



# A MAGAZINE OF FEMINIST, PROGRESSIVE THINKING

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## OUR GENDERS

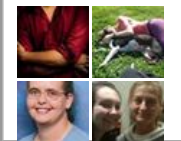
## OUR RIGHTS

In our Summer '09 edition, On The Issues Magazine writers and artists discuss gender norms and differing perspectives of gender identity in **Our Genders, Our Rights**

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## Art World Insiders Struggle to Address Disparity by Linda Stein

Does a female artist who submits work for an exhibition receive the same careful and serious evaluation as her male counterparts? Can it still be true that the gender of an artist comes into play in determining recognition and success?

Unfortunately, research on gender parity, as well as my own interviews, show that the old boys' art network is still very much alive and well.

Statistics tell the story: although the majority of college and graduate art students are now female, as are the gender-neutral slide registries, less than one-third of New York solo exhibitions feature women. And the statistics for top museum exhibits are even more dreadfully one-sided.

What's going on? For women in the visual arts, it's like a physical pain that remains year after year. In order to solve the mystery of why gender disparity continues, I sought out specialists and power-players in the art world for their diagnoses. I found very different degrees of awareness of the problem.

In conducting interviews, I asked male and female experts – writers, curators, reviewers -- if they were aware of the "open secret" of gender bias, if they thought speaking out about it would hurt the cause of women artists, and if they characterized their own collections or focus on art as mostly male-dominated. Off-the-record, at least one art collector described male-dominated collections as "normal" and "hard-to-change." In other cases, commentators confirmed the second-class status of women and seemed inclined to take a step further toward equity, but struggled about how to correct the imbalance. In seeking recommendations for change, I found that the answers could not be easily categorized by gender -- a few of the most adamant whistleblowers are men.

The comments of four interviewees are below: Ben Davis, art critic and editor; Glenn Harper, editor; Gail Levin, art historian and biographer, and Terrie Sultan, museum director.

**BEN DAVIS** is an art critic and the editor of *Artnet Magazine*. His essay, "White Walls, Glass Ceiling" was published in March, 2007 in Artnet and lays bare the grim news that the situation of gender parity might actually be "several steps behind where we were 10 years ago."

In an interview, he said:

"Women artists are shockingly underrepresented in the art world. To my knowledge, nothing has changed in the interim for the better. If anything, the current recession seems likely to strengthen the hold of the more conservative regions of the art market.

"What is striking about critical writing on this topic to date is the lack of curiosity about why this is. A large part of the problem lies with the fact that it is, unfairly, the male collectors and gallerists, who determine what is "hot" in the art world, and they are less inclined to throw their support to women artists and, arguably, less prone to buy overtly "feminine," let alone feminist, work, or take women seriously.

"The struggle to combat the second-class status of woman artists cannot just be fought within the art world, and must link-up with movements outside of it as well. Women are still paid less in general. Women pay more for health care. Women have to deal with a confidence-destroying and corrosive sexism that extends considerably beyond the art gallery. We can and should shame art institutions that have a bad record on gender representation."

**GLENN HARPER** is the editor of *Sculpture magazine*, a program of the *International Sculpture Center*.

"If you look at the pool of curators that are showing up at the helm of the big shows on the biennial circuit and other prominent venues, it's still a largely male domain.

"There seems to be no objective reason for an imbalance in press coverage or exhibitions, since there seems to be no lack of interesting women artists, based on the exhibition announcements and other information that we receive. More and more women are leaders in areas within the field, like public art, installation, etc.

"I don't have a prescription for correcting the injustice or imbalance of the field, in terms of gender. But a reasonable corrective would be for everyone, from gatekeepers to audiences, to keep their eyes (and minds) open. It's a complex situation that all of us need to keep in the forefront of discussions about art and equity. Speaking out is the only way to keep the issue active.

"I don't have a significant art collection, but among the works I own, probably 70 percent are by women.

"I try as an editor to be inclusive, but when I survey the artists we cover in a given year, women are usually a

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The Feminist Mind

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(substantial) minority, though we do occasionally offer an issue that has all women (or almost all women) in the feature section, without remarking on that fact. And when the gender balance tips too far out of alignment, we make an attempt to redress the imbalance. But we are, in fact, driven (in terms of coverage) by the exhibitions in progressive galleries and in nonprofit institutions, so the gender imbalance there affects us (as it affects collectors, viewers, everybody down the line)."

**GAIL LEVIN** is an art historian and biographer of women artists. She has written about [Judy Chicago](#), [Josephine Nivison Hopper](#) (Edward's wife), and is currently "trying to take Lee Krasner out of Jackson Pollock's shadow," she said. A feminist, Levin believes that "institutions, curators, and historians too often erase the contributions of women."

"I have long been aware that women do not have a level playing field in the art world. There are women who function as curators, museum directors, critics and historians who nonetheless do not give female artists equal attention as they do male artists. The reasons for this are historic, but you could sum it up with the fact that women artists, in general, command less money and prestige than their male counterparts. There are, of course, a few token exceptions.

"I believe that biographies of women artists help by informing the reading public about women's struggles in general, as well as about the tenacity and talent of particular artists. Though it is very difficult to make a case for a biography of any living artist, especially a female, biographers should devote more time to writing about the many talented women out there. Some of the prejudice still present in the art world becomes clear with such closely focused studies of individual women artists.

"I know that the proportion of women who receive biographies is much smaller than the men who do. A female editor from a major trade publisher told me years ago that for a biography to be published about a female artist, the subject should either be a victim or the book had better be written as an inspirational tale for other women.

"I have tried to reinscribe the artist, Josephine Nivison Hopper (Edward's wife) into art history, which is difficult since the Whitney Museum discarded most of the work in her bequest of 1968. Telling Hopper's story, without the companion artist who helped make his career possible, seems unjust.

"Though the artist's work (if not lost or destroyed) will eventually determine the success of any artist, a good biography can stimulate the public's interest in an artist and popularize that artist, leading to shows and publications, and more recognition. A good dealer will persuade collectors to invest in the artists that he or she is promoting. A biographer usually comes on the scene after an artist has already been validated, collected and exhibited. Sometimes the biographer can bring a forgotten artist back to public attention and acclaim."

**TERRIE SULTAN** is the director of the [Parrish Museum in Southampton, New York](#). Cognizant of the hurdles facing female artists, she said, "I have to admit I am sometimes at a loss to understand how to improve the situation."

"I think it is important for women--and men--to speak up. Calling attention to discrimination, whether deliberate or not, is essential. Also, we, as women, should continue to take matters into our own hands by being proactive in organizing projects, opening galleries, becoming leaders in the curatorial community.

"My personal collection is equally balanced between men and women. In my curatorial practice I have consistently focused equally on both genders. I won't say it's automatic—I consciously pay attention to my own aesthetic responses to gauge whether or not I am being lazy myself. The Parrish Museum's permanent collection is predominantly male. I would say that historically this happened automatically.

"If female patrons and collectors put more pressure on the museum director to exhibit the work of women, it would not necessarily result in more openness to female artists. I think it would be more effective coming from the ground up—from the curators to the director. I do feel that because I am a woman, I am more sensitive to the fact that there are many very creative woman artists who have made substantial contributions to the advancement of art who have not received the credit they deserve. Throughout my career I have championed these artists by organizing exhibitions, writing publications and making acquisitions."

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*Linda Stein is the [Art Editor](#) of On The Issues Magazine. The concepts of Protection, Peace and Parity have permeated Stein's art, writing and lectures for the last three decades, culminating in *Knights*, her sculptural series of body-as-armor. She references icons from spiritual and pop culture, especially the superhero, Wonder Woman. More about her work and upcoming exhibitions is at [www.lindastein.com](http://www.lindastein.com).*

*Also See: [Breaking Ground on Feminist Art: Elizabeth A. Sackler by Linda Stein](#) in this edition of On The Issues Magazine.*

*See [The Art Perspective](#) in this edition of On The Issues Magazine.*

## Hot Topics

What's concerning us, feminists and progressives? From the front lines to the back burners, our angle on vital matters on our