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PREFACE

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In November 2001, I organized a conference called “Women Artists at the Millennium,” which brought together papers and discussion by and about women artists and art historians at Princeton University, with the cosponsorship of the Program in the Study of Women and Gender and the Department of Art and Archaeology. Four years later, I return to the motivation for the conference, and to the links among the three nouns in its title: “women,” “artists,” and “millennium.” I want to reconsider them from the more sober vantage point of a time to which no millennial freight need be attached, in spite of—or perhaps precisely because of—our living through September 11, 2001, and its aftermath. Those of us at the conference in November 2001 had already begun to live through that tragic event, but its shadow hung over us so immediately that the triumphalism that initially seemed to hover around the notion of “women artists at the millennium” was converted into its epically anxious opposite. I myself am not epically minded, but I believe there is a special need now to retreat from our desire for epic adventures and conclusions. So I will reconsider the category of the “woman artist” here in a more modest light, taking some critical distance from the conference which this book records, modifies, and supplements and from which it departs.

There are, in fact, reasons from within the category of the “woman artist” for withdrawing from the epic perspective and the baggage of greatness that goes

with it. Back in 1971, at the outset of the modern women's movement and the onset of feminist art-making, Linda Nochlin had asked the question, "Why have there been no great women artists?" The thirty-year anniversary of that famous, double-sided query was the first of the motivations for the conference held in 2001. The question had been asked and answered—the answers, of course, were historical, institutional, cultural, psychological, not biological—primarily with regard to nineteenth-century painting and what came before it. In 2001, the idea was to ask and answer the question with regard to what came after, particularly during the thirty years after 1971. Thus the focus was on the contemporary situation, with regard to which Nochlin herself had to reframe the original question, so that it now read, "Why have there been great women artists?" In my view, something unexpected happened with that simple, one-word change. Suddenly the reformulated question seemed a little less double-sided, less equivocal than it had in its original negative incarnation: now that there have been and continue to be increasing numbers of "women artists" producing some of the most compelling work in the contemporary scene, and being recognized for doing so, the conundrum of greatness with regard to women artists had lost some of its edge. At least, so I felt, and still feel now.

Crucial to its cleverness was what I had taken to be the ambivalence of the original question—if the "great artist" is a mythic figure borne aloft by patriarchal values, should the "woman artist" aspire and be assimilated to the very same greatness that the question implicitly criticizes? One of the missions of feminist art (by men and by women) has been canon critique—what does that say about the millennial mission of adding women to the pantheon of great artists? Of course it is a good thing that we can now argue the reasons for there being plenty of prominent female contributors to the contemporary canon, paradoxical as this may be. Of course it is a good thing that some of us can even assume that proposition as a fact and proceed from there, either taking the class of the "woman artist" for granted or ignoring it as a special category altogether, as most of the art historian participants in the conference did. Yet the contemporary inversion of the question not only turns it inside out, it also—quite inadvertently—goes a long way toward blunting its critical pointedness and undoing its destabilizing

potential. And assuming or ignoring the “woman artist” as such vitiates the question itself, thus eliminating one of the prime motivations for the conference in the first place, and for the somewhat different book that follows upon it.

Four years later, then, what are we to do with our terms? Well, first we should reconsider some of the things we may have come to take for granted since 1971. So what about the category that the original question put in place? Is a “woman artist” a woman who happens to be an artist, or the other way around, an artist who happens to be a woman? Well, the other way around, surely, if we take her artistry seriously. But then, of what importance is the fact that the artist happens to be a woman—relative to other facts about her, such as her race, her class, her geographical and historical situation, her personal history, and her artistic formation? I am a woman professor—but I consider myself such only at certain moments; at other moments I consider myself a professor *tout court*; at yet other moments I don’t consider myself a professor, but I do consider myself a woman, or a mother, or a lover, or a daughter, or a sister, or a friend, or some combination thereof. Sometimes I don’t consider myself either a professor or a woman, but simply a person with a particular history, a fifty-year-old, white Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, left-leaning, culturally Protestant, agnostic person who converted to Judaism but only in certain circumstances considers herself Jewish. Sometimes I consider myself an artist, a writer, and/or an intellectual with a particular point of view and particular curiosities who is sometimes “feminine” and sometimes “masculine” of mind and behavior (and sometimes neither and/or both). Sometimes I consider myself a feminist, but I have to admit, sometimes I don’t: especially when feminism entails orthodoxy, the espousal of permanent victimhood, or gender self-hatred—feminist misogyny is just as prevalent as Jewish anti-Semitism, for example; and I for one am a girl who has always liked being a girl. Sometimes, thankfully, I don’t consider myself at all: it is instructive that that happens most frequently when I simply get down to work. Often I am a nomad among different places and personas, calling nowhere and no one home. I assume that some different version of what I just said about myself as a “woman professor” applies to most “women artists,” or artists-who-happen-to-be-women. And yet . . .

If I take one of the personal descriptors listed above—my whiteness, for instance—perhaps the “and yet” may come into better focus. (As it turned out—this had not been the intention—all of the participants in the original conference were white women.) When one of the terms that describes me happens to fall within a group defined as mainstream, normative, or universal, I tend to think of it as a neutral, invisible aspect of my personhood—as lacking color—until someone else outside of that mainstream turns around, looks my whiteness in the eye and forces me to do so too. So I think it must be for the “man artist.” But so it can never be, quite, for the “woman artist,” just as it can never be for the person “of color.” For like it or not, the woman in the artist colors her experience as an artist with the fact that she is not the normative case, that she does not occupy the position of universality, that she will always be looked at by others, and therefore by herself at least sometimes, as other and outsider, as exceptional, as different by definition.

What I want to claim here, however, is that that coloring by otherness, by outsidership, by difference, is a positive, not a negative—an expansion, not a reduction, of what it means to be a person and an artist. Neither lesser nor greater, if we remove the hierarchical scale of evaluation from the equation, the difference of the “woman artist” alters the balance and opens the closed system of values that structures the canon of human “genius.” It does so, I would argue, not only for women but for men as well, for we all gain by the changed face and expanded definition of humanness that ensues: as we always gain by recognizing each other in and through the differences that we share as human beings. For this reason it would be a shame to repeat the historically necessary single-sex constitution of a conference like *Women Artists at the Millennium*.

This is to take the figure of the “woman artist,” then, as a construction just as much as that of the “great artist.” It is to see the “woman artist” as a figure whose womanness is historically constructed, and to whom a set of historically disparaged (and often contradictory) values has been attached, such as smallness, domesticity, interiority, superficiality, artificiality, animality, mobility, incoherence, irrationality, particularity, plurality, supplementarity, and so on. Defined in opposition to a set of historically privileged “masculine” values, the descriptors of

“femininity” have been defined as lacks—the lack of essence, coherence, singularity, depth, transcendence, etc. (Couldn’t we finally forget about that little-boy absurdity, the famous lack of a phallus? Spell it with a little *p*, say penis-phallus, same difference, and girls, stop joining the ranks of priapic high priests and false-idol worshippers?) The feminist trick, then, is to call them not lacks but differences and additions, to upend the opposition that they involve, to take its vertical arrangement and turn it horizontal, to set the “lower” values inside the “higher” ones in order to rework them from within: to intertwine Mother Earth with Father Sky, so to speak, rather than setting her beneath (or for that matter above) him, and see what happens to the Old Man then. No millennium, no revolution, no utopia, no heroic advance, no final destiny, no messiah (and no Great Goddess, either), just this: an alteration, a different world of art, not the same-old-same-old.

So, although I think there are philosophical essentialisms to be learned from—I also think that the question of what role biology plays in the binary structure of “femininity” and “masculinity” must remain forever open (both in the sense that it can never finally be answered satisfactorily, and in the sense that it remains an interesting question)—it is not the X chromosome that determines and defines the “woman artist.” But of course, all of this has to do with mythologies of the artist, not the fact and function of the art itself. What of that? Does it matter? And does the “different world of art” mentioned above simply refer to a more inclusive terrain, a standardless anticanon with no exclusions (except that of “man artist”)? In response to the last question, I think not; I think for the figure of the “woman artist” to matter at all now, her art must make some kind of difference, a difference that has to do with the ethics of and in aesthetics. I offer no prescriptions or proscriptions, only the proposition that the purpose of the artist, whether man or woman, is not celebrity, either now, for posterity or in the millennial roll call—not greatness, that is—but art. And the ethical purpose of art is to make you see, think, and feel anew—not “new” in the sense of modernist novelty, but “anew,” in the generative sense, which is to say again but as if for the first time; to move you to those redeeming features of human life, care and curiosity of the noninstrumental kinds; to induce you to respond to the domicile you inhabit—to be receptive to it, to allow it to affect you and be affec-

tionate toward it; to make live what is so often deadened by the doing-time of day-to-day getting-by; even to make you love what is simultaneously the horror, the farce, and the beauty of the flawed world we live in, which would not even be if it were not flawed. This ethics is an aesthetics that is an erotics. In this ethical-aesthetical-erotic enterprise, this ethos-eros, the art-producing task of the “woman artist” as I have defined her is not, in my opinion, radical critique (which, like that which it critiques, just goes on reproducing itself) or a separatist aesthetic—neither the ultimate denaturing nor the essentializing of gender—but the judicious, amorous, and constant testing of the boundaries between Nature (X) and Culture (Y), between the matter of the one and the thought of the other. Without end, millennial or otherwise.

I wish to thank Catherine de Zegher, Director of the Drawing Center and one of the participants in *Women Artists at the Millennium*, for coediting this volume with me. Where I organized the conference, it is her commitment to this book that has made it possible, her genius for producing beautifully and intensively considered books, and her dedication to contemporary art and its feminist projects, that make it what it is. She has done the real work of addressing and bringing together the contributions of the separate essays in this book, so I have chosen to leave that to her introduction. There is no one better suited to the task: as the conceiver, curator, and editor of the justly famous *Inside the Visible*, she is uniquely qualified to comment on the book version of *Women Artists at the Millennium*, and to consider some of the ways in which it might be understood as a sequel to the earlier set of essays, with their nuanced and differentiated views on the intertwined matters of contemporary art and feminism. I owe much to her as a friend and co-conspirator on this and other projects: I am grateful for having this space to credit her with the labor of love that she has performed here. That labor is truly exemplary of the ethics, aesthetics, and erotics alluded to above.