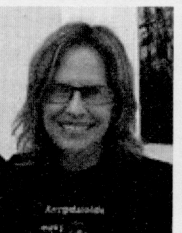


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the
women's
group

early
1990s,
new
york
city

curated by
natalie rivera



networking in the early 1990s as a woman artist in nyc



Throughout the annals of Western art history women artists have been gravely underrepresented and undocumented. While there have always been women artists, their work is historically dismissed as “craft” as opposed to “fine art.” Ancient cultures reference female artists, whether in the Mithila region of India or Classical Greece and Rome, but rarely by name.

In the Medieval era, names of individual women artists increasingly started to be distinguished as they often worked beside men while creating manuscript illuminations, embroideries, and carved capitals. These women often came from two literate classes—wealthy aristocrats or nuns. Aristocrats generally created embroideries and textiles while the nuns would create illuminations. Ende, Guda, Hildegard of Bingen, all educated, powerful, intellectual women, lived in a time where their contributions to art were welcomed and even encouraged. In this period, women were allowed to be part of guilds and even run their husband’s businesses should they find themselves widowed. They were instrumental in creating and working in commercial workshops throughout Europe. However, when the printing age began, women artists found themselves to be excluded in the printing workshops and

their influence in the arts encountered a setback.

Fortunately, the Renaissance Period introduced a philosophy of Humanism, which sought to bring dignity and respect to all human life. This shift in society helped women artists achieve further recognition. Women were educated in the arts, including painting, with a focus on mathematics, perspective, anatomy of the body, and the study of ancient arts. But at a certain point, the academies excluded women as their ability to study the male anatomy was discouraged. This would leave the woman artist to revert to marriage instead of pursuing a career in the arts. Nuns and female offspring of painters were the select few to become artists in Southern Europe. In Northern Europe the climate was more socially liberal and women were encouraged to follow their father’s profession which resulted in more women employed in the arts in this region.

During the Baroque Period, more women painters (again primarily coming from a family of painters) were finding recognition. The shift of subject matter to still lifes made it easier for woman artists to do more commissioned work and artists like Clara Peeters, Maria van Oosterwijk, and Louise Mouillon created reputations for themselves with their talents.

In the 18th century the academies reverted back to not accepting women artists, again using the excuse of male anatomy. If a woman was in an academy she was often the wife of an existing member. Women resorted to studying male nude sculptures in institutions to gain this knowledge base. Large scale historical scenes were the main commissions at that time and why so many woman artists were excluded from the work. Due to this development, women artists began concentrating on portraiture. Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun was able to enter the academy based on her portraits and was a court favorite.

Despite the fact that two women

(Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser) were founding members of The Royal Academy of Arts in London in 1768, they too had to deal with the issue of male nudity. Besides admitting one other female artist, there were no additional full female members inducted into the Academy until Laura Knight in 1936. Only at the end of the 18th century would academies include women and let them study the male anatomy. Even then, women were only able to study men in armor or draped in sheets.

In Paris, the Salon opened up to artists not trained in academies in 1791, making it possible for women painters to exhibit and many were accepted as protégés for established painters. Artists like Mary Cassatt, Lucy Bacon, Elisabeth Jane-Gardner, and many other women working in various mediums began gaining international reputations comparable to their male contemporaries. In 1855 in the United Kingdom, The Society of Female Artists (now The Society of Women Artists) was the first organization to focus on the achievements and exhibition of women’s art. In the United States the National Association of Women Artist was established in 1889 with similar goals.

Not until the 20th century did art academies in Europe and the United States finally accept woman artists with no anatomy limitations in the curriculum. Salons and galleries became more open to showing artists of both genders. More women were able to budge their way into the art history journals at this point. To name only a few Dorothea Tanning, Dorothea Lange, Louise Bourgeois, Lee Krasner, Joan Mitchell, Georgia O’Keeffe were establishing worldwide recognition. However, it was still a man’s world and there was an uphill climb to achieve recognition. Female patrons of the arts such as Gertrude Stein and Peggy Guggenheim helped women artists but men still had an easier time exhibiting and networking. With the academic world starting to increase the number of female faculty, more female curators

hired at museums, and the rise in voices of female art critics and female art patrons, it became an agenda to include more women in the annals of art history.

In the late '60s, with the Vietnam war looming and the country in the middle of a social and political revolution, women artists were joining together and organizing in groups and associations to end discrimination in the art world and help facilitate their professional careers. One of these first associations was WAR (Women Artist in Revolution) established in 1969. This association came out of the AWC's (Art Worker's Coalition) unwillingness to fight hard enough for women to be included in major museum exhibitions and galleries. WAR picketed The Whitney Annual (later the Whitney Biennial) in 1969 when women comprised only 5% of the exhibition. A degree of success was realized as the next year women comprised almost 30% of the exhibition. In 1971, WAR disbanded and formed other collectives such as Ad Hoc Women's Artist Committee in 1970, WIA (Women in the Arts) in 1971, WCA (Women's Caucus for Art) in 1972, and AIR Gallery (Artist in Residence) also in 1972, to name just a few. Many members of these groups are acclaimed women contemporary artists, including Yoko Ono, Nancy Spero, Louise Bourgeois, who organized, networked, and protested against the museum institutions and male dominated commercial art galleries throughout the '70s, especially in New York City. More art collectives were to spring up in the '80s. ArtTable was established in 1980 as a women's networking group to support women leaders in the visual arts at all stages of their careers. In 1985, Guerrilla Girls was created as a response to a painting survey exhibition held at MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) where women comprised only 2% of the exhibition. They picketed the show outside the museum, and engaged in other protest actions, their identities concealed with gorilla masks. Although yielding little success with this particular exhibition, they grew to be an organization that took on racism and

sexism in art, film, and popular culture.

In the '90s more groups were established to develop better opportunities for women in the arts such as WAC (Women's Art Coalition, 1991), WMG (Woman Made Gallery, 1992) and Women Arts, 1994. There were more informal groups that evolved from these times and the focus of this section is the Women's Group as established 1991.

The Women's Group started in the summer of 1991 with artist LC Armstrong. On a mission after working in Europe, she became determined to start a group where women would help women have an open dialogue in the art world. Although she felt her stay in Europe was good for the development of her work, she saw that just as in New York the art scene could be a good ol' boys club. In her studio on North 11th Street in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, she invited a number of her contemporaries at the time and presented her works and ideas.

These artists, some of whom had been around for a while, some just out of art school, took to the idea and energy of supporting one another by getting feedback from a group united in its goals to help foster an atmosphere in the art world where, even in the early '90s, it was still considered a man's world.

There was no real attempt to make an official organization as seen in the '70s and '80s. As the meetings continued, the groups intentions evolved without any one leader, specific meeting place, rules, or even official title. The ball was passed on from artist to artist, the camaraderie expanded and a thirst was quenched for community and sisterhood of the NYC art world of the '90s.

Hence we have here the recollections of some of the Women's Group participants—nineteen women answer our questions on why they joined, what it did for their work, how it affected their lives, what it means to be a woman artist,

and how best to support and encourage one another.

So today we make an effort to remember, honor, and recollect the Women's Group as it brought forth many influential women artists of the contemporary art world of the '90s, helped many artists find their voices, and gave them the confidence they sought after. For those now and in the future who look back at this time and see its record and history, the Women's Group most certainly deserves to be evoked, and not just as a minor footnote in art history. And after being stagnant for a few years, the group lives on.

—Natalie Rivera



Kerri Scharlin at her art exhibition, "Wanted" 1993 at Postmasters Gallery, Soho, NYC.



Kerri Scharlin in her studio in the early '90s.

kerri scharlin

The first Women's Group meeting I remember going to was probably at Janine Antoni's studio. I think Janine was presenting, it was probably around 1992 or 93. I attended for two years maybe. I remember attending the presentations Elana Herzog, Lisa Hein,

KK Kozik, Nicola Tyson, and Jessica Stockholder. In addition I remember seeing LC Armstrong, Natalie Rivera, and Devon Dikeou at these meetings.

I decided to attend the Women's Group out of curiosity and the desire to connect, I had no expectations of the group. It was a positive experience and although it did not influence my art in the '90s I feel like

it informs my current project.

Back then for networking in the art world I used to go to openings, dinners, and bars with colleagues (now it's mainly openings). I must admit when it came to networking I had more issues with feeling competitive with other women, less so with men. Today I don't have much contact with the attendees.