

**FEMINIST  
PERSPECTIVES  
IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS  
AND THEORIES OF ART**

**III. EDITION**

2014

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Title

**RECOGNISING WOMEN ARTISTS:  
REFLECTIONS ON SYMBOLIC  
TRANSMISSION**



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To recognise an artist is to recognise the artist's value. Not only their commercial value or the validity of their artistic practice, as we say today, but their intrinsic value: their creative potential, their identity as an artist. In this sphere, women have suffered — and still suffer — an almost ontological devaluation stemming from the conflict between creation and procreation that precedes the sexual division of labour. To justify compulsory maternity for the survival of the species, Judeo-Christian culture has questioned the creative capacity of women to the point that this doubt has become the basis of the professional organization of artistic activity.

For me, the question is not so much why this culture has emanated a fundamental doubt regarding the female creative genius, but how this doubt has structured the professional lives of female artists. Since the Middle Ages, 'artistic power' has organized the forms of creation and the circulation of artwork based on a double conception of artistic gifting.

## 1. The gift comes from the father

Creative talent is transmitted genetically from the father. The professional translation of this concept is the family workshop, run almost exclusively by a maestro within a patriarchal context in which the father holds all the rights over his children. The family workshop is integral to the guild system of the master painters, which in France corresponded to the *Académie de Saint-Luc*, (the Guild of Saint Luke). Daughters with talent were also allowed to produce.

Belonging to the guild was necessary if one wanted to make a living from this profession, as it gave artists the right to sell their work. In the seventeenth century, painters were also art dealers and at times engravers or even creditors, as in the case of the father of Louise Moillon. A painter was equivalent to an artisan. In Paris, they were organized into a Community of Master Painters and Sculptors, with statutes dating back to the Middle Ages. With the formation of the Royal Academies, the association took the name *Académie de Saint-Luc*.

Female artists were not from the nobility, as might be assumed, but from the artisan bourgeoisie, which was organized under the guild system. They were inserted into an economic system governed by its own laws of profitability and quality work. This closed and essentially masculine world of the guilds constituted a real obstacle for women, who were dominated by the father figure, the system, and money. Until the eighteenth century, women could not become masters unless they were widows, which was mainly the case with women artisans.

Given that power was in the hands of the father of the family, female filiation was completely hidden. The guild system, based on control of the profession by its members (a painter had no right to sell his work if he did not belong to a guild), reinforced patriarchy and privileged paternal filiation. It also explains why the great women artists of the Ancien Régime were generally the daughters of a father who was a painter: Lavinia Fontana, Artemisia Gentileschi, Louise Moillon, Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, Rosa Bonheur...

In the nineteenth century, the system became matrimonial; they were the wives of painters.

## 2. The gift comes from above

The second explanation of the origin of the creative gift came to us through the ideology of the divine right of rulers. Inspiration comes from above, from God, who does not choose the sex or social origin of the persons on whom such grace is bestowed. From this point of view, women could not be barred from admission into the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, which was founded by Cardinal Mazarin in 1648. Through the pressure applied by Colbert, it began admitting women in 1663 and had fifteen women members before it was dissolved in 1793 as a result of the French Revolution.

Here, we enter the territory of value judgements, exceptional models, and 'excellence': a concept that arose from the divine right of kings founded on the regime of privileges, religion, and the double hierarchy of the three estates that underpinned society (nobility, clergy, and commoners) and that of the sexes. Given the 'mercenary' nature of the master painters throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a new hierarchy of values based on 'excellence' took hold.



Women were admitted into the Academy, but in restricted numbers. On at least two occasions in its history (1663 and 1791), the academic authorities decided to establish a quota of four women. They were not allowed to study nudes, to teach, or to participate in anything related to academic authority (Bonnet, 2004). Threatened by female competition, the academic powers restricted it *a priori*, depriving women of the opportunity to demonstrate that they were as talented as men, or even more so.

Soon after the fall of the monarchy, the notion of an artistic elite endowed with the divine *genius* also began to wane. It was dismantled in the nineteenth century, with the appearance of impressionism and the struggle against rigid academic models. Its end had been delayed by the revolutionaries who, under pressure from the economic crisis and market changes, redefined the notion of 'genius'. Since it had become necessary to develop a degree of originality in order to stand out from the rest, it also became necessary to re-define the selection criteria.

The notion of 'genius' made it possible to again stack the deck in favour of men. In the Ancien Régime, *genius* was a divinity, a grace, an inspiration from above. We see this reflected in the numerous portraits of poets and musicians with their eyes raised to the heavens. That is how Fragonard painted Diderot (Musée du Louvre); that is how Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun portrays the musician in her *Portrait of Giovanni Paisiello* (1791, Versailles). *Genius* can be poured into anyone, regardless of sex.

After the French Revolution, *genius* became a fact of nature, a component of virility that materialized in a State institution, the *Institut de France*. Its mission was to 'establish the most beautiful conceptions of the human spirit in order to guide the flight of *genius* toward the most useful and secure goal' (Franqueville, 1895: 128). Allegories mark this displacement as the *Genius of the Arts* begins to be personified by young men floating in space (see for example, Jean-Baptiste Regnault, *The Genius of France between Freedom and Death*, 1795), whereas in prior centuries the allegories of Painting were personified by women painting. I have studied this very important moment in history when women artists became aware of their own value and abandoned allegory for self-portrait, pallet and brushes in hand (see for example, Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun, *Self-portrait in a Straw Hat*, 1782) (Bonnet, 2002: 140-167). Another example of the confusion between allegory and portrait are works representing two women embracing, which were really an allegory of Painting and Sculpture captured in a moment of harmony. The same occurs with Peace.

With these examples of the allegories, we see how value systems are structured around dominant ideas that have been decoupled from the collective sub-conscious. Allegory is the opposite of symbolism, which, in order to operate assumes a relationship with the invisible and the sub-conscious. This passage from the *Pictura* to masculine personifications of the *Genius of the Arts* reveals the degree to which the revolutionaries distanced themselves from the feminine in order to make the transition from a divine-right monarchy to a Republic based on the Rights of Man and the citizen.

Actually, if women were excluded from the new regime of the arts, it was not for lack of *genius*; it was because they did not vote. The displacement of the political to the symbolic went almost unnoticed, though the result is there, with its dramatic consequences for the artistic expression of women. By depriving them of any other public space in the City besides the *salon*, they were relegated to the imitation of masculine models and a situation of economic, political and symbolic dependence on virile power.

None of this stopped 'divine inspiration' from building the twentieth-century imaginary, as we see in the photo of Séraphine de Senlis taken by Anne-Marie Uhde. There, the artist, a former servant of the Senlis bourgeoisie, poses with palette in hand before one of her large canvases in 1924, with her eyes turned upward and head tilted toward heaven, attentive to celestial voices (Cloarec, 2008; Bonnet, 2008c).



### 3. Inspiration comes from the muse

With nineteenth-century romanticism, the third conception of artistic inspiration was imposed: the muse, the inspiring woman, that which was repressed in the French Revolution. Expel the feminine from the public square, and she will return to torment the dreams of the poets.

This conception is typical of the organization of social space established by the Civil Code of Napoleon I. It marked the transition from the societal organization of the Ancien Régime, with its three estates — nobility, clergy, commoners — to a society divided into two sexes, which informed the opposition between two classes: bourgeoisie and proletariat. For women, home and family; for men, the City. In response to this separation between the sexes, a masculine imaginary was developed in which the woman was both the missing element and the inspiration. By woman, I mean the feminine: we should be precise here because today we have more of a tendency to see the muse as an image of the feminine in mankind. This requires a work of inner recognition of both masculine and feminine components, as C.G. Jung demonstrated with his concepts of *anima* and *animus*. For women, however, this did not lead to an acknowledgement of their masculine dimension. Instead, fear of the ‘virilization of women’ blocked it as the feminine was devalued and female creators were subjected to a virile model, which took the incarnation of the Genius of the Arts and the model of excellence to new heights.

Why are there no man-muses? Because masculine symbolic domination governs society, so there is no lack of the masculine. In fact, there is an all-powerful, omnipresent, excess of it. The creator god is laicized while women are hindered from developing an active, different, and plural feminine. Men continue to be the bosses, in whose shadows women express themselves. He is the one who shows the way and foresees the future. Women cannot, therefore, escape from the host of problems arising from imitating models and only have a right to express themselves within those models.

### 4. ‘Effluences’ and divine vapour

This concept of the poet and his muse is an update of a much older concept from Antiquity. In his treatise *On the Sublime* the rhetor Longinus gives us the example of the inspired words of the Pythia. Evoking the path that leads to the Sublime, his words refer to the imitation/emulation of the great writers and poets of the past:

For many men are carried away by the spirit of others as if inspired, just as it is related of the Pythian priestess when she approaches the tripod, where there is a rift in the ground which (they say) exhales divine vapour. By heavenly power thus communicated she is impregnated and straightway delivers oracles in virtue of the afflatus. (Longinus, 1993: 26 / trans. 2014: 35).

It should not surprise us that Longinus equates ‘divine vapour’ with ‘effluences’. It is the vapour, the breath, that impregnates the prophetess, enabling her to speak under divine inspiration: that is, from a source other than ‘I’. In that era, humans did not believe themselves to be gods and distrusted anything disproportionate that might lead to *hubris*, or excess. We are in the realm of the *pneumatic*, of fecundation by the Spirit, an ancient dimension of the Sublime that we find again in Mary’s greeting to Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke.

I cite these examples of fecundation by the Spirit because they have not been developed by our cultures. Quite the opposite, they have been reduced to their least interesting aspect, which relegates women to the role of the sacred Pythia and the imitation of male models. They are ‘penetrated’ by the greatness of others, as a woman is impregnated. Observe that the divine vapour is exhaled from a crack in the earth. Here we find a pretty way of evoking the fault line through which creative energy emerges. A fault line in the symbolic feminine (the earth), and pre-existent to birth after impregnation by the divine vapour. If the earth, the female body, the woman subject, were not in a state of openness, could it give birth?



## 5. Vanguardism, or the re-modelling of masculine hegemony

Until the twentieth century, all models of excellence were conceived by men, whether in a religious framework involving the sanctification of the Creator (let us not forget that St. Luke is the patron of painters) or in an academic framework with the creation of the notions of the artist — as opposed to the artisan — and the masterpiece: a rare object that justifies its price and the genius of its ‘maker’.

Women who began to break out of their aesthetic frames in the early twentieth century — Sonia Delaunay inventing abstraction, Natalia Goncharova in Russia, or Sophie Taeuber in Switzerland — were literally obliged to contract marriage with male painters. Even with the vanguardists, especially with the vanguardists, matrimony became the preferred form of artistic legitimacy.

One might have thought that vanguardism would abandon the masculine-feminine rift to pursue the dynamic impulse of George Sand, who proclaimed in one of her novels that ‘genius has no sex’. Quite the opposite occurred under the post-mortem authority of Duchamp, who systematized the position of the poet and his muse in his famous maxim: ‘arrhe is to art as shitte is to shit grammatically: the arrhe of painting is feminine in gender’ (Duchamp, 1975: 37).

If painting is feminine in gender, the painter is necessarily masculine. The urinal requires it! Denouncing the market strategies at work in the world of art, in museums and galleries, leads us to a reaffirmation of the masculine creator subject who can do anything, and under the benevolent auspices of vanguardism. The question of gender is therefore effectively interwoven into that of vanguardism. A century after Duchamp’s readymades, we can ask ourselves: how is it that female artistic practice is so seldom and so poorly recognized? Is it because it was hidden by vanguard ideology? Is it because vanguardism had to rely on and reinforce virile supremacy in order to establish itself as the new artistic elite? Whatever the reason, the deeper question is understanding how men have managed to make women believe for so long that they were not creators but procreators who brought children into the world.

## 6. The Fight for Recognition

For many years now, we have been immersed in a new historical phase that I would call the ‘fight for recognition’. This phase emerged in the late nineteenth century, when women began to form associations to demand their rights, including the right to create. The founding of the Union of Women Painters and Sculptors in 1881 and the early writings of Marie Bashkirtseff mark the beginning of the struggle of modernity for a society in which both sexes have an equal place. Throughout the twentieth century, groups of women artists such as *Femmes Artistes Modernes* (F.A.M.) in the 1930s, *Spirale* in the 1970s — which I was a member of — and groups formed in the wake of the women’s liberation movement have carried on this struggle for the recognition of female art practice (Bonnet, 2006).

However, in recent years, the conditions of the fight for recognition have changed. Now, the struggle involves not only recognition of women by men, but also by other women. Historically, this new element has never before appeared as such. It arises from the fact that once equality between the sexes was legally solved (or in the process) in the West, we moved on to another, equally important problem of affirming female individuality in the City through the construction of new references.

The struggle for recognition has thus shifted and now takes place among women. We have realized that, in order to develop ourselves, we had to be recognized by women also; in other words, to be inscribed within symbolic female filiation. If we maintain paternal filiation as our only reference, we remain prisoners of the struggle for recognition in which one is the other, and there is no more than one reference. In mutuality, or what the philosopher Paul Ricoeur expressed as mutual recognition, one does not become the other. Maintaining a dual relationship with both makes it possible to escape from the equality-identity trap in which women have been enclosed. Ricoeur cites the example of the genealogical principle as the invariant of all filiation invariants.



All ranks are at once instituted and instituting, since none are founding; and all lineages are already double, paternal and maternal. The feminine and the masculine are already there. This double condition, relative to ranks and lineages, is sufficient to instil a relation of debt in ascending order, and of inheritance in descending order (Ricoeur, 2004: 286 / trans. 2006: 248 note 6).

We can see new perspectives opening with this thought on the invariant.

The invariant of our culture is no longer domination of the feminine by the masculine, as Françoise Héritier believes; it is rather the genealogical principle that situates us in a double lineage in which no one is the founder. This reflection is valid both for politics and art. By re-introducing female filiation into the genesis of artistic practice, we depart from the traditional vision of art production in which the female is the receptacle of male genius — of sperm, the procreative force of the Father — following an etymological association between ‘procreate’ and ‘genius’ in the word *gignere*. This linkage has given rise to the words ‘genesis’ and ‘generation’, making the connection undeniable.

## 7. Let's go deeper

The road to recognition begins with a woman identifying herself as an artist, and this identification depends on an identity quest that is present in every activity. It is about knowing her talent and testing it in an ‘I can’ that materializes in the City. However, with the status of women artists one realises that this does not suffice. To be truly recognized, it is necessary that the other accept her as an artist. We have seen that this is one of the main problems women have encountered throughout history, because they are defined first and foremost as procreators. Doubts regarding their creative capacity are inscribed in dominant symbolic thought. Neither diplomas, nor the art market, nor any other current form of recognition overcome this doubt.

The aesthetic-economic context of the struggle for recognition is not at all what it was at the end of the nineteenth century. The notion of the masterpiece has disappeared. Industrialization brought on the manufacture of numerous objects and has destabilized the notion of an artistic object, along with the status of the artist. We can talk about artists without art, while certain practices such as collages, installations, or land art use what is discarded by the consumer society — perishable by definition — and work with what is ephemeral. The artist is no longer the one in search of beauty, who uses light to look for what is invisible and create a ‘masterpiece’. The artist is the one who breaks ties with the Father, but does not necessarily find maternal filiation.

This explains why the doubt about the creative capacity of women has survived all the political, economic, and social convulsions, and has infused the struggle of women for recognition with its tragic, interminable character.

Equality policies concerning the formation of artists of both sexes have little impact on the value system favoured by institutions and the international market. Men still dominate the artistic scene, even when 60 per cent of art students are women. Similarly, we should note that knowledge of history is insufficient as a basis for recognizing the artistic practice of women. Past practices have disappeared, but their re-discovery has not brought about a new perspective on the presence of women in art history.

For example, the researcher Jean-Michel Chazine has demonstrated that the hand stencils found in Borneo were women's hands (Chazine, 2006). However, pre-historians continue to speak of the ‘masters’ of Lascaux, without providing any proof that these cave paintings were done by one or several men.

Another researcher, LeRoy McDermott from the United States, has demonstrated that the Aurignacian Venuses of the Upper Paleolithic period, such as the Venus of Willendorf (-2800 / -2500 B.C.E.) and the Venus of Lespugue (-2500 / -1800 B.C.E.), were self-portraits of pregnant women, confirming thereby the presence of women in the very origins of art (Bonnet, 2004:10). Here also, discussion is denied for the hypothesis that questions the creative supremacy of men, consolidated as it is by two centuries of art history written in the masculine voice. Likewise, the nineteenth-century discovery of the tomb of a woman painter who would have worked in the Gallo-Roman



era (third century A.D.) in Fontenay-le-Comte (Vendée), testifies to the importance of this practice in France. Why have the historians silenced this discovery? Was it for lack of security that the objects found in the tomb disappeared into the market or were 'kept in safe hands'? Was it for lack of an appropriate site appraisal? More than 150 years later, the only testimony of the discovery is an 1850 article in *L'Illustration*. This, however, does not stop researchers from writing articles on Gallo-Roman painting instruments based on the drawings published there, though omitting that their source was a female artist (Bonnet, 2008b: 21-22).

## 8. Feminism is insufficient to fight against institutional intransigence

Feminism is insufficient to change the dominant perspective regarding what women create. Without a doubt, the women's liberation movement of the 1970s opened the doors for the rebellious side of femininity and raised up vocational historians. However, the gender theory so complacently prevalent in universities and international institutions today neutralizes the new balance of power between men and women with the belief that they have resolved the problem of discrimination by annulling sexual bipolarity. According to gender theory, discrimination corresponds to the sociological and political construction of sexual norms. Art, however, is precisely the space in which the collective imaginary is liberated from social conditioning through sub-conscious dynamics characterized by multiple meanings in the life of the image. Genders are not codified in the sub-conscious, and male-ness can be equally represented by a banana, a father, a lion, or a rock. We could even add that bisexuality is constitutive to every human being and that male domination rests on a devaluation of the female sex that makes it possible to establish a power structure, a social order, a symbolic system, for those who care very little how male and female genders are defined. The genders — sociological data — should not be confused with symbols, which visibly and invisibly take root in the life of the sub-conscious. All of us, men and women, are carriers of the universal, but patriarchy can be credited with having convinced women that their universal dimension is located in male-ness, rather than in their awareness as creator- subjects.

Research about the past, the denouncement of discrimination, the questioning of social norms and systems of excellence are insufficient to sustain the struggle for recognition. What then is needed to lay the foundations of recognition for women artists?

I would say that we lack symbolic or even sacred anchors, or to borrow from Longinus, reflection on the sublime. The sublime, he wrote, is that 'which please all and always. [...] when men of different pursuits, lives, ambitions, ages, languages, hold identical views on one and the same subject' (Longinus, 1993: 62 / trans. 2014: 16-17). Etymologically, sublime means 'that which is above the limit' — of sexes, genders, countries, the 'I', and the other.

The artistic practice of women is not anchored in a symbolic transcendentalism and this debilitates the feminist critique considerably, reducing it to the denouncement of discrimination or the defence of a critical art most akin to sociology.

The transcendental surpasses the social being, above and below. We are not the only products of social conditioning. Art itself is rooted in the sub-conscious, the emotional, physical, and even deeper sphere of core impulse, where ideology has not penetrated. Artistic forms are historically determined and regulate what we call Art History; but the primal energy by which it exceeds time, fashion, and models operates outside of history, proving that art does not progress. A Romanesque church can move us as much as a horse painted on a cave wall or a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe. That is the greatness of art and its capacity to link human beings beyond time and space through our aesthetic predisposition.



## 9. The making of a new female public

In recent years, the recognition of Camille Claudel has changed the terms of the struggle of women artists for recognition.

In its negative aspect, it has given credence to female creative genius touching on madness, reclusion, and male persecution, while leaving to one side the mother-daughter relationship that did so much damage. Camille Claudel was cut off from her maternal lineage. It is rather interesting to note that her mother's surname was Cerveau (meaning 'brain') and that Camille was born the same day as her mother: December 8, the Day of the Immaculate Conception. Camille stood apart from the female sculptors of her time, who were irrelevant to men anyway, and from the movement to affirm women in art that emerged during the Third Republic.

In its positive aspect, the passion for the work of Camille Claudel testifies to the enormous work that has been done regarding the value of women's art in the collective conscience. Today, the level of indignation is such that it has created a shield, protecting other women from same fate. However, with Séraphine de Senlis — who has been labelled as a primitive painter, who also died in an asylum, in this instance near Senlis in 1943 — we see that 'national' recognition plays favourites. In the eyes of the dominant class, this housemaid who emerged as a great artist, and who sang hymns at night to avoid the bourgeois women of Senlis, would for a long time continue to be someone that needed locking up.

However, this did not impede the constitution of a female public capable of imposing its tastes and playing its role in the dynamics governing the recognition of women artists.

For example, the work of Louise Bourgeois would probably not have emerged from the shadows without the attention it received from North American feminists in the 1970s. These two female artists, who are now known the world over, have done essentially autobiographic work in which many women see themselves. That is where the shift in the balance of power became perceptible. Women need a visual expression of their life experience. This is an undeniable achievement of the twentieth century. Another point of view now exists, that of the collective female experience, which has contributed to the breakdown of the dominant male model: the vision of the cyclops.

## 10. Mutual recognition and symbolic exchange

In his book *The Course of Recognition*, philosopher Paul Ricoeur provides fascinating clues for reflection. For him, it is first of all a journey, or in other words, the 'step from recognition-identification, in which the subject of thought aspires to domination of the meaning, to mutual recognition, in which the subject places itself under the tutelage of a relationship of reciprocity, passing through recognition of the self in the variety of the capacities that modulate its power to work, its *agency* (Ricoeur, 2004: 359 / trans. 2006: 310).

For mutual recognition to be effective, the recognized subject must recognize this recognition. Then, the struggle for recognition — boundless by definition — can cease. Paul Ricoeur goes on to explain that two modes of recognition currently exist: desire-based and legal.

Desire, which pre-supposes mutual esteem, still largely prescribes the relationships between men and women in the world of art. Through my desire, I recognize the other as having importance, but desire is not inscribed within a specific professional structure. Marriage between artists is its institutionalized form; for many women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we know that it was the privileged path — often the only path — to artistic recognition. One only need look at how the paintings are hung in the National Museum of Modern Art in Beaubourg to be convinced that almost all the women artists who are included in twentieth-century art history were married to artists (except Claude Cahun, but that was another issue). The importance assigned to the representation of Eros by young contemporary female artists demonstrates their acknowledgment that it continues to be a privileged path for accessing recognition by the art institution. The work of Thérèse de Saint-Gelais addresses this topic from the angle of hyper-sexualization in the current production of women artists.





In contrast, the legal mode is sparse when it comes to recognition. It implies entering the world of the contract, where I abandon a part of my power and transfer it to another for the benefit of a contract of mutual recognition. We have already seen the point to which male political power has found this procedure very difficult to execute, given that a vote on parity was required in order to establish a minimum of justice for both sexes in the system of political representation. In art, this type of contract is very difficult to put into practice, except from below, through education. However, when school is over, the market system, globalization, and high-investment technologies underpin recognition in commercial exchanges where ‘what has no price’ — what is non-negotiable — has no symbolic value.

## 11. New mechanisms for symbolic recognition

In light of all this, it is time to think about new mechanisms for symbolic recognition that are not dictated by the general commercialization of exchanges (globalization) and do not rest on the conflictive recognition resulting from the master-slave dialectics on which contemporary feminism has largely based its analysis of male-female domination. It implies a relationship of reciprocity that allows us to step out of the one-sidedness of the institutional relationship that assigns a place to — when it doesn’t instrumentalize — the artist who seeks recognition. Symbolic recognition makes it possible to overcome misogyny, and with it, the commonly accepted disdain for what is feminine. How shall we proceed? Paul Ricoeur contemplates the ceremonial exchange of a gift through the ‘coalition between that which is priceless and the gift’. Though this mindset has not yet caught on, we can always explore it in specific ways, such as by exhibiting the artistic work of women outside the commercial context. To come together to look at it, think about it, appreciate it, assign it value, as we are doing here in Bilbao. To respect the artists and help them follow their own paths apart from trends and career advancement formulas. We can create a kind of inquisitive, adventuresome spirit that seeks them out beyond aesthetic, geographic, sexual, or gender borders. In other words, we can show interest and curiosity about their work.

Though the situation has changed significantly in the last forty years, certain forms of feminine expression are still subjected to censorship by institutions that should instead open themselves to the perspectives of women artists. The example of what happened to the work of Joana Vasconcelos at Versailles in 2012 shows us that the art institution is still largely governed by the symbolic system of male power.

## 12. The Bride by Joana Vasconcelos, too subversive for Versailles.

The Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos, the first woman artist to be invited to install her works in the palace of Versailles, suffered institutional censure for her work *The Bride*. She had to withdraw the installation because it was composed of white tampons in their plastic wrappers. The beauty of the work, constructed in the shape of a chandelier and perfectly harmonious with the Versailles lighting, did not convince the management. The problem was not in the form, but in the materials. ‘Noble’ materials were required in this royal power centre, consecrated as it was to the symbolism of monarchic power: the domination of space in four cardinal directions, the symbolism of power based on Greek mythology through the exaltation of Apollo, the image of the ‘sun king’, the splendour of the paintings, the decoration, the gardens with their fountains affirming dominion over water. In other words, the architecture of Versailles exalts male virility in its ability to control the feminine (Diana and water), space, and transcendence.

Tampons are the specific intrusion of the feminine into this masculine space. However, the censorship was not directed entirely at the material. It attacked the subversive deviation of the tampon in the way it was exhibited: for bringing to light (the chandelier) what is hidden inside women and forms part of their everyday life. This noteworthy symbolic work of Joana Vasconcelos was rejected by the institution.



The work on rebellious femininity that emerged in the women's liberation movements of the 1970s continues to be censored fifty years later. Has the institution been built against rebellious femininity, in its desire to construct forms of transmitting masculine knowledge and power that counter-balance the maternal power of women?

Without a doubt, we must address this matter in the coming years, given that recognition is achieved through assimilation, integration, and the disappearance of the perspectives of women who have been transformed into 'men like everyone else'.



## Iconography

Portrait of Séraphine de Senlis (1864-1942). Photo of Anne-Marie Uhde. Archives of M.-J. Bonnet.

George Sand: "Le génie n'a pas de sexe". Postcard (19<sup>th</sup> cent.). Archives of M.-J. Bonnet

LeRoy McDermott: "Self-Representation in Upper Paleolithic Female Figurines", figs. 5 and 6, in *Current Anthropology*, 1996 (© Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research).

"Description de la Villa et du Tombeau d'une femme artiste gallo-romaine, découverts à Saint-Médard-des-Prés (Vendée)", by M. Benjamin Fillon, *L'Illustration, Journal Universel*, 1850. Archives of M.-J. Bonnet.

Photo of Camille Claudel before the plaster statue of *Perseus and the Gorgon*. Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand, Paris.

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