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American Women Artists, 1935–1970: Gender, Culture, and Politics

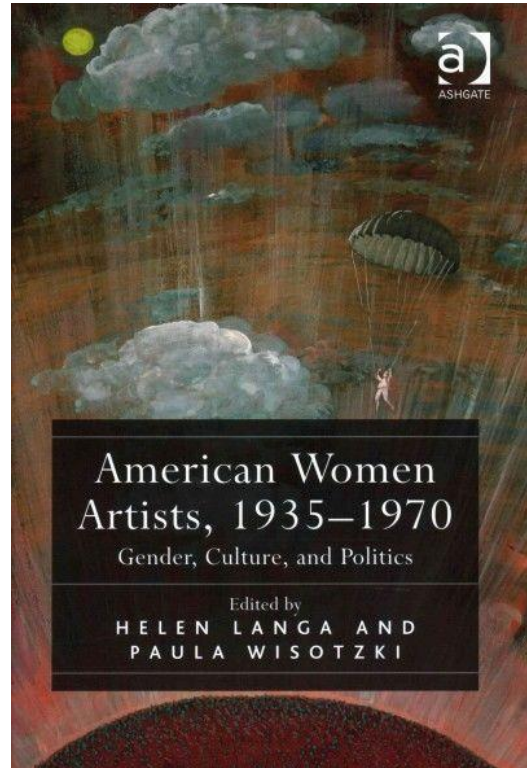
Edited by Helen Langa and Paula Wisotzki

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The publication of *American Women Artists, 1935–1970: Gender, Culture, and Politics* comes at an opportune time, as the art world is exhibiting a reinvigorated desire to uncover and celebrate artists who heretofore have been underappreciated because of longstanding biases and discriminatory practices, while simultaneously tapping into underdeveloped areas of the art market. Museums are publicly transforming their collecting and exhibition practices to better represent diversity. In April 2018, the Baltimore Museum of Art announced it was selling seven works by white male artists estimated at \$12 million to fund acquisitions of work by artists of color and women; the following month, the Brooklyn Museum publicized that it had added ninety-six works by women to their collection; and such exhibitions as *Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction*, at MoMA in 2017, demonstrate an effort to highlight works already in their collections.¹ These developments remind us there is still viability and necessity in the fight initiated by artists in the 1960s for equal representation in museums and galleries. An important front continues to be the writing of art history, which can bring attention to artists regardless of investment value or institutional recognition. *American Women Artists, 1935–1970*, builds upon the expanding literature on women artists, both well-known and less familiar, offering a variety of viewpoints and methodologies for understanding their artistic legacy.

The book covers a period from the beginning of the Federal Art Project to the feminist art movement, the complexities of which are outlined and contextualized by Helen Langa in her excellent introduction, as she notes: “As participants in America’s mostly urban art communities between 1935 and 1970, women had already marked out career paths along a continuum that included competitive fine arts professionalism, bohemian experimentalism, teaching in elementary and high schools, and various forms of commercial art practice, but



their options were also shaped by shifting political tensions, stylistic imperatives, and gender anxieties” (3). This volume deals with the issues that affected the production and reception of artwork at the time it was made—stereotypes of women, biased critics, disparaging notions of femininity—the consequences of which continue to shape the historical record in ways that marginalize women’s contributions. Moreover, the book weaves the social, professional, and personal circumstances of women artists with the broader historical and cultural changes during the period, particularly as they relate to shifts in artistic styles and critical discourses. The artists represented here were (and some continue to be) interested in exploring formal innovations and, importantly, being recognized as artists rather than “women artists” when binary and restrictive notions of gender shaped every aspect of the art world. This is an expansive publication, including thirteen essays and covering dozens of artists, and this review aims to provide a sense of each of the worthy contributions within this volume, which is organized into four thematic sections.

Part one, “Exhibitions: Opportunities and Resistances,” takes exhibition histories as a starting point for assessing the ways gender and cultural inequalities have been institutionalized in the history of modern art and highlights women’s agency in working against this practice. Siobhan Conaty revisits two exhibitions of American and European women artists at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery. With *Exhibition by 31 Women* (1943) and *The Women* (1945), Guggenheim made a pioneering attempt to include women as part of the avant-garde, whose “creative ability,” she wrote, “[was] by no means restricted to the decorative vein” (28). The fact that Guggenheim saw mounting a women’s exhibition as provocative speaks volumes. Conaty conducted extensive research, including interviews with participating artists, relaying their firsthand accounts of both exhibitions and the challenges they faced in maintaining careers. (Readers will wish they had seen the restaging of these exhibitions by Conaty at the Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center in East Hampton, New York.) Her analysis of the critical reception of the exhibitions reveals much about the sexism endured by women artists, as well as the subtle changes that took place in the critical assessment of women’s work during this period, as the preference for abstraction overtook Surrealism.

Cynthia Fowler also focuses on the 1940s, looking at the invisibility of Native American women painters in the context of the MoMA exhibition *Indian Art of the United States* (1941). The exhibition was intended to give credibility to Native American artists as modern artists instead of craftsmen, and Fowler demonstrates the ways women were left out as their male counterparts gained ground. Her recounting of the discourse that precipitated the MoMA exhibition reveals that the effort toward inclusion was made exclusively through the work of male artists, even though women teachers and collectors were key to the development of Native American painting. Fowler traces the legacy of such figures as Pueblo painter Tonita Peña and educator Dorothy Dunn, who—despite a lack of public recognition—were integral to the development and support of younger female painters. Furthermore, Fowler argues that the gendered marginalization of Native American painting as decorative had a doubling effect on women because their subject matter often addressed women’s experiences. Both essays in this section provide an overview of the ways inequalities were structured over time and affected by privilege, gender, and race, thereby providing a useful framework for reading the chapters that follow.

The essays in part two, “Survival, Politics, Gender,” examine understudied periods in four women artists’ careers, and provide a more nuanced understanding of their professional

lives and bodies of work, particularly in relation to their commitments to leftist politics. Paula Wisotzki reevaluates Dorothy Dehner's early career from the 1930s to the mid-1940s, disputing the perception that this period was one of retreat from public life into domesticity as the wife of artist David Smith. Instead, Wisotzki establishes that Dehner exhibited regularly during these years, reinforced her interest in Marxism, and created work representative of her political beliefs. Dispelling the notion that her *Life on the Farm* paintings (1941–45) comprise a mere direct record of her life on their Bolton Landing farm, Wisotzki, using Dehner's writings, reads these scenes of country life as evocations of revolutionary politics, arguing that "images which might otherwise seem little more than charming scenes of country life functioned as evidence of radical culture's endurance through the lives of ordinary citizens embodying historical American values" (65). In the 1930s and early 1940s, a range of abstract and realist styles were connected to leftist politics, and a major contribution of this essay is the reading of figurative painting by a woman artist as more than decorative or descriptive, as previously put forth.

Melanie Anne Herzog examines Elizabeth Catlett's subject position as an African American woman living and working in Mexico during the Cold War. Herzog connects Catlett's transnational identity and leftist politics to the fluid identities of the women she depicted in her prints and sculptures. Herzog traces the development of her practice from the United States to Mexico, where she studied Pre-Columbian and Mexican sculpture, became a member of the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), and eventually secured a prestigious professorship. Herzog sees Catlett's initial trip to Mexico in 1946 to complete the *Negro Woman* series, which presents images of the lives of working-class African American women, as transformative because she also absorbed the Mexican revolutionary spirit that characterized the TGP. While her sculptures of women are abstract and not overtly political, Herzog posits that they reflect Catlett's own bodily experience and "do not signify the 'universal' of presumably unmarked (white) ancestry, but rather suggest a simultaneous multiplicity of ethnicities that derive from diaspora, border crossing, and *mestizaje*" (86). Herzog argues that Catlett was able to identify with the human struggle across national borders and ethnic groups and therefore could work with various stylistic influences from multiple cultures without subsuming them into a Eurocentric modernism.

M. Melissa Wolfe explores the case of American figurative painter Honoré Sharrer, who embarked on a successful career in the late 1930s and then fell into relative obscurity when interest in social realism declined in the 1950s in favor of Abstract Expressionism. While Sharrer is best known for her ambitious painting *Tribute to the American Working People* (1951; Smithsonian American Art Museum), Wolfe instead takes on a reappraisal of the artist's later work, arguing that it signifies more than the complicit watering down of social realism to satisfy new tastes and political changes in the early years of the Cold War. Wolfe provides a wonderful, close reading of *Reception* (1958; private collection), framing it as a transitional work, away from Sharrer's more directly political celebrations of working-class people and toward a more nuanced, subversive critique. Through her close reading, Wolfe illuminates the social and psychological dimensions of the work and reveals its juxtaposition of "feminine" references as a subversive critique of exclusionary Cold War politics.

Similarly, Joanna Gardner-Huggett attends to the later years of Chicago artist Julia Thecla's career, after a formidable period associated with Magic Realism in the 1930s and 1940s. Gardner-Huggett examines the circumstances of the artist's postwar marginalization and her planetary paintings of the 1960s, such as *Red Grass Planet*, which helped reestablish her reputation. She had previously been known for Surrealist-informed images of girls and

animals, but the planetary series connected with the public fascination for the space race. Gardner-Huggett also suggests a kinship with feminist science fiction writers in their creation of an imaginary space outside of the patriarchal structures to which women were subjected in everyday life. Furthermore, the author argues that the artist's choice of subject matter, large scale, and increased abstraction were strategic decisions based on popular and market appeal. From Gardner-Huggett, we learn that Thecla never fully regained financial viability, and consequently much of her work and archives were lost. The author provocatively suggests that "what is often considered a 'failure' in art, such as Thecla's science fiction and planetary paintings, in fact can challenge prevailing historical narratives of modernism, ultimately providing more provocative conversations regarding art produced in the United States in the last century" (121). A strong ending for this section, Gardner-Huggett's essay advocates for acknowledging both women's professional disadvantages and their resistance to them, and for accepting that such circumstances will continue to shape history until we decide to look at the past differently.

In the opening to part three, "Alternative Media, Alternative Visions," Christina Weyl claims that Louise Nevelson's first prints, thirty etchings created at Atelier 17 in New York in the late 1940s and early 1950s, manifest an experimental quality that is indicative of her later sculptural innovations. According to Weyl, Nevelson forged her own path in the print studio, sometimes baffling those who tried to give her advice on conventional techniques and tools. Weyl argues that Nevelson's practice in the print studio—the highly expressive inking style, free application of color, and use of nontraditional fabric materials, such as lace, that were stereotyped as feminine—broke with conventions of printmaking and rejected gender norms.

In the next chapter, Krystal Hauseur explores the intersections of identity, craft, and modernism in the postwar work of Ruth Asawa, Kay Sekimachi, and Toshiko Takaezu. Hauseur asserts that their individual bodies of work each convey their experiences as Japanese American women working in craft-based media who engaged with modernist ideas of abstraction and high art. Recognizing the stereotypes of craft, particularly when employed by women of color, Hauseur analyzes the artists' formal contributions while simultaneously reading their work through their heritage, education, and life experience. For example, she interprets the "transparency" of Asawa's hanging woven wire sculptures and use of positive and negative space as embodying a hybridity that emerged from multiple influences: her understanding of Mexican basket making, training at Black Mountain College, knowledge of Zen Buddhism, and childhood experiences of labor, including in an internment camp during World War II. Similarly, Hauseur establishes how the unique backgrounds of Sekimachi and Takaezu are expressed in their large-scale fiber and ceramic sculptures, respectively; in each case, the author refuses to forgo the personal to establish their status in the canon of modernist sculpture. She argues, "By examining the formal elements of their crafted abstractions through the context of the artist's identity, modern art discourse is broadened to include craft's and women of color's significance during the international rise of post-World War II American art" (145).

Regarding the intersections of craft and modernism, Mary Caroline Simpson appraises fiber artist Claire Zeisler's groundbreaking contributions to the field, despite the gendered, marginalized status of craft and the artist's own hesitation to situate her practice within fine arts discourse. Simpson shows how the artist's image affected the public perception of her and how ageism limited her association with contemporary trends. The conceptual and formal innovations in fiber she exhibited in the 1960s—for example, *Red Preview* (1969; Art

Institute of Chicago), a large sculpture of carefully composed knotted and wrapped red rope with strands cascading to the floor—resonated with Minimalist and Post-Minimalist contemporary sculpture. Yet Simpson insists that the artist’s production should not be aligned with this trajectory or the feminist reclamation of craft in the 1970s. Instead, Zeisler’s work should be valued on its own terms, as personal and materially based fiber art.

Part four, “From Formalist Abstraction to Feminist Agency,” begins with Helen Langa’s examination of queer coding in abstraction, as employed by mid-twentieth-century lesbian artists. She writes: “Pictorial strategies that focused on seemingly neutral subjects such as landscapes, still lifes, and abstractions, as well as the deployment of formalist stylistic vocabularies, choices that any artist might have made, were uniquely valuable for lesbian artists because they offered modes of art production that could dissimulate or disguise identities not deemed permissible to reveal in public” (183–84). These choices, which registered as objective rather than self-expressive, helped artists gain recognition while protecting their personal lives. She shows how this manifested differently for three artists, examining Berenice Abbott’s architectural photographs of New York City, Nell Blaine’s gestural landscape and still-life paintings, and Ruth Bernard’s photographic nudes. Each artist found “an effective screen with which to mute qualities that might associate an artist with either a feminine or lesbian identity, at a time when neither status would be viewed as professionally competitive by patrons, dealers, or the public” (186–87). Bernard’s example is contingent on accepting that the idealized, sculptural female nude was an already established pictorial mode in modern photography and therefore would not implicate the lesbian female artist. However, this case reveals the extent to which both the artist and viewers were willing to ignore the eroticism of these photographs, highlighting the power of abstraction, at midcentury, as a “screen” masking the content within.



Fig. 1. Chamion Von Wiegand, *The Wheel of the Law, #83*, c. 1958. Gouache and pencil on paper, 15 3/16 x 13 1/2 in. The Newark Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Alan Loesberg, 1983, 83.401

Continuing a consideration of the flexibility of abstraction for female artists, Aliza Edelman studies the coexistence of Neoplasticism and Eastern ideas and symbols in Charmion von Wiegand’s 1950s abstractions, such as *The Wheel of the Law, #83* (fig. 2). Through close examination of the artist’s sources and careful visual analysis, Edelman shows how von Wiegand’s use of geometry, color, and symbolism synthesize her transnational interests, including psychology, Zen Buddhism, Tibetan art, and Neoplasticism. Her use of the circular mandala expresses the ideal of inclusivity, “an even greater synthesis through the circular form,” which challenges the dualistic and masculine readings of abstraction; Edelman’s extensive study mirrors these important goals (203).

The final two chapters address agency more than abstraction. Seth Feman posits that previous readings of Alma Thomas’s *Watusi (Hard Edge)* (1963; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution) painting (based on a collage by Henri Matisse) as an African American

artist's critique of white European modernism is limited. Instead, he proposes we understand her identity as dynamically realized through her experiences in Washington, DC, where she was deeply influenced by social changes in her neighborhood (school desegregation and urban renewal). He formulates a new reading of *Watusi* in which her "search for beauty" is plotted through various coordinates—her teaching, changes to the physical and social environment, daily experiences—considering the social dimensions of race, class, and gender (227). He reads Thomas's painting process as an embodied one: "She employed her full body in this process of transferring to paint the beauty she discovered in the city, every stroke, not a subliminal inscription, but a trace made" (227).

Likewise, embodiment is a central concern of Mary McGuire's essay, which draws on Carolee Schneemann's performance notes to show that her experience creating *Queen's Dog* (1965; staged at the Judson Dance Theater, NY) influenced her move toward methods of individual performance and the "solidification of her feminist perspective" (238). McGuire describes how the "psychosexual drama" in *Queen's Dog*, inspired by a dream, transformed Red Riding Hood from a moralizing story to an "unleashing" of female sexual desire. In the realization of the performance, elements of chance, the agency of the performers, and authorial control/expression of the artist's vision came into conflict. McGuire posits that Schneemann's dissatisfaction with parts of the performance, particularly one male participant's failure to follow her direction, led her to embrace a solo approach in which she could more directly "assert her artistic and sexual agency," as quintessentially displayed with the use of her body in *Interior Scroll* (1975) (245). This analysis raises further questions about how and when feminist authorship operates differently than patriarchal models. Both Alma Thomas and Carolee Schneemann navigated their surroundings and drew on personal experience to develop new forms of expression that responded to their immediate physical, professional, and psychological environments.

The histories in this volume expand and challenge narratives of American art between 1935 and 1970, presenting new ways of understanding the representation of politics, identity, and culture in practices of figuration, abstraction, and alternative media. This book will serve to inspire further interest on a range of subjects and could be an excellent teaching tool. It would be a benefit to courses in American art, exposing students to a variety of art-historical methods, supplementing the canonical approach of textbooks, and framing issues of discrimination and gender bias. Unfortunately, the high cost of the book will be prohibitive for many to use as a required text. The lack of color images is also regrettable, especially for such an expensive book, but many of the illustrations can be found online. Despite these drawbacks, the book provides a model for distributing a substantial selection of new scholarship in a format that engages the reader with intertextual connections. As a whole, this collection of essays reminds us that recovering women artists is not enough; we must keep building scholarship to more fully account for their contributions.

Notes

¹ Baltimore Museum of Art, Press Release, "The BMA Diversifies its Collection, Strengthening its Holdings to Enhance Visitor Experience," (April 13, 2018), <https://artbma.org/documents/press/contemporary.pdf?pdf=contemporary>; McCauley, Mary Carole, "Baltimore Museum of Art to Sell Works by Masters

such as Andy Warhol, Will Aim to Improve Artist Diversity,” The Baltimore Sun (April 13, 2018), <http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/arts/bs-fe-bma-sells-artworks-20180413-story.html>; Brooklyn Museum, Press Release, “Brooklyn Museum Announces 96 Recent Acquisitions by Female Artists,” (May 29, 2018), https://d1fxha3ugu3d4.cloudfront.net/press/docs/Year_of_Yes_Acquisitions_Press_Release.pdf