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“Why should there be art if we aren't going to look at it?”

A tribute to Linda Nochlin



Linda Nochlin in front of Philip Pearlstein, *Wedding Portrait of Linda and Richard* (1969) © Adam Husted

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I recently attended a memorial service for Linda Nochlin, who died last fall and was one of the greatest art historians in the history of the history of art. Her specialty was Courbet and French Realism, subjects in which she was a true innovative thinker, though she was most popularly known for having written the [landmark essay](#) *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* in 1971—which launched the feminist art movement.

The title has been ubiquitously quoted and the question is still being asked as equally valid today. And yet, to my mind, nothing has done more to change the art of the past 40-plus years than feminism, having validated such previously inconsequential issues in contemporary art as intimacy, narrative, autobiography, smallness of scale, the personal and collectivity; each of which is now seen as central to the lexicon of art.

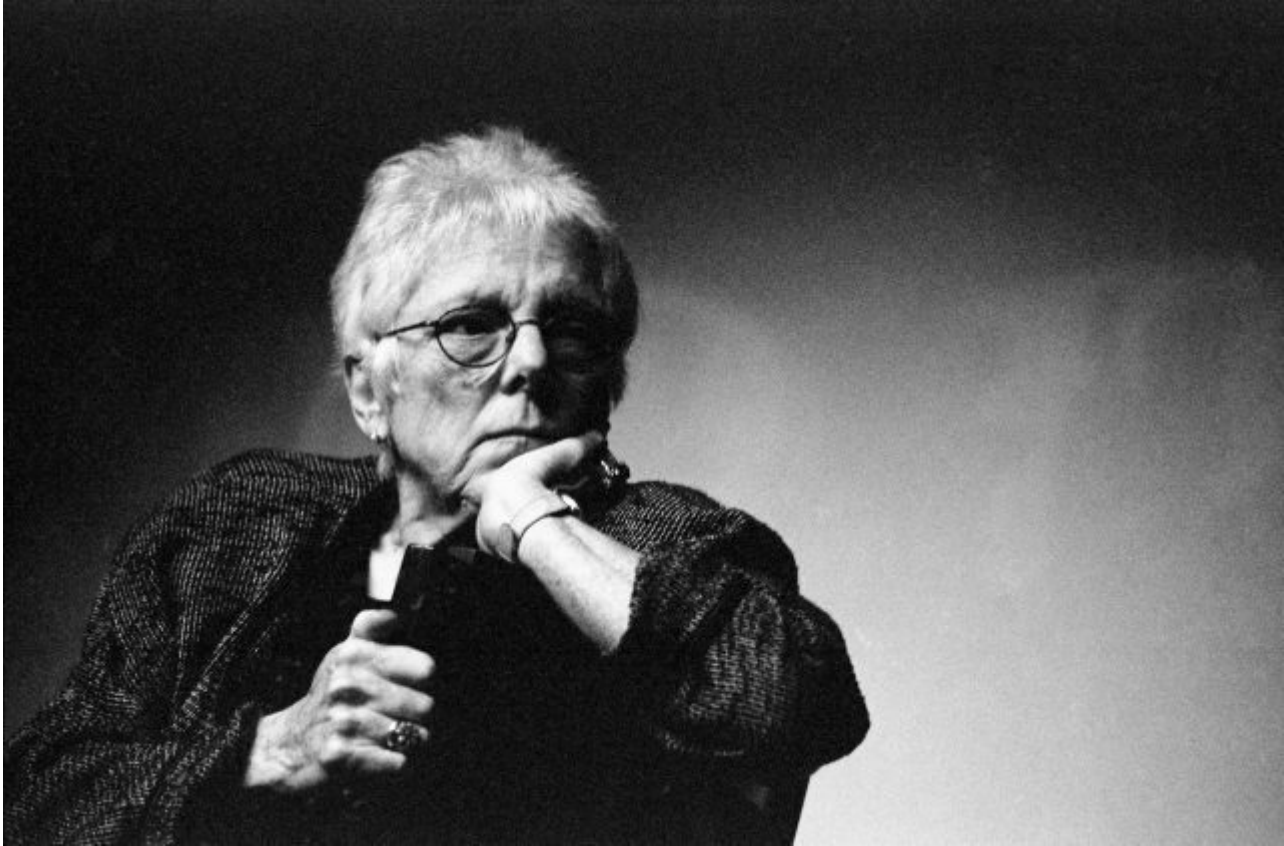
Before I met her—before I knew much about art and even less about art history—I knew about Linda. She was a person who truly changed the course of history. Before her, art history was focused on writing the canon. Ever since Linda it has been about debunking the canon. That is not simply being a giant in your field: she changed the very ground from which this historical landscape now rises.

I found it fascinating to hear from so many of the speakers at the memorial service how, before Linda, there was no place for a woman art historian. She broke through gender barriers and she saw herself as an activist operating in the realm of art history.

Beyond her brilliance and countless contributions to the field of art history and art, Linda was a real person who loved life and adored people. Part of her unique influence was how grounded, fun-loving and inspiring she was, both rigorous and nurturing.

Throughout the memorial at the [Guggenheim Museum](#), there was a photograph projected onto a screen of Linda seated in front of a famous portrait by [Philip Pearlstein](#) of her and her husband, [Richard Pommer](#), both of whom I had the honor to study with. Unlike the PhDs who spoke on Sunday, I barely finished college, and I did so because of Linda. I had taken a year off from college to see if art history would be a vocation or an avocation. In the process I found myself in the unexpected position of being the first employee and curator of the [New Museum](#). After the year off my father sternly told me: “You are going back to college” in a way that clearly left no room for a reply other than “Yes”.

Nonetheless, I kept my job at the museum, which meant that my life could have been a lot easier had I coasted through my final years at NYU or Columbia. Instead I commuted to Vassar three days a week because Linda was my advisor and I knew I would learn from her.



Linda Nochlin. Courtesy LACMA archives. Photo credit: Annie Appel

I have been fortunate enough to have had three mentors, all women, who have impacted my adult life so profoundly that I would not be who I am or have done what I have been able to do without their wisdom and support. Having attended Vassar in the early years of its co-education in the mid-1970s, Linda's influence on how I think, how I write and what I aspire to communicate continues to carry me through.

The capacity to let fate lead me is a comfort and strength I gained from Linda. While I was trained as an art historian I have since been a curator, critic, journalist, art market analyst and advisor to some of the great collectors of our time. I remain, in part, all of those things in the work I do today, which can also mean I am not fully any of them. What I learned from her the most is to have the courage and discipline to find my own path, to do things in my own way.

I remember running into Linda at the Venice Biennale, some 20 years ago, and she gave me her usual warm embrace, before describing me to those of her party as "one of the ones who's really done something in the field". Many times since then, those validating words have fortified me to persevere and continue on my own path as opportunity has directed it.

As the memorial neared its conclusion, a videotape of [Linda speaking](#) at the [College Art Association](#) conference in 2016 was played. In it, Linda says: "You do the best when you're being yourself, when you're not making huge efforts to conform or to think of some great new theory, but when you are doing your own work according to your own standards and your own moral and visual vision."

Every time I looked at the screen what I saw was that rigorous, nurturing genius of a scholar, activist, mother, and friend to so many. She concluded her talk by emphasizing that, in the end, much of her strength came from looking: "Looking is important, and so much recent art history has denigrated the act of looking. I'm not talking about the 'gaze' or whatever you want to call it, but just simple looking. Why should there be art if we aren't going to look at it?"

Underneath it all, this is the point: what makes it all real and meaningful? Looking, and being transported by the process is what always tethers me. Why should there be art if we aren't going to look at it should be the watchwords of our field—history, practice, and market all.

Linda Nochlin's final book, [Misère](#), was recently published by Thames & Hudson on 10 April 2018

