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Report outline

This report will analyse Linda Nochlin’s ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists’ essay, examining the work in terms of its references to feminist literature, theory and debate. The essay is often heralded as the text that launched the field of feminist art history.\(^1\) Although influential, the ideas and rhetoric within the work are not without precedent.\(^2\) This report will adopt Nochlin’s own anthropological method of art history to her Great Women Artists essay.\(^3\) In doing so, it is hoped that the essay will be viewed and read as a product of its period, rather than as a lone trailblazer.\(^4\)

This report focuses on the literary context of Nochlin’s essay, however it must be noted that there are many themes and lines of enquiry that are left open within this report. The impact of Nochlin’s essay has been discussed by figures such as Rozsika Parker, Griselda Pollock, Norma Broude and Mary Gerrard.\(^5\) This report has consulted primary source material, including contemporary feminist literature and biographical writing by Nochlin herself. To avoid unfounded assumptions this report is grounded within the text of Great Women Artists, strategically un-picking textual references, rather than general influences.\(^6\)

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3 Nochlin’s methodology within Great Women Artists can be defined as a feminist anthropological approach. Artworks are viewed as products of their period, they are analysed in conjunction with the norms and values of societies. Nochlin, like the academics within the field of contemporary feminist anthropology, identifies the customs of society as male and eur centred. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louis Lamphere, “A Theoretical Overview” in *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 18.


6 One could discuss the influence of Bart Cammaerts’ media content analysis in relation to Nochlin’s use of popular nineteenth century literature, or Kant’s theories on aesthetics and the female ‘beautiful’ mind, but this analysis, although relevant, would not be grounded within the actual references in Nochlin’s Great Women Artists essay. Therefore, such literature, despite the arguably great influence upon the academic practice of Nochlin, is not discussed within this report.
The introduction of this report seeks to establish the general context of Great Women Artists. The first section of this report will analyse Nochlin’s method and source handling, references to past and contemporary feminist approaches will be examined. The second section of this report will focus on ideas, examining references to contemporary feminist theory and debate. The third section of this report focuses on audience and outcome, attempting to establish Nochlin’s audience and aims.

Setting the Scene: A Brief Contextual Introduction

Great Women Artists was published in 1971, in Women in Sexist Society edited by V. Gornick and B. Moran and the journal Art News. Nochlin penned the essay in the midst of the women’s liberation movement, when the political was becoming fundamentally personal. Feminist groups such as NOW, Redstockings and the New York Radical Women acted within a political sphere, challenging institutional structures and rhetoric.

Upon returning as a teacher to Vassar College, a female friend loaned her many polemical texts of the Women’s Liberation Movement. Prior to this, Nochlin described herself as a ‘premature feminist’; the texts she was given and enthusiastically read included a Redstockings Newsletter, issues of Off our Backs and Everywoman. The first Women in Art course, led by Nochlin at Vassar College in the spring of 1971, examined art historical texts and societal structures in conjunction

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8 ‘One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution’. Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political”, Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader (New York: New York University Press, 2000). 113.
9 ‘the personal was political, and that politics, where sex-roles and gender were concerned, began with the personal.’ Nochlin recounts that the major takeaway from the collection of polemical feminist literature she was given was that the personal was political. Nochlin, “Introduction”, Representing Women, 17
10 ‘heady days of the women’s liberation movement’. Nochlin, “Introduction”, Women, Art and Power, and Other Essays, xiii.
11 Groups such as NOW were actually formed in direct response to the lax implementation of the EEOC and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964), such groups felt that women were still being discriminated against in the work place- in terms of recruitment, unequal wages and attitudinal misogyny. Miriam Schneir, Feminism in Our Time: The Essential Writings, World War II to the Present (London: Vintage Books, 1994), 95–102. Miranda K. Stockett and Pamela L. Geller, “Perspectives on Our Past, Present and Future”, in Feminist Anthropology: Past, Present and Future (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 6.
13 Ibid, 17.
with the final aesthetic of the artwork. In Research gathered within the course showed the lack of support for female artists within past and present institutions, education and wider society.

In *Great Women Artists*, Nochlin’s methodology is grounded in social context; she examines contemporary texts and theories in conjunction with artworks. The question underpinning the entire essay is an antagonistic piece of rhetoric in itself- the question is unanswerable as it is riddled with patriarchal assumptions. The essay shows that societal conditions and structures of the nineteenth century impeded the majority of women artists from becoming ‘great’.

1. Methodology and Technique

Questioning Assumptions

Nochlin explicitly references John Stuart Mill within the introduction of *Great Women Artists*, celebrating his methodology, which she views as embodying the ‘engaged feminist intellect’. Mill represents a feminist figure from the past whose scholarly technique Nochlin incorporates within her essay. In ‘The Subjection of Women’, Mill questions the logic and basis of his society’s ‘natural’ assumptions, primarily analysing the belief that women must be naturally inferior to men because society treats them as such. Within the introductory paragraphs of *Great Women Artists*, Nochlin also interrogates the assumptions of her society (academic art history), unpicking the essay’s title to discuss notions of greatness and the academic (male) gaze. Nochlin condemns the traditional (majority) methodology of art history, as its rubric is grounded within ‘the white Western male viewpoint’, which is assumed to be the only viewpoint. In describing the consensus, Nochlin frames

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15 Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” 43.
17 Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” 43.
18 Ibid, 42.
her own theories and methodology as belonging to the minority within the field, similar to Mill’s declaration that his ideas and methodology are not shared amongst his contemporaries.¹⁹

Nochlin specifically examines Picasso and the fact that he passed difficult art school exams within a record time frame.²⁰ Nochlin asks questions prompted by fact, what if Picasso was born a girl? Are the careers of contemporary students as successful? How much of a role did Picasso’s art professor father play in the success of Picasso? Such questions interrogate the assumptions and myth-making of contemporary monographs and autobiographies of Picasso.²¹ Nochlin not only analyses the assumptions within the field of art history, but also within contemporary feminism. Nochlin condemns contemporary feminism’s ‘emotional’ focus, and urges an academic, research led, evidence based critique of societal structures that perpetuate inequality.²² Mill similarly asserts that ‘mass of feeling’ rather than logic and enquiry guides debate within his period, encouraging a more nuanced and factual approach.²³

Interrogating the Popular

In Great Women Artists Nochlin references popular nineteenth century literature to expose the sexist assumptions of the period, particularly in analysing the painting Nameless and Friendless by Emily Mary Osborn. Within the analysis, Nochlin also critiques contemporary popular literature, asserting a continuation of the oppressive sexist narrative and referencing 1970s feminist activity. Nochlin emphasises the cross-genre sexism of nineteenth century literature by examining the rhetoric within Mrs. Ellis’s domestic handbook, The Family Monitor and Domestic Guide and Mrs.

¹⁹ ‘I am willing to accept the unfavourable conditions which the prejudice assigns to me’. Mill, “The Subjection of Women”, 18.
²⁰ Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” 49.
²¹ Although five years after Nochlin’s Great Women Artists essay was published, art historians such O’Brien still presents myth (divine artistic genius) as fact, elaborating evidence to create a legendary artistic protégée. Patrick O’Brien, “Chapter 2” in Pablo Ruiz Picasso: A Biography (London: Collins, 1976), 35.
²² Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” 42.
Craik’s novel *Olive*. Societal and contextual analysis grounded in contemporary popular literature, precedes visual analysis of the ‘high’ art objects within Nochlin’s essay, highlighting her belief that institutional powers oppress the individual woman.

In framing contemporary popular literature as an oppressive device, Nochlin references 1970s radical feminist critiques of women’s magazines and journals. In 1970 feminist groups including Media Women, New York Radical Feminists, NOW and Redstockings staged a sit-in at the *Ladies’ Home Journal* offices. Columns such as ‘Can This Marriage Be Saved?’ were condemned, as they represented the sexist *female as domestic* narrative, presenting matrimony as the ultimate goal for women. Similarly, in analysing the narrative structure of the novel *Olive*, Nochlin emphasises how the novel ends with the female protagonist slipping into willing subservience, abandoning all her artistic pursuits in favour of matrimony. Nochlin cites the novel’s conclusion as an example of the past construction of sexist narratives oppressing women, while clearly stating that a sexist narrative still permeates through much modern writing. Nochlin cites popular women’s magazines and Betty Friedan’s *The Feminist Mystique* as contemporary examples encouraging female sacrifice and subservience. Nochlin asserts that Friedan’s championing of the ‘well-rounded’ woman is as sexist and traditional as Mrs. Ellis’s championing of the ‘adequate’ subservient woman. Nochlin not only references the feminist debate of the present but also her own methodology within previous academic work. In an undergraduate social psychology paper Nochlin condemned rhetorical contradiction within contemporary women’s magazines. She juxtaposes articles celebrating

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24 Ibid, 61.
25 For example, visual analysis of *Nameless and Friendless* appears after a discussion of nineteenth century societal values and beliefs. Ibid, 61.
27 Alston, Shakea. “Feminists sit-in at Ladies Home Journal”.
28 “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” 59.
29 Ibid, 38.
30 Nochlin asserts that contemporary rhetoric championing the ‘well-rounded’ female personality is really ‘helps guard man from unwanted competition in his “serious” professional activities and assures him of “well-rounded” assistance on the home front, so that he may have sex and family in addition to the fulfilment of his own specialised talent’. Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 58.
31 ‘the unfemininity of deep involvement in work rather than sex, is still the mainstay of the Feminine Mystique.’ Ibid, 58.
successful and famous women (who defied the status quo) with articles offering advice on the
cleanliness and ambience of the home, which emphasised and reinforced the domestic
responsibilities of the ‘normal’ female reader.\textsuperscript{33}

\section*{2. Theories and Concepts}

\textbf{The Patriarchal Structure of Art History}

Nochlin specifically describes the gaze of the art historian as male, further asserting that the entire
art world is male in contribution, dictation and outlook.\textsuperscript{34} In this assertion, Nochlin references
Simone de Beauvoir’s theory of male dominated culture.\textsuperscript{35} Contemporary to Nochlin, many feminist
theorists were also referencing Beauvoir’s idea in regards to women and art.\textsuperscript{36} Shulamith Firestone
in ‘\textit{(Male) Culture}’ seeks to show that the oppression of women is not justified by, or because of an
inferiority of nature (referencing Mill), asserting that women are oppressed through cultural
frameworks.\textsuperscript{37} Nochlin discusses nineteenth century academic frameworks, specifically the
institutional barring of female artists from studying the nude.\textsuperscript{38} She highlights the continuation of
institutional sexism, referencing nineteenth century paintings alongside more contemporary
photographs and illustrations.\textsuperscript{39} Contemporary to Nochlin, visual analysis of ‘low’ art and media
became a focus of feminist and wider academic debate, the use and manipulation of the female
nude in particular was examined.\textsuperscript{40} Firestone references both mass media and ‘high’ art education,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid, 11.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” 43.
\item \textsuperscript{35} ‘Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth.’ Simone de Beauvoir, \textit{The Second Sex} (London: Vintage Books, 2015).
\item \textsuperscript{36} Theorists such as Sherry B. Ortner (Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture? 1972), as well as Shulamith Firestone (Male Culture, 1970) referenced Beauvoir’s idea of male culture specifically within the context of visual culture.
\item \textsuperscript{37} ‘Thus because cultural dicta are set by men...’ Shulamith Firestone, “(Male) Culture”, in \textit{The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution} (London: Women’s Press, 1970), 149.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” 52-57.
\item \textsuperscript{39} ‘group portrait of the members of the Royal Academy in London in 1772’, Ibid 54, ‘In an imaginary gathering of all the Russian Realist’s pupils’ Ibid, 56.
\item \textsuperscript{40} See Roland Barthes’ critical analysis of ‘low’ art film and advertising in \textit{Mythologies} (London: Grant & Cutler, 1994).
\end{itemize}
specifically discussing pornography in conjunction with the nude in nineteenth century and contemporary 'high' art education.\textsuperscript{41}

It is interesting to note that within Nochlin and Firestone’s essays, the Impressionists, nineteenth century popular literature and the nude are discussed in terms of patriarchal cultural frameworks.\textsuperscript{42} Firestone also briefly references the political and social factors determining the success and subject matter of both the female and male artists in the group, referencing the line of enquiry that Nochlin expands within \textit{Great Women Artists}.\textsuperscript{43} Nochlin differs from Firestone and other contemporary feminists in that she places the most importance on sexist structures as opposed to the activities of the individual.\textsuperscript{44} Although Firestone recognises the importance of social context in the display and narration of artworks, she describes the potential for a true ‘female’ art, possibly believing that the exclusion of female artists from art history was/is due to an innate style rather than purely un-objective institutional bias.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{Innate Feminine Style}

Nochlin within \textit{Great Women Artists} contributes to the contemporary feminist debate around feminine style. Nochlin condemns attempts by ‘some contemporary feminists’ to shift the ground of the title question through asserting that there is a ‘recognizable feminine style’ and thus a different set of criteria for determining ‘great’ female artists.\textsuperscript{46} The ‘contemporary feminists’ Nochlin alludes to may include figures such as Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago.\textsuperscript{47} The ideas Chicago articulates

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41}‘In any art school in the country one sees classrooms full of girls working diligently from the female model.’ Firestone, “(Male) Culture”, 150.
\item \textsuperscript{42}Ibid, 150. ‘the Victorian 'young lady' with her accomplishments', 150 'the Impressionist school', 151 'the birth of the crude feminine novel in the nineteenth century'. Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 57-58.
\item \textsuperscript{43}‘This is partially explained by political conditions of that period’ Firestone, “(Male) Culture”, 150.
\item \textsuperscript{44}“Why have there been no great women artists?” 67.
\item \textsuperscript{45}‘It would take a denial of all cultural tradition for women to produce even a true ‘female’ art.’ Ibid, 150.
\item \textsuperscript{46}Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 44.
\item \textsuperscript{47}Miriam Schapiro although only mentioned briefly here, created and wrote about art and the feminine style. Nochlin discusses Schapiro further in “Introduction”, \textit{Representing Women}, 31.
\end{itemize}
within her essay ‘Woman as Artist’ can be compared and contrasted with Nochlin’s theories in Great Women Artists. Chicago specifically is relevant to discuss as she arguably represents one of the major proponents of feminine style, and interviews conducted both with Chicago and Schapiro were also included within the bibliography of Nochlin’s Women in Art class at Stanford University. Nochlin asserts that although male and female experience differs, the difference is not clearly articulated within art, challenging Chicago’s assertion that successful or ‘great’ woman artists create work that references a distinctly feminine experience. By comparing Impressionist artists, female and male, such as Morisot and Cassatt, Renoir and Monet, Nochlin emphasises that the female sphere, the realm of female experience, was utilised as an artistic subject by both genders. Nochlin seeks to show that the feminine style theory falls apart when applied to a methodology as ‘feminine’ subject/experience was depicted by both genders and male artists depicting feminine spaces and pastimes, achieved ‘greatness’ over and beyond their female counterparts.

If Nochlin was indeed interacting with the contemporary discourse regarding feminine style, in attempting to show the theory’s flaws, she perhaps over-extends the theory’s application to stretch across time periods it was never supposed to. Chicago within ‘Woman as Artist’ references O’Keefe, who first exhibited in 1916; Nochlin applies the feminine style theory to older works and movements. Chicago’s theory of a feminine style may have been primarily intended to apply to twentieth century and later works. The critique by Nochlin in Great Women Artists of such theories and theorists therefore, may be unfair or even obvious. In commenting on the feminine style idea,

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49 Schapiro and Chicago were invited by the Woman in Art course to give lectures and receive questions from the students, Nochlin in Representing Women (1999) heralds the two speakers as greatly influential, describes the event and expresses her disagreement of the two artist theorist’s ideas of feminine style. Nochlin, “Introduction”, Representing Women, 31.
50 Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 45.
51 ‘In every instance, women artists and writers would seem to be closer to other artists and writers of their own period and outlook than they are to each other.’ Ibid, 44.
52 Judy Chicago, “Woman as Artist”, 223.
Nochlin clarifies her own methodology to consist of social context over aesthetic and formal metaphor.53

3. Intended Audience and Outcomes

Consciousness Raising, Awareness and Rebuilding

Nochlin emphasises the importance of sight and realisation throughout her essay, highlighting a consciousness-raising intention.54 Nochlin states that the feminist critique can lay bare assumptions embedded in tradition.55 Through unpicking conceptual assumptions, Nochlin hopes to reveal the ‘failure of much academic art history’.56 She also emphasises the importance of women facing ‘up to the reality of their history and of their present situation’.57 The feminist publication Off Our Backs throughout the 1970s also emphasised the importance of situational understanding, believing understanding leads to individual ‘radicalisation’.58 In a reply to a letter from Alice Wonznack, Off Our Backs declares that the impetus to change occurs only when women’s ‘eyes are forced open, when they are confronted directly with reality’.59 ‘Consciousness raising’ was also a primary aim of the radical feminist group Redstockings, the group states that their main priority ‘is to develop female class consciousness’.60 Nochlin mirrors the rhetoric of radical feminist groups in her academic

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53 Nochlin also clarifies her stance regarding the definition of art, believing artworks to be neither a ‘confidential whisper’ to the viewer nor a ‘personal sob story’ of the artist. Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 45.
54 Consciousness-raising can be defined as the activity of making people more aware of personal, social or political issues. Within the realm of feminism, 1970s consciousness raising groups aimed to politicise the personal, rather than to personalise the political. “Consciousness-raising” Sisterhood and After Research Team, The British Library, accessed April 5, 2017.
55 Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 42.
56 Ibid, 42.
57 Ibid, 67.
59 Ibid, 15.
essay as she emphasises the importance of female sight and understanding, hinting that without awareness change is impossible.  

Nochlin also encourages direct action, calling on the reader to help rebuild institutions rather than eradicate them completely. Nochlin uses vocabulary that connotes both physical and ideological rebuilding. She calls on women post-realisation to ‘destroy false consciousness’ and to ‘take part in the creation’ of new, fair institutions. However, the direct action Nochlin proposes differs from Redstockings and similar organisations. Nochlin does not describe an exclusively male vs. female battle within the institutional realm, whereas Redstockings only encourages female action, declaring all men to be oppressors. Nochlin however, declares that institutional inequality is a challenge to be confronted by both men and women. Redstockings urges members to expose ‘the sexist foundation of all our institutions’, but does not appear to advocate any rebuilding.

Gender, Demographic and Academia

The gender of the intended reader is particularly important to gauge within Great Women Artists, was the essay a plea to the oppressors (male orientated institutions) to welcome female contribution, or a rally cry urging the oppressed (women) to challenge cultural frameworks? Throughout Nochlin’s essay, she uses collective pronouns, to communicate that the aims of the reader and writer are shared. Particularly in the conclusion of Nochlin’s essay, she asserts that ‘women can reveal institutional and intellectual weaknesses’; ‘we’ and ‘us’ may therefore specifically

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61 There are countless examples of radical feminist publications encouraging the radicalisation of women through sight. Including ‘As women, we must open our eyes’, Judy Bissell, “Lilith- Why the name”, in Lilith, (1968): 1. In discussing flaws of the 1967 Manifesto published by the female caucus of the national SDS convention, writers critique the group’s lack of understanding; ‘radical females do not understand the desperate condition of women in general’, Beverly Jones and Judith Brown, “The Manifesto”, in Toward a Female Liberation Movement, (1968): 8.

62 ‘destroy’, ‘creation’. Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 68.
63 Ibid, 67-68.
64 ‘All men have oppressed women’. “Redstockings Manifesto”, 7.
65 ‘the creation of institutions in which clear thought- and true greatness- are challenges open to anyone, man or woman’. Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 68.
reference women in the arts. The fact that Nochlin addresses her readers as ‘dear sisters’ clarifies that her intended audience is female, in evoking the rhetoric of sisterhood, Nochlin references radical feminist newsletters such as Lilith. Nochlin’s essay appears to address her contemporary female scholar-activists. Nochlin, through research and factual evidence reveals some of the biases within the field of art history; she also appears to urge her fellow female scholars to investigate the sexist frameworks of all their respective disciplines. Nochlin in Great Women Artists states she wished to provide a paradigm for fellow female scholars to unpick the assumptions inherent within all disciplines and institutions.

Nochlin addresses the assumptions behind the art historian’s approach, using anthropological research methods to reveal the biases of the status quo; she references both the method and aims of early feminist anthropology, where the focus was on mass society rather than the minority other. Nochlin emphasises the influence of the institutional (public) over the individual (private), dissecting the traditions of the majority rather than the minority, aiming to show that the institution narrates and dictates the success and narration of the artist. In this aim, Nochlin references Gayle Rubin’s essay, ‘The Traffic of Women’, that highlights the crafting of fact (female biology) into mythic narratives (the woman) based on assumption that are intellectually, morally and ethically weak. Nochlin’s essay as a body of research and rhetoric alone, asserts that feminist enquiry can form the

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69 ‘let us’, ‘we know’. Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 43-44.
71 ‘scholar-activists asking questions that they thought might help them to formulate strategies for addressing persistent social injustices’, I feel this term used to describe the first feminist anthropologists applies to Nochlin. Ellen Lewin, “Introduction”, in Feminist Anthropology: A Reader (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 1.
72 ‘History, philosophy, sociology, psychology etc.’ Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 42.
73 ‘I have tried to provide a paradigm for the investigation of other areas in the field.’ Ibid, 67.
74 ‘the hidden “he” as the subject of all scholarly predicates.’ Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 42. Feminist anthropology emerged in the 1970s, contemporary to Nochlin. Lewin, “Introduction”, 1.
75 “Why have there been no great women artists?” 67 and 45. Especially within the discussion of Impressionist artists- the success of male artists over their female counterparts despite working in the same style.
basis of an incredibly rigorous scholarly methodology.\textsuperscript{77} Nochlin wishes to rebuild institutions, through feminist enquiry rather than emotional rhetoric.\textsuperscript{78}

Conclusion

This report has analysed Nochlin’s \textit{Great Women Artists} essay by examining the rhetorical references to contemporary and past feminist methods, theories and aims. It is hoped that Nochlin’s essay now appears grounded within its period, rather than a literary and theoretical trailblazer. Nochlin’s \textit{Great Women Artists} references and contributes to the feminist discourse of the period, Nochlin hopes to reveal some institutional biases of her field, encouraging and urging further research into other biases. In terms of further research, Nochlin’s later essays could be compared and contrasted with her 1971 piece, and the influences of Feminist Anthropology on Nochlin could also be investigated.

\textsuperscript{77} Condemning primarily emotional rhetoric and debate whilst championing the feminist academic gaze. Nochlin, “Why have there been no great women artists?” 42.

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid, 42.
Bibliography

Books


Journals

Lilith No. 1, (1968).


Articles


Online Resources

