

Male Artists Upstairs, Females in the Basement

BY NORAH PHILLIPS

Dear Ted,

I've run into you a couple of times and it seems we keep coming back to the same topic. You ask me about my night course, but you just use that as an excuse to tell me that there is no reason for a course on women artists; you say it's sexist. And the other day at the gallery, you said what really bothers you about the gallery is that "it's all women." You meant that the people in charge were all female, and the last two exhibits have been either about a female or hosted by one. (Go back now and you'd be pleased. Mostly male artists upstairs, mostly females in the basement.) And every time we meet, we talk around and around in a diminishing spiral, until one of us says "I'll get you another glass of wine" and the matter rests until the next time. But at least you say what you think, unlike others whose disapproval is silent and impenetrable.

So what I really want to do is explain it all to you. That's not true. What I really want to tell you is that I am angry that you keep saying the same old things, no matter what I say. I would like you to spend the day as a female, just like those people who spend time as a black or a senior citizen and then write an exposé of what it's really like. But of course, this wouldn't work. Biologically, we're still different. Physically, economically, socially, sexually, I am weaker. This is hard to say. Maybe it's difficult for me because I can't fit myself into a nice neat concept to back me up. Feminism is changing from a bad word to just a misunderstood one. And "women's lib" — well, we're both young enough to believe this is a really tacky phrase. Like bell-bottoms, we wouldn't be caught dead near a thing like that. I'd like to have a ready-made label that summarizes what I think, but I haven't found one yet.

Does it matter if I tell you I know in my bones we still live in a male world? That every day, there are ads and jokes and looks and comments that say: A woman is an object. Would you listen if I told you about the lives of female artists, if I described this obstacle race, as Germaine Greer calls it, filled with exclusions and restrictions? Oh, you don't trust historical accounts. But even when I try to describe *my* context, you feel threatened. You think I'm blaming all men, as if there is some conspiracy. Well, it's not a conspiracy. But before we can decide on causes and effects, we have to agree on the reality.

I know, you say you don't feel threatened. You say you believe we're all equal, you have no problem with that. You think females want special treatment, and you don't understand why. I don't want special treatment but I don't want to be treated like everyone else. I want females to be treated fairly and equally. What's really

depressing is that you think this is how it is. But I look at your life, one in which all significant relationships exclude females. I listen to your comments about females, about their bodies, their faces, their clothes, their manners. Do you ever listen to what we say?

So we have to decide: are females different from males, different in thought, word, action, as well as in body? Is it because art history has always been defined from a male perspective? Is it because females were never given the opportunity to practise art? You justify everything you say about art by stating that there is only one standard: beauty. But who defines beauty? Do we each see something completely different when we look at a painting? at anything?

And apart from the way we look at art, do males and females produce different kinds of art? In various articles, I've read about women's art being composed of circles and spirals, rather than arrows and daggers, enclosing, rather than penetrating. But that seems much too neat and simple (although it's true I've already used the spiral motif). I am more inclined to agree that our standards of art are culturally determined, not biologically.

But this is too theoretical for you. Let's take an example. Gregorian chants are things of beauty, we both agree. I keep thinking of this monastery we've both visited. You remember the aesthetic experience of the chants. I remember watching the nun who sat in the front row, imitating all the gestures and words of the monks. I can still picture her in the women's villa; when she has finished making the last meal of the day, she sits down and makes tiny sad-looking dolls and sells them in town. This is her devoted duty. The men make apple cider, wine, cheese, chocolate, shoes, and beautiful music, and bask in the glory of their worship. Gender alone denies the nun this form of worship. Can't you see how the same thing can happen in other spheres?

We've drawn the borders of our argument. You'd like neat, fixed categories to define our disagreement. I read a description of Albertini instructing the artist to use a window frame around his painting, and I can almost see you putting a frame over your thoughts. Mine run in and out of the borders but never quite join at the edges. I would like you to try seeing things my way, or any way that offers a different perspective. It's difficult at first, like writing with your wrong hand.

And that's why I may never send this letter. It's barely legible you'll say, and you just don't have the time to decipher it. Instead, I'll wait for a sign that shows me you've changed your mind.

Yours truly,

Norah