

IT WASN'T NEO TO US

BY JOAN SNYDER

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“When I hold these paper leaves between my fingers, far off across the countless ages I hear the sound of women beating out the fibers of hemp and flax to shape the first garment, and above the roar of the wheels and spinnies of the factory, I hear the whirr of the world’s first spinning wheel and the voice of the woman singing to herself as she sits beside it, and know that without the labor of those first women kneeling over the fibers and beating them swiftly out, and without the hum of those early spinning wheels, neither factory nor paper pulp would ever have come into existence. . . . This little book!—it has got its roots down, down, deep in the life of [people] on earth; it grows from there.”

Olive Schreiner, *From Man to Man*

Chicago, 1977, p.409

Has anything changed in the art world over the last 20 years? Has anything changed for women artists? Are we still discriminated against by curators, critics, and dealers? Do we still need to have women’s shows? Why did the Women Artists Series begin in the first place? Why is it still going on?

I entered Rutgers’s MFA program in 1963. The years I spent there, at that point in my life, were the best years of my life. My classmates were an intense, talented, generous group. The faculty consisted of some old blood and some new blood—all male blood. The irony of this situation was inescapable for the MFA program which was on the Douglass campus, a women’s college, had never had a woman teaching a studio course. These were the years right before the dawning of the women’s/feminist art movement.

Some years later, a new consciousness had awakened within me. Having moved to New York City in 1967, I was aware of the wonderful work being produced by women who had few places to exhibit. I was also aware that students at Douglass had no role models. The creation of the Women

Artists Series was the solution to both problems. Daisy Shenholm, director of Douglass Library, willingly provided space so that women artists could exhibit and students could see art that they would not have seen otherwise.

I curated the first few years. I remember choosing artists either because I felt the students needed to see certain work, or the artist herself needed the exposure, or I simply loved the work and wanted it shown. It was very exciting.

Did it need to be done then? Did it have meaning for the students, and for the artists? Yes, to these questions. Does it have meaning now? Probably yes. Women have more access to show now and they are taken more seriously. Are we discriminated against by curators, critics, and dealers? More frequently than not, but in the most subtle ways.

I believe that women artists pumped the blood back into the art movement in the 1970s and the 1980s. At the height of the Pop and Minimal movements, we were making other art—art that was personal, autobiographical, expressionistic, narrative, and political—using word and photographs and as many other materials as we could get our hands on. This was called Feminist Art. This was the art of the 1980s was finally about, appropriated by the most famous male artists of the decade. They called it neo-expressionist. It wasn't neo to us. They were called heroic for bringing expression and the personal to their art. We were called Feminist (which was, of course, a dirty word). I offer a quote by Hilton Kramer as an example of how women artists are cut out of history:

The whole phenomenon of New-Expressionism, and particularly the American aspects of it—Schnabel, Salle and Eric Fischl, and people of that generation—really has to be understood in relation to minimalism and colour-field abstraction, which by the 1970s had established a standard of visual anemia in art. There was a longing for a kind of art that was richer in visual incident. It was an invitation to the next generation to say, We're going to fill up those surfaces with everything we can lay our hands on.

Except that it was women who did that. Nancy Spero did that, Faith Ringgold did that, Jackie Winsor did that. —WE DID THAT. Is there still a need for the Women Artists Series at Douglass College? Yes. Perhaps another need is for a series which could be called "Setting the Record Straight: The 21st Year, The 21st Century.

