

## Crowding

ROBERT STORR

We were there on a mission, my friend Nancy Bowen and I. Our object was to collect slides and catalogues about Alice Neel from Neel herself. Sometime earlier she had done an interview with the Video Data Bank, for which we worked. Created at the end of the 1970s by Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Korsfield, this pioneering documentation project had in a few years amassed a major archive of unedited conversations with leading artists of the moment. Significantly, given the pluralist nature of that moment, it included artists of multiple generations and many aesthetic dispositions. For if the 1970s had begun with the Color Field, Pop, and Minimalist “mainstream” of the 1960s still dominant in museums, magazines, and seminar rooms, it ended in fertile confusion with a radical diversification of media—conceptualism in all its myriad varieties, performance, installation art, land art, book art, and much more—and an equally radical leveling of aesthetic hierarchies, leading to a correspondingly radical rewriting of art history as a mesh of interconnected art histories, and, as was very much a sign of the times, *herstories*.

It is a common journalistic practice to look for auguries of wider social and cultural change in avant-garde art—and so to accept the avant-garde’s claims of foresight and leadership at face value. It is an equally common error of historians to do so retrospectively, thereby ratifying such claims *ex post facto*. Frequently, however, art has lagged behind developments in other sectors. So it was with feminism, which came late to the visual arts when compared to its effects on literature and the mass media, starting with Simone de Beauvoir’s 1949 classic *The Second Sex* (first translated into English in 1953) and Betty Friedan’s populist call of 1963 to do away with traditional gender roles, *The Feminine Mystique*. As a broad phenomenon, feminist mobilization in the North American art world was a by-product of the Vietnam War protests of the mid- to late 1960s and, at least so far as the downtown New York scene was concerned, of the dissatisfaction many women in the Art Workers’ Coalition and other such activist groups felt at being consigned to supporting roles within radicalism’s ranks after having already been marginalized by the gallery, museum, and academic systems. Based on this and many other instances of aggravated neglect, women banded together to create their own organizations,

promote their own agendas, publish their own journals, and rediscover the past that had been denied them.

Linda Nochlin's 1971 *Artnews* essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" provocatively challenged the conventional wisdom of the period on all fronts.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, Nochlin argued art historically against the "first-response" hagiography of some feminists who had tried to invent a canon of "distaff" geniuses from scratch, and on the other, she explained art historically how systemic denial of access to education and opportunity within the art world, rather than gender-based "biological" deficits in individual talent or vocation, accounted for the lack of female Michelangelos and Rembrandts. She further argued that only a dramatic opening up of the art academies and professional networks would result in sexual equality in art production, or even measurable progress in a structurally biased system.

The complement to Nochlin's feminism, in terms of her sweeping repudiation of mainstream modernist dogma of the period, was her critical as well as scholarly preoccupation with realism. Nochlin's 1976 monograph on Gustave Courbet, her curatorial efforts in contemporary art, and her articles in the art press were the forums in which she made the case for realism as the exception to the idealism that was the foundation of both purified (that is, classical) figuration and pure (that is, purely optical) abstraction, most notably in the two-part polemic "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," which appeared in *Art in America* in 1973.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, Neel was one of Nochlin's prime subjects, and Nochlin and her daughter in turn became Neel's subjects (plate 26).

The upshot of these tectonic shifts in art-world strata was that late-1970s pluralism pushed artists who had been long in the shadows briefly—and sometimes for more extended periods—into the spotlight. Women and realists counted prominently among them. Neel was both. And so, in keeping with that widening of perspectives, and as a part of an educational—or, more accurately, self-educational—enterprise initiated by two women deeply engaged with feminism and quick to seize the means that the relatively new medium of video provided, Nancy Bowen and I showed up at the doorstep of Neel's apartment on 107th Street and West End Avenue in February 1978.

We were received by the artist and her daughter-in-law Nancy, who escorted us into a corner front living room that doubled as a studio. There Neel's easel was set up opposite an old-fashioned sofa where her models usually sat with the windows behind the artist's chair shedding light on her canvases. Suspense for much of the visit was provided by each of us simultaneously realizing that we might be asked to pose for her—we were—and that in the event it was probable that we would be invited to shed our clothes, as some of her models were asked to do and did. This was a mildly awkward prospect, given that we were not a couple, but one obviated by the fact that Neel couldn't paint that day and we weren't free to return the next. Thus as vanity and modesty competed with each other while we sat across from a voluble, plainspoken old woman who suffered from neither, the focus of our visit became a partial inventory of the hundreds of finished paintings packed into the entrance, corridors, and other cluttered spaces of her third-floor flat.<sup>3</sup>

Contrary to the way they appear in photographs of that apartment, or of Neel's previous uptown quarters in Harlem, the arrangements at West End Avenue were not at all chaotic. Rather, pictures were stacked in rows coming out from the wall, with the biggest ones in the back and the smallest in the front. Many, but not all, faced forward, so that in passing by them, one had the impression of moving through a crowd at an impromptu rally, or through a crush of commuters in the subway, and of one's course being carefully monitored and one's features unapologetically and unforgivingly scrutinized by a cross section of New Yorkers, some vaguely familiar, some very familiar, a few aggressively fabulous, a few more outright famous, and the remainder completely unknown, except in their own everyday worlds, but nonetheless utterly distinctive. And all of them seemed to be accustomed to being stared at no less frankly or insistently than they stared out at anyone who walked by.

It is customary among critics and historians who have elected to describe and evaluate Neel's work to invoke the unifying character of Nikolai Gogol's unfinished novel *Dead Souls*, the census-taker or "collector of souls" Chichikov, and in interviews and conversation Neel herself encouraged the comparison. The correspondence quickly breaks down when one considers that Chichikov is a caricature of bourgeois greed in old-regime Russia who seeks to buy "dead

souls”—that is, serfs who have died but remain registered with their owners on the taxation rolls—so that he might use their names for speculations designed to make him rich and raise him to the status of the landed gentry. Updating the patently absurd conceit of Gogol’s satire, one might say that Chichikov was a pioneer in leveraging servitude’s “derivatives.” Arguably, Neel was in some respects a satirist, and in others an opportunist—what portrait painter is not? However, she was anything but bourgeois, and her motives, like her pictures, were startling in their transparency.

Other literary analogies include Honoré de Balzac’s multivolume *La Comédie humaine* (*The Human Comedy*), which attempts to describe the social contradictions and psychological conflicts of a vast cross section of French society from the French Revolution of 1789 to the revolution of 1848, and Émile Zola’s suite of twenty novels, *Les Rougon-Macquart*, which tackles the same problems from a less romantic, ostensibly more scientific point of view, covering the period from the Paris Commune of 1871 through the advent of the twentieth century. Here too the dangers of seeking correlations largely outweigh the rewards, though more so with Zola than with Balzac, who had a fine appreciation of the dynamism and perversities of human nature denatured by class pressures, whereas Zola, like many artists with a cause, had a weakness for creating types in preference to fully realized characters with all their anomalies.

Of course Neel was not producing serial fiction for a hungry public, nor did she independently set out to take any kind of systematic census of the men and women of her time, as the photographer August Sander had done in Germany starting with the 1929 publication of *Face of Our Time*, the first installment of his lifelong documentary project *People of the 20th Century*. Neel was never a documentarian or a pictorial sociologist, and, to the extent that stories are attached to her pictures, they are inferred rather than told, except in a handful of instances—for example, the 1935 portrait of writer Kenneth Fearing (plate 3), in which the artist filled the nonnaturalistic foreground and background with symbolic details in the manner of a Depression-era Hollywood movie montage, or when she told the stories herself to admirers or interviewers, and did so often enough and colorfully enough that they effectively became the voice-over narratives of her otherwise mute images.