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MoMA's Modern Women

The Museum of Modern Art was founded in 1929 when Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and fellow society ladies, Lillie P. Bliss and Mary Quinn Sullivan, opened a space to show Mrs. Rockefeller's ever-expanding collection of European modernist art. In 1935 Iris Barry, a film critic rising to prominence in Great Britain and one of the first female film critics ever, came to the United States and founded a film library and collection at MoMA. The collection quickly gained attention for holding some of the world's most prominent and rare films, and Barry quickly became known for her taste and ability to see the social and historical importance of films otherwise forgotten. However bureaucratic an institution it may have become, from the very beginning the heart of the museum, its collections, were built on the foresight of dedicated, passionate women.

In 2004 an anonymous donor approached MoMA with the vague mission of exploring the collections for any works created by women. Her plan was to find out what was "missing"—a term that would continue to be defined over the next five years—and to develop programs within the museum to benefit women. Mary Lea Bandy, then Deputy Director for Curatorial Affairs and Chief Curator of Film and Media, assembled a cross-departmental committee of curators to begin exploring their respective department's holdings and taking an inventory of sorts to determine the presence of work by women. This presented a somewhat

uncomfortable change to the departmentalized, rigid structure that the curators were accustomed to working under, but an air of excitement and sense of purpose brought the departments together in a uniquely open and communicative way. Regular meetings were set and held to discuss findings and create a collective understanding of what the real purpose of the project was. In 2005 Mary Lea Bandy retired, Deborah Wye, Chief Curator of Prints and Illustrated books took over as head of the committee and the Modern Women's Fund, the full realization of the committee as a planning group, was established. Over the next two years, the departments continued deep research into their holdings, the committee grew in size, and it became clear that something tangible needed to be put together from all of this work. It was unanimously decided that a book was the best way to collect all of the findings in one place and begin to honor MoMA's rich history of female curators, founders, administrators, philanthropists and artists. This would only be the first phase of the project, but it would be a handy reference, a unified statement of purpose and a cornerstone to build from. In 2007 Cornelia Butler, Chief Curator of Drawings, took over and the group hosted the Feminist Future Symposium. The event was a sold out success, featuring lectures and exhibitions by scholars, students, artists and activists with the intent of, as Alexandra Schwartz, co-editor of the book and curator in the Department of Drawings, put it, "fully immersing us and our audience in the subject matter." More specifically, asking questions about gender in art, what "women's art" means and the feminist voice in art history. These discussions were enlightening for the committee, who hoped to grasp what it meant to truly include women in the history and dialogue on modern art, and provided a

platform to publicly announce the book, *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, for the first time.

The project was never intended to stop there but now a clear path had been formed. The book would launch in June 2010 and be accompanied by an increased presence of women's art in the galleries, new acquisitions by female artists on display in public spaces and a six-month unfolding of exhibitions based on the book. As holes were identified in the collections and it was time to start filling them in with new acquisitions or preservation work, the anonymous donor came forth to take a more central role in the process. She was identified as Sarah Peter, an artist and philanthropist with a particular interest in feminist art. With her support at the head of the Modern Women's Fund, curators were allocated funding to plan the first wave of exhibitions to unfold around the release of the book.

Performance artist Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* is the first to open, three months before the book would launch, and features a performance by Abramović and a team that would reperform several of the most popular works of her career. Showcasing a performance art retrospective presents an interesting challenge, and Abramović's career has been so influential to the genre that curators had to find a way to bring a career's worth of works back to life. This undertaking created a buzz about the museum and set the tone for the unveiling of the book and subsequent exhibitions. The departments of Drawings and Prints and Illustrated Books collaborated for *Mind and Matter: Alternative Abstractions, 1940s to Now*—which includes work from five female artists that “features idiosyncratic, organic forms, materials that appear to be malleable and pliable, craft-based techniques,

and, in many cases, an engagement with gender and sexuality (moma.org).” The Fund allowed for new acquisitions of Louise Bourgeois’s drawing *Femme Maison* (1947), sculptures, prints and drawings by Alina Szapocznikow, and drawings and prints by Atsuko Tanaka to be included. The Department of Architecture and Design will launch Counter Space: Design and the Modern Kitchen, featuring the “Frankfurt Kitchen,” designed in 1926–27 by the architect Grete Schütte-Lihotzky. Since Lihotzky created this design for post-WWI public housing estates, it has become the definitive model for the kitchen as we know it today and the center of much debate over gender roles. The Photography Department is seeking to rechart the history of photography from the very beginning to the present through the lens of the female photographer with *Pictures by Women: A History of Modern Photography*. The Fund is also supporting new acquisitions of sculptor and printmaker Lee Bontecou’s work, and will announce more exhibitions and acquisitions throughout the year.

As the MoMA Film Department sifted through their holdings, from the obvious to the nearly forgotten, Sally Berger, curator and Modern Women’s Fund committee member, and other Film Department curators began to make decisions regarding the criteria by which they would assess the female artists in their collection. Who would make it into the book? Who would make it into the larger exhibition plan, and how would they allocate the funding that would come as a result of the initiative? For the book it became first a question of the artist’s involvement or influence over a particular artistic impulse or movement, and second of their ties to MoMA and how valuable they had been or could be to the collection and to the institution as a whole. The selection was eventually narrowed down to five artists, all of whom played a

central role in a particular movement of film and exerted control over her own career. Five MoMA Film curators were selected to write essays on these women for the book, making the case that each played a crucial role in film history, and begin an exhibition or preservation plan for the artist's work.

Laurence Kardish wrote on his long-time friend and supporter of the museum, Agnès Varda. Varda began her career as a photographer in Paris and upon an unassuming foray into moving image with her first film, *Le Pointe Courte*, found herself surrounded by the Cahiers du Cinema and stylistically influencing La Nouvelle Vague. Varda's career has been a constant evolution, most recently into installation art. The Fund is allowing for possible restoration work on Varda films in the collection, the acquisition of her film *Lions Love*, and the exhibition of her installation art down the road. Also on the international front, Jytte Jensen selected Danish film star Asta Nielsen for her essay. Iris Barry traveled to Germany and the Soviet Union in the 1930s and acquired Nielsen's films as the first in the MoMA film collection. Denmark and Germany were at the forefront of respected filmmaking at the time, and Die Asta was arguably the biggest name, so acquisition garnered international attention and set the standard for MoMA's film collection.

Furthermore, Nielsen was completely in charge of her career, from the directors she chose to work with to every aspect of her image. She advanced her own career and it is often said that she singlehandedly influenced the acting technique of the time.

Sally Berger had the task of writing not only about American avant-garde filmmaker Maya Deren, but also on the powerful female avant-garde and experimental filmmakers who followed her. *The Legacy of Maya Deren* is to be the

first exhibition resulting from the Film Department's work, and will be based around the influence of Deren on Carolee Schneemann, Su Friedrich and Barbara Hammer. Sally Berger's notes state that Deren began a visionary movement during a time of stagnation in American cinema and that "Her pioneering formal innovations—performing in front of the camera, using semiautobiographical content, and meshing literary, psychological, and ethnographic disciplines with rigorous technique—inspired future generations of experimental filmmakers."

Jenny He's essay on Lillian Gish covers her seventy-five year, 100+ film career, delving beyond her best-known Biograph work with D. W. Griffith to her move out of silent film and into stronger character roles. Half of Gish's films, particularly her earliest work with Griffith, already reside in the MoMA collection and an exhibition is planned for late 2010. Finally, Anne Morra wrote on Ida Lupino's pioneering career as an actress who became the first female director in Hollywood. At the height of the mid-1940s studio system, Lupino turned down a role and was put on suspension as an actress. She reacted by forming her own independent production company called The Filmmakers, through which she became producer, director and writer of several films and a feminist voice in Hollywood. Her films range from distinctly issue-driven pictures such as *Outrage*, a controversial film about rape, to the classic noir film *The Hitch-Hiker*. She went on to have a long, successful career directing for film and television, and is an integral part of MoMA's film collection. The Fund will cover any necessary work and exhibitions by these and other artists not included in the book as the need presents itself.

The curators, artists and philanthropists who have become involved in the project as a result of Sarah Peter's donation, have found themselves rehashing specific debates as old as MoMA itself. These stem from questions of whether or not art has a sex, of the process of differentiation when it comes to feminism in art and what a female presence looks like at a place like MoMA. This project seeks on the grandest scale to rewrite art history, focusing on the women who pioneered but were often long left out of the discussion on modern art. The process of producing a multi-departmental work and collaborative exhibitions was the first step, but ideologically this endeavor goes beyond any book or admission ticket. Right now, in the "third wave" of feminism, when the movement is far less active and vocal, our cultural institutions are looking backwards at what has been written. Karen Staser, Founder of the National Women's History Museum, said at the announcement of the museum's passing in the Senate, "A better world awaits the generation that absorbs what women and men have to share about life from a joint perspective." The History Museum will be the first of its kind and seeks a similar result to Sarah Peter's: to rewrite history books with women included. Though the two endeavors are operating separately, this movement could help solidify the Museum of Modern Art's position as a forward-thinking institution and help it to avoid stagnation under a bureaucratic system.