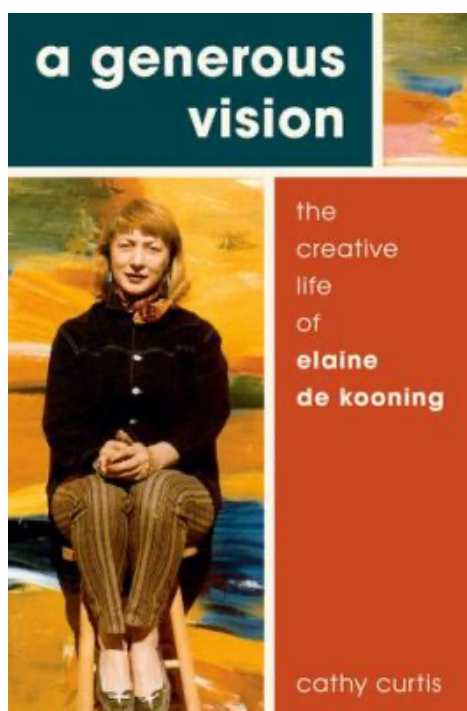


A Generous Vision: The Creative Life of Elaine de Kooning

by Cathy Curtis. Oxford University Press, October 2017. 304 p. ill. ISBN 9780190498474 (h/c), \$34.95.

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Renowned art critic and action painter Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989) attempted to write her memoirs, even securing a publishing contract, but the project never came to fruition. She intended to feature dramatic and humorous details and loathed the thought of the rambling and evaluation that might result if others took on the task. So, how does Cathy Curtis's biography of the artist measure up in this entry in the Oxford Cultural Biographies series focusing on American creatives? The answer may have pleased de Kooning, but may limit the book's usefulness to readers looking for serious analysis in this first-ever biography of the artist.

Curtis careens, but with panache, through the life of the vivacious, free-spirited Cedar Tavern regular, fulfilling the Oxford series' goal of appealing to the general public. *A Generous Vision* feels chatty because of the generous quoting of dialogue. At times the book is heartwarming thanks to anecdotes like President John

F. Kennedy sketching a cat for his daughter during a portrait sitting with de Kooning, or the artist reportedly inviting a mugger in for coffee. With occasional speculation and frequent repetition of details of her personal life the text verges on gossipy, an effect enhanced by paragraphs that often end with a flourish. Still, Curtis (former staff writer at the Los Angeles Times and author of the 2015 biography *Restless Ambition: Grace Hartigan, Painter*) cites sources frequently and engages in sound art-historical analysis. More of that would be preferable to details like the presence of dust bunnies in an artists' haunt.

On the topic of minutiae, unnecessary entries in the index for detective novels, telephones, and such cause the section on the artist's life to consume five pages. Contributing to the length is

duplication: for example, separate index entries exist for “on her memoir” and “memoir project.” More counterproductive for researchers is the fact that salience is often overlooked. For instance, the artist’s childlessness appears under D for “decision not to have children”; the profeminist’s opinion of the National Museum of Women in the Arts’ appears not under N but under O for “opinion of National...”

Personal photographs and reproductions of the artist’s work are printed in color—capturing her vivid palette—and in black and white. One criticism is that a full page is not warranted when image quality is poor, which is the case for the first three photos in the book.

This biography of de Kooning’s storied life is recommended lightly for public library collections and as a supplement to scholarly book collections.