HOW FEMINISM IN THE ARTS CAN IMPLEMENT CULTURAL CHANGE

Anomie by Joyce Treiman (Pacific Palisades, Cal.), oil, 1971-72.

by Linda Nochlin
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The question I shall deal with is: "How can feminism in the arts implement cultural change: defining aims and developing a philosophy to deal with the outer and the inner realities of women. The goal is to resolve a conflict between ingrained attitudes and new possibilities and develop a plan for translating philosophy and aims into practical reality in cultural institutions." This is a rather large order. The best way of approaching it is a way that I've learned from the woman's movement—that is, in terms of my own personal experience.

Since I am an art historian and since art history, and art, are cultural institutions, I should like to tell you something about the way feminism has led me to question and reformulate my own position in relation to the arts and to history itself. Feminism has been an enormous intellectual, spiritual, and practical breakthrough in my life as a human being and as a scholar. Since, however, I don't distinguish between the self and society and don't see them as opposites—I see them, rather, as totally interconnected—in talking about myself, I'm talking about a social issue. Unlike many of the other people here, I don't see a basic conflict between the individual and the social group. The self seems to me a piece of the social group that happens to be enclosed in a certain boundary of skin and bone and has incorporated a great many values and ideals of the larger society. Even the feelings that one thinks of as being most personal are ultimately gotten from somewhere. And what is that somewhere? I don't think it's nature in the raw. It's the particular historical, social and cultural situations that one is born into. And in turn, the individual or the self is constantly acting upon and modifying and changing the social group so that self and society or individual and institution are not hard and fast opposing entities but really a kind of process in a constant state of mediation and transaction. Therefore when I talk of my personal experience, I'm not opposing it to the nature of history, to the nature of an intellectual discipline. I see them as part of the same sort of structure and, therefore, I think any one individual's life and experience can be a paradigm for the whole, can stand as an example of the whole. It's not my little personal life as opposed to every one out there or even to this country or to this historical moment that I'm really talking about.

How in effect does feminism have an influence on the way I look at art history? Or, to make the issue even stronger, how does the notion of feminism transform for me the institution of art, the nature of art, and the

whole way I look at history? I'll give you some examples because I think they are useful.

One of the primary notions that we have about art is the notion of genius. Art, great art, is created by great geniuses. And these geniuses are in some way mythical beings—different from you and me, more valuable than you and me—whose products are in some way inestimably richer and more important than anything that you or I could produce. And the genius who is looked up to by our society as the very apex of human achievement is seen, *par excellence,* as the individual, the one who is set apart from or rebels or is in some way elevated above the mass of ordinary human beings.

When I began to be interested in feminism and when I started looking into the actual, concrete historical situations in which art was created or could be created, I found some very interesting things. Far from being totally unpredictable or uncaused, great art was usually produced in fairly predictable situations. For example, very often great artists had had fathers or even grandfathers who happened to be artists; in other words, often it was a family endeavor. Naturally, someone who's interested in art is going to encourage progeny in that direction. And I found many father-son or even grandfather-father-son art situations. Second of all, I found that if the talented child in question happened to be a woman the chances of her going on to be what is considered a "genius," that is, an innovator in the field of art, were minimal no matter what degree of early talent she showed. For example, going to the museum in Barcelona and looking at the early work of Picasso is really an eye-opener. He was a very, very talented little boy and his early work is extraordinary—he was indeed a child prodigy. I might also point out that his father was an artist and a teacher of art. I asked myself: what if Pablo had been Pablita? What if he had been a girl? I went to the Brooklyn Museum class for talented children and there really were girls in that class who were also little *wunderkinder*—little child prodigies—who did work on the level of that of the twelve-year-old Picasso. What happened to them? Why didn't their genius come to fruition in the way that Picasso's did? One tends to think that in any situation innate genius will come out no matter what the odds are against it. But it does not come out, no matter what the odds are against it. It comes out only in very special circumstances, and it fails to fulfill its potential in very definable circumstances too; and one of those circumstances of almost guaranteed failure is if the child prodigy in question happens to be a woman. There are no doubt many unsung Pablita Picassos who are doing dish washing or being sales girls simply because of the fact that they are women.

Now this of course forced me to raise other issues in art. Feminism not only asks questions about the position of women in society, it seems to me that it forces basic ideological questioning of many other assumptions we accept as normal in a given culture or a given society. In other words, if you ask why are there so few women who have pursued successful careers or are what we call geniuses in the fine arts, feminism forces us to be conscious of other questions about our so-called natural assumptions. That is one way in which feminism affects cultural institutions: it sets off a chain reaction. From your feelings about injustice or your feelings about wanting to push further into issues like that of genius you could go on to question a great many other assumptions that govern the discipline as a whole and ask why art history has focussed so exclusively on certain individuals and not others, why on individuals and not on groups, why on art works in the foreground and something called social conditions in the background rather than seeing them as mutually interactive. In other words, you can question the entire paraphernalia and standards of the discipline or institution that you're working in.

In addition, my involvement in feminism has led me to question some of the standards and values by which we have judged art in the past. In the article I wrote, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," I said that I thought that simply looking into women artists of the past would not really change our estimation of their value. Nevertheless, I went on to look into some women artists of the past and I find that my estimations and values have in fact changed. Another plus to feminism which I think can make one more flexible, more open to

abandoning or rejecting our own previous positions when we find that we're wrong. I think that's another thing that I've learned from the feminist movement: not to stick to a position because one's ego is involved in it but to let go of an old idea and see how a new one works. In any case, I have been looking into women artists of the past and I find that in the process of examining them my whole notion of what art is all about is gradually changing.

For example, one of the artists in the past that I had always been taught to look down on as a horrid example of the salon machine manufacturer *par excellence* was Rosa Bonheur, a laughing stock, the prototypical academic painter. Now I've gotten very interested in Rosa Bonheur. First of all it's interesting to know that she was the most popular painter in the United States. She was probably the only painter who was really known out in the Middle West or in the Far West, by means of prints and reproductions. She was practically the only painter that a lot of people were acquainted with and I still know older women who say they grew up in Kansas or upper New York State and the only art work they had was a print of *The Horse Fair* that hung in the kitchen. That was their contact with art—Rosa Bonheur. And I asked myself why has she been rejected? It's not because she's a woman. I'm not naive enough to think that that is the reason: it's because the style of art that she made went out of fashion.

But being interested in realism and being interested in a kind of justice for art—rejected styles need some support and some help just as rejected people do!—I decided to look into the work of Rosa Bonheur and I came up with interesting results. The results were so interesting that I decided to look into other nineteenth century women artists as well and have done further work on Rosa Bonheur. It is certainly significant to Rosa Bonheur's development as an artist that her father had been an active member of the utopian Saint-Simonian community at Menilmontaut. The Saint-Simonians were firm believers in equality for women. They disapproved of marriage; they believed in equal educational opportunity; they advocated a similar trousered costume for both sexes; and they made strenuous efforts to find a woman messiah to share their leader's reign. All of this must have made an enormously strong impression on the young Rosa Bonheur whose father was himself an artist, although a struggling one, supporting the point that art tends to run in families. (Another interesting fact derived from research on Rosa Bonheur was that the Saint-Simonians were among the first to believe in total mutual dependency. Their garments all buttoned in the back which meant that you had to get a fellow member of the community to button you—a very interesting symbolic idea.)

The notion of egalitarianism for women must have made a profound impression on the young Rosa Bonheur. "Why shouldn't I be proud to be a woman?" she once responded to an interviewer. "My father, that enthusiastic apostle of humanity, many times reiterated to me that woman's mission was to elevate the human race, that she was the messiah of future centuries. It is to his doctrines that I owe the great and noble ambition which I have conceived for the sex which I proudly affirm to be mine and whose independence I will support to my dying day." *The Horse Fair* is indeed a work of noble ambition. There is nothing stereotypically feminine, i.e., soft, delicate or dainty, in this powerful, highly charged work. Its overpowering size itself constitutes a self-confident answer to the challenge of the young woman artist's abilities. The theme of human strength pitted against animal energy depicted in *The Horse Fair* had existed as far back as classical antiquity: indeed Rosa Bonheur claimed that she received her initial inspiration for the painting when she went, as she often did, to study horses from life, wearing masculine costume, at the Parisian horse market, where the sight of the horse dealers showing off their merchandise suddenly reminded her of the Parthenon frieze. So there she was, dressed like a man, full of vigor, watching the men show off their wonderful Percheron horses. (And I might add that *The Horse Fair* started a vogue for Percherons which made the breed popular throughout this country.)

She immediately went to work setting down her initial impression. The final *Horse Fair* is based on many studies from life and preliminary sketches. But it is a work in which the raw material of immediate observation has been transformed in the interest of more

The Horse Fair by Rosa Bonheur. Courtesy: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Gift of Cornelius Vanderbilt, 1887.

lasting values. Forms have been generalized and idealized to emphasize the muscular vitality of the animals. The surge of movement is heightened by skillful manipulation of the dynamics of the composition. Adrienne Rich in a recent issue of *MS* magazine commented on the stifling of women's energies and the resulting vague sorrow, melancholia and despair characteristic of women's poetry in the nineteenth century. When we look at *The Horse Fair* how refreshing it is to find an artistic statement in which a woman's energy, all her vigor and power, far from being stifled, find a direct equivalent in the grandeur and dynamism of the work itself. For the real subject of *The Horse Fair* is energy, physical freedom and power: energy as displayed by a woman and the pride and joy that both humans and animals take in the visible demonstration of energy. While many modern critics have disparaged Bonheur's masterpiece as a typical salon *machine* of its time—for instance John Rewald, an authority on the art of the nineteenth century, recently characterized *The Horse Fair* as "highly expendable" and a "majestic exercise in futile dexterity"—it is well to remember that present-day judgments of nineteenth century art are themselves in the process of reevaluation. Many of the works cast aside earlier in the twentieth century as salon machines or kitsch are now being reconsidered in contexts less exclusively determined by formalism and the emphasis on "pure" pictorial qualities.

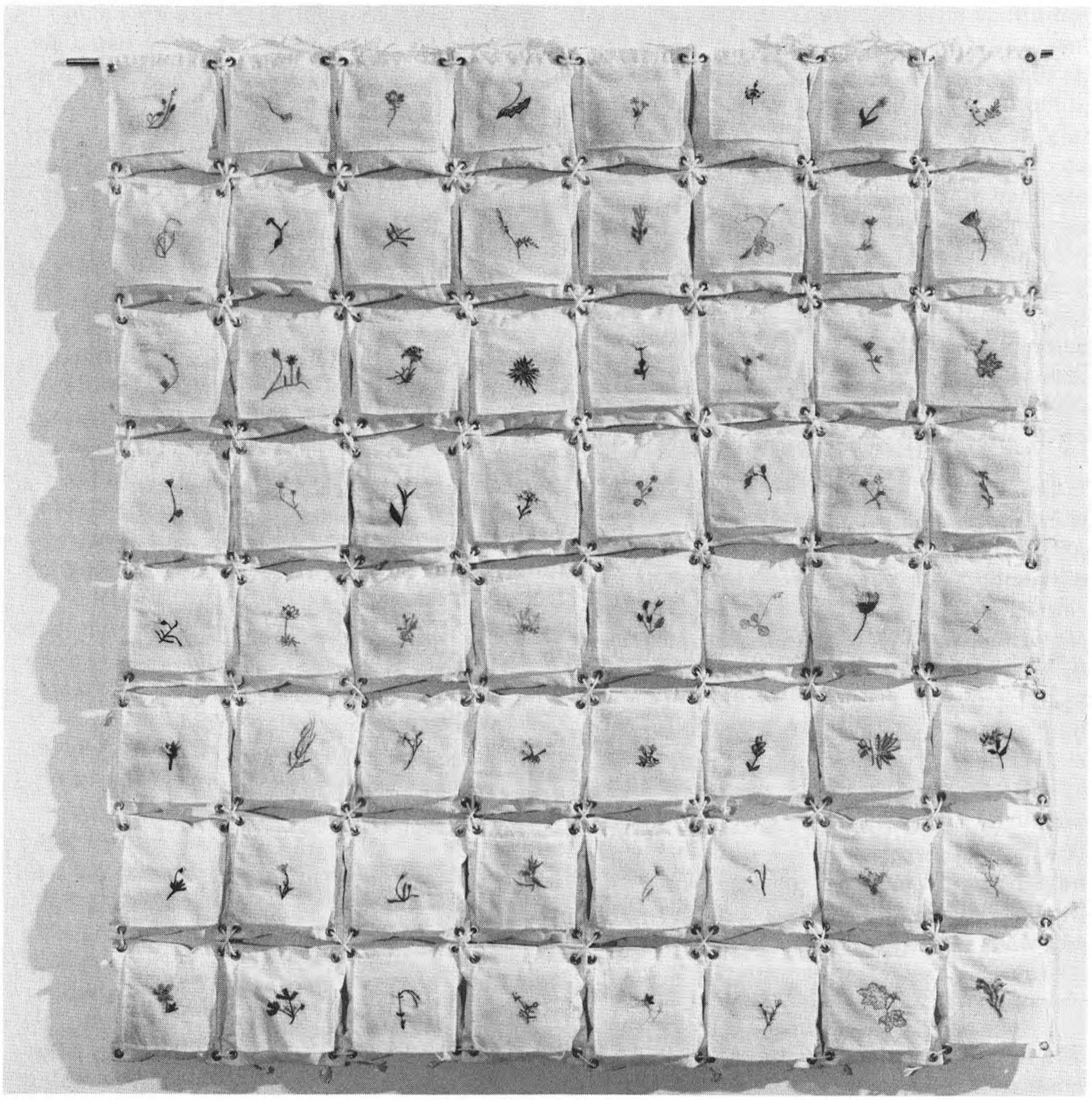
In the light of this reevaluation it is again worthwhile to look back at the positive judgments of the paintings by Bonheur's contemporaries, like the reviewer in the *British Art Journal* who wrote about *The Horse Fair* in 1857, "There is a freshness in this picture and a living power and a deep yet simple sympathy with nature which causes it to grow upon the spectator and make one wish to look on it again and again." Here, then, is an instance of how a feminist approach may bring about reevaluation, making us look again at pictures which have been cast aside and really rethink of the implications of this rejection, making us ask what elements exist within the work of art that one might look at from a feminist viewpoint.

Still another area in art history that I have been examining is that of nineteenth century Britain. It surprised me to find out that approximately 3000 names of women artists were listed in Grave's catalogue of artists who exhibited in London during the nineteenth century. A lot of them it's true showed one flower painting in one minor show, but many of them showed consistently in the most prestigious showplace of all—The Royal Academy. How many people can call to mind a single nineteenth-century British woman painter? It is hard. These women, 3000 strong, have been simply dropped from the rolls of history. Since art history demands detective work and a desire to track down historical facts, I wanted to find out who these women were and what had happened to them. And I did find quite an interesting group of artists for a big exhibition of women painters which will take place at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1976 or '77. This exhibition is itself an example of how feminism can affect our cultural institutions, because such a large scale show of women artists at a major museum would, I think, have been unthinkable ten years ago. This is an example of how feminist pressure, women's interest in the arts, and the work of feminist art groups, in Los Angeles particularly, have assured the fact that women are finally going to reappear in art history.

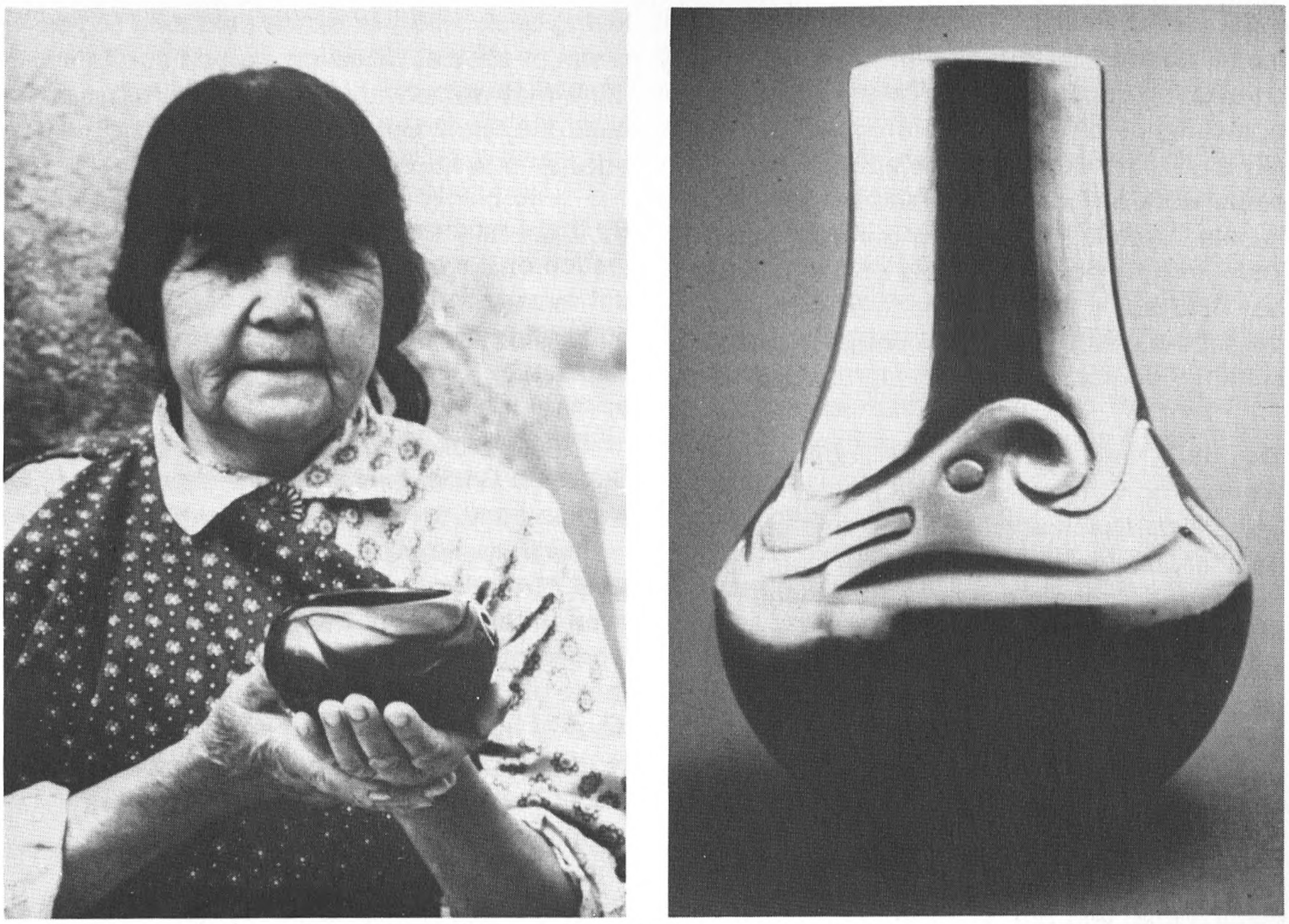
Some of the most interesting nineteenth-century British women painters are those who did narrative painting, painting which tells a story, which is generally realist in character and which follows in the great British tradition established by Hogarth and carried on throughout the nineteenth century. Narrative painting has been singularly neglected and rejected for a variety of reasons (having nothing to do with the issue of women artists) by critics and art historians of today. Through my study of these nineteenth-century women painters, my admiration for and my interest in the whole realm of narrative and genre painting has risen enormously. And I began to ask myself why it is that traditional art history has taught us to admire, respect and devote our lives to the difficult and complex iconography of Van Eyck or Dürer or Michelangelo with its erudite religious references, its neoplatonic double meanings, its hidden references to contemporary events, and has simply cast aside or laughed at the equally rich, meaningful and in many ways complex

The Water Quilt (detail). Photo: Eberhard Otto.

iconography of this narrative genre painting of the nineteenth century. Why is this content, often dealing with social issues in the lives of ordinary men and women and with the moral problems of the day, cast aside as trivial whereas what seems to me rather paltry and silly questions about neo-platonic doctrine in the sixteenth century is taken enormously seriously, suitable for a lifetime of scholarly work? Why is there this kind of value dichotomy governing our cultural institutions? Here again feminism led me to ask questions which are not necessarily totally concerned with the issue of women. Feminism is like a key that unlocks many of the closed compartments in the mind, compartments created by one's "natural" expectations which now have to be revised, cast aside, sorted out again.



The Water Quilt by Joyce Weiland (Canada), embroidered cotton and printed cloth, 1970. Collection: The Art Gallery of Winnipeg. Courtesy: *artcanada.* Photo: Eberhard Otto.



Rose Gonzalez and two of her award-winning pots (Pueblo, N.M.). Courtesy: Exxon Company, U.S.A.

Still another issue raised by the examination of nineteenth-century women artists is that of the democratization of the very *creation* of art. I have been looking more seriously at decorative art since my involvement in the women's movement, for the decorative arts are one of the realms in which women were "permitted" to express themselves in the past. In the course of investigating the work of American women artists of the nineteenth century, especially those of the Peale family, I found out that there were a whole group of what are known as "theorem" painters: women painters who painted from patterns or stencils; these were the ancestors of our paint-by-dot kits. There were in fact rule books and stencils—("theorem" meant stencil)—so that women could make their own works of art by using stencils, following directions about what colors to apply, using sample patterns and so on. According to one authority in the field in nineteenth-century America women turned away from more elaborate types of embroidery, lacemaking, and stitchery because they simply did not have time to do it in the New World. They wanted an easier, quicker means of self-expression: theorem painting was one way of doing it.

In a certain sense, then the democratization of art-making took place in the United States in the hands of women. One may or may not think this is a good thing: the issues of "creativity" or "individual expression" raised by such procedures are far from clear. Perhaps painting from stencils was a kind of conceptual art before its time. It raises all sorts of interesting issues but it is not so far away from the intention behind what Seurat and the Neo-Impressionists were to do later on in France. Seurat and his friends, Signac, Cross and the others, were ardent practising anarchists who really believed in the democratization of art. They believed in painting subjects from everyday life, in painting working-class suburbs: the *Island of La Grande Jatte* has to do precisely with ordinary and upper-class people mixing in a working-class outing place. And Seurat and his friends also tried to invent a system whereby the making of art could be universally available to all. His friend, Charles Henry, invented something called the aesthetic protractor which was a method of judging lines and colors suitable to the mood and subject you wanted to express. Seurat codified his system, saying that lines above the horizon created

a gay mood, lines below the horizon a sad mood, emphasize blue and purple dots for an evening calm painting. This was a way of making pictorial expression more generally available. He also boasted that he could work on *La Grande Jatte* by gaslight, for his "system" worked so perfectly that he knew exactly how many dots of which color he could apply to each area in order to produce a given effect, no matter what the lighting condition might be.

This does have democratizing implications. We may now object to Seurat's system as being a mechanization of art, a kind of dehumanization of it. But to Seurat and to many of the people around him, as well as to these women theorem painters, this was not the issue. The point was that more people could derive the satisfaction of creating something for themselves that they thought of as art, no matter what our particular present-day judgments of it are. And we have to remember, too, that the whole notion of the standardized, the mechanical, and the repeatable did not necessarily have the negative implications at that time that it has now. Mechanization and standardization were seen as instruments of democracy, ways of making more and more available to more and more people, not as instruments of alienation or dehumanization. Here again my interest in the women's movement forced me to rethink certain issues and certain innovations in the field of nineteenth-century art which I hadn't really thought about before.

These then are some of the ways in which "we as individuals and members of social groups can effect change." That is, by doing, writing, publishing, spreading, and simply thinking about issues in our own fields. I don't believe one can separate thought and action: I think thought is action. I don't believe that going out and waving a muscle means that you're acting. I believe thinking is one of the most important forms of action because it's the form of action that leads you to truth and it is only through truth that you can arrive at what is really the whole point of the women's movement and that is the implementation of justice. If we don't know what is true, it seems to me we cannot implement what is just, and for me, justice is the main goal of the women's movement, not all women loving each other, or women establishing a realm of special virtue (because I don't think that women are especially virtuous nor need they be). But I think that our first priority is to implement justice.

By that I mean two different things: primary justice or the abolition of primary prejudice but even more important, the abolition and combating of secondary injustice or discrimination. And let me differentiate. By primary injustice I mean the very obvious fact that there are no women in the Supreme Court, that there are almost no women bank presidents—maybe there's one —that there's never been a woman president of the United States, that it is very hard even in the realm of the arts to mention a woman museum director. But in any case those are the obvious and visible manifestations of injustice. Women are simply openly deprived of visible opportunity. On that, we work with affirmative action, we work on making sure that faculties at colleges and universities are as co-educational as the student bodies. (Why is it that we call a college "co-educational" when it has a half male, half female student body, but not half men and half women faculty?) The area of overt discrimination—primary injustice—is our first fight, but it's not really the major fight.

The major fight is against secondary injustices. And by secondary injustice I mean the whole way that women are dealt with from the moment they enter the world. I mean the fact that men very often show more attention to, are rougher with and more demanding with their male children than with their female children. I mean what a child entering a nursery school sees and experiences. All the teachers there are women. In other words, right away male and female children are indoctrinated with the notion that women are there to serve their needs while men are off doing something else, presumably more important.

I would also question the notion that "boys will be boys"—in other words, permission and encouragement for roughness, brutality, violence, ignoring the sensibilities of others granted to young people of one sex: male; reproval (and kids get the notion very quickly of what is approved and disapproved) either voiced or not of such behavior in women. I don't have to mention too many

examples. Another might just be the assumption that it is women's duty to arrange for child care and the management of the house, even if she does have a job, that she's the one automatically that is supposed to assume that burden. Would one dare ask a busy executive to worry about the babysitters, the meal planning and household trivia? But women who are the equivalent of busy executives or who work all day in supermarkets standing on their feet are constantly asked to assume these responsibilities which in a just society would be taken care in more positive ways by day care, by living arrangements in which some of these services are built in, or by actual sharing; and it seems to me that until this secondary discrimination is done away with, until truly we have created an androgynous society, a society where it doesn't matter what kind of sexual organs you have but you do what you are fitted for, dividing the burdens half and half or taking turns—until we have that, we still have injustice. I think that it is the business of the feminist movement in every field and on every level to combat both of these types of injustices, through action, through thought, through the pursuit of truth, and through the constant questioning and piercing through of our so-called "natural" assumptions. And it's only in this way that feminism can be a real weapon for justice for 51 percent of humanity, which is us. □

DEVELOPING CAREERS IN THE ARTS

Discussion Leader: Doris Freedman
President, City Walls, Inc., New York

Doris Freedman: Artists throughout history have had periods where they have come out and made strong social statements and involved themselves in broader communities. But traditionally they have worked in the isolation and privacy of their own creation. This is changing now and because it is new careers in the arts are developing—particularly for women.

Arts councils and street theatre groups are two cases in point. In almost every case that I'm familiar with the spirit behind these organizations is a woman. While the administrative positions in these groups started out as voluntary positions, today all the councils have paid executive directors.

Clare Spark-Loeb: When you have a woman in an administrative position on a newspaper, television or radio station, things begin to happen. I devoted many hours of radio programming to a group of women called the Feminist Theater. They told me the group involved around thirty women who did their own research, writing, directing, technology—everything. These women built new careers for themselves. A woman who had been an actress became a director and the success of this experience opened her eyes and gave her new confidence. Career aspirations were raised incredibly. And I cannot urge women strongly enough to get into journalism and every aspect of communications. If a woman is not around to cover stories then these things don't happen in the community. Without reporting of events accurately the people don't know about them. People remain invisible to themselves—they don't validate their own experience.

Unfortunately, people don't tend to believe their experience unless they see it validated by media, which is a different issue, but I think the opportunities in alternative media, for instance, are absolutely extraordinary. Having a free press can change power relationships within a city simply because secrecy is out and people know what's going on. Artists and creative people can speak directly to the public without the mediation of whatever special interest group is interested in keeping those opinions out of the public focus. Please don't ignore the need to get into the mass media.