

NANCY G. HELLER

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Inteligência, arte, humor, originalidade, ritmo, entrega e sensibilidade, são algumas palavras que associamos imediatamente a Nancy G. Heller a partir dos livros que escreveu. Veio confirmar a impressão que estes termos suscitam, como oradora convidada no I Congresso Internacional Arte e Género? (Lisboa, 22-24 Outubro, 2014).

Nancy Heller nasceu em Los Angeles, Califórnia, em 21 de Abril de 1949 e teve um ambiente familiar feminista (a mãe na área da ciência política e o pai nas artes) que a conduziu naturalmente a estar atenta à vida e obra não só das mulheres artistas, mas das mulheres em geral. Historiadora de Arte, doutorada em História da Arte Moderna/Contemporânea, pela Rutgers University, é professora com larga experiência na The University of the Arts, em Filadélfia, desde 1996. Também trabalhou noutras Universidades em Washington DC, Texas, e Maryland. Ganhou, em 2005, um prémio académico que a define: por Extraordinária Dedicção como Professora e Mentora, prémio intitulado Richard C. Von Hess.

Women Artists: An Illustrated History, cuja primeira edição data de 1987 e que se encontra actualmente na 4.^a edição revista e aumentada, é um livro pioneiro e de referência para este domínio de estudos. Ultimamente, tem-se dedicado ao cruzamento entre as Artes Visuais e a Dança Espanhola, especialmente o *Flamenco*. Professora e investigadora excelente, mas acima de tudo e por tudo quanto tem dado e nos deu: uma excelente Pessoa. Juraria que as páginas dos seus livros dançam¹.

Intelligence, art, humor, originality, rhythm, and sensitivity are some of the words we had associated with Nancy G. Heller, based on her writings. She came to Portugal and confirmed those impressions, when she presented a keynote address at the First International Congress of Art and Gender?, held in Lisbon, October 22-24, 2014.

¹ Dado o constrangimento do número de caracteres publicáveis, trata-se de um excerto da entrevista.

Born April 21st, 1949 in Los Angeles, California, Heller’s feminist parents (a political-scientist mother and a father who was an artist) raised her to be aware, not only of the lives and works of women artists, but also of women in general. An art historian with a PhD in the History of Modern/Contemporary Art from Rutgers University (1982), since 1996 Nancy G. Heller has been a Professor at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia. She has also taught at universities and colleges in Washington, DC, Texas, and Maryland. In 2005 Heller won the Richard C. Von Hess Award for Outstanding Commitment as a Teacher and Mentor, an honor that reflects her passions and values.

Women Artists: An Illustrated History (originally published in 1987 and now in its 4th revised-and-expanded edition) is a pioneering reference book for everyone interested in this field of study. Recently, Heller has been studying the intersection of visual arts and Spanish dance—especially *flamenco*. She is an accomplished professor and an excellent researcher; in addition, she is a fine person. Moreover, I swear that the pages of her books dance².

You have had a feminist background, since birth. Could you tell us something about the lives and beliefs of your parents and how that background has influenced you?

I consider myself very lucky, to be a second-generation feminist (meaning: someone who believes that women should have the same rights as men) with parents who encouraged me, and my younger sister, to pursue whatever kinds of lives we wanted. Both our parents were native New Yorkers, whose own parents – three of them Jewish, one Catholic – had emigrated to the U.S. from other countries (Romania, Austria, Italy, and Ukraine). My mother, Gloria Heller, is a retired political scientist and my late father, Dr. Jules Heller, was a pioneering artist, author, teacher, and university arts administrator.

Neither one of my parents was raised to believe that women and men had equal rights; they decided this for themselves, based on their own life experiences – education, travel, friends, etc. They moved to Los Angeles, California, in the late 1940s; that’s where my sister and I were born and – initially – raised. (Our parents later moved to central Pennsylvania, Toronto, Canada, and then Arizona.)

Although America in the 1950s was generally quite conservative, I still remember my parents’ enthusiastic support for the so-called “Hollywood

² This is an excerpt of the interview, because of the constraint on the number of publishable characters.

10”, a group of film directors and writers who were blacklisted during the infamous McCarthy era. And one of my earliest political memories involves walking through the neighborhood, helping my mother distribute campaign literature for the Democratic presidential candidate, John F. Kennedy. So the concept of political activism, and the idea that it was important to express one’s support for – and disagreement with – governmental and societal policies about gender, and/or anything else, was ingrained in us, pretty early.

Since my father had to commute long hours to and from his job as a studio art teacher and Art Department Chair, at the University of Southern California, we didn’t see much of him during the week. But I understood from an early age that my father believed in women’s rights, and art made by women; he started working on his book about the history of women artists – all over the world, from prehistory to the 20th century – during the late 1950s, a time when this topic was almost universally ignored. There is no question that this book (which grew to be an enormous, lavishly illustrated manuscript, too expensive for any publisher to accept but now on deposit at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, DC) helped pave the way for many books that followed – including my own *Women Artists: An Illustrated History*, first published by Abbeville Press in 1987.

My parents also showed us that feminism can be complicated. For a variety of personal, economic, and other reasons our (feminist) mother spent the first years of our lives as a stay-at-home Mom, while our (equally feminist) Dad was the family’s breadwinner. Later on, Gloria took a number of important jobs outside the home – notably, as Executive Director of the Governor’s Advisory Council on the Aging, for the state of Arizona. Her ability to move, fluidly, between her identities as wife/mother and prominent political staffer taught me that playing a traditional woman’s role need not preclude doing nontraditional things. As a result, it didn’t feel like a betrayal of feminist beliefs when I got married, or when I spent a few years between undergraduate and graduate school working as a secretary. (In fact, the latter experience made me a far more knowledgeable feminist.)

One more thing I’d like to mention, here: children tend to assume that however they grow up is “normal”, until they learn that every family’s idea of “normal” is different. I grew up in a household filled with many kinds of art – made by my father and his male and female friends. As a result, I initially thought that everyone had original art on their walls, and it never occurred to me to doubt that some artists were women. [Note: I realize that it is no longer sufficient to distinguish between male and female artists; the old “gender binary” with which I was brought up

has been supplanted by the recognition that people self-identify in many different ways. However, because old habits die hard, and because there is no general agreement re: how best to refer to the many different kinds of people in the world, in this interview I will continue to refer to men and women.]

Why did you choose to study the History of Art? Did someone in particular make you interested in the mysteries of Art?

I have already mentioned the influence of my father, who was an artist and also wrote and taught about art history. But my father never called himself an “art historian,” and I grew up believing that art history [in the U.S., in the late 1960s] was a stuffy and politically suspect field, populated exclusively by white men with very narrow intellectual concerns, who had little interest in the practice of making art.

As a result, I entered Middlebury College – in Vermont – as a French major. However, during my second year, I signed up for a course on Italian Renaissance art history taught by a new professor: Dr. A. Richard Turner, who went on to hold important administrative posts at Grinnell College in Iowa and New York University.

Dr. Turner looked like a stereotypical art historian – a middle-aged white man with a salt-and-pepper beard, horn-rimmed glasses, and a tweed jacket with suede patches on the elbows. But he was anything but typical. This extraordinary man demonstrated that it was possible to respect, enjoy, and learn about work from all parts of the world and all eras, made by both women and men, and to have a sense of humor about art – while maintaining rigorous intellectual standards. Not surprisingly, soon after Dr. Turner arrived at Middlebury a number of students – myself included – changed their majors to Art History.

It also helped, that Middlebury required art history majors to take several courses in studio art (at the time, studio art majors in the U.S. had to study art history, but the reverse was almost never true). Luckily, by the time I entered graduate school in 1973 (at Rutgers University in New Jersey, after spending several years out of school, working full-time as a secretary, editor, proofreader, etc.), the whole field of art history (in the U.S.) had undergone some important changes. It was finally beginning to be considered “kosher” to focus on art from continents other than Europe and North America, including nontraditional forms like photography, crafts, and the so-called decorative arts; and the artists who were studied no longer had to be either white or male.

Why is the History of Art relevant, in the context of Social Science and the Humanities?

The History of Art is relevant for the same reason that the study of other fields within the Social Sciences and Humanities is relevant. All these disciplines explore, and seek to understand, how human beings “work” – that is, how we communicate, how we think, and, ultimately, how we live. As an art historian, naturally I believe that my field is especially important. To explain why, let me quote an admittedly sentimental pair of lines from the 1989 feature film, *Dead Poets Society*, directed by Peter Weir and written by Tom Schulman. Here, Robin Williams, playing the inspirational English literature teacher at a prestigious boys’ preparatory school, says: “...medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love: these are what we stay alive *for*.”

It’s not much of a stretch to substitute “visual art” for “poetry,” or to imagine a teacher saying the same thing to female students.

In 1987 you published what has become a reference book and a standard text for universities and art museum docents: Women Artists: An Illustrated History, now in its 4th edition. Please explain how this remarkable book came about.

Between 1979 and 1981 I was a Smithsonian Predoctoral Fellow at the Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden in Washington, DC. While there I got to know the museum’s editor, Nancy Grubb, a marvelously intelligent and talented woman. After both of us moved on to other jobs we kept in touch, through holiday cards and professional conferences. Shortly after she was appointed Chief Editor for art books at Abbeville Press, Grubb asked if I would be interested in writing a survey/history of women artists in the western world, from the 16th century to the present. Naturally, I said yes and, thanks to her expert guidance and superhuman patience, the first edition of *Women Artists* was published in 1987.

A number of circumstances combined to make this book successful. Although it was not the first modern, English-language survey of women artists, it was one of the first. More significantly, it was the first such book to include high quality, full-page, color reproductions of works by all the artists discussed in the text. That doesn’t sound especially impressive, in 2015, but back then it was difficult to find legible images of art by women – in books, or as two-by-two-inch slides (this, of course, was long before the advent of the Internet). Luckily, the book did well enough, in terms of both reviews and sales, so that the publisher requested new, enlarged and revised editions, in 1991, 1997, and 2004. I am delighted to report that today, almost three decades after its initial appearance, this book can still

be found on the shelves of many museum stores, university libraries, and private homes.

Have new ways of thinking about art been developed, since the viewpoints offered by Feminism, Women's Studies, Gender and Queer Studies?

As an American art-history graduate student in the early 1970s I had to familiarize myself with the major [western] academic approaches to the discipline, up to that point. These included connoisseurship; iconography; Marxist, Freudian, and Jungian interpretations; and more. Naturally, a great deal has changed since the 1970s, and the more-recent approaches you mention have become standard. However, as your question implies, new ways of thinking about art – and everything else – are always being developed. Personally, I am not aware of other, significant art-historical approaches that have achieved widespread acceptance – at least, in the U.S. But I look forward to finding out more about this, next month [February 2015], when I attend the annual meeting of the College Art Association, much of which will be devoted to papers by young artists and scholars.

In the lecture you presented at the “First International Congress of Art and Gender?” (Lisboa, 22nd – 24th October 2014) you mentioned, among many other subjects, the Guerrilla Girls. Do you believe the strategy used by this group of women artists is still needed today? Do they use masks just because they belong to a guerrilla group? Or, to put it another way, why do you think they wear masks?

The Guerrilla Girls is an anonymous political action group made up of New York City-based female artists. Guerrilla Girls was established in 1985, in response to the previous year's exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, an “International Survey of Contemporary Art,” consisting of works by 169 artists, only 13 of whom were women. This was especially disturbing, since MoMA's show opened a decade after the groundbreaking exhibit, “Women Artists: 1550-1950,” co-created by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin. Moreover, all the artists represented were white, and from either Europe or the U.S.

The Guerrilla Girls' name is a play on the concept of *guerrilla* warfare, since no one can anticipate where the Girls will show up next (distributing their subversive literature that highlights the unequal treatment of women by prominent U.S. art galleries, museums, fellowship-granting organizations, etc.) and the fact that they wear gorilla masks in public. They compare themselves to other “masked avengers,” such as the Lone Ranger, Batman, and Robin Hood. In addition, the term “Girls” – here referring to grown women-is used ironically, thus removing its stigma, in the same way that certain gay organizations have adopted the word “queer.”

Another important point: it looks very funny, to see these women – dressed in chic, all-black Art World clothing, topped with gorilla heads. Humor can be an extraordinarily effective political tool, and one of the Girls' main goals has always been to fight discrimination “with facts, humor, and outrageous visuals.”

Since you became interested in the art world, what things have advanced, retreated, and remained stagnant, in terms of women artists and other women in the art world?

During the past half-century the status of women artists, and other women within the art world, has improved greatly in the U.S. However, the news is not all good.

Beginning with *Academe*, when I entered graduate school in 1973 – at the start of the modern women's movement (a.k.a. “second-wave feminism”) – there was hardly any bibliography available, in English, and in print, about women artists. Today, in contrast, it is impossible to keep up with the enormous output of books and articles on the subject. Even the standard western art-history survey textbooks, from prehistory to the present, have changed. Before 1986 none contained any examples of art by women; nowadays, they all do. Women's Studies programs, effectively nonexistent in the early 1970s, are now ubiquitous; doctoral dissertations routinely focus on female artists; and it is rare to find university art/art history departments without women on the faculty.

However, most art-history courses remain male-focused; Women's Studies now seems old-fashioned and too restrictive, in our post-gender-binary world; and the highest ranks of American institutions of higher learning are still generally filled by men.

Recent studies have shown that roughly half of American art museums have female directors. While this is a huge, and welcome, change from the 1970s, the numbers are misleading. In fact, women usually run the smaller, college-based, regional, and less prestigious museums. Only 25% of American art museums with annual budgets over \$15 million have female directors, and they reportedly earn just 71¢ for every \$1 paid to their male counterparts. (A notable exception was Anne d'Harnoncourt, who directed the Philadelphia Museum of Art from 1982 until her death in 2008. D'Harnoncourt was a highly respected and extremely influential administrator, but – ironically – during her tenure the PMA had a very poor record of acquiring, and/or displaying, art made by women.)

These days the works of a select group of women artists – notably Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keeffe – have invaded American popular culture. But, unfortunately, the myriad references to these women in films,

plays, novels, notecards, and jewelry, do not seem to have sparked a broader interest in historical, or living, women artists.

Meanwhile, there are many more exhibitions of art by women than there were in the 1970s, and women artists now receive a far larger percentage of important fellowships and awards than they used to do. Still, as the Guerrilla Girls remind us, the situation is nowhere near equal. This is particularly true for women of color.

Wealthy American women have long been important as art collectors and museum patrons. Pioneers like Hilla Rebay (1890-1967) and Peggy Guggenheim (1898-1979) helped to shape U.S. interest in modern and contemporary art. More recently, collectors like Wilhelmina Holladay (who founded the National Museum of Women in the Arts) and Linda Lee Alter (who gave her enormous collection of work by women to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) have also made significant contributions.

On the whole, then, things are considerably better for women in the American art world than they were, 50 years ago. Yet a number of disturbing developments threaten to erase some of these important gains. These include: the rejection by some young people, including young women, of the term “feminist,” which they seem to equate with the shrill, humorless, man-hating stereotype of decades past; the tendency to believe that women’s rights have already been fully achieved and, therefore, need not be fought for, any longer; and the resentment that has resulted in the “men’s rights” movement, and related efforts. To say nothing of the continuing effort to repeal reproductive rights, something that potentially threatens all women, including women artists. Men, too.

To see works by women artists, what institutions in the United States should we visit?

While I obviously cannot claim to be familiar with every art museum in the U.S., I would strongly urge any visitor whose travels include the northeastern part of the country, and who is interested in art by women, to see two institutions in particular. The National Museum of Women in the Arts (in downtown Washington, DC) was established in 1987 with the express intention of displaying the work of women artists – in all media, techniques, and styles. NMWA’s permanent collection focuses on art from the western world, from the 16th century to the present. These works include paintings, prints, photographs, videos, sculptures, pewter vessels, Native American pottery, performance and installation art, and an extraordinary group of artists’ books. The museum also hosts temporary exhibitions, many of which have highlighted work that seldom receives attention from major American institutions – such as embroidered textiles from rural India.

The second U.S. collection I would recommend is the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, which is part of the Brooklyn Museum in New York City. Founded in 2007, the Sackler Center has both permanent and changing exhibitions of various kinds. Its crown jewel is the enormous, groundbreaking multi-media installation, *The Dinner Party* (1974-79) by Judy Chicago; this, alone, is worth the trip to Brooklyn.

Other institutions in the same region that offer regular and insightful displays of art by women include the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (in downtown Philadelphia); the oldest art school and public art museum in the U.S., PAFA was established in 1805. In 2010 the artist/collector Linda Lee Alter gave more than 400 pieces made by women artists to PAFA. Also, since 1971 the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series has been exhibiting work made by women at Douglass College (a part of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, which also hosts the Institute for Women and Art, an important source for activities such as the Feminist Art Project).

In 2002 you named one of your books Why a Painting is Like a Pizza: A Guide to Understanding and Enjoying Modern Art, a title that immediately makes one smile. What is the role of humor in your studies?

I hope that humor plays a very significant role in all my lectures and writings. In my opinion, one of the negative things about some art historians, and many academics in other disciplines, is that they take themselves far too seriously. Obviously, one's scholarship should be regarded and conducted seriously, and presumably no one would enter the field of art history without a passionate love, and respect, for both art itself and the artists who create it. But I, personally, want my lectures and articles/books to be as accessible as possible to any educated, English-speaking, individual; that is why I try to avoid unnecessary jargon. And visual and verbal humor – judiciously added-can help keep readers and listeners interested. For many years I performed with a Spanish-dance troupe based in Washington, DC; I no longer do so, but I still regard my guest talks and classroom lectures as mini-performances, in which a certain level of enthusiasm, variety, and – yes – humor can go a long way. Besides, some art is intended to be funny; it is important to recognize, and celebrate, that fact.

What projects are you working on, now? What projects would you like to develop in the future?

At present I am working on a paper (focusing on visual images of dancers) for a conference to be held next spring in New York, about the history of the *fandango*. Also, I write occasional freelance reviews and

previews about dance and visual art, for the local newspaper, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. For my latest journalistic assignment I've started researching "Black Grace," a New Zealand-based troupe that combines traditional Maori music and movement with contemporary dance.

In the future, I hope to write articles about several women who were pioneering Spanish dancers in the early part of the 20th century. And I'm excited about putting together an essay concerning a Spanish female Pop Art painter.