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WHO WERE THE GREATEST WOMEN ARTISTS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY?  
A QUANTITATIVE INVESTIGATION

David W. Galenson

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**ABSTRACT**

Recent decades have witnessed an outpouring of research on the contributions of women artists. But as is typical in the humanities, these studies have been qualitative, and consequently do not provide a systematic evaluation of the relative importance of different women artists. A survey of the illustrations of the work of women artists contained in textbooks of art history reveals that art historians judge Cindy Sherman to be the greatest woman artist of the twentieth century, followed in order by Georgia O'Keeffe, Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, and Frida Kahlo. The life cycles of these artists have differed greatly: the conceptual Sherman, Hesse, and Kahlo all arrived at their major contributions much earlier, and more suddenly, than the experimental O'Keeffe and Bourgeois. The contrasts are dramatic, as Sherman produced her greatest work while in her 20s, whereas Bourgeois did not produce her greatest work until she had passed the age of 80. The systematic measurement of this study adds a dimension to our understanding of both the role of women in twentieth-century art and the careers of the major figures.

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## Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed an intense interest in the role of women in the art of the past. Scores of museum exhibitions have been devoted to the work of women artists, and scores of monographs have examined the contributions of women to our artistic heritage.

As is common in the humanities, however, the scholarly attention devoted to the role of women artists has been qualitative rather than quantitative. As a result, we now have a large amount of scholarship that analyzes the contributions of individual women artists, or of particular groups of women artists, but we do not have studies that provide systematic evaluation of the relative importance of different women artists. The present study will begin to remedy this deficiency.

Specifically, this study will investigate the question of which women made the greatest contributions to art during the past century. The choice of this time period reflects the fact that women played a far greater role in the art of the twentieth century than in any earlier time. So for example the third edition of Nancy Heller's *Women Artists*, published in 1997, a textbook written "to provide a richly illustrated overview of some of the most interesting professional women painters and sculptors in the Western world, from the Renaissance to the present," devotes fully 144 pages to the twentieth century, substantially more than the total of only 97 pages devoted to all earlier centuries. This concentration is a product of the fact that the twentieth century witnessed, in Heller's words, "a profusion of women artists."<sup>1</sup>

Following the practice used in a series of earlier studies, the present investigation will measure the relative importance of the members of a sample of artists by the number of illustrations of their work contained in art history textbooks. As discussed in those earlier

studies, this measure draws on the judgments of large numbers of art scholars as to which artists, and works of art, are most central to the narrative of the history of art.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, a number of scholars have specifically cited textbooks of art history as evidence of the neglect of women artists in earlier times. So for example Thomas McEvilley observed that the 1970 edition of H. W. Janson's *History of Art* contained no mention of any woman artist, and Nancy Heller noted that the 1986 edition of Janson's book contained only 19 illustrations of works by women.<sup>3</sup> One indication of the recent increase in the attention paid to women artists is that the 2007 edition of Janson's book contains 40 illustrations of works by women. The present study will use not only the latest edition of Janson's text, but also more than two dozen other recent textbooks, to produce the first systematic survey of the judgments of art scholars on the relative importance of the greatest women artists of the twentieth century.

### The Ranking

This study began by identifying all the women artists who worked in the twentieth century who had a total of four or more illustrations of their art included in five leading textbooks of art history published from 2000 to 2005.<sup>4</sup> There were 25 such artists. A data set was then created by recording all illustrations of the work of these 25 artists in 29 textbooks of art history published in English from 1995 on.<sup>5</sup> All of these books examined the art of at least the entire twentieth century, so that all 25 artists were eligible to appear in every book, regardless of when they worked.

A ranking of the ten artists (actually eleven, because of a tie) whose work was most often illustrated in the 29 texts is presented in Table 1. Overall, the ranking is dominated by Americans. In addition to the four artists who were born in the United States, three others -

Bourgeois, Hesse, and Nevelson - spent their careers in the US. Five of the 11 women are alive today; these range in age from Bourgeois (95) to Sherman (52). The youngest woman in the table, Cindy Sherman, is also the highest ranked.

### Careers

This paper will examine the nature and timing of the major contributions of the five highest-ranked women in Table 1. The data set constructed for this study can help to identify those contributions, by pointing to when they occurred - the periods in these artists' careers that are most heavily represented by textbook illustrations.

Table 2 shows the five-year period in the career of each of the top five women from Table 1 from which the textbooks include the largest number of illustrations. There is substantial variation in the ages at which these periods occurred. Thus whereas Sherman's best five-year period ended when she was 28, and those of both Kahlo and Hesse ended when they were 34, O'Keeffe did not complete her best period until the age of 43, and Bourgeois, remarkably, did not complete hers until the age of 84. Why the timing of these artists' most important periods differed so radically is one topic of interest for this study.

The following sections of this paper will consider each of the artists listed in Table 2, in chronological order of their prime periods as identified in that table.

### Georgia O'Keeffe

I think that what I have done is something rather unique in my time and that I am one of the few who gives our country any voice of its own - I claim no credit - it is only that I have seen with my own eye and that I couldn't help seeing with my own eye.

Georgia O'Keeffe, 1945<sup>6</sup>

Georgia O'Keeffe was an experimental artist, whose paintings were based on vision.

When the director of the Cleveland Art Museum asked her to write a description of one of her paintings, she protested that “It is easier for me to paint it than write about it and I would so much rather people would look at it than read about it. I see no reason for painting anything that can be put into any other form as well.” But the brief account she then provided ended by stressing the central importance for her art of her perception of color: “Color is one of the great things in the world that makes life worth living to me and as I have come to think of painting it is my effort to create an equivalent with paint color for the world – life as I see it.”<sup>7</sup>

The visual basis of O’Keeffe’s art was clear to those who knew her work. So for example in 1927 the critic Lewis Mumford observed that O’Keeffe’s art originated in images rather than ideas: “hers is a direct expression upon the plane of painting, and not an illustration by means of painting of ideas that have been verbally formulated.”<sup>8</sup> A decade later the painter Marsden Hartley agreed, writing of O’Keeffe that “She is satisfied that appearance tells everything and that the eye is a better vehicle of truth for picture purposes than the mind can ever be.”<sup>9</sup>

O’Keeffe painted to capture the beauty and color she saw around her. Her sensitivity to the colors and shapes of her surroundings is manifest in the vivid description of her home in New Mexico that she sent to a friend, the painter Arthur Dove, in 1942:

I wish you could see what I see out the window – the earth pink and yellow cliffs to the north – the full pale moon about to go down in an early morning lavender sky behind a very long beautiful tree covered mesa to the west – pink and purple hills in front and the scrubby fine dull green cedars – and a feeling of much space – It is a very beautiful world.<sup>10</sup>

The strength of O’Keeffe’s feeling for the beauty of the world led her to defend her artistic goal in an era when beauty in art had fallen out of fashion, as in 1960 she remarked that “I’m one of the few artists, maybe the only one today, who is willing to talk about my work as pretty. I don’t

mind it being pretty.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, when it had become fashionable for artists to declare that their work expressed their emotions, O’Keeffe persisted in maintaining that her art was visual: “I never think about expressing anything. I’m not so wonderful that my thoughts should be expressed that way.”<sup>12</sup>

O’Keeffe did not plan her paintings. A *New Yorker* profile in 1929 reported that “She does no under-painting on her canvases; she rarely even blocks out her design in advance.”<sup>13</sup> O’Keeffe believed that achievements were made in a body of work rather than in individual paintings: “Success doesn’t come with painting one picture. It results from taking a certain definite line of action and staying with it.”<sup>14</sup> Throughout her career, she tended to work in series, with multiple variations on a particular theme. Sometimes these would comprise four or five paintings done within a few weeks, but sometimes they were more extended. So for example between 1946 and 1960 she made more than 20 paintings of the patio door of her adobe house in Abiquiu. She told Katharine Kuh that she had bought the house because of that door: “I’m always trying to paint that door – I never quite get it. It’s a curse – the way I feel I must continually go on with that door.” She couldn’t explain why the door interested her: “I wish I knew. It fascinates me.” When Kuh asked why she painted in series, O’Keeffe replied that “I have a single-track mind. I work on an idea for a long time. It’s like getting acquainted with a person, and I don’t get acquainted easily.”<sup>15</sup>

Even O’Keeffe’s abstract paintings were based on the observation of nature, for they grew out of progressive simplification of the shapes of real objects over the course of a series of works: “Sometimes I start in very realistic fashion, and as I go from one painting to another of the same thing, it becomes simplified till it can be nothing but abstract.”<sup>16</sup> The process of

simplification was gradual, based on visual inspection: “Details are confusing. It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things.”<sup>17</sup>

O’Keeffe believed that artists had to develop slowly. In 1928, at the peak of her accomplishment, she told an interviewer that “The notion that you can make an artist overnight, that there is nothing but genius, and a dash of temperament in artistic success is a fallacy. Great artists don’t just happen, any more than writers, or singers, or other creators. They have to be trained, and in the hard school of experience.”<sup>18</sup> In 1960, looking back on 40 years of O’Keeffe’s art, the curator Daniel Catton Rich observed that her style had evolved gradually: “Her work shows a complete organic growth. There have been no sudden reversals, no abrupt shifts in style.”<sup>19</sup> Like many other experimental artists O’Keeffe did not believe in the reality of achieving success, but instead valued the process of seeking greater clarity of vision: “Whether you succeed or not is irrelevant, there is no such thing. Making your unknown known is the important thing – and keeping the unknown always beyond you. Catching, crystalizing your simpler clearer vision of life – only to see it turn stale compared to what you vaguely feel ahead – that you must always keep working to grasp.”<sup>20</sup> When the Museum of Modern Art honored her with a retrospective exhibition in 1946, O’Keeffe told the responsible curator that she was flattered, but then immediately returned to her dissatisfaction with her achievement: “I can not honestly say to myself that I could not have been better.”<sup>21</sup>

The period the textbooks identify as that of O’Keeffe’s most important work was marked both by her paintings of New York and by a continuation of the series of large paintings of individual flowers that she had begun in 1924.<sup>22</sup> O’Keeffe had moved to New York in 1918, but it was only in 1926 that she began to paint the city, with simplified and often elongated



geometric shapes of the skyscrapers dramatically illuminated, and sometimes partially obliterated, by reflected sunlight or neon signs. The familiar magnification of the flower paintings was also influenced by the pace of life in the city, as O’Keeffe later recalled that “I said to myself - I’ll paint what I see - what the flower is to me but I’ll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it - I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see the flowers.”<sup>23</sup>

### Frida Kahlo

The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint always whatever passes through my head, without any other consideration.

Frida Kahlo<sup>24</sup>

Frida Kahlo’s art was dominated by images of herself to an extent that may be unique among important painters. More than one third of all her paintings, and all of her most celebrated paintings, were self-portraits. Thus 24 of the 25 illustrations of her work in the textbooks surveyed for this study were self-portraits, including her most famous single painting, *The Two Fridas* (1939), which accounts for seven of the illustrations. Kahlo used her own image as a vehicle to explore not only her own life, but also a wide range of issues involving religion, politics, and society. On the occasion of a recent exhibition of her work, Tanya Barron stressed the great variety and range of Kahlo’s artistic sources:

Frida Kahlo built up a complex symbolic language, a repertoire of signs and emblems... which she gave a particularly personal and often highly idiosyncratic character. Her visual language is eclectic, encompassing European fine art traditions from Bosch and Brueghel to avant-garde movements such as Surrealism, Mexican colonial-era art, the Mexican avant-garde of her contemporaries (including her husband Diego Rivera), popular and folkloric Mexican art and culture, as well as belief systems as different as Catholicism, Eastern spirituality, Aztec culture and

religion, ancient Egyptian belief, European philosophy, psychoanalysis and Communism. She often combines varied references together in a single image, speaking on multiple levels and creating an especially private and cryptic language.<sup>25</sup>

Much of the critical analysis of Kahlo's work involves its relationship with Surrealism.

When the poet and founder of Surrealism, André Breton, visited Mexico in 1938 and saw Kahlo's art, he declared that she in fact belonged to that movement: "her work has blossomed forth, in her latest paintings, into pure surreality, despite the fact that it had been conceived without any prior knowledge whatsoever of the ideas motivating the activities of my friends and myself."<sup>26</sup> Although Kahlo welcomed the attention, and placed *The Two Fridas* in a major Surrealist exhibition in Mexico City in 1940, she never fully accepted her categorization as a Surrealist, and in later years vehemently denied the affiliation altogether. But she did recognize that her work shared some common ground with that of the Europeans:

I adore surprise and the unexpected. I like to go beyond realism. For this reason, I would like to see lions come out of that bookshelf and not books. My painting naturally reflects these predilections and also my state of mind. And it is doubtless true that in many ways my painting is related to that of the Surrealists. But I never had the intention of creating a work that could be considered to fit in that classification.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of the fact that Kahlo had developed her art independently, her biographer Hayden Herrera argued that Surrealism affected her work in what became her prime period:

Frida was surely one for whom contact with Surrealism served to reinforce both a personal and a cultural inclination toward fantasy. Though she was a Surrealist discovery rather than a Surrealist, there is a definite change in her work after her direct contact with Surrealism in 1938... After 1938 her paintings become more complex, more penetrating, more disturbingly intense.<sup>28</sup>

After her participation in the International Exhibition of Surrealism in 1940, Kahlo gained increasing recognition, and her paintings rose in value. At the same time, some of the intensity of her earlier work was lost. Herrera observed that the paintings she produced after 1940 were “generally larger-scale than those she had done in the 1930s, and they appear to have been aimed at a broader audience, to be less like private talismans or votive images.”<sup>29</sup> Her growing reputation also led to more commissions from patrons: “Frida’s portraits of others are almost always less vibrant and original than her subject paintings and self-portraits - perhaps because, in painting a specific individual, she did not feel free to project all her complex fantasy and feeling - her ‘own reality’ - onto the image.”<sup>30</sup>

Kahlo’s distinctive contribution lay in the difference between her symbolism and that of the European Surrealists. Unlike Surrealism, which attempted to create visual metaphors for the experience of dreams and the unconscious, Kahlo’s art was a personal and direct expression of her thoughts and emotions. As Herrera observed, Kahlo’s symbolism was “almost always autobiographical and relatively simple.” In 1952 Kahlo herself declared that “I do not know whether my paintings are Surrealist or not, but I do know that they are the frankest expression of myself.”<sup>31</sup> The next year she made a key distinction in distancing herself from the Surrealists’ goals: “They thought I was a Surrealist, but I wasn’t. I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality.”<sup>32</sup>

Breton stressed the expressive power of Kahlo’s art by describing it as “a ribbon around a bomb.”<sup>33</sup> By effectively making Surrealism an autobiographical project, Kahlo later became a model for many younger women artists who wanted to use their art to express their own feelings about their lives and their societies. So for example a Kahlo self-portrait that showed her

growing from the earth like a plant was a direct inspiration for the celebrated earth/body sculptures the performance artist Ana Mendieta made during the 1970s.<sup>34</sup> David Cottington recently noted that Tracey Emin's trademark works are related to Kahlo's art:

Her quilted, embroidered, and appliquéd blankets with their angry, desperate confessional declarations look back to the tradition of women's craft activities, and to the example of Frida Kahlo's autobiographical, populist symbolism and style. Such works affectingly, but also knowingly, restage Kahlo's manner and her suffering persona in the contemporary idiom of street and fashion-magazine graphics or political murals.<sup>35</sup>

Peter Wollen observed that the themes of Kahlo's art had a powerful appeal for women artists in the 1970s:

Her art was intimate, private and personal; it was about her identity as a woman and a Mexican; it was about the body - very specifically the female body and, even more specifically, her own; it was about babies or the lack of them, clothes and their signification, the contradictory projection of both strength and weakness. It was in violent contrast to the pretentious asceticism of much late modernism, to its vatic emptiness, to the tedious aspiration of being high art, to its ultra-refined painterliness.

Even more generally, Wollen noted that Kahlo's art addressed a number of concerns that were central to the advanced art of the 1970s and beyond: "Whether we look at Kahlo from the vantage-point of women's art, Third World art or surrealism; whether we are interested in the appropriation of vernacular forms or the crossover between outsider and fine art, we will find Kahlo's paintings staring us right in the face."<sup>36</sup>

### Eva Hesse

First feel sure of idea, then the execution will be easier.

Eva Hesse, notebook entry, 1965<sup>37</sup>

Trained initially as a painter, Eva Hesse began to make sculptures in 1964, just six years before her death at the age of 34. Yet as a young artist in New York, she was in contact with some of the leading advanced artists of the late 1960s, including Robert Smithson, Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, and Robert Ryman. Hesse's exposure to these artists profoundly affected her art, and between 1966 and 1970 she created new sculptural forms that were based on Minimalism, the dominant movement of the time, but that made distinctive departures from it.

Minimalist sculpture typically used unyielding materials, including aluminum, steel, and wood, to make rigid, austere, geometric forms. In contrast, Hesse used unconventional and often pliable materials, such as wire, latex, and rubber tubing, to make related forms that were often irregular and imprecise in appearance. These included elements drawn from the work of a number of artists who had influenced her. So for example the tangled ropes in some of her works were often considered three-dimensional references to Jackson Pollock's dripped webs of paint. The frequent repetition of elements within her sculptures was inspired by LeWitt: "Series, serial, serial art, is another way of repeating absurdity." The tubing that projects out from the empty frames that Hesse mounted on walls may have been extensions of the hooks that break the surface of some of Jasper Johns' paintings. And the humor that Hesse considered to be basic to her work may have originated in the work of Claes Oldenburg.<sup>38</sup>

Hesse was determined to make an important contribution to art. This ambition was reflected in her desire to make radical departures, as for example in 1960, at the age of 24, she wrote in her diary that "I will paint *against* every rule I or others have invisibly placed."<sup>39</sup> Although she did not know where to start to do this at the time, her determination led to quick results once she solved that problem. Hesse first began experimenting with sculpture in

December of 1964, using discarded materials in the abandoned factory where she and her husband, who was also a sculptor, were working during a year in Germany. Barely more than a year later, in January of 1966, she made *Hang-Up*, the large wall-mounted sculpture that has become her most celebrated individual work, and that accounts for five of the illustrations of her work in the texts used for this study.<sup>40</sup> Shortly before her death, Hesse told an interviewer that *Hang-Up* was “I think the most important statement I made.” Describing it as “really an idea piece,” Hesse remarked that “It’s the most ridiculous structure I have ever made and that is why it is really good.”<sup>41</sup>

Hesse’s unconventional materials and irregular forms brought humor and absurdity to Minimalism, which had previously been humorless and ascetic. Rosalind Krauss summarized Hesse’s contribution as “countering the formalist dialogue of the 1960s with the message of expressionism.”<sup>42</sup> Kim Levin stressed that Hesse’s art adapted the formal tools of Minimalism to her own ends, producing “a new kind of Expressionism, abstract and Minimalist in form.”<sup>43</sup> That Hesse could make a substantial contribution to advanced art in such a brief career was a result of the conceptual nature of her art. Lucy Lippard described Hesse as “a pivotal figure and a synthesizer,” and like many other young conceptual innovators, Hesse combined previously unrelated elements to create a synthesis that yielded a novel and unexpected result.<sup>44</sup>

### Cindy Sherman

These are pictures of emotions personified, entirely of themselves  
with their own presence - not of me.

Cindy Sherman, about *Untitled Film  
Stills*, 1980<sup>45</sup>

Cindy Sherman gave up painting for photography in art school: “I was initially in school for painting and suddenly realized I couldn’t do it any more, it was ridiculous, there was nothing

more to say... [T]hen I realized I could just use a camera and put my time into an idea instead.”<sup>46</sup>

In 1977, the year after she graduated, she began to make the series of 69 photographs, *Untitled Film Stills*, that is generally considered her most important work, and accounts for more than a third of her illustrations in the texts used for this study. Each photograph in the series portrayed Sherman as a character in what appeared to be 1940s, ‘50s, and ‘60s B-movies. Rosalind Krauss explained that the point of the *Film Stills* was “the simulacral nature of what they contain, the condition of being a copy *without* an original.”<sup>47</sup> Sherman intended her photographs to be unconvincing imitations of publicity film stills from the era: “My ‘stills’ were about the fakeness of role-playing as well as contempt for the domineering ‘male’ audience who would mistakenly read the images as sexy.”<sup>48</sup>

Throughout her career, Sherman has used herself as a model. Her photographs are not self-portraits, however, because the costumes and settings clearly signal that in each case she is playing a role. Precisely what the role is remains unclear: “I didn’t want to title the photographs because it would spoil the ambiguity.”<sup>49</sup> This ambiguity allows many interpretations, and Sherman’s work has become the basis for an imposing body of analysis by a large number of scholars and critics, who use her photographs to consider how women have been represented, and more generally how identity is constructed, through the media. As early as 1990, Arthur Danto remarked that “Sherman’s brilliant appropriation, in the late 1970s, of the format of the ‘still,’ with its implied narrative in which she was the nameless starlet, became the focus of so much neostructuralist, radical feminist, Frankfurt School Marxist and semiological hermeneutics that one is convinced there must be whole programs of study in institutions of higher learning in which one can major, or even earn a doctorate, in Sherman Studies.”<sup>50</sup>

Although Sherman does not reject the academic analysis of her work, she denies that it captures her intentions: “I’ve only been interested in making the work and leaving the analysis to the critics. I could really agree with many different theories in terms of their formal concepts but none of it really had any basis in my motivation for making the work.” She pays little attention to criticism of any kind: “It’s the way I feel about the art world and the critical world; after being around for a while, I don’t take anything that seriously in this field. So I’m making fun of it all, myself included.” She wants her art to reach a wide audience: “I just want to be accessible. I don’t like the elitism of a lot of the art that looks like it’s so difficult, where you must get the theory behind it before you can understand it.”<sup>51</sup> It was this concern with accessibility that led her to mimic movie ads: “I wanted to imitate something out of the culture, and also make fun of the culture while I was doing it.”<sup>52</sup>

Sherman entered the art world at a time when it was in a highly conceptual phase, and Peter Schjeldahl noted that she and some of her peers added to its visual vocabulary: “it was precisely in the art historical muddle of the early ‘70s that Sherman and her keenest contemporaries found their orientation, not by rejecting conceptualism but by bringing a particular grist to its mill: images.”<sup>53</sup> Sherman and others made photography more central to contemporary art at the same time that they changed the practices of the genre. Lisa Phillips explained that, “Cindy Sherman, along with other contemporaries, such as Richard Prince, Barbara Kruger, and Sherrie Levine, have diverted the official course of the history of photography by rejecting its most revered conventions: the sacredness of the photographic paper, of the camera, the perfect exposure, and the immaculate print.”<sup>54</sup> Sherman emphasizes that she



considers herself an artist who uses photography rather than a photographer.<sup>55</sup> She is not concerned, for example, with whether she takes a photograph or has someone take it for her.<sup>56</sup>

After the black and white *Stills* of 1977-80, Sherman began to use color, initially to make pictures of herself in more elaborate costumes and settings, and later to make pictures of dolls, often grotesquely mangled, and often featuring sexual themes. Yet her early work is disproportionately represented in the textbooks, and the *Untitled Film Stills* are likely to remain her most important contribution. Sherman's most important innovation lies in her nostalgic use of the formulaic methods used for movie stills in the 1950s. Her later creation of shocking images is likely to prove less distinctive than her early images of apparently familiar scenes. In Sherman's words, the *Stills* "should trigger your memory so that you feel you have seen it before. Some people have told me they remember the movies that one of my images derives from, but in fact I had no film in mind at all."<sup>57</sup> This parallels Jeff Koons' statement about his celebrated *Banality* statues, "where I did not work with direct ready-made objects but created objects with a sense of ready-made inherent in them."<sup>58</sup> Sherman explained that she stopped making the *Stills* when she ran out of clichés.<sup>59</sup> And it was in large part because of the use of clichés that her early work had such a great impact on an art world that valued novel uses of irony.

In a review of an exhibition in 1989, Schjeldahl remarked on the beauty and range of Sherman's pictures, and predicted that "she may very well emerge in eventual retrospect as the single most important American artist of the '80s."<sup>60</sup> Sherman has had enormous success. In 1987, at the age of 33, she had a full-scale exhibition at New York's Whitney Museum, and in 1997 the Museum of Modern Art in New York presented an exhibition, sponsored by the pop

singer Madonna, in honor of the museum's acquisition of a complete set of the *Untitled Film Stills*. Sherman's work has also helped to raise the position of photography in the art world. Thus in 1987 the curator of her Whitney exhibition claimed that "She has accomplished what photographers have been pursuing for a century - true parity with the other two arts."<sup>61</sup> And in 1995, a dealer's guide to the art market commented that "Cindy Sherman has performed some sort of modern-day alchemy. She has convinced the art market that her photographs should be priced like paintings."<sup>62</sup>

### Louise Bourgeois

I am a long-distance runner. It takes me years and years and years  
to produce what I do.

Louise Bourgeois<sup>63</sup>

Louise Bourgeois was a contemporary of the Abstract Expressionists - she was born a year before Jackson Pollock - and like them she spent her career working experimentally to create a visual art that would explore the unconscious. Her statements about her art parallel the attitudes of her contemporaries. In 1954 she described art as a quest into the unknown: "The finished work is often a stranger to, and sometimes very much at odds with what the artist felt or wished to express when he began." Fifteen years later, she stressed that an entire career was properly devoted to a single elusive goal: "for a lifetime I have wanted to say the same thing. Inner consistency is the test of the artist. Repeated disappointment is what keeps him jumping." Two decades later, her work still hadn't reached a conclusion: "That's why I keep going. The resolution never appears: it's like a mirage." She did not make art for pleasure, but out of necessity: "I do sculpture because I *need*, not because I have fun. I have no fun at all - everything I do is a battlefield, a fight to the finish." Artistic style emerged from abnegation and adversity:

“My style, the way I work comes from all the temptations I have resisted, all the fun I didn’t have, all the regrets.” In 1993, the 82-year-old artist explained to an interviewer that the prestige of having her work exhibited in the United States pavilion at the Venice Biennale was not important to her: “Personally, no exhibition is important. The progression in the work is important. The self-knowledge that I get and that all artists get - I’m not special - the self-knowledge is its own reward.” She believed firmly in the value of experience: “You know, artists improve... Otherwise, what’s the use of working?”<sup>64</sup>

Like the Abstract Expressionists, Bourgeois was deeply influenced early in her career by Surrealism. But from her art diverged significantly from the main concerns of Abstract Expressionism. The dominant genre of that movement was painting, but Bourgeois early gave up painting for sculpture. William Rubin commented that “The organic, biomorphic language of the abstract side of Surrealist art *wants* to be three-dimensional, wants materials of more organic allusiveness than paint. Louise Bourgeois understood this, and picked up where certain veins of Surrealist art had left off.”<sup>65</sup> From the beginning of her career, Bourgeois’ exploration of the unconscious was more intensely personal and autobiographical than those of the Abstract Expressionists. Thus in 1994 she stated that “All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects have found their inspiration in my childhood.” She told a critic that one of her better-known sculptures, *The Destruction of the Father*, was made “to exorcise the fear. And after it was shown – there it is – I felt like a different person. Now, I don’t want to use the term *thérapeutique*, but an exorcism *is* a therapeutic venture. So the reason for making the piece was catharsis.”<sup>66</sup>

The art world's recognition of the importance of Bourgeois' work came gradually and late in her career. In 1971, when asked whether she had received as much recognition of her work as she would like, Bourgeois answered "No. But recognition will come in time, and this is enough for me."<sup>67</sup> Ten years later, when Bourgeois was 70, the critic Kay Larson chose Bourgeois as her nominee for a feature in *Artnews* on "Artists the Critics are Watching." Larson explained that "Perhaps Louise Bourgeois is an idiosyncratic choice for an article on 'emerging' artists. Yet she was the first to come to mind when considering artists of high caliber whose work came to my attention during the past season."<sup>68</sup> In 1982, when Bourgeois was given an exhibition at a major museum, the critic Robert Hughes commented that "Louise Bourgeois is certainly the least-known artist ever to get a retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art." He went on to explain that two recent developments had increased interest in Bourgeois' art:

One was the collapse of the idea that art had only one way, the abstract track, forward into history. This made Bourgeois' idiosyncratic kind of late surrealism well worth examining. The second, which made it look more interesting still, was feminism. The field to which Bourgeois' work constantly returns is female experience, located in the body, sensed from within.<sup>69</sup>

Bourgeois' success in creating new visual forms has affected many younger artists. So for example the British sculptor Rachel Whiteread recently named Bruce Nauman and Bourgeois as the two greatest influences on her work, explaining "They're the yin and yang of me, the conceptual and the emotional sides."<sup>70</sup>

Although Louise Bourgeois was born more than 40 years before Cindy Sherman, Table 2 shows that her most illustrated period occurred more than a decade later than that of Sherman. As a late bloomer, Bourgeois is extraordinary even among great experimental artists, for the

most illustrated period in her career did not begin until she reached the age of 80. In 1988, she continued to maintain that art should not be made primarily from the art of the past, as in the practice of the reigning conceptual artists, but should grow out of perception and experience:

Art is not about art. Art is about life, and that sums it up. This remark is made to the whole academy of artists who have attempted to derive the art of the late 1980s, to try to relate it to the study of the history of art, which has nothing to do with art. It has to do with appropriation.<sup>71</sup>

For Bourgeois, the greatest art came with age, for with time “you become better in every way, morally, intellectually... You become better, which is really the Chinese philosophy – the wisdom of the elders.”<sup>72</sup>

### Old Masters and Young Geniuses

Conceptual innovators generally make their major contributions earlier in their careers than do experimental innovators. Table 2 shows that this is true for the artists considered here. The three conceptual artists – Sherman, Hesse, and Kahlo – began their best periods at 24, 30, and 30, respectively, whereas the experimental O’Keeffe began hers at 39, and Bourgeois at 80.

Conceptual innovators also generally make their major contributions more suddenly than their experimental counterparts. Table 3 shows that this is also true for the artists considered here. Thus 21% of Sherman’s total illustrations are of work done in her single best year, as are 30% of Hesse’s and 32% of Kahlo’s, whereas only 13% of O’Keeffe’s total illustrations, and 11% of Bourgeois’, are accounted for by their best individual years.

The composition of retrospective exhibitions provides an independent source of evidence on the timing of artists’ most important contributions. In general, the museum curators who organize these exhibitions include larger numbers of works from the periods of artists’ careers

that they consider the most important.<sup>73</sup> For comparison to the evidence of textbook illustrations, Table 4 uses the most recent major retrospective for each of the five artists to identify both the best single year and the best five-year period in their careers.

The retrospectives and the textbook illustrations yield nearly identical results for four of the artists. Thus for O'Keeffe the best single year identified by the two sources is the same; there is a difference of just one year between the two sources for Hesse and Kahlo; and there is a difference of just two years for Sherman. Similarly, the best five-year periods identified by the two sources are exactly the same for O'Keeffe and Kahlo, and they differ by just one year for both Sherman and Hesse. For these four artists it is therefore clear that the textbooks and the retrospectives agree on when in their careers they produced their most important work.

This agreement is not possible for the fifth artist, for the retrospective exhibition analyzed for Bourgeois was held at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1982, a decade before the five-year period of 1991-95 that the textbook illustrations identify as Bourgeois' best. There is some agreement between the two sources, for the single year most heavily represented in the retrospective was at age 59, just two years from one of the two years most frequently illustrated by the textbooks. But what the textbook illustrations suggest is that Bourgeois has had such a remarkably late peak in her career that the museum exhibitions have not yet caught up with her achievement.<sup>74</sup>

### Conclusion

Artistic importance depends on influence: the most important artists are those who have the greatest impact on the future course of their discipline. As many art historians have stressed, in the past discrimination made it extremely difficult for women artists to become genuinely

important. Since the 1970s this has changed, however. Not only have current women artists had greater opportunities to become influential, but some women who worked in earlier times have been rediscovered, and have had new opportunities to influence new generations of artists.

A survey of 29 textbooks found that art historians generally consider Cindy Sherman to be the most important artist of the past century. Sherman entered the art world in the late 1970s, and has had an impact not only on women's art, but also on the importance of photography, and its use in advanced art. Two of the other artists ranked in the top five by the art historians – Bourgeois and Hesse – both made their major contributions after the mid-1960s, and a third, Kahlo, has probably a greater impact on art since her rediscovery in the 1970s and '80s than she did in her own time.

This study furthermore demonstrates that the creativity of important women artists is not the exclusive domain of either the young or the old. Sherman, Hesse, and Kahlo are all conceptual artists, and all made major contributions early in their careers, whereas O'Keeffe and Bourgeois are experimental artists, and were at their best only after decades of experience. Bourgeois' case is extraordinary, for she persevered in developing her sculpture in spite of decades of neglect and indifference from the art world, and she has made her greatest work beyond the age of 80, an achievement that has been matched by few in the history of art.

Footnotes

I thank Robert Jensen for discussions of the issues treated in this paper.

1. Nancy Heller, *Women Artists*, third ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997), p. 111.
2. For discussion see David Galenson, *Artistic Capital* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 4-6.
3. Randy Rosen and Catherine Brawer, eds., *Making Their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970-85* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), p. 187; Heller, *Women Artists*, p. 8.
4. See the appendix for a list of these books.
5. See the appendix.
6. Wendy Slatkin, *The Voices of Women Artists* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993), p. 231.
7. Slatkin, *The Voices of Women Artists*, p. 226.
8. Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 264.
9. Marsden Hartley, *On Art* (New York: Horizon Press, 1982), p. 106.
10. Lisa Mintz Messinger, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001), p. 141.
11. Katharine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 194.
12. Hunter Drohojowska-Philp, *Full Bloom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), p. 450.
13. Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics*, p. 303.
14. Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics*, p. 288.
15. Kuh, *The Artist's Voice*, pp. 190-91.
16. Lloyd Goodrich and Doris Bry, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1970), p. 19.
17. Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics*, p. 180.
18. Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics*, p. 288
19. Drohojowska-Philp, *Full Bloom*, p. 478.



20. Drohojowska-Philp, *Full Bloom*, p. 240.
21. Drohojowska-Philp, *Full Bloom*, p. 413.
22. Messinger, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, pp. 79-88; Goodrich and Bry, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, p. 17.
23. Anne Middleton Wagner, *Three Artists (Three Women)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 70.
24. Hayden Herrera, *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p. 254.
25. Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson, eds., *Frida Kahlo* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), p. 55.
26. André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting* (Boston: MFA Publications, 2002), p. 144.
27. Herrera, *Frida*, p. 255.
28. Herrera, *Frida*, pp. 256-57.
29. Herrera, *Frida*, p. 316.
30. Herrera, *Frida*, p. 322.
31. Herrera, *Frida*, pp. 258, 263,
32. Herrera, *Frida*, p. 266.
33. Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*, p. 144.
34. Whitney Chadwick, ed., *Mirror Images* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 164-67. In 1979 a friend held a costume party for which guests were to dress up as their favorite artist, and Mendieta attended as Frida Kahlo; Olga Viso, *Ana Mendieta* (Washington, DC: Hirshhorn Museum, 2004), p. 71.
35. David Cottington, *Modern Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 89.
36. Peter Wollen, *Paris Manhattan* (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 240, 246.
37. Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992), p. 32.
38. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, pp. 172, 96, 197.
39. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, p. 14.
40. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, p. 56.

41. Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with 15 Women Artists* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 180.
42. Mignon Nixon, ed., *Eva Hesse* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), p. 28.
43. Kim Levin, *Beyond Modernism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 62.
44. Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, p. 196.
45. Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz, eds., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), p. 791.
46. Michael Kimmelman, *Portraits* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), p. 146.
47. Rosalind Krauss, *Cindy Sherman, 1975-1993* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), p. 17.
48. Slatkin, *The Voices of Women Artists*, p. 312.
49. Cindy Sherman, *The Complete "Untitled Film Stills"* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2003), p. 7.
50. Peter Meyer, ed., *Brushes with History* (New York: Nation Books, 2001), p. 445.
51. Slatkin, *The Voices of Women Artists*, pp. 313-16.
52. Sandy Nairne, *State of the Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1987), p. 132.
53. Peter Schjeldahl and Lisa Phillips, *Cindy Sherman* (New York: Whitney Museum, 1987), p. 7.
54. Schjeldahl and Phillips, *Cindy Sherman*, p. 13.
55. Kimmelman, *Portraits*, p. 148.
56. Sherman, *The Complete "Untitled Film Stills"*, pp. 14-15.
57. Schjeldahl and Phillips, *Cindy Sherman*, p. 14.
58. Danto, *Unnatural Wonders*, p. 293.
59. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Stills* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 14.
60. Peter Schjeldahl, *The "7" Days" Art Columns, 1988-1990* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 1990), p. 114.
61. Schjeldahl and Phillips, *Cindy Sherman*, p. 13.

62. Richard Polsky, *Art Market Guide, 1995-96 Season* (New York: D. A. P., 1995), p. 129. In 2004, a print of an early *Film Still* from an edition of ten sold at auction for \$484,000.
63. Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews 1923-1997* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), p. 261.
64. Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, pp. 66, 91, 162, 169, 218, 262, 318.
65. Deborah Wye, *Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), p. 11.
66. Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, pp. 277, 158.
67. Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, p. 97.
68. Wye, *Louise Bourgeois*, p. 33.
69. Robert Hughes, *Nothing If Not Critical* (New York: Penguin, 1990), p. 285.
70. Jackie Wullschlager, "Rachel Whiteread," *Financial Times*, (Jan. 20/21, 2007), p. W3.
71. Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, p. 166.
72. Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, p. 319.
73. David Galenson, *Painting outside the Lines: Patterns of Creativity in Modern Art* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), pp. 26-29, 181-90.
74. A major retrospective of Bourgeois' work is scheduled for 2007. I predict that her work of the early 1990s will be prominently featured in that exhibition.

Table 1: Greatest Women Artists of the Twentieth Century

Artist	Date of birth	Date of death	Country of birth	N
1. Cindy Sherman	1954	--	USA	38
2. Georgia O'Keeffe	1887	1986	USA	30
3t. Louise Bourgeois	1911	--	France	27
3t. Eva Hesse	1936	1970	Germany	27
5. Frida Kahlo	1907	1954	Mexico	25
6t. Barbara Kruger	1945	--	USA	23
6t. Jenny Holzer	1950	--	USA	23
8t. Louise Nevelson	1899	1988	Russia	22
8t. Bridget Riley	1931	--	England	22
8t. Natalia Goncharova	1881	1962	Russia	22
8t. Käthe Kollwitz	1867	1945	Germany	22

Source: This and Tables 2-3 are based on the data set constructed for this study. See the text for the method of construction, and the appendix for a list of the sources used.

Table 2: Best Five-Year Period in Each Artist's Career, by Total Illustrations in Textbooks

Artist	N	Years	Ages
1. Sherman	17	1978-82	24-28
2. O'Keeffe	13	1926-30	39-43
3t. Bourgeois	9	1991-95	80-84
3t. Hesse	24	1966-70	30-34
5. Kahlo	14	1937-41	30-34

Table 3: Best Single Year in Each Artist's Career, by Total Illustrations in Textbooks

Artist	N	Year	Age	% of total illustrations
1. Sherman	8	1978	24	21
2. O'Keeffe	4	1926	39	13
3t. Bourgeois	3	1968 1993 (tie)	57, 82	11
3t. Hesse	8	1966	30	30
5. Kahlo	8	1939	32	32

Table 4: Best Single Year and Best Five-Year Period in Each Artist's Career, by Total Works in Retrospective Exhibitions

Artist	Best Year	Age	Best 5-Year Period	Ages
1. Sherman	1980	26	1977-81	23-27
2. O'Keeffe	1926	39	1926-30	39-43
3t. Bourgeois	1970	59	1967-71	56-60
3t. Hesse	1965	29	1965-69	29-33
5. Kahlo	1938	31	1937-41	30-34

Sources: Amanda Cruz, Elizabeth Smith, and Amelia Jones, *Cindy Sherman: A Retrospective* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997).  
 Lloyd Goodrich and Doris Bry, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1970).  
 Deborah Wye, *Louise Bourgeois* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982).  
 Helen Cooper, *Eva Hesse: A Retrospective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).  
 Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson, *Frida Kahlo* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005).

Appendix. The 29 books surveyed for this study are listed here, ordered alphabetically by author's surname. The five books used to select the artists for the study are indicated by asterisks.

Adams, Laurie, *Art Across Time*, third ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2007).

\*Arnason, H. H., *History of Modern Art*, fifth ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004).

Barnes, Rachel, et. al. *The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art Book* (London: Plaidon, 1996).

Bell, Cory, *Modern Art* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2001).

Blistène, *A History of 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001).

Bocola, Sandro, *The Art of Modernism* (Munich: Prestel, 1999).

Britt, David, ed., *Modern Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

Buchholz, Elke Linda, *Women Artists* (Munich: Prestel, 2003).

Chadwick, Whitney, *Women, Art, and Society*, third ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

Cottingham, David, *Modern Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Cumming, Robert, *Art* (New York: DK Publishing, 2005).

Davies, Penelope, et. al., *Janson's History of Art*, seventh ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007).

Dawtre, Liz, et. al., eds. *Investigating Modern Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

\*Dempsey, Amy, *Art in the Modern Era* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

Foster, Hal; Rosalind Krauss; Yve-Alain Bois; and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

Freeman, Julian, *Art* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 1998).

Gilbert, Rita, *Living With Art*, fifth ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1998).

Grosenick, Uta, ed., *Women Artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Cologne: Taschen, 2005).

Heller, Nancy, *Women Artists*, third ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997).



Honour, Hugh, and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts*, sixth ed. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002).

\*Hunter, Sam; John Jacobus; and Daniel Wheeler, *Modern Art*, third ed. (New York: Vendome Press, 2004).

Johnson, Paul, *Art* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003).

\*Kemp, Martin, ed., *The Oxford History of Western Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Lucie-Smith, Edward, *Visual Arts in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).

Parmesani, Loredana, *Art of the Twentieth Century* (Milan: Skira, 2000).

Richter, Klaus, *Art* (Munich: Prestel, 2001).

\*Stokstad, Marilyn, *Art History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995).

Walther, Ingo, ed., *Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Cologne: Taschen, 2005).

Wilkins, David; Bernard Schultz; and Katheryn Linduff, *Art Past, Art Present*, third edition (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1997).