

Looking Through a New Lens:

Terry Wolverton interviews Art Historian Arlene Raven

Editors' Note: Arlene Raven, Ph.D., was one of the founders of the Woman's Building. She was also a pioneering feminist art historian. She was interviewed by Terry Wolverton on October 2, 2004, in her Brooklyn studio on the subject of how feminist art history has changed art. Raven had intended to use the interview as a basis for her own essay about the origins of feminist art criticism, but she became ill with the cancer that eventually took her life—on August 1, 2006—before she could undertake this writing. This interview was edited by M. Gwin Wheatley.

Terry Wolverton: I want to start talking about how you grew up. And especially, when you were growing up, what kind of art, if any, were you exposed to?

Arlene Raven: I was exposed to no art at all. I had no idea who Rembrandt was. I grew up in Baltimore in a working class, Jewish community. You know, Jewish people traditionally don't make images. So there wasn't even, as some of my Christian friends experienced, visual imagery in worship. I did take piano lessons, but never art lessons. I vividly remember the seventh grade where I couldn't color in the lines and was given a "D" on my painting project. So I basically knew nothing about art until I went to college.

TW: This might be hard to reconstruct, but as you think back, do you have a sense of yourself as a visual person, of how you perceived or how you looked at things?

AR: I have a sense of myself as a thinking and philosophical person. I always liked to look, but I wasn't conscious of my perceptions or how they were constructed.

TW: When you went to college what was your first exposure to art?

AR: I went to college at the age of sixteen. I was made [by my parents] to go to college within the state boundaries of Maryland, so I chose the college that I thought might be the farthest away from where my family lived. This was Hood College, which turned out to be a fantastic place. For about three weeks, I majored in home economics which included

a design course. It was a course in two- and three-dimensional design, sort-of an introduction to techniques in art. I found this course really fascinating, so I quickly changed my major.

TW: What fascinated you about design?

AR: It tapped a part of me, a part of my mind and my being, which had never before been tapped. There was a physicality that was at once foreign and delightful. Design was also strangely intuitive for me. As I said before, this was nothing I'd previously experienced, and it certainly was not part of the predetermined pathway to a suburban lifestyle. I found myself equally fascinated with the history of art while in this class, so this first course in design really provided another path for me.

TW: What do you remember about your first studies in the history of art?

AR: I was a real novice. I had no background in art, and here I was presented with a lot of information that I had never considered before. Unlike most of my classmates who had been to prep schools, I had a huge learning curve. I didn't know any artists, and I didn't understand what the role of art was in history.

TW: Who would you say was the first artist who caught your attention, in that early stage?

AR: It was the Abstract Expressionists.¹ They were my first love and still are—Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and some of the images of Ad Reinhardt, people like that.

TW: So you were attracted to work that was fairly contemporary?

AR: Yes, in fact I think it was in the early fifties that *Life Magazine* had a picture of Jackson Pollock painting in his studio, and I had seen that picture. I went to college in 1961, and Pollock and his cohort were just becoming known outside the the art world.

TW: What did you think about it?

AR: The Abstract Expressionists created these spaces in which you could walk with your eyes in an endless kind of a landscape. They created another world—a world to which I was quite drawn. The world as I knew it seemed untenable, so I was quite attracted to this other world. In those paintings, I could wander anywhere. To this day I wander in my mind, and I'm very entertained and stimulated by reading and by pictures.

TW: Among the Abstract Expressionists, was there a particular artist who emblemized this possibility for you?

AR: Jackson Pollock and Hans Hoffman were my favorites in that group, and I also liked Franz Kline quite a bit. At that time, it didn't occur to me that they were men and that I wasn't studying a single woman artist.

TW: Not one?

AR: There were no women artists to study, according to every textbook. But I honestly didn't even think about it. I didn't have a feminist consciousness then.

TW: Nobody did at that time.

AR: No, but I knew that I was a girl and that I was going into places where I was not supposed to go.

TW: How did you experience that?

AR: Clearly I felt transgressive. Still, I didn't know how I was going to become a scholar and a thinking person.

TW: What were the signals that let you know that you didn't belong?

AR: For example, the fact that my teacher told me that I thought like a man. That was even as late as in graduate school, in a Ph.D. program.

TW: Was that meant as a compliment?

AR: Yes, his comments were meant as a compliment, but the conformity in my community was so prescribed that there was no deviation. Going to college was okay, but after the second year women were expected to drop out, teach elementary school with a certificate, and be engaged at least. That was just *pro forma*.

TW: But you didn't do that?

AR: No, I didn't. From that first design course and through college and graduate school, I was completely drawn to the material and what was in that body of knowledge. It was also myself in that body of knowledge that was going to determine my life and not a pre-scripted life of marriage and family.

TW: So you knew you were a girl, but you were a girl who thought like a man and you wanted to enter this profession that girls weren't supposed to go into. So how did you? At the time, did that seem like a conflict or an obstacle or that you were the exception?

AR: It seemed like a big conflict, and I didn't know how it was going to play out, because I was still underage when I graduated from college. I still didn't really know all of what I was about, but I did go to graduate school right away. I went into an MFA program at George Washington University, and thereafter I went into a Ph.D. program at Johns Hopkins. I was in school for a very long time.

TW: On what did you concentrate in the MFA program?

AR: Painting. But by the conclusion of that program, I'd written the longest thesis they had ever received from a fine arts student. It was at that moment I decided that my thinking and my ability to express myself were really rooted in writing—not in making visual statements, but in interpreting them.

TW: Can you describe the way that your visual sense, your perception, changed when it began to be fed with visual imagery and art?

AR: Yes, I remember a painting class, in which, in the manner of Cezanne, we were to paint little patches of color all over the canvas, not simply do the apple and then the orange and such. When I finished that painting I could see all the colors of the universe—not just in the painting, but *everywhere*. That exercise shaped how I see everything. Today, I'll be on the street and I will look at every single thing. I look at people's clothes and their bodies, and I look in shop windows, though I'm not a shopper at all. I like to look at everything. It's a complete feast, the world, and that, I think, is what I can say about how my perception started to change and to develop critically. Also I was associating with a completely different group of people.

TW: People who were also thinking and perceiving?

AR: People who were not interested in money, who were interested in old things as well as new things—their values were more in line with my own. It was a great relief for me. I didn't want to go shopping every minute and be concerned with the kinds of things my family wanted me to pursue.

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

TW: After graduate school you went into the Ph.D. program as a writer?

AR: My Ph.D. is in art history. My field was contemporary art, and my particular interest in my thesis was the Washington Color School,² which was a slightly later movement than the Abstract expressionists. I also had an amazing revelation about the baroque period in Italy in Caravaggio's work, in particular, and I studied that quite a bit, as well as, medieval manuscripts and early Christian books. Those were all interests of mine.

TW: What in particular interested you about the Washington Color School?

AR: I was there. I taught at the Corcoran School, which was part of the Corcoran Gallery; that was where the artists of the Washington Color School were gathering. I knew the artists, and I saw them making history. It was a very, very exciting time. I interviewed so many of the artists, and I participated in their art world and recorded my own environment.

TW: What were they doing?

AR: They were painting primarily. They were doing wash painting onto unsized canvas, which meant the paint soaked into the fabric. The paintings were hard-edged geometric paintings, mostly, sometimes on a very big scale. In addition to the interviews, the primary artist I was interested in was Morris Louis,³ who had already died. I made a timeline that put together all of the artists' work and what was happening in Washington and what was it about the city of Washington that contributed to the work. I was particularly interested in their approaches to art education. Many of these artists formed an independent art academy, and many of my own ideas about independent feminist education came from this.



Morris Louis, painter, 1912-1962. (Source: <http://www.nndb.com/people/918/000084666>.)



Morris Louis, Nun, 1959, 80 3/4 X 106 inches, Magna Acrylic on Canvas. (Source: http://www.abstract-art.com/abstraction/l2_Grnfthrs_fldr/g091_louis2_nun.html.)

TW: Was there a particular visual quality about the work that arrested you or was it really more about the fact that you were in this community?

AR: The visual quality of the work was number one. It has a meditative quality, a stillness and a spirituality that I enjoyed. You could sit and stare at the work.

TW: Where did you go after you got your Ph.D.?

AR: I immediately went to California to work at CalArts in the Feminist Art Program⁴ as an art historian.

TW: Did exposure to feminist ideas predate your move to California?

AR: During my graduate studies, I was very much accepted into male circles. At any party I would be talking with men, but the other women would be in the kitchen having a completely different kind of conversation—or so I thought. It wasn't that I didn't like women. I just believed I had more in common with the men, most of whom were fellow students. I also had a lot of male attention at that time because I wasn't ugly. Looking back I think I was both threatening and alluring to the men I was around. I ended up marrying one of my teachers, not at Johns Hopkins, but at George Washington University. At the time, I was completely unconscious of how I was aligning myself.

TW: So when did it start to occur to you that there were no women in the picture?

AR: I began to see that there were no women when I started teaching modern art history at the Maryland Institute. At the same time I was going to consciousness-raising groups for the first time, and I was working on a magazine called *Women: A Journal of Liberation* that came out of Baltimore. I was working also at a free clinic. So it wasn't in my profession that I first noticed there were no women; it was through consciousness raising that I noticed there were no women in my profession. It also raised my consciousness about my marriage and my participation in it, such as making all the meals, doing all the cleaning and the laundry and so on and being a full-time student and having a full-time job and my husband doing nothing. That didn't seem unfair to me until I was in consciousness raising. That was the beginning of the end of my marriage.

TW: When did you start to become interested in women artists?

AR: In Baltimore, before I went to California. Then in California in 1972, I began a study of women artists not at all covered in my Ph.D. program. While my education had given

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

me a wide knowledge of art from the beginning of time to the present, I knew nothing about these women. I didn't even know how to find them. But the books were coming out, and I found them in bookstores.

TW: Who was the first woman artist who caught your attention?

AR: Mary Cassatt, because if there would be a woman artist mentioned at all, previous to the feminist movement, it would be Mary Cassatt. She was a 19th century figurative artist, and she painted women and children. Most would look at her work and consider her "a typical girl artist," but, in truth, the relationships between the women and children in Cassatt's work were often erotic, conflicted and merged. She also did Biblical interpretations. For the Woman's Building of 1893,⁵ she did a panel on the tympanum, which was about the tree of knowledge in Genesis, and she depicted all women and children picking the fruit of knowledge. This was radical! Here's a painter who was grudgingly acknowledged as of historical note and, still, she would be called the student of Degas, if she was included at all. During this time, I was able to begin to see her work as radical. Her work was technically conventional, but she made images of things that were very subversive and that became for me a way to identify a good painting—if it depicted something you hadn't seen before and it was expressing a way of life for a group of people who hadn't had a voice before. That's what Mary Cassatt was doing.



Mary Cassatt, painter, 1843-1946. (Source: <http://www.nndb.com/people/683/000084431>.)



Mary Cassatt, *La Toilette*, 1893. (Source: <http://www.misbehaving.net/2003/10>.)

TW: The fifties and sixties and even early seventies were so much about formalism in art. Forms and surfaces—content was almost an embarrassment or taboo. It seems to me that as feminists began to consider art from that perspective, there was a shift back to focusing on content in work.

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

AR: I think the feminist movement in art actually fostered additional awareness of content. Feminists were talking about feelings and personal experiences, and women's experiences were considered to be the proper subject of our art and our art history. Also, consciousness raising was a part of our program at CalArts. At the time, I engaged in a study of women's visual expressions and writing. I interviewed a number of women and viewed their work, and I tried to find what it was about this work that says "I'm a woman." I tried to consider why we didn't notice or note the gendered aspects of art prior to this time, and I contrasted the women's work with that of living male artists. And it was a huge revelation for me. I had just completed my formal training, and I was using my education not to train students but to explore new, heretofore, uncharted territories.

TW: We've talked about how when you were a child there was really nothing to look at and so you didn't have an awareness of looking. Then, your visual sensibility opened up in a profound way. When you began to look for women and to read for women's experience in the images you were seeing—was this another shift for you in your own perception?

AR: It definitely changed the way I was looking at things. It was reciprocal. I was looking at things in my life and in the lives of other women, and in the lives of men too, and I was beginning to see it all differently—art and life. To return to our conversation about content—I believe that feminist art really encouraged other people, men and women, to be concerned with what was motivating their art and its contents.

TW: In that movie I was telling you about, *What the Bleep Do We Know?*, one of the principles they talk about is that if you have no knowledge of something you can't see it even if it is there. There's this story about the Indians when Columbus' ships came and how they literally couldn't see them because they didn't know what a boat was. So as feminist perception was dawning, were there things that you had to learn to see?

AR: Yes, I had to learn about being a woman and what it meant. Here I was, putting on all the meals, cooking from scratch with organic everything and never having one thought that this wasn't what I was supposed to do until I had the thought that it wasn't. I went to a consciousness-raising meeting where the topic was doing the dishes, and I realized I did all the dishes as well as all the other household chores. This realization prompted me to ask why couldn't my husband and my step-daughter do the dishes? This sounds like a simple question, but it had huge ramifications for my work; this question changed how I perceived certain artistic images of women's work. For example, my per-

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

sonal understanding of women's household labor came to influence my understandings of depictions of women's household labor. I began to question the artist's intent in a different way. And I think my own realization was writ large in the community. In *Womanhouse*,⁶ the art work was all about domesticity. It was about dishes and putting food on the table and the bride in the linen closet, but from a feminist perspective. And in fact, the young women who were in that program were not housewives; they were young women who were talking about their mothers' lives, not their own lives. These young women were forging different kinds of lives than those lived by their mothers; the young women were making studios, doing carpentry, learning to have a work ethic—the kinds of things that had been taught to male artists and not female artists. On the one hand the young artists were honoring the lives of the women who came before them, and, on the other hand, they were acknowledging the oppressiveness of their predecessors' lives.



"Linen Closet" from Womanhouse, collaborative art installation by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and students of the Feminist Art Program at CalArts, 1972. (Source: http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/edu/student_pages/Sem2_2001/bbobbete/chic.html.)

TW: As you continued your research project about women artists, eventually you were able to go further back than Mary Cassatt?

AR: Oh yes, right back to goddess worship and female basket weaving, fishnets, all kinds of useful arts women participated in and which weren't even considered in the realm of art. Then I looked at artists who were unknown in the early Christian period, the medieval period, the Renaissance, all the way through the mid-twentieth century. I found particular artists such as Artemisia Gentileschi,⁷ an early Baroque artist, whose images were infused with her anger at her own station in life. She would over and over again depict a woman cutting a man's head off—that would be John the Baptist. Of course, we in California were not the only people investigating women's art; there were other people, feminists, other women investigating women's art as well. Mary Garrard⁸ became an expert on Artemisia Gentileschi. Previously it would have been absolutely unheard of for anyone to specialize in a woman artist.

TW: How were images like Gentileschi's read before feminists started looking at them?

AR: They likely would not have even been considered, or they would have been considered as minor, because they were done by women. The art world paralleled the patriarchal society in which it existed.

TW: Nobody was looking at the content?

AR: It's not that no one was considering the content. It's that the work of women artists was simply not considered. Again, in the case of Gentileschi, the content was derivative; it's a Bible story. What is interesting about her work is that she was repeating these images over and over again, and no one was noticing it.

TW: So they just hadn't been studied by anybody?

AR: No, they had not been studied. And to study them with a feminist perspective would be entirely different than studying them without. To employ a feminist perspective means finding meaning in a woman's life, and in Gentileschi's case it would be considering her rape and the lack of support around that rape.



Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1620. (Source: <http://www.anlamak.com/gormek/artemisia-gentileschi---Judith-Slaying-Holofernes-2.htm>.)

TW: This gets into the area of woman as subject?

AR: Well, I'm talking about women as artists right now. But yes.

TW: Right, but we're also talking about the images that are in the paintings themselves. Because we're not talking about Gentileschi's rape but we're talking about the rape that is depicted in the painting. So how were the women depicted in art perceived prior to the articulation of a feminist consciousness?

AR: Scholars at that time were beginning to notice both woman as artist and as subject. Linda Nochlin⁹ has addressed the area of the non-looking at women and has noted that many times women are depicted lying down, frequently nude, eyes averted, an object to be looked at, but not one who could look back. There were many instances of this throughout art history.

TW: But in a painting like the ones that Gentileschi painted, women were not depicted this way, correct?

AR: Correct, but historically there are many more supine women than not. Gentileschi's Judith was always twisting around and wielding the knife, and Gentileschi painted from very close range, so it was in your face. She compares to Caravaggio who was called the painter of dirty feet because he would use peasants as models and you could see that they had dirt on their feet. Caravaggio also had this very close up view, so that you felt as though you were just standing right next to them. It wasn't the voyeur from afar looking at beauty which is symbolized by nude women. These were people doing things.

TW: Once women began to do the looking at this art with a consciousness of being a woman, how did the meanings of those images change?

AR: First of all you could see that a castration image was about castration. And that if a woman was doing it, it was making a certain statement about her hostility and anger against male privilege and the penis as an organ. Now I don't know what kind of change that is. I think I can talk more about how the perception of the depiction of rape changed. Before the feminist movement, the perception of rape in society-at-large was: "It's the woman's fault. She wore a short skirt. It's not a big deal." From the woman's point of view, however, it was always violation, violence, humiliation and disintegration. As women artists began to paint rape, the view changed. Not only would the viewer encounter a woman who was more conscious of the things that could happen to one as a woman, but also the painter may have, in fact, had some kind of life experience that was infused in the work.

Another thing that changed was how we began to see earlier work; for example, Harriet Hosmer's¹⁰ work. She was a 19th century sculptor whose work was very large. It was conventional public sculpture, but it was gigantic. In her case, the sheer size of the work is significant. She clearly was bucking convention. And there were others, often lesbians in the 19th century, who were artists and writers who defied social conventions in their work and in their art. We rediscovered these foremothers in the 1970s. Because our education had not included these women, we felt compelled to study and record their lives for posterity, to enter them in the canon but also to consider them separately. It was critical that women should enter the canon, be compared to men's art and other factors as well, and that we should look at women's art as a body and see what women's art has to say separately.

TW: So there was scholarship in the 19th century that included women artists?

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

AR: There was writing about women artists. I wouldn't really say *scholarship*, because the art historical writing was done by male art historians and this writing about women artists was not by art historians. They were biographies or memoirs or factual journalistic accounts of women artists. For instance, I found an anthology about girls in art and "ladies who painted." It was sort of a Christmas coffee table book of the 19th century. So it was not in the scholarly canon. In order to bring those women into the canon you really had to be a professional art historian who understood what made up the canon and how to incorporate women's contribution, and that would be in terms of 19th century women as well as 20th century women, even though texts did exist. I saw this as my joyful task, as did many other feminist art historians.

TW: What are the kinds of things that you saw when you took on this task?

AR: I saw things that I would have avoided previously or thought unimportant, such as watercolor painting and china painting. I went into little, rural museums in Italy, for example, and I saw work by women that mostly went unnoticed. I also looked at what women artists were depicting; many employed domestic imagery—child care, gardening, housekeeping—in secular works to let you know what women did at home while the men were outside the home. Then, I would also see men's depictions of women, how women looked and what they did, first in ecclesiastical art and then in secular art. There were differences, and I looked for these differences as well as similarities. I would try to combine that with my previous knowledge. For example, prostitutes, and many women of the Bible, were depicted in ways that dishonored them. Mary Magdalene was never depicted as someone who had a value even though she did so to Jesus Christ. And the Virgin Mary is an interesting case; men and women artists would give the Madonna and child these various interpretations. Some depictions were quite erotic, suggesting incest. I also looked for what wasn't depicted; for example, there were no representations of women as heads of state.

TW: So as we re-enter the seventies and work is starting to be made with a feminist consciousness how does the work begin to change?

AR: For one thing, in the Feminist Art Program, women who had little art training were encouraged to use materials right at hand. You didn't need to learn painting or sculpture or architecture, but you could put pieces together with what was at hand. This resulted in a lot of performance art, photographs, videotapes, and making art with everyday feminine

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

materials—lipsticks, shoe polish, nail polish. Performance art was like playing dress up in a lot of ways, because we did it not only for an audience but also in terms of role-playing inside of the educational experience. It wasn't only for exhibition. In general, in the United States a lot of soft materials began to be used, soft sculpture, by both men and women. There was a total re-thinking of what is an appropriate art material. Some used eggs, and other drew pictures with their menstrual blood. All of this experimentation gave rise to the pattern and decoration movement, which included men and women artists, but which was inspired by the feminist art movement, in particular by Joyce Kozloff's¹¹ and Miriam Schapiro's¹² art.



Miriam Schapiro, Mother Russia, (fan), 1994, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 82 x 90 inches. (Source: <http://www.tfaoi.com/aa/1aa/1aa102.htm>.)

TW: Do you believe the women artists were well served or ill served by instructors not insisting that they gain some particular skills with art making materials?

AR: Women did develop skills with art making materials, for example video and with construction, but I don't think skills were taught in general at CalArts. Nobody learned to paint at CalArts. People who came after the David Salle¹³ and Eric Fischl¹⁴ period learned to paint after they were in school. If you wanted to learn those skills you could go to a conservative academy. In general, I don't think that the students in the Feminist Art Program were any less skilled than those students outside of the program. But I think that because of the content of their work, it was perceived as incompetent. I, in particular, remember when Faith Wilding¹⁵ came up for her master's degree and found her imagery ridiculed by the committee. In effect, CalArts had appeared to accept and nurture this feminist program, but many of the traditionally trained academics rejected the work fulfilled by the program.

TW: What was Wilding's imagery?

AR: Her imagery was semi-abstract nature imagery, leaves, spirals, designs emanating from the center. It was very sensuous, and it wasn't the conceptual art that some of the other students at CalArts were producing. Her work was not criticized for its craft, but for its content, for the sentiments she expressed in it. Obviously once you teach women to find their content and to



Faith Wilding, Womb Room 1972, installation. (Source: http://www.yorku.ca/caitlin/4920/2002/assignments_2002.htm.)

give it a form, the next step is how to make that form the best form, and that's where the skill comes in.

TW: Aside from materials how else did the art begin to change?

AR: How the work was exhibited changed; it was exhibited in different places—on the streets, in grocery stores, in parades. A lot of the principles of public art that are now not called feminist were developed by those early feminist artists. Make a parade, silk screen the grocery bags at a supermarket, get your message out. That was very unusual. I think that feminists made a tremendous contribution to performance art, especially Barbara Smith¹⁶ and Linda Burnham.¹⁷ While there was a growing performance art movement in Los Angeles at the same time, it was largely male and driven by different ideals. For example, the male performance artists Chris Burden¹⁸ was having himself shot, crawling through glass, and being nailed to his Volkswagen on a crucifix at the same time that *Womanhouse* was expressing what it was that women did. On the one hand we have the male artist as “hero,” and on the other hand we have the woman as invisible domestic. These are clearly two different realms.

TW: Can we talk about the Woman's Building?

AR: Concurrent with the CalArts' Feminist Art Program, we were developing WomanSpace, which was a gallery where we also held events that would foster community among the women artists. We had to create a community so that we could see the community, making it visible. We had days honoring women's achievements with speeches and other such gatherings. As time went by it became clear that having a program in someone else's institution is just not the same as having your own independent institution.

TW: What were some of those differences?

AR: In the former, you can control your classroom or your program in terms of teaching whatever you want, as long as it doesn't violate the standards of the whole. At the time, CalArts was one of the most radical schools ever. It was a completely avant garde school, and they had an amazing faculty. Yet the Feminist Art Program was seen as beyond radical. Many thought it trivial to consider women's experience, and many were simply angered or irritated by our presence. Over time, it became clear that we were operating too far outside the value system of the school, and we were really not considered part of

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

the academic community. Even within such a so-called progressive institution, feminism was threatening the dominant paradigm.

TW: And once the women artists had mutated, if you will, they could no longer co-exist at CalArts?

AR: I could foresee that we couldn't go where we wanted to go with our students in the environment of CalArts. So when I had an opportunity with Judy Chicago¹⁹ to start something new, and then Sheila de Bretteville joined us during the planning process, I was very eager to do that. We knew we had to do something that was really different. The bottom line difference was our value system, not our technique or artistic standards.

TW: Were there other times in art history when a community of artists or a group of artists or a movement of artists was driven largely by non-normative values?

AR: The Abstract expressionists in America in the 1950s were driven by values different from the norm. The dominant paradigm was the businessman in the gray flannel suit coming home to the woman in the shirtwaist dress and high heels and the two children and what they appeared to consider important was financial security, fidelity and domesticity. The Abstract expressionists didn't look anything like these people, and they didn't share the same values. They were bohemian and non-conformists.



Joyce Kozloff, *Boys' Art #8: Battle of Panipat, 1739*, mixed media on paper, 11.4 x w: 16.8 in. (Source: <http://www.artnet.com/artwork/423802314/joyce-kozloff-boys-art-8-battle-of-panipat-1739.html>.)

TW: As you look at the contemporary art world now, do you see vestiges of feminist art there?

AR: There are the same people still working—Miriam Schapiro, Joyce Kozloff, Suzanne Lacy, Judy Chicago and many, many others. I think that the challenge today is about what it means to have feminist content, what is the content of feminist content, what is being a woman, and how do we talk about it. That has been under discussion for three decades now, and many different approaches have come to the fore. Some issues not emphasized

in the first flowering of feminist interpretation became more urgent and filled out in some way the various points that one could make about art, the things that you noticed about art and artists. Queer art has become a category of investigation. You could even see art made by mothers as a category that would be very interesting to investigate. And I don't know that there are "vestiges"; I think people who were originally in those feminist programs that I knew and were in other feminist groups across this country and who I'm still in touch with are still working. They may not be in the same organizations, but they are still working.

TW: And have you seen their work shift?

AR: Yes, I've seen their work shift, but neither towards nor away from feminism. Work shifts because the artist finds new materials and grows and changes directions. And yes, we can see a lot of different changes, but I don't think those changes have been necessarily in point of view.

TW: Do you think that the art historical record will retain this work and this movement?

AR: I don't know. Of course we hope so, but if history repeats itself, we're in big trouble. It's possible that, because of the current level of destructiveness in the world, we might have no historical record of anything. We could have absolutely no legacy. If things stay as they are now, yes, more women will enter the canon, but I don't think things will stay the same. History doesn't move forward in a progression. It's a very complex question, and it depends on things other than the work of women artists.

TW: So often when I encounter people who have been born in the last two or three decades, inevitably they accept how things are right now and they don't understand the enormous shift that occurred to enable them to be how they are now. So I'm wondering if there is anything else that you would want to say to explain to such a person that shift of perception?

AR: It's a revolution, and perhaps younger people experience their own revolutions. I don't know what they would be, because I'm in this older generation. We are currently in an exciting period of paradigmatic shift. This shift is not tied to the 1970s. What I would say to younger women is this: you will see as you go along in your career where gender will play a role in your accomplishments and then you will understand. There is no other way to really know but through experience. If young women see, for example, abortion

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

become illegal, I expect that they will better understand the role of gender in society. Young women will have their own experiences of gender. Their experiences will be different from ours because the bar is higher now.

TW: I do get concerned by their lack of knowledge of history.

AR: It's not only young feminists who lack history. Art history is not being taught in art schools now, so you have young artists who don't know who the important people in the history of art are, even in their own lifetimes. I work with young artists who don't know who de Kooning is, who might not know who Pollock is. I had been working with a young woman who is doing work about skin and herself and her body, and she didn't know who Hannah Wilke²⁰ was. That's a problem of education. And it's bigger than feminism.

TW: Who undertakes that education, if not art schools?

AR: I personally undertake it, but now I'm working in an institution where I have a certain job during a certain period of time. I'm not going to make a new school again; I'm just going to be who I am and educate from where I am and from what I know. I think there are many people like me who are transmitting that consciousness, but it's not programmatic. One of the things I've learned is the limits of one's influence, and I learned this from feminism.

TW: Will you say more about that?

AR: I can be effective as a teacher and as a mentor to students because I know where my effectiveness and their effectiveness in art begins and ends. We truly thought we were changing the world in 1970, and I think that I have learned a great deal about what it takes to change the world and what kind of power you have to have, at what level you have to be. It's a fantasy to think that you are going to paint a picture or write an essay and change the world; you are not. But let's look at what you can do. I think very much that the legacy of the feminist movement resides largely in people who have gone through that experience, through that evolution of self and who are sharing it with others in whatever way they are sharing it. I think change is a pebble dropped into the water and spreading in rings. I think that's the way change happens—from small, discrete acts repeated over time.



Hannah Wilke, *S.O.S. Starification Object Series*, 1974. (Photo: Les Wollam. Source: <http://www.artnet.com/artist/17886/hannah-wilke.html>.)

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

TW: People are transmitting the processes and values and philosophies. Let me go back a little bit. As there was this enormous revolution from the sixties into the seventies, this revolution of seeing and perception of women, it seemed to me that there was another revolution that occurred as we moved from the seventies up to the eighties and into more of a postmodern idea.

AR: The eighties brought a lot of critical perceptions to bear on art. Much of the postmodern critical apparatus was lifted from literary criticism, but still derived from the feminist approach. Unlike feminist approaches, however, postmodernism was highly intellectualized and increasingly academicized so that, to me, it got away from its original intent, which was to be direct. However, I think one learns a lot from postmodernism. For example, invention is not necessary; there might not even be such an action as invention on parts and pieces that make up an apparent whole. Furthermore, postmodernist thought suggests that one can rewrite history by using parts and pieces. To me this is completely feminist. It's making a collage—taking the fragments of your life and other lives and putting them together. In this same period, there was a lot of conflict between what was called essentialism, which was a belief that there is a true nature of women that can be expressed by female artists, and anti-essentialists, who believe that gender is a construct. The latter is a postmodern notion. In reality, I think that work has to have both heart and ideas, and in its simplest form that's what that debate was about—heart versus ideas. When one makes a cultural comment, one is also making a statement about oneself—what we would call “identity politics.” The statement is both individual and universal. For example, I make distinctions about the quality of art, and these distinctions are based largely on my intuitive reaction to that art, not something that I learned, or so I think. But I cannot separate myself from my learning.

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

¹ Abstract Expressionism is a type of art in which the artist expresses himself purely through the use of form and color. It is non-representational, or non-objective, art, which means that there are no actual objects represented. It was centered in New York City between 1946 and 1960.

² A visual art movement of the 1960s, the Washington Color School was originally a group of painters who showed works in the "Washington Color Painters" exhibit at the Washington Gallery of Modern Art in Washington, DC, from June 25-September 5, 1965. The Washington Color School artists painted largely abstract works and were central to the larger color field movement.

³ Morris Louis (Morris Louis Bernstein) (November 28, 1912 - September 7, 1962) was one of the many talented U.S. abstract expressionist painters to emerge in the fifties. He was among a group of artists that were central to the development of Color Field painting. These artists were concerned with the classic problems of pictorial space and the statement of the picture plane.

⁴ The Feminist Art Program was founded by Judy Chicago in 1970 and housed at California State University, Fresno. In 1971, the program moved to the new California Institute of Arts (CalArts), and was co-directed by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro.

⁵ Designed by architect Sophia B. Hayden for the 1893 World's Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, the Woman's Building housed art and crafts made by women from around the world. It was from this structure that the Woman's Building in Los Angeles took its name.

⁶ *Womanhouse* (30 January-28 February 1972) was a women-only art installation and performance organized by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro. Chicago, Schapiro, their students, and artists from the local community participated. Chicago and Schapiro encouraged their students to use consciousness-raising techniques to generate the content of the exhibition. Each woman was given a room or space of her own in a 17-room mansion in Hollywood, California.

⁷ Artemisia Gentileschi (July 8, 1593-1653) was an Italian Early Baroque painter, today considered one of the most accomplished painters in the generation influenced by Caravaggio (Caravaggisti). In an era when women painters were not easily accepted by the artistic community, she was the first female painter to become a member of the Accademia dell' Arte del Disegno in Florence. She was also one of the first female artists to paint historical and religious paintings, at a time when such heroic themes were considered beyond a woman's reach.

⁸ Art historian Mary D. Garrard is the author of *Artemisia Gentileschi: Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, (Princeton University Press, 1991), and co-editor, with Norma Braude, of *The Power of Feminist Art* (Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1996).

⁹ Professor and art historian Linda Nochlin is a leader in feminist art history studies. In 1971, the magazine *ArtNews* published an essay whose title posed a question that would spearhead an entirely new branch of art history. The essay was called "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" As the title suggests, the essay explores possible reasons as to why women artists had not achieved the same historical notoriety as their male counterparts.

¹⁰ Harriet Goodhue Hosmer (1830-1908), an American sculptor, was born at Watertown, Massachusetts. She studied anatomy with her father, a physician, and afterwards at the St. Louis Medical College. She went to Rome in 1852, where she was the pupil of the English sculptor John Gibson. Her "Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra, in Chains" (1859), is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

¹¹ Joyce Kozloff, (b. 1942) was, in the 1970s, one of the leaders of the Pattern and Decoration movement, which questioned the positioning of the decorative arts as an inferior, wholly feminine genre.

¹² Miriam Schapiro, (b. 1923), originally painted in the Abstract Expressionist style. As her commitment to feminism grew during the 1960s, she developed her own personal style which she called "femmage." Combining such commonplace elements as lace, fabric scraps, buttons, rickrack, sequins, and tea towels she transformed them into sophisticated compositions that often imply multiple layers of both space and meaning.

¹³ David Salle (b. 1952) is an American painter. He earned a BFA and an MFA from Cal/Arts, where he studied under John Baldessari.

¹⁴ Eric Fischl (b. 1948) is an American painter, who also studied at the Cal/Arts.

¹⁵ Faith Wilding came to the U.S. from Paraguay in 1961. She received her MFA at CalArts where she was a founding member of the Feminist Art Program. Wilding is a multi-disciplinary artist. She has exhibited and lectured widely in the U.S.A. and Europe.

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

The [e]Book Edited by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton

¹⁶ Barbara T. Smith is a pioneer performance artist and art educator. Among the innovators in the field, she did her first performances in L.A. in the 1960s and subsequently has performed throughout the U.S. and abroad. She has been among the founders of several early alternative arts spaces including the Woman's Building in L. A. and part of the dynamic of the women's movement from its inception.

¹⁷ Linda Frye Burnham was the founding editor of *High Performance*, a magazine that chronicled and reviewed performance art in the seventies and eighties.

¹⁸ Chris Burden (b. 1946) is an American artist. His reputation as a performance artist started to grow in the early 1970s after he made a series of controversial performances in which the idea of personal danger as artistic expression was central. His most well-known act from that time is perhaps the performance piece *Shoot* that was made in F Space in Santa Ana, California, in 1971, in which Burden was shot in his left arm by an assistant from a distance of about five meters.

¹⁹ Judy Chicago (b. Judy Cohen, 1939) is a feminist artist, author and educator. In 1971 Chicago and Miriam Schapiro jointly founded the Feminist Art Program at Cal/Arts where they organized *Womanhouse*. In 1973 she founded, with Arlene Raven and Sheila de Bretteville, the Woman's Building and the Feminist Studio Workshop. Chicago is most famous for her 1974-1979 work *The Dinner Party*, an homage to women's history in which hundreds of volunteers participated. It is now permanently housed at the Brooklyn Museum.

²⁰ Hannah Wilke (1940-1993; born Arlene Hannah Butter) was an American painter, sculptor and photographer associated with Conceptual Art and Post-Minimalism. Her work explores issues of gender and the body.

Arlene Raven art historian and critic founded *The Woman's Building* and its educational program, the *Feminist Studio Workshop*, with Judy Chicago and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville. She was also a founder and editor of *Chrysalis*, an influential magazine of women's culture. With Terry Wolverton she initiated the *Lesbian Art Project*. In addition, she was a founder of the *Women's Caucus for Art*. Raven published widely as a critic and essayist. During the mid-1980s, she was chief art critic for *The Village Voice*. She also served as contributing editor for *On the Issues: The Progressive Woman's Quarterly*, and a member of its advisory board. She was on the board of the *United States chapter of the International Association of Art Critics*, and she received the *Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism from the College Art Association* in 2001. Arlene Raven died in August 2006.