ESNA Conference 2023: Beyond 'The Obstacle Race' (The Hague, 1-2 Jun 23)

RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague, Jun 1–02, 2023
Deadline: Jan 1, 2023

Rachel Esner

CALL FOR PAPERS.
European Society for Nineteenth-Century Art (ESNA) Conference 2023:
Beyond 'The Obstacle Race'. Women's Role in the History of Nineteenth-Century Art Revisited

Rephrasing John Donne's famous poem, 'No man or woman is an island entire of itself', the 2023 ESNA conference will investigate women's interrelations within the art world and their impact on art objects and art collections.

In recent years – following waves of feminist art history in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s – the interest in women in the art world has broadened from a focus on women artists to encompass their numerous roles in the field, including as collectors, curators and critics. This, in turn, has led to an increased number of initiatives and interventions, among others, through exhibitions, collection presentations, and acquisitions, while also affecting the art market. Although this wide-ranging attention is necessary to correct historic biases and realize a more balanced and inclusive art history, past experience has taught us that once the attention wears off, imbalance recurs. So far, the response to the underrepresentation of women in the art world and art history has mostly been to either isolate them or to add them to existing structures, publications, and institution, and most often to refer to the obstacles they had to overcome (Germaine Greer, The Obstacle Race). This has led to new names, new artworks, new exhibitions, new books, and separate galleries and museums, even though, from the 1970s on, various scholars have argued that the entire art historical system needs to be reconsidered.

Although we realize that for a woman in the nineteenth-century art world there were indeed many obstacles to be overcome, this conference will focus instead on the choices and possibilities women did have. Women do not live in a separate female universe, nor do they necessarily have many characteristics in common, apart from their sex. If we have learned anything in our ongoing quest for an inclusive society, it is that people live in relation to each other and create a world together. We are all individuals, defined not by a singular identity but by manifold, intersecting, and evolving features and practices. Only by studying the diverse ways in which women took up different roles in relation to others is it possible to understand not only historic and present realities, but also the dynamics of art (history). By fully taking various factors into account in our thinking about our field, by enlarging the concepts and scope of our research and exhibition practices, female actors will become a self-evident and permanent part of history.

The 2023 ESNA conference will thus take a holistic and systemic approach to women's roles in art during the nineteenth century. We invite papers which explicitly present women makers, models, critics, dealers, museum professionals, collectors, and other mediators in relation to their historical context and within the broader art world. How did women work together with others, which networks and strategies did they use, run into, or create? And how did the situation evolve over the course of the nineteenth century?

Suggested topics include, but are not limited to:
- Creation and collaboration in mixed or same-sex studios, networks and artists' unions: partnerships/ collaborations between members of an artist-family, (married) couples, artist-model, artist--colleague, artist-teacher, artist-agent, artist-critic, artist-patron, collector-museum, etc.
How did collaboration aid women's activities within the art world? Which strategies did they employ to create a network and to construct a space for themselves?
- Manifestation and reception: the effectiveness and perception of women-only exhibitions or exhibiting, the stance and profiling of male and female critics towards female actors in the art world, professional agency versus the position or perception as an amateur.
Has historiography treated women-only initiatives differently? How were they considered by women artists themselves, and by male and female critics? How are women categorized, what language/terminology is used and by whom, and how does this criticism evolve in time and place? Are there differences between male and female critics?
- Sabotage and intimidation by male or female colleagues, family members, teachers, people in dominant positions, jury members, institutions, etc. in language or deed.
How was this dealt with? Can it be used to one's advantage?
- Strategies and choices: to obtain training, study and exhibiting opportunities or attention as a woman.
What role did femininity play? Was it better to play off one's femininity or to conceal it (cross--dressing, male pseudonyms) and act as 'one of the boys'? How was the 'master's influence' considered differently for women? To what degree was art in museums, galleries, and magazines accessible to women?
- Matronage and patronage: the role of female or male collectors, donors, patrons of female (or male) artists.
Is there a difference between collecting practices by men or women? Did they choose other kinds of objects and how did they qualify them? Is there a difference in their relation to the artist? Did they present their collectibles in another way? What is the significance of the term 'collector' for women? How did they present themselves and were they as visible?
- Methodology and sources: methodological challenges, lacunae and invisibility within archives, finding and interpreting 'other' sources, while formulating new questions and new perspectives.
How to avoid the traditional focus on "the obstacle race" and instead focus on the possibilities women created for themselves? How do we secure a more balanced and inclusive art history and sustainable visibility for women in the art world?

Please send your abstract (max. 200 words) and biography (150 words) by January 1, 2023 to esnaonline@hotmail.com
The scientific committee will answer all applicants by January 31, 2023.

Scientific committee:

Beatrice von Bormann (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam)
Maite van Dijk (ESNA: Museum More, Gorssel)
Rachel Esner (ESNA; University of Amsterdam)
Stefan Huygebaert (ESNA; Mu.ZEE, Oostende; Ghent University)
Mayken Jonkman (ESNA; RKD- Netherlandish Institute for Art History; Free University, Amsterdam)
Sandra Kisters (Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam)
Annemiek Rens (ESNA; Drents Museum, Assen)
Jenny Reynaerts (ESNA; Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)
Fleur Roos Rosa da Carvalho (ESNA; Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam)
Marjan Sterckx (ESNA; Ghent University)

Reference:
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