

Where Are All the Women? On MoMA's identity politics.

By Jerry Saltz

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This week marks the third anniversary of the Museum of Modern Art's reopening in its sleek new building, and a birthday is as good a time as any to celebrate. The museum has the most stupendous collection of modern painting and sculpture in the world. It is where we go to reconnect with our roots, the place entrusted with presenting the genesis of modernism. MoMA is our fountain of youth, our Garden of Eden, our Promised Land. But all these things will not last much longer if this institution continues excluding women from the display of its permanent collection of painting and sculpture from 1879 to 1969, which lives on the fourth and fifth floors. Everything about this museum rides on the vibrancy and diversity depicted there, and MoMA is allowing that life to drain out. It is slowly turning the history of modernism into a procession of dead presidents and greatest hits, in effect making modern art a gated community and a state religion.



Willem de Kooning's vicious Woman I (1950-1952), at MoMA.

Each fall since MoMA's reopening in November 2004, I've gone to these two floors, counted the number of artworks on view, tallied the number of women artists included, and then pitched a fit in print. So many women artists had come to light over the past few decades that MoMA's reopening in 2004 became an enormous opportunity to alter its monolithic version of modernism. There was ample evidence that MoMA wanted to do so in 2000, when the permanent collection was totally rethought. Even the usually conservative chief curator of painting and sculpture, John Elderfield, admitted that previous MoMA installations had been "less real than ideal," adding that the museum now wanted to investigate "multiple narratives." It sounded as though the institution was on a slow but steady road to equal time.

That's why the reopening brought such high hopes. On that Saturday in November 2004, the huge crowds wanted MoMA to be great. Opinions on the architecture varied but were primarily positive. (Yoshio Taniguchi's building is handsome and essentially invisible; you can walk right past it and not know it, which may or may not be a good thing.) That first installation was the MoMA men's club as usual, though you could make a case that it was an okay time for the old greatest-hits lineup to betrotted out one last time. (There were 415 works, excluding books, on view on the fourth and fifth floors, 20 of them—less than 5 percent—by women.) Either way, it was appropriate to temper one's criticism. MoMA was learning how to deal with its new space, trying to get as many of the masterpieces on view as possible; we all needed to see them in their new house.

BACKSTORY

Despite its male-dominated collection, MoMA hosted its first solo exhibition by a woman only 13 years after it was founded, and 25 years before the Whitney did." Josephine Joy: Romantic Painter" opened on June 12, 1942, followed in the next few years by Brazilian photographer Genevieve Naylor, Helen Levitt, and Georgia O'Keeffe. As for the Whitney, it was a pretty male preserve until sculptor Louise Nevelson showed her work in 1967. That is, if you don't count the memorial exhibit devoted to Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney herself—an artist as well as a benefactress—in 1943.

By the fall of 2006—after two years, and substantial tinkering—there were 399 objects on view; 19 were by women, or 5 percent. Yet even this figure was misleading because MoMA had included three decorative objects by the estimable Marianne Brandt that weren't, strictly speaking, in the painting-and-sculpture collection. The museum also slipped in a great Bridget Riley. But it was dated 1983–2002, well outside the closing date of the floor. So the real number was still around 3 percent.

Which brings us to the present, and after a great deal of art has been shuffled in and out of storage and rearranged, you can't say MoMA isn't sticking to its story. There are 28 Picassos on view, 22 Matisses, 15 Mondrians, and 13 Rauschenbergs. On the fifth floor, MoMA has its Cézannes all in an astounding row. On the fourth floor, there's a whole gallery of Ellsworth Kellys (constituting one of the museum's "Focus" exhibits); the Johns-Rauschenberg-Twombly galleries have been revamped, as have parts of the Pop Art galleries. Best of all, the fourth floor now starts with six Willem de Kooning "Women."

Sadly, those slashing depictions are about the only women you're going to see there. By my count, there are 400 works of art on these floors, 14 by women. That's rock-steady at 3.5 percent, and includes the Bridget Riley again. Even if you give MoMA the benefit of the doubt and count only the number of artists on these floors, there are 137—11 of them women. That's 8 percent.

Not to sound like a broken record, but it has become bitterly clear that MoMA's stubborn unwillingness to integrate more women into these galleries is not only a failure of the imagination and a moral emergency; it amounts to apartheid. Even the Met has integrated women into its twentieth-century wing, hanging four Florine Stettheimer paintings and a room of ten Georgia O'Keeffes. Obviously, MoMA can't invent modern masters and new Cubists. By my count, only about one percent of all the art up to 1970 in MoMA's Painting and Sculpture Collection is by women. The people who run this institution are earnestly trying to do the right thing; I'm not declaring them sexist bigots. Nor am I a quota queen, advocating that women be allotted their 51 percent: Art history isn't about fairness. Nevertheless—and this is a vital point—MoMA's master narrative would not be disrupted if more women were placed on view. In fact, that narrative would come to life in ways it never has before, ways that would be revitalizing, even revolutionary. Ask yourself if hanging any of the following artists would really ruin the narrative espoused by the museum: Barbara Hepworth, Louise Nevelson, Louise Bourgeois, Joan Mitchell, Dorthea Rockburne, Yoko Ono, and Florine Stettheimer. Or just take Alice Neel, a kind of American antihero (auntie-hero?) who painted in seclusion for nearly her whole life while raising children on her own in Spanish Harlem, and who arrived at an original figurative style that is simultaneously brooding, bizarre, and Pop-ish. She's one of the better painters of the mixed emotions of motherhood, and maybe the best painter of pregnant women who ever lived. Or MoMA could explore the work of Hilma af Klint, the Swede who fashioned mystic-looking alchemical diagrams and who arrived at pure abstraction more than five years before the great Kasimir Malevich. Even Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keeffe are missing. There's no Mary Cassatt. I could list dozens more.