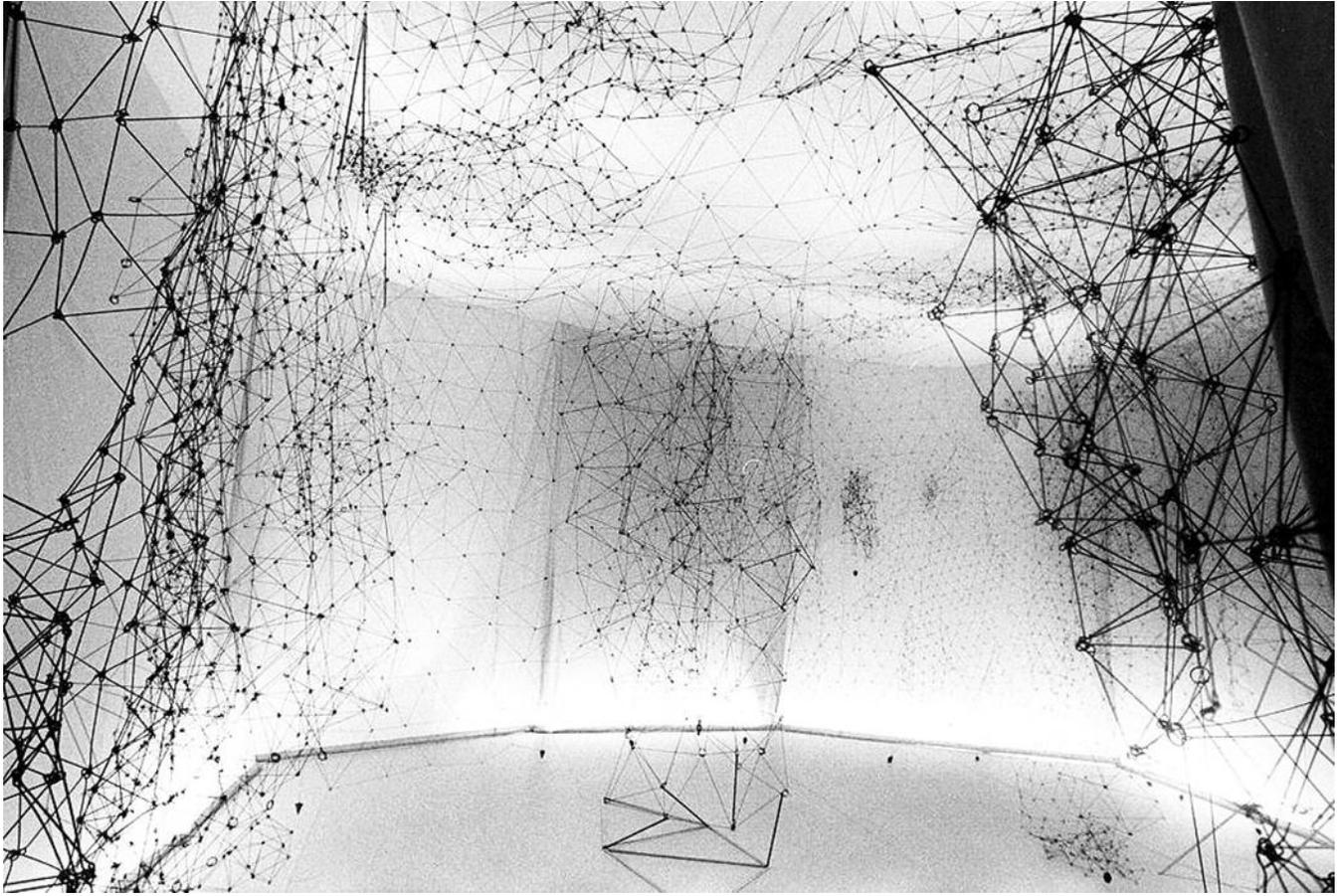


Fig. 8. Gego, *Reticulárea* (1969), wire, dimensions variable, installation at Center for Inter-American Relations, New York, 1969. Photo: Martha Holmes. © Fundación Gego. All rights reserved.

wittingly disrupts the historical *paragone* between painting and sculpture—prescribed first by Lessing and then again by Greenberg—through her choice of ordinary cord, now industrially cast, and employed for wrapping, anchoring, and spinning, and replete with feminine and bodily metaphors.<sup>49</sup> In Hesse’s opinion, absurdity was somewhat lost at the cost of beauty in *Right After’s* installation in *A Plastic Presence* of 1969 at The Jewish Museum (November 1969–January 1970); the artist had preferred the daring propulsion of “irregular wires” as a “big nothing,” hung as it was for over a year in a disorderly mass along her studio’s sloped walls.<sup>50</sup> This loss was somewhat rectified by the “ugly” confections of knots, wires, and ropes in her unfinished *Untitled* (“Rope Piece”) of 1970 (Fig. 7), which was intended, by her assistant’s account, to “determine” its completion through a willingness of its own.<sup>51</sup> Further, unlike contemporary installations hygienically sealed above the spectator, Hesse had

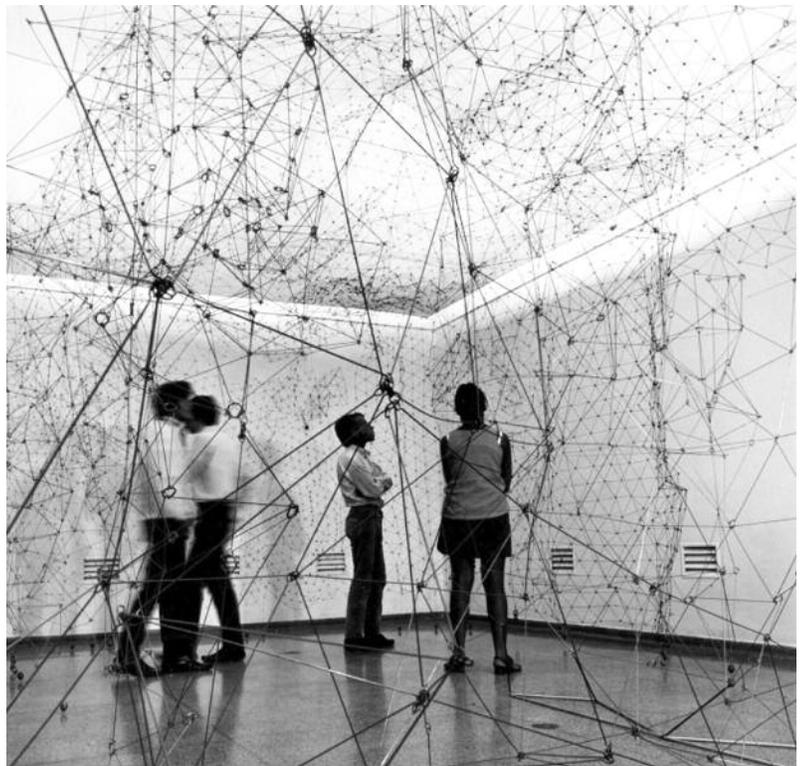


Fig. 9. Gego, *Reticulárea* (1969), wire, dimensions variable, installation at Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, 1969. Photo: Paolo Gasparini. © Fundación Gego. All rights reserved.

desired the suspended loops and hooks in line with the spectator's "eye-height" to immerse the viewer within a "disorienting" environmental matrix, as Godfrey attests.<sup>52</sup>

Yet perhaps the most vital comparison to Hesse's desire for structured chaos, as evidenced by her *Laocoon*, *Metronomic Irregularity II*, *Right After*, and "Rope Piece," was to be found merely twenty-four blocks south along Park Avenue, in November 1969, as the German-born Venezuelan artist Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt, 1912–94) was concurrently installing her New York version of the *Reticulárea* at the Center for Inter-American Relations (now the Americas Society) (Fig. 8), only a few months after its first installation at the Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas (Fig. 9).<sup>53</sup> Gego had transplanted the physical components of her Caracas version for the challenging 420-square-foot gallery in New York, remapping the modular system of florist wires, aluminum, and stainless steel to variously hang, support, or ballast the walls and ceiling. A muslin tent further veiled its intricate "scaffold" of leaded weights and filaments, wherein the viewer, spatially enveloped by the network of reticules or nets, phenomenologically encountered, on an environmental scale, the artist's innate reliance on drawing and line.

Notably, in his 2003 essay "Gego: Laocoön, Nets and the Irresolution of Things," Luis Pérez-Oramas turns to a Laocoönian reading of the development of the artist's *Reticulárea*, from its early installations to the later iterations.<sup>54</sup> Invoking the "spectral" nature of Venezuela's kinetic postwar sculptures, he argued the artist simultaneously undermined these histories through her tireless weaving, knotting, and binding of an ever-growing labyrinth—a predatory matrix portrayed in 1969 by critic Lourdes Blanco as "walking into the domain of a ... spider."<sup>55</sup> Described by Pérez-Oramas as a "preverbal net of *ligatures*," Gego's *Reticulárea* reveals a silent chamber "where there is no memory of discourse to restrain impossible bonds. Laocoön has been unbound; his suffering body is no longer there. Only the chains, the ties and bonds are left to mark the place, like a hollow ball of bulky knots and weavings."<sup>56</sup> Recalling Smithson's evocation of an "empty center," the Laocoön's "aphasic groaning space," as Pérez-Oramas characterizes it, appears in the wake of the Trojan priest's exaggerated movements and impaired language, a metaphorical critique à la Lessing of the visual arts' limited poetic expression, and an artistic boundary deconstructed by Gego's pursuit of spatiality.<sup>57</sup> As in Hesse's *Laocoon*, classicism's mitigation occurs through Gego's "regulating" reticule that emancipates space from the rational and idealized Cartesian grid to the oppositional margins and to the site's "habitable and marked body."<sup>58</sup> The reticule as woven by Gego is a blemished, "marked structure," whose deformed rhizomatic growth not only engenders an "unpredictable existence," but also embodies its specific site by conforming mutually to its environment or gallery space, and by resisting its environs through an adaptable yet irresolute construction; at its core center-less and non-hierarchical, the *Reticulárea* ultimately requires "neither an ideal spectator nor a privileged place from which to be seen."<sup>59</sup> As Mónica Amor adds, "the dispersed body of the *Reticulárea* is woven into space itself," an inspired imprint of multiple corpora.<sup>60</sup>

In Hesse's attempt to secure the "most absurd opposites or extreme opposites," and in Gego's "destabilized" weavings, both artists' repetitive operations inject a preternatural anti-virility and anti-monumentality that resonate as spatial specters.<sup>61</sup> Under the rubric *Laocoönism*, Eva Hesse found a way to mitigate the pain imbued in the sculpture from classical antiquity, visualized and redirected through subsequent male histories on the "suffering male prototype," by feminizing it, thereby resisting a heroic masculinity to communicate with her contemporaries and problematizing her position as a woman artist in the 1960s. From this precarious position, Hesse arrived at sculpture's intertextuality, a medium that in her early experiments reflected the indelible presence and size of her own body, a physical body adjusted for fragmentation, penetrability and loss from which she created her *Laocoon*. •

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## Notes

All artworks and texts by Eva Hesse © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy Hauser & Wirth.

1. Although the wall text and web entry for the piece at the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College in Oberlin, Ohio, where the work has resided since 1970, give its title as *Laocoön*, and Robert Smithson, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," *Arts Magazine* 41.1 (Nov. 1966), 28–31, spells the title *Loakoon*, Hesse herself twice wrote the title of her sculpture as "Laocoon": on the "Stundenplan" notebook page (see our fig. 5) and in a diary entry of May 1966 (Eva Hesse, *Diaries*, ed. Barry Rosen [New Haven and London: Hauser & Wirth and Yale Univ. Press, 2016], 577). Most scholars follow Hesse's spelling.
2. J. D. Beazley, Bernard Ashmole, *Greek Sculpture & Painting: To the end of the Hellenistic Period* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1932), 78 and fig. 169. Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.37 (or 36.4), describes a Laocoön in the Roman emperor Titus's palace carved by *summi artifices Hagesander et Polydorus et Athenodorus Rhodii*. Whether the Laocoön to which Pliny refers is the same sculpture now in the Vatican Museums is the subject of much scholarly debate. The most notable recent studies of the Vatican sculpture, including its reception and historiography, include Margarete Bieber, *Laocoon: The Influence of the Group Since its Rediscovery*, rev. ed. (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1967); Salvatore Settis, *Laocoonte: Fama e stile* (Rome: Donzelli, 1999); Brunilde Sismondo Ridgway, *Hellenistic Sculpture*, vol. 3, *The Styles of ca. 100-31 B.C.* (Madison, WI: Univ. Wisconsin Press, 2002), 87–90; Leonard Barkan, *Unearthing the Past: Archaeology and Aesthetics in the Making of Renaissance Culture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), 2–17; Richard Brilliant, *My Laocoön: Alternative Claims in the Interpretation of Artworks* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 2000); Michael Koortbojian, "Pliny's Laocoön?," in *Antiquity and its Interpreters*, eds. Alina Payne, Ann Kuttner, Rebekah Smick (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000): 199–216; Andrew Stewart, "Baroque Classics: The Tragic Muse and the Exemplum," in *Classical Pasts: The Classical Traditions of Greece and Rome*, ed. James I. Porter (Princeton, NJ: Princeton

- Univ. Press, 2006), 127–55: 144–49; and Francesco Buranelli, Paolo Liverani, Arnold Nesselrath, eds., *Laocoonte: Alle origini dei Musei Vaticani* (Rome: Bretschneider, 2006).
3. Beazley and Ashmole, *Greek Sculpture & Painting*, 78. Cf. Pliny 36.37 (36.4): *Opus omnibus et picturae et statuariae artis praeferendum*.
  4. Eva Hesse, notes from Prof. Vincent Scully, "Greek Art" (undergraduate course, Yale Univ. School of Art and Architecture, 1958–59), in the Eva Hesse Archives, Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin Museum, Oberlin, OH. Whether the Vatican *Laocoön* is a Hellenistic original, a Roman copy of a lost Hellenistic sculpture, or a Roman original is another hotly contested question in scholarship (see note 2 above), further problematized in the last twenty years by more nuanced notions of Roman copying as put forth by Elaine Gazda and Miranda Marvin, among others; on the *Laocoön* and Roman attitudes towards Greek art and innovation, see Ellen Perry, *The Aesthetics of Emulation in the Visual Arts of Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005), 179–81.
  5. *Datebooks 1964/65*, *Eva Hesse: A Facsimile Edition* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), 79, transcription of datebook entry for Saturday, Sept. 19, 1964: "Vatican City / Vatican museum – treasury / Pope tombs / up to Duomo / evening Trevi Fountain."
  6. *Datebooks 1964/65*, 81, 82, 84, visits to the Uffizi on Sept. 22, 25, and 27, 1964. On the circumstances surrounding the 1520 commission of the copy from Bandinelli, see Giorgio Vasari, *Le vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori*, ed. Gaetano Milanesi (Florence: Sansoni, 1906), 6.145.
  7. Virgil: *Aeneid* 2.40–56, 199–231. Michelangelo's visit to site, adoption into oeuvre: Barkan, *Unearthing the Past*, 3–17 and n. 13; Nigel Spivey, *Enduring Creation: Art, Pain, and Fortitude* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 2001), 122–23. Julius II's acquisition: Buranelli et al., *Laocoonte: Alle origini dei Musei Vaticani*, 126 and n. 12.
  8. Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764), vol. 4, 1.11, elaborating on his analysis in *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755). On Winckelmann's analysis of the *Laocoön* and its relationship to later interpretations, see Bieber, *Laocoön: The Influence of the Group*, 20–29; Brilliant, *My Laocoön*, 50–61; and Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Beauty and Art: 1750–2000*, Oxford History of Art Series (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 22–27.
  9. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie* (1766). See, most recently, Avi Lifschitz, Michael Squire, eds., *Rethinking Lessing's Laocoön: Antiquity, Enlightenment, and the 'Limits' of Painting and Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2017).
  10. On Lessing's impact on, for example, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, see Brilliant, *My Laocoön*, 58–60; Ritchie Robertson, "Suffering in Art: Laocoön between Lessing and Goethe," in Lifschitz and Squire, eds., *Rethinking Lessing's Laocoön*, 257–77.
  11. Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," *Partisan Review* 7.4 (1940): 296–310, responding to literary critic Irving Babbitt's *The New Laocoön: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1910).
  12. Beazley and Ashmole, *Greek Sculpture & Painting*, fig. 169.
  13. On Montorsoli's arm of 1532, which was probably the extended one removed during the 1957 restoration, and on the alternative theory that the extended arm had been carved by Michelangelo in 1540 to take the place of Montorsoli's, see Filippo Magi, "Il ripristino del Laocoonte," *Atti della Pontificia Accademia Romana di Archeologia*, serie 3, *Memorie* 9 (1960): 5–117.
  14. *Ibid.* The reattached original arm had been discovered in a stonecutter's shop in Rome in 1905.
  15. Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: NYU Press, 1976), 58 and figs. 72–75; Bill Barrette, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture, Catalogue Raisonné* (New York: Timken, 1989), no. 31; Helen A. Cooper, Maurice Berger, Lesley K. Baier, *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective*, exh. cat., Yale University Art Gallery (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1992), 37–38, 66, 92, 106–07; Alex Potts, *The Sculptural Imagination: Figurative, Modernist, Minimalist* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 341–43; Barry Rosen, Renate Petzinger, eds., *Eva Hesse: Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 2, *Sculpture* (Weisbaden and New Haven: Museum Weisbaden and Yale Univ. Press, 2006), cat. no. S38.
  16. Hesse consulted with Ray Donarski on how to build the armature, but she deliberately chose plastic tubing so that she could cut and assemble the segments herself (Barrette, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture*, no. 31).
  17. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 58, fig. 74.
  18. *Ibid.*, 58.
  19. Smithson, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," 31 and figs. 25A–B. Smithson illustrated an earlier version not only of Hesse's *Loakoon* [sic], with the graduated palette of grays and blacks, dated 1965, but also of the Vatican *Loakoon* [sic], still endowed with *Laocoön's* sixteenth-century extended right arm (see note 13).
  20. *Ibid.*, 31, caption 25C.
  21. To quote Brilliant, *My Laocoön*, 4: "One might say that the *Laocoön* is still there but the viewer is so changed as a perceiver that the sculpture has become nearly invisible."
  22. *New York Times* film critic A. O. Scott's review of the documentary *Eva Hesse*, which shows the clip of Hesse working on the *Laocoön* in her studio (see note 23), similarly describes the artist in the film as "something of a specter—an animating spirit and a ghost haunting the frames." Scott, "Review: 'Eva Hesse' Offers a Moving Portrait of an Artist's Brief Life," *New York Times*, April 16, 2016.
  23. Dorothy Beskind, Director-Producer, *Eva Hesse*, documentary film, 1968, excerpt in Marcie Begleiter, Director-Producer, *Eva Hesse*, documentary film, 2016 (DVD, Zeitgeist Films, 2017), 1:10:16–28.
  24. Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 341–43.
  25. See especially Leopold Ettlinger, "Exemplum Doloris: Reflections on the *Laocoön* Group," in *De artibus opuscula XL. Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss, vol. 1 (New York: NYU Press, 1961), 121–26, and Spivey, *Enduring Creation*, 121–27.
  26. The ropes may simultaneously call to mind twisted corporeal innards (per Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 343).
  27. On the interpretation of Hesse's oeuvre as reflecting an anxious emotional state arising from a difficult life, see Lippard, *Eva Hesse*; Anna C. Chave, "Eva Hesse: 'A girl being a sculpture,'" in Cooper et al., 99–117; Briony Fer, "Bordering on Blank: Eva Hesse and Minimalism," in *Eva Hesse*, October Files 3, ed. Mignon Nixon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 56–85; Begleiter, *Eva Hesse*. Specifically regarding Hesse's *Laocoön*, Chave, "'A girl being a sculpture,'" 106–07, argues that Hesse may have seen in its ancient namesake "an analogue to her own family situation," namely her father's primary role in caring for her. Differing from the "Hesse-as-wound" view is Anne M. Wagner, "Another Hesse," in *Three Artists (Three Women): Modernism and the Art of Hesse, Krasner, and O'Keeffe* (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 1996), 191–283.
  28. Dissolution of marriage (to artist Tom Boyle): Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 56.
  29. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 84. On the exchange of ideas between Hesse and LeWitt, see Veronica Roberts, ed., *Converging Lines: Eva Hesse and Sol LeWitt*, exh. cat., Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, TX (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2014), and Aliza Edelman's review in *Woman's Art Journal* 36.1 (2015), 60–62.
  30. Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 7–8.
  31. On Hesse and Minimalism, Chave, "'A girl being a sculpture,'" in Cooper et al., 99–117, and "Minimalism and Biography," in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: Univ. California Press, 2005), 384–407; Wagner, "Another Hesse," in *Three Artists*, 191–283; and Elizabeth Sussman, Fred Wasserman, eds., *Eva Hesse Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006).

32. Returning in August 1965 from her fifteen-month residency in Kettwig an der Ruhr, Germany, Hesse fabricated fourteen small collaged-based reliefs, including her first, *Ringaround Arosie* (1965), in which tightly wound cloth-covered electrical wire and papier-mâché form small breastlike lumps.
33. Kynaston McShine, "Introduction," in *Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors*, exh. cat. (New York: Jewish Museum, 1966), n.p. See also Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," *Artforum* 4.6 (Feb. 1966): 42–44.
34. Notably, Carl Andre—who publicly assumed his patrilineage to Bernini and Brancusi—conducted the viewer to walk over or bypass 137 "neutral geometric" firebricks, without pedestal or base, in *Lever* of 1966. See "Carl Andre on his Sculpture," *Art Monthly* 16 (1978), 8, cited in Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 311.
35. Potts, *Sculptural Imagination*, 312–15. On "bodily empathies," see Briony Fer, "Objects beyond Objecthood," *Oxford Art Journal* 22.2 (1999), 29.
36. Michael Fried wrote, "I am suggesting, then, that a kind of latent or hidden naturalism, indeed, lies at core of literalist theory and practice," in "Art and Objecthood," *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: Univ. Chicago Press, 1998), 157.
37. Briony Fer described Hesse's "sustained dialogue" with Minimalist tendencies as an "economy of loss" that strives for a "literal blankness ... where all the incident is emptied out to the borders or frame." In Fer, "Bordering on Blank," 58.
38. Lucy R. Lippard, "Eccentric Abstraction," *Art International*, Lugano, 10.9 (Nov. 1966): 28. See also Briony Fer, *The Infinite Line: Re-Making Art after Modernism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2004), 101.
39. Lippard, "Curating by Numbers," unpublished lecture, Vienna, May 29, 2008, cited in Roberts, ed., *Converging Lines*, 165.
40. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 70. She never did exhibit the piece during her lifetime, but it was purchased shortly before her death in 1970 by the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College in Ohio, where it still stands at the center of a large gallery.
41. Sol LeWitt, cited in Roberts, ed., *Converging Lines*, 22.
42. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 83.
43. Mel Bochner, "Review: Eccentric Abstraction," *Arts Magazine* 41.1 (Nov. 1966), 58.
44. Smithson, "Quasi-Infinities and the Waning of Space," 30–31.
45. Smithson was strongly under the influence of George Kubler, the eminent Mesoamericanist and architectural scholar. See Pamela Lee, "'Ultramodern': Or, How George Kubler Stole the Time in Sixties Art," *Grey Room* 2 (Winter 2001): 46–77.
46. The earliest known record of the Laocoön's findspot places it in *una Camera antiquissima subterranea*, but not a tomb: For a transcription and translation of the full text, see Koortbojian, "Pliny's Laocoön?," 200 and n. 6.
47. Hesse, *Diaries*, 577.
48. Mark Godfrey, "A String of Nots: Eva Hesse's Hanging Sculpture," in Sussman and Wasserman, eds., *Eva Hesse: Sculpture*, 35.
49. As Rosalind Krauss observed, the "edge that is displayed by Hesse is not focused on the boundaries *within* a painting or sculpture, but rather on the boundary that lies *between* the institutions of painting and sculpture." In Krauss, "Eva Hesse: Contingent (1969)," in Nixon, ed., *Eva Hesse*, 32.
50. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 161. See Barrett, *Eva Hesse: Sculpture*, 222.
51. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, 172.
52. Godfrey, "A String of Nots," 42.
53. Known today as *Reticulárea* CIAR, it was on view as part of the group exhibition, *Latin America: New Paintings and Sculpture*, Downey, Gego, Morera, and Fernández, organized by Stanton Loomis Catlin from Nov. 20, 1969 to Jan. 18, 1970. See Gabriela Rangel, "Reticulárea: Module and Version, 2006," in *Untangling the Web: Gego's Reticulárea, An Anthology of Critical Response*, ed. Melina Kervandjian and Mari Carmen Ramírez (Houston: Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, 2013), 44–48.
54. Luis Enrique Pérez-Oramas, "Gego: Laocoön, Nets and the Irresolution of Things," in *Untangling the Web: Gego's Reticulárea, An Anthology of Critical Response*, 146–53, originally published as "Gego: Laocoonte, las redes y la indecisión de las cosas," in *Gego: Obra completa, 1955–1990*, ed. Iris Peruga et al. (Caracas: Fundación Cisneros, 2003), 394–400. See also, Pérez-Oramas, "Gego: The Paradigm of Laocoön/Gego: El Paradigma del Laocoonte," *Trans* 7 (2000): 160–67; and "Abstraction, Organism, Apparatus: Notes on the Penetrable Structure in the Work of Lygia Clark, Gego, and Mira Schendel," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Cornelia H. Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: MoMA, 2010), 316–33: 325 and n. 18.
55. Lourdes Blanco, *Gego: Reticulárea* (Caracas: Ediciones de la Galería Konkright, 1969).
56. Pérez-Oramas, "Gego: Laocoön, Nets and the Irresolution of Things," 146–47.
57. *Ibid.*, 146.
58. *Ibid.*, 151.
59. *Ibid.*, 151. Also, Mónica Amor writes, "Against idealized structures (social, visual, conceptual, linguistic, etc.), rhizomatic performance undoes Platonism and instead favors heterogeneity, antihierarchical connections, and an affective materialism that is mutable and transitory .... Reticular configurations are also antagonistic to centralized structures," in "Another Geometry: Gego's Reticulárea, 1969–1982," *October* 113 (Summer 2005), 111.
60. Amor, "Another Geometry: Gego's Reticulárea," 113.
61. Eva Hesse in Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 12 Women Artists* (New York: Scribner's, 1976), 210.

# JUDY CHICAGO'S *THE DINNER PARTY*

## THE CURATORIAL CONTEXT

By Sally Brown Deskins



Fig. 1. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (table) (1974–79), installation March 23, 2007, mixed media, 36' x 48'. Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn, NY. Artwork © Judy Chicago. Photo: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn, NY.

Research on Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* is abundant, focusing on the monumental table of thirty-nine place settings (Fig. 1), each representing a woman who made some contribution to Western history. It was produced over a five-year period, from 1974 to 1979, with more than four hundred volunteers.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have examined, praised, and criticized the installation, predominantly the sculptural table, from feminist and formal aesthetic perspectives.<sup>2</sup>

Overlooked in the copious literature is Chicago's curatorial framework for *The Dinner Party* exhibition experience. Based on personal interviews with the artist, team members, and contemporary curators, and by consulting the artist's installation manuals, I was able to identify some essential curatorial features that helped make *The Dinner Party* an international phenomenon. While such elements are evident

elsewhere in the work of Chicago and others,<sup>3</sup> they are uniquely concentrated within *The Dinner Party*, and thus cannot be separated from the intent—to symbolize women's contributions to Western society throughout history. This reexamination proves timely, as curatorial scholarship within feminist discourse is very slowly expanding as a method to challenge continuing underrepresentation of women artists.<sup>4</sup>

"Although I do not see myself as a curator," Chicago wrote to me in a 2105 email, "in the 1970's it became clear to me that there was no context for female-centered art, at least not yet. As a result, I began to experiment with installation of my exhibitions, writing on the walls, controlling the color and lighting. It wasn't something I wanted to do but rather, something that I felt compelled to do in order to help viewers understand my intentions as an artist."<sup>5</sup>

In this article, I argue that Chicago's original methods offer a most proactive, critical, and approachable curatorial presentation, providing considerations for future research. The permanent installation at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art (EASCFA), at the Brooklyn Museum, demonstrates a subtle shift from the artist's inclusive framing to an institutionalized display, a context that, ironically, *The Dinner Party* worked against. Aspects regarding Chicago's curatorial structuring of *The Dinner Party* to be addressed include the artist's evolution from a minimalist to experimenting with curating; Chicago's plan for exhibiting *The Dinner Party*; her original permanent installation design; original and current permanent installation at the Sackler Center; and curatorial considerations gleaned from *The Dinner Party*.

Judy Chicago (b. 1939) initially created minimalist art, the popular style of the 1960s, with some success.<sup>6</sup> Her pieces encouraged viewer interaction, for example, the rainbow-colored *Rainbow Pickett* (1963–74; Fig. 2) and *Multicolor Rearrangible Game Board* (1965–66). On the cusp of her transition to feminist work were her *Atmomospheres* (1969), transforming surroundings with colored smoke to “feminize the environment.” Her minimalist training and feminist desires were merging into a language that helped formulate a context that led to *The Dinner Party*. Chicago came to the feminist movement near the end of the 1960s and recognized how the context—the environment in which art is presented—impacts viewer interpretation.<sup>7</sup> This is seen most clearly in *Womanhouse* (1972), a groundbreaking project suggested by art historian Paula Harper and produced with artist Miriam Schapiro.<sup>8</sup> Chicago and Schapiro took over a house in Los Angeles, and, along with their students at California Institute of the Arts, created an exhibition of women's perspectives that occupied the entire viewing experience.<sup>9</sup> The project overtly expressed feminist concerns while experimenting with curation: utilizing the entire space and collaborating, aspects which would Chicago would utilize in *The Dinner Party*.

Chicago continued to home in on her curatorial concepts during a 1973 exhibition at Womanspace Gallery in Los Angeles of *The Great Ladies* series of abstracted painted portraits of women in history such as Marie Antoinette, Queen Christina of Sweden, and Queen Victoria (1972; Fig. 3).<sup>10</sup> When she asked viewers for feedback, response was positive for the idea and aesthetics but lacking in comprehension of the content.<sup>11</sup> To create accessibility, Chicago wrote descriptions of the women's lives and why she chose them around the imagery.<sup>12</sup> This prompted a crucial turn in use of didactics that would impact *The Dinner Party*.

Chicago deemed her 1977 solo exhibit of china paintings at Ruth Schaffner Gallery in Los Angeles a “test exhibition” for *The Dinner Party*.<sup>13</sup> Chicago and Ken Gilliam, an industrial designer, used the opportunity of this show to work out lighting for porcelain artworks and creating a reverential atmosphere. The overall installation was lit to create a sense of spirituality in the space; in a “nonintimidating environment.”<sup>14</sup> Windows facing the street displayed photographs of the artist painting on porcelain, contextualizing the artist's process. Upon entry, viewers saw a wall text briefing the intent and



Fig. 2. Judy Chicago, *Rainbow Pickett* (1963–74), installation April 4, 2014, acrylic on canvas on plywood, 126" x 126" x 110". Artwork © Judy Chicago. Photo: Brooklyn Museum.

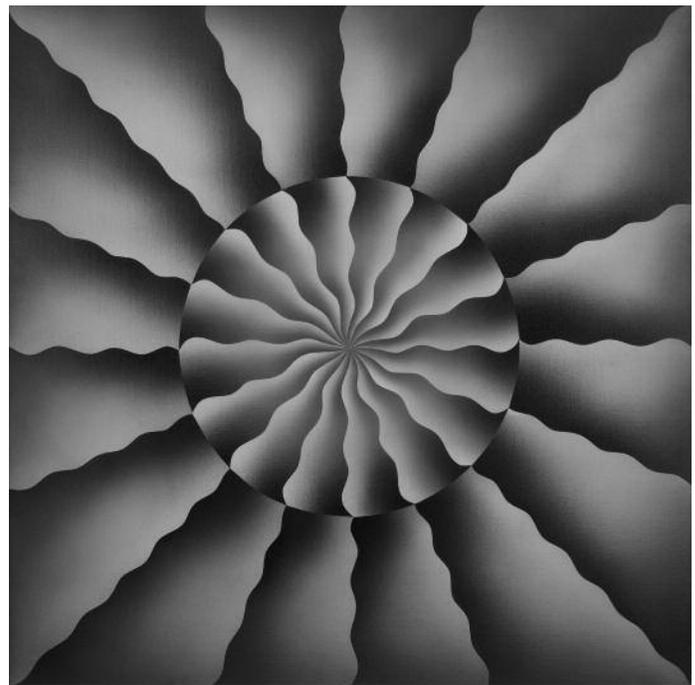


Fig. 3. Judy Chicago, *Queen Victoria*, from *The Great Ladies* series (1972), acrylic on canvas, 40" x 40". Artwork © Judy Chicago. Photo: Courtesy the artist.

crediting those who helped install. The space was dimly lit and reverential, with lights on individual ceramic pieces and reflections of butterflies against painted walls, elements that would be repeated in *The Dinner Party*.

The original exhibition manual for *The Dinner Party* stresses the significance of viewer experience.<sup>15</sup> Diane Gelon, who was in charge of managing the installation, travelled with the exhibition and used the manual written by Chicago and Peter Bunzik, detailing the lighting, wall colors, floor table



Fig. 4. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, exhibition (1980), Brooklyn Museum, visitors viewing the Documentary Panels. Artwork © Judy Chicago. Photo: Brooklyn Museum, PSC\_E1980i007.jpg., 1980, Museum Archives, Records of the Department of Painting and Sculpture.



Fig. 5. Judy Chicago, exhibition pamphlet from *The Dinner Party* (1980), Boston. © Judy Chicago.

substructure, and placement of the banners, information panels, and guardrails.<sup>16</sup> Accessibility and interactivity were prioritized—wheelchair accessibility was required years before the 1990 American Disabilities Act, and interactivity was encouraged throughout, so that the multilayered informational displays allowed the broadest audience possible to connect to the work and message. According to Gelon, if a space could not accommodate the requirements, they would not exhibit there,<sup>17</sup> an interesting nuance, considering many art spaces would not show it due to the controversy as well as the strict exhibition requirements.<sup>18</sup>

The Documentary Panels, displayed before or after the table, allowed for viewers to see photographs of the artist and volunteers working (Fig. 4).<sup>19</sup> This was intended to allow for a deeper appreciation for the artistic and collaborative methods involved in the creation of the ceramics and needlework and the feminist workshop Chicago directed. While attendees waited in line they could watch a documentary film about the process and read the exhibition pamphlet (Fig. 5).<sup>20</sup> These elements were intended to give agency to the people involved and provide a visual context for their efforts. If shown in a location where the majority language was not English, selected text was to be translated and displayed.<sup>21</sup>

Viewers entered *The Dinner Party* through the Entryway Banners hallway, which Chicago and her team were more flexible with. The walls behind the six woven banners were required to match the red color (as opposed to the traditional white cube of museum displays). The Entryway Banners could be installed either against the wall as two-dimensional works or, preferably, hung so viewers walked between them (Figs. 6 and 7). According to Gelon:

The idea was for people to walk *through* the banners. To allow a transition from the outside world into the contemplative space housing the work of art. This was done through lighting and a change in wall color. As you

walk through the banners, then emerge into a darkened space that is illuminated.... That was the image that she had: essentially this floating piece that transcended the space. You felt you were in some other world ... this was the general layout: walk into the space through the banners, then walk into a darkened room with the artwork, then back out to the documentary information and Heritage Panels.<sup>22</sup>

The most detailed instructions concerned the lighting and the table substructure. Woodman's installation photographs from the Frankfurt exhibition are included in the second manual he created. The angle of every light is diagrammed and its positioning explained with respect to each place setting. Lights were to hit the runners on the front of the place settings, so viewers would see the women's names clearly and to highlight the ceramic plate. The lighting allowed for a rainbow reflection on the runner backs that would bounce up from the luster glaze used on the floor tiles (Fig. 8), which viewers could see as they walked around the table.<sup>23</sup> This lighting plan, a call to her *Rainbow Pickett*, contributed to the reverent atmosphere, viewer focus, and respect for the women featured.

The significant curatorial aspects of the table lie in the collaborative process and exhibition design. Volunteers, along with Chicago, researched thousands of women's histories to select the thirty-nine to be honored in the place settings, and 999 others whose names were to be inscribed on the porcelain floor, arranged by era, subject, or location.<sup>24</sup> They were selected for their courageousness in their personal or professional lives and for making an impact on the situation of women.<sup>25</sup> The walls were required to be painted black to allow for total focus on the table, with gray floors, and handrails at a specified distance.

The selection of women, iconography, and formal aesthetics of *The Dinner Party* table have been written about extensively. Curatorially, the significance lies in the choice to exhibit the place settings on a table, not individually or framed on the



Fig. 6. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, Entryway Banners (1974–79), installation, 2002, six woven banners, each 5' 6" x 3' 6". Artwork © Judy Chicago. Photo: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn, NY.

wall. The multiple media—the embroidered runners and ceramic plates—and the juxtaposition of the names and the women they honor add a critical context to the message, and a shared experience as viewers interact and see each other across the table.

Chicago and her team created photographic and text collage Heritage Panels, offering historical and cultural context for the 1,038 named women,<sup>26</sup> visually demonstrating an intent beyond gallery walls. Each venue was required to exhibit these panels after the table and on gold-painted walls. Finally, Acknowledgement Panels (Fig. 9), listing the volunteers who worked on *The Dinner Party*, were required to be exhibited after the Heritage Panels, acknowledging the many volunteers who helped create *The Dinner Party*, and illustrating the collaborative feminist methodology.

A traveling exhibition often accompanied *The Dinner Party*. Titled *From the Dining Table to The Dinner Party: A View of Traditional China-Painting*, and curated by art educator and activist Juliet Myers, Gelon, and Chicago, the description reads: “This exhibition honors the women and men who have preserved the glorious techniques of porcelain painting. Specially commissioned plates by the twenty-four finest traditional china-painters working today demonstrate such styles as still life, portrait, landscape, raised paste and enamel work. Additionally, the show traces Judy Chicago’s development of the unique china-painting techniques that led to the creation of *The Dinner Party*.”<sup>27</sup> Further contextualizing a primary medium Chicago selected for *The Dinner Party* artwork, this exhibition traveled with *The Dinner Party* throughout the US and Canada.<sup>28</sup> (Many US venues, such as Boston Center for the Arts, added a wall of photographs of the exhibit workers showing the process of *The Dinner Party*.<sup>29</sup>) Such concurrent exhibitions restated Chicago’s intent beyond the artwork as part of a larger discourse.



Fig. 7. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, exhibition at Brooklyn Museum (1980). Artwork © Judy Chicago. Photo: Brooklyn Museum, Museum Archives, Records of the Department of Painting and Sculpture (P&S\_E\_1980\_Chicago).

*The Dinner Party* debuted in the summer of 1979 at San Francisco Museum of Art to long lines around the block.<sup>30</sup> Here, as at subsequent venues, the installation and the content were met with both praise and criticism by audiences, critics, and scholars.

“The audience found it a real experience. That’s art,” wrote Henry Hopkins in the *San Francisco Sunday Examiner*.<sup>31</sup> The *Newsweek* critic noted the sense of engagement viewers enjoyed.<sup>32</sup> The feminist art historian Eunice Lipton, writing for the *Cleveland Beacon*, expressed dismay at the “controlling” instructions for the viewer experience: “Why the reverence, the awe, the overwhelming ambience of authority at *The Dinner Party*? Walk this way, not that! Whisper! Admire! Believe!



Fig. 8. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* (table) (1974–79), installation detail, mixed media, 36' x 48'. Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn, NY. Artwork © Judy Chicago. Photo: Brooklyn Museum.

Where is the invocation to question, to explore, to disagree?"<sup>33</sup> Others, including feminist activist and critic Lucy Lippard defended *The Dinner Party* and its effect on viewers, suggesting its strong curatorial impression as well as its marketability,<sup>34</sup> emphasizing the significance of the broad reach and recognizing the ensuing respect from people who had never encountered anything like it.<sup>35</sup>

When "exclusivity" became a common feminist criticism of the project's content,<sup>36</sup> Chicago took action. To "emphasize the inclusive intentions of my art," Chicago, her nonprofit arts organization Through the Flower, and local groups invited the public to send 24-inch triangular quilt pieces honoring a woman of the quiltmaker's choice.<sup>37</sup> The International Honor Quilt (Fig. 10),<sup>38</sup> made from these pieces, became an ongoing project, growing as the exhibit travelled throughout 1980–88 to include 539 quilts, and was a required installation feature (at least a selection).<sup>39</sup> This inclusive element exemplified Chicago's community-oriented intent, offering a deeper historical context and the inclusion of more women, a significant acknowledgment of the limitations of *The Dinner Party*, as it was challenging institutional exclusions.

The original grassroots tour, included seven US exhibitions, three in Canada, two in the U.K., one in Frankfurt, Germany, ending with Melbourne, Australia, in 1988.<sup>40</sup> At each stop, educational programs and local exhibitions promoted and contextualized *The Dinner Party's* message. The team liaison, Diane Gelon, worked with local committees on getting a venue, fundraising, installation, events, and promotion. Chicago or a team member spoke at opening weekends. New courses were developed, such as "Women in Europe" at the University of Houston. A conference titled "Women's Heritage: Celebration and Challenge" was organized in Chicago. Prominent political figures became involved, such as then-Mayor Jane Byrne in Chicago, and local women artists exhibited work.<sup>41</sup> For example, Suzanne Lacy, a

former Chicago student, and *The Dinner Party* studio artist Linda Preuss, organized *The International Dinner Party* at the opening of the San Francisco exhibition, inviting participants worldwide to hold celebrations to honor historical women in their local communities.<sup>42</sup> In Chicago, a professional dance group performed in the street, an all-women orchestra played, and a slide exhibition featured prominent women in the city's history.<sup>43</sup> The documentary showed next door to the main exhibition, allowing viewers to see the artistic and collaborative process. A bookstore sold *The Dinner Party* items, and regional artwork. Artemisia Gallery, a women-owned exhibition space, hosted the china-painting exhibition. The Art Gallery of Ontario used *The Dinner Party* as a fundraiser—and it worked, selling out in its second week.<sup>44</sup>

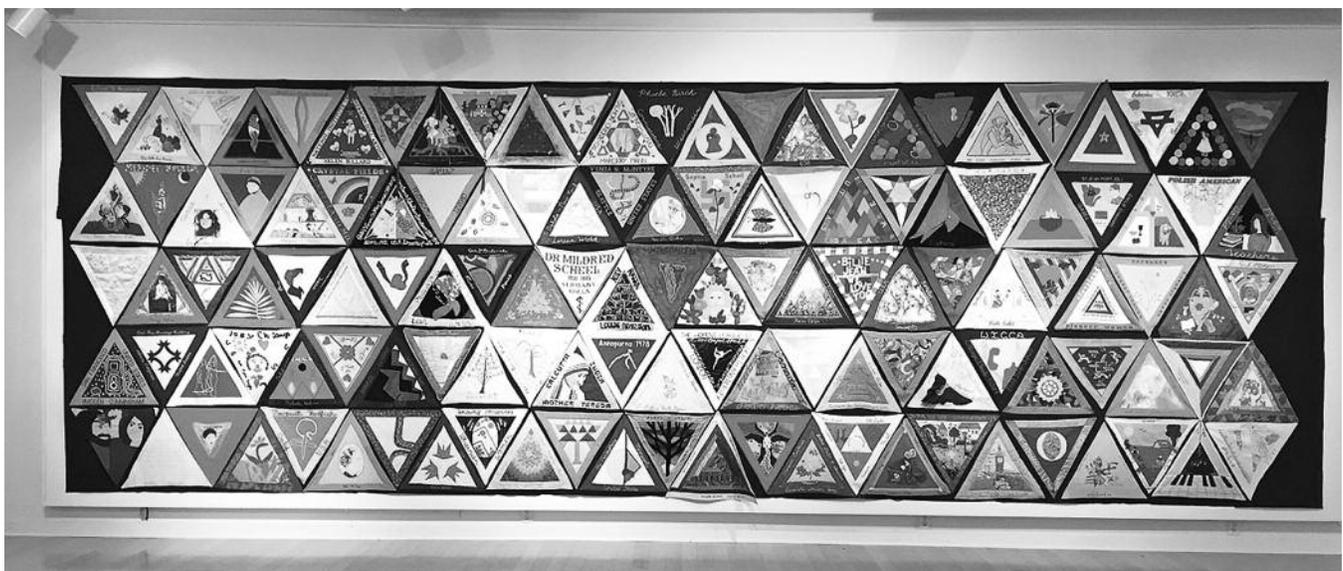
The last European stop in 1987 took place in Frankfurt's Schirn Kunsthalle, a contemporary art museum, a year after *The Dinner Party* festival took place in a restored Opera House in Frankfurt. The three-day festival to raise money to exhibit *The Dinner Party* was organized by Dagmar von Garnier, a self-described "folklorist dance expert." Women were invited to research and dress up as a woman inscribed on the floor of *The Dinner Party*, while an all-female orchestra played during the opening. Over a thousand women participated, exemplifying the tremendous excitement over the piece and its message, but a point of contention arose regarding the contextual events. Chicago spoke about the Holocaust during her opening lecture and planned to refer to it again during a presentation on the third day of the festival, but von Garnier did not allow it. This disagreement resulted in a falling out between the two. The German-folk-inspired events proved controversial in contextualizing the work, as well.<sup>45</sup> (In fact, some reviewers and participants found the festival's folklore-programming reminiscent of Nazi-era rituals.) Today, however, the festival is remembered by Chicago with warm regard.<sup>46</sup> Though *The Dinner Party* exhibit in Frankfurt the following year was deemed "the most popular" exhibition of the year for the Museum, it was met with negative criticism from German media (perhaps due to the controversy with von Garnier), which focused on the content and Chicago's personal feminism. This controversy echoes today with its recent installations, revealing how an exhibition might be promoted by curators and interpreted by viewers. Though this memory has been relegated to a warm one, it echoes the significance of the context of art as it gets interpreted by others.

As evidenced by their international grassroots tour, even after the original tour collapsed,<sup>47</sup> Chicago's team continued networking with local feminist and women's groups. Gelon continued to write inquiries for potential venues. Some venues wanted to host but lacked the required space. Rejections referred to *The Dinner Party's* size, cost, or its being declared "unfit" with regular programming.<sup>48</sup> While the feminist content was subject to intense scrutiny from popular and academic media, the challenging curatorial approach, from the art to the educational and documentary components, also elicited institutional resistance.<sup>49</sup> This early controversy foretold its ultimate presentation.



Fig. 9. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, The Acknowledgement Panels (1974–79), one of three panels, each 94 3/4" x 48 1/4" x 1". Artwork © Judy Chicago. Photo: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn, NY.

Fig. 10. (below) Judy Chicago, *International Honor Quilt*, detail (1980–88), installed at Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville. Artwork © Judy Chicago. Photo: Hite Art Institute.



Chicago designed a permanent installation for *The Dinner Party*, which was displayed on a documentary panel (Fig. 11).<sup>50</sup> She envisioned a triangular building that would include a second floor with the Entryway Banners and space for people to look down upon the table. The plan shows benches in a porcelain-walled gallery, and a library.<sup>51</sup> This design was never carried out, and following the last exhibition, in 1988, *The Dinner Party* was placed in storage with *Through the Flower* in its then-headquarters in Santa Monica, California.<sup>52</sup> In 2002, philanthropist Elizabeth Sackler acquired it as the centerpiece for the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, which opened in 2007.<sup>53</sup> Architect Susan Rodriguez won the commission to design the ESCFA around *The Dinner Party*. Although Rodriguez's design retained many aspects of Chicago's original plan, the loss of the contributors' agency diverged from the original exhibition experience, overlooking the many people who participated in this exhibition meant to honor those overlooked throughout history.<sup>54</sup>

In Rodriguez's design *The Dinner Party* table occupied the center of the Sackler Galleries. Viewers would enter through a corner hallway displaying the Entryway Banners, which were

backed by red walls, as with the original installation.<sup>55</sup> Rodriguez's table room also shares similarities with Chicago's design. A separate room with a dark atmosphere, Rodriguez's entrance to the table following the Entryway Banners had black walls. Varying from the original, Rodriguez's design included "sloped walls ... lined with large glass tablets" creating mirror-like, infinite reflections.<sup>56</sup> This emphasized the contrast of viewing the art through the restricted lens of frames at a distance. The glass-lined walls evoke intimacy, inviting viewers in. Though a different effect than the original, Chicago acknowledged that "The glass walls accomplish something the porcelain would have also achieved, that is, a dematerialization of the space which I like very much."<sup>57</sup>

Each corner holds a triangular glass panel looking into the surrounding galleries. According to Rodriguez, "The open corners at the vertices allow glimpses into the space from the changing exhibits that envelop the gallery, provoking consideration of contemporary feminist art in the context of the movement's legacy. These glimpses actively challenge preconceptions established by the Museum's adjacent period rooms."<sup>58</sup> The corners light life-sized triangles, reflecting

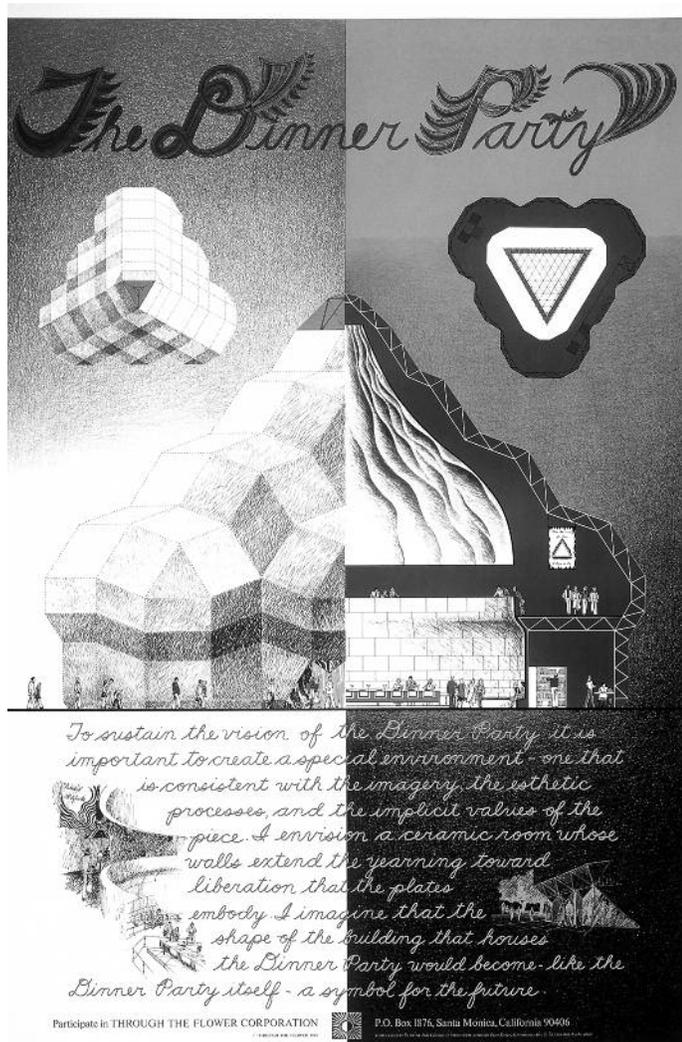


Fig. 11. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party Permanent Housing* (1979), offset lithography on paper, 36" x 24". National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. Artwork © Judy Chicago. Photo: Courtesy the artist.

Chicago's symbol of an ideal, equalized world. The Sackler designers were not able to achieve individualized lighting. There are no rainbows reflected on the porcelain floor, and some of the runners are in low light, as sustainability was a factor. Still, viewers can walk around, look over and experience the interactive installation of women in relation to women, as per Chicago's intent. The table proves critically relevant, continuously challenging patriarchal institutional structure, while the glass reflections and corner glimpses encourage individual criticality and contemporary experience.

Rodriguez designed The Heritage Panels (Fig. 12) after viewing the table in the Herstory Gallery, a space in the EASFA located outside *The Dinner Party* table room, where seven large-scale collaged panels contained information, related art, and artifacts.<sup>59</sup> Updated before the 2007 installation, many of Chicago's findings were still current, and others needed revising based on more recent research.<sup>60</sup> The Herstory Gallery was designed for changing exhibits inspired by *The Dinner*

*Party*. Current head curator Catherine Morris noted that curatorial inspirations lay in "moments" in *The Dinner Party* to tell a larger story.<sup>61</sup> Viewers could read and interact with the historical and cultural context on The Heritage Panels, in connection with the exhibition on view and relating to aspects of women's past using selections from the Sackler collection.

*The Dinner Party* is significant to the EASCFA's mission: "to raise awareness of feminism's cultural contributions, to educate new generations about the meaning of feminist art, to maintain a dynamic and welcoming learning environment."<sup>62</sup> According to curator Morris, "*The Dinner Party* is central literally and figuratively to the Sackler Center itself. It's important because it situates the Center within a history and within the institution this is the most successful function of it. This is a historical institution that reflects a similar type of history that Judy Chicago was correcting—visually important that we point to this and continue to correct."<sup>63</sup> Morris solidifies Rodriguez's intentions in extending *The Dinner Party's* story through the layering of spaces, asserting a powerful feminist identity for the EASCFA.<sup>64</sup> In this way, *The Dinner Party* establishes the curatorial framework for the Center.

A 2015 wall label offered a brief history of the table, its production, context in the feminist movement, and architectural plan; missing was information regarding the curatorial framework and volunteers. The label defined *The Dinner Party* as the Banners, Heritage Panels, Heritage Floor, and table, with no mention of the Acknowledgement and Documentary Panels and the International Honor Quilt. The absence of these original elements revealed an irony, that a portion of a work meant to bring symbolic awareness to a traditionally silenced population is itself silenced. This also reveals the institutional impact and its change over time away from the artist's inclusive ideals and team members' design.

When the Heritage Panels were taken down from permanent display in 2016, The Brooklyn Museum introduced a new application, ASK Brooklyn Museum, which invites viewers to identify artwork with Bluetooth and text questions to art historians and educators.<sup>65</sup> The most popular searched-item is *The Dinner Party*.<sup>66</sup> A printed "PocketMuseum Cell Phone Gallery Guide" for the place settings includes brief descriptions of The Entryway Banners, the table, The Heritage Floor, The Heritage Panels, and The Acknowledgment Panels,<sup>67</sup> indicating a desire to connect with audiences, which could help them grasp *The Dinner Party's* vastness.

Because the table is considered the key aspect, as evidenced in standard discourse, so, perhaps, the exclusion of certain elements was deemed acceptable, if not ideal. For Morris, the Entryway Banners and table are the most important aspects of *The Dinner Party*,<sup>68</sup> which is likely linked to the restructuring. A recent show at the museum, titled *The Roots of 'The Dinner Party': History in the Making* (2017–18), included The Heritage Panels as well as test plates, research documents, ephemera, notebooks, and preparatory drawings, encouraging deeper understanding of the process and final work.

Scholars will continue to debate the aesthetics and intent of *The Dinner Party*. This examination is meant to shed light on

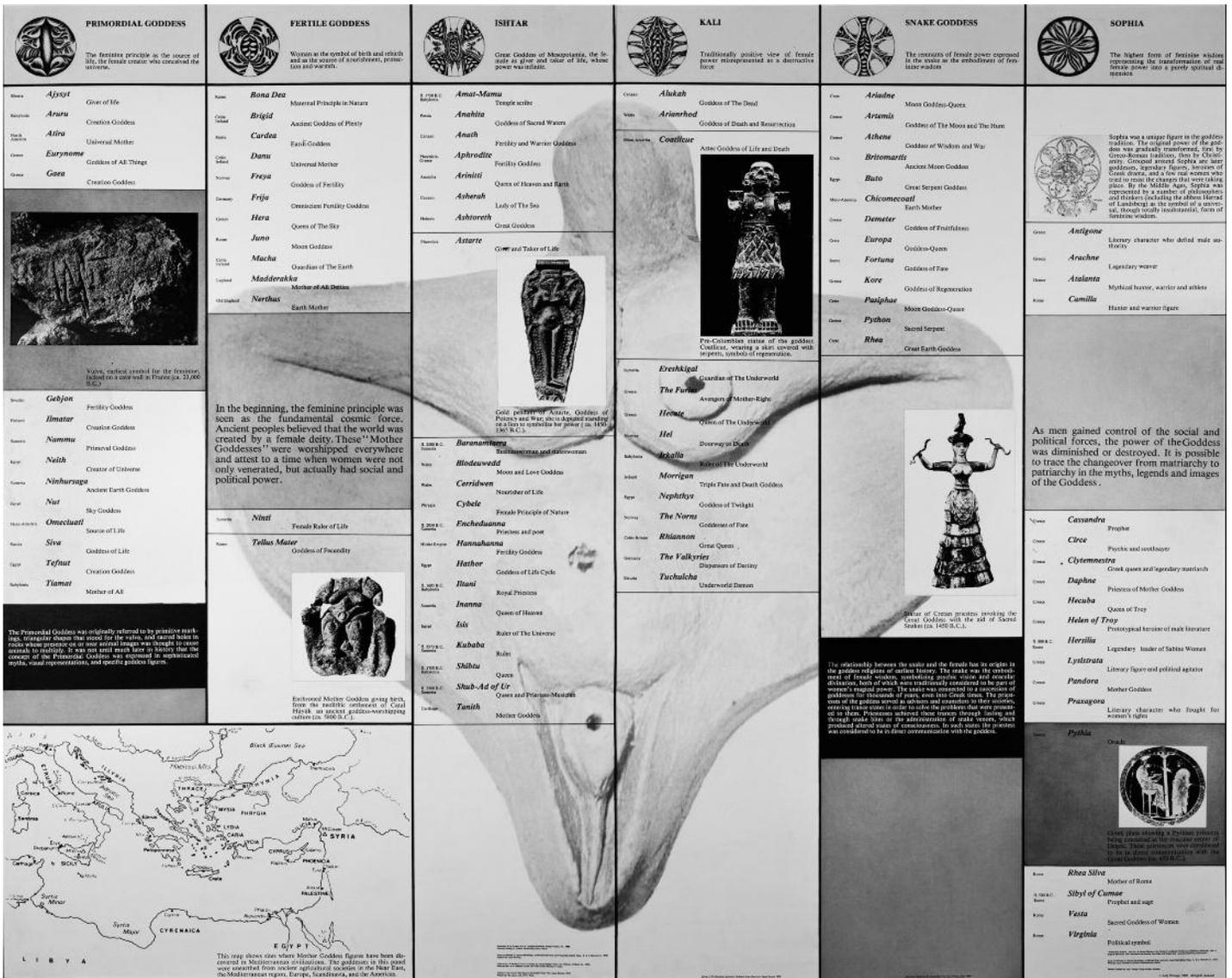


Fig. 12. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party, Heritage Panel* (1979–2007), one of seven photographic reproductions of hand-colored photo-and-text collages, ranging in size from 57 1/2" x 70 3/4" to 57 1/2" x 107". Artwork © Judy Chicago. Photo: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn, NY.

Chicago's curatorial methods. Chicago's multifaceted and complex installation has yet to be fully recognized as a strong curatorial exemplar, providing considerations including collaborative elements; accessibility and interactivity; elements assembled in a critical, conversational manner; enriching context accessible to a broad audience; limited flexibility to accommodate institutional limitations; and encouragement of regional contextual elements and activities.

From Chicago's early innovations developing context through research, artistic experimentation, and creating a framework for honoring women's contributions to history, to *The Dinner Party's* contemporary display, the curatorial implications are significant. This article also touches on how *The Dinner Party* current exhibition reflects the original design and also deviates from it through the process of institutionalization. The hope is that some of the strategies and

feminist innovations outlined here might be integrated into contemporary feminist curatorial discourse and practice. •

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**Notes**

1. See, for example, Anna Marie Pois, "Review: *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* by Judy Chicago," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 4, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 72.
2. For more on the controversies, see, for example, Jane Gerhard, *The Dinner Party* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2013); Amelia Jones, *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Berkeley:

- Univ. of California Press, 1996), or Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation* (London and New York: Merrell, 2006).
3. For example, Chicago and artists such as Adrian Piper and Mary Kelly have used and continue to use innovative curatorial tactics to explore context and audience experience, before curators recognized them as such.
  4. Julia Halperin and Charlotte Burns, "Museums Claim They're Paying More Attention to Female Artists. That's an Illusion," *ArtnetNews*, <https://news.artnet.com/womens-place-in-the-art-world/womens-place-art-world-museums-1654714>, accessed Oct. 23, 2019. Note that Chicago's feminism is not the purview of this paper.
  5. Judy Chicago, email with the author, April 22, 2015.
  6. Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: An Autobiography of a Feminist Artist*, (New York, Lincoln, Shanghai: Author's Choice Press, 1975, 1996), 11.
  7. Frances Borzello, "An Art History Sit-In: The Dinner Party in Its Artistic Context," in *The Dinner Party: Restoring Women to History*, ed. Judy Chicago (New York: Monacelli Press, 2014), 259–60.
  8. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 103–04. There is a great deal of literature about *Womanhouse*. See also, for example, Temma Balducci, "Revisiting 'Womanhouse': Welcome to the (Deconstructed) Dollhouse," *Woman's Art Journal* 27: 2 (Fall-Winter 2006), 17–23.
  9. See for descriptions, Balducci, "Revisiting 'Womanhouse': Welcome to the (Deconstructed) Dollhouse"; Linda Napikoski, "Womanhouse," Thoughtco, Women's History, <http://womenshistory.about.com/od/feminism/a/womanhouse.htm>, accessed Jan. 7, 2020.
  10. Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 203.
  11. Judy Chicago, "Introduction: Restoring Women to History," in Chicago, ed., *The Dinner Party: Restoring Women to History*, 10.
  12. Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 178.
  13. Solo exhibition of china painting at Ruth Schaffner Gallery in Los Angeles, 1977. Judy Chicago, interview by author via email, April 22, 2015.
  14. Gail Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist* (New York: Random House, 2007), 295.
  15. Schlesinger Library holds Judy Chicago papers from 1947 through 2004, <https://hollisarchives.lib.harvard.edu/repositories/8/resources/7648>, accessed Jan. 11, 2020.
  16. Diane Gelon, email with the author, Nov. 10, 2015.
  17. Diane Gelon, interview with the author, Sept. 4, 2015.
  18. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007*, 187.
  19. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* Exhibition, installation diagrams [and instructions], n.d., Judy Chicago Papers, 20.45, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard Library, hereafter Chicago, *The Dinner Party* Exhibition, installation diagrams. All further references to the original requirements are based on these diagrams and instructions.
  20. Diane Gelon, interview with the author, Sept. 4, 2015.
  21. Though the only non-English speaking country where it was exhibited was Germany, Gelon had meetings with museums in France, and corresponded with people in Italy. Diane Gelon, email with the author, July 31, 2016.
  22. Diane Gelon, interview with the author, Sept. 4, 2015.
  23. Donald Woodman, interview with the author, Nov. 8, 2015.
  24. The names were written in Palmer script, which Chicago chose as a representation of 20th century penmanship. Chicago, *Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*, 21–21. "Subject" context might imply that the women were both involved in the same professional fields such as art, literature, or science.
  25. Chicago, *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*, 288.
  26. "The Dinner Party," Elizabeth A. Sackler for Feminist Art, [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/easca/dinner\\_party/heritage\\_panels/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/easca/dinner_party/heritage_panels/), accessed Jan. 7, 2020.
  27. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party* Exhibition, installation diagrams.
  28. Diane Gelon, interview with the author, Sept. 4, 2015.
  29. See, for example, *The Dinner Party* photographs at <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/exhibitions/634>, accessed Jan. 11, 2020.
  30. Chicago, *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*, 27.
  31. Henry Hopkins, quoted in Mildred Hamilton, "The Dinner Party' Left without a Second Sitting," *San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle*, July 1, 1979, 6.
  32. Mark Stevens, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?," *Newsweek*, April 2, 1979, 92.
  33. Eunice Lipton, "Ain't Misbehavin': At Chicago's Dinner Party," *Cleveland Beacon* 1, no. 5, June 1981, 6.
  34. Lucy Lippard, "Dinner Party a Four-Star Retreat: A Feminist Counterpart of the Sistine Chapel," *Seven Days*, April 27, 1979, 27–29.
  35. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007*, 232–33.
  36. *Ibid.*, 224–26.
  37. Chicago, *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*, 213.
  38. Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago*, 320. The International Honor Quilt was originally called "The International Quilting Bee."
  39. The exhibition manual provided instructions for hanging selections with Velcro. Venue staff were invited to select portions "in conjunction with the TTF needlework supervisors." See Chicago, *The Dinner Party* Exhibition, installation diagrams. In 2013, it was donated to and is now housed at the University of Louisville Hite Art Institute.
  40. The American tour, organized and fundraised for with local women's groups, included five community shows: in Houston, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, and Atlanta; and two museums: SFMOMA and the Brooklyn Museum. Beyond the US, *The Dinner Party* international tour lasted eight years and included exhibitions in three Canadian museums, at the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh, The Warehouse in London, Frankfurt's Schirn Kunsthalle (a contemporary art museum), and the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne, Australia, in 1988. See Gerhard, "From Controversy to Canonization: *The Dinner Party's* Journey to Brooklyn," 275.
  41. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007*, 207–08.
  42. Elke Krasny, "Feminist Thought and Curating: On Method," *Curating Degree Zero Archive* 26 (Sept. 2015), 63.
  43. "The Dinner Party in Chicago," The Dinner Project in Chicago, <http://www.dinnerpartyprojectchicago.org/PageExhibition/Exhibit0n.html>, accessed Jan 7, 2020.
  44. John Bentley Mays, "Epic Dinner Party strikes to the core," *The Globe and Mail* (Canada), May 22, 1982.
  45. Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago*, 359.
  46. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*, 275.
  47. Reasons for cancellation included the educational programming requirements, and interpretation of the installation as being political rather than fine art. As Chicago intentionally designed the work to be challenging traditional museum modes of exhibition curating, it was difficult for some people to view it as art. The entirety of the exhibition including the brochures, and the other

- "non-fine art" aspects of the Heritage Panels, Acknowledgement, and Documentary Panels, as well as the controversy over the media and content, created a complex and boundary-breaking exhibition situation. The Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Rochester canceled its exhibition due to the educational programming requirement by Chicago and Through the Flower for exhibiting *The Dinner Party*. The Seattle Art Museum canceled, claiming the space had been preempted by another project, though the director had visited *The Dinner Party* studio with a positive experience before its SFMOMA debut in 1979. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007*, 183-84. Seattle's curator of modern art, Charles Cowles, publicly shared his stance: "I do not consider it fine art, but an interesting project by a group of women whom the leader was an artist. I saw it more as a political statement than art." Mildred Hamilton, "The Dinner Party' Left Without a Second Sitting," *San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle*, July 1, 1979, Scene 6. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007*, 180-85.
48. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007*, 187.
  49. *Ibid.*, 212.
  50. Wall text, *The Dinner Party Permanent Housing*, Through the Flower and Judy Chicago, 1979. Chicago, with structural designer Peter Pearce and artist Carlos Diniz, merged industrial technology with personal content for the design.
  51. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party Permanent Housing*, lithograph, 1979.
  52. Judy Chicago, "Feminist Art Education: Made in California," in *Entering the Picture: Judy Chicago, the Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists*, ed. Jill Fields (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2011), 111.
  53. Gerhard, "From Controversy to Canonization: The Dinner Party's Journey to Brooklyn," 275. The work was installed in the Brooklyn Museum's Rotunda (where it had been shown in 1980), before the EASCFA was designed and built, and Chicago, Woodman, Susan Hill, and Diane Gelon were present for this installation as coordinators. Diane Gelon and Susan Hill emails with the author, Nov. 10, 2015; Donald Woodman, interview with the author, Nov. 8, 2015.
  54. The Acknowledgement Panels are owned by the EASCFA but were not included in the design to be on permanent display (they can be seen on the EASCFA website). The International Honor Quilt, including 539 quilts, were donated to the Hite Art Institute in Louisville, Kentucky in 2013. The Documentary Panels were acquired by the National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington D.C. It is unknown why the EASCFA did not purchase the Quilts or Documentary Panels. Though it reflects the earlier institutional response. See "The Dinner Party: Acknowledgement Panels," Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, 2015, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/acknowledgement\\_panels](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/acknowledgement_panels), accessed Jan 7, 2020. "International Honor Quilt," University of Louisville, Hite Art Institute, <http://louisville.edu/art/facilities-resources/international-honor-quilt>, accessed Oct. 7, 2015.
  55. Red is one of the common colors throughout the place settings, notably in the setting for Margaret Sanger, for which "red hue serves as a reminder of the bloodshed of many women who died during childbirth or as a result of illegal and unsafe abortions. It also signifies the struggle of early reproductive rights activists." "Margaret Sanger," [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/place\\_settings/margaret\\_sanger](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/place_settings/margaret_sanger), accessed Jan. 7, 2020.
  56. Susan Strauss, *Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art* (New York: Polshek Architects, 2009), 18.
  57. Judy Chicago, email with the author, May 21, 2015.
  58. Susan T. Rodriguez, "A Triangular Gallery," *Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art*, (New York: Polshek Partnership, LLP, 2009), 7.
  59. Elizabeth A. Sackler for Feminist Art: "The Dinner Party: Heritage Panels," [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/heritage\\_panels/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/heritage_panels/), accessed Jan. 7, 2020.
  60. Chicago, *Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*, 288.
  61. Catherine Morris, interview with the author, Sept. 25, 2015.
  62. "About the Center," Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/about/index.php>, accessed Jan. 7, 2020.
  63. Catherine Morris, interview with the author, Sept. 25, 2015.
  64. Rodriguez, "A Triangular Gallery," *Brooklyn Museum: Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art*, 7.
  65. "iTunes: ASK Brooklyn Museum," <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/ask>, accessed January 11, 2020.
  66. Meredith Deliso, "ASK Brooklyn Museum app engages visitors with the artwork," *amNewYork*, April 17, 2016, <http://www.amny.com/lifestyle/ask-brooklyn-museum-app-engages-visitors-with-the-artwork-1.11701295>, accessed Jan. 11, 2020.
  67. "The Dinner Party, by Judy Chicago: PocketMuseum Cell Phone Gallery Guide," Brooklyn Museum of Art, exhibition pamphlet, 2016.
  68. Catherine Morris, interview with the author, Sept. 20, 2015.

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E.R.A. NOW acrylic on canvas 40"x30" 2018

### Social Issues Art

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# PAINTING THE MARGINS

## TINA BLAU AND THE SPACES OF MODERNITY

By Julie M. Johnson



Fig. 1. Tina Blau, *Spring at the Prater* (1882), oil on canvas, 84 1/4" x 114 1/2". Photo: Belvedere, Vienna.

**T**ina Blau (1845–1916) was a pioneer Impressionist in her native Austria. In *Spring at the Prater* (1882; Fig 1 and Pl. 17), her signature work, Blau captures an impression of Vienna's "people's park," where all social classes could meet in the expanse of nature, whether to enjoy the pleasure of wading in a muddy stream or the chance meeting or parade of fashion on a spring day. In its most recent display at the Belvedere's 2019 retrospective of women artists, "City of Women," the canvas appeared to float, cinematically lit against a dark blue wall. When it was initially displayed at the 1882 international Künstlerhaus exhibition it caused a stir: one critic complained that it created a "hole in the wall," so light was her palette compared to the other canvases. The French Minister of Fine Arts admired it and declared it "the best picture in the whole room."<sup>1</sup>

Blau lived long enough to become an "old mistress" during her lifetime, celebrated by a select few and a coterie of devoted students who studied with her at the Art School for Women and Girls, which she co-founded in 1897. Her student and fellow co-founder, Rosa Mayreder (1858–1938) was certainly an admirer. Writing as an art critic under the pseudonym of "Franz Arnold," she was once assigned to write a review of the Vienna Secession, but subversively turned the review into a notice for Blau's first one-person exhibition at a local art dealer's.<sup>2</sup> In it, Mayreder accused Gustav Klimt of copying Munich-based artist Franz Stuck, and suggested that to really discover the original, "homegrown" art of Austria, which critic Hermann Bahr had claimed the Secession represented, one would do better to walk over to the Salon Pisko, where Blau's

work was on view. The emperor purchased *Spring at the Prater* from a collector in Bavaria that year, and so the painting went on display with the court collections in Vienna's new Kunsthistorisches Museum.<sup>3</sup> A decade later, it was shown at the Secession, as one of the highlights of the first international retrospective of women artists, a splashy event that filled the modern building with over three hundred paintings, sculptures, and works on paper from the Renaissance to the present. The exhibition was curated by two founding members of a new association of women artists, who travelled through Europe to borrow works from imperial and national collections to debut their artist association with the unassailable argument that women artists were great, too. For them, Blau was key, and fortunately for them, her "Praterbild" (Prater picture) belonged to the Habsburgs—all they had to do was borrow it. Although Blau supported feminist causes, she likely would have said no, as she had in the past to all invitations from separate women's art exhibition groups. She had had one bad experience, and the discourse on women artists in Vienna was all too often demeaning and misogynist, which the curators of "The Art of the Woman" would soon discover for themselves.<sup>4</sup> That was much less the case with solo exhibitions, and Blau often received good notices in the press. Blau was well aware of the unfairness of Vienna's art world, but never let it stop her. Not only did she foster the talents of countless women and girls in the field of plein-air painting, she continued to paint and travel to artist colonies throughout her long life.

Tina Blau's immersive landscapes, still little known outside Austria, present a challenge to contemporary theories of difference and representation. Prominent feminist scholars working on nineteenth-century women artists have focused on difference, not just in terms of social history, but also in how women represented subject matter. The argument has been made that the public spaces of modernity were inaccessible to women artists in France.<sup>5</sup> Outdoor scenes painted by women express the frustration of women who were confined, and the "psychic spaces of femininity" can be read in the compressed spaces, as in *View of Paris from the Trocadéro* (1872) by Berthe Morisot (1841–95). This theory has been "open to dispute," because men used the same compositional devices, for example, compare Morisot's *Summer's Day* (1879; Fig. 2) with *Boating* (Fig. 3), an 1874 canvas by Edouard Manet.<sup>6</sup> Morisot, "the only woman plein-air Impressionist who is now accorded equivalent status to her male colleagues" is nevertheless in Anthea Callen's estimation often painting from a balcony, or in a garden, rather than from a more immersive point of view in public space.<sup>7</sup> For Callen, the fence in the foreground of Morisot's *Hanging the Laundry Out to Dry* (1875; Fig. 4) not only bars the spectator from the scene, but mirrors the artist's "restricted" location: "she works not outdoors here, but from an upper window or balcony."<sup>8</sup>

Such theories about women and space do not apply to Blau's aesthetic production, and, at least given the current state of scholarship on women artists, make her all the more exceptional, at least in the French context.<sup>9</sup> Blau engaged themes that T.J. Clark and other social historians have singled out as defining the modernist nineteenth-century landscape in



Fig. 2. Berthe Morisot, *Summer's Day* (1879), oil on canvas, 18" x 29 5/8". National Gallery, London. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 3. Edouard Manet, *Boating* (1874), oil on canvas, 38 1/4" x 51 1/4". Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 4. Berthe Morisot, *Hanging the Laundry Out to Dry* (1875), oil on canvas, 13" x 16". National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 5. Tina Blau, *At the Danube Regulation* (1872), oil on canvas, 8 1/4" x 11". Wien Museum, Vienna, Inv. Nr. 117.383. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

France, a decidedly “masculine” genre.<sup>10</sup> The Impressionists chose to paint the margins where industrialization, leisure, labor, and new man-made interventions into nature took place—not quite suburbia, or the sprawl of an extended periphery, but rather the environs that could be reached by short train trips from Paris.<sup>11</sup> The new subject matter of industrial waterways, canals, harbors, smokestacks, and factories differentiates French modernist landscapes from peasant painting, the Barbizon school, and the nymphs of Corot. These latter scenes were seen as timeless, unchanging and had a nostalgic appeal for Parisians. As the avant-garde artists sought out the edges where modernization was taking place, they also devised new modes of representing it. A match between form and content is how one could be of one’s time.<sup>12</sup>

The engineered landscape and the facture of modern art that revealed the work of the artist appears in Blau’s 1872 painting *At the Danube Regulation* (Fig. 5). A cart with digging equipment idles in the distance; a laborer rests on the dried bed of a water channel. Behind the barren landscape, tall trees loom like apparitions in an unforgiving cloudless sky, merely suggested by the thinnest layer of paint. The title is necessary to determine the subject matter, for the artist leaves out narrative details, allowing the aesthetics of her brushwork to take precedence over what is being depicted. The Danube regulation (1870–75) was undertaken by a French company whose machinery had dug the colossal Suez Canal.<sup>13</sup> The same equipment was shipped to Vienna to create a straight line for the course of the Danube, to prevent deadly flooding, to dry up errant channels that turned parts of Vienna

and the Prater into random islands, and to reclaim land for the growing population.<sup>14</sup> Instead of showing the marvel of engineering, a spectacle of colossal proportions that transformed Vienna more than any of the great infrastructure projects of the nineteenth century,<sup>15</sup> Blau reminds us that there were manual laborers too. She gives us an image of the marginal, the periphery, a scene perhaps painted at Fischamend—the equipment shovels rather than machines.<sup>16</sup>

Blau’s frequent attention to mud, overturned earth, and prosaic scenes of labor is seen in another early work, *Rafters at the Tisza* (1874; Pl. 18), which she viewed during a trip to the artists’ colony of Szolnok.<sup>17</sup> Stark white shirts, a uniform for rafters, dot the composition in quickly formed brushstrokes. Piled logs and planed wood culminate in a figure standing upright at the center of the composition, not iconic like Delacroix’s heroic *Liberty Leading the People* (1830), but a mute punctuation of a white brushstroke on a slate blue horizon. Behind him, the sky is dusted with yellowed clouds. It is an old technology, in which rafters would build long rafts to transport logs on rivers, then disassemble them for the materials after taking arduous river journeys on them. Only the paint

scumbling and dry brushwork indicate the painter’s presence, which goes unnoticed by the bent-over forms of the laborers.

Rather than unconsciously incorporating compressed “psychic spaces of femininity” into representations of large outdoor spaces that she could not access comfortably, Blau consciously sought prototypes in the old masters, as many artists of the time did.<sup>18</sup> Her longed-for trip to the Netherlands, undertaken in 1875, allowed her to encounter the source of the genre, the Dutch landscape of the seventeenth century. She experienced this landscape firsthand, while viewing works by Jacob Ruisdael, who compressed space in topographical scenes, with edges of windmills on the horizon meeting vast, changing skies.<sup>19</sup> In Blau’s *Lane Near Amsterdam* (1875–76; Fig. 6) enormous trees loom over a scene of people clustered on a brick road, a ship in the distance, and a string of windmills on the horizon. The one-point perspective, developed into a landscape convention by Meindert Hobbema (1689; Fig. 7), became almost a way of seeing for Blau, who found it useful for describing the meeting between alley and canal, dock and sea, train tracks and Danube in *Railroad Construction at Dürnstein* (1909; Pl. 19).<sup>20</sup> It invites rather than restricts the viewer from entering the scene. Her interpretation of the Dutch landscape as seen through seventeenth-century prototypes allowed her to develop her lifelong interest in the engineered landscape, and to cultivate a fascination for meteorology and turbulent skies.

Even after having witnessed the impressive Danube regulation, Blau must have marveled at the reclaimed landscape of the Low Countries. It was then, and still remains, the ultimate

Fig. 6. Tina Blau,  
*Lane Near Amsterdam*  
(c. 1875–76),  
oil on canvas,  
25" x 35 3/8".

Kunstmuseum Lentos, Linz.  
Photo: Wikimedia  
Commons.



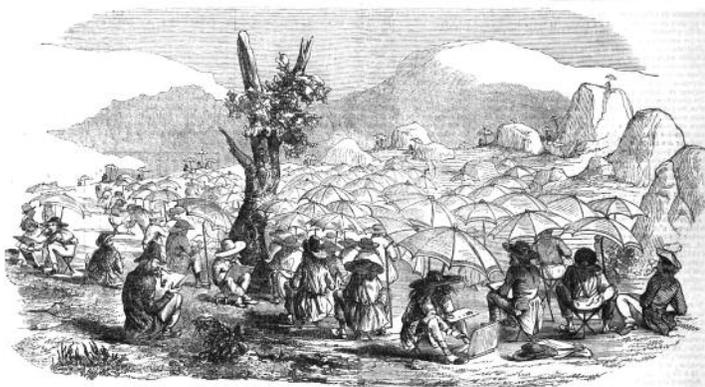
feat of engineering, with entire cities supported by pilotis over marshes. The geometry of plotted canals, polders, dikes, and machinery of windmills turned to keep the sea at bay, provided motifs for painters interested in spaces where the man-made meets nature. The extensive network of canals allowed for easy travel by towboat between villages, a practice continued into Blau's lifetime.<sup>21</sup> Fellow landscape painter Emil J. Schindler accompanied Blau on this first trip, but her later comment on the journey makes it sound as though he needed her more than she needed him.<sup>22</sup> She reworked the theme of the Dutch landscape in her Prater studio, sometimes years later, using her own plein-air sketches and photographs that she and Schindler commissioned as source material.<sup>23</sup> Like the French Impressionists, she exhibited oil sketches along with more finished works in the more intimate viewing space of the art dealer's salon.

Blau was, of course, not the only female landscape specialist in Vienna, and there were legions of women plein-air painters active in Central Europe. Gustav Klimt, for example, witnessed numerous women artists painting the landscape of Dachau, umbrellas opened, in search of a motif with "Stimmung," or mood. He wrote to Emilie Flöge in 1898 that the Dachau landscape (outside Munich) was "[a]n incomparably beautiful, picturesque piece of land—though quite flat, picturesque at every step and turn—a surplus of motifs—unfortunately also male and female painters in excess—akin to the garden spiders of late summer, so 'frequently' does one encounter them as they dodge the sun and elevate the 'mood' with their opened umbrellas."<sup>24</sup> If women landscape painters were a noticeably visible aspect of the artists' colony of Dachau, as witnessed by Klimt in 1898, they had also become part of contemporary life



Fig. 7. Meindert Hobbema, *The Avenue at Middleharnis* (1689), oil on canvas, 41" x 55 1/2". National Gallery, London. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

in and around the Prater, the park and nature preserve in the second district of Vienna. The Prater was a favorite motif of Blau, and she used it as a field trip destination for the course she taught at the Art School for Women and Girls beginning in 1897.<sup>25</sup> Yet Blau's focus on plein-air painting was decidedly rare for women in the French context, which Callen has determined was "a woman-free zone that marked the field as indisputably masculine."<sup>26</sup> No women are to be seen in an 1849 cartoon lampooning the popularity of outdoor painting, in which a sea



Les Peintres de Paysage dans la Forêt de Fontainebleau; — Étude d'après nature par un marchand de parapluies et de parasols.

Fig. 8. "Landscape Painters in the Forest of Fontainebleau: Study from Nature by a Merchant of Umbrellas and Parasols," from *L'illustration*, November 24, 1849, reproduced in Callen, *The Work of Art*, p. 53.

of umbrellas eclipses the landscape of Fontainebleau (Fig. 8). This is an accurate reflection of the known statistics for Barbizon, where just three percent of the recorded artists were women.<sup>27</sup> Callen posits that the masculinity of the French landscape tradition was due to the institution of bourgeois culture and imposition of domestic spheres after the French Revolution, in which women were shunted to the margins.<sup>28</sup> The extremely low number of women at Barbizon compared to other artists' colonies confirms that France's normative gender roles were especially pronounced.<sup>29</sup> The Habsburg Empire was still intact during Blau's life, and while gender equality remained but a dream, the gender dynamic in Central Europe may have been more akin to the situation in eighteenth-century France, when there were more prominent women artists, in Callen's account.

The act of painting outdoors required carrying equipment—umbrellas, packs, and paint trays—for which new portable versions were invented. Women also had to contend with encumbering nineteenth-century dress, which American artist Eliza Greator described in especially vivid terms:

I congratulated myself on being finely equipped for the tramp up the Cañon—short walking-dress, stout boots, and veil tied over my much suffering and rebellious nose, for the sun burns fearfully here ... My boots seemed most unfit to be trusted, my dress a mere incumbrance [sic], my veil no shield; for looking upward, there rose before us a straight wall of stones, bedded in gritty sand.... We, the petticoated ones of the party, tucked our draperies taut and snug, and went sliding, slipping, tripping, tumbling, till we felt we must be turning into atoms of an avalanche, whirling down that awful slide till we came breathless and almost stunned to the other side of "The Bath."<sup>30</sup>

Blau's encounters with the landscape did not involve tumbling down mountain slides. Like the French Impressionists, she focused on locations where the man-made meets nature. Such edges and margins are present in her depictions of various sites, including the Prater, technically inside the city, but where a wild nature preserve coexisted with amusements, carriage



Fig. 9. Tina Blau with her Painting Wagon (1911-12). Unknown photographer. Tina-Blau-Nachlass, New York.



Fig. 10. Postcard of Willy Sluiter painting *en plein air* by Volendam Harbor (c. 1905), reproduced in Brian Dudley Barrett, *Artists on the Edge. The Rise of Coastal Artists' Colonies, 1880-1920*, Amsterdam 2010, p. 319.

parades, restaurants, and other forms of leisure frequented by Vienna's wealthy and not-so-wealthy. Blau's ingenious solution for carrying equipment between her studio and painting sites at the Prater can be seen in a famous photograph (Fig. 9), in which she transports a large painting on a baby carriage with an attached easel. She used this for color checking and finishing touches,<sup>31</sup> reversing the process of Monet, who brought his *Grainstacks* inside his studio to retouch them in relation to one another as a series.

Often during the summer months, instead of experiencing the *Sommerfrische*, or summer stay in a lakeside residence, as Gustav Klimt did at Attersee, Blau traveled to artists' colonies,

Fig. 11. Tina Blau, *Harbor in Volendam* (c. 1905), oil on wood, 18 3/4" x 29 1/8".  
Photo: Vera Eisenberger, KG, Vienna.



from Dachau to Szolnok, in an extended practice over her life.<sup>32</sup> According to a recent study, women artists “found a higher level of acceptance, encouragement and security within these rural communities, more than if they remained in the more-structured, urban, art circles.”<sup>33</sup> In a sample of registered guests in several European colonies, women ranged from 3 to 49 percent of the resident artists, with an average around 15 percent. Volendam, a small Dutch village on the sea where Blau spent time in 1905, recorded 136 artists, with 15 percent women overall, and a variety of nationalities, while Barbizon recorded 253 artists, with just 3 percent women.<sup>34</sup> Anecdotes in diaries and letters reveal the special appeal the artists’ colonies held for women artists, who described great freedoms compared to social restrictions they experienced at home.<sup>35</sup> Artists’ colonies provided an unstructured sociability, with regular schedules of meals and evening festivities, painting in the mornings and afternoons, and “shop talk,” art critiques, and collegiality. Larger colonies supported separate groups, which divided themselves by nationality or language, but Volendam typically had thirty artists per season, and because there was just one hotel proprietor until 1907, we can reconstruct some aspects of Blau’s time there.<sup>36</sup> A painting on the door welcomed artists, and the hotel itself became a gallery with works given to the hotel by its guests.<sup>37</sup> The proprietor furnished some rooms as ateliers with props for artists and also provided studios on the hotel grounds, all along the waterfront, and in nearby properties.<sup>38</sup> A 1905 photograph of Willy Sluiter painting on the docks at Volendam (Fig. 10), which Blau also painted (Fig. 11), can help us imagine the relative ease with which artists could paint outdoors without carrying large amounts of supplies and equipment into the countryside. The town was beloved for its old picturesque views and local costumes, the upturned hats



Fig. 12. Adolph Menzel, *The Palace Garden of Prince Albert* (1846), oil on canvas, 26 3/4" x 33 7/8". National Gallery, Berlin. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

and baggy trousers still associated with the Netherlands, but Blau minimizes the quaint in favor of a dramatic one-point perspective scheme. She captures the shadows of clouds and raking sunlight moving across the sea and dock with loosely applied brushwork. The painting is a study in red as observed in the light conditions where the sea meets land. In this harbor habitat, the roofs, sails, shirts, even the clouds have turned red, but Blau is using local color—Volendam was nicknamed the “magenta village.”<sup>39</sup>

Blau was told that she was different when she was not allowed entrance to the Academy of Fine Arts or membership in the Künstlerhaus association, but she did not believe that her art was any less "competent."<sup>40</sup> She painted a large number of high quality canvases and sketches, proving in her daily studio practice that she was as good as, even better than, most men artists; but she did not want to submit her art to a representative gender contest, which is how separate women's art exhibitions were received in Vienna.<sup>41</sup> Blau lived at a time when it was acceptable to publish misogynist tracts, to bar women from academies, and to limit their rights. She had extra obstacles to overcome as a woman but was unfailingly inventive—not only on the canvas, but also in the life solutions she created for herself and her students. She was sympathetic to the women's movement, and counted feminists among her dearest friends.<sup>42</sup> She found some freedom and replenished her creativity by traveling to artist's colonies, and, as a Viennese at home, she also experienced a few of the benefits of class distinction, the status that came with imperial approbation, and respect from students as a founder and teacher at the Art School for Women and Girls. Blau underwent posthumous erasure from histories of art because of her Jewish identity, and then, for a second time, received too little attention because she was a woman, even as formalism supposedly reigned in the academy. It took a renewed interest in identity for her reputation to be reestablished. Now we can take a more balanced view. Yet the question remains: is her art different because she was a woman? It is the product of a unique individual, who could only paint as she could, but it is hard to say exactly how one can differentiate the brushstrokes and choices she made as an artist from moment to moment as quantifiably connected to a single aspect of her identity.<sup>43</sup>

In looking back at the production of Blau, the paintings are there, as facts, as testaments to her talent, her way of seeing. But, as W.J.T. Mitchell writes:

... images are not words ... it seems to be part of the nature of visual images that they are always saying (or showing) something more than any verbal message can capture.... That is why a picture is said to be worth a thousand words—precisely because the exact words that can decode or summarize an image are so indeterminate and ambiguous. A picture is less like a statement or speech act, then, than like a speaker capable of an infinite number of utterances.<sup>44</sup>

Mitchell's claim is a reminder that spectatorship itself is gendered.<sup>45</sup> The very words we use to describe art are loaded with gendered associations. Instead of calling Morisot's brushstrokes "daring" and "Fauve before the fact," as Linda Nochlin has, early critics reduced Morisot's pioneering role in Impressionism to the more contained expression, "feminine" charm.<sup>46</sup> On the other hand, critics detected masculinity in Blau's work, which, when hanging next to paintings by her male colleagues in art exhibitions, looked "more severe and manly" than theirs.<sup>47</sup> In 1991, British curator Sarah Hyde tested how contemporary museumgoers use language to express their

preconceptions about gender and art. She placed similar works by men and women artists side by side, and asked visitors to guess which was by a woman and then to explain why, to perhaps isolate something in the composition, the color, or line quality. Blau was not in the exhibition, but one can resurrect Hyde's project as a thought experiment by comparing her painting of a resting laborer with Adolph Menzel's image of men lying down on the job next to their shovels. Might Menzel's elevated view and compressed space in *The Palace Garden of Prince Albert* (1846; Fig. 12), be equated with a restricted balcony view, and Blau's *At the Danube Regulation* (Fig. 5), with a more immersive visit to a land reclamation site? If the comparison were with a landscape by E.J. Schindler, might a viewer equate Schindler's poetic realism with femininity, and Blau's prosaic observations of labor and overturned dirt as masculine?

In *At the Weissgerber Landing (House Construction)* (Pl. 20), her 1905 painting of bricklayers at work, Blau continues her insistence on portraying immersive public spaces, in this case located near the Ringstrasse, but at an underdeveloped part of the Danube canal landing, just blocks from her home.<sup>48</sup> Blau has provided an image of laboring women, as Morisot has done with her *Hanging the Laundry* (Fig. 4). For Blau, though, the radical dissolution of the figure in which "all that is solid melts into air," as Nochlin describes Morisot's brushwork, is not at stake.<sup>49</sup> Blau cultivates instead the solid, layered, experienced hand of the old master, imposing architectonic clarity onto her encounter with modernity and the changing boundaries between urbanization and the natural world. Interlocking horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines introduce Poussinesque order to the construction site. A graying sky and muddy ground provide a backdrop for brilliant turquoise, Maria Theresa yellow, and terracotta colored bricks. In this late work, Blau both experiments with rhyming basic formal elements on the surface of the picture plane and continues to carve out space in her favored one-point perspective scheme.<sup>50</sup>

In modeling herself on old masters and taking on the subject matter of labor, periphery, and the engineered landscape, Blau staked out a claim, perhaps even as a conscious strategy, that she was not confined in her encounters with the landscape by gender norms. Blau belongs not just to a history of women artists, or a history of plein-air painting, but also to a history of artists who emulate old masters, from Manet to Yasumasa Morimura. Modernists like Manet did so because they wanted their art to be in dialogue with the past as they experimented with new forms on the canvas; postmodernists like Morimura appropriated old masters in order to play with gender and identification. Blau, who identified with, emulated and admired Ruisdael, Hobbema, Rembrandt, and Hals, falls somewhere in between the two. As Rita Felski observes, "Women's art, like men's art, is informed by its creator's situation, but not reducible to it; to see it as solely an expression of gender or sexual difference is to limit and pigeonhole it according to categories that men have long escaped."<sup>51</sup> This statement, it seems to me, matches Blau's life and work more than any other. If the plein-air field was gendered "masculine," as Callen writes, Blau's insistence on participating in the

immersive, plein-air field, emulating old masters, was a statement about gender in the simplest way possible. She asserted her right as an artist to paint the spaces of modernity, with increasing diagrammatic clarity. ●

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## Notes

This article first appeared in German as: “Malen an der Peripherie: Tina Blau und die Räume der Moderne,” in *Tina Blau*, ed. Agnes Husslein-Arco and Markus Fellingner (Vienna: Belvedere, 2016), 47–61.

- For more detail on how this anecdote became part of her biographical documentation see Julie M. Johnson, *The Memory Factory: The Forgotten Women Artists of Vienna 1900* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue Univ. Press, 2012), 27.
- Rosa Mayreder, [Franz Arnold], “Tina Blau,” *Magazin für Literatur* 68, no. 13 (April 1899), 306.
- Martina Haja, “Alltägliche Natur. Tina Blau und die Freilichtmalerei in Österreich,” in G. Tobias Natter, ed., *Plein Air. Die Landschaftsmalerin Tina Blau 1845–1916* (Vienna: Jewish Museum, 1996), 9.
- The exhibition and reception are covered in Johnson, *The Memory Factory*, 295–335.
- Such as the now-canonical scenes of bars and brothels. For the full argument, see Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” *Vision and Difference*, (London: Routledge, 1988), 50–90. Feminist scholars in the English-speaking world who have most profoundly transformed the field of nineteenth-century art have focused on women artists in France. This essay, therefore, while presenting Blau in a comparative “international” context, pays closest attention to that literature.
- Paul Smith, *Impressionism Beneath the Surface* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1995), 68. That one cannot tell the difference between male and female Impressionists does not mean they are free of the “gender relations in which they were produced and consumed.” Tamar Garb, “Gender and Representation,” *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven/London: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 287.
- Anthea Callen, *The Work of Art: Plein-air Painting and Artistic Identity in Nineteenth-Century France* (London: Reaktion, 2015), 9. Most scholars agree that Morisot focused on the spaces of bourgeois domesticity.
- Ibid., 238–39.
- For more recent work on how “definitions of both femininity and the public were mutually defining and constantly shifting,” see Temma Balducci/Heather Belnap Jensen, eds., *Women, Femininity and Public Space in European Visual Culture, 1789–1914* (Burlington, VT: Routledge/Ashgate, 2014).
- Callen, *The Work of Art*, 13.
- T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1984), 147; James Rubin, *Impressionism and the Modern Landscape. Productivity, Technology, and Urbanization from Manet to Van Gogh* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2008).
- The idea that the French Impressionists merely painted what they saw without analyzing it (a formalist approach) has been discredited since the 1940s, but scholars who have led investigations into social history and subject matter (Meyer Schapiro and T.J. Clark) do not discard aesthetic innovation. Robert Herbert, “Impressionism, Originality, and Laissez-Faire,” in Mary Tompkins Lewis, ed., *Critical Readings in Impressionism & Post-Impressionism* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2007), 23.
- On the politics of the shift from manual to machine labor at the Suez Canal see Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, *Colossal: Engineering the Suez Canal, Statue of Liberty, Eiffel Tower, and Panama Canal* (Pittsburgh: Periscope, 2012), 54–55.
- Wolfgang Kos and Ralph Gleis, eds., *Experiment Metropole, 1873: Wien und die Weltausstellung* (Vienna: Wienmuseum; Vienna: Cernin Verlag, 2014), 320–29.
- Ibid., 320.
- She sketched the regulation in Vienna, reworked the motif in Munich, and submitted three of these canvases with the German delegation to the World’s Exhibition in 1873, which took place on the Prater grounds. It cannot be determined with certainty that the Wienmuseum painting was one of the scenes displayed, however. Bad weather and muddy conditions made Blau’s representations of the Danube regulation very topical, but critics did not mention her work. Alexandra Ankwicz, “Tina Blau, eine österreichische Malerin,” *Frauenbilder aus Österreich* (Vienna: Obelisk Verlag, 1955), 257.
- Claus Jesina discusses Blau’s interest in overturned dirt, labor, and progress in “Motive aus Österreich” in Natter, ed., *Plein Air*, 114.
- Frances Suzman Jowell, “Impressionism and the Golden Age of Dutch Art,” in Ann Dumas, ed., *Inspiring Impressionism. The Impressionists and the Art of the Past* (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2007), 79–110.
- The spatial conventions of landscape painting were developed through military mapping; painters belonged to the same Dutch guilds as mapmakers. Ulrike Gehring, “Painted Topographies. A Transdisciplinary Approach to Science and Technology in Seventeenth-century Landscape Painting,” in Ulrike Gehring and Peter Weibel, eds., *Mapping Spaces. Networks of Knowledge in 17th-Century Landscape Painting* (Karlsruhe: ZKM Museum of Contemporary Art; Munich: Hirmer Publishers, 2014), 22–93.
- Blau made a pilgrimage to see works by Frans Hals and Rembrandt, whose works were experiencing a revival throughout Europe, but was not impressed with the contemporary Hague School of landscape painters. Blau, letter to her parents, September 21, 1875, quoted in Claus Jesina, “Holland—Die Faszination eines Landstrichs,” in Natter, ed., *Plein Air*, 80; Haja, “Alltägliche Natur,” 14–15.
- Ann Adams describes how “in almost Genesis-like fashion, the Dutch had reclaimed their land almost entirely from the waters” in “Competing Communities in the ‘Great Bog of Europe’: Identity and Seventeenth-Century Dutch Landscape Painting,” in W.J.T. Mitchell, ed., *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), 49.
- Blau later remarked that Schindler “tagged along with me from the beginning. He had only 400 Gulden and with such a small sum would never have been able to take a study trip to Holland.” Letter to August Schaeffer, Feb. 14, 1900, reprinted in Natter, ed., *Plein Air*, 172.
- Natter, ed., *Plein Air*, 166–67, 177; Ankwicz, “Tina Blau,” 258–59.
- “Eine unvergleichlich schönes malerisches | Stück Land—obwohl ganz flach malerisch auf jeden | Schritt und Tritt—Motive im Über- | maß—leider auch Maler und | Malerinen im Übermaß—| wie die Kreuzspinnen im Spätsommer, | so ‘häufig’ trifft man sie an und | sehen sie aus, mit ihren aufgespannten | Schirmen—sie weichen auch | der Sonne aus und gehen auf ‘Stimmung.’” Letter from Gustav

- Klimt to Emilie Flöge, Sept. 3, 1898, as quoted in Agnes Husslein-Arco and Alfred Weidinger, eds., *Gustav Klimt 150 Jahre* (Vienna: Belvedere, 2012), 289.
25. Blau's role as an innovator in teaching landscape painting to women deserves further research. She was the teacher for still life and landscape painting in the Munich Women's Academy from 1887 to 1894. After she moved back to Vienna, she became a founding member of the Art School for Women and Girls there and developed a landscape course that included field trips for plein-air painting. I would like to thank Markus Fellingner for the Klimt reference as well as discussing this aspect of Blau's influence on the next generation of women plein-air painters with me.
  26. Callen, *The Work of Art*, 13.
  27. Nina Lübbren, *Rural artists' colonies in Europe, 1870–1910* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 2001), 166.
  28. Callen, *The Work of Art*, 11–12.
  29. Nor was the French cult of masculinity as pronounced in the US when it came to plein-air painting. There are at least fourteen women landscape painters who deserve greater attention according to Nancy Siegel, "'We the Petticoated Ones': Women of the Hudson River School," in Siegel, ed., *The Cultured Canvas. New Perspectives on American Landscape Painting* (Durham: Univ. of New Hampshire Press, 2011), 177–78.
  30. Eliza Greathouse, *Summer Etchings in Colorado* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1873), 63–65, as quoted in Siegel, ed., *The Cultured Canvas*, 177.
  31. G. Tobias Natter, "Sie Kann Nicht aus der Mode Kommen," in G. Tobias Natter and Claus Jesina, eds., *Tina Blau (1845–1916)* (Salzburg: Verlag Galerie Welz, 1999), 12.
  32. For the list of her destinations, see G. Tobias Natter, "Dokumentation," in Natter, ed., *Plein Air*, 170.
  33. Brian Dudley Barrett, *Artists on the Edge. The Rise of Coastal Artists' Colonies, 1880–1920* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam Univ. Press, 2010), 344.
  34. Lübbren, *Rural artists' colonies*, 175. See her "Gazetteer" for more statistics, 164–77. Including non-artists—chaperones and the innkeeper's family—the ratio of women to men at Volendam reached 50 percent, according to Barrett, *Artists on the Edge*, 263.
  35. Lübbren, *Rural artists' colonies*, 27.
  36. Non-artists also occupied Spaander's hotel, which had 40 rooms by 1900. Barrett, *Artists on the Edge*, 249, 254.
  37. Details on Volendam are in Barrett, 242, 248–50, 258. The owners, Leendert and Aaltje Spaander (the wife actually ran the place) provided meals and a transport service for daytrippers from Amsterdam and introduced electricity and piped water (257, 291), something that Blau must have appreciated, as she often traveled with a portable rubber bathtub. Natter and Jesina, eds., *Tina Blau*, 134.
  38. Barrett, *Artists on the Edge*, 302.
  39. *Ibid.*, 254.
  40. See her letter to August Schaeffer, Feb. 14, 1900, reprinted in Natter, ed., *Plein Air*, 171–173.
  41. On this reception history, see Johnson, *The Memory Factory*, 263, 303–28. On Blau's refusal to exhibit with women's groups, see Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber, "Tina Blau und die Frauenbewegung," in Natter, ed., *Plein Air*, 43–45; Johnson, *The Memory Factory*, 39–41.
  42. Plakolm-Forsthuber, "Tina Blau und die Frauenbewegung," 48–52.
  43. For an elaboration of this idea, see Johnson, *The Memory Factory*, 23, 45–46.
  44. W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 140.
  45. One of the earliest lessons of feminist film theory came from responses to Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6–18, which broadened her model of spectatorship to be less staid, more fluid and multifaceted, with multiple identifications possible in the space of a very short time. Therefore, why can't a man imagine himself as a woman, as Charles Harrison suggested Degas may have been doing with some of his imagery? *Painting the Difference: Sex and Spectator in Modern Art* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 125.
  46. Linda Nochlin, "Morisot's Wet Nurse: The Construction of Work and Leisure in Impressionist Painting," in Ingrid Pfeiffer and Max Hollein, eds., *Women Impressionists* (Frankfurt: Hatje Cantz, 2008), 46. The essay first appeared in 1988; Tamar Garb, "Berthe Morisot and the Feminizing of Impressionism," in Mary Tompkins Lewis, ed., *Critical Readings*, 192. The essay first appeared in 1990. Because women, as it was then falsely believed, possessed more nerve endings, Morisot was optimally poised to capture the "sensations" of her surroundings; her nervous energy, feminine and unfiltered, so to speak, was brushed directly onto the canvas (Impressionists translated "sensations" of landscape through technique and temperament onto the canvas). Impressionism itself came to be gendered as feminine after 1891, 191–201.
  47. Hans Tietze, "Tina Blau," in *Kunstchronik*, N.F. 18, no. 7 (Nov. 10, 1916), 59, as cited in Plakolm-Forsthuber, "Tina Blau und die Frauenbewegung," 37.
  48. *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, Dec. 24, 1907, 4, as cited in <http://www.pratercottage.at/2016/04/26/bauarbeiterinnen-auf-der-weissgerberlaende-ca-1906/>, accessed Jan. 8, 2020. Blau lived on Rasumovskygasse 2 from 1895 to 1907.
  49. Nochlin, quoting Karl Marx in "Morisot's Wet Nurse," 46. Morisot's fence can be read not only as "restrictive" here, but also as asserting the flatness of the picture plane, in the modernist, Greenbergian sense.
  50. Morisot took part in constructing representations of work and suburban leisure, with scenes of laundresses and boating instead of bars and cabarets. With her brilliant analysis of Morisot's plein-air painting, *The Wet Nurse and Julie*, Nochlin reframed the field of French Impressionism by placing the subject of women's work at center. Morisot portrays her wet nurse, an employee, in the act of nursing her daughter. The marks of the labor of painting, the facture, are bound up with the theme of the laboring household help. In Nochlin's retelling, key paintings of French art, such as Manet's *Olympia* or *Bar at the Folies Bergère*, are only about men's leisure—the women are working. Nochlin, "Morisot's Wet Nurse," 46–54.
  51. Rita Felski, "Charmy: A Challenge to Art Theory," in Matthew Affron, ed., *Émilie Charmy* (Charlottesville, VA: Fralin Museum of Art, 2013), 64.



commitment to the art of critique necessary to social change and human transformation (21). Deutsche focuses on gendered subjectivity and the topic of imperialist war inherent in Rosler's work, particularly in *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, a series of twenty photomontages produced between 1967 and 1972 as anti-war flyers to distribute at demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. Home as a concept is explored in a wide perspective, quite literally as a dwelling, a space negotiating the private and public, but also a figure in Freudian terms standing for the human subject. In feminist discourse the home is affiliated with domesticity and male dominance inherent in the nuclear family. Deutsche navigates through different interpretations affiliated with the production of masculinity and femininity, questioning power structures and the violence of war in the context of phallic masculinity. Contributors to the exhibition catalogue also include Elena Volpato, who traces the artist's methodological origins and negotiation of meanings, and Rosler, whose text entitled "Exit Through the Thrift Shop" questions and explores "perfor-

mance reenactments" (15–20). The texts in the catalogue, accompanied with 582 color illustrations provide an insightful and rich introduction to the discursive context for Rosler's work and her embodied politics.

In light of our current politically, socially, and economically troubling times, Rosler's work is highly relevant. Her dedication to social justice and democracy reminds us of our responsibilities towards each other and the care that needs to be employed between and across communities and actions. The title of the exhibition and catalogue, "Irrespective," combines the words "retrospective" and "irreverent," drawing on Rosler's skepticism with regard to having her work displayed at public institutions. It may also be understood quite literally as "regardless" or "in spite of," making it an active call for action, solidarity, and responsibility. Her relentless effort, translated through aesthetics and irrevocably bound up with ethics and politics, offers us a direction that is more sustainable, inclusive, and simply human—*regardless* of history—which is a "bitch." Rosler says, "We're

talking about politics as if it was still possible. Frankly, democracy may not be possible right at this moment. We have to act as though it is, though, because we have no choice. And I would also say: Don't frighten off the young people. I mean that quite seriously" (44). The exhibition catalogue is a generous invitation to Rosler's uncompromising rich universe where the personal is political and in which the 'F' word is not dirty, tainted with 'buts' and 'what ifs' and might be the only hope towards a just, inclusive, and equal future for *all* of us. •

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#### Notes

1. See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985).

## Ruth Asawa: Life's Work

Edited by Tamara H. Schenkenberg  
Yale University Press with the Pulitzer  
Arts Foundation, 2019

Reviewed by Gabrielle Rose-Curti

The Japanese-American artist Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) and her non-objective sculptures in wire, which she produced over a sixty-year period, starting in 1948–49, have earned rightful signification in the expanding, non-canonical histories of American modernist art. Her prolific meditations in form, line, and space have enjoyed a renaissance of scholarly consideration in recent years, inaugurated by the seminal 2006 book, *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air*, which accompanied her major retrospective show in San Francisco.<sup>1</sup> *Ruth Asawa: Life's Work*, published in conjunction with the 2018–19 Pulitzer Arts Foundation exhibition in

St. Louis (notably, the first museum exhibition of Asawa's art outside her native California), brings its own important contributions under the assiduous editorial direction of Tamara H. Schenkenberg. With intentional design, this book yields new penetrations into the relational logic, methodology, and development of Asawa's sculpture and her consummately integrative pursuits of art, family, community, and identity.

The book is replete with fine color reproductions of the exhibition's nearly eighty works, which include a sizeable number of drawings and paintings executed from her time at Black Mountain College and beyond. In its attentiveness to reproductive quality, the sensitive coloristic and textural effects of Asawa's sculptural work—achieved with different types of metal wire, techniques, and treatments—is brought to full force. Additional installation images from the exhibition capture the magic of these

works in their situationally contingent realities. The sequencing of the exhibition works in the catalogue abandons strict chronology for a more instructive arrangement; many of the two-page spreads, for example, pair works from various years, even decades, to underscore Asawa's non-linear development in form, medium, and technique. Evident from these pairings too, is the importance of her drawing to these wire constructions as they sit or dangle in exquisite tension between line and spatial volume. A major contribution of the book is its section titled "Evolution of Form," created collaboratively by Schenkenberg and Asawa's children, Aiko Cuneo and Addie Lanier. Asawa's complexly variegated approaches in looped wire, cast-bronze wire, and tied wire are subjected to nothing less than a comprehensive, formal and methodological taxonomy. Based on terminology developed by Asawa and her husband, Albert Lanier, each sculp-

tural category is given a concise explanation and identified by an exemplary work. Despite the challenge to keep straight these finely calibrated classifications, the necessary aims of this section are clear: to demystify Asawa's sculpture and make evident the acuity with which she explored every iterative possibility of form and material.

The same analytic scrutiny is contextually attended to in the book's three essays, by Schenkenberg, Helen Molesworth, and Aruna D'Souza. Schenkenberg's titular opening essay, "Life's Work," is the lengthiest and most broadly scoped. In it she traces Asawa's artistic education and growth over her lifetime and the fertile exchanges between formal themes, materials, techniques, even between her non-objective work and her figurative public commissions beginning in 1966. Significantly, in pointing to Asawa's constant reliance on the day-to-day rudiments of structured and iterative work through a single motif or material to mine new creative possibilities, Schenkenberg elucidates how this working method was profoundly instilled in Asawa while at Black Mountain College (1946–49) under her primary teacher, Josef Albers. She argues its deep coalescence with Asawa's earlier formative experience on her family's California farm in which cyclical, repetitive, and determinative labors—beginning with the planting of a seed—were rewarded with "material transformation" (26). In a most satisfying way, Schenkenberg sheds light on the enveloping role of Asawa's art making, as she used it to "set up conditions for learning" (28–29) in her home for her six children, and in the community, as she brought advancement and reform in art education through her Alvarado School Arts Workshop (established in 1968) and in subsequent work for the San Francisco school system.

In her essay, "San Francisco Housewife and Mother," Molesworth probes more deeply into Asawa's synchronous nurture of art, home, children, and the community at large. Although she addresses her reception after her 1956 solo show by critics who labeled her disparagingly as housewife and mother



Fig. 1. Imogen Cunningham, Ruth Asawa (1957). Photo © 2018 Imogen Cunningham Trust.

and her art as merely domestic handicraft, Molesworth's reclamation of Asawa seeks to avoid the chronic pitfall of older feminist models prone to misleadingly "divorce" her artistic identity from identities as mother, wife, and teacher, and hence to re-inscribe the same masculine code of artistic autonomy (36–38). Accordingly, she seeks expansion and enrichment to strictly formalist readings of Asawa's work, suggesting—as anticipated—her work in association with bodily, embryonic, fetal forms and processes. More intriguing is her suggestion that within and among her work Asawa's modus operandi of repetition and difference functions correlatively with the notion of offspring—siblings with their sameness and difference, inter-relatedness, and autonomy.

"Transparency and Its Other" by D'Souza, explores these same dialectics at work within Asawa's concept of

selfhood as revealed in the artist's own statements, one emergent from her discriminatory experiences as a Japanese American, in particular the years spent with her family in an Arkansas internment camp during World War II, the other emergent from the self-empowering period at Black Mountain College. D'Souza argues compellingly that Asawa's "contradictory impulses," between "endless expansion outward" as a singular individual and "contraction to infinite smallness" or invisibility (46), find correspondent negotiation in her sculpture's array of visual ambivalences. She also finds those impulses detectable in the many 1950s photographs of Asawa (most famously by Imogen Cunningham) shown with, through, and physically inside her looped wire forms (1957; Fig. 1) and therefore, simultaneously assuming presence and absence.

*Ruth Asawa, Life's Work* sharpens and necessarily complicates our understand-

ing of Asawa's sculpture, the cumulative learning that each new iteration of form and process bore, as well as her profoundly encompassing ethos and practice of being an artist and making art. And the book's curation follows in form. Although having their own illuminating purposes, the essays richly overlap and augment one another in content and share reliance on her work, statements, and photographic imaging to

draw crucial insights. Indeed, every component of this impressive book builds upon and dialogues with the other so that we may more fully apprehend—to use Schenkenberg's words—"the spiral line of her life's work" (33).

**Gabrielle Rose-Curti** recently served as Associate Professor at Simpson College. She received her Ph.D. in Art History from Rutgers University and is the

author of "Writing the French Sculptor: Operations of Exclusivity in the Critical Discourse of Émile-Antoine Bourdelle, 1918-1931," *Word & Image* (2020). •

#### Notes

1. *The Sculpture of Ruth Asawa: Contours in the Air*, ed. Daniell Cornell (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2006).

## Lee Krasner: Living Colour

Edited by Eleanor Nairne, with essays by Katy Siegel, John Yau, and Suzanne Hudson  
Thames & Hudson, 2019

Reviewed by Ellen G. Landau

When London's Barbican Center announced in 2018 it would soon feature only the second ever solo retrospective of the work of Lee Krasner in Europe—her first anywhere had also been in London, at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1965—most press coverage of the upcoming exhibition ran along dismayingly predictable lines, all too similar to its predecessor more than a half century ago. Various versions of "Jackson Pollock's Artist Wife to get Major Barbican Exhibition" introduced the event yet again as an opportunity to display work by the spouse of a famous painter, albeit one already more than somewhat recognizable as an "artist in her own right." Of course, this overused phrase frequently marshalled in regard to women artists, especially those partnered with or daughters of noted male painters, sets up from the start a not so subtle diminishment, coloring viewer's expectations before they even walk into a show. And Lee Krasner (1908–84), as has often been remarked by herself and others, had to work extra hard to come out from under Pollock's "shadow."

With the exception of a 1989 joint exhibition with Pollock at the Kunstmuseum Bern in Switzerland (for which I was co-curator), Krasner's only

other retrospectives anywhere have been an American traveling show organized by Barbara Rose at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston six years earlier, that culminated in a combined effort by the Museum of Modern Art and Brooklyn Museum opening shortly after Krasner's 1984 death, and Robert Hobbs's 1999–2001 US traveling exhibition, created under the auspices of Independent Curators International. Each received a modicum of art historical and popular press attention, claiming vindication for Krasner as an artist (above and beyond her knotty status as the ur-example "art widow"), but not enough enthusiasm for any major museum here or abroad to mount another go-round until recently.

As a result, it was actually rather glorious that Barbican curator Eleanor Nairne's overdue re-look at Krasner's career, which opened in May 2019, accompanied by a substantial catalogue claiming additional fresh takes on Krasner's oeuvre, engendered ecstatic critical accolades on both sides of the pond.<sup>1</sup> American critic Peter Plagens, for instance, writing in the *Wall Street Journal*, heaped praise on what he termed a "superbly cool, concise, complete and—most important—compelling exhibition," applauding in particular the large "brilliant" canvases that so well held their own in the Barbican's difficult Brutalist-designed main gallery. These, Plagens said, presented "just about the best roomful of abstract paintings I've seen." In his review, Plagens mostly judges Krasner's works on their own merits, not ignoring, of course, but neither



Fig. 1. Sidney Waintrob/Budd, *Lee Krasner*, August 30, 1956, two weeks after Jackson Pollock's death.

overplaying the usual emphasis on comparisons with Pollock.<sup>2</sup>

Similar in intent, Waldemar Januszczak of the *London Times* celebrated the Barbican show as "a rousing and persuasive tribute" to Krasner's amazing talent. Januszczak did place her in juxtaposition to Pollock at the very start of his review, but his comparison interrogates past patterns that either emphasize the impact of Krasner's subservience to her husband's development during his lifetime, try to characterize (as did Barbara Rose) their relationship as working partners all along, or make various attempts to elevate Krasner's status to "seminal" by seeking to identify what she supposedly originated and Pollock then took up. Whitechapel curator Bryan Robertson must certainly have consid-

ered it the highest of compliments when he wrote in 1965, "At certain stages her own gaze was brought to bear on her husband's work and expanded his consciousness."<sup>3</sup> To properly view the difference exhibited by the most recent show and catalogue, it's worth quoting in its entirety Januszcak's opening salvo, as he uses it to frame key parameters of the Barbican retrospective's renewed focus, arguing as well for the ongoing relevance of Krasner's story to the culture wars of today.

Januszcak begins by cleverly rehearsing the known constraints of Krasner's predicament. "Poor Lee Krasner," he writes:

When the gods of art arranged for her to marry Jackson Pollock, they cursed her on several levels. On a personal level, they forced her to put up with the madneses of a violent alcoholic who died in a drunken car crash, with another woman by his side. On a professional level, they ensured that her career would be blown out of the water by the nuclear fame of her partner. On a creative level, they barged her into an unequal struggle for an artistic voice, trying to find her own song while the roaring Pollock hogged the microphone.

Perhaps though, we have underestimated those sneaky gods of art. Perhaps they were playing a longer game and knew all along that at some point in the future the art world would seek to recalculate the male-female imbalance, that the taste for macho painting styles would evaporate and a taste for its alternative would grow. Right now, being Jackson Pollock is problematic. But being Lee Krasner is exciting.<sup>4</sup>

The many changes in focus Krasner chose to make during her roughly half-century of art production, typically criticized in previous accounts, are remarked much more positively by Januszcak later in his review. "Nowhere in the rule book," he con-

cludes, "does it say impressive art careers need to follow straight lines." The rationale for such adjustments and how they function progressively plays a central role throughout the Barbican catalogue, as well as in the show. The various twists and turns Krasner incorporated throughout her development, including bouts of destruction, re-focus, recapitulation, and revision, are now no longer being held against her or considered negative factors in establishment of a first-rate reputation. In contradistinction to most of the male Abstract Expressionists—her generational and ideational peers including Pollock—Krasner was regularly criticized during her lifetime for never developing "her own voice," in other words, not coming up, commensurate to the men, with a recognizable and consistent signature style. Moreover, she didn't seem to care; change, as Krasner always insisted, was, for her, "the only constant," a point remade in the catalogue several times.

What might be termed Lee Krasner's ongoing operational self-critique, as Januszcak observed without employing such trendy art historical lingo, appears clearly in the selection of works Nairne placed on view at the Barbican and, in a variety of ways, is examined for its merits in each of the four main essays contained in *Lee Krasner: Living Colour*. Included as well in this handsomely designed book is a never-published 1970 interview with the artist by Gail Levin, an updated bibliography, and an illustrated and annotated chronology, as well as a series of ten short narratives prefacing full-page color illustrations from the individual groupings that comprised the content on exhibit in the Barbican's gallery spaces. These sequential narrative sections, written by Nairne and her exhibition assistant Charlotte Flint, correspond to the trajectory of the artist's career. They are interspersed with close-up color photographs of Krasner and Pollock's house and its environs in East Hampton, especially the flowers growing nearby as photographed by her friend Ray Kaiser Eames, blowups of which were included on the museum's walls. Also

prefacing some of these shorter texts are black and white photos of Hans Hofmann teaching at his school, where Krasner studied, and of the artist posing with or at work on various key paintings during different stages of her life (1956; Fig. 1).

Unfortunately, comprising its sole lacuna, both the show and catalogue, while emphasizing the modernist charcoal drawings Krasner created under Hofmann's tutelage, somehow skip over her foundational American Abstract Artists period, which encompassed the end of her years at the Hofmann School and her late 1930s – early 1940s roughly simultaneous tenure on the WPA. In works on paper and on canvas in oils at this time, Krasner essayed compositional ploys and color arrangements mostly based on her developing understanding of the innovations of Mondrian, Matisse, and Picasso. Addition of a sampling of these would more appropriately explain the roots of her response to Pollock that underpin the transformative *Little Image* paintings Krasner created during 1947–50, than the included photographs of 1942 window displays she was assigned to supervise (but not design all by herself) when the WPA converted that year to War Services. Prior to the latter, Krasner had been permitted to draft, although not execute, an important and unusually advanced abstract mural for Radio Station WNYC in New York, sketches of which survive and could also have been reproduced in the catalogue as well as exhibited.

Eleanor Nairne's primary essay, "To Breathe and Be Alive," its title taken from a quote by the artist about what she aimed for in creating a canvas ("Be alive is the point" she said), highlights the pertinent foundational influences of Krasner's life, both situational and artistic, emphasizing as is frequently done the challenge Krasner threw out to her viewers and commentators: "My painting is so biographical if anyone can take the trouble to read it."<sup>5</sup> Nairne introduces Krasner as a "ruthless editor" (10) and explains that the artist herself seems to have ultimately considered her lack of recognition as perhaps "a blessing,"<sup>6</sup> allowing her to

“make the work she felt impelled to make.” “Without a coterie of controlling dealers and collectors,” true to her own spirit, Nairne expounds, “she was never forced to repeat herself, but could flow with each new direction as it came” (19).

Katy Siegel’s essay, “Nothing Outside Nature,” focuses on Krasner’s visual as well as experiential organic thinking and its impact on her approach to painting. Despite her obvious “urbaness” (i.e., immigrant Jewish identity, emphasized in Hobbs’s earlier retrospective essay), Krasner’s relationship to nature, starting in her Brooklyn childhood (the area was more rural then) and amplified after her marriage and relocation from New York City to Long Island, Siegel maintains as critical. “Above all,” she writes, “Krasner’s relationship to nature took complicated form in her relationship to her own work, to how it was made and to her place in the world” (22). For Siegel, a professor at Stony Brook and senior curator of research and programming at the Baltimore Museum of Art, the cyclical character of nature remarked upon by Krasner played a key role in her refusal to remain static: natural processes of seeding, flowering, dormancy, and its repetition are recapitulated in her artistry. This Siegel sees as especially pertinent to Krasner’s choice to recycle earlier images and pieces of actual previous artworks (by herself and some by Pollock) exemplified in her brilliant use of collage at various significant aesthetic and psychological junctures in her work and life. Ultimately, “trying to understand Lee Krasner can push us to think harder about the nature of nature,” Siegel writes (29).

The title of Rutgers critical studies professor, critic and poet John Yau’s contribution, “Writing Rimbaud on the Wall,” refers to the famously self-reflective lines of the French author from *A Season in Hell* of 1873 that Krasner asked painter Byron Browne to scrawl on her studio wall: “To whom should I hire myself out? What beast must I adore? What holy image attack? What lie must I maintain? In what blood

tread?” Yau uses Krasner’s fascination with Rimbaud to highlight her deeply felt need for exploration of multiple selves undertaken in the face of realizing how “the struggle for artistic freedom was a complicated, arduous and ceaseless undertaking” (37). He brings in additional literary influences and assesses their generative role; these include Maeterlinck, Novalis, and Edgar Allan Poe, whom Yau believes contributed as well to Krasner’s lifelong resistance to categorization that he also finds exemplified in the altered names she chose to use at different times. Calling attention to “details and ruptures” in such works as Krasner’s 1953 collage *The City*, Yau is most adamant of all the catalogue authors in rejecting those in the past who spilled so much ink hunting for signs of influence in either direction with regard to the mutually beneficial artistic relationship of Krasner and Pollock. “My interest,” Yau writes, “is in what distinguishes her work from that of her contemporaries, its ‘strange beauty,’” bringing his argument back again to writers she admired, Rimbaud most specifically. By periodically “attacking failed works” and “transforming them into something fresh and new,” he explains, Krasner “both literally and metaphorically authored her own history.” “I think,” Yau conjectures, “this is what Krasner wanted to achieve more than anything else” (39).

In the final, related essay, “Present Conditional,” University of Southern California art historian Suzanne Hudson borrows her title from one of the perhaps most important examples of what Yau describes, Krasner’s magisterial 1976 collage paintings shown to great acclaim at Pace Gallery the following year. To create these works, Krasner famously cut and spliced mostly into slivered shards a large number of the abstractly figurative charcoal drawings she’d made at the Hofmann School then stored away and rediscovered, combining them with ghost-like reverse impressions rubbed off from the back of stacked unfixed pages, as well as sections of raw canvas, and areas of freshly applied pigment. She

grouped these works into a series titled *Eleven Ways to Use the Words To See*. Each was named for a different verb tense borrowing from a linguistic system suggesting time and its conditions. In *Present Conditional* (a designation, Krasner said, based on the verb form “I would be seeing”) she counterpointed larger gridded sections, reminiscent of both her fondness for Mondrian and a sub-set of her own 1947–50 breakthrough *Little Images*, reflecting several Hofmann corrective techniques that, as a student, she had rejected, but now understood. These included cutting up a composition and repositioning its parts or pasting small pieces of colored paper onto it to guide its reworking.

The ultimate example of Krasner’s intermittent use of collage to both reconsider the past and move forward, this late burst of energy was described by the artist herself as responding to a self-directive: “Meaning I experienced the need not just to examine these drawings but a peremptory desire to change them; a command, as it were, to make them new.”<sup>7</sup> Hudson further comments, “An ending that is also a beginning is perhaps a structural ploy, effectively creating a scene of origin for Krasner’s emergence as an artist on her own terms” (43). Hudson explains that *would*, a modal verb form, can be used to reference either past or present and Krasner’s twinning of these temporalities, “what could have been and what might still come” was her way of asserting (and, reflecting at an age well beyond the life spans of most of her more celebrated male colleagues, I assume) that “she was still there” (47). Ah, those sneaky gods of art. •

**Ellen G. Landau**, Andrew W. Mellon Professor Emerita in the Humanities, Case Western Reserve University, is the author of *Lee Krasner: A Catalogue Raisonné* (1995) and has written articles and catalogue essays on Krasner published in the U.S. and internationally. Her latest contribution, *Lee Krasner Charcoals* (NY: Kasmin Gallery, 2019) will accompany a show debuting in 2020.

## Notes

1. After London, *Lee Krasner: Living Colour* is scheduled to be shown at the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt (Oct. 11, 2019 – Jan. 12, 2020), the Zentrum Paul Klee in Bern (Feb. 2 – May 10, 2020), and the Guggenheim Bilbao (May 29– Sept. 6, 2020).
2. Peter Plagens, "'Lee Krasner: Living Color [sic]' Review: From Pain to Primacy," *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 9, 2019.
3. Brian Robertson, "Preface," *Lee Krasner paintings, drawings and collages* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, Sept.–Oct. 1965).
4. Waldemar Januszczak, "Ever-changing Moods," *London Times*, June 2, 2019.
5. Cindy Nemser, "A Conversation with Lee Krasner," *Arts Magazine* 47 (April 1973).
6. Nairne cites a 1980 interview Krasner gave to Barbara Cavaliere for the journal *Flash Art*.
7. Quoted in John Bernard Myers, "Naming Pictures: Conversations between Lee Krasner and John Bernard Myers," *Artforum* 23, no. 3 (Nov. 1984).

## Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist

Edited by Gilbert Vicario  
Hirmer Verlag and Phoenix Art  
Museum, 2019

Reviewed by Rachel Middleman

The exhibition catalogue *Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* offers an in-depth look at an artist whose work does not easily resolve into familiar categories of abstract art because of its deeply spiritual purpose. This book brings together a range of scholarly perspectives on aspects of Agnes Pelton's (1881–1961) abstractions, delving into her biography, and carving out a place for her in the history of American modernism without downplaying her engagement with esoteric religions and devotional painting practices.

Curator Gilbert Vicario notes at the outset the challenge of locating Pelton's work today, although fortunately many California museums acquired her work during her lifetime. An artist with no immediate heirs, her legacy has largely been cared for by individuals who were drawn to her, from curators and artists to Simeon Den and Peter Palladino, who founded the Agnes Pelton Society with Nancy Strow Sheley after they purchased her former home in Cathedral City, California. A handful of publications constitute the monographic literature on Pelton, including the significant contributions from Karen Moss, Margaret Stainer, and Michael Zakian.<sup>1</sup> Thus, this catalogue is an important addition, and its beautifully illustrated large color plates of Pelton's abstract paintings and chronology by Rachel Sadvary Zebro enhance this contribution.



Fig. 1. Agnes Pelton, *Mother of Silence* (1933), oil on canvas, 30" x 25". Private collection.

In his introduction, Vicario provides an overview of the development of Pelton's career, which began at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn at the turn of the twentieth century. She exhibited her figurative "Imaginative Paintings" in New York, notably at the Armory Show in 1913. After her mother passed away in 1920, Pelton moved from the city to

Long Island, where she lived in a historic windmill and painted her first abstractions. During a period of travel in the 1920s, she continued the development of both her landscape and abstract styles, finally settling permanently in California, in Cathedral City, near Palm Springs, in 1932. Vicario addresses the oft-made comparison between Pelton and

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) in contemporary journalism, and there are interesting parallels between the two artists' lives, including the educational influence of Arthur Wesley Dow and the introduction to the Southwest through patron Mabel Dodge Sterne (later Luhan), but he also points out how their intentions and experiences diverge, bringing Pelton out of O'Keeffe's shadow.

Positioning her Imaginative Paintings (as Pelton called them) as a precursor to her abstractions begun in the 1920s, Vicario looks at her artistic influences and the "formal and conceptual break" she makes from her earlier symbolist-style paintings of slight women in dark and romantic landscapes to reach her subjective form of "pure abstraction" (26). Yet, as he writes, the landscape, or at least the horizon, returned to her abstractions by the 1930s. Her transcendentalist works share a basic composition of radiant and colorful semi-abstract and geometrical forms that seem to float in the heavens of an imaginary landscape. Vicario discusses Pelton's interest in Agni Yoga as a source for her abstract paintings, and her involvement with the Transcendental Painting Group formed in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1938, with Pelton as a founding yet absent member. Tracing the afterlife of Pelton's work, Vicario lays out the brief history of the collection of Pelton's papers and the distribution of her artworks into some of the major collections in the United States. He concludes the essay noting: "At this moment Pelton's greatest advocates seem to be a new generation of women painters, perhaps the true receivers of the messages she sent many years ago" (27). Situating Pelton as a forerunner to contemporary painting today, Vicario aims to highlight women's agency in the evolving history of modernism. He describes the ways Pelton's use of light and idiosyncratic mix of abstract and figurative approaches to representing the metaphysical resonate with the works of such artists as Mary Corse (b. 1945), Carrie Moyer (b. 1960), Loie Hollowell (b. 1983), Linda Stark (b. 1956), and Mary Weatherford (b. 1963), some of whom, he writes, have actively contributed to the recent increase in attention to Pelton's work.

Erika Doss situates Pelton's abstractions in relationship to her spiritual exploration and independent (feminist) thought in the essay "Agnes Pelton's Spiritual Modernism." Doss writes:

Kandinsky argued that modern art should be a form of creative transcendence, and modern artists should heed an inner "necessity" toward the "spiritual life, to which art belongs." Following his advice, and inspired by the teachers, tenets, and practices of new religions including New Thought and Theosophy, Pelton honed a distinctive style of spiritual modernism that embodied her faith in a transcendent reality: in that which is beyond purely immanent, or secular, experience and understanding (31-32).

Pelton's openness to alternative spirituality and artwork that engaged this was shaped through her personal history as much as cultural contexts. Doss dips further into Pelton's past to consider her family legacy of social ostracization, deep religious beliefs, and alternative treatments for physical and mental "ailments" that included the artist's "neurasthenia," a condition "blamed on the overwhelming conditions of modern times" (36). Doss discusses Pelton's interest in New Thought, a form of Christian mysticism founded by Emma Curtis Hopkins that conceptualized a Holy Mother Spirit. As a private spiritual healer, Hopkins counted Pelton as one of her patients. Another significant source was Theosophy, a syncretic religion founded by Helena Blavatsky that combined occult and ancient traditions into a modern spiritual practice that emphasized the individual and provided an alternative to mainstream Christianity. Through the close study of Pelton's writing and notebooks, where she diagrammed her works and copied extensive passages from the many figures who inspired her, Doss is able to connect Pelton's imagery to such thinkers; for example, in the reference to the Holy Mother Spirit in *Mother of Silence* (1933; Fig. 1).

"Painting was a devotional practice for Pelton," Doss writes, "a means of articulating her spiritual beliefs on modern art terms" (37–38). That the work is both spiritual and modern is a key point. In addition to reading esoteric texts, Pelton practiced such methods as meditation, and "rituals involving incense, trance states, and prayer" were "used to further hone her Abstractions" (37). Doss describes Pelton's relationships with other women, including patrons, teachers, and healers, who exemplified "female agency and independence" in the first half of the twentieth century (36). These networks among women who did not conform to mainstream feminine social roles or religious beliefs constitutes an important history that illuminates further the impact of women thinkers and artists on the twentieth century.

In his essay, "Agnes Pelton: Transcendental Symbolist," Michael Zakian builds on his pioneering 1995 retrospective *Agnes Pelton: Poet of Nature*. He approaches Pelton's practice and her role as an artist through the understanding that she "never adhered to any one particular system. She absorbed all these influences into her psyche, where she would let them spontaneously inform her internal visions" (41). He captures the ways that her paintings cannot be fully explained in words but rather are meant to be experienced in ways that materialize her poetic symbolism. He guides the reader on a journey through her life (travels, locations, literature) and personality (psychological, religious, spiritual), chronologically, from her early life and Imaginative Paintings to her interest in cosmic imagery and the California desert. Zakian utilizes vintage sepia photographs to imbue the artist's romantic sensibility.

Zakian's knowledge allows for a wide consideration of her oeuvre and provides the closest compositional readings of individual paintings and sources. For example, he notes the symbol of fire in works such as *Mount of Flame* (1932), which "features a triangle of progressively ascending fires, reflecting her belief that mountains serve as positive images of sequential personal growth. Her

readings in Agni Yoga reinforced the idea the fire was a purifying force" (47). He discusses *Mother of Silence*, identifying the symbolism as referencing both Christianity and Buddhism, but also "intended to embody the spirit of the artist's deceased mother ... she would turn to it when she struggled with a canvas or with life decisions" (49). He follows this with a citation from her journal about receiving guidance from the painting. Zakian argues that Pelton's work differs from the other Transcendental Painting Group artists through her painstaking execution, "creating in her best paintings an unmatched depth of resonant, glowing color through delicate stippling or careful layers of thin glazes" (49).

Elizabeth Armstrong's essay, "Agnes in the Desert," explores the ways Pelton's physical and low-key social environment of the California desert inspired her. "During her first decade in the desert, when she was in her fifties," Armstrong writes, "Pelton experienced a sense of renewal and transformation" (60). With a brief history of Cathedral City, this essay conjures images of the region's "vast desert, palm trees, canyons, stunning mountain backdrops, and atmospheric desert light" (58). Along with the spiritual inspiration imaginable in this landscape, Armstrong notes that Pelton was introduced to the area by way of friends in the Theosophy Society in Pasadena, California. Turning to her paintings produced in the desert, Armstrong describes them as having an energy produced through an integration of Pelton's exterior physical environment and internal spiritual impressions. By all accounts, Pelton's life in Cathedral City had its challenges, but she was sustained by her artwork and environment, and by the circle of friends who shared her quest for discovering the spiritual in both.

In "Women, Modern Art and the Esoteric: Agnes Pelton in Context," Susan L. Aberth places Pelton's work within a longer history of the role that occultism played in the creation of modern art by women artists. "In many cases, involvement with esoteric groups was one of the few avenues helping women break free

of Christianity's restrictive stranglehold on their lives," Aberth writes, "allowing for greater autonomy and self-development in the arts and beyond" (179). She discusses the connections between spiritualism and women's rights and the influence of powerful female spiritual leaders such as Blavatsky and her successor, Annie Besant, who was a social activist. Aberth puts Pelton's work in conversation with an international group of artists, including Leonora Carrington (1917–2011), Remedios Varo (1908–63), Hilma af Klint (1862–1944), Georgiana Houghton (1814–84), and Emma Kunz (1892–1963), who represented the spiritual in their work and in some cases served as mediums in its creation. Aberth analyzes specific Pelton paintings in relationship to spiritual teachings and especially publications of Theosophy and Agni Yoga. The author argues that in many cases women created abstract paintings before their male contemporaries, "a moot point perhaps, since their work was either not exhibited, or only briefly so in peripheral institutions, yet some type of recalibration seems only fair and necessary, if only to establish once and for all the central importance of modern esoteric movements, largely instigated and run by women, had on inspiring women to become artists and make new visual inroads" (190).

*Agnes Pelton: Desert Transcendentalist* makes an excellent case for the continued study and appreciation not only of Pelton but of the many women artists whose work may have been forgotten in history because of their work's esoteric references or lack of public visibility, as articulated by Aberth. *Agnes Pelton* focuses on her abstract works and the earlier

Imaginative Paintings as precursors, a similar tactic used in the recent Hilma af Klint exhibition, which focused on the years in which she created her monumental abstractions.<sup>2</sup> Acknowledging that exhibitions must create frameworks and limit their scope out of necessity, we should also keep an eye on these exclusions (a study of Pelton's landscape paintings and portraits, for example) and consider how such choices reveal what we value. On this point, Vicario writes that "she could never dismiss her landscapes as simple commercial necessities" (49). Pelton's abstract paintings, however, like the esoteric texts she was so fond of, entice the viewer as beautifully crafted puzzles waiting for an interpretive key to unlock their potential. •

**Rachel Middleman** is Associate Professor of Art History at California State University, Chico. She is the author of *Radical Eroticism: Women, Art, and Sex in the 1960s* (2018), and a chapter titled "Outlying Modernism: Agnes Pelton, Theosophy, and Gender," in Sarah V. Turner et al. eds., *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, the Arts and the American West* (2019).

#### Notes

1. Karen Moss, ed. *Illumination: The Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe, Agnes Pelton, Agnes Martin and Florence Miller Pierce* (Newport Beach, CA: Orange County Museum of Art, 2009); Margaret Stainer, *Agnes Pelton* (Fremont, CA: Ohlone College, 1989); and Michael Zakian, *Agnes Pelton: Poet of Nature* (Palm Springs, CA: Palm Springs Desert Museum, 1995).
2. See Tracey Bashkoff, ed. *Hilma af Klint: Paintings for the Future* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2018).

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## Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman

Jeffreen M. Hayes, with contributions  
by Kirsten Pai Buick, Bridget R. Cooks,  
and Howard Dodson  
Cummer Museum and D. Giles Limited,  
2018

Reviewed by William L. Coleman

The art and life of Augusta Savage (1892–1962) present no small number of challenges and contradictions for those who would seek to understand the contributions of this pioneering African-American sculptor of the Jim Crow era. Simultaneously a revolutionary and an aesthetic conservative, an essential teacher and mentor to a generation of artists of color whose work often risks overshadowing her own, an impresario and institution builder who dreamed big but failed to achieve lasting durability for her institutions, and a practitioner of monumental sculpture who saw few of her own works ever fully realized in the envisioned bronze, Savage requires some effort from contemporary audiences to see the valiant struggle behind even minor surviving works.

This exhibition catalogue, accompanying a small show that was organized by the Cummer Museum (Jacksonville, FL) and traveled to the New-York Historical Society, Palmer Museum of Art (State College, PA), and the Dixon Gallery & Gardens (Memphis, TN), makes a welcome contribution by laying out the case for Savage's sociopolitical importance and compiling some of Savage's surviving works for comparative study. The book gradually reveals that this is a project concerned with her art primarily as a means to frame the artist's biography and history, so it will need to be evaluated as such. It remains for other curators of the future to do the sorely needed work of close looking and hard thinking about the actual objects Augusta Savage made—fundamentally, taking her seriously as an artist and not merely as a thinker—that is absent here. Nevertheless, there is also much of value within.

Savage's own telling of her early artistic development, as quoted in Howard Dodson's introduction and elsewhere in



Fig. 1. Unidentified photographer, "Augusta Savage at work on *The Harp*" (c. 1935-45), gelatin silver print, 8" x 10". Photo: The New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations, New York World's Fair 1939–40 Records, 1654255.

the book, resembles that old chestnut from Vasari about Giotto's beginnings as a poor shepherd boy who was so organically and irrevocably drawn to art that, without training, he started to sketch his sheep on a rock. Likewise, Augusta Savage seems to have been drawn to sculpture from the first, making small animal figures in clay, for which her Methodist minister father beat her because he considered them "graven images" (11). Even after she escaped such provincialism for the cosmopolitan world of the Harlem Renaissance, opposition continued. In a key incident that is the crux of Jeffreen M. Hayes's essay, the 1923 award to Savage of a summer scholarship to study at the Fontainebleau School of Fine Arts in France was revoked by its American jurors once they learned she was African-American. Hayes convincingly sets up this incident as a transition point in Savage's life, when she made a fateful decision not to go quietly but to go public with the scandal. In the process, Hayes argues, she accepted the role of a "race woman," using a term from Pauline Hopkins (1859–1930), an influential African-American writer and editor, that refers to an intellectual fundamentally engaged in

their work with the sociopolitical experience of people of color, a commitment that Savage carried out in speaking, writing, and building new institutions to counter the obstacles she had faced (18).

While the focus on Savage's activism and advocacy sheds needed light on an essential context for her art, it is not without shortcomings. For Hayes's agenda, it's necessary that Savage be, first and foremost, a fellow intellectual, and her art often feels inconvenient for that project. A key example of this is the cursory discussion of Savage's most important public commission, *The Harp* (c. 1935-45; Fig. 1), for the 1939–40 New York World's Fair. This work could have been a revealing focus for the catalogue and exhibition, but the reader is left wanting to know more about the commissioning context, choice of subject, development of the composition, techniques used, the market for the fascinating surviving souvenir reproductions, and the use and distribution of the many photographs that preserve the lost original's appearance, among other concerns. Hayes is on stronger footing in the use of rich documentary evidence that helps piece together a story of a life of activism behind the work.

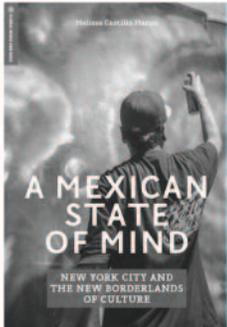
Bridget M. Cooks's essay presents another interesting context for Savage's work, laying out the circumstances that surrounded her creation in Harlem in 1939 of the Salon of Contemporary Negro Art. While the coalescence of major artists and political figures around Savage's groundbreaking commercial gallery of African-American art will be valued by students of the art market, the reader might be surprised to learn, near the end of Cooks's essay, that the Salon only endured for three months, and might wonder if this was the most helpful topic to be assigned an essay of its own. Savage's more lasting institution building and pedagogic strategies at the Savage Studio of Arts and Crafts (established in 1932) and the Harlem Community Art Center (where she was appointed its first director in 1937) would have been more appropriate subjects for in-depth discussion, especially because of the case this project makes that her prominent students are key to her continued relevance.

Kirsten Pai Buick's essay places monument projects by Savage in dialogue with those of Mary Edmonia Lewis (1844–1907) and Meta Warrick Fuller (1877–1968) (whose careers foreshadowed Savage's in certain aspects), with respect to current controversies about monuments and memory. As Buick argues, these three artists "each conceptualized, designed, and in some cases realized monuments that re-articulated public space as a space of love, justice, and peace" (40). The concept of the anti-monument is a useful lens for Fuller and Savage, especially in the discussion of the latter's enigmatic *Realization* (51–52).

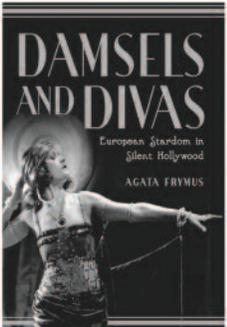
The book concludes by reproducing some archival materials and providing brief, chiefly biographical entries on each of the twenty works by Savage in the show as well as the twenty-four works by students of Savage or artists otherwise associated with her. The need for greater engagement with the artworks themselves is also apparent

here. Further discussion of the motivations for Savage's conventional realist mode, in contrast to the often much stronger and more innovative work of those who followed her, could have been helpful for those who love Savage and would prefer to see her buoyed up, rather than weighed down, by keeping company with the likes of Gwendolyn Knight (1913–2005), Jacob Lawrence, and Romare Bearden. There is more work to be done, and *Augusta Savage: Renaissance Woman* will make a useful contribution if, like Savage herself, it paves the way for new ideas and approaches that follow. •

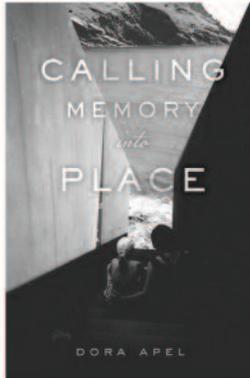
**William L. Coleman** is Director of Collections & Exhibitions at The Olana Partnership. He was previously Associate Curator of American Art at the Newark Museum, where he contributed to a major reinstallation that prominently featured Augusta Savage's c. 1930 *Gamin*.



**A MEXICAN STATE OF MIND**  
New York City and the New Borderlands of Culture  
Melissa Castillo Planas



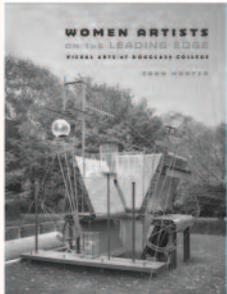
**DAMSELS AND DIVAS**  
European Stardom in Silent Hollywood  
Agata Frymus



**CALLING MEMORY INTO PLACE**  
Dora Apel  
(September)

In this deeply personal work, acclaimed art historian Dora Apel examines how memorials, photographs, artworks, and autobiographical stories can be used to fuel a process of "unforgetting"—reinterpreting the past by recalling the events, people, perspectives, and feelings that get excluded from conventional histories. The ten essays in *Calling Memory into Place* feature explorations of the controversy over a painting of Emmett Till in the Whitney Biennial and the debates about a national lynching memorial in Montgomery, Alabama. They also include personal accounts of Apel's return to the Polish town where her Holocaust survivor parents grew up, as well as the ways she found strength in her inherited trauma while enduring treatment for breast cancer.

Essays shift between the scholarly, the personal, and the visual as different modes of knowing, and explore the intersections between racism, antisemitism, and sexism, while suggesting how awareness of historical trauma is deeply inscribed on the body.



**WOMEN ARTISTS ON THE LEADING EDGE**  
Visual Arts of Douglass College  
Joan Marter



**Queer Objects**  
EDITED BY CHRIS BRICKELL & JUDITH COLLARD

**QUEER OBJECTS**  
Edited by Chris Brickell and Judith Collard

Throughout her extensive career, Russian conceptual artist Irina Nakhova has frequently pushed the limits of what constitutes art and how we experience the art museum.

Released in conjunction with Nakhova's first museum retrospective exhibition in the United States, this book includes many full-color illustrations of her work, spanning the entirety of her forty-year career and demonstrating her facility with a variety of media. It includes essays by a variety of world-renowned curators and art historians, each cataloging Nakhova's artistic innovations and exploring how she deals with themes of everyday life, memory, viewer engagement, and moral responsibility. It concludes with a new interview with Nakhova herself.

Published in partnership with the Zimmerli Museum.



**IRINA NAKHOVA**  
Museum on the Edge  
Jane A. Sharp and Julia Tulovsky

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## Sara Tyson Hallowell: Pioneer Curator and Art Advisor in the Gilded Age

By Carolyn Kinder Carr  
Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press,  
2019

Reviewed by Taylor L. Poulin

“**H**earty commendation is certainly due to Miss Sarah [sic] T. Hallowell, whose untiring energy, discriminating taste, and artistic judgment have done so much to advance the interest and the standard of quality of these collections” (42). This celebratory phrase from a critic for the *Daily Inter Ocean* newspaper arrived in the wake of curator and art advisor Sara T. Hallowell’s (1846–1924) fourth Inter-State Industrial Exposition in Chicago in 1884, and is an equally fitting encapsulation of *Sara Tyson Hallowell: Pioneer Curator and Art Advisor in the Gilded Age*, the biography of her life and work written by Carolyn Kinder Carr.

The first chapter sets the tone, with deep, impressive research charting Sara Hallowell’s family tree and origins in Philadelphia. Indeed, one of the brightest facets of this book, as a work of documentation on the nineteenth century, is how thoroughly Carr has delved into archives and libraries to bring to light the life and world of this dynamic woman of the Gilded Age. For example, when facts could not be found regarding what Hallowell did from 1869, when her mother moved her and four of her five siblings from Philadelphia to Chicago, until 1877, when Hallowell is mentioned in newspapers for her role with an art fair held in Iowa, Carr proposes that Hallowell was studying art, a common practice for upper-class women, and one that must have helped her develop her discerning eye. But where? The author digs deep, and is able to relay everywhere Hallowell was *not* during those years: she was not at the early art and design schools in Boston, Philadelphia, or New York; nor was she abroad at the *École des Beaux Arts* in Paris or studying privately with a working artist in Europe; her name did not appear in records of these schools



Fig. 1. Mary Fairchild MacMonnies, *Portrait of Mlle S. H. (Sara Tyson Hallowell)* (1886), oil on canvas, 38 1/4" x 44". Collection of Robinson College, Cambridge University, gift of Marion Hardy.

or studios. Despite the continued mystery, this is but one example of the depths to which Carr has mined a panoply of resources, over the course of more than thirty years, to offer a narrative of Hallowell’s life that is rich and meaningful.

The first nine chapters set the foundation for Hallowell’s work ethic, determination, and early career trajectory with Chicago’s Inter-State Exposition, an annual industrial fair celebrating the city’s recovery from the devastation of the Great Fire in 1871. In chapters two and three, Carr paves a smooth, friendly path for Hallowell as she moved from sales assistant for the Exposition’s art exhibition, to assistant clerk of the art committee, and finally to clerk, which meant that she had full responsibility for developing the checklist and securing loans for this major annual event. Hallowell was the first woman to hold this role, and she would remain in this position from 1880 through 1890.

Hallowell’s creativity and capability as a curator are fully revealed in chapters

five and six, which concludes with her final Inter-State Exposition in 1890. Her ingenuity and inventiveness gave a new look to the sprawling Expositions: beginning with the 1883 exhibition, she proposed to include works by American expatriate artists living in Paris, prioritizing artists included in the juried annual Salons. This effort gave contemporary and international cachet to what had been largely a regional exhibition. With her inclusion of expatriate and foreign-trained artists, Hallowell’s exhibitions contributed to contemporary conversations about identity, stirring debate in reviews over the definition of “American” art, a conversation that is still widely relevant today.

Chapter seven turns the focus from Hallowell as curator to Hallowell as art advisor. Traveling between Paris, New York, and Chicago to secure loans for the Inter-State Exposition established her as a well-informed globetrotter; it also welcomed her into the network of gallerists and annual Salon exhibitions to which she would introduce wealthy Chicagoans Potter and Bertha Palmer as

they amassed their superb collection of contemporary painting. In fact, Hollowell was the one to define and shape their collection, encouraging them to collect art from 1850 “to the present”—including cutting edge works by artists like Claude Monet and Auguste Rodin—in order to set their collection apart from others in the Midwest. This storyline brings to bear another extremely rich facet of the book: an appendix listing all of the works of art which passed through Hollowell’s hands as curator and advisor, mined from correspondence and archival material. Many of these works are now beloved additions to major art museums and collections in the United States, a testament to Hollowell’s savvy ability to determine what contemporary art was worth pursuing for her clients and exhibition audiences.

By Carr’s estimation—and contemporary newspaper reviews—Hollowell succeeded at nearly every turn with her work for the Inter-State Exposition, the recounting of which lends a cheerful, warm tone to the first third of the book. Challenge and tension appear in chapter eight, which recalls Hollowell’s tenacious, but ultimately unsuccessful, campaign for the position of Director of the Art Department of the World’s Columbian Exposition, the landmark 1893 fair organized to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s arrival in the Americas (87). While her gender was not a barrier to her role with the Inter-State Exposition, organizers of the World’s Fair fell in line with traditional assumptions that a woman could not handle the demands of an exhibition of such important stature for Chicago on the global stage. Newspapers followed the campaign and the progress made by the deciding committee, who met in October of 1890. Several museum director and collector friends were involved in the process and knew of Hollowell’s petition for the role, but some of these colleagues and friends she had garnered over the years turned against her candidacy. The *New York Times* reported that while, initially, the Chicago contingent of the committee was “quite prepared to secure Hollowell’s nomination,” unfortunately, for the

group at large, “her sex remained an insuperable objection” (91). To her great frustration, Hollowell was passed over for Halsey Ives, director of the St. Louis Art Museum, and her anger at this result is palpable in letters from Hollowell to Bertha Palmer, who herself was involved in the World’s Fair.

Despite this major disappointment, Hollowell had a champion in Mrs. Palmer, who served as the President of the Board of Lady Managers for the Fair. Carr offers the likely reality that it was Mrs. Palmer who urged Halsey Ives to offer Hollowell a role as assistant director for the art department of the fair—a position Hollowell did not immediately accept, due to a lower-than-expected salary. Hollowell did not want to be involved in the fair under any circumstances that did not match what she believed she deserved; she considered the role and negotiated with Ives for eight months. Ives wrote to a colleague that “Miss Hollowell’s appointment is not at all assured. She is inclined to stand on her dignity and the boys are not in the proper humor for that sort of thing” (112). Ultimately, however, the salary offered did not change, and Hollowell accepted the position.

Chapters ten to thirteen focus on Hollowell’s work for the Columbian Exposition and her involvement with Bertha Palmer to help collect works for the Woman’s Building. Those familiar with the history of the 1893 fair may not know that it was Hollowell who suggested Mary Cassatt (1844-1926) and Mary Fairchild MacMonnies (1858-1946), both expatriate artists living in France, to design and execute their well-known, but now lost, murals for the Woman’s Building. Hollowell knew both artists personally, and MacMonnies was a longtime friend and had painted a portrait of Hollowell in 1886 (Fig. 1). Hollowell had a leading role in the process, initially proposing the two women and making periodic studio visits. At Palmer’s request, Hollowell also wrote the chapter titled “Woman in Art,” a 200-year overview of women’s impact on the field of fine art, for the publication that accompanied the works on view in the Woman’s Building (146).<sup>1</sup> Bertha Palmer owns a large, charismatic

presence in the history of women’s participation in the Columbian Exposition; Carr’s thorough recounting of Hollowell’s important contributions is a refreshing addition to this story.

At the end of the fair, Sara Hollowell returned to Paris, carving out a role for herself as “foreign agent” for the Art Institute of Chicago, scouting and proposing potential acquisitions, while continuing to do the same for the Palmers. She also spent the next twenty-one years sending works by American artists working abroad to Chicago for inclusion in the Art Institute’s annual exhibition of American art. In 1909, her mother purchased a house in Moret (now Moret-sur-Loing), a small town an hour southeast of Paris, and this is where Hollowell would spend the last several years of her life, which occupy the final three chapters. Her last exhibition for the Art Institute was in 1914, and in this same year her services as foreign agent were discontinued. Carr recounts other endings: the deaths of close friends and family; the end of World War I, which Hollowell spent in France as a fundraiser for a local hospital charity; the end of Hollowell’s unique role of international curator, as women began to emulate her and offer their knowledge and services as foreign art agents to museums; and Hollowell’s death in 1924.

With an admirable investment in facts and details that can only be woven seamlessly together by the most indefatigable of researchers, Carr stitches into a structure of annual exhibitions the many diverse activities, interests, and friendships which Sara Hollowell pursued throughout her long and dynamic life, creating a vivid picture of a true pioneer in the curatorial field.

**Taylor L. Poulin** is Assistant Curator at the Terra Foundation for American Art. •

## Notes

1. S. T. Hollowell, “Women in Art,” in *Art and Handicraft in the Woman’s Building of the World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893*, ed. Maude Howe Elliot (Paris: Boussois, Valadon, 1893), 50–58.

## Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art Since 1970

By Vivien Green Fryd  
Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019

Reviewed by Monika Fabijanska

A book dedicated to the representation of rape in contemporary visual art features a fitting cover design for the dust jacket: red-stained, coarse paper provides a tactile sensation that lends a physical aspect to the reader's encounter. There was almost no literature on this subject until Vivien Green Fryd's book, which appeared in early 2019. Professor Fryd's research began in 2002—long before the #MeToo movement—and for many years she struggled with the lack of interest among publishers for this groundbreaking book (xiii).

The richly illustrated volume has seven chapters, arranged chronologically, and presenting selected multi-year or collaborative projects, works of art, exhibitions, and workshops. Chapter 1 details seven complex public projects on rape created in the 1970s in California by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz along with their many collaborators.<sup>1</sup> In Chapter 2 the author discusses multidisciplinary work created as part of the *Incest Awareness Project* (1977–81), established by Nancy Angelo with Labowitz (under the umbrella of Lacy and Labowitz's Ariadne: A Social Art Network), by mostly lesbian artists working collaboratively in the Los Angeles Woman's Building (funded by Judy Chicago, Arlene Raven and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville). Chapter 3 analyzes Faith Ringgold's *Slave Rape Series* of paintings on unstretched canvas surrounded by large textile borders, as well as two later quilts, all made between 1972 and 1986. Beginning with *No. 1: Fear Will Make You Weak* (1972; Fig. 1), they are devoted to the subject of rape of African American women during the slave trade, on Southern plantations, and in black families today, resulting from and contributing to transgenerational trauma (106–08).

Chapter 4 covers three exhibitions either partially or fully dedicated to



Fig. 1. Faith Ringgold, *Slave Rape Series #1: Fear Will Make You Weak* (1972), oil on canvas, 86" x 48". © 2018 Faith Ringgold.

rape: *A Decade of Women's Performance Art*, in New Orleans (1980); *Rape*, at the Ohio State University (1985); and *The Subject of Rape*, curated by the fellows of the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1993). Chapter 5 explores the student workshops led by Judy Chicago and her husband, Donald Woodman, in 2001 at Western Kentucky University and in 2006 at Vanderbilt University. In Chapter 6 the author surveys art works made between 1994 and 2014 by Kara Walker, who has been weaving the story of rape into her black-paper silhouettes, drawings, animated movies, and monumental sculpture showing African

Americans as both victims and victimizers. Chapter 7 is largely a summary of the foregoing analyses.

*Against Our Will* is written from a particular position—that of the survivor. Fryd employs the theory of trauma and shows that it is necessary for understanding art on rape. Her introduction includes a discussion of contributions to this theory by psychologists, neuroscientists, and cultural and art historians (19–24). She traces representations of trauma to explain how art was, or was not, able to heal the victim, help the victim grow as a survivor, and make the viewer a witness to a kind of violence that often

had none. Fryd's entire study focuses on the obsessive reenactments of the traumatic experience of rape conveyed in art through the compulsive repetition of images and themes, as well as expressions of rupture and gaps in memory characteristic of PTSD. Within the broader subject of rape, she delineates the specific trauma of incest, where the memory of the event is often repressed.

The author explores art in the context of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s. She broadly considers the evolution over the past fifty years (but pre #MeToo) of medical and legal definitions of rape and incest, and of society's understanding of rape, in books, media, TV documentaries, and movies. Her extensive endnotes and bibliography will serve as valuable resources. Fryd discusses the West Coast feminist artists in the 1970s as being at the forefront of social change and exhaustively describes their works. Considering that many were ephemeral and/or time-based (performance, video, and social practice), *Against Our Will* provides valuable documentation of works that are not widely known or easily accessible. The book is heavily focused on cultural changes and on the value of art for the healing process, and this reader wished the author had placed more emphasis on how Lacy and Labowitz's projects on rape in the 1970s were revolutionary and influential in that they established a new medium for contemporary art (including art about rape)—social practice. The book situates them only in the context of performance art.

The book's great merit lies in its thorough documentation (in Chapters 1 and 2) of the pioneering work of the myriad West Coast feminist artists, who are (except perhaps for Judy Chicago) still relatively unknown to a broader audience. Fryd's deep analysis and excellent interpretation of the complex, challenging, often controversial oeuvres of Faith Ringgold and Kara Walker exploring transgenerational trauma (Chapters 3 and 6) are superb examples of art criticism.

Chapters 4 and 5, covering 1980 through 2006, switch format by

reviewing individual artworks from three exhibitions and two student workshops, rather than continuing with in-depth analysis of oeuvres of selected major artists representative of the 1980s and 1990s. In Chapter 4, titled "Recirculating the Anti-rape and Anti-incest Cycle in Exhibitions, 1980–1993," works by Lynn Hershman Leeson (b. 1941) and Nancy Spero (1926–2009) are briefly discussed as part of a description of a group exhibition. Although the author claims that artists after 1980 "did not compulsively reiterate the topic of violence against women consistently" (25), nor did they "create a large body of work on this subject" (150), there were many major artists active in this period whose work on rape is characterized by repetitive returns to the subject over the years. Besides Hershman Leeson and Nancy Spero, others include, for example, Louise Bourgeois (1911–2010), Nan Goldin (b. 1953), Jenny Holzer (b. 1950), Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002), and Kiki Smith (b. 1954). The change of approach in Chapters 4 and 5 makes it difficult to appreciate the importance of works by major artists in these decades and supports opinions (including Fryd's) that art on rape after 1980 was rare.

In fact, rape constitutes one of the central themes in women's art decade after decade; and while one cannot expect any single text to cover its full history, the title of the book and of its chapters, as well as the chronological order and samplings of works from the 1970s through 2015, may leave the reader with the impression that *Against Our Will* is a comprehensive account of women's art on rape.

The works made after the 1970s, up until 2015, are chosen to reflect specific artistic strategies developed by Chicago, Lacy, and artists associated with them. Meanwhile, there have been numerous works on rape created after 1980 that were innovative and valuable in their own right—created by almost every acclaimed woman artist, including Native Americans, Latinx, and Asian Americans. Most of them worked autonomously, and some were influenced not just by the West Coast feminists but also by Ana Mendieta (1948–85, who is sparingly discussed in

this context). There are important differences between works created in the 1970s and in the twenty-first century, when artists focus not just on regaining control over the victim's sexuality and psyche, but also on reclaiming cultural narratives.

The final chapter, despite its title, "Mapping and Chronicling the Anti-rape and Anti-incest Cycle into the Twenty-First Century," is a summary of the book and adds descriptions of two contemporary projects: Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in January* (2012) and Emma Sulkowicz's *Carry That Weight* (2014–15). These are important but hardly representative of the number and variety of works on rape created since 2000 by artists who have repeatedly addressed the subject of rape, including Andrea Bowers (b. 1965), Teresa Margolles (b. 1963) or Shirin Neshat (b. 1957).

Despite some inconsistencies, *Against Our Will* is eminently worthy of serious reading by art historians, sexual trauma therapists, and anyone interested in the history of women's struggle to combat rape culture. The depth of research and validity of arguments regarding works developed in the 1970s and by black artists are formidable, as is the thesis that repetition is a strategy of artists working with the subject of rape. For the first author to explore the uncharted territory of art on rape, where all research is new, Fryd's accomplishment is laudable. •

**Monika Fabijanska** is an art historian and independent art curator. Her critically acclaimed exhibition and catalogue, *The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Women's Contemporary Art in the U.S.* (2018, at Shiva Gallery, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY) was reviewed by *The New York Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *Artforum*, and *Art in America*, among others.

## Notes

1. See, for reference, Angelique Szymanek, "Performing a Public for Rape," *The Collaborative Performances of Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz-Starus*, *WAJ* 39, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2018), 32–42.

## Unspeakable Acts: Women, Art, and Sexual Violence in the 1970s

By Nancy Princenthal  
Thames & Hudson, 2019

Reviewed by Carmen Hermo

**U***nspeakable Acts* is an important, engaging exploration of a decade of revolutionary artmaking, the 1970s, when heretofore silenced truths about rape and sexual violence became the impetus, or the clarion cry, of a wide spectrum of artworks from the metaphorical to those sharpened to activist, on-the-ground ends. Nancy Princenthal's meticulous research, clear writing, and thematic structure translates the variances of work by iconic artists and underknown practitioners alike, through a framework that illuminates without sensationalizing and theorizes without losing emotional weight. Princenthal unfolds what this groundswell looked, sounded, and felt like for feminist and wider audiences, and for a generation of feminist artists during a crucial period of art-making and everyday violence.

Artists of the 1970s employed body-based performance tactics, drew from consciousness-raising and public speak-outs, and pushed to garner awareness of rape's pervasiveness. At the same time, they endeavored to convey the embodied experience and emotional consequences of sexual trauma. Princenthal adeptly weaves together connections and alliances between varied artists with formally disparate approaches and end goals, resulting in a rich field of work defined through the ways it both came out of and completely challenged its social and cultural context. The title evokes the silencing of sexual violence, but also the "acts" or "acting" of performance, and of performing gender at large. Some of these acts are oblique in their approach to the subject of rape, with the author stepping in with care and nuance to connect them to more direct expressions of brutality and trauma and to public actions against sexual violence. Marina Abramovic (b. 1946; *Rhythm O*, 1974),

VALIE EXPORT (b. 1940; *Tapp-Und Tast-Kino [Tap and Touch Cinema]*, 1968), Lynn Herschman Leeson (b. 1941; in her Roberta Breitmeyer series, 1974–78), and Adrian Piper (b. 1948; *The Mythic Being*, 1973–75) placed their bodies at the electric nexus point of potential violence, but their works skimmed specific references to rape in order to more broadly dramatize gendered dynamics of vulnerability and power.

Princenthal begins her lineage with the "most ambiguous" of the "first works involving the unmediated presence of performing bodies": Yoko Ono's (b. 1933) groundbreaking 1964 *Cut Piece* (35). She cites firsthand reports of audience members, and several of Ono's contemporaneous reflections of it as a form of self-sacrifice, self-knowing, and an act against the artistic ego before moving into more recent and retrospective understandings of it as a proto-feminist piece. Ono's vulnerability and relinquishing control to others in her seated, silent acceptance of each snip away of her clothing mark this a moving starting point for art about rape; but more direct engagement with the visual and bodily terms of Ono's performance would have mounted a scaffolding from which to gauge the relationship to sexual assault in other artworks, and further comparative visual analyses throughout the book. The stakes and specificity are raised in Ono and John Lennon's 1969 film *Rape*, in which a blonde woman with scant English skills is at first bemused, then terrorized, by a stalking cameraman for 77 minutes.

Rape is named as subject, often in the title or in performed or accompanying text, in the works of Ana Mendieta (1948–85; *Rape Scene*, 1973); Suzanne Lacy (b. 1945) and Leslie Labowitz's (b. 1946) *Three Weeks In May* (1977), which mapped Los Angeles rapes and specifically addressed the epidemic in performances; and Judy Chicago (b. 1939), Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani's (b. 1945) *Ablutions* (1972; Fig. 1). These approaches utilized stark red paint referring to blood or bureaucratic rubber-stamping, and ritualized, carefully planned confrontational openness. If Ono was silent in the face of potential harm, Chicago, Lacy, Orgel, and

Rahmani saw fit to directly address rape in the maximal, overflowing hour-and-a-half long performance of *Ablutions*. They combined loud recorded testimonies with ritual bathing in raw eggs, beef blood, and liquid clay; set a stage strewn with rope, chains, offal, and broken eggshells; bound a nude woman onto a chair; and hammered fifty beef kidneys onto the wall. By overlaying "performance art" with actual stories of rape and assault, the artists moved into a space of social practice that is well-known in art today, that is, as Princenthal argues, deeply indebted to early feminist performance around this unspeakably systemic social issue.

The inclusion of contemporaneous derision and critical rejection of the era's performance art trailblazers, or the persistent questions about titillation, exhibitionism, or exploitation that they raised, builds a compelling argument that the history of performance art itself cannot be divorced from the specter of bodily risk and sexual violence inspired most powerfully by women artists. (Princenthal does give Vito Acconci a lot of credit for plumbing the subject from a rare male vantage point, albeit with some well-worded skepticism around the conceptual twists and turns that work around some truly creepy "gestures" with too-often-unnamed women "collaborators.")

Throughout her analyses of these artworks, Princenthal expertly unpacks the racial dynamics at play in the era's conception of rape, particularly a sense of racial panic among white feminists. She also leads us to the later works built upon the foundation staked out by 1970s feminist artists, exploring and analyzing pictorial and graphic references to rape in the work of Sue Coe (b. 1957; *Woman Walks into Bar – Is Raped by Four Men on the Pool Table – While 20 Watch*, 1983), Nancy Spero (1926–2009; *Torture of Women III*, 1976) and Sue Williams (b. 1954; *A Funny Thing Happened*, 1992), and the seemingly detached but emotionally devastating work of Ida Applebroog (b. 1929; *Now Then*, 1979–80), Jenny Holzer (b. 1950; *Lustmord*, 1993), and Kara Walker (b. 1969; *Gone: A Historical Romance of a Civil War as it Occurred B'tween the Dusky Thighs of One Young*

*Negress and Her Heart*, 1994). Additionally, the author tracks more organizational art world endeavors, from the 1978 *Heresies* issue “On Women and Violence” to the 1985 Ohio State University exhibition entitled “Rape” (177).

The book’s small number of illustrations convey the aesthetic differences and political range of some of the artworks highlighted by Princenthal, but a reader searching for an image referent for every cited work (and many are cited all too briefly) must trawl the internet—sometimes to paltry results, evincing the necessity of this book and for continued work around this essential subject. For that reason, *Unspeaking Acts* pairs well with Vivien Green Fryd’s more lavishly illustrated *Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art Since 1970*, and Monika Fabijanska’s compact catalogue for her important 2018 exhibition, *The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Contemporary Women’s Art in the U.S.* All three work together to create a study of how artists visualize and convey rape in art.

For this reader, the strongest passages emerge from the chapters unpacking and delineating divisions in feminist, antiwar, and civil rights movements, often cited but rarely explored in as much depth as Princenthal achieves here. This brings a nearer sense of how early readers of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) or Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) responded to a seemingly sudden awareness of bodily autonomy and women’s agency over her own desires, and where women fit into and negotiated leadership positions in groups like Students for a Democratic Society or the Black Panthers. Impactful passages outline how presumably progressive movements subsume and make subservient women’s political needs through the objectification and exploitation of their bodies. Princenthal’s engagement of artworks against this backdrop adds considerable power to the already-revolutionary sharing-out of silenced experiences when considered against the complexities, frustrations, and outright abuses within art and activist circles.

Still, this “first wave millennial” reader detected subtle notes of intergenerational dissonance. There is, for me, an



Fig. 1. *Ablutions* (1972), performance by Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani. Venice, CA.

unnecessary hand-wringing around defining rape. Suzanne Lacy’s 1972 *Rape Is* artist book (slyly appropriated for Princenthal’s red wraparound cover design) already laid the foundation as to how “legitimate rape” (to borrow Republican Todd Akin’s sickening, judgment-laced term) and the full spectrum of sexual aggressions—from physical penetration to social micro-aggression—encompass what “rape is”: both an act and a culture (108). Princenthal honestly traces her own anger and dismissal of this formative publication in what she asserts is a definition “so broad as to be counterproductive” (112). A similar dismissiveness emerges in the book’s conclusion, where a promising call to consider how dynamics of privilege, race, class, and power influence what rape stories we hear in the media is clouded by an odd warning that “harm also lurks in the clamorous need for attention inherent to a movement identified by the assertion, ‘me too’” (252). #MeToo’s global chorus of collective identification seems in line with the critical trajectory of artists moving away from personal witness into more systemic critique, while somehow holding on to the personal amidst it all—it is messy, but it is powerful. In these same brief concluding pages, Princenthal juxtaposes the rape statistics of the seventies against “women on campuses falling victim” today, an oddly passive

woman-blaming construction that stands out starkly after chapter upon chapter of nuanced, intentional language in a conclusion that is meant to extend the influence of the 1970s artists to our present day (253). Here, the noted recent artworks receive a much more cursory engagement than those of previous chapters—sometimes breezily laudatory, as for the works of Naima Ramos-Chapman (b. 1987) and Joyce J. Scott (b. 1948), and sometimes uncomfortably shallow and distrustful, as for Emma Sulkowicz (b. 1992), who targets institutional inaction and present-day art-world silencing in her work.

In recent years, the concerns of intersectional feminists have been caught in a crisis of perpetual timeliness. Abortion access, school segregation, voting rights, and sexual violence are among the many current calamities requiring immediate action with long decades of battles behind them; it can be wearying to feel as though little has been achieved since then. Princenthal, however, leaves the reader situated in a space where autonomous, women-defined art about rape has finally superseded art history’s centuries of allegorical rape aestheticized for the male gaze. •

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## **Bauhaus Women: A Global Perspective**

By Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler  
Bloomsbury and Herbert Press, 2019

## **Bauhaus Bodies: Gender, Sexuality, and Body Culture in Modernism's Legendary Art School**

Edited by Elizabeth Otto  
and Patrick Rössler  
Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019

Reviewed by Julie M. Johnson

In two closely related books, Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler revisit gender issues at the Bauhaus a century after its founding. *Bauhaus Women* is comprised of short biographies of forty-five women affiliated with the school, around 10 percent of the female population. The artists were chosen by the authors as representative, based on “the quality of their surviving work, the availability of biographical information, and the diversity of their skills and their lives before and after the Bauhaus” (11). *Bauhaus Bodies* addresses gender issues more broadly, with fourteen essays by established and newer scholars on body culture, spirituality, dance, androgyny, clothing, experimental photography, and the unsung contributions of Bauhaus wives and female wall painters. A touchstone for both volumes is Anja Baumhoff’s 2001 assessment of institutionalized gender bias at the school. Baumhoff had looked closely into the archives of the Bauhaus to discover Walter Gropius’s “hidden agenda” to limit the number of female students and to shuttle the majority into the weaving workshop.<sup>1</sup> Otto and Rössler are careful to look again, and to tell a more nuanced story, one in which many women took workshops in multiple disciplines. Despite the internal policies to funnel women into a weaving workshop, which was gendered as more feminine than architecture or wall painting, Otto and Rössler prove in *Bauhaus Bodies* that “women artists, designers, photographers, and even

architects were—despite the very real adversity that they encountered—an essential part of the Bauhaus and its innovations” (xxvii). Furthermore, because of the stricter admission criteria for women, they were often the more qualified among the students (xxv). Together these books show that however important and eye-opening institutional histories such as Baumhoff’s may be, they can never tell the whole story of women’s experiences or accomplishments.

Otto introduces *Bauhaus Bodies* with a concise history of the Bauhaus in its various phases and contextualizes the book’s theme of embodiment. Gropius famously proclaimed that the school would be gender-neutral, but space and sexuality are always intertwined, and especially so when these are denied, as Otto points out, citing Beatriz Colomina’s 1992 *Sexuality and Space* (xxi). Looking at the empty studio spaces in photographs shown at the 1923 Bauhaus exhibition, Paul Monty Paret therefore asks, “where are the bodies and flesh of the students? Where are the creative art kids and free-spirited, experimental students so celebrated today but so invisible in the public presentation of the early Bauhaus in Weimar?” (115), (c. 1928; Fig. 1). The 1923 decision to remove Rodin’s *Eve*, a sculpture that stood under the stairwell at the Bauhaus, combined with the erasure of female bodies in official photographs demonstrated anxiety about traditional gender roles. Paret also uncovers a bizarre undercurrent of blatant misogyny in print series by a conservative faculty member who was inherited with the Grand Ducal Saxon School of Arts and Crafts merger. Although his is the fifth contribution, Paret sets the stage in a way for many of the other essays, which together repopulate and bring to life the history of the “free-spirited, experimental students” who are missing in those official Bauhaus photographs, deliberately staged as empty in order to neutralize the school’s image with regard to the very vibrant female presence there.

Part one opens with “Soft Skills and Hard Facts,” in which Rössler and Anke Blümm provide a statistical analysis to test the assumption that women were

involved primarily in the weaving workshop. They found that during 1919–20 almost half of the students were women; there were 462 female students between 1919 and 1935 (about 37 percent of the student body). Weaving was in fact the dominant preoccupation of women (35 percent), as Baumhoff and others have asserted, but women also participated in photography, printmaking, drawing, and architecture. Furthermore, the majority of women “were pioneers in disciplines other than textiles” (12). The authors provide helpful graphs and a definitive answer to student numbers over the course of the institution’s history, concluding with case studies of two Bauhaus couples. This essay will become a new touchstone for Bauhaus scholars; the agency of women as creative and dynamic actors who negotiated these frameworks of power begins to take on a more tangible presence with these “hard facts.”

Three essays on body culture at the early Bauhaus round out part one. The embodiment exercises and nudity that seem so foreign to art school experiences today were a big part of the early years, in part because the Bauhaus mirrored its environment. Sandra Neugärtner examines the connection between the Moholy and the nearby Loheland and Schwarzerden Women’s Communes, where therapeutic gymnastics were foundational. Linn Burchert analyzes the spiritualization and purification of the body in the philosophy and teaching of Johannes Itten, whose far-reaching influence included dietary restrictions and fasting regimes, and for whom breathing, rhythm, and movement were essential to creating balance in the self, the body, and, by extension, the basic principles of design. Itten’s source for the breathing and movement exercises was not Weimar but the esoteric religion of Mazdaznan. Like Itten, Gertrud Grunow (1870–1944), who taught Applied Harmony in music-based lessons, stressed the importance of balance and movement. Ute Ackermann covers the history of nudity, body culture, and classical gymnastics at the Bauhaus. The early holistic approach that Itten and Grunow championed is

systematized after 1922 by later masters into regimes of gymnastics, which are practiced as a sport. The body is no longer the foundation for artistic experience and self-actualization, but “abstracted into a yardstick for the reformation of the living environment” (41).

Five essayists explore the “technologies and techniques of gender” in part two. Kathleen James-Chakraborty analyzes the clothing that Bauhaus women wore, a combination of practical classicism and modernity. In a revision of the longstanding narrative that Paul Klee rejected modern art forms in favor of classical music and opera, Susan Funkenstein uncovers the story of Klee’s friendships with contemporary dancers Gret Palucca (1902–93) and Karla Grosch (1904–33). These interactions clearly influenced his depiction of movement. Mercedes Valdivieso gives long overdue credit to two Bauhaus wives. Ise Gropius (1897–1983) tirelessly wrote promotional materials and designed kitchens that promoted Bauhaus ideals, while Lucia Moholy (1894–1989) produced many of the iconic photographs of the Bauhaus. Gropius enjoyed the fruits of her labor after moving to the US with her husband, but the divorced Moholy struggled financially. She could not even access her own work after the dissolution of the Bauhaus. Gropius had the negatives, which he continued to use for publicity purposes.

Despite anxieties about femininity and decoration and attempts to limit these connections at the Bauhaus, three women stand out for their innovative contributions to the wall-painting workshop: Dörte Helm (1898–1941), who specialized in Raumkunst (spatial art), Lou Scheper-Berkenkamp (1901–76), who contributed as a practitioner, historian, and theorist of wall painting, and Margaret Leiteritz (1907–76), who played a major role in forming collaborations with the wallpaper industry. Morgan Ridler tells this fascinating story based on original research from her 2016 dissertation. Wall painting was a very gendered discipline, considered masculine because of the physicality, and dangerously close to femininity because of associations with the decorative. Few



Fig. 1. T. Lux Feininger, *The Weavers on the Bauhaus Staircase* (c. 1928. Top to bottom: Gunta Stözl (L), Ljuba Monastirska (R), Margaretha Reichardt (L), Otti Berger (R), Elisabeth Müller (light patterned sweater), Rosa Berger (dark sweater), Lis Beyer-Volger (center, white collar), Lena Meyer-Bergner (L), Ruth Hollós-Consemüller (far right), and Elisabeth Oestreicher. Gelatin silver print. 10 7/8" x 3 1/3". Photo: Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin © Estate of T. Lux Feininger.

women joined the workshop. Helm experienced sexual harassment in the workshop; her harasser (Carl Schlemmer, the brother of Oskar) was fired and Helm stayed on but moved to the weaving workshop after having achieved the position of journeywoman. In 1927 she formed her own firm for Raumkunst. Deborah Ascher Barnstone, who is also a series editor for this book, covers the theme of classicism in Oskar Schlemmer’s androgyny, behind which lay an openness to gender ambiguity and intersexuality.

Part three comprises four essays on photography as an experimental space for staging gender relations, rethinking

gender disorder, and codes of masculinity and femininity (Burcu Dogramaci); the experimental twinned portraits that dealt with themes of the copy and the original (Karen Koehler); explorations of labor and communist femininity (Julia Secklehner); and the pairing of female bodies with tubular furniture (Jordan Troeller).

**B**auhaus Women is organized chronologically, by the date of matriculation into the Bauhaus—useful because the Bauhaus had three phases marked by location: Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin. The first artist to be profiled, Friedl Dicker-Brandeis (1898–1944), was the first

student invited to teach in the preliminary course. She left the Bauhaus before it moved to Dessau. Her experience at the school was therefore quite different from that of Ivana Tomljenovic (1906–88), a “fashion plate, sports champion, rich girl turned revolutionary and spy” (134) from Zagreb. Tomljenovic was studying applied arts with Josef Hoffmann in Vienna when she heard a lecture by Hannes Meyer, the second director of the Bauhaus. She quickly packed her bags and left for Dessau and matriculated at the Bauhaus in 1929. Politically engaged, she worked alongside John Heartfield in Piscator’s Berlin theater company after leaving the Bauhaus. Her paintings and photographs of Bauhaus students capture the spirit of the zany art students that was absent in official Bauhaus publicity; she also made the only film of the Dessau Bauhaus building and students, a 57-second “jumble of raucously diverse images” (136).

The theme of women at the Bauhaus has made it into the popular culture and literature of Germany—through a novel and television series that follow the dreams of a young woman who wants to become an architect at the school—an imagined composite figure who encounters the famous Itten, Gropius, and Georg Muche in the first few pages.<sup>2</sup> But as we learn again and again in *Bauhaus Women*, the facts of real women at the Bauhaus need no embellishment or fictionalization to fascinate. Zsuzska Bánki (1912–44) enrolled at the Bauhaus in 1930 at the age of eighteen. She studied architecture and interior design with Mies van der Rohe and Lilly Reich and also enrolled in the carpentry workshop, working on textiles in her free time. She became politically involved with a communist student group and was therefore one of twelve students who were not accepted back. She next enrolled to study architecture in Frankfurt in 1933, but her teacher was fired by the Nazis, so she moved to Vienna to study architecture with Oskar Strnad at the School of Applied Arts; finding the tuition too high, she interned with Clemens Holzmeister at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1933. She participated in his master class for architecture for three

years. She was the only woman and the only Jewish student at the Vienna Academy. In 1936 she returned to her hometown of Gyor, Hungary, where she married in 1938. She and her mother were deported to the ghetto and then murdered at Auschwitz in 1944. Her husband survived in a labor camp.<sup>3</sup>

Bánki’s story provides one answer for why so little is known about some of the artists presented in this book—it is not simply due to gender bias in the historiography, though that certainly factors in—dispersal, disruption, and loss of life contributed to the erasure. Finding documentation remains difficult for many of these artists. Edith Tudor-Hart (1908–73), for example, studied photography at the Bauhaus from 1928 to 1930, and became part of the underground in Vienna during the interwar years. Holding her Rolleiflex camera at chest level, she was able to surreptitiously photograph police making arrests and political demonstrations. As a secret courier for the communist party, she was discovered and arrested at her parent’s home in 1933. She fled to London, where she was trailed by MI5; some of her records are thought to be in the KGB archives in Moscow, inaccessible still to researchers. Her story, first told by Duncan Forbes and Peter Stephan Jungk, is neatly summarized in a few pages with splashy photographs and references for further study.

As such, *Bauhaus Women* is an invitation for further research, not only into the lives of the women presented, but also the other 90 percent of female Bauhaus students. Trude Waehner (1900–79), for example, did not make the cut, but she, like Tudor-Hart, came from Vienna, studied at the Bauhaus in 1928 with Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, and then returned to Vienna, where she worked in the underground, fabricating identification papers for those in trouble.<sup>4</sup> Tomljenovic and Dicker-Brandeis, both mentioned earlier, were also politically engaged as artists during the interwar years; both used avant-garde collage techniques to make political posters and brochures (15, 138). Dicker-Brandeis was murdered at Auschwitz in 1944. Tomljenovic survived the war and was rediscovered in 1983; in the estimation of

the authors, her work “reveals an array of thrilling visual experiments that picture a new unity that was at the heart of the Dessau Bauhaus’s later years: that of art and politics” (139). Otto and Rössler’s global history tells many more stories of women who returned to their home countries or emigrated to the US and elsewhere, most notably, Japan, and were influential in disseminating Bauhaus ideas after the war. Beautifully written and presented, experts will not quibble with the short biographies or presentations, while newcomers to the field will find a friendly format with references for further reading in an easy-to-use bibliography. One can imagine several dissertations arising from this compilation, but they may require the methods of a detective working a cold case. Part of the problem is not just the erasures of Nazism, but also the fact that a focus on male artists has eclipsed these heroic tales of women’s work, both aesthetic and political. It’s a lot that we’ve missed. •

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#### Notes

1. Anja Baumhoff, *The Gendered World of the Bauhaus: The Politics of Power at the Weimar Republic’s Premier Art Institute 1919–1932* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2001).
2. Theresia Enzensberger, *Blaupause* (Munich: dtv, 2019, first published in 2017).
3. The author of this essay is Esther Bánki, whose other work on Zsuzska Bánki is cited in the bibliography.
4. Waehner, who was not Jewish, was able to emigrate first to the US in 1938, where she taught at Sarah Lawrence College. She returned to Vienna in 1947 and moved to Venice in 1963. Her manuscript memoir, “Una Cosa Sola,” is in the Literaturarchiv of the National Library of Austria.

## In a Cloud, in a Wall, in a Chair: Six Modernists in Mexico at Midcentury

Edited by Zoë Ryan  
Art Institute of Chicago, 2019

Reviewed by K. L. H. Wells

This book accompanies an exhibition of the same name at the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) that took place September 6, 2019 to January 12, 2020, and although it does not provide a checklist of the exhibition's objects, its many informative essays expand upon the subjects and themes of the museum show. The AIC exhibition was inspired by an historic exhibition, *Art in Daily Life: Well-Designed Objects Made in Mexico*, curated by furniture designer Clara Porset (1895–1981) at the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City in 1952. In that show, Porset brought together handmade and machine produced objects, arguing that “there is design in everything, in a cloud, in a wall, in a chair,” to encourage Mexican consumers to seek out good design in order to improve their daily lives (c. 1952; Fig. 1). Porset is loosely linked together with the five other artists included in *In a Cloud*. Photographer Lola Álvarez Bravo (1903–93) and textile designer Cynthia Sargent (1933–2006) contributed works to *Art in Daily Life*. Porset introduced Anni Albers (1899–1994) and her husband Josef to other artists and designers in Mexico and helped facilitate their travel and art collecting around the country. Ruth Asawa (1926–2013) was briefly Porset's student in Mexico City before learning her signature wire basket weaving technique in Toluca. Sheila Hicks (b. 1934) seems to have had no direct relationship with Porset, but she developed her weaving practice as a form of modern art in Mexico in a climate fostered by Porset's promotion of local design. Like Albers, Asawa, and Sargent, Hicks was drawn to textiles as a transcultural art form.

Essays by Randal Sheppard and Christina L. De León bring Porset's influential career to the attention of US audiences. Sheppard focuses on how



Fig. 1. Elizabeth Timberman, Clara Porset, with Totonac chairs and table (c. 1952), photograph, 8" × 10". Archivo Clara Porset, Centro de Investigaciones de Diseño Industrial, Facultad de Arquitectura, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City.

Porset, a political exile from Cuba, became involved in communist activism in Mexico and how this shaped her commitment to good design for the masses in ways that contested international modernism's devotion to pure functionalism. De León focuses on Porset's reinterpretation of the traditional butaque chair and her collaboration with the architectural historian Esther McCoy to market the chair in the US. Essays by Johanna Spanke and James Oles highlight Álvarez Bravo's photomontages and their place within Mexican muralism. Oles investigates the liminal artistic status of these works, which were often commissioned for government or corporate buildings and reports, while Spanke argues that they contest dominant narratives of US hegemony over modernism. Ann Reynolds clarifies the important relationship between Asawa's woven wire sculptures and Mexican basketry. Asawa learned her signature wire weaving technique in Toluca, but was imitating less a traditional, indigenous craft than the modern, vernacular manufacturing of

egg baskets and other practical items. Ana Elena Mallet draws attention to Cynthia Sargent's important role as a promoter of artisan designers in Mexico alongside her successful career producing rugs and textiles for the Mexican and US markets. Glenn Adamson illuminates the standing that Sheila Hicks enjoyed in Mexico as a modernist rather than a fiber artist and suggests convincingly that this experience helped propel her career at MoMA and other prestigious venues.

Erica Warren's essay offers a beautiful rumination on how Anni Albers's experience in Mexico visiting archeological sites and collecting Mesoamerican sculpture contributed to the self-referential quality of her artistic work. However, since Albers is the most studied artist in the group, it would be difficult for Warren's essay to advance much beyond Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye's scholarship on the Albers collection in *Small Great Objects* or Virginia Gardner Troy's earlier account, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles*.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one gets the impression that Albers was included precisely because she could

lend some name recognition to an exhibition of relatively unknown figures. It is notable in this regard that two of the other artists, Asawa and Hicks, had influential experiences as students of Josef, not Anni, Albers. Although Albers's textile practice may have shaped Asawa's and Hicks's interest in weaving, this relationship was not explicitly discussed by any of the book's contributors.

This raises the question of why *In a Cloud* didn't incorporate work by Josef Albers or more explicitly consider his relationship to Mexican modernism. The answer, of course, is that the book and the exhibition only included women artists, although two of them—Albers and Sargent—worked quite collaboratively in Mexico with their husbands. Yet this focus on women artists remains only a latent aspect of the project. Although it seems admirable that *In a Cloud* does not frame its subjects entirely in terms of gender, by resisting the subtitle "six women modernists in Mexico," it is disappointing that the book pays so little attention to gender in its critical analyses of these artists' work. A notable exception is De León's discussion of Porset and McCoy, which draws attention to the "network of women who helped one another professionally ... during a period when women were considered consumers of design rather than producers" (96).

Similarly, *In a Cloud* largely sidesteps another glaring issue that its assemblage of artists raises: the politics of transcultural exchange. While Álvarez Bravo was Mexican, the five others worked in Mexico, and only Porset and Sargent settled there permanently. Zoë Ryan's extensive introduction makes the important point that foreigners played a significant role in shaping Mexican national identity by actively participating in Mexico's nationalist project of promoting indigenous art. But nowhere in the book is the imperialism of this project acknowledged. Cultural elites and government officials sought to liberate Mexico's national identity from the legacy of Spanish colonial rule and reorient it around indigenous groups and pre-Columbian history, but this work enacted a kind of domestic

imperialism of the metropole over the provinces. What impact did this metropolitan appropriation of indigenous art have on indigenous communities across Mexico? And if foreigners were so integral to this project, what role did the promotion of indigenous Mexican art play in Mexico's larger foreign relations? As several contributors point out, the rise of Mexican modernism coincided with growing industrialization and foreign investment. Could we then understand foreign artists' interests in Mexico as part of a larger imperialist stake in the developing country?

The museum exhibition did address the issue of cross-cultural appropriation in an opening wall text, saying that the works on view "resulted from a complex dynamic of cultural learning and exchange," and asking, "Who holds power in these processes? Who benefits?" Although the exhibition tried to steer visitors towards a positive view of these encounters by pointing out the ways in which these artists acknowledged their indigenous sources, it also encouraged visitors to make up their own minds. "As you move through this exhibition," the wall text concludes, "we invite you to hold the past in the present, interrogate the gaps, and consider the legacies and lessons of history." This kind of open-ended acknowledgement of problematic content is perhaps as far as we can expect museums to go within exhibitions themselves, but accompanying publications offer the opportunity to delve into such issues more deeply. It is notable therefore, that the book, *In a Cloud*, does even less than the exhibition to address cross-cultural appropriation, for the book does not even raise this as a serious issue for readers to consider on their own throughout the text. Instead, Ryan tries to downplay the problem by insisting more forcefully than in the exhibition that these artists were not appropriating artistic practices at all, because they did not steal or copy them. Indeed, many of the contributors are at pains to present their subjects as crediting their indigenous sources or as transforming them thoroughly into modern art and design. *In a Cloud* thus attempts to define appropriation very narrowly as outright theft and as a whol-

ly negative practice (25). But this narrowness misrecognizes the productivity as well as the pitfalls of cultural appropriation. We can acknowledge the fruitfulness of cross-cultural exchange, the way it allows for new artistic forms to develop and modes of self-expression to migrate, while also recognizing how these exchanges are structured by inequality, hierarchy, or exploitation.

While it is admirable that the Art Institute of Chicago took on this transcultural subject matter, presenting it in such exclusively celebratory terms dramatically limits the extent to which it can advance the discipline of art history. *In a Cloud* certainly expands our understanding of American modernism by highlighting marginalized voices and media, but it also relies on traditional models of artistic creation in which individual geniuses transform indigenous source material into modern art. *In a Cloud* offered a remarkable opportunity to consider how national, ethnic, and gender identities intersected to shape artistic production during a period of dramatic geopolitical change. That it did not quite do so shows us that there is much more work to be done to challenge our discipline's dominant modes of thinking. •

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#### Notes

1. Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye, *Small Great Objects: Anni and Josef Albers in the Americas* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Art Gallery with Yale Univ. Press, 2017); Virginia Gardner Troy, *Anni Albers and Ancient American Textiles: From Bauhaus to Black Mountain* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002).

## Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists

Edited by Jill Ahlberg Yohe  
and Teri Greeves  
University of Washington Press and  
Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2019

Reviewed by Karen Kramer

Playing tribute to women whose artistic contributions to the cultural, economic, and political needs of their communities have been overlooked historically, *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* is the accompanying catalogue to the eponymous exhibition that opened at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (Mia) on June 2, 2019. The first large-scale traveling exhibition celebrating artistic achievements by Native women spanning antiquity to the present throughout the US and Canada, the show opened to much fanfare, including laudatory articles in the *New York Times*, *The Art Newspaper*, and *vogue.com*. The project offers an antidote to the ghettoization that Native American women's arts have suffered in relation to the critical attention granted their male counterparts and canonical art history, which is usually told from a predominantly male European or Euro-American perspective.

An advisory team of twenty-one women, led by co-curators Jill Ahlberg Yohe (Mia) and Teri Greeves (independent curator and Kiowa Nation member), determined the project's thematic organization, artworks, and catalogue texts. The publication includes over 115 artworks, ranging from textiles, ceramics, baskets, and beadwork to painting, photography, video, and installation art. The catalogue showcases artists from more than seventy-five tribal nations, and is filled with 400 color plates, including luxe details, and dozens and dozens of artist, scholar, and community voices provided by forty-two contributors over a sprawling 344 pages. The preface explains that the advisory board did not want the catalogue to have one unified voice, often made possible through stylistic conventions and editing. Instead, their aim was to demonstrate

the multiplicity and diversity of Native women artists across time and space, a goal abundantly realized. After three introductory essays, the catalogue follows the exhibition's thematic structure: Legacy, an intergenerational, evolving continuum of resiliency; Relationships, which explores Indigenous concepts of family, belonging, reciprocity, and kincentricity; and Power, comprising objects that illustrate diplomacy and influence, honor, grace, and balance. Within each section, there are various forms of scholarship: short- and long-form essays, including personal reflections, "In Focus" object entries, conversations, artist biographies, and poems. As well, some plates have extended captions beyond the object's tombstone information.

*Hearts of Our People* is broadly connected to a resurgence of women-only art shows in the United States that strive toward equality and serve as correctives to disparities of gender in the art world. A sampling of these group exhibitions includes *Dreaming Their Way: Australian Aboriginal Women Painters* (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2006) and *WACK!: Art and Feminist Revolution* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007), and the more recent *Women of Abstract Expressionism* (Denver Art Museum, 2016), *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-85* (Hammer Museum, 2017), *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85* (Brooklyn Museum, 2017), and *Women Take the Floor* (Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 2019). The Museum of Modern Art went to considerable lengths to incorporate 28 percent women in their 2019 reinstallation, about five times the proportion in recent years, although their curators did not include a single work of Indigenous art.

For more than four decades, Kay WalkingStick (b. 1935, Cherokee Nation) has been painting metaphysical and empathy-driven reflections of land, place, and people, and for more than thirty years, she has used the horizontal diptych format to bring together seemingly disparate ideas through visual abstraction and representation. *Venere Alpina* (1997; Fig. 1) evokes permanence and vitality by juxtaposing

lush, mountainous terrain with a single vaginal-like opening in the raw, earthen surface. Despite her notoriety and renown in the mainstream art world, it wasn't until 1995 that WalkingStick was added as the first Native American and the first Native American woman artist in H.W. Janson's *History of Art*, the essential art history survey text first published in 1962 (the first woman was included in 1987). Yohe asserts that roughly 90 percent of Native art in museum collections is made by women, and *Hearts of Our People* brings overdue recognition to their work. Yohe's essay, "Animate Matters: Thoughts on Native American Art Theory, Curation, and Practice," and Janet Catherine Berlo and Ruth B. Phillips's essay, "Encircles Everything: A Transformative History of Native Women's Arts," shed light on some of the structural, often invisible biases within the deeply entrenched racist and sexist systems that have led to the marginalization of Native women artists. Throughout the book, emphasis is placed on individual artists whenever possible, in an effort to underscore the female maker—her hands and her knowledge and creativity embodied in work—often anonymous or attributed to an entire "culture" in museum exhibitions.

Several authors reveal principles of generosity as a common denominator in Native women's art. Another core idea is that Native women artists simultaneously engage with the world around them, reaching back to ancestral knowledge, techniques, and materials to nurture the present and future. Authors ascribed holism—a unifying sensibility of interconnectedness—to many of the artists. That is, Native women's art-making holistically embodies cultural values and current trends of thought, grounded in an artist's community, philosophy, language, and environment, and the evolving personal experiences of the individual, whether articulated through time-honored or cutting-edge techniques, materials, and forms. Aldona Jonaitis describes the artistic practice of Tlingit weaver Teri Rofkar (1956-2016) as one that "integrated her continued analyses of the natural world with Tlingit ancient traditions, demonstrating the



Fig. 1. Kay WalkingStick (Cherokee Nation), *Venere Alpina* (1997), (left) oil on canvas, (right) steel mesh over acrylic, saponified wax, and plastic stones, 32" x 64". Photo: Minneapolis Institute of Art, The David and Margaret Christenson Endowment for Art Acquisition, L2018.124a,b. © Kay WalkingStick 1997.

inseparability of history, knowledge, spirituality, creativity, and science" (119). Several authors positioned not just Native artists but their objects as dynamic, living beings in relation to the world around them—active agents connected to people past and present, to place, and to surrounding life forces.

One of the great triumphs of this catalogue is that personal reflections and conversations between artists are given equal weight to the more traditional (read "academic") essays. The dialogue between artists Dyani White Hawk (b. 1976, Sicangu Lakota) and Rose Simpson (b. 1983, Santa Clara Pueblo) in "Maria, Rose, Empowerment, and Indigenous Women Rollin' Hard" was thrilling, and it almost felt as if I were a fly on the wall of their studio, listening in while their hands were busy making, or as if we were all drinking coffee at the kitchen table. Anita Fields (b. 1951, Osage/Muscogee) generously shared family biography in "Memory Threads" through personal reflections of experiencing her Wah-Zha-Zhi community's material culture in the Osage Nation Museum, Pawhuska, Oklahoma. Another high watermark is heather ahtone's (Choctaw, Chickasaw) "Making Our World: Thoughts on Native Feminine Aesthetics," in which she elucidates her ideas on Indigenous kincentricity, or relationality, and how Native women artists' cumulative knowledge, history, and experiences are

visually expressed. Berlo and Phillips's essay is outstanding for widening and deepening our understanding of Native women's art history through select case studies. Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse's and Megan A. Smetzer's essay, "Working to Change the Tide: Women Artists on the Northwest Coast," illuminates influences on Indigenous women's art production through themes of resilience, activation, and balance.

The publication may have also benefitted by including a scholar of gender studies or feminist art to flesh out art historical foundations beyond what Berlo and Phillips provided, if only to shade in further the importance of the feminist art movement to Native women's art. Lucy Lippard's formative work from the 1970s forward, for example, is a beacon for investigating visual modes and strategies that underpin art, women's lives, and institutional politics of the art world, while Nancy Mithlo's (b. 1961, Chiricahua Apache) scholarship has addressed the intersection of Indigenous women's arts with feminist-embodied knowledges and communal values.<sup>1</sup> As well, an essay exploring Native female arts' inclusion of transgender, non-binary, two-spirit, third gender, and gender-fluid Indigenous artists was a missed opportunity (Lea McChesney's segment on Laguna potter Arroh-a-och [c. 1830–1900]) did not address this adequately).

In addition to bringing to light Native women artists, this project set out to establish their place in the annals of American art (40). This could have been accomplished through more substantive cross-cultural visual and historical comparison and links. It also would have been helpful to readers to understand why references in the catalogue to male scholars was acceptable, but male participation on the advisory panel and in the catalogue as writers was not. That may seem like a minor quibble, but understanding more clearly the advisory panel's principles would have strengthened their platform. Finally, with more than three dozen contributors, the design of the book makes their various voices and forms of writing tedious at times.

Ultimately *Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists* is an important contribution to the field of Native art history, museum studies, and Native American and Indigenous studies. The catalogue's diverse perspectives and platforms encourage closer looking and new modes of inquiry about Native art. It also provides a new framework to consider for multi-authored exhibition catalogues of Native art, one that radiates multivocality and models consensus and collaboration, grounded in respect, reciprocity, and responsibility, characteristics at the heart of Native women's art. Perhaps most poignantly, this publication celebrates

Native women artists who have, as ahtone shared, “created the potential for a future where their cultures live, survive, and thrive ... their work makes it possible for our children to see themselves in the future, to be proud of their history, and to continue to make our world” (42). •

**Karen Kramer** is the curator of Native American and Oceanic Art and Culture at the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, MA, where she has developed major exhibitions on Native American art, including the recent, critically acclaimed *T.C. Cannon: At the Edge of America*. She directs the museum’s innovative Native American Fellowship Program.

## Notes

1. For example, see Lucy Lippard’s *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976) and *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984), and Nancy Marie Mithlo, “‘A Real Feminine Journey’: Locating Indigenous Feminisms in the Arts,” *Meridians* 9, no 2 (2009): 1–30.

## What if Not Exotic? Critical Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art

Edited by Mahsa Farhadikia  
Building Bridges Art Exchange,  
Los Angeles, 2019

Reviewed by Donna Stein

In Iran, “exotic” has been a code word for the traditional Orientalist point of view about life in the Middle East. Because of political tensions between the US and Iran, curiosity in the West about the geographic East and its political affairs has become exoticized and eroticized, and women’s issues historically and in modern times are simple ways to explain the message.<sup>1</sup> *What if not Exotic? Critical Perspectives in Contemporary Iranian Art*, the recent exhibition at the Los Angeles non-profit Building Bridges Art Exchange, offered new insights into the consideration of Middle Eastern art and specifically contemporary Iranian art. The title immediately addresses the curatorial approach by asking the question, “What if not Exotic?”

The well-written, carefully documented, and thoughtful exhibition catalogue, edited by Mahsa Farhadikia, the show’s curator alongside Aria Eghbal, with a contributory scholarly essay by Ali Golestaneh, introduces an alternative to current international market perspectives that favor Iranian modern artists. These include well-known artists Parviz Tanavoli, Hossein Zenderoudi, and Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian (1922–2019), who, beginning in the 1950s, incorporated the new culture of a developing country through calligraphy and other traditional and indigenous motifs. More



Fig. 1. Shaya Shahrestani, *Figure 6* (2019), pencil on cardboard, 12" x 16 1/2".

recently, post-modern artists whose careers developed after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, for instance Shirin Neshat (b. 1956), Shadi Ghadirian (b. 1974), and Siamak Filizadeh, emphasize socio-political issues in juxtaposition with Orientalist clichés from the Qajar Dynasty (1789–1925) first propagated by nineteenth-century European and American artists, and have also received worldwide attention. Contrary to what most Western viewers expect, the curators for this exhibit wanted to show artworks of high technical quality by Iranian artists who do not explicitly work in the political arena. Nevertheless, it is impossible for individual artists to escape their day-to-

day reality, which encompasses limited access to materials, and an underlying narrative of censorship in which everyone is insecure about what they do and say even in their own home.

The exhibition and accompanying catalogue never intended to give a complete view of Iranian art but present instead an in-depth exploration of contemporary Iranian art and artworks that reflect the lived experience of a new generation of artists who are middle class and have primarily exhibited in local art markets. Both catalogue essayists, Farhadikia and Golestaneh, note that Iran’s class-oriented society does not support marginalized middle-class

artists, and, because of the sanctions on Iran, the economic restrictions on those in the lower classes place limitations on their personal and professional involvement in the arts. Of the twenty-three artists included, more than half (fourteen) are women. Of these, only Foroozan Shirghani (b. 1980) had exhibited in Los Angeles previously, and several do not live in Iran, including Shirghani, Ghazale Baniahmad (b. 1983; Canada), and Nazanin Noroozi (b. 1985; New York). The foreword by Farhadikia and Eghbal states that the included artists “have not resorted to predictable and predetermined subject matter or visual elements to question their current political situation” (8). What struck me immediately was how every artist relied on photography, which has had a great flowering in Iran since the early 1980s, as a basis for their work in all media, including painting, video, photography, mixed media, printmaking, and sculptural installation.

Farhadikia’s essay, “A Critical Review of Neo-Orientalism in Contemporary Iranian Art,” is a theoretical discussion based on post-structuralism, critical theory, and linguistics. She presents a careful reading of the ideas of historians Maziar Eslami and Ali Behdad and Juliet Williams, and concurrently summarizes the critical trends in Iranian studies among her colleagues with relevant quotes by domestic critics and international defenders. To substantiate her thesis and underscore her point about Neo-Orientalist artists, for example, she cites Iranian-American art historian Abbas Daneshvari, a Professor of Art History at California State University in Los Angeles: “The Qajars ... are both the gateway to Iran’s modernism and also a sign of Iran as a failed modern state. These two qualities are today the defining force of the conflicts that emerge regarding Iran’s identity and life ....” (21).<sup>2</sup>

Ali Golestaneh’s essay, “The Art of [a] New Generation of Iranian Artists: The City, Memory, and Escaping Inwards,” begins with a short history of Iranian art from the mid-1950s through the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88, setting the stage for his analysis of style and thematic content in the current exhibition. Stylistically, the

work of the artists in the New Generation, “whose work is not in tune with the standards of national and international art markets” (31), reveals their economic limitations. Small in scale, their modest presentation often exhibits a sketch-like quality, which encourages repeated variations and constant experimentation in form and expression (31). The artists communicate a passive, reportorial account in their compositions, employing frontal perspective to create opportunities for dialogue between the artwork and viewer. There is minimal use of strange, imaginary, or unexpected elements. Color underscores and enhances subject matter (31).

The exhibition focuses on four main themes that are examined further in Golestaneh’s essay and in the catalogue’s excellent reproductions: Public Spheres, Private Interiors, the Body (from Defiance to Deformation), and Memory (from Personal to Collective). Quotidian life and urban experience are subjects rarely found in mainstream Iranian artworks. Private space as sanctuary represents individual habits and realities. Family gatherings depict nostalgic relationships, suggesting the home as a comforting space, both a refuge and escape from the pressures of a consumer society (35). The digital photographs of Ramyar Manouchehrzadeh and Ali Nadjian’s *Kathmandu* series (2016), for example, emphasize the coldness of the interior spaces, whose lack of context supports the idea of the alienation of human beings (36).

Representations of the human body in art are determined by restrictive laws and are under constant regulation and control within a social-political context (41). They serve as substitutes for the individual woman, a worker, or a middle-class artist. Since the Iran-Iraq War, the human figure has been a dominant theme in marginalized and unofficial Iranian art. This general motif allows the New Generation artists to use a work of art as a setting for the expression of pain, torture and oppression (36). Shaya Shahrestani’s (b. 1972) *Figures* series (2019; Fig. 1) drawn in charcoal pencil on cardboard suggests distress, conflict, and resistance, while the quivering lines, stains, ink blots and shading in Laleh Memar Ardestani’s (b.

1972) untitled monoprints on an ancient map of Anatolia (2018), bring to mind bruises and pain.

Memory and referencing the past constitute familiar and safe territory for artists. Using family photographs and personal artifacts as source material, they weave together social and collective memory. Afshin Chizari’s untitled intaglio prints, from the *Family Landscapes* series (2014), masterfully employ aquatint and drypoint to transform the anonymous group photographs from realistic events to abstract ideas. Nazanin Noroozi overlays her cyanotype photographs with abstract embroidery, employing a similar obfuscation of history by drawing on top of a stop-motion video in her studies for *Elite 1984* (2018). Master embroiderer Samane Motallebi (b. 1986) uses her stitchery over delicately colored digital prints on fabric that further historicize the imagery from the past.

Apart from the informative and worthwhile essays, the catalogue’s forty-two reproductions suggest the wide-ranging styles and interests of these artists, most of whom are largely unknown outside Iran. Their work provides a provocative entry into contemporary Iranian thought and experience. •

**Donna Stein** is former Deputy Director of The Wende Museum of the Cold War in Los Angeles, CA. Her book *The Empress and I*, about her years (1974–77) as art advisor to the Shahbanou of Iran on Western acquisitions currently held by the Tehran Museum of Contemporary Art, will be published later this year.

## Notes

1. Mahsa Farhadikia, interview with author, Dec. 6, 2019.
2. Abbas Daneshvari, “Seismic Shifts Across Political Zones in Contemporary Iranian Art: The Poetics of Knowledge, Knowing and Identity,” in *Performing the Iranian State: Visual Culture and Representation of Iranian Identity*, ed. Staci Gem Scheiwiller (London: Anthem Press, 2013), 111.



Pl. 1. Yvonne Thomas, *Summer Fantasy* (1954), oil on canvas, 40" x 50". Private Collection, Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

Pl. 2. Yvonne Thomas, *Highway* (1957), oil on canvas, 50" x 62". Private Collection, Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.



Pl. 3. Yvonne Thomas, *Early Morning* (1956), oil on canvas, 48" x 60". Private Collection, Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.



Pl. 4. Yvonne Thomas, *Untitled* (1954), oil on canvas, 39 1/2" x 50".  
Private Collection, Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

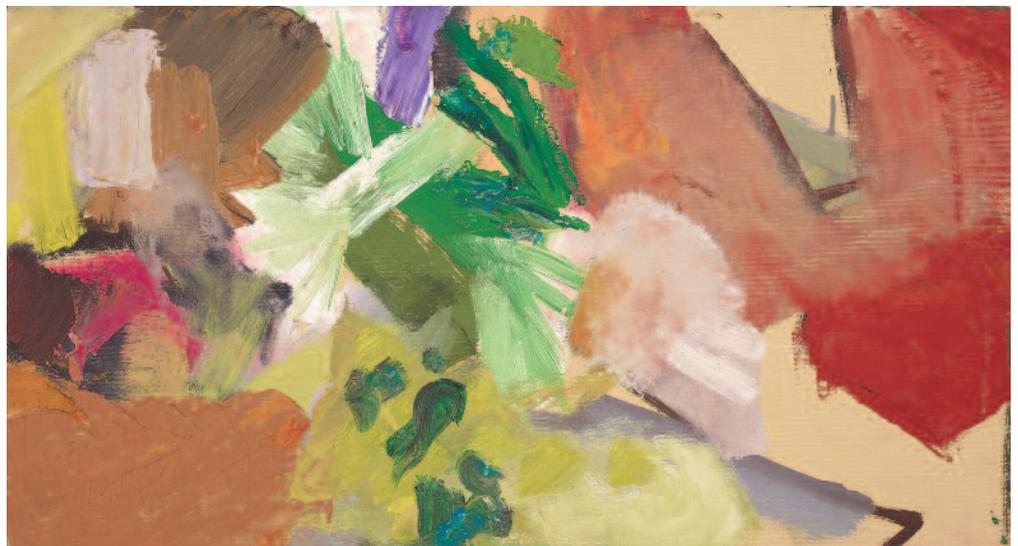


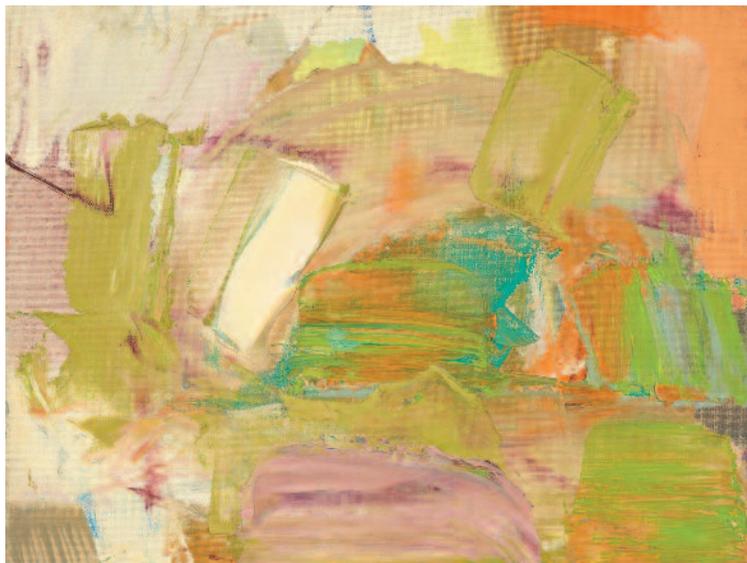
Pl. 5. Yvonne Thomas, *Summer Day* (1952), oil on canvas, 65" x 48".  
Private Collection, Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.



Pl. 6. Yvonne Thomas, *The Game* (1960), oil on canvas,  
61 1/2" x 73 1/2". Private Collection, Courtesy Berry  
Campbell, New York.

Pl. 7. Yvonne Thomas,  
*Memory* (1960),  
oil on canvas,  
13 1/2" x 23 1/2".  
Private Collection,  
Courtesy Berry  
Campbell, New York.



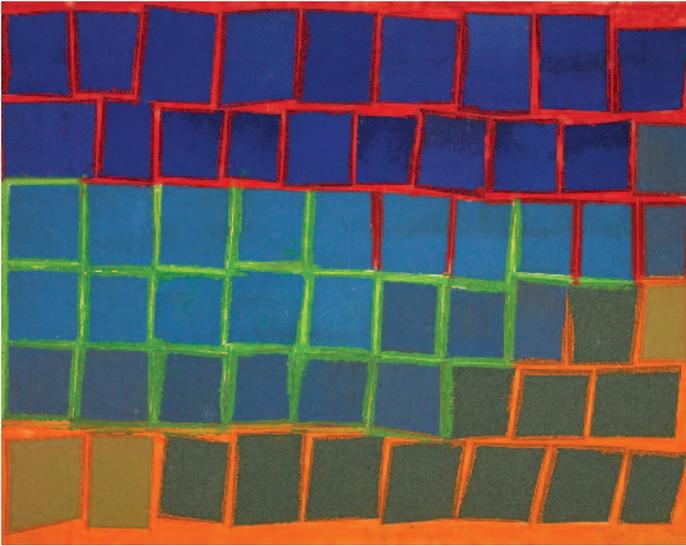


Pl. 8. Yvonne Thomas, *The Valley* (1960), oil on canvas, 11" x 14". Private Collection, Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

Pl. 9. Yvonne Thomas, *Flight* (1953), oil on canvas, 48" x 60". Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

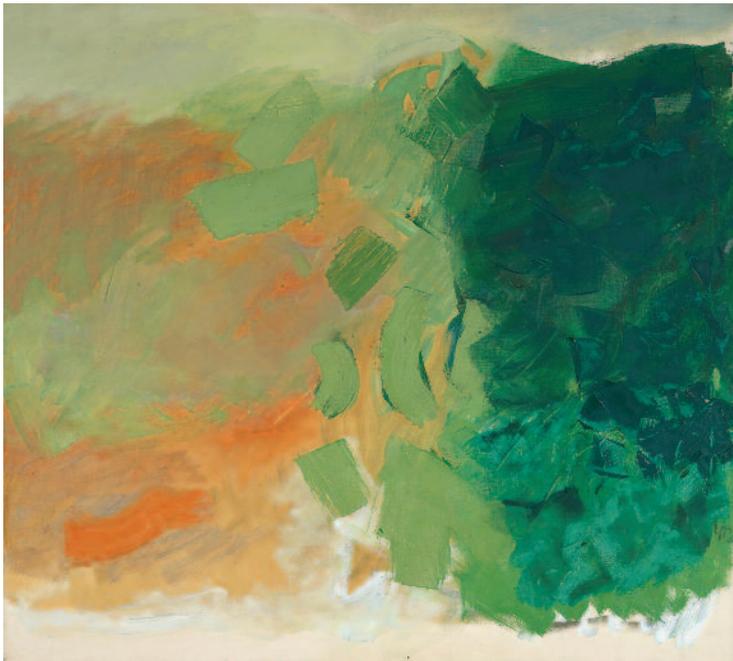


Pl. 10. Yvonne Thomas, *Untitled* (1956), oil on canvas, 40" x 50". Private Collection, Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.



Pl. 11. Yvonne Thomas, *Untitled* (1965), collage and crayon on paper, 11" x 13 7/8".  
Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

Pl. 12. Yvonne Thomas, *Blue Green No. II* (1963), oil on canvas, 40" x 50", Private Collection, Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.



Pl. 13. Yvonne Thomas, *No.3* (1961), oil on canvas, 36" x 40". Private Collection, Courtesy Berry Campbell, New York.

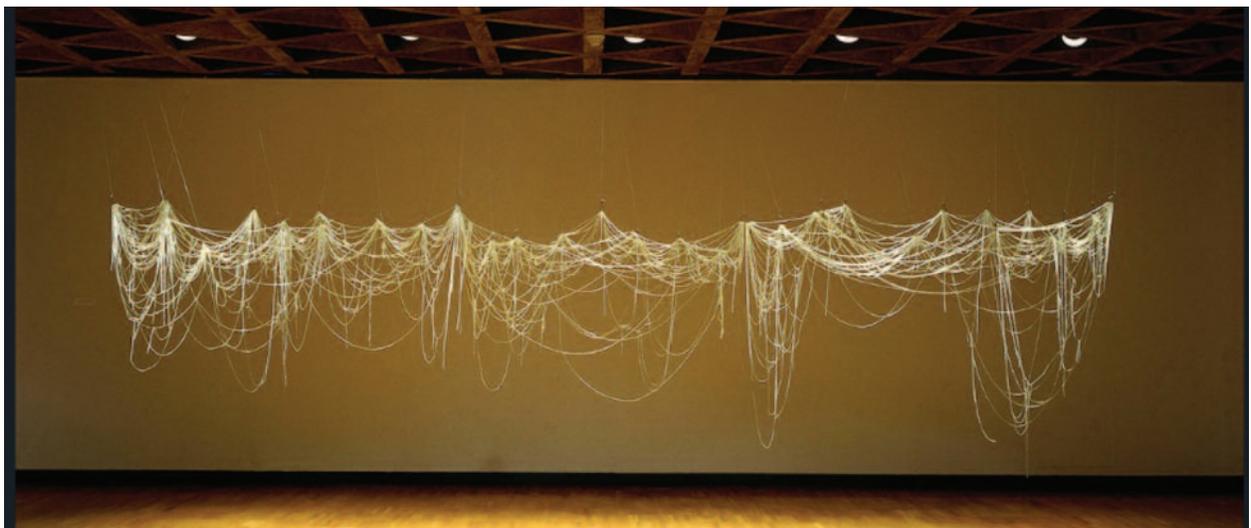


Pl. 14. (left) Eva Hesse, *Laocoon* (1966), plastic tubing, rope, wire, papier-mâché, cloth, and paint, overall 130" x 23 1/4" x 23 1/4", each cube 23 1/4" x 23 1/4" x 23 1/4". Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio; Fund for Contemporary Art, and gift from the artist and Fischbach Gallery, 1970.70.32. © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth.



Pl. 15. (above) Detail of Eva Hesse, *Laocoon* (1966). Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Ohio. Photo: Alison Poe.

Pl. 16. (below) Eva Hesse, *Right After* (1969), as installed in the exhibition *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective*, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, 1992. Casting resin over fiberglass cord with metal hooks, 60" x 96" x 48". Milwaukee Art Museum, Gift of Friends of Art, M1970.27. © The Estate of Eva Hesse. Courtesy of Hauser & Wirth.





Pl. 17. Tina Blau, *Spring at the Prater* (1882), oil on canvas, 84 1/4" x 114 1/2". Photo: Belvedere, Vienna.

Pl. 18. Tina Blau, *Rafters at the Tisza* (1874), oil on wood, 8 1/4" x 14 5/8". Vienna Belvedere, Inv. Nr. 1567. Photo: Belvedere, Vienna.



Pl. 19. Tina Blau, *Railroad Construction at Dürnstein* (1909), oil on canvas, 22 x 28 3/8". Private Collection. Photo: Belvedere, Vienna.

Pl. 20. Tina Blau, *At the Weissgerber Landing (House Construction)* (1905), oil on canvas, 28 1/8" x 43 7/8". Private Collection, Vienna.



# DISPLACEMENT FROM HOME: WHAT TO LEAVE, WHAT TO TAKE CABINETS, CUPBOARDS, CASES AND CLOSETS

A SCULPTURAL SERIES BY LINDA STEIN



© Linda Stein Totem 913; 2017; 66" x 17" x 10" wood, metal, fiber, mixed media

HAVE  
ART:  
WILL  
TRAVEL!  
INC.

UNDER THE AUSPICES OF HAVE ART: WILL TRAVEL! (HAWT)  
WITH EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS ON DIVERSITY AND EMPATHY  
BY A CURRICULAR TEAM OF NATIONAL SCHOLARS  
IN COLLABORATION WITH PENN STATE UNIVERSITY

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