

Introduction to *The Roots of Creativity: Women Artists Year Six* by Lawrence Alloway

Note on the writing of the text. My idea of a useful catalog is one that supplies contextual information for the use of visitors. However, critics are expected to display their feelings as well as their thought processes and this is often done by writing evocatively about the artists. It is not possible, writing in September, on a cycle of exhibitions that will run until next summer, to discuss each artist. What I have done is this. There turned out to be six paragraphs in my text and I put a personal reaction to an artist in each of the five spaces.

This is the sixth annual exhibition of Women Artists in the Mabel Smith Douglass Library. The series started in 1971, and the meaning of that date should be discussed. There had been a few exhibitions of art by women in 1970, but they were scattered and improvised, at Museum-a downtown loft, at the Public Theater, at International House.^[1] The impulse toward defining women's art by showing it together had emerged, but outside the normal channels of art exhibitions. Then in 1971, an important show took place, out of New York, but based on New York women artists: Lucy Lippard's "26 Contemporary Women Artists" at the Aldrich Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut. Thus when Women Artists Year One started at the Library in the fall, running through the spring, it was a decisive contribution to the socioesthetic problem of women's art. (It antedates the appearance of the *Feminist Art Journal* or the founding of the A.I.R. Gallery, the first women's co-operative gallery.) It is fully characteristic of the resistance to women's art that this remarkable series of shows, held on the campus of Douglass College, is located in the Library and not in the gallery run by the art department. The series owes its existence to the initiative of a librarian, not an art historian or an artist.

Mary Ann Gillies. Fiber as a sculptural material: knots and loops, repetitive but with lots of give and take. Geometric patterns of great insistence, but analogs with natural forms are not forgotten. Spanish moss (fringes); shells (spirals).

It is sometimes supposed that women's art displays a natural, stylistic multiplicity and that this can be taken as a sexual characteristic. Certainly this exhibition, like its predecessors, is stylistically diverse. However, it is a constituent fact of modern art that, taken as a whole, it is highly diverse. A representative cross-section of art in Munich in 1875, or Paris in 1907, or New York in 1938 would reveal immense variety of style and taste. What happened in the United States, however, is that the breadth of modern art has been restricted and attenuated to a few possibilities by formalist bias in art criticism and theory. Thus the diversity of women's art is not in itself a significant sign of gender, but it is evidence of the rejection of a tyrannical reading of art history which many artists accept. Women artists and realists share a common revival of the original generosity of choice of earlier modern art.

Cynthia Mailman. The world in a state of extreme composure. Windshield views as vignettes of unruffled, fadingly pale tones. A world of profiles softly dividing the space and repairing it by blushing.

The 20th century artist is in a position to make her or his own choice of subject and tradition, because just about all art is consultable. As a result, painting and sculpture have become flexible and volatile to an extraordinary degree; the personal decisions of the artists have to deal with both the process of painting and the availability of the art world. In a sense, the visual arts are in a position not dissimilar to that attributed to the piano by Max Weber. "The unshakable modern position of the piano rests upon the universality of its usefulness for domestic appropriation of almost all treasures of music literature, upon the immeasurable fullness of its own literature, and finally on its quality as a universal accompanying and schooling instrument."^[2] Visual art is an exceptionally responsive instrument for women artists as they recover modern art's earlier abundance.

Ce Roser. The structure of meander; morphology of the dot. Colors disperse the taut picture plane making a fluent continuum. Apparent nonchalance.

Of the ten women in the present series, seven were kind enough to make statements in response to a question proposed by Lynn Miller: "How does a woman become an artist?" Her interest was "the roots of the artistic impulse in the lives of the women artists." The seven respondents all affirmed connections between their childhood and their later lives as artists. Cathy Billian notes, "My earliest memories include a fascination with finger paints and making things."^[3] Mary Ann Gillies, too, refers to early recognition "as someone who excelled in art." Cynthia Mailman recalls, "I did my first oil painting at age ten." Ce Roser says, "Painting and drawing are things I have done since early childhood." Lucy Sallick: "I was born an artist." Judy Solodkin: "I was known as the class artist." Athena Tacha mentions that an "ability to draw well-representational images was manifested at the age of ten or so."

Lucy Sallick. Studio floor as picture plane, the artist's past as the present of art, the process of work as the subject of work.

Thus art is seen as a spontaneous childhood activity prolonged and developed in the work done later as a professional artist. This habituation to art as a natural activity provides a firm base from which to oppose the excessive professionalism and careerism of the American artists of the preceding generation. I do not consider this sense of genetic rootedness as a gender characteristic, because plenty of men have it too. However, it certainly provides women with conviction out of which they can work, and with which they can resist the hostility of the art world.

Athena Tacha. Conceptual art as an autobiography without naturalism. Sculpture as an environment of geological memories. Project: to read her Conceptual art on or in one of the sculptures.

Ce Roser studied in Berlin. "Käthe Kollowitz was no longer alive but her son, a doctor, as was his father and his son, invited me to visit her home. He told me that she continued to work until a short time before her death and showed me some of her last lithos. I felt then that I would like to live that way too." Here is a clear statement of the necessity of the young artist to match an appropriate predecessor, like Emil Nolde, say, repeating Gauguin's South Sea adventure. Lucy Sallick records that after she got a studio of her own in 1966, she felt a strong sense of solitude. In 1970 she joined a consciousness-raising group, "many of whom were writers and artists who had been kicked around or who lacked goals or confidence. Simply discovering that I was not alone was a comfort to me. I learned that many women's problems are not personal but social and political." Here the solution is not the discovery of a model but of peers with similar problems. Another area of vulnerability is indicated by Judith Solodkin: "I realized that I functioned up to this point only with the approval of teachers. The definitive turning point of my career occurred when I was in my late twenties. I decided to buy a lithography press and on the heels of this decision was admitted to Tamarind Institute as a student printer." Athena Tacha, until 1973 an art historian, "continued to feel the urge to make art and finally dropped everything to become an artist." What seems clear to me is that what characterizes women artists is not a shared stylistic quality, but simply the difficulty of being an artist in a resistant culture. In their different ways, all the artists here have successfully overcome the obstacles to working.

Lawrence Alloway

Originally printed in *The Roots of Creativity: Women Artists Year Six* (New Brunswick, NJ: Women Artists Series, 1976), pp. 1-2.
All rights reserved.

[1] For more detail, see the author's "Women's Art in the '70s," *Art in America*, May-June 1976.

[2] Weber, Max, *The Rational and Social Foundation of Music*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1958.

[3] Quotations for which no reference is given are from letters to the author by the artists, August-September 1976.