Are Art Critics Guilty of Sex Discrimination?

June Wayne, noted Los Angeles painter and printmaker, is the founder of the Tamarind Lithography Workshop which has just published a special report on "Sex Differentials in Art Exhibition Reviews." Henry Seldis, Times art critic, comments.

BY JUNE WAYNE

Every artist invited to Tamarind has been an exceptional professional. Yet more women artists than men turned down the opportunity to come to the workshop. Some asked for grants for artist husbands as a condition of acceptance—a condition we could not meet—but none of the men asked for grants for their artist wives.

Some women declined because their families couldn't spare them for two months, but no men refused their grants for family reasons. Only recently have women been accepting their grants without reference to domestic responsibilities, a trend directly traceable to the feminist movement.

Early on, another problem was noted: Most of the Tamarind women artists, although the artistic peers of the men, were getting fewer exhibitions and having fewer sales than were the men. "Sex Differentials in Art Exhibition Reviews: A Statistical Study," just published by Tamarind, sought to trace the source of these pressures on their careers. Without even considering content, what quantity of space can any artist, male or female, reasonably hope to receive for a solo show or for participating?

BY HENRY J. SELDIS

No one well acquainted with the contemporary art scene needed Tamarind's survey, "Sex Differentials in Art Exhibition Reviews," to be aware that far more men than female artists are given exhibitions annually.

Nor can the seemingly objective matrix of statistical data hide the fact that June Wayne, whose own art and art editorial activities have had enormous publicity—especially in this newspaper—was not to charge art critics with systematic sex discrimination.

Having gained national fame not only through her own creative talents but through the revival of lithography by her Ford Foundation-backed Tamarind Lithography Workshop, Ms. Wayne has battled for professionalism in art for 20 years. Yet nowhere in the extensive editorial comments on this statistical report do her employees touch on the differentiation between amateur and professional artists—be they male or female.

After first stating that the two art critics on this paper reviewed solo shows by 344 artists from June, 1970, to June, 1971, as compared to 238 artists reviewed by the New York Times...
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Art

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In a group exhibition, a group of researchers examined the joint direction of attention in art. They found that critics often focus on male artists, while ignoring the work of female artists. This biased attention can have serious consequences, as it limits the visibility and recognition of female artists' work. The researchers argue that this bias is not accidental, but rather a result of systemic sexism in the art world. They call for a more equitable approach toart criticism that takes into account the contributions of all artists, regardless of gender.
Critic Responds to the Report's Charges

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which employs four full-time critics and at least three more freelance art writers, Ms. Wayne insists that "obviously, women shows were there to be covered. If anyone wanted to find them." This was certainly not true for the geographical area that William Wilson and I try to cover each week. Unless, of course, Ms. Wayne expects us to regard every woman who puts brush to canvas or blowtorch to metal as a professional artist. This we are not prepared to do for either females or males.

The report deliberately ignored the fact that art coverage in newspapers or magazines can only mirror what happens in reputable galleries, museums and university art centers. What is reviewed simply reflects what is available. Art critics do not determine any community's art fare. Nor should they.

If the press covers fewer women than men shows, it is simply because there are fewer. Nor does the charge of sexual discrimination sit well with this particular critic, who decided over 10 years ago to call a woman artist's gallery show a "solo" show rather than to stick to the traditional "one-man show" designation.

We are all agreed that women artists deserve far wider exposure. Even as Tamarind researchers were laboriously measuring lineage and size of reproductions, the feminist movement was finding ready response in the art world, so that if the study were to be repeated a year later its statistics would be far more favorable to women.

In discussing the report with a good number of women artists, I found that many would rather have a five-inch rave review than negative criticism measuring four times as long.

"I believe women probably do suffer discrimination in our West Coast segment of the art world," Wilson told me after studying the report. "For as long as I have known you, we have deplored this circumstance. All of our sympathy, however, cannot create more exhibitions for gifted female artists." Says New York Times art critic and art news editor Hilton Kramer: "Just ask Louise Nevelson whether I have ever been indifferent to the talents of contemporary women artists. I was the first to write about her and about all the other major women artists during the past 15 years."

Art News managing editor Elizabeth Baker insists that despite Tamarind's charges, "We covered every solo show in New York that year, including all the women artists that were showing. There is some indication that galleries have long been discriminatory. It is a situation that all responsible art reviewers know have not only been deplored but protesting. Still it seems strange for June Wayne to bring these charges when so few women made it into her own Tamarind program."

Washington Post art writer Paul Richard points out that the Ford Foundation granted $4.4 million in funds during the 10 years of the Wayne-founded Tamarind Lithography Workshop.

During that time Richard says of the 102 artists given Tamarind grants, 89 (87.3%) were males; of the 57 guest artists invited to the workshop, only eight (14%) were women; of the 57 master printers trained at Tamarind, all were men; of the 29 print curators trained at Tamarind, only two (7%) were women.

"While I find the idea behind the Tamarind report basically sound, it ignored the fact that the funneling of art works is controlled by galleries and museums rather than the art press," says Art Forum editor John Coplans. "Since I took over the editorship of this magazine last year we have been making deliberate efforts to write about little known but highly professional women artists whether they happen to be having a show or not. But there is just no way of taking a democratic view of the art scene without giving up a standard of artistic quality which must be kept for the sake of all artists regardless of their sex."

Surely all artists in this, the second most active contemporary art scene in America, deserve far greater attention in the mass media. Art critics, reviewers and writers may have failed in convincing editors and publishers about the demonstrable growth of wide public interest in the visual arts. But they have never deliberately discriminated against artists on any grounds other than those of quality of artistic worth.

In these columns artists will continue to be judged on their merit rather than on their sex, color, religion or politics. I can readily join June Wayne's appeal for greater exposure of women artists' work and for wider coverage of the art world in general.

But I most determinedly reject her trumped-up charge, that critics systematically discriminate against women artists.