

Where are All the Women in Art?

By Christopher Collier

The question of where all the women in art might be found is one that is posed with alarming regularity. I say alarming because firstly, entering the second decade of the twenty-first century it is depressing that we are still forced to ask this question. Secondly, it is alarming in so much as by asking the question so recurrently there is a danger that it becomes integrated into a general discourse around art and that as a consequence it becomes overlooked, part of the ambient background of discussion and hence loses its potency. There is also the ever present danger that by asking the question we are tacitly re-enforcing its negative implications and ourselves functioning as part of the discourse that marginalises the art of women. Accepting or excepting these problems, there are, as I see it, two main ways of answering the question. In fact there are three but the third merely defers it to another level, although perhaps shedding light on the other positions.

The first major attempt to answer the question is based in what I would call an 'archaeological' theory. In what was and still is clearly a culture, both in the West and elsewhere, largely structured upon patriarchal grounds; this argument would claim that women were discouraged from entering into artistic activity and that the works of those that did were dismissed, ignored or suppressed. There is naturally some truth in this argument but to claim that there is some hidden archaeology of unrepresented art created by women, a female canon comparable to that of conventional discourse that is waiting to be exposed and paraded to art history is, I believe, problematic. In short, in my view it is as equally false to assert that there is some undisclosed, comparable female canon awaiting recovery as it is to claim that women do not naturally possess the inherent qualities to become successful artists. This position demands an explanation.

I would argue that a position that answers the question by seeking to construct a female canon is perhaps reminiscent of Foucault's 'archaeologies' or 'genealogies' in seeking to bring to light a suppressed discourse or equally of Dale Spender and Elaine Showalter's attempts at constructing a female literary canon. This idea of opening up a hidden or suppressed discourse, whilst valuable up to a point depends upon there being such a discourse to uncover, a canon to construct, and I would argue that this is not necessarily always the case. The second wave of Anglo-American feminism took the position further in calling for a Gynocriticism to recentre discourse upon specifically female experience and to essentially revise cultural history with this aim in mind. Critical of what they saw as the inherent misogyny of theories from Marxism to psychoanalysis they were particularly opposed to both what they viewed as the under-representation of female writers and artists within the accepted canon and of the unsympathetic portrayal of women with this male dominated discourse.

It is possible to argue that there exists an element of contradiction in this position in that if the discourse was entirely dominated by male practitioners who then presented an unsympathetic portrayal of female experience then this contradicts the assertion that there was a female discourse that has been suppressed and is awaiting rediscovery. Either this discourse existed, in which case it should have been providing a sympathetic picture of female experience, or it did not and hence there is little from which to reconstruct a suppressed canon. The contradiction is answered by the fact that this discourse is supposed to have operated 'underground' as it were, which is a plausible position but it is a contradiction that it is worth considering nevertheless.

In the French tradition, ideas from the likes of Hélène Cixous have argued for a *écriture*

féminine in order to combat the allegedly unsympathetic portrayal of women in male-dominated discourse. The dilemma lies in the fact that male cultural practitioners are clearly inevitably unsympathetic to female experience in the literal sense, not through a fault of their politics but because they are male and therefore, whilst they may empathise with the female condition, can not directly portray female experience with sympathy and authenticity. This presents a problematic situation in which men and women are apparently alienated from one another and no longer able to share a common sense of experience without being opened up to criticisms of imposition. The problem of an *écriture féminine*, in literature or a similar concept in the visual arts, is that despite its professed *différence* it still implies a specifically female experience that is impossible to theorise. I would argue, converse to its intention, that by claiming a unique female experience it inherently implies a unity or commonality (through the defining femininity) that can not account for its own multiplicity and it becomes left with a situation in which one can only define this *écriture féminine* by a single unifying factor; that of its negative; the fact that it is not male. Therefore in doing so one is still defining female experience in the negative, by that which it is not, and in a fashion still privileging the mainstream 'male' discourse which does not seek to unify itself under the banner of 'male' but rather perceives its multiplicity and does not, self-consciously at least, exclude the female. Despite its professed deconstructionist sympathies, the *écriture féminine* could in fact be seen as an entrenchment of the binary oppositions that the likes of Cixous' friend Derrida sought to deconstruct. Concealing the contradiction of calling for a specific *écriture féminine* behind the language of deconstruction and labelling it as a challenge to logocentrism, I find fairly unsatisfactory.

A criticism of *écriture féminine* is to an extent shared by the likes of Luce Irigaray who takes the difference of the female rather than a sense of *différence* in terminology to another level, believing that an *écriture féminine* is a circumscription of female experience. Irigaray has however been accused of a biological essentialism that is at odds with a certain current of social constructivist informed feminism from the likes of Germaine Greer and Simone de Beauvoir. Whilst I have elements of sympathy for some degree of biological essentialism, I would be wary of anything that might lead to a separatism which I do not believe to be productive. Instead I would subscribe to a position more in line with the view of theorists such as Rosalind Coward who warn against what they label a cult of 'womanism': a reactionary and exclusive assumption that the female perspective is always the more valid. Coward's position has been defined in some quarters as post-feminism but it is one that has drawn accusations of dilution and complicity from more traditional feminists, for example Tania Modleski. I however, see advantages in its rejection of a separatist, doctrinaire and authoritarian feminism that offers little towards a positive co-existence of the sexes. Attempts to reconstruct an exclusively female canon or to create a *écriture féminine* are in my view susceptible to this accusation of tending towards a degree of 'womanism'. Therefore I do not believe that this can be a positive or helpful answer to the question of where the women in art are to be found.

Another answer to the question, as mentioned above as a tangential addition to the two main arguments, is also largely essentialist. It is the rather dated argument that women do not have the same creative urge as men, being capable of a far more impressive creative act in the form of childbirth. Or else the claim that women are naturally unsuited to the profession of artist, in that being an artist requires a selfish, single-minded attitude that elevates 'the practice' as some sacred calling that is paramount above all else. Therefore, the argument goes, being an artist is inherently unsuited to those whose priorities were often traditionally culturally restricted to family and home. This is a position that relies upon conjecture and false assumptions, particularly a flawed Romantic mythology of the artist as a single-minded genius. It is an argument that merely defers the problem to the

system that perpetuates this myth and it is through this that it informs a second, major and in my view more valid answer to the question.

The Romantic myth of artistic uniqueness and genius is one strongly encouraged by a capitalism and an art market that seeks to deny a universality of creativity and to promote artistic activity as a specialised and restricted phenomenon and hence to retain what Benjamin labelled the 'aura' of the work of art. Art must be the work of the specialised genius, a sacrosanct calling, insists capitalism with the complicity of much of the art world. This is precisely for the purpose of restraining a generalised creative realisation that might threaten its hegemony and simultaneously to restrict the supply of art, ensuring its value as commodity and status indicator. The aura of the work, created by the myth of its specialised production as a result of a highly focused, single-minded individual (complete with style and signature) exists to maintain its position as a trade-worthy commodity and an entrenchment of social position. The idea of genius as force external to social conditions is reliant upon an implicit transcendence that is masculinist in its inherently patriarchal and logocentric conception. It is a myth constructed to enshrine the aura and an elitist separatism on behalf of the artist. The masses may look, be dazzled and disorientated by the spectacular display of art, but may not own and certainly not create 'serious' art. This is where we arrive at the heart of the problem, 'serious' art as defined by whom? It is not the male-dominated discourse in my view that is largely guilty of suppressing female artists, rather it is the aristo-capitalist dominated discourse that demands and perpetuates the myth of specialisation and commodity.

There have been myriad women throughout history that have produced profound and extensive creative works in the form of illustration, sketching, watercolour, embroidery, craft, folk-art and in many other varieties of output. The problem arises in the fact that these were not and are not classified as 'serious' art. Not 'serious' in terms of the fact that they were popularly produced and hence they constitute an art unfit to act as an exclusive aristo-capitalist status commodity. They are not the work of a specialised professional, and hence they are not fit for inclusion in the canon. There is therefore a clear distinction between my argument and that which would see the reconstruction of a female canon from this material. I would argue than rather than seeking to construct a female canon along these lines; attempting to shoe-horn works into an art history to which they are ill-suited and incomparable on its own terms; instead that any notion of a canon itself should be dissolved. The theories that see the exclusion of women from the artistic canon as a conspiracy of male discourse are missing the economic imperative. The role played by biological essentialism, for which I stated a small element of sympathy, comes in here in that due to the innate biological differences in the sexes the female has traditionally adopted more of a role in raising children. Indeed the necessity of raising children is the single most important reason, above male sexually jealous control or self interest, why without some intervention from an overarching power-structure (for example the state, or an accumulated means to fund outsourced child care) women have been often constrained in perusing a profession. Here we unmask the true enemy, the capitalist doctrine of professionalism and its application to art. By enforcing a code of professionalism upon artistic production capitalist relations thereby to a large degree have marginalised women from its discourse. The question is therefore not, where are the women in art but rather, where are the women professionals. It is a situation that was certainly more pronounced a generation or two ago but the apparent progress that has been made masks an resolution that is by no means entirely benign. The solution of liberalism is the one adopted by most feminist positions and is one which insists on the woman's right to employment equality with the man but this again misses the point. This is an false 'right': the right to slave in a capitalist system of relations. A true emancipation would give women, or men for that matter, the right not to be constrained by the choice of economic self-sufficiently and a

legitimate desire to be intimately and personally involved in the long term raising of their children. A market system that defines people narrowly by their profession and sees no value outside of direct, economic production can not truly accommodate both. It insists upon an 'either/or' scenario that leaves women in the unenviable position of reliance upon an external income (usually male controlled) in order to invest time in childbirth and motherhood or else a reliance upon maintaining a position of relative financial independence in the capitalist system which problematises the legitimate and biological desire to be a mother. When I use the term mother I mean in the sense of having an intimate and central position in the raising of the child rather than outsourcing the role to an employee like some professional position via the logic of the market and capitalism. Due to the historical, and indeed current, highly competitive professionalisation of art, women, either through social convention or genuine desire to raise children, have been often excluded from its discourse. This exclusion has hinged upon the very basis that they have been unable or sometimes, dare we say, legitimately unwilling to progress far enough along the path of professionalism to gain admission to the canon. The insistence upon 'serious' or 'high' art being constituted upon that which can operate as an exclusive commodity and social signifier excludes non-professionals from the canon of art history. The fact that I must be wary of suggesting any unwillingness towards professionalism is a significant illustration in itself of just how ingrained this capitalist model is within our culture to the extent that it is almost unquestionable.

Professionalism is a social commodification of the individual through qualification and classification. It is a defining identity imposed upon strictly economic terms and a fundamental bastion of power relations that due to the biological imperatives of human reproduction is essentially masculinist. The solution is not to resort to 'womanism' in an attack on the male discourse, this merely exposes what in my view is the fundamental problem with a Foucaultian position in that by raising up the suppressed discourse to a position of power you inevitably construct a new hierarchy and authority: domination is not dissolved only transferred. Instead the solution to the lack of women in the higher professional realms of the art world discourse instead lies in a critique of the capitalist system of relations (or equally of a bureaucratic socialist one) that straitjackets subjectivity into the objective definitions of professionalism. Why should women, or indeed men, be forced to toil in an individualistic, ultra-competitive modus operandi of professional practice which sees no value in everyday life and that demands a totalitarian singularity of purpose? Why should all the desires of an everyday life be sublimated to the demands of a sacrosanct, competitive professionalism that snobbishly excludes all else from the discourse of 'serious' art. Whilst it might not be considered feasible in a postmodern world to speak of an alienation from authentic, subjective desires, until we can arrive at a system that values the produce of creative activity as just one facet, all be it in many cases an important one, of the individual experience of human life, the situation is unlikely to be desirably remedied. Until the economic and social imperative to competitive professionalism that through biology and convention is constituted to the advantage of the male is overcome, the system will dictate that female artists will not receive the prominence or recognition that they regularly merit within the higher realms of art discourse. This is a situation largely in keeping with other professions but it is a situation especially marked within the arts due to the large levels of self-employment and an ultra-competitive playing field. Until art can extricate itself from a culture of individualistic, hyper-competitive, monograph demanding elitism change will be laboured and incremental. Until it can abandon a model whose discourse privileges the aura-generating commodity and the worst of the art market over the best of the truly relational or a more dispersed practice I see little hope for resolution. A model based more on collaboration and less on competition is required in order to facilitate a more conducive atmosphere to a genuinely inclusive discourse of artistic production.

A self-consciously feminist art, in my view merely forms an oppositional but integral dimension of the discourse of professionalism and male dominated practice. Despite the illusion of resistance it simply tacitly reinforces the underlying assumptions that are at root situated the system of power relations inherent in professional capitalism. The resistance is constituted by the relations of the power it opposes. There can be no *écriture féminine*, or art *féminine* for that matter, without the masculine other which constitutes it and the economically driven discourse in which they are both produced and embedded. Therefore there is little to be gained from juvenile womanist attempts to draw up battle lines in lipstick, to divide us from our common humanity and reinforce a culture of victimhood that is a separation and specialisation of identity in itself. Instead it is in overcoming this enforced specialisation and a cult of professionalism that occludes the diversity of desires that we might find something that resembles a solution. Where are the women in art? They are all around us, in every gallery and art school but likewise in every office, factory, street and home, if we simply have the courage to believe in the validity of our everyday desires.