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Art History & Criticism / Meno istorija ir kritika 18
ISSN 1822-4555 (Print), ISSN 1822-4547 (Online)
https://doi.org/10.2478/mik-2022-0006

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MODERNIST GENIUS IN THE LIGHT OF THE RECEPTION OF GEORGIA O'KEEFFE'S WORK

Summary. The text analyzes the discourse on modernist genius functioning within the critical reception of the works of an American abstract painter Georgia O'Keeffe in the 1910s and 1920s. The aim is to reflect on how the understanding of O'Keeffe as an atypical artist in the masculinized reality of her time influenced the views on the ideal of genius articulated by art critics during the discussed period. The text also aims to revise some concepts regarding the painter's presence in the artistic world and the position of her artwork therein.

Keywords. Art criticism, 1920s, modernism, genius, Georgia O'Keeffe.

INTRODUCTION

Georgia O'Keeffe made her debut in 1916, when the famous New York promoter of modern art and popular photographer Alfred Stieglitz placed in his gallery, then enjoying considerable prestige, ten of her works. They were small, coal-painted abstractions of organic shapes and explicit modeling. These images reached Stieglitz accidentally, as they were sent to him by a friend of the painter, who believed in their artistic value and the need for their public presentation in what was then the center of modern art of the United States.[1] Stieglitz, captivated by O'Keeffe's work, decided to convince the artist to start a professional career, abandon her then current work as art teacher and move from North Carolina to New York. He wanted her to develop further as an artist under his wing, in a stimulating, as he hoped, circle of other artists and intellectuals with whom he maintained close contacts by providing them with intellectual and financial support. O'Keeffe's career, indeed, quickly gained significant momentum, and she became one of the most recognizable figures of the art world of the nineteen twenties, enjoying great interest from the critics and the public.[2]

Her art undoubtedly arouses interest, enjoying popularity, as has already been stated, almost from its beginnings. A lot of space has been devoted to her work and life in popular and scholarly literature. The scholarly work recounting and characterizing her art and artistic life is twofold. On the one hand, the descriptions of her work can be found in books devoted to the New York cultural scene, on which she functioned.[3] On the other hand, they are included in broader studies, dedicated exclusively to herself, characterized by their large size and discussion of more problems emerging from the reflection on her art and life.[4]

Both types of publication show the object of their description in a similar manner, emphasizing mainly the limitations and problems which the artist was facing with varying degrees of success. As a result, the studies show her art as extremely important, enjoying the interest of the public while being underappreciated by the professional art world and not receiving its proper place in historic discourse. The researchers point to the unfair assessment of her art and its general undervaluation, both throughout the artist's life and now, long after her death. They demonstrate the need for the rehabilitation of the painter, appointing her the mother of American art, making the necessary, according to them, adjustments of the place she should occupy in history.

This trend is particularly evident in the studies devoted to the reception of her paintings during the early years of O'Keeffe's career during the 1910s and 1920s. Such texts seem to testify best to the way her art is being described and the position the artist has enjoyed. This is because the reviews, made by critics who are professional representatives of the audience and are legitimized by their knowledge to give judgements of special importance, clearly manifest the way somebody's art is characterized and evaluated as well as determining its place in particular artistic reality.

Researchers involved in this issue, in the context of the reception of O'Keeffe paintings, focus on two separate problems. With their research they are trying to answer the question of how the artist's work was evaluated. Also, they are focusing on the comprehension of the choice of such, and not other, characteristics describing her art in critical texts. They are turning towards the socio-cultural terms, influencing the perception of art, its objectives, nature and possible prospects of development.

THE STATE OF RESEARCH

The oldest text characterizing the reception of O'Keeffe's art is an article by Marilyn Hall Mitchell, *Sexist Art Criticism: Georgia O'Keeffe: A Case Study.*[5] This text is based on but a few excerpts of art criticism, in which the authors treat O'Keeffe's works enthusiastically, characterizing it as an effect of the manifestation of the painter's feminine nature. Characterization of O'Keeffe's art, emerging from fortuitously picked examples, is filled with references to female body and spirit, which are to give it, as claimed by the critics, universal and supra-individual expression. Mitchell describes the reception of O'Keeffe's art as chauvinist and subscribing to a broader phenomenon of cultural discrimination against women and the devaluation of their achievements. In her opinion, Mitchell believes that in defining the nature of the artist's work as essentially feminine, the critics wanted to diminish her achievements. The author assumes that the concentration of the critics on the gender of the artist and the search for the characteristics of her painting resulting not so much from her artistic skill but from the fact of being a woman, served to demonstrate the qualitative difference between her painting and the art of men, considered by default as the correct one and professional, anchored in creativity and not physical determinism. In a similar vein, Anna C. Chave writes her text *O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze*,[6] twelve years after Mitchell.

By far the most comprehensive analysis can be found in a book by Barbara Buhler Lynes *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916–1929.*[7] The author focuses on the way in which O'Keeffe functioned on the art scene from her debut until the end of the nineteen twenties, which constituted the peak of public interest in her work, and shows all the possible examples of the reaction of art criticism on her activity. Lynes places her reflections in the context of the then contemporary artistic and social beliefs. The consequence of Lynes's speculation is to determine the major trait of the reception of the painter's work which, as was the case with previous texts, is strongly focused on her gender. However, the author does not see this as the manifestation of historical discrimination against women, but treats it as a sign of bygone times.

One of the most interesting publications about the reception of O'Keeffe's art is *Modernism and the Feminine Voice. O'Keeffe and the Women of the Stieglitz Circle* by Kathleen Pyne.[8] The author focuses directly and exclusively on the category of femininity attributed to the artists from the Stieglitz circle in reviews. She states that its use results from the then adopted concept of art as a manifestation of sexual physicality and mentality in form and color. At the same time, the author points to its roots, visible in the generally respected social order, based on the traditional division of female and male roles rooted in biological differences. The reasons for it are also found by Pyne in psychoanalysis, which was then a contemporary tool of scientific and rational background, then believed as fundamental, allowing for the legitimization of the principles of social order based on gender differences. Pyne, therefore, just as Lynes, explains

the focus on gender in O'Keeffe's reviews with the circumstances appropriate to the place and period.

One of the latest publications about the reception of O'Keeffe's art is *Equal Under the Sky: Georgia O'Keeffe and Twentieth-Century Feminism* by Linda M. Grasso.[9] The author links together reception of O'Keeffe's art with the background of feminist ideas. The book presents the painter's feminist views, projected onto the way of thinking about the women's question at the time. It explains the artist's approach to the discourse on women, including that which appears in the reception of her work. The author shows how O'Keeffe's creation of her own artistic image was connected to the way she thought about the social position of women. As Grasso notes, feminism permeated O'Keeffe's work, both its early-century version, associated with the struggle for women's universal political rights, and its 1970s incarnation, focused on cultural equality and exposing phallogocentrism. O'Keeffe's example – as a female icon – serves for Grasso as a lens to explain the continuity and changeability of American feminism. In her view, the artist's biography is an accumulation of all those issues that have been addressed by the feminist community through the 20th century, and O'Keeffe herself has experienced all the difficulties of being a woman and entering formerly male-dominated spaces. The reactions of art critics to O'Keeffe's works are presented by Grasso in a dialogue with the ideas of the women's liberation movement of the 20th century, considering them as symptoms of the then current attitudes, connected with suffragism, and later with second-wave feminism. On the one hand, they were, according to the author, the result of opposition or reserve towards gender equality, and on the other, the result of its affirmation. This publication shows the problem of gender within reception of O'Keeffe's works cross-sectionally in relation to the entire century and in constant dialogue with various gender categories.

The existing literature on the reception of O'Keeffe's art seems to focus just on one aspect, which actually occurs in all the reviews of the time, which consists in placing emphasis on the feminine nature of the painter's work. Strikingly however, in the existing state of research, the enthusiastic approach to the artist's work of the majority of analyzed reviews is ignored, remaining completely dominated by the category of gender.

THE AIM OF RESEARCH

Therefore, the purpose of this text will be to penetrate the areas of the reception of O'Keeffe's work which have not yet been explored, or have been passed over in silence. The material which will be examined will be limited to the reviews written for newspapers and magazines from the painter's debut until the late nineteen twenties, which represent the peak of her popularity. Only those texts whose authors directly refer to the category of artistic genius, which is both the most extreme manifestation of enthusiasm and a unique normative category of serious implications, will be taken into account. It serves not only as a tool for positive evaluation of activity in a given field, but is also marked by specific context resulting from the tradition of the use of this term – originally limited to men, as well as through its prism unveiling the features particularly valued in a given area and time.[10]

Genii, as believed in ancient Rome, being protective spirits, guided the fate of males, bringing them happiness. As such, they constituted beings reserved exclusively for one gender, subscribing to the tradition of patrilineality, which influenced the further understanding of the word and its historically changing meanings.[11]

Its current meaning, of general enthusiasm, or more specifically, the concept of aesthetics, was brought about by the intellectual achievements of the Middle Ages. In those times the word became a definition of a person characterized by above-average quickness of mind, although this did not have to be innate, but could also constitute something worked out in the course of education and training. The concept of genius was mainly adequate in relation to a person who could get to the bottom of the divine idea, as the final and the most competent

instance, according to the dominant conceptions of reality in the Christian era.[12]

The subsequent centuries contributed to the reflection on genius, as a category in the field of aesthetics, an even clearer gender entanglement than in the ancient times. The Renaissance understanding of genius fluctuated around the concept of objectivity, unique thoughtfulness, the skill of rational assessment of facts, allowing for ultimate separation from emotions, corresponding with the ideals of the era just like in the Middle Ages. The aim, thus, became the pursuit of truth separated from God, acting as a distinct and definite entity, independent of external factors, understood as individual and variable, and therefore biased. It was decided that objectivity is available by default only to males, their having the innate skills to separate emotions and desires from facts. It was also thought that women, emotional by nature, could not rise above their own emotionality, remaining forever in the realm of personal and absolute subjectivity.[13] As a result, the category of genius was not a property that could be possessed or developed, but rather a determination of who you are.[14]

A certain shift to these convictions occurred in the Enlightenment, when woman ceased to be tied with a lack, for example of rationalizing skills, and began to be seen as endowed with other properties than man. Still however, the category of genius was constructed in such way as to exclude women and, as was believed, their specific intrinsic qualities from its semantic field. Genius ceased to be understood as a kind of consciousness, and turned into a personality type, that allowed to manage art, to give it shape, which was completely new, expanding the existing horizon.[15] The concept expressed in such a way influenced especially the romantic paradigm. Contemporary reflection on genius owes the most to this very era. Romantic personality, seen as extremely original, nourished by imagination and instinct, underwent detailed description. It filtered current reality through its own thoughts and emotions, showing it in a completely new light, describing the world in a broader, deeper spectrum. The personality of a romantic genius has become rare and separate, non-existent among other people but next to them, unable, because of its inherent distinctiveness, to reach an agreement with the other. The genius combined the divine with the hellish, balancing on the verge of madness.[16] Although the description of the romantic genius involved many features traditionally attributed to women, including intuitiveness, emotionality or imagination, still women were not recognised as geniuses. It was motivated by the opinion that although emotional, the woman could not be, in contrast to the man, rational. The man was still seen as more complete, able to easily manipulate his rational nature as well as entering the areas of spirit, feeling and emotion which, as a rule, were distant to him, but not inaccessible.

The alienated romantic mindset has, for the first time, become so attractive that it evolved into a kind of praise, a specific recognition of one's artistic activity. The application of the category of genius in nineteenth century art criticism, which was becoming more and more influential, became kind of a normative judgment. It revealed the personal relationship of the writer to the work of the genius, and implied the manner of its reception by the public. A genius was therefore the one who significantly expanded the perspective of reality.[17]

The entanglement of genius with gender, with its centuries-old tradition, despite the various shifts, still influences the term and the ways judgments about art are made. Due to the way it functions, it is still primarily associated with the outstanding activity of men, a progressive inventiveness resulting in positive values not only for the individual, but for the surrounding reality. Its premises, that is everything the person carrying this name is to be characterized with, remain variable, being tied with the current – that is temporary – ideals of the man, the artist and the piece of art. Its application to females raises serious doubts, a surprise arising from the abnormality of its use as well as of the experience, which does not encompass genius women, as they tend to function on the periphery of the marginal, generic roles, appearing in the center only to supplement male heroes.

As a result, the use of this term forces authors to a more or less conscious manifestation of their relationship to tradition, giving not only insight into the way of thinking about the described person, but also, and perhaps above all, into their approach to the surrounding reality and in terms of the conditions required to define someone as a genius, to evaluate something in a given way, and to create different sorts of implications. As a result, the below analysis focusing on the category of artistic genius in the reception of O'Keeffe's art from the 1910s and 1920s will let us consider two issues. First, it will serve the building of a new perspective on the question of ambivalent perception of the artist, who on the one hand is treated with unusual interest by the public and researchers who treat her activity as important and groundbreaking, while requiring recognition. Secondly, it will allow insight into the specifics of the environment in which the painter functioned, and into the views on art and male and female roles, which determined the way of thinking about her work.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Selected reviews from the 1910s and 1920s (period of the great popularity of O'Keeffe, that started from her debut) will be analyzed in terms of three problems relating to the category of artistic genius, which are of interest to the author of this text. The first is the circumstances of the use of the term. The central question will relate to the application of the category, its compliance with the traditional use of the words, or breaking with it and proposing a possible redefinition. As a result of considering these issues, I want not only to learn how the authors understood the artistic genius, but above all to look at the consequences of the way it is used. I would like to reflect on their relationship to reality, if they favored a conservative point of viewing it – related to the belief in gender roles and asymmetry of the relationship between the feminine and the masculine, or they had a more liberal vision of reality breaking with the conviction of the determining role of gender on the skills of individuals and the areas in which they can operate.

The second issue to be considered is the context of the use of the category of artistic genius, the location, and therefore the profile of the paper in which the review was published and the writing practice of the given author and his or her attitude towards the observed world of art.

Finally, I will present, basing on the analyzed reviews, the reasoning through which the authors considered that O'Keeffe deserves to be labeled as artistic genius. I hope to illustrate in this place the way in which the artistic and intellectual environment of the analyzed period treated O'Keeffe and her work, what it considered to be characteristic of her, and how it influenced the recognition of her work, reconstructing as a result the accepted concepts of aesthetics and the perception of the category of genius.

DISCUSSION

The question of genius was first used with regard to O'Keeffe in the text of unknown authorship, which appeared in the conservative *New York Sun* in 1922.[18] The circumstances of its creation are extremely interesting because of several reasons. This article remains, in fact, unrelated to the presentation of the artist's work. In 1922 not only was there no retrospective of O'Keeffe's works, but nor had there been any such event in the preceding years. What's more, in those days the artist was just setting her first steps on the professional art scene, and her work had previously been exhibited only twice, in a collective debut exhibition in 1916 and in the first individual one, a year later. O'Keeffe was therefore just a budding artist, with little experience, still fighting for recognition. As a result, the use of the term of artistic genius, commonly used in relation to recognized artists with well-known reputations, seems surprising. It becomes even more interesting if we take into account the poor response of art criticism to the first exhibitions, resulting in only two reviews,[19] however favorable to the painter, though not extremely optimistic in character. Striking is also the fact that such a radical assessment was made in a conservative paper,

whose editors must have shared more traditional views of reality. In probability, it must have shared a reserved approach to the belief in the skills of women in areas traditionally connected with the activity of men. Similarly, the then emerging ideas of the new roles for women and men, promoted by leftist circles favoring different forms of emancipation, must have been distant to them, resulting in the probability that the editors and the authors of the paper were skeptical towards female capabilities to create art.[20]

It should also be noted that the text after all was not created in a vacuum but was strongly associated with the media noise built around O'Keeffe since her individual exhibition in 1917. During this time, quite a lot of thorough texts were written about her, although they were not related to her exhibitions. They were published in art magazines and art books. Their authors were members of the environment constituted around Stieglitz: Marsden Hartley, Paul Rosenfeld and Stieglitz himself.[21] The number of texts written by de facto her friends, may seem unusual; however, it was related to the fairly common practice of the Stieglitz circle, which has been found in existing research.

Undoubtedly, Stieglitz was the guiding spirit of these activities, which resulted from the vision of art he promoted. This photographer – promoter, and one of the most important representatives of pictorialism, publisher of art magazines, namely *Camera Notes, Camera Work,* and *291*, as well as the owner of the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, 291, The Intimate Gallery and An American Place, and above all, art lover, with great orientation in its novelties, wished to revive and renew the local art scene and end the monopoly of academic realist painting. He supported young experimentalists, believing that through his ventures he would give the desired shape to the art in the United States, consistent with his ideas about culture, the needs of the audience and the goals which should be realized through art. He was helping artists and intellectuals interested in the practice and the reflection on the modern concept of aesthetics. His actions oriented around the awareness of the breakthrough, required also, as he believed, a turn in the field of culture, aimed to contribute to the modernization of cultural reality and providing it with the desired direction. He sent many local painters and sculptors to Europe, believing in the inspiring power of transatlantic relations, he organized their exhibitions, supported them financially and intellectually, and finally promoted them in the local art and publishing markets. His circle included, apart from O'Keeffe, among others, the artists Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, Paul Strand and intellectuals Van Wyck Brooks, Waldo Frank, Paul B. Haviland, Agnes Ernst Meyer, Lewis Mumford, Paul Rosenfeld, Abraham Walkowitz and Marius de Zayas.[22]

Stieglitz, gathering numerous artists, constituted an artistic-intellectual community, which was an important phenomenon of American modernism in the early pre-war phase. Its shape and principles have largely been identified and presented in publications dedicated to it, giving insight into how it functioned and into its consequences to the development of the art scene in the United States. It was characterized by specific features, both in terms of the visual aspect of the works produced by artists, and in terms of the aesthetic views propounded by intellectuals. The thinking about art adopted within the circle was anchored on the one hand in the fascination with the European avant-garde trends, and on the other hand, in the local reflection on art, searching for its American essence. Stieglitz cared both about the consistency of the views in the circle and their development, aiming at familiarizing the American public with modern art, which as he believed, corresponded best to the context of time and place. He undertook a number of specific and, at the time, innovative endeavors. He cared primarily about the circulation of the views he promoted. He often verbalized them himself in the journals he edited and in exhibition catalogues of the artists he supported, publishing also selected, approved content, created by befriended authors. He supported the intellectuals who cooperated with opinion-forming journalists and critics, persuading them to his vision. He tried to find a clear interpretative key for the activity of the artists he

supported, that would serve the public, making it in principle easier for them to receive modern and non-mimetic art, which was then quite a novelty and often aroused widespread embarrassment. Another aim of his activity was to arouse interest in art and attract new audiences to galleries, by unconventional interpretations of abstract works, often violating social taboos, forming an appealing aura of scandal. As a result, his undertakings had an effect not only on the individuals remaining in the direct field of his impact resulting from financial or friendly dependency, but also influenced the views of the public and art critics at the beginning of the twentieth century, which mainly because of him learned about modern art, both the European and the local one. Undoubtedly, this mechanism should be linked to the aforementioned texts about O'Keeffe, who was merely standing on the threshold of her future career.[23]

In the light of this knowledge, the above type of activity should also be combined with the already mentioned reviews of the artist's first exhibitions. The first one was written just after the opening of the exhibition in 1916 by Henry Tyrell[24] – the author of a regular column dedicated to art and culture in *The Christian Science Monitor*, a paper which, contrary to the title, had a neutral profile.[25] Tyrell was a well-known lover of modern art, carefully observing the artistic life of New York and remaining in close relationship with Stieglitz. He often both visited the exhibitions Stieglitz organized and participated in the meetings for friends and acquaintances, thus remaining in his field of influence.[26] The way in which he characterized O'Keeffe's art proved to be fraught with consequences, influencing the way it was interpreted by the following art critics. Hence, the combination of O'Keeffe's art and the category of femininity as the mark of her paintings, which was for the first time expressed in his text, and with a high degree of probability inspired by Stieglitz, was adopted permanently as an unchangeable category serving the interpretation of her work and further reflection on it. As a result, the works of the painter began to be treated as filled with feminine sensitivity, resulting from the experience rooted in her gender, inscribed in her psyche and physicality. The reviewer, followed by others, also concluded that as a result of a whole new repertoire of forms and color combinations used by O'Keeffe, she initiated the freeing of painting from anecdotal nature and the transferring of it into purely visual and most appropriate scopes. Pyne wrote more about this phenomenon in the book that has already been mentioned in the state of research, especially discussing the concept of art popularized in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century.[27] The author proved that the characterization of O'Keeffe's work by way of a manifestation of female experience resulting in unique visuality of her art, stemmed from a concept of art promoted by Stieglitz that was widely accepted in his circle. It was rooted in the fascination with psychoanalysis and the belief that sexuality is a driving force of creativity, resulting in the forms providing the audience with an inexpressible sentiment and reveal of feminine nature characteristic of the modern times.

The thesis about the influence of Stieglitz on the first press review of O'Keeffe's art is confirmed not only by Tyrell's and Stieglitz's similar way of thinking, reconstructed on the basis of the studies pertaining to the circle, as well as their close relationship. Further important evidence can be found in Stieglitz's own statement published in Camera Work[28] in the year of the artist's first independent exhibition. In his text, Stieglitz sought to add authenticity to the views expressed by Tyrell, and then adapted further. For this purpose, he referred to the opinion of one of the female visitors in the gallery, thus objectivizing the opinion about the feminine character of O'Keeffe's work. The woman's opinion on the painting, which was quoted by Stieglitz, touches upon his interest, namely that of the influence of gender and individual experience on art work. The viewer states in fact that the art she has seen embodies femininity, which can only be shown in a non-verbal way, by arousing by means of visual stimulus all of those feelings that constitute the feminine. In this way, Stieglitz tried to legitimize the views he and friendly authors proclaimed, by giving voice to those who by default should be the appropriate persons to imply a sense of femininity in the art under

review. In addition, he was so convinced of this interpretation of the art he promoted that he made it into an interpretative key repeated in all the catalogs accompanying the almost annual exhibitions of the painter's new works, which he organized in the twenties.[29]

The article from the *New York Sun* that interests me, in the context of the premises of this text, using the category of artistic genius to characterize O'Keeffe's works as the first one, opens with a statement of the artist herself. It serves to direct the way of thinking about this art, which was apparently shared by the author. O'Keeffe determined the nature of her art as simply abstract in form and realistic in the impressions it evokes, arising from experienced states. She also claimed that in art there is nothing less realistic than the realism itself, reflecting reality with all of its possible details, while human perception is far more selective, relying not only on the visual, but to a large extent on feelings. For O'Keeffe, abstraction was in fact a way to express her experiences, emotions, serving as a kind of a diary, where by means of an image she sought to materialize the difficult to verbalize mental states which she often expressed in her letters[30] and in the catalog texts which quoted her statements.[31] As a result, the author of the discussed text paid particular attention to the nonrepresentational nature of the described art on the one hand and its effects on the potential target audience. In the above text, the abstract form constitutes a huge asset of the art under review, moving the artist's painting into the non-verbal scopes most appropriate to visual arts. The attempt to describe the specifics of the perceived art ends in failure, and this failure contributes to such an extremely enthusiastic review. The author, not being able to find a verbal equivalent to the much-admired painting, sought to equate it to music, which speaks through equally abstract means, and still arouses true, though difficult to express, sensations.[32] The author recognized that O'Keeffe was able to move the visual arts into the areas that have not yet been reached, to liberate them from an anecdotal nature and turn them into a purely visual phenomenon.

Another positive aspect of O'Keeffe's work which was indicated by the author of the text is the feminine nature of artistic solutions used by the painter and discernible in her works. The view proclaimed by O'Keeffe, that she treats her painting as a vent for the emotions she experiences, and which are an inexhaustible source of inspiration for abstract forms, constituted the author's support of the thesis that he or she proposes.[33] In the text, O'Keeffe's paintings became an emanation of color and form, which are considered essentially feminine, because they derive from individual feelings and experiences forming kind of a stimulus.[34] This is supposed to arouse in the audience the feelings appropriate to the experience of femininity, treated directly in the case of women, and in a mediated representation of it, particularly in the form of a reverse, in the context of men. As a result, O'Keeffe's art is characterized as inherently feminine and giving insight into the unexposed, due to the lack of female painters working according to their own inner impulses and only imitating the art of men, female nature.

The category of artistic genius was used regarding O'Keeffe in the summary of the article due to two above reasons. As a result, her art was supposed to be characterized by simplicity and sincerity, and her genius is supposed to be confirmed by the fact that O'Keeffe's fate corresponds to a specific myth of artistic genius, who not only opens new doors in respective fields, but also draws from uneasy life, marked for example by the sign of disease and ill health.[35] The author did not stop with a description of the artist's painting, marking the features which are ground-breaking, but tried to link the category of artistic genius used for O'Keeffe and ultimately confirm it with the literary ethos of genius, in which not only the adversities of artistic nature are inscribed.

Therefore, in this text, the category of genius remains in direct strain towards the elements by means of which O'Keeffe's art was presented by Stieglitz, by means of texts written, selected and inspired by him, published shortly after her debut and serving as a tool to excite interest in her art and inscribe her painting in the idea of art he promoted.

The anonymous author adapts all the previously known elements characterizing those paintings. Going a step further, he or she calls the creator a genius who discovers something completely new in art, which was previously totally absent from it. As a result, this category is primarily used to emphasize enthusiastic assessment and is used in its conventional meaning, associated with a definition of activities conducted by individuals who make new discoveries, push the field towards the future while navigating a variety of limitations, which constitute an important source of innovation. The author does not consider the relationship between the category and gender.

Two years after the publication of the above text, Paul Strand – a photographer, filmmaker and Stieglitz's close friend, also influenced by him, sometimes writing about American art, characterized O'Keeffe's works presented at another individual exhibition in 1924 by applying the term of artistic genius.[36] Just like all of the other reviewers, he made a description of her painting in a spirit that does not differ from the one presented above.[37] Perhaps it was due to the fact that he thought about it in this way and it gave rise to such feelings, or, more likely, being a close friend of Stieglitz, it was the only way he could describe it. Strand, unlike the previous reviewer, based on these premises developed much further-reaching conclusions. He considered that these elements are in fact so innovative from the perspective of the history of the art and culture, that O'Keeffe's art is, in fact, a manifestation of the spirit of the times, implied in quite romantic terms. He was trying to show her painting as a breakthrough, not only for the local art scene, but including it in a far more general discussion, of extremely momentous weight, referred to the widest possible area of culture that goes beyond the framework of modern art and American continent.[38]

He was referring to the relationship of the painter's art with the United States, which is created thanks to the then contemporary social conditions prevailing on the continent,[39] is inspired by the artist's experience of American life[40], and proves false the popular, according to Strand, belief that the US culture is characterized by imitative nature and dependence on European trends.[41] Combining the artist's work with the US context and inscribing it into the logic of the history of art characteristic of the country does not only mark the review under discussion but also characterizes the texts written by the artistic-intellectual environment in New York in the early twentieth century. A typical feature of the activities of its representatives was in fact highlighting the local nature of American art, deriving from the experience embedded in the specific context of space, unmediated by European aesthetics, under the influence of which the US art remained for a long time.[42] The concept of modern art, preferred by Stieglitz, and as a result by other critics remaining under his influence, was linked with the desire to promote artistic activity which would not only correspond to the experience of American public, which was different to that of the audience from the Old Continent, but would also kindle communal and national sympathies.[43]

As a result, Strand made, in his opinion, a necessary redefinition of the concept of genius.[44] In the front of O'Keeffe's art, he noted that widespread use of the category of genius, previously only associated with male activity, had no longer reason to exist, just as the conviction of the apparent general intellectual limitations of females. He stated that it can no longer be reserved to men in the light of women entering into new areas of life which is undergoing constant change – a result of modernization processes. He proposed to treat it in a more varied way, to expand its meaning, extending it to female activity. He wanted the concept of genius to break away from gender connotation, marking innovation resulting from exceptional skills, offering de facto its modern meaning, much less encumbered by conservative world order.

O'Keeffe is hailed a genius, though only of her era, in 1926 by *New Yorker's* reporter Murdock Pemberton.[45] He wrote according to the paper's style, which is primarily dedicated to the culture of New York, which is seen as the center of the United States, and addressed to people involved in the city's artistic life, that the painter perfectly senses the rhythm

of the city, the pace of its development, and as one of the few is capable not only of adapting to it, but also being at the forefront, proposing solutions that break completely with the sentiments, contributing to the appointment of new perspectives in local art.[46] Importantly, the reviewer, unlike the others who wrote about O'Keeffe, did not make a detailed characteristic of her work, maintaining only the above-mentioned statement, which results from his conviction that the way of writing about this work is so unified and generally known to the paper's readers that it did not require reintroduction. Pemberton therefore called O'Keeffe a genius due to the fact that unlike other artists of her time, she does not follow the existing course of events, but is moving in the directions that are completely separate, delineated by her instinct, which opens up a whole new visual arts perspective. Therefore, the way in which this article used the term *artistic genius* does not differ fundamentally from traditional usage of the term, relating to the activities of all those who follow their own path thus defining new horizons of reality, but it ignores its gender connotations. Pemberton applied it directly to the painter, ignoring, otherwise than Strand, the need for its renegotiation. It seems that the most likely explanation for Pemberton's move – a representative of a magazine with liberal profile, accepting the fruit of modernity with enthusiasm, is that he treated as obviousness the fact that creative genius is independent of the constraints of gender and dependent on skills and decisions. It seems to be confirmed by his ironic and somewhat disrespectful attitude expressed in the text towards the psychoanalysis which was applied to O'Keeffe's work, as a tool which is obsolete and needlessly preserves the division into what is male and female.

Yet another example of reflection on artistic genius can be found in Appleton Read, who wrote about O'Keeffe almost every year since the early twenties. The author was particularly keen on attributing an essentially feminine nature to her works and drawing from a specifically female experience of physical-psychological nature. According to Read it resulted with innovative aesthetic solutions, applied by O'Keeffe, respecting as a result the concept of art dependent on gender, which was so readily accepted by artists and intellectuals associated with Stieglitz. Up until 1928, Appleton Read did not apply the category of genius in relation to the artist, however, she always spoke warmly about her art. An article written for the women's magazine *Vogue* has therefore a special place in her writings.[47] What is important, it did not concern so much the description and evaluation of O'Keeffe's painting, but was aimed at a reflection on the actual category of artistic genius and the possibilities of its application towards women. As a result, the article is very interesting because of its scope and theme convergent with the objectives of my analysis, providing direct insight into the way of thinking about the subject in the nineteen twenties.

Appleton Read began her reflection with a discussion on the history of the category of artistic genius and its relationship to women. Through a sequence of examples, from antiquity to modern times, she stated that women's capabilities in the field of innovation and skills which do not fall within the scope of their traditional family-related roles are constantly doubted. She noted that this thinking has virtually no root in experience, being more of a common belief, an expression of blind faith, thus questioning the soundness of disbelief in female capabilities and the absence of the category of genius as relevant to their activities. She also pointed out that this way of thinking is particularly unfair because of its universal character, which does not take into account the diversity of attitudes and personalities that are present both among men and women, appointing them to different tasks. Appleton Read also recognized that due to the changes which are taking place in the world, consisting in the transformation of tradition, including gender roles, the previous approach can no longer match reality.

The reflection on the category of genius allowed the author to detach it from its usual connotation with male gender. She stated that in this sense genius is not dependent on biology, but only, in the case of the visual arts, on the skills resulting in the artists' inscription into current aesthetic ideals. She applied

such transformed meaning of genius to O'Keeffe's painting, which in turn constitutes proof that women are able to break stereotype roles, developing the skills enabling them to achieve mastery in a given field. According to Appleton Read, O'Keeffe's painting enrolled into this particular definition of genius, primarily by realizing the idea of art commonly received in the New York art world, which understands the work of art as a reflection of an artist's internal landscape.[48] She emphasized at the same time the fact that the painter achieves excellence in this field first and foremost because she can not only match colors and forms, creating interesting combinations, but her source of inspiration stems from her own interior, individual experience. As a result, it allowed O'Keeffe to create unique art that is far from the triviality and aesthetics of other artists.

The last of the texts under review is completely different from the previous ones, as it is the most critical of all of the reviews about O'Keeffe's painting. The category of artistic genius, which is used in the text, is rejected by the author. Louis Kalonyme, an art critic who wrote for numerous magazines, among others, *New York Times, Creative Art* and *Arts and Decoration*, writes in the latter[49] on the nature of O'Keeffe's work, subscribing to the style commonly used for writing about her art. Paradoxically, however, he evaluated its elements differently. He stated that the painter is not an innovator and her art in no way revolutionary. He preferred to call her an explorer who is discovering contemporary but already established aesthetic areas.[50] The category of artistic innovation was not possible to apply to O'Keeffe, according to Kalonyme. The feeling of novelty given to the audience admiring her art stemmed from the fact that for the first time in the history the audience has to deal with a woman who does not try to imitate esteemed artists, but transfers to the canvas her emotions encoded in non-representative form. He claimed, however, that O'Keeffe in no way exceeds the current concept of art, understood as visual expression of experiences and emotions which occurs through the language of abstraction breaking with anecdotal character of realism and existing aesthetic styles. Kalonyme, therefore, considered that the term of a genius is right for people in the vanguard, proposing new solutions that go beyond the existing aesthetic horizon. As a result, he is the only one to note what other critics have failed to see in their enthusiastic assessments of her art. He indicated that the visual novelty of O'Keeffe's art is not so much the result of going beyond current thinking about art, but is a consequence of the fact that the concept of abstract art is implemented by a female, not a male, which allows for a manifestation of the experiences of a person functioning in a different socio-conventional context, and thus, demonstrating a new visual form.

CONCLUSION

The above-described reviews applying the category of artistic genius have a number of common features, although they also differ considerably. Undoubtedly, most of the reviews which call O'Keeffe a genius have been published in press dedicated to culture. This is to some extent surprising, first of all, because these magazines were addressed to specialists, art connoisseurs, regular participants of cultural life, and not the general public. Therefore, as it may seem, they should be characterized by greater moderation than newspapers and tabloids which, as compared with the analysis of all known reviews on the art of the painter in the nineteen twenties, wrote about her more willingly but, as it turns out, remained less enthusiastic.

The way in which the reviews characterized her painting is essentially convergent, following Stieglitz's interpretative key. As a result, it should be noted that the concept of art adopted in his circles, that understood art as a manifestation in non-representative form of feelings and emotions, rooted in gender and the experience of American life, was respected by all of the discussed critics, regardless of their closer or further relations with Stiglitz.

It is definitely more difficult to determine unequivocally how artistic genius was defined by the critics in the analyzed texts. Some of the authors (the unknown reviewer from *New York Sun*, Stand and

Appleton Read) claimed that a genius implements the idea of art respected within the New York community at the beginning of the twentieth century in an honest way, not alluding to the art of other, often more established artists. Others (Pemberton and Kalonyme) were more demanding, recognizing that a genius should go beyond the existing aesthetic horizon, always remaining in the forefront.

The most interesting aspect that emerges from the analyzed texts, however, is the approach to O'Keeffe and her art, formed in relationship with the vision of the world and artistic reality shared by the critics. The way the authors used the category of artistic genius towards O'Keeffe reveals their awareness of traditional assessment on the roles and opportunities for women and men. The authors indicated the groundlessness of differing assessment of the skills of women and men, where greater skills were traditionally ascribed to men. They indicated their obsolescence in the face of cultural transformation, as a result of which women were successfully taking over the roles previously reserved for men, fulfilling them equally well. They also stressed that this way of thinking was marked by the yoke of unjust generalization, based not so much on the facts as on the a priori assumption that gender is responsible for possessing or not possessing certain skills. Consequently, it should be noted that the vision of the world shared by the authors and exposed in the analyzed texts was marked by the desire to break with the traditional positive assessment of the achievements and abilities of men and the belittling one towards women.

At the same time, it should be noted that their disagreement with the different assessment of female and male skills did not go hand in hand with the conviction that both genders might create the same works, using identical array of colors, forms and compositional ideas. In connection with the favoured conception of art, immersed in psychoanalysis, which was accepted as a scientific tool confirming the assumptions of its validity, which treated the work of art as a manifestation of personal, and determined by gender and experience, it remained unacceptable to state that women could create in the same way as men, and men as women. As a result of the concept art, proposed by Stieglitz and adopted by the New York community, due to the lack of other competing visions of art, O'Keeffe's painting had to be characterized through gender. This way of writing, contrasted to the way it has been presented in existing research, was not dictated by sexism and the desire to diminish her achievements, but was a result of the widespread views on art, pointing to gender differences. What is most important here, and most of all, what results from the analysis set out above, the exposition of essential femininity, materialized according to the critics in O'Keeffe's paintings, did not serve as a negative assessment of her art. On the contrary, in the context of the views presented in the texts, it was intended to overthrow the traditional assessment of artistic output depending on gender. Through the reviews, the authors wanted to show that the emphasis on femininity, as well as on masculinity, cannot as such be subject to judgment, and the favor or the lack of it can only be stemming from the assessment of skills, abstracted from gender entanglement.

The ambivalence which is visible in the current perception of the artist, her work and the reception of it, results therefore from the fact that the category of femininity, which is manifested in the reception of O'Keeffe's art, is treated as a symptom of sexism, aimed at belittling the value of her accomplishments. A failure to undertake a broader reflection on critical writing of the times, underlining just one of its features and discarding full context, has led to inconsistencies in the studies on the reception of O'Keeffe's art. In no way do the existing studies on the New York Community of the nineteen twenties attest to the treatment of gender by its representatives. The interest in the male and the female becomes a specific fascination of the period, rooted in the traditional world order based on gender boundaries. The analysis of texts concerning a woman point to something completely different, and the concept of gender specific to the said times becomes much more complicated. Although the idea that the male and the female substantially differ and cannot be exceeded is not affected, it needs

to be seen with respect to the community's desire to break with historical valorisation of achievements and specific features ascribed to women and men. Only then the views on gender, as expressed by the New York community, appear in their fullness, explaining the problems with the perception of O'Keeffe's art oscillating between enthusiasm and alleged marginalization by male participants of the artistic world.

As a result, the views talking about the need for a revision of the space occupied by O'Keeffe in artistic discourse become untenable. A rather different mechanism should be proposed. That of a redefinition of the way the painter was perceived, for in the period of her greatest popularity it was associated with genuine liking from the audience and respect of the critics, who did not hesitate to call her a genius, sometimes just of her time, sometimes from the perspective of the history, revising the concept and manifesting the need to transform the views on the female and the male, which, although different in its essence, should be seen as equivalent.

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[3] Deborah Balken, *Debating American Modernism: Stieglitz, Duchamp, and the New York Avant-Garde* (New York: American Federation of Arts in association with D.A.P./ Distributed Art Publishers, 2003); Marcia Brennan, *Painting Gender, Constructing Theory. The Alfred Stieglitz Circle and American Formalist Aesthetics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001); Celeste Connor, *Democratic Visions. Art and Theory of the Stieglitz Circle*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity 1915–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Bram Dijkstra, *Georgia O'Keeffe and the Eros of Place* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998); William Homer Innes, *Alfred Stieglitz and the American avant–garde* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1979).
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[8] Pyne, 7.
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[11] Battersby, 75.
[12] Battersby, 90.
[13] Battersby, 43; Trevor D. Starnes, "The Figure Genius in the Renaissance", *Studies in the Renaissance* 11 (1964), 234–244.
[14] Battersby, 120.
[15] Jaffe Kineret, "The concept of genius: its changing role in eighteenth-century French aesthetics", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 41 (1980), 579–99.
[16] Battersby, 8; 148–153.
[17] Battersby, 179.
[18] "I Can't Sing, So I Paint! Says Ultra Realistic Artis; Art is Not Photography – It is Expression of Inner Life!: Miss Georgia O'Keeffe Explains Subjective Aspect of Her Work", *New York Sun*, 5 December 1922, 22.
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[23] Abrahams, 6; Steven Biel, I*ndependent Intellectuals in The United States 1910–1945* (New York: New York University Press, 1992); Connor, 10; Corn, 8; Dijkstra,12; Homer, 6–12.

[24] Tyrell, 10.

[25] John C. Merrill and Harold A. Fisher, *The World's Greatest Dailies: Profiles of Fifty Newspapers* (New York: Hastings House, 1980), 96–103.

[26] Lynes, 316.

[27] Pyne, 117–123.

[28] Stieglitz, 12–13.

[29] *Alfred Stieglitz Presents One Hundred Pictures: Oils, Water-colors, Pastels, Drawings, by Georgia O'Keeffe American*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Galleries, 1923); *Alfred Stieglitz Presents Fifty-One Recent Pictures: Oils, Water-colors, Pastels, Drawings, by Georgia O'Keeffe American*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Galleries, 1924); *Fifty Recent Paintings by Georgia O'Keeffe*, exhibition catalogue (New York: the Gallery, 1926); *Georgia O'Keeffe: Paintings* 1926, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Gallery, 1927); *O'Keeffe Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Gallery, 1928); *Georgia O'Keeffe: Paintings, 1928*, exhibition catalogue (New York: The Gallery, 1929).

[30] Letter of Georgia O'Keeffe to Anita Pollitzer from 14 January 1916, in: *Lovingly Georgia. The Complete Correspondence of Georgia O'Keeffe and Anita Pollitzer*, ed. Charles Giboire (New York: Simon & Simon, 1990), 122.

[31] This view can be found in O'Keeffe's statements from her exhibition catalogues from 1923 and 1924.

[32] *"Miss O'Keeffe's painting is intrinsically an expression of her inner life. It is more like music than any painting we have ever seen".*

[33] *"Certainly, the most unusual, and perhaps the most characteristic of Miss O'Keeffe's paintings are those which express simply what she feels – a mood perhaps, or a spiritual experience".*

[34] *"Were they in reality essentially feminine? (…). Here was a sensitiveness, a spirituality, a feeling for essentials, that seemed peculiarly feminine – a fineness of execution that men might aspire to but few could achieve".*

[35] *"(…) the thing that impresses one the most in Miss O'Keeffe is her absolute genuine(ne)ss and her simplicity. Is there, after all, a connection between genius and ill health? Miss O'Keeffe has known a great deal of illness in her life (…) She is intellectual and introspective – for an artist, a curiously austere type".*

[36] Paul Strand, "Georgia O'Keeffe", *Playboy: A Portfolio of Art and Satire* 9 (1924): 16–20.

[37] *"(...) the most personal and subtle perceptions of women are embodied in for the first time in plastic terms. This is achieved not only through line and form but through color used with expressiveness which has not had before, which opens new horizons in evolution of paintings in incarnation of human spirit." "(...) her work stands as the first veritable individualized expression by a woman, in plastic terms, which is differentiated from, yet meets comparison with the best work of men".*

[38] *"Here in America something rare and significant in realm of the spirit, has unfolded and flowered in the work of Georgia O'Keeffe".*

[39] *"(…) work of Georgia O'Keeffe is product of a new world for women (...)".*

[40] *"(…) it springs from roots as deeply embedded in American soil, is equally expressive of its spiritual realm".*

[41] *"(…) here in America, let it be said again, in this land which, according to some, is spiritually sterile, whose alleged sterility is excused by others on the ground of seemingly eternal infanthood, a miraculous expressiveness in the use of color has been added to painting, a genuinely new element thus contributed to its evolution through her work".*

[42] Compare with Van Wyck Brooks, *The Wine of the Puritans: A Study of Present-day America* (London: Sisley's, 1908); Paul Rosenfeld, *The Port of New York: Essays on Fourteen American Moderns* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1924); Marius de Zayas, 291 4/5 (1915): 3.

[43] Connor, 32–50.

[44] *"That such amalgam has actually been projected upon material by a woman in America, is particularly significant. For considering the development in Europe even, (…), the achievements of women have been relatively second rate. If genius is a natural and high differentiated impulsion away from the atavistic subjugation of the herd, women have been, from the point of view of those media, an undifferentiated species".*

[45] M. Pemberton, "The Art Galleries: The Great Wall of Manhattan, or New York for Live New Yorkers", *New Yorker* 2 (1926), 36–37.

[46] *"Here we have one of the few geniuses born of this generation which has played so much of its energy through shuffling feet of saxophones. (…) O'Keeffe, more than any other else we have seen this year, thrusts forward the banner without removing it altogether from the sentimental eyes of the multitude".*

[47] Helen Appleton Read, "The Feminine Point of View in Contemporary Art", *Vogue* 71 (1928), 76–7, 96.

[48] *"Her view–point is unique and personal, and her technical equipment extraordinarily competent and individual".*

[49] Louis Kalonyme, "Georgia O'Keeffe: A Woman in Painting", *Creative Art* 2 (1928), 34–40.

[50] *"Now Georgia O'Keeffe is neither a revolutionary nor an innovator in the art of painting, rather is she an explorer. Her distinction is not that she has perceived better or differently the things (…) but that she has seen those things as a woman. Her relation to those things is akin to women's relation to man".*

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MODERNIZMO GENIJAUS SAMPRATA GEORGIOS O'KEEFFE DARBUOSE

Santrauka

Remiantis Amerikos abstrakcionizmo tapytojos Georgios O'Keeffe darbais, sukurtais XX a. antrajame–trečiajame dešimtmečiais, straipsnyje analizuojama kritinė modernizmo genijaus išraiška. Tikslas – atskleisti O'Keeffe kaip netipišką kūrėją tuometinės vyriškos realybės kontekste, įtakojusiame požiūrį į tuometinės meno kritikos formuluotą genijaus idealą. Straipsnyje siekiama apžvelgti keletą tapytojos dalyvavimo tuometiniame meno pasaulyje konceptų ir jos sukurtų meno kūrinių vietą jame.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: meno kritika, 1920-ieji, modernizmas, genijus, Georgia O'Keeffe.

Gauta 2021-10-27
Parengta spaudai 2022-06-16

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