

Letter to the Editor

You Too

Behind every story of well-known artists, dealers, critics, and curators who've abused their power are those left struggling to access their self-worth. In an art world where power structures are intentionally opaque and inaccessible, individuals on the receiving end of this abuse often struggle alone. The hazy line between social and professional interactions clouds our perception of what would otherwise be deemed inappropriate or offensive behavior in the workplace. While whisper networks warn against predatory individuals and off-hand comments on Instagram sound alerts, many artists prefer to remain anonymous rather than risk career retribution or personal mischaracterization for calling out perpetrators.

Amidst the public reckoning of the #MeToo movement, why has the art world been slow to condemn sexist behavior? In 1995, when asked why they remain anonymous, the Guerilla Girls answered, "The art world is a very small place. Of course, we were afraid that if we blew the whistle on some of its most powerful people, we could kiss off our art careers."¹ While a few art professionals have been castigated by institutions or on social media, wholly upending the social acceptability of sexual misconduct in the art world is a collective burden. *New York Times* critic Amanda Hess proposes that "[o]ur assessments of men's contributions to an art form ought to be informed by the avenues they have closed off for other artists."² She argues that the myth of the artistic genius perpetuates the patriarchal narrative of art history at the expense of the disempowered.

Years ago, when a former graduate student of mine confronted a well-known artist for his sexual predation, he simply reaffirmed her accusation by stating that this was just the way things were. A successful male artist could get away with using his notability as a sexual ploy irrespective of how it affected his young admirers. In light of the current cultural moment and heightened awareness around consent, I hope things have changed. On an individual level, those of us who have been subject to abuse or have witnessed it are tasked with reexamining our personal experiences to psychically redress the shame and discomfort placed upon us by social norms. On a community level, we need to share, listen, and dialogue about sexual assault and gender inequality in order to cultivate new standards for how we treat one another, keeping in mind that the most poignant stories are often the ones that have yet to be told.

Julie Weitz with
Angella d'Avignon

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1. Guerilla Girls and Whitney Chadwick, *Confessions of the Guerilla Girls* (New York: Perennial, 1995).

2. Amanda Hess, "How the Myth of the Artistic Genius Excuses the Abuse of Women," *The New York Times*, Nov. 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/10/arts/sexual-harassment-art-hollywood.html>.