

Art historian Linda Nochlin (1931-2017)

By Clare Hurley and David Walsh
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Art historian Linda Nochlin died of cancer October 29 at the age of 86. Best known today perhaps for the provocative essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” published in *ArtNews* in 1971, Nochlin wrote a number of valuable and insightful works on the art of the 19th century in particular. Later, she played a seminal role in establishing a feminist approach to art history through her influential career as a writer, scholar, professor and curator for the better part of five decades.

In her books *Realism* (1971), *Gustave Courbet: A Study of Style and Society* (1976) and even *The Politics of Vision* (1991) to a considerable extent, Nochlin examined the historical and material context of works of art with an eye to the nexus of artistic form and politics, with special regard to the changing class relations of the various periods.

Born Linda Natalie Weinberg in Brooklyn, New York on January 20, 1931, Nochlin grew up as an only child in a left-leaning, wealthy Jewish family. Her father Jules Weinberg made his fortune in the family’s newspaper delivery business, and her mother Elka Weinberg née Heller surrounded her daughter with art, culture, and material privilege. Like many secular Jews of the period, financial success was not incompatible with radical, even Communist sympathies.

“I thought all radicals were rich,” she told interviewer Richard Candida Smith in April 1998, “All the radicals I knew were wealthy Jews who lived either in Westchester or Brooklyn or the Upper West Side, and they were highly interested in politics. Many of them were [Communist] Party members, some were even Trotskyites, others were just left-wing Democrats. ... I mean, [Franklin D.] Roosevelt was as far right as people were willing to go.” (“The Feminist Turn in the Social History of Art: Linda Nochlin,” 2000)

Receiving her B.A. from Vassar College in Philosophy in 1951, and an M.A. in English Literature from Columbia University in 1952, she was attracted to the work of French painter Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) who became the subject of her 1963 doctoral dissertation at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts, where she studied with renowned art historian Walter Friedländer. According to *The ArtBook* (2000), she began her dissertation “during the McCarthy period, she had been a philosophy major, she was steeped in the political ideas of seventeenth-century literature and she chose Courbet, she now says, because she liked his politics.”

She sought an artist to study who challenged the status quo in both artistic form and content. Courbet, the self-proclaimed “proudest and most arrogant man in France” fit the bill. His Realist manifesto (1855) proclaimed “To know in order to do, that was my idea. To be in a position to translate the customs, the ideas, the appearance of my time, according to my own estimation; to be not only a painter, but a man as well; in short, to create living art—this is my goal.”

Courbet’s materialist approach—in contrast to the idealism of the preceding Romantic and Neoclassical schools—was influenced in no small part by the theories of utopian socialism shared by his friend and co-thinker, the philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. The latter championed the burgeoning workers’ movement, the writings of Karl Marx, and to a greater extent, the perspective of Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. Appreciating Courbet’s dedication to producing art that

was “of its times,” with its emphasis on observation of the objective and, in particular, class character of social reality, Nochlin was also decidedly “of her times” in contradictory ways.

Her *Realism* is an intriguing work that sets out “to isolate the peculiar implications of Realism, considered as an historical, stylistic movement or direction in the arts.” In the opening essay, “The Nature of Realism,” she observes, for example, that “A new and broadened notion of history, accompanying a radical alteration of the sense of time, was central to the Realist outlook. Furthermore, new democratic ideas stimulated a wider historical approach. Ordinary people—merchants, workers and peasants—in their everyday functions, began to appear on a stage formerly reserved exclusively for kings, nobles, diplomats and heroes.”

The “insistence on the connection between history and experienced fact,” Nochlin writes, “is characteristic of the Realist outlook. As Flaubert pointed out in a letter of 1854: ‘The leading characteristic of our century is its historical sense. This is why we have to confine ourselves to relating the facts.’ A true understanding and representation of both past and present was now seen to depend on a scrupulous examination of the evidence, free from any conventional, accepted moral or metaphysical evaluation. . . . Applying this attitude to art, Courbet declared in 1861 that ‘painting is an essentially concrete art and can only consist of the presentation of real and existing things. It is a completely physical language, the words of which consist of all visible objects; an object which is abstract, not visible, non-existent, is not within the realm of painting.’”

And later, she points out: “A new demand for democracy in art, accompanying the demand for political and social democracy, opened up a whole new realm of subjects hitherto unnoticed or considered unworthy of pictorial or literary representation. While the poor might always have been with us, they had hardly been granted a fair share of serious artistic attention before the advent of Realism—nor had the middle classes, who were now the dominant force in society.”

Nochlin’s essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” may well have been motivated by her own “conversion” to feminism in 1969, but it also contains arguments that are unobjectionable. In her essay, she argues essentially that feminists and others should stop trying to mythologize past artists or claim that world-historical female talents have been suppressed and turn their attention to the fact that there have been no great female painters in particular for social and institutional reasons.

It is clearly not “because women are incapable of greatness.” Art, Nochlin writes, “is not a free, autonomous activity of a super-endowed individual.” She refers instead to “the total situation of art making, both in terms of the development of the art maker and in the nature and quality of the work of art itself,” which “occur in a social situation, are integral elements of this social structure, and are mediated and determined by specific and definable social institutions.” Thus Nochlin argues that “the answer to why there have been no great women artists lies not in the nature of individual genius or the lack of it, but in the nature of given social institutions and what they forbid or encourage in various classes or groups of individuals.”

The essay, however, does not conclude with a radical indictment of class society, but merely a moral appeal for women to “face up to the reality of their history and of their present situation, without making excuses or puffing mediocrity.”

Nochlin could be a sensitive analyst of artistic trends and an insightful observer of the social process, especially astute, as noted, in her analysis of 19th century Realism from a historical and materialist point of view. However, her application of this philosophical method steered well clear of its practical, political implications. Her version of leftism, informed to a degree by Marxism, was susceptible to the pressures and problems of the postwar period.

Under the impact of America’s economic boom and the McCarthyite witch-hunting of suspected communists in the 1950s—which intimidated and destroyed the careers of many leftists, including one of Nochlin’s uncles—as well as the ongoing betrayals and disorientation sowed by the Communist Party, “radical” politics in the 1960s progressively abandoned the working class in favor of the struggles of oppressed groups as defined by gender, race, and nationality—not class. The so-called First Wave of the Women’s Liberation movement originated among more affluent middle and upper class women seeking equal pay, reproductive rights, freedom from sexual harassment, and the redress of a host of discriminatory conditions.

Nochlin was very much of this milieu. Dismayed to discover that her students at Vassar in the 1960s, then still an elite all-women’s college, were interested in knitting and playing bridge, Nochlin describes her “awakening” upon being handed a stack of feminist pamphlets by a friend. From there she organized the first class in Women and Art at Vassar College in 1969. In 1971, as we pointed out, she threw down the gauntlet, as it were, in “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”

Nochlin’s embrace of gender politics led her to quite wrongheaded conclusions about contemporary art and society. She played an active role in establishing Second Wave feminism with its focus on “institutional sexism and racism” as a central component of academic discourse. She embraced fellow academic Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), which simplistically reduced Western art’s depiction of the Middle East to the needs of imperialism, and otherwise through her writings promulgated the identity politics that has developed such a stranglehold on arts and culture.

Nochlin increasingly, in essays such as “Women, Art and Power” (1988), conformed to the retrograde requirements of postmodernism and feminism, and indeed helped shape them. Gone was the concrete historical analysis, at least in regard to the present. She now spoke quite ahistorically and abstractly about “men” in general and their apparent malevolent desire to control “women,” in passages like these:

“Yet what I am really interested in are the operations of power on the level of ideology, operations which manifest themselves in a much more diffuse, more absolute, yet paradoxically, more elusive sense, in what might be called the discourses of gender difference. I refer, of course, to the ways in which representations of women in art are founded upon and serve to reproduce indisputably accepted assumptions held by society in general, artists in particular, and some artists more than others, about men’s power over, superiority to, difference from, and necessary control of women, assumptions which are manifested in the visual structures as well as the thematic choices of the pictures in question.”

The “patriarchy,” “male-controlled discourse,” “male-defined terms,” the “male fetishist” and references to Michel Foucault make their unfortunate and frequent appearance. This is not the concrete reality of capitalist social relations, but “a world—and a cultural and academic world—which is dominated by male power and, often unconscious, patriarchal attitudes.” In fact, this complaint about the “cultural and academic world” suggests the striving for privileges that lies at the heart

of so much of identity politics, also indicated in another passage where Nochlin complains that women “are in similarly powerless or marginalized positions within the operational structure of the art world itself: patient catalogers rather than directors of museums; graduate students or junior faculty members rather than tenured professors and heads of departments; passive consumers rather than active creators of the art that is shown at major exhibitions.”

In any event, as late as her *Politics of Vision*, Nochlin could still offer illuminating comments on the art of the past. Her essay, “Van Gogh, Renouard, and the Weavers’ Crisis in Lyons,” sheds fascinating light on van Gogh’s indirect connection to the labor and socialist movement of the time.

It is also worth noting that in her extended 1998 interview with Richard Candida Smith, Nochlin noted her legitimate pride in her early work, *Realism*: “And that I think is one of the best things I have ever done. I still stand by that.”

She commented in 1998 about the general state of the world: “When I think about what’s going on in the political world and the commodity world and the capitalist world and the economic world, I think this is a pretty chilling moment, in many ways. Pretty chilling. People are comfortable, they are buying stuff, they are doing their own thing, but something terrible is happening. The rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, there’s not too much articulated complaint that anyone can hear. There should be.”

In her academic career, Nochlin taught at Yale University, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, Vassar College, and finally at New York University Institute of Fine Arts where she was the Lila Acheson Wallace Professor Emerita of Modern Art, until retiring in 2013.

Reputed to be an indefatigably erudite yet engaging speaker with a sharp wit and unabashed sense of style, Nochlin was friends with numerous artists, including Philip Pearlstein and Alice Neel, both of whom painted her portrait, as well as a mentor to younger generations of women artists and feminist critics. She also co-curated several museum exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum: *Women Artists: 1550-1950* (1976), *Courbet Reconsidered* (1988) and most recently *Global Feminisms* for the opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007.

Even after her cancer diagnosis, she continued writing. At the time of her death, she was finalizing *Misère: Representations of Misery in 19th-Century Art*, to be published in March 2018. Perhaps seeking a connection to today’s conditions, in this final collection of her essays Nochlin will likely bring further insight into her area of expertise: the work of Charles Dickens, Frederick Engels, Thomas Carlyle and Victor Hugo, as well as the painters Théodore Géricault and Courbet, all examined in the context of the Irish famine of 1847 and the effects of the Industrial Revolution.

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