

For art's sake

'Art for art's sake is an empty phrase. Art for the sake of truth, art for the sake of the good and the beautiful, that is the faith I am searching for.' – George Sand.

French novelist and memoirist Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin went by the nom de plume George Sand. I assume she did so for similar reasons to that of celebrated English novelist and poet Mary Ann Evans aka George Eliot. They wanted to be taken seriously. Most women writing in the 1800s wrote romance, so for both novelists, adopting a masculine pen name achieved the outcome of not being blindly marginalised from the outset by mere virtue of their biology.

With no regard for tradition or conventional femininity, Sand was notorious for wearing trousers, smoking cigars and having scandalous relationships with famous male artists like pianist Frédéric Chopin, writer Alfred de Musset and countless others. Similarly, Eliot, who was the legendary author of *Middlemarch* (1871–72), rejected a perfectly legitimate marriage proposal in her twenties, shunned the idea of going to church and entertained a series of affairs with men who were already married to other women. Several contemporary reviewers have suggested Sapphic sentiments or connotations in Eliot's work. Depending on how you read her, and who you read, this may or may not have been the case – but to my mind, it's almost extraneous, if not outright irrelevant, because the novels she penned are so complex and canonical. And her writing is just extraordinary.

Fast forward roughly two centuries (give or take a decade) and it would seem that work by female creatives – in the absence of a masculine alias – is somehow still less valued than the works by their male counterparts. Responding to some of the figures in the Art Basel and UBS Global Art Market Report 2019, sociologist Taylor Whitten Brown argues that 'the statistics of the past few decades confirm that the art world is not one of gender parity.' I fully realise that I am jumping genres somewhat here, but I do so intentionally to illustrate a very particular commercial point from that report:

'Gender disparities in the art market have been the subject of continued study and debate for many years. Research on the auction sector has shown that there is a gender discount of close to 50% in the paintings market at auction, and this discount is higher in countries with greater gender inequality. Statistics have also been tracked over time to show the changing share of female artists in exhibitions. Gender imbalances in the gallery market

are no exception and have been brought to light in different contexts for some time, with rising debate in recent years regarding the reasons for their persistence.'

Data from Artfacts.net attempts to console us with the assurance that 'the share of women in global exhibitions has grown from 25% in 2000, up to 33% in 2018.' But I, for one, am not assured. I am not consoled. I have two daughters and I am horrified. It terrifies me that merely by virtue of their biology, whatever my daughters may do creatively or otherwise in life will still only be valued at one-third of that of a male child. It's just not okay. And it makes me go all Greta Thunberg inside: HOW DARE THEY? HOW DARE YOU? HOW DARE I? HOW DARE ALL OF US?

I have always been a proponent of *l'art pour l'art*, the philosophy of the intrinsic value of art or 'art for art's sake'. But equally so, I have always attempted to reconcile that position with being an advocate for the reasons that creativity plays such an important role in a vast range of so many things, ranging from music helping learners to comprehend mathematics to dance inspiring design innovation and even the role of comedy in medicine (consider, for example, comedian Dr Riaad Moosa's medical educational show *The Best Medicine*, currently in production, which utilises humour to communicate important and practical health promotional information).

Sometimes a creative work is awesome just because that's what it is: awesome. Sometimes the value of a creative work has to do with the conversations it generates, the lessons it teaches, or perhaps the way in which it potentially shifts how you or I see the world or ourselves. But none of those has anything to do with gender. And why would they?

Business and Arts South Africa NPC (BASA) has a proven track record of supporting creative projects in South Africa. It also has a majority-female staff complement, a historically female executive leadership and currently, a gender non-binary CEO. BASA's ongoing Supporting Grants programme offers a slightly different lens to conventional funding and development agencies in that we focus on amplifying and extending existing partnerships between arts and businesses that aim to meaningfully impact society through shared value and social cohesion. BASA's purpose is quite clearly not merely art for art's sake, but very much art for all – and for the sake of the good and the beautiful. And I am thrilled to be celebrating my first anniversary at the helm! **CF**



Portrait of George Sand (Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin) by Auguste Charpentier (1838)



George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), aged 30, by the Swiss artist Alexandre-Louis-François d'Albert-Durade



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