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Bharti Kher, Six Women, 2013-2015, plaster, wood, metal, photo Urszula Usakowska Wolff

Under-representation of women artists in the contemporary art world

Can you name five female artists? It was the question asked by the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C., USA. Ask someone to name five artists, they added, and many people will give you the names of men.

As a matter of fact, if we refer to the latest international report on contemporary art market, published by Artprice in 2017, we note that women account for only 14% of the Top 500 contemporary artists. However the percentage rises to 31% for women artists born after 1980. We could therefore deduce that the contemporary art market is evolving towards more gender equality, even if the imbalance remains important. This observation, however, varies according to countries, societies and economies.

In 1989, a group of female artists calling themselves 'Guerrilla Girls' denounced the obvious domination of male artists in the museum collections in New York. They displayed posters and stopped passers-by with the following slogan: "Must women be naked to enter the Metropolitan Museum? Less than 5% of artists in the modern art section are women, but 85% of nudes are female". In 2015, only 12% of MET exhibitions were dedicated to women. In 2014, only 14% of exhibitions were dedicated to female artists at the Guggenheim Museum of New York. In 2015 only a quarter of the retrospective exhibitions organized by The Tate Modern in London were dedicated to women artists. The Venice Biennale 2015 accounted only 33% women compared to 43% in 2009. Today the prices of female artist works remain much lower than those of men; in addition, male artists hold almost 90% of the world's best auctions.

Women artists lacking visibility in France

According to Camille Morineau, artistic Director of La Monnaie de Paris and co-founder of the AWARE Association (Archives of Women Artists, Research & Exhibitions), in France, "there have always been women artists, but we have simply ignored their work and history has forgotten them". Until the 1950s, women expressed more in so-called minor genres, such as flower paintings or portraits of children. It must be recalled that they had access to artistic education very late. In 1970, the Franco-American artist Louise Bourgeois considered that art was a world of men, adding "that it was a world where men and women try to satisfy the masculine power". At the end of the 2000s, women were the majority, constituting more than 60% in art schools in France but they accounted for only 17% of artists and were not very present in galleries (5%) and exhibitions. Today they account for 80% of the population of art schools, however only 20% of artists living on art are women, reported the platform KazoArt in 2016. In the Top 100 of artists who sold most in France between 2012 and 2013, there were only 8 women, according to Art Actuel magazine (2014).

Sonia Delaunay has waited for half a century to come out of the shadow of her husband Robert. Louise Bourgeois was 96 years old when the Centre Pompidou in Paris devoted her first retrospective in 2008," says Camille Morineau. To fight against this lack of visibility of women artists, the AWARE Association, co-founded in 2014 by 7 women from diverse backgrounds, is working on an history of art based on equal representation. Based on the fact that there were no awards in France dedicated to women such as the Max Mara Art Prize for Women (England) or the German Gabriele Münter Preis, it also created an AWARE prize. On January 24, 2018 it was awarded to Violaine Lochu - who builds her creations around noises and the musicality of the language - in the presence of the French Minister of Culture, Françoise Nyssen. In September 2016, the French artist Annette Messager received the Japanese Praemium Imperiale, the French equivalent of the Nobel Prize applied to art. The artist Sophie Calle had the honor of having a second retrospective at Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature in Paris at the end of 2017, after the exhibition dedicated to her at Centre Pompidou in 2003.

If by extension, we take a look at the Seventh Art, we note that to date no exhibition at the Cinémathèque française has been dedicated to a female filmmaker. According to a 2017 report by the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC), only 20% of women make feature films and only 28% of CNC revenue advances are for projects led by women.

Imbalance between women and men artists in England and Germany

According to figures compiled by the Guardian in 2017, over the past decade, the majority of shows in the big galleries in London were dedicated to male artists: 83% of Lisson Gallery solo shows, 71% of Hauser and Wirth, 88% of Gagosian and 76% of White Cube. According to statistics collected by the Great East London Art Audit in 2012-2013, of the 134 commercial galleries in London, which represented 3163 artists, only 31% of the artists presented were women. At the Frieze Art Fair 2012 in London, of the 3441 artists represented in the 135 galleries, 27.5% were women. In 2017, the Frieze Art Fair recognized this need for rebalancing and presented special sections devoted to women, one of which was particularly dedicated to emerging women artists. In Germany, based on Berlin Institute for Strategy

Development (IFSE)'s survey, we also note that of 700 contemporary art galleries, representing over 11,000 artists, only 25% of all represented artists in German galleries were female; 75 % male.

Jennifer Thatcher, an art professional in London, reported figures from the Higher Education Statistic Agency indicating that women accounted for 61.7% of undergraduate art students graduating for 2011-2012. At the Berlin University of the Arts, 58% of all graduates in 2011 were female; at the Academy of Fine and Applied Arts Berlin-Weißensee (KHB) it was even higher: 63.8 %.

The imbalance exists everywhere and not just in the enormous gaps that are evident in the collections of publicly funded institutions. It is also perpetuated by some of the biggest commercial galleries that operate in the UK and internationally. Frances Morris (Head of Collections, International Art, Tate Modern) considers that: To focus too heavily on statistics leads to miss a crucial point: "it's not just about volume, it's really about demonstrating that work by women is just as good. We need to create some kind of a network; we need to know what each other is doing and reflect on what that means ». According to Artfinder, an online company for 9,000 independent artists, « women consistently outsell their male counterparts”, reported the Guardian, and they collect the most popular sales. For every £ million For every £1m worth of art made by men, women sell £ 1,16 million.

"Valeria Napoleone, a collector of contemporary art in England, explained: " Time is the factor that is most valued by the art market: speed. Women tend to work at a different pace. Women suffer from a lack of time being available to them in a system in which motherhood and career continue to be treated as mutually exclusive“. Art collectors have an important role to play in helping to deconstruct the existing western power structures: "The collector absolutely has a lot of power. If collectors start buying the work of women artists and supporting them, and if new art buyers start looking at work by women, things would change. It's supply and demand. The collectors look at museum exhibitions; if they see an artist in a show they think, I'll start buying it. And then the galleries follow as well ».

Same gender imbalance across the Asian art world

The "#MeToo" movement does exist in Asia but the battle for equal rights of women artists remains nascent, in China for example. A survey of The Art Newspaper of exhibitions in Hong Kong in late March 2018, reported 144 male artists showing compared with 51 women and a transgender artist. The 'Guerrilla Girls' showed their gender survey of the last year's edition of Art Basel Hong Kong. It concludes that 76% of total artists shown at the fair were men, 37% of galleries showed no women and 29% had only one female artist. The art scene in most Southeast Asian countries is thus still men-dominated, "which is probably statistically still the case all over Asia," explains Wenny Teo, lecturer in modern and contemporary Asian art at the Courtauld Institute in London, "but the situation is improving."

Contemporary art, a male world in China

As Chinese contemporary art is strongly progressing around the world, what is the place of women artists in China? If we look at the Hurun Art List of the first 100 Chinese artists, we see that women represented only 10% of this ranking during the last decade. In 2017, only four women artists were among the top 100 Chinese artists: Chen Peiqiu, 95 years old, Xu Lele, 62, Lou Zhenggang, 50, Yan Ping, 61 years old.

Women, however, work on various topics, innovative in their visual form, and integrated into the art market around the world. But criticism in China is largely controlled by men and the judgment on the value of art created by women is still largely in the hands of men. Even favourites such as Cao Fei and Yin Xiuzhen get fewer solo shows at museums than male artists. “While China’s rising younger generation evidences more balance, feminism and women’s rights remain almost as taboo in the art world as in the larger polity”, reported TheArtnewspaper in March 2018. Wenny Teo, a lecturer in Modern and contemporary Asian art at the Courtauld Institute in London, explained that now: “Women are more willing to directly engage with questions of gender and sexuality, and this might also have to do with social media bringing debates over such issues to the wider public sphere”.

As to video artist and photographer Cui Xiuwen, he told Asian Art in 2017: « I consider myself as an artist, I never think I am a Chinese artist or a female artist. You feel equal in myself. There are not so many female artists in China ... because you are under pressure to look after the family. It is really hard to hang on and reach to the top”. The painter artist Cui Jie confirmed: “it is very hard to break out of the dominated man’s world. The most difficult thing for female artists is you have to think about if you want to have a child. Because for two years you really cannot do anything. And missing two years is a long time for an artist. But I am not thinking about starting a family ». « Male artists have been dominating the art market in general and not only in China. I think that there is in fact more female artists than male artists in Chinese art world nowadays, especially among the artists of the younger generation,” explained the young artist Yuanyuan Yang to Art Curate in 2014. “In my opinion, male and female artists play equal roles in China. I am sure there will be more young people involving themselves in the creative industries; however, contemporary art has only existed in China for a short period of time. What I hope is to have more art institutes, bookstores and galleries appearing in our contemporary scene”, she added.

“When the society allows women to think more freely we will possibly have more contemporary female artists. The Chinese society is still very traditional and only beginning to appreciate contemporary art now. In the past year, seven out of ten openings our gallery had were actually exhibiting work by female artists”, Jacqueline Liu, a gallery assistant in Beijing, concluded.

A slightly better position for female artists in South Korea

“In Korea—“perhaps surprisingly” given its more traditional Confucian-Christian society—“the arts industry has long been dominated by women—many of the curators, dealers and gallerists are female”, Bo Young Song, the managing director of Seoul’s Kukje Gallery explained to TheArtnewspaper. “However, it hasn’t been very long since female artists began receiving attention for their work and contribution to Korean art history.” She cited Wook-kyung Choi (1940-85) whose “status as a female artist and [independent] practice kept her largely overshadowed by her male Korean contemporaries”. The historical significance of her work is being examined only now, along with those of other acclaimed female contemporary artists. Wenny Teo, added: “In Korea, figures like Lee Bul, born in the early 1960s—or the ‘386 generation’—were very active politically, and engaged with feminist thinking and practice.”

Under representation of female artists compared to male artists in Indonesia

Early 2018, during an exhibition in Jakarta which presented the works of 6 Indonesian female artists, renowned internationally – linked with the commemoration of the Indonesia national heroine Kartini – one of them Ines Katamso, explained that her works were not directly related to Kartini, but they echo the feminist pioneer's tireless effort to bring gender equality to Indonesia. "Kartini is a feminist symbol. We are here to continue her work in empowering women, this time through art," Katamso said. "There are a lot of great female artists in Indonesia, but we are still underrepresented compared to our male colleagues," Ines said. Ines Katamso' works at the exhibition were grouped under the title, "Somatization" and represented the anxiety of female artists in the art industry.

Female artists, less recognized than men in India

In India, "men are seen professionals from the moment they start working as artists. Women need to prove their skills because they are seen as having other competing priorities - children, the family -. A gallery thinks before investing in a woman artist: how seriously does this woman take his art? Will it last? » says Anjali Purohit, an Indian artist based in Mumbai. Female artists accounted for only 14.8% of the 303 Indian artists on the art market in 2016. According to Artery India report, there were only 23 female artists compared to 153 male artists so-called "modern". In contemporary art, their number was higher with 55 female artists for 148 men, featuring artists like Bharti Kher, Anju Dodiya, Shilpa Gupta, Reena Saini-Kallat and Mithu Sen among others. Among Indian artists, some women are often the most innovative and they are also involved, exploring a wide range of themes ranging from identity, tradition, history, politics, and contemporary culture.

After the Hungarian-Indian painter Amrita Sher-Gil, "one of the greatest avant-garde female artists of the early twentieth century" and "pioneer" in modern Indian art, many women emerged on the Indian art scene in the 1970s and 1980s. Nalini Malani, Sheela Gowda and Bharti Kher began to address the issues of gender and tradition in Indian society in their work. Shilpa Gupta, Mithu Sen, Tejal Shah, Gill Gauri, Sureka continued in this process of reinvention of the image of Indian women and criticism of social or religious discriminations. "Pricing is only one way to look at differences between the sexes in the arts, here and elsewhere", Anjali Purohit explained. "The difference in pricing is not a conscious gender divide," said the art critic Deepanjana Pal, who is based in Mumbai. "Despite the fact that we have so many women gallerists and artists, the ones who are taken more seriously are the men. As a society, we take women less seriously. When you look at artist couples — Atul and Anju Dodiya, Bharti Kher and Subodh Gupta — both might be taken equally seriously by critics, but for a long time, the pricing was completely different. It's an unconscious bias."

In 2010, things appeared to change. "Wish Dream," a multipaneled canvas by Arpita Singh, was sold at the Saffronart auction for \$2.24 million — the highest price ever achieved for a work by an Indian woman at auction. That same year, a sculpture of Bharti Kher, a life-size lying elephant, covered with thousands of bindis, was sold at Sotheby's in London for a record \$ 1.5 million. The artist was ranked 9th on a list of the 10 best-selling artists in India and became the most highly rated Indian artist in the world. In 2016, 8 women's works were in the top 100 prizes between \$ 375,000 (Rs. 1.11 crores) and \$ 2.6 million (Rs 10.56 crores).

Women, more managers than artists in the field of art

According to statistics from the French Ministry of Culture and Communication, as of 1 January 2015, there were 31% women at the head of a "museum" type establishment, 41% at the head of a national museum, 61% of women directors of art centers. Suzanne Pagé directed the Museum of Modern Art of Paris from 1988 to 2006, then she was an artistic Director of the Louis Vuitton Foundation until 2016. Former director of the office of the French president François Hollande, Sylvie Hubac was appointed director of the RMN- Grand Palais in Paris in January 2016. Jennifer Flay has been the director of FIAC (International Fair of Contemporary Art) since 2003. In the United States, Kathy Halbreich was director Assistant to the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York from 2008 to 2017. In early 2017, Maria Balshaw became the first female director of The Tate Art museums & galleries, in England, while Frances Morris was appointed director of The Tate Modern in 2015. In London, there is a growing number of women exhibition curators, gallery owners and museum directors. The major galleries - The Whitechapel Gallery, The Camden Arts Center, The South London Gallery, The Serpentine Gallery, The Chisenhale Gallery - are run by women. The art world in India also welcomes women as gallery owners, art fund managers, curators and auction house managers. A private museum of modern and contemporary art, the Kiran Nadar Museum, was also established in New Delhi, on the initiative of Kiran Shiv Nadar, a collector woman, in January 2010.

So why do not women artists have a more important position on the art market in the 21st century? Why do their works remain undervalued? An exception, in May 2017, the Indonesian artist Christine Ay Tjoe obtained a small victory with her work "Small Flies and Other Wings", sold at Phillips HK 1,5 million \$, which exceeded 10 times its estimated value. Consequently she beat the record of her male compatriot, I Nyoman Masriadi. In 2014, in the United States, the American Georgia O'Keeffe obtained the highest price reached in public auction by a work signed by a woman, 44,4 millions \$. 'Spider' by Louise Bourgeois was sold for 10,7 millions \$ in 2011.

However, if in the last four or five years, some female artists began to approach the prices of their male counterparts, there is still a significant gap between the two sexes in the art world. If the price imbalance should equalize, how long will it take?

The question therefore remains: why do we see the work of a woman artist differently from that of a male artist? Why gender is still taken into account today when women are addressing a wide variety of topics without gender qualification? They also use all sorts of media and current techniques such as the Indian videographer Nalini Malani, the Chinese digital animator Bu Hua, they realize spectacular installations such as the Korean Lee Bul or hallucinatory paintings like the Japanese Yayoi Kusama, precursor of popart. So how to change the perceptions of art professionals about the work of women artists?

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