

MIGNON NIXON

In November 2001, thirty years after Linda Nochlin wrote “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” Carol Armstrong, then director of the Program in the Study of Women and Gender at Princeton, convened a conference, “Women Artists at the Millennium,” to consider the galvanizing effects of the essay on art and art history. Armstrong emphasized that the event’s focus would be “the contemporary situation.”<sup>1</sup> For those two days, we would think with Nochlin about what had changed after 1971—after the essay, after the women’s liberation movement, after the emergence of a feminist discourse in art and art history—and about how that discourse continued to evolve as feminism, in all its critical articulations, reimaged the questions art and art history might pose. “At its strongest,” Nochlin declared, “a feminist art history is a transgressive and anti-establishment practice meant to call many of the major precepts of the discipline into question.”<sup>2</sup> But as it turned out, those gathered in Princeton that November weekend were also compelled to think with Nochlin about what was to come after the attacks of 9/11, after the invasion of Afghanistan, and after a political regression to delusions of mastery and supremacy that threatened to undo three decades of collective work on “women, art, and power.”

A shadow “hung over us so immediately that the triumphalism that seemed to hover around the notion of ‘women artists at the millennium’ was converted into its epically anxious opposite,” Armstrong recalled.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan had been under way for a month, and the war was already being sold to the American public as a fight against women’s oppression.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, back home, paens to heroic masculinity bloomed in the newspapers, including one in the *New York Times*

1. Carol Armstrong, “Preface,” *Women Artists at the Millennium*, ed. Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/October Books, 2006), p. x.

2. Linda Nochlin, “‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ Thirty Years After,” *Women Artists at the Millennium*, p. 30.

3. Armstrong, “Preface,” p. ix.

4. Judith Butler develops this theme in “Violence, Mourning, Politics”: “This sudden feminist conversion on the part of the Bush administration, which retrospectively transformed the liberation of women into a rationale for its military actions against Afghanistan, is a sign of the extent to which feminism, as a trope, is deployed in the service of restoring the presumption of First World impermeability.” Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), p. 41.

that Nochlin quoted in her lecture at Princeton, her piercing soprano rising to a crescendo of indignation as she read out the headline: “Heavy Lifting Required: The Return of Manly Men.” “The operative word,” the article continued, “is men. Brawny, heroic, manly men.”<sup>5</sup> That the author of the piece was a woman, Nochlin observed, was unsurprising. “The need to comply, to be inwardly at one with the patriarchal order and its discourses, is compelling,” she had observed in her second-most-famous essay, “Women, Art, and Power,” published in 1988.<sup>6</sup> Summing up the message of that piece, Nochlin put it plainly: “Real men are the good guys; the rest of us are wimps and whiners—read ‘womanish.’”<sup>7</sup>

The convergence of these two trends—rationalizing war with the excuse of women’s liberation in Afghanistan and restoring masculine supremacy with the excuse of domestic security in the United States—represented a sweeping return to order, Nochlin warned: “I fear this moment’s overt reversion to the most blatant forms of patriarchy, a great moment for so-called real men to assert their sinister dominance over ‘others.’”<sup>8</sup> When Linda Nochlin died at the end of October last year, almost sixteen years after delivering this prophecy, she had just completed a final book, *Misère*, about nineteenth-century French painting, that also speaks to the *misère* of our own time of precarity and oppression, in which the prerogative of “real men to assert their sinister dominance over ‘others’” has emerged as the defining condition of our politics, but also as the focus of broad, feminist-led political resistance.

“Now, more than ever, we need to be aware not only of our achievements but of the dangers and difficulties lying in the future,” Nochlin warned in 2001. “We will need our wit and courage to make sure that women’s voices are heard, their work seen and written about. That is our task for the future.”<sup>9</sup> Nochlin’s response to this dangerous political moment was neither reactive nor merely prescient, but historical and political. She grasped immediately that the politics of the coming “war on terror,” cynically promulgated on the rationale of women’s liberation, would mostly exclude “women’s voices” and feminist thinking, both on the left and on the right. The author of “Women, Art, and Power” also understood all too well that resurgent fantasies of omnipotence, however extravagant, would be absorbed as an inherent feature of war and its extended culture of militarism. “It is important to keep in mind,” Nochlin wrote in that essay, apropos of David’s *Oath of the Horatii*, “that one of the most important functions of ideology is to veil the overt power relations obtaining in society at a particular moment in history by making them appear to be part of the natural, eternal order of things.”<sup>10</sup> “Women, Art, and Power” tracked the historical persistence of *retours à l’ordre* in politics and representation.<sup>11</sup> That work is a vital resource now. “Our task” after Nochlin is to counter an ongoing political regression by attending vigilantly and creatively to the nexus of women, art, and power.

5. Nochlin, “‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ Thirty Years After,” p. 30.

6. Nochlin, “Women, Art, and Power,” in *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 32.

7. Nochlin, “‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ Thirty Years After,” p. 31.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

10. Nochlin, “Women, Art, and Power,” p. 2.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 32.