

GEORGIA O'KEEFFE, A STUDY OF THE CRITICAL
INTERPRETATIONS OF HER EARLY WORKS,
1916-1930

by

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ABSTRACT

Georgia O'Keeffe's success in the first fourteen years of her professional career is the direct result of the adaptability of her images to the Freudian and Feminist theories popular at that time. The sensuous forms in both her abstract and objective works were pointed to by the Freudian theorists as embodiments of the feminine viewpoint and by the Feminists as expressions of the new modern woman.

Alfred Stieglitz's role in O'Keeffe's early career is important because he is responsible for first showing her works and initiating the interpretations that linked her works with the two movements mentioned above.

O'Keeffe has refused to comment on the interpretations placed on her works, but, from a study of the reviews and reactions found in the newspapers and art publications of this early period, it is possible to attribute her early success to the interpretive association of her work with the social movements of her time.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This study is based on the artistic criticism and interpretation applied to the works of Georgia O'Keeffe in the first fourteen years of her professional career, 1916-1930. It deals with the relationship of her art to her times and not with her art alone. This relationship consists of three phases: presentation, interpretation and reception; each phase significantly affecting the others. Presentation involves dealers and galleries, interpretation involves critics, and reception involves buyers and gallery-goers.

The success of an artist depends upon the progressive acceptance of the work of art as relevant by those in each phase of the relationship. The dealers must believe that the work of art can be presented in such a manner that it will sell. The critics must believe that the work of art has meaning for the times; that it provides a new insight or a deeper understanding of contemporary life. Finally, the buyers must believe that the first two groups are right and that the work is a good investment.

Georgia O'Keeffe stands out in this period as one of the few successful women artists in a predominantly male

profession. An interesting aspect of her success is that it depended more on the external fact that she was a woman than on the absolute value of her art. Freud's theories on sexual consciousness were increasing in popularity at this time and O'Keeffe's fluid abstract forms were interpreted as distinctly feminine expressions (Figs. 1, 2, 3; for the sake of convenience, all illustrations are placed at the end of the text). O'Keeffe's artistic success and her independence were pointed to by the feminists (active since the turn of the century) as expressions of the new modern woman. Alfred Stieglitz plays an important role in O'Keeffe's career in that he initiated these early interpretations. His influence is felt strongly throughout O'Keeffe's early career both professionally as her dealer and personally as her husband.

This paper proposes to study the relationship of O'Keeffe's work to her times during the first ten years of her career; to examine why this relationship was successful.

As Frances O'Brien said in an interview, "O'Keeffe was fortunate in that the things she did happened to click. . . . She told me, 'I could have been a much better artist and not so successful'. It was a combination of the times and people."¹

¹Frances O'Brien, personal interview with author, Tucson, November 3, 1971. Frances O'Brien first met O'Keeffe and Stieglitz in 1926 when she was an art student in New York. She visited them several times in New York and at Lake George and has continued her friendship with O'Keeffe.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

O'Keeffe's background suggests that while she had ability and desire, the likelihood of her coming to the public's attention seemed negligible.

O'Keeffe grew up in the Midwest. She was born in 1887 on her father's 600-acre farm near the small community of Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. O'Keeffe, the second of seven children, showed an early aptitude and desire to become an artist.

Although her family was not wealthy, O'Keeffe was given private drawing lessons when she was eleven and twelve. In 1905, at the age of eighteen, O'Keeffe enrolled in the Art Institute of Chicago where she studied under John Vanderpoel who was known as a draftsman and anatomist. In 1907 she joined the Art Student's League in New York. Here she studied under William Merritt Chase who had previously taught Marsden Hartley.

Chase's style has been described by O'Keeffe's biographers, Lloyd Goodrich and Doris Bry, as "Frans Hals Americanized."² This somewhat eclectic style employed a

²Lloyd Goodrich and Doris Bry, Georgia O'Keeffe (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 7.

bright impressionist palette, facile brushwork and a preference for the artistic "atmosphere": cluttered backgrounds filled with exotic objects and souvenirs. O'Keeffe quickly mastered this style and won the Chase Still Life Scholarship for her painting of a dead rabbit and a copper pot.

This year was important for O'Keeffe for several reasons. She developed a friendship with a fellow student, Anita Pollitzer, who was to play a key role in bringing O'Keeffe to the attention of Alfred Stieglitz nearly ten years later. Her only contact with Stieglitz prior to 1916, when he first exhibited her work, was during this year.

O'Keeffe remembers that a group of students had been sent to the Rodin exhibit in Stieglitz's gallery to decide whether Rodin was fooling Stieglitz and America with "such a ridiculous group of drawings,"³ or whether Stieglitz knew what he was doing and, tongue in cheek, was trying to see what he could put over on the American public. O'Keeffe writes: "I very well remember the fantastic violence of Stieglitz's defense when the students with me began talking with him about the drawings. I had never heard anything like it, so I went into the farthest corner and waited for the storm to be over. It was too noisy. I was tired. There

³Georgia O'Keeffe, "Stieglitz: His Pictures Collected Him," New York Times Magazine, December 11, 1949, p. 24.

was nothing to sit on, so I stood. . . ."⁴ O'Keeffe does not relate what her own feelings were toward the Rodin drawings, but during this year she rejected the ideas about painting taught at the Art League and decided to give up painting altogether.

"I began to realize," she said, "that a lot of people had done this same kind of painting before I came along. It had been done and I didn't think I could do any better. It would have been just futile for me, so I stopped painting for quite a while."⁵

In 1908 O'Keeffe moved to Chicago where she worked as a commercial artist drawing lace for advertisements. O'Keeffe did not take up painting again until 1912 when her sister encouraged her to take a summer course at the University of Virginia. The course was taught by Alon Bement, a follower of Arthur Dow.

Dow had been with Gauguin at Pont Aven and was an admirer of Japanese and Chinese art. He rejected realism and based his theories on flat patterning, simplification and harmony. These ideas renewed O'Keeffe's interest in painting and finally, in 1914, she took a course from Arthur Dow at Teachers College in New York. "It was Arthur Dow," O'Keeffe states, "who affected my start, who helped me to

⁴Ibid.

⁵Goodrich and Bry, p. 8.

find something of my own. . . . This man had one dominating idea: to fill a space in a beautiful way."⁶

This was a turning point for O'Keeffe's personal style. "I locked myself up in my room," she says, "and held a private exhibition of everything I had painted. I noticed which paintings had been influenced by this painter, which by that one. Then I determined which of the finished pieces represented me alone. From that moment forward I knew exactly what kind of work I wanted to do."⁷ The first results of this decision were a series of charcoal drawings and watercolors (Figs. 4, 5, 6). All of them are marked by an economy of composition, abstracted natural forms, and an emphasis on the visual object rather than the surface texture. The shapes have a definite tactile quality and a sense of movement through the alternation of curves and lines.

Meanwhile, in order to earn a living, O'Keeffe accepted teaching positions in the Amarillo public schools, Texas, 1912-1914; Columbia College, Columbia, South Carolina, 1915; and West Texas State Normal School, Canyon, Texas, 1916-1918.

Several aspects of O'Keeffe's background are important. O'Keeffe did not come from a wealthy or prominent family and,

⁶Ibid., p. 8.

⁷Dorothy Seiberling, "A Flowering in the Stieglitz Years," Life Magazine, March 1, 1968, p. 52.

until she met Stieglitz, she had to support herself. This contributed to her independence and self-discipline. As Anita Pollitzer describes it: "Even in her student days she saw that dancing at night meant daytime lost from painting—so she refused to dance although she loved it. She decides carefully on each point, what to have and what to give up. There is nothing weak about her will-power."⁸

O'Keeffe received formal art training on and off from the age of eleven, most of which she rejected in 1912. She was familiar with the art world in Chicago and New York, including Stieglitz's gallery. Her friendship with Anita Pollitzer was fortunate from the standpoint of bringing her works into direct contact with Stieglitz. This came about through their exchange of ideas and information. As Pollitzer writes: "We had been in the habit of writing each other everything that we were discovering in art and literature. . . . In our letters we had been sharing everything in the art world that was important to us. . . ."⁹

Knowing O'Keeffe's background discredits some of the implications made by critics as to her lack of intellectualism. Such criticism is voiced by Marsden Hartley when he writes: "O'Keeffe lays no claim to intellectualism.

⁸Anita Pollitzer, "That's Georgia," Saturday Review of Literature, November 4, 1950, p. 43.

⁹Ibid.

She frets herself in no way with philosophical or esthetic theories—it is hardly likely she knows one premise from another."¹⁰

Noting the direction of O'Keeffe's life prior to 1916, it seems unlikely that O'Keeffe's work would have come to the public's attention if Anita Pollitzer had not shown some of her drawings to Alfred Stieglitz.

¹⁰Mitchell A. Wilder (ed.), Georgia O'Keeffe (Ft. Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1966), p. 6.

CHAPTER III

INITIAL EXPOSURE

Alfred Stieglitz's role in exposing Georgia O'Keeffe's work to the public is particularly significant and interesting. Without his patronage it is doubtful whether O'Keeffe could have dedicated her life to painting, at least not at the time and as successfully as she did. Louis Kalonyme, a critic for the New York Times in the 1920's, states that, "without Stieglitz's excitement it is altogether probable that O'Keeffe's paintings never would have been seen. . . ."11 A personal friend of Stieglitz, Herbert J. Seligmann, reaffirms this opinion when he states: "But neither Marin's nor O'Keeffe's work would have existed without Stieglitz. Marin would have been making pleasant etchings, nice little water colors. O'Keeffe's work would not have existed at all."12

O'Keeffe's first exposure as an artist was through Stieglitz and all her major exhibits until his death in 1946 were handled by him. In other words, there was a

¹¹Louis Kalonyme, "Georgia O'Keeffe: A Woman in Painting," Creative Art, XXXV, January, 1948, 38.

¹²Herbert J. Seligmann, Alfred Stieglitz Talking (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 129.

single outlet for her early works: Alfred Stieglitz. His philosophies on the relationship of artist to dealer and patron support the assumption that not only was he responsible for bringing O'Keeffe's work into contact with the public, but he was also responsible for the interpretations placed on them. Frederick S. Wight, in his biography of Arthur G. Dove, writes about this aspect of Stieglitz's relationship with Dove. The same relationship was established later with O'Keeffe. Wight writes:

As a dealer, inevitably Stieglitz interpreted his painters to a public that was more his than theirs, and their independence was presented as detachment. This was peculiarly true of the aloof Arthur Dove. How much Stieglitz brought him forward, how much he sequestered him—for he had an instinct for artificial scarcity—is not easy to determine. It is time to let Dove stand clear; yet the fact remains that to this day Dove must be approached by way of Stieglitz.¹³

It is the recognition of a similar relationship with O'Keeffe that prompted the art historian Homer Saint-Gaudens to write in 1941, "He stands guard over his wife [Stieglitz and O'Keeffe were married in 1924]. It is a severe guard. I have never known whether it was fostered by love, general irascibility, or a yearning for publicity. I think it is the latter . . ." ¹⁴

¹³Frederick S. Wight, Arthur G. Dove (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), p. 20.

¹⁴Homer Saint-Gaudens, The American Artist and His Times (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1941), p. 27.

It is largely Stieglitz's interpretations of O'Keeffe's early works that account for her popularity and success. It is, therefore, important to determine how Stieglitz saw and interpreted her works and what attracted the public to these interpretations.

The first O'Keeffe works that Stieglitz saw were a series of drawings (Figs. 4, 5, 6). They are all abstract in nature and were not accompanied by an explanation. Three primary sources are important in the account of Stieglitz's first encounter with these drawings although the story is told in essentially the same form by most writers. The first is an account written by Marsden Hartley who was also present. The second is Stieglitz's retelling of the incident to Herbert J. Seligmann, and the third is excerpts from Stieglitz's magazine Camera Work which carried the first reviews of the O'Keeffe exhibit.

Marsden Hartley writes of the reaction among those at Stieglitz's gallery "291" when the O'Keeffe drawings were first brought in. Anita Pollitzer had received them from O'Keeffe, then in Texas, with the express instructions not to show them to anyone. Nevertheless, she took them to Stieglitz.

It was the custom at that period for certain artists to gather daily in that special room—and as in the case of all other products brought there—the drawings were considered and discussed.

Most of them found that the drawings had merit—they were sure that a very definite personality had produced them—and those of a psycho-analytical turn of mind said things that mattered very much to them—but of not much consequence to anyone else—for artists are not usually concerned with subterranean reasons.

All that mattered was that the drawings had merit—it was a woman who rose up out of the drawings of a singularly violent integrity—and the woman is she who is now known as Georgia O'Keeffe.¹⁵

Herbert J. Seligmann records how Stieglitz told of this first encounter:

. . . Anita Pollitzer, Secretary of the New York branch of the National Woman's Party, walked in with a roll of drawings under her arm, "I've been asked by letter not to show anyone these," she said, "but they belong here, and here they are."

When Stieglitz saw the first one he said, "At last a woman on paper." He looked through all the drawings, and told the girl who had brought them that he would keep them for several months and look at them once or twice daily, and if at the end of that time he felt as he did then, he would show the drawings publicly. "And there will be hell raised here."¹⁶

Further in his book, Seligmann relates Stieglitz's first encounter with O'Keeffe. Stieglitz had hung the drawings in his gallery in May, 1916.

Even psychoanalysts came and told him things about the drawings. . . .

Finally O'Keeffe herself came to 291 and asked Stieglitz by what right he showed the drawings. Stieglitz said they were so wonderful he had had to show them, that she let herself be seen, gave herself

¹⁵Wilder, p. 5.

¹⁶Seligmann, p. 23.

like a flower and for an American woman that was too remarkable. He asked her questions about what had been in her mind when she made them, until O'Keeffe said suddenly: "Do you think I'm an idiot?"

"Far from it, but you haven't the slightest idea of what you've put down."

. . . He had been faced with the problem of initiating her into the significance of what she was painting. He felt that if that initiation would destroy her work, he would destroy it himself rather than let the world do so.¹⁷

In his magazine Camera Work, Stieglitz expresses his ideas as editor regarding the O'Keeffe exhibit and includes excerpts from several reviews: "Miss O'Keeffe's drawings besides their other value were of intense interest from a psycho-analytical point of view. '291' had never before seen woman express herself so frankly on paper." A response by Evelyn Sayer to a letter written by Stieglitz states: "I feel very hesitant about trying to write an appreciation of the woman pictures. I was startled at their frankness; startled into admiration of the self-knowledge in them. How new a field of expression such sex consciousness will open." An excerpt from a review by Henry Tyrrell for the Christian Science Monitor describes the exhibit as, ". . . a dozen or so of charcoal drawings alleged to be thoughts, not things, by Georgia O'Keeffe of Virginia. . . . Miss O'Keeffe looks within herself and draws with unconscious

¹⁷Ibid., p. 71.

naivete what purports to be the innermost unfolding of a girl's being, like the germination of a flower."¹⁸

The importance of looking closely at these reactions or interpretations of the O'Keeffe drawings becomes apparent in later criticisms. The avenues of interpretation which were taken by the later critics and the attraction those interpretations held for the public were all established in these first encounters. Hartley's account establishes that the works were discussed among the artists frequenting "291". In the Seligmann account, Stieglitz stated that he would study the drawings then possibly hang them. These two accounts suggest that, by the time of the first exhibit in 1916, some kind of definite interpretation had been reached by Stieglitz through discussion with fellow artists and his own personal reactions.

All three accounts mention psychoanalysis. The Hartley and Seligmann accounts state that the works were discussed in this light. In Camera Work this connection is emphasized more strongly by the statement that the works are of intense interest from this point of view. Thus the invitation to psychoanalytical interpretation was consciously set in the first exposure.

¹⁸Alfred Stieglitz (ed.), Camera Work, No. 48, (October 1916), pp. 12-13, 60-61.

An even more emphatic point made in all three accounts is the fact that these drawings were made by a woman. This emphasis on the external fact that O'Keeffe was a woman is, perhaps, the most important from the standpoint of her success with the public. It is also this fact which is stretched and formed into a blanket that fits both psychoanalytical and feminist interpretations. This factor makes it difficult to extract discussions of her sex as either psychoanalytically oriented or feminist oriented.

The fact that it was Anita Pollitzer, Secretary of the New York branch of the National Woman's Party, who brought the drawings to "291" may have a bearing in the adoption of O'Keeffe's deep personal expression as a symbol for the "newly liberated" modern woman.

In Seligmann's account, when Stieglitz first met O'Keeffe he remarked that she had let herself be seen and for an American woman that was remarkable. Aside from the separate issue of a woman being seen, the fact that Stieglitz emphasized an American woman may be significant in light of what was later described by O'Keeffe herself as Stieglitz's "fanatical belief that something alive in the arts must come out of America."¹⁹ In other words, Stieglitz may have found a double bonanza, not only a woman expressing herself but an American.

¹⁹O'Keeffe, "Stieglitz: . . .," p. 24.

One final point to be looked at is Stieglitz's initial relationship with O'Keeffe. Seligmann's account suggests that Stieglitz first saw his role towards O'Keeffe not merely as protector and benefactor but as teacher, interpreting what she saw and making her aware of it. It should be emphasized that this was the initial role assumed. Later in their relationship their cooperation and partnership is clear, but this initial attitude is important with regard to those early interpretations. O'Keeffe disagreed with many of the interpretations attached to her work. Her failure to do so at the start may be attributed to her initial willingness to accept the role of initiate. This willingness could be attributed to a natural reaction towards an established and respected man in the forefront of what was new in art, who took up her cause, offered her a year to paint and exhibited her works. In addition to these conjectures, O'Keeffe states her willingness in an early letter to Anita Pollitzer where she writes: "Anita—do you know—I believe I would rather have Stieglitz like something—anything I had done—than anyone else I know of. . . ." ²⁰ Later O'Keeffe remarked on Stieglitz's role among the artists who gathered in his galleries. She states: "He was the leader or he didn't play. It was his game and

²⁰"O'Keeffe's Woman Feeling," Newsweek, XXVII, no. 21, May 27, 1946, 94.

we all played along or left the game."²¹ It seems unlikely that O'Keeffe would have protested too vigorously when first confronted with these interpretations. It also seems unlikely that her disagreement would have had much effect. In an interview with Dorothy Seiberling for Life Magazine O'Keeffe comments on the attitude she encountered: "At first the men didn't want me around. They couldn't take a woman artist seriously. I would listen to them talk and I thought, my, they are dreamy. I felt much more prosaic but I knew I could paint as well as some of them who were sitting around talking."²²

To conclude, we have a group of assumptions made from these initial interpretations. First, that it was Stieglitz who initiated these interpretations. Second, that these interpretations consciously suggested viewing the works from a psychoanalytical framework and with an emphasis on the external fact that O'Keeffe was a woman. Third, that O'Keeffe herself played a negligible part, if any, in the acceptance or rejection of these initial interpretations. And finally, that it was the choice of these particular interpretations that accounted for O'Keeffe's success.

²¹O'Keeffe, "Stieglitz: . . .," p. 24.

²²Seiberling, p. 52.

CHAPTER IV

STIEGLITZ'S PHILOSOPHIES

To understand how Stieglitz came to form the interpretations he did and to understand the kind of influence he exerted over those who came to his galleries, it is necessary to discuss his philosophies on art and the purpose of a gallery.

The gallery itself was thought of as a laboratory in which experiments were conducted. The experiments concerned the responses of people to the works of art on display. The gallery's function was to provoke a confrontation, an intimate contact between the viewer and the spirit of the work. Stieglitz was more concerned with that living thing that happened in the gallery than with the works themselves. It was not the symbol of life that a particular artist was working with that mattered. Stieglitz's goal was to make one see that life which was symbolized, and the work of art was a vehicle by which to approach the reality of experience.

Hutchins Hapgood, who was a frequent visitor to Stieglitz's galleries, writes:

Stieglitz would talk by the hour about "life," as it manifests, or should manifest, itself in all human relations . . . it was natural that the usual

starting-point for his propaganda should be some work of art. . . . Stieglitz is important not so much for his contribution to the storehouse of definite art objects, important as that is, as for the general effect of his living personality.²³

Hapgood introduced Mable Dodge Luhan to Stieglitz and "291". She recalls:

It was always stimulating to go and listen to him analyzing life and pictures and people—telling of his strange experiences, greatly magnifying them with the strong lenses of his mental vision. . . .

There were always attractive people at Stieglitz's place. And strange, alluring paintings on the walls that one gazed into while he talked, until, gazing, one entered them and knew them. The critics came there to listen and learn, and to argue among themselves, and Stieglitz educated many of them: Henry McBride, Gregg, Forbes Watson, Ralph Flint, and others.²⁴

This account suggests an almost hypnotic influence Stieglitz was able to evoke on the viewer. It also suggests the close interaction between some of the critics and Stieglitz, implying Stieglitz's influence on them.

Stieglitz was a very exacting and thorough man. If one did not understand what he was saying he went to great lengths to find the right explanation. This sort of patience is described by Sherwood Anderson in a letter to Georgia O'Keeffe:

²³Hutchins Hapgood, A Victorian in the Modern World (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939), p. 337.

²⁴Mable Dodge Luhan, Intimate Memories (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), p. 72.

Sometimes when I saw him and you at your own show and how he so patiently worked with the stupid people who came in, it wearied me and made me half ill.

Surely I know I haven't any of his patience and would in many cases have kicked out of the room people I saw him working with so patiently. There is one person I shall always remember, just the figure of heavy, pompous stupidity standing on his two heavy legs like a bull, and before him the small, tired, intense figure of Stieglitz trying to tell that man something of his own delicately fine feeling about the artist's work.²⁵

The close association of Stieglitz's ideas with those of Henry Bergson is important when approaching the discussion of psychoanalytical interpretations. Bergson had published several articles on dream theory and although his theories differed significantly from Freud's, he was aware of the new movements and had an understanding of Freud's theories. Stieglitz published several of Bergson's articles on art theory in Camera Work. It is the compatibility of Stieglitz's ideas on art with Bergson's rather than Freud's that associates him with psychoanalytical interpretation.

A good illustration of this compatibility can be seen through a comparison of one of Bergson's articles published in Camera Work²⁶ with several statements by Stieglitz.

²⁵Howard Mumford Jones and Walter B. Rideout (eds.), Letters of Sherwood Anderson (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953), pp. 104-105.

²⁶Henri Bergson, "What is the Object of Art?," Camera Work, Vol. 37, January, 1912, pp. 22-26.

Bergson begins by stating that most of us see objects as generalities with labels affixed to them. We do not see the reality that lies beneath. By accident certain areas of nature or life are perceived by the artist in its reality and through his work "he diverts us from the prejudices of form and color that come between ourselves and reality."

Bergson continues by stating that art "has no other object than to brush aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities, in short, everything that veils reality from us, in order to bring us face to face with reality itself. . . ." Stieglitz is talking about the same ideas when he states: "If only each will permit himself to be free to recognize the living moment when it occurs, and to let it flower, without preconceived ideas about what it should be."²⁷

Further in his article Bergson states that all art is individualized, yet often works of art are talked of in generalities and symbols. The reason for this misunderstanding, Bergson continues, "lies in the fact that two very different things have been mistaken for each other: the generality of things and that of the opinions we come to regarding them. Because a feeling is generally recognized as true, it does not follow that it is a general feeling." One can see a similarity to Stieglitz's statement

²⁷Dorothy Norman, Alfred Stieglitz: Introduction to an American Seer (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1960), p. 28.

that, ". . . no ism in itself has any final meaning for me. All isms contain some measure of truth. Each is part of a passing phase."²⁸ By isms Stieglitz means those labels that Bergson refers to as generalities and symbols. The measure of truth they contain is the recognition that the artist perceived the reality of experience, yet because this is an individualized perception with regard to the physical work of art, it cannot be lumped with others under a generalized label. This is what Bergson means when he states that there is a difference between a feeling generally recognized as true and a general feeling.

Stieglitz's ideas towards art, then, correspond closely with those of Bergson and can thus be linked to the psychoanalytically inclined interpretations, but not necessarily with Freudian ones. It is in the area of sexual interpretations that Stieglitz is linked with the popularized versions of Freud.

²⁸Ibid., p. 48.

CHAPTER V

FREUDIAN INTERPRETATIONS

Freud's theories first became accessible to the American public during the period 1910-1913. By this time educated laymen in Freudian psychology were writing articles in such popular magazines as the New Republic. These were men like Max Eastman, a teacher of metaphysics at Columbia University, and Walter Lippman who was beginning his career as a journalist. Both Eastman and Lippman were friends of Mable Dodge Luhan and it is through her that a direct connection between Freudian theorists and Stieglitz is most likely.

Mable Dodge Luhan was an unusual woman who had both the energy and finances to effectively involve herself in most of the new movements in New York. She would gather artists and intellectuals in her home in what has been described as the only successful salon in America.²⁹ On several occasions her salon was dedicated to the discussion of psychoanalysis as interpreted by Freud. A. A. Brill, who knew both Freud and Jung personally, states that he

²⁹Claudia C. Morrison, Freud and the Critic (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 25.

spoke at one of her gatherings in the winter of 1913.

"There I met radicals, literateurs, artists, and philosophers, some of whom have influenced the trends of our times in no small way."³⁰ Lincoln Steffens, a close friend of Walter Lippman, recalls: "It was there that some of us first heard of psychoanalysis and the new psychology of Freud and Jung. . . ." ³¹ Stieglitz may have attended some of these gatherings; in any case, he would have heard accounts of them through Mable Dodge Luhan and Lippman, both of whom frequented his galleries.

The importance of Freud's influence was through his stressing of sex as an element in human emotions and behavior. Its application to society as a whole is an American revision. As Marthe Robert states in his book The Psychoanalytical Revolution, " . . . the idea that it [psychoanalysis] can somehow be applied in the mass and concern itself less with making an individual an integrated person than making him conform to social standards, thereby bringing him down to a common level, is undoubtedly something which would have disheartened Freud."³² Yet, it is these revisions that made Freud attractive to middle-class Americans.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Marthe Robert, The Psychoanalytical Revolution (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1966), p. 237.

In 1925 Freud wrote in his autobiography: "It [psychoanalysis] has not lost ground in America since our visit [Freud visited America in 1909]; it is extremely popular among the lay public. . . . Unfortunately, however, it has suffered a great deal from being watered down. Moreover, many abuses which have no relation to it find cover under its name."³³

Sexual expression and its resulting interpretations became the symbol of freedom and sophistication. In reality, as Lewis Mumford states, "Although talk about sex, and even possibly physical indulgence, became more common, the actual manifestations often remained placidly anemic."³⁴ He goes on to say that the American woman remained untouchable and paradoxically her womanliness and untouchability were supposed to be one. "But what was sex," he writes, "how could it exist, how could it nourish the personality, if it were not in fact the most essential demonstration of touchability?"³⁵

Stieglitz took the idea of touchability both in its tactile sense and in its meaning of accessibility. "The quality of touch in its deepest living sense is inherent in my photographs," he says. "When the sense of touch is

³³Ibid., p. 236.

³⁴Waldo Frank (ed.), America and Alfred Stieglitz: A Collective Portrait (New York: Country Life Press, 1934), p. 55.

³⁵Ibid., p. 56.

lost, the heartbeat of the photograph is extinct."³⁶ Later he adds: ". . . (W)hen I photograph I make love. . . . If what one makes is not created with a sense of sacredness, a sense of wonder; if it is not a form of lovemaking; if it is not created with the same passion as the first kiss, it has no right to be called a work of art."³⁷ Stieglitz is not only speaking of the tactile sensuousness of things, but that intimacy which one gains through direct and close contact.

There is a difference, however, between this sensual approach to sex and the symbolic one in which all things are seen as having sexual meaning. The first approach is directed towards understanding through intimate knowledge, the second is an attempt to explain by relating to already existing ideas.

Stieglitz's personal relationship with O'Keeffe reinforces the idea that Stieglitz saw sexual expression as understanding through intimate knowledge. He had known and worked with talented women before but never in conjunction with the personal intimacy he had with O'Keeffe.

In the earlier days of his gallery, when he was exhibiting only photographs, Stieglitz had been associated with and had exhibited woman photographers as Julia Cameron

³⁶Norman, Alfred Stieglitz . . ., p. 56.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 34, 45.

and Gertrude Casebian. His first non-photographic exhibit in 1907 was of drawings by a woman, Pamela Coleman Smith. Stieglitz had also published several works by Gertrude Stein in Camera Work.³⁸ All of these events occurred without an emphasis placed on their womanhood. The most likely explanation seems to be that Freudian emphasis on sex was not popular prior to 1913 and Stieglitz was not as closely involved with these other women.

Seligmann relates that "Stieglitz said his life had certainly shown he respected woman. Now he was really trying to find out what woman was, to get at the root of woman's being."³⁹ Again the emphasis on sex through Freudian interpretations may have been influential in Stieglitz's new focus. More important is the fact that immediately after meeting O'Keeffe, Stieglitz closed his gallery and for the first time in nearly fifteen years devoted his energy to the development of his own art. Thus, at the moment of their relationship, Stieglitz was freed to devote more time to exploring it. As the editors of Time-Life suggest in The Print, "Stieglitz was using his camera to explore a deeply personal relationship, the relationship between a man and a woman"⁴⁰ (Fig. 9).

³⁸Gertrude Stein, "Henry Matisse," "Pablo Picasso," Camera Work, special edition, August, 1912, pp. 23-30.

³⁹Seligmann, p. 65.

⁴⁰Editors, Time-Life, in The Print (Time Inc., 1970), p. 24.

In a sense, then, Stieglitz's relationship with O'Keeffe gave him an opportunity to realize his theories from both an artistic and personal level.

While Stieglitz was concerned with the sensual approach to sex, most of the Freudian interpretations of O'Keeffe's work came from the symbolic approach. It is with these ideas that the popularizations of Freudian psychology and the feminist movement, which had been in the news for some time, came together.

CHAPTER VI

FEMINIST INTERPRETATIONS

The feminist movement had been a lively issue since the beginning of the twentieth century. It had mainly been concerned with political issues as gaining the right to vote and exerting a voice in the formation of foreign policy regarding peace preservation. The movement was also concerned with women in lower income areas and initiated experimental clinics, birth control and child care. On the whole, very little had been accomplished in changing the general attitude towards women. The most active figures in the movement at this time were Jane Adams and Margaret Sanger. The National Woman's Party was one of the more influential organizations.

At first the feminist movement advocated greater rights for women and, in doing this, stressed that women were capable of activities they had not engaged in before. This brought widespread interest from both sides in analyzing the physical and mental traits of the sexes. The differences received wide attention, including works by presumably competent investigators as Havelock Ellis. A sample of his work is found in a 1916 edition of the Atlantic Monthly. The chief distinction he finds among women is their greater

emotionality. "All the mental, moral and other characteristics, desirable or undesirable, which are correlated with emotionality, are especially found in women, and will continue so to be found so long as emotionality is more marked in women than in men."⁴¹ To this rather non-committal statement he adds: "There is a deep feminine dislike of analysis, probably connected with the emotionality of women."⁴² One might conclude that those women who disliked Ellis's type of analysis were proving their emotionality.

In general, the feminist movement had set out to eliminate such characterizations of women as being more emotional, more personal in their thinking, less sensitive to pain, more religious and more docile. What happened during the 1910's with Freudian interpretations of sex consciousness was that women began to become aware of themselves as important in their own right. In a 1915 article entitled "Some Reflections on Feminism," Zephine Humphry notices this turn of events and writes: "The self-contradiction of feminism is its most perplexing feature. Its advocates complain that there is too much stress laid on the difference between the sexes, and then they proceed to lay the most violent stress the world has ever known. . . .

⁴¹Havelock Ellis, "The Mind of Woman," The Atlantic Monthly, Vol. 118, September, 1916, pp. 371-373.

⁴²Ibid.

A sex which thus emphasizes itself must consider itself distinct. We seem in danger of doing precisely that."⁴³

One further characteristic that became frequently emphasized was that women were undeniably the mothers. The new interpretations placed on this fact the feeling that the female also determined the characteristics of the future race. This point appears several times in the O'Keefe reviews. It made little difference whether a woman actually bore children, the maternal instinct was supposedly inherent in all women.

The importance of a brief understanding of these aspects is clear when we read some of the early reviews of O'Keefe's works in which Freudian sexual awareness and the ideas brought to attention through the feminist movement are blended in improbable combinations.

⁴³Zephine Humphry, "Some Reflections on Feminism," Outlook, Vol. 109, April 14, 1915, p. 893.

CHAPTER VII

EARLY REVIEWS

In studying the early interpretations of O'Keeffe's works,⁴⁴ we become aware of a very involved emotional battle taking place. One group of interpreters responds to the sensual forms in O'Keeffe's works with associations to sexual symbols. The other group sees only abstraction.

Within the former group another dichotomy forms. It evolves around the definition of the new woman. As Barbara Rose puts it: "Was modern woman, in terms of the dichotomy of Henry Adams, the Virgin or the Dynamo? Davies saw her as the former, elevating her to the majestic status of the 'Great Mother', whereas the Dadaists Duchamp and Picabia portrayed her as an animated machine, the bitch goddess of the dynamo."⁴⁵

⁴⁴Most of the early reviews of O'Keeffe's works refer to exhibitions and not particular paintings. Therefore the illustrations for this section are grouped chronologically and references to them indicate a reference to the work done during that period rather than the specific work illustrated.

⁴⁵Barbara Rose, American Art Since 1900 (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968), pp. 49-50.

On the virginal side, O'Keeffe is seen as the innocent revealing the simple truth of what she sees. As Louis Kalonyme writes:

No woman painter ever has made so innocent an approach in painting as she does. Innocent, that is, of the primitive, savage, naive, virile, mystical abstract, ecstatic, Promethean, Dionysian, Apollonian—innocent, in sum, of all aesthetic categories of masculine approach in painting. Innocent, too, of all feminine versions of masculine painting.⁴⁶

On the other side O'Keeffe is seen as preoccupied with sex. Abstraction, 1922 (Fig. 1) is noted for its breastlike contours and Grey Line with Black, Blue and Yellow (Fig. 3) is seen not merely as a phallic symbol but as a graphic enlargement of the vagina. As Paul Rosenfeld states, "The organs that differentiate the sex speak."⁴⁷ This preoccupation is often seen in a negative sense. As Samuel Kootz writes:

Much of her earlier work showed a womanly preoccupation with sex, an uneasy selection of phallic symbols in her flowers, a delight in their nascent qualities. O'Keeffe was being a woman and only secondarily an artist. Assertion of sex can only impede the talents of an artist, for it is an act of defiance, of grievance, in which the consciousness of these qualities retards the natural assertions of the painter.⁴⁸

⁴⁶Louis Kalonyme, "Georgia O'Keeffe: A Woman in Painting," Creative Art, XXXV (January, 1928), p. 38.

⁴⁷Paul Rosenfeld, "American Painting," The Dial, Vol. 71, December 21, 1921, p. 666.

⁴⁸Samuel Kootz, Modern American Painters (New York: Brewer & Warren, Inc., 1930), p. 49.

O'Keeffe removed herself from any involvement in this controversy. Waldo Frank describes her position: "O'Keeffe—who is the spirit of quiet and of peace—finds her haven in this whirlwind world of Stieglitz. It is always hushed and still at the vortex of a maelstrom."⁴⁹

The group of interpretations describing O'Keeffe's works as pure abstraction are most interesting for the contrast they present to the sexual interpretations. It is interesting to note that these interpretations are also closest to present discussions of O'Keeffe's early work (see Chapter X). In 1924 Sheldon Cheney described her work: "She is bold, but always within a harmonious restraint; her canvases are compact, the design counting strongly, color emotional, the absolute feeling poised with exquisite certainty. . . . In the still-lives the corners, the patches, the objects answer each other compositionally."⁵⁰

Duncan Phillips, who bought several O'Keeffe's for his collection, writes:

One may be attracted or alarmed by her unprecedented patterns, but one cannot fail to be impressed by her passionate sacrifice of self to color and line. It is courage which commands our

⁴⁹Waldo Frank, Time Exposures (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), p. 34.

⁵⁰Sheldon Cheney, A Primer of Modern Art (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1924), p. 235.

attention in the art of this amazing young woman—the courage of her challenging philosophies especially her courage in so often prolonging the intensity of a theme based on one color, or on the intricate elaboration and enlargement of one linear motif.⁵¹

A review in the New York Times in 1928 reads:

In Georgia O'Keeffe's work, some excellent examples of which are now on view, abstraction is treated with an understanding that has deepened and broadened with experience in art forms the most difficult, the most eluding. Some abstractions as she weaves are created through simplification, if by simplification we mean essentially the paring away of all that is non-essential.⁵² (Fig. 8.)

In contrast to these reviews are those which interpret O'Keeffe's works from a sexual reference point. The dichotomy mentioned earlier is most often interwoven within each interpretation. The most obvious user of these dual symbols is Paul Rosenfeld who was also one of O'Keeffe's avid reviewers. In a 1921 review in The Dial he states:

Her great painful and ecstatic climaxes make us at last to know something the man has always wanted to know. For here, in this painting, there is registered the manner of perception anchored in the constitution of the woman. The organs that differentiate the sex speak. Women, one would judge, always feel when they feel strongly, through the womb. . . . But this girl is indeed the innocent one. For here there appears to be nothing that cannot be transfused utterly with spirit, with high feeling, with fierce clean passion. The entire body is seen noble and divine

⁵¹Duncan Phillips, A Collection in the Making (New York: E. Weyhe, 1926), p. 66.

⁵²New York Times, January 22, 1928.

through love. There is no flesh that cannot become the seat of a god. There is no appetite that cannot burst forth in flowers and electric colour.⁵³ (Fig. 1.)

In 1922 he writes:

There are certain of these streaks of pigment which appear licked on with the point of the tongue, so vibrant and lyrical are they. . . . There are spots in this work wherein the artist seems to bring before one the outline of a whole universe, an entire course of the mysterious cycles of birth and reproduction and death, expressed through the terms of a woman's body. . . . Essence of very womanhood permeates her pictures.⁵⁴ (Fig. 2.)

In his book Port of New York, written in 1924, Rosenfeld is still writing of the "verity of woman's life" expressed by O'Keeffe. "An American girl's implicit trust in her senses . . . an American girl's utter belief, not in masculinity nor in unsexedness, but in womanhood . . . rendering in her picture of things her body's subconscious knowledge of itself. . . . What men have always wanted to know, and women to hide, this girl sets forth."⁵⁵ (Fig. 3.)

Rosenfeld does not see O'Keeffe and her works as expressions of a deep individualized perception but as merely the first expressions of generalized perception, the perception of woman. This perception is not very sophisticated but a rather basic one associated with the mysteries

⁵³Rosenfeld, "American Painting," . . ., p. 666.

⁵⁴Paul Rosenfeld, "The Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe," Vanity Fair, Vol. 19, October, 1922, p. 112.

⁵⁵Paul Rosenfeld, Port of New York (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1924), pp. 204-205.

of the womb, or the maternal instinct. Perception is almost stretching the point because Rosenfeld emphasizes the intuitive approach and the subconscious, both of which may be revealing but neither of which involves perception on the part of the intuitive. In this sense Rosenfeld sees O'Keeffe as the Virgin, the "Great Mother." At the same time Rosenfeld comes near the idea of the "bitch goddess" with his evocative nearly erotic descriptions of O'Keeffe's pictures and her painting method.

The later part of the dichotomy, woman as Dynamo, is centered on the idea that O'Keeffe's approach and symbols are calculated and her control of the sexual passions behind them give her the strong harsh detachment of the machine. Marsden Hartley writes of O'Keeffe in this vein:

With Georgia O'Keeffe one takes a far jump into volcanic crateral ethers, and sees the world of a woman turned inside out and gaping with deep open eyes and fixed mouth at the rather trivial world of living people. . . . She had seen hell, one might say, and is the Sphynxian sniffer at the value of a secret. She looks as if she had ridden the millions of miles of her every known imaginary horizon, and has left all her horses lying dead in their tracks.⁵⁶

In a curious use of the very symbols he is denying, Waldo Frank writes the following discussion of O'Keeffe in his book Time Exposures:

O'Keeffe is a peasant—a glorified American peasant. Like a peasant, she is full of loamy hungers of the

⁵⁶Marsden Hartley, Adventures in the Arts (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1921), pp. 116-117.

flesh. Like a peasant, she is full of star-dreams. She is a strong-hipped creature. She has Celt eyes, she has a quiet body. . . . And then, along came the experts. And they prated mystic symbols: or Freudian symbols. How could you expect New York to admit that what it likes in O'Keeffe is precisely the fact that she is clear as water? Cool as water? New York is sure, it is too sophisticated to care for anything but cocktails. What a blow to our pride, to confess that it is neither more nor less than the well-water deepness of O'Keeffe which holds us! Better pour the simple stuff of her art into cunningly wrought goblets of interpretation. Better talk of 'mystic figures of womanhood', of 'Sumerian entrail-symbols', of womb-dark hieroglyphics. Doubtless, all this would make the woman tired--if she could not smile.⁵⁷

Frank's discussion is even more interesting when we learn that four years before his own works were criticized for being written according to a Freudian formula. His characters were criticized for being tedious and unsympathetic, for being "slack balloons appended to bulbous genitals" rather than human beings.⁵⁸

While Frank denies the relevancy of Freudian symbols in discussing O'Keeffe's work, he employs them in his opinion of O'Keeffe the woman. Frank describes O'Keeffe in some of the same terms as Rosenfeld did previously. She is simple and close to the earth with the kind of innocence of expression that Rosenfeld attributes to the subconscious.

⁵⁷ Frank, Time Exposures, pp. 32-33.

⁵⁸ Matthew Josephson, "Instant Note on Waldo Frank," Broom, IV (December, 1922), p. 57.

These particular characteristics are expanded to symbolize not only O'Keeffe's individual approach, but her approach as a woman in contrast to the approach of a man.

Allan Burroughs, writing for the Sun in 1923, reviews an exhibit at the Durand-Ruel galleries which included works by Manet, Monet, Pissarro, Cezanne and O'Keeffe. He states: "Here are masculine qualities in great variety and reserve. But as in this unfair world, though the man spends a lifetime in careful consideration of a question his answer may seem no more sure than the one the woman gets by guess-work."⁵⁹

In 1927 Louis Kalonyme writes in the New York Times, "O'Keeffe plays a grand, maternal music, which reveals the shape of the world as a woman sees it and feels affirmatively toward it. She reveals woman as an elementary being closer to the earth than man, suffering pain with passionate ecstasy and enjoying life with beyond-good-and-evil delight."⁶⁰ (Figs. 7, 8.) Here, again, the maternal aspect of woman is linked to her more basic nature and her intuitive perception, but it is posed as a contrast to man's.

In 1928 Kalonyme states this point more clearly: "Her distinction is not that she has perceived better or differently the things Seurat, Rousseau, Renoir or Ryder

⁵⁹Wilder, p. 13.

⁶⁰Louis Kalonyme, New York Times, January 16, 1927, p. 6.

saw, or that John Marin sees, but that she has seen those things as a woman. Her relation to those things is akin to a woman's relation to man."⁶¹

These male-female distinctions occasionally were carried to ludicrous extremes as in Edmund Wilson's 1925 review of an O'Keeffe exhibit where he states that, "where men's minds may have a freer range and their works of art be thrown out further from themselves, women artists have a way of appearing to wear their most brilliant productions however objective in form—like those other artistic, expression, their clothes . . ." ⁶²

The best summation of this type of criticism is well said by W. L. George who, in 1916, attacked the criticism of George Moore. "He judges a man's work as art," he writes, "he will not judge a woman's work as art. He starts from the assumption that man's art is art, while woman's art is—well, woman's art."⁶³

These reviews all have a bandwagon quality about them. They are not concerned with Georgia O'Keeffe the artist as much as Georgia O'Keeffe the symbol of new womanhood. If sexual expression was the new symbol of freedom and sophistication, the critics were going to make sure they were the

⁶¹Kalonyme, "Georgia O'Keeffe, . . .," p. 37.

⁶²Edmund Wilson, "The Stieglitz Exhibition," The New Republic, Vol. 24, March 18, 1925, p. 97.

⁶³W. L. George, "Further Notes on the Intelligence of Woman," The Atlantic Monthly, Vol. 117, January, 1916, p. 106.

first to identify its manifestations. They were ready for the opportunity that Stieglitz showed them through Georgia O'Keeffe.

The feminists also wanted to be identified with this new symbol and so they incorporated O'Keeffe into their ranks.

Henry McBride is one critic who seemed to have consistently perceptive reviews. As early as 1923 he writes:

In definitely unblossoming her soul she not only finds her own release but advances the cause of art in her country. And the curious and instructive part of the history is that O'Keeffe after venturing with bare feet upon a bridge of naked sword blades into the land of abstract truth now finds herself a moralist. She is a sort of modern Margaret Fuller sneered at by Nathaniel Hawthorne for a too great tolerance of sin and finally prayed to by all the super-respectable women of the country for receipts that would keep them from the madhouse. O'Keeffe's next great test will be in the same genre. She will be besieged by all her sisters for advice—which will be a supreme danger for her. She is, after all, an artist, and owes more to art than morality.⁶⁴

O'Keeffe consistently refrained from commenting on her works. She felt her language to be that of painting and words at best would muddy her statements. The problem became not one of being besieged by her "sisters" for advice, but that by withdrawing herself from the issue, her sisters found their own advice in her works.

In 1927 McBride wrote:

⁶⁴Wilder, pp. 10-13.

I begin to think that in order to be quite fair to Miss O'Keeffe I must listen to what the women say of her—and take notes. I like her stuff quite well, very well. I like her colour, her imagination, her decorative sense. Her things wear well with me . . . but I do not feel the occult element in them that all the ladies insist is there. There were more feminine shrieks and screams in the vicinity of O'Keeffe's work this year than ever before; so I take it that she too is getting on.⁶⁵

It is interesting to note O'Keeffe's reaction to McBride. His close association with Stieglitz and his gallery was mentioned before. Mable Dodge Luhan goes so far as to suggest that McBride "received his education" from Stieglitz. In any case, O'Keeffe seems to have appreciated him more than others. Responding to a review written by him in 1927, which must have been in the same vein as the preceding, O'Keeffe writes:

Thanks for the notice in the Sun. I like what you print about me and am amused and as usual don't understand what it is all about even if you do say I am intellectual. I am particularly amused and pleased to have the emotional faucet turned off--no matter what other ones you turn on. It is grand. And all the ladies who like my things will think they are becoming intellectual . . . it is wonderful. And the men will think them much safer—if my method is French. I will phone you to spend an evening with us sometime soon—if you would like to.⁶⁶

The closest O'Keeffe comes to a public rejection of some of the interpretations placed on her works is in the catalogue to her exhibit in 1939. Here she explains that

⁶⁵Henry McBride, "Modern Art," The Dial, Vol. 107, May, 1926, p. 437.

⁶⁶Art in America (ed.), The Artist in America (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1967), p. 158.

she painted her flower pictures big so that even busy New Yorkers would take time to see what she had seen. She writes: "Well—I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower, you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower—and I don't."⁶⁷ (Fig. 7.)

"O'Keeffe told me once," O'Brien said, "that the critics were talking about themselves and not about her."⁶⁸

If we look at O'Keeffe's private life, we do not find an active participation in either of the two movements connected with her painting. She did attend meetings of the National Woman's Party with Anita Pollitzer, but seems to have taken a passive role. In February 1926, O'Keeffe and Pollitzer went to Washington to attend a National Woman's Party dinner honoring Jessie Dell, newly elected U. S. Civil Service Commissioner. Seligmann relates Pollitzer's account of the meeting. She states that "O'Keeffe in her speech to 490 women at the dinner there, had created an equivalent of her painting, that what she said had been clear above all the other speeches, and that everyone had said that O'Keeffe's remarks were the most real of all that

⁶⁷Goodrich and Bry, p. 19.

⁶⁸O'Brien, interview.

had been said at the dinner."⁶⁹ The New York Times account of the dinner merely lists O'Keeffe as one of the guests.⁷⁰

While O'Keeffe had a very real interest in the women's movement, she was not actively in the forefront. Frances O'Brien in an article for The Nation in 1927 accurately sums up O'Keeffe's position in relation to these movements. "If Georgia O'Keeffe had any passion other than her work," she writes, "it is her interest and faith in her own sex. . . . She believes ardently in woman as an individual. An individual not merely with the rights and privileges of man, but what is to her more important, with the same responsibilities. And chief among these is the responsibility of self-realization."⁷¹

O'Keeffe refused to involve herself in the interpretational controversy sparked by her works. That these interpretations, however, were responsible for her success seems evident. Being in the middle of the discussion of sex, both from a psychoanalytical and a feminist angle, she was always in the public's eye whetting its curiosity and available as a symbolic representation to either side.

⁶⁹Seligman, p. 65.

⁷⁰New York Times, March 1, 1926.

⁷¹Frances O'Brien, "Americans We Like: Georgia O'Keeffe," The Nation, Vol. 125, October 12, 1927, p. 362.

CHAPTER VIII

O'KEEFFE'S SUCCESS

Georgia O'Keeffe was successful. She enjoyed a favorable press from the start in contrast to many of the other artists exhibited along with her at "291" and the other Stieglitz galleries. These galleries had been the center of controversy from the start. Stieglitz's first goal had been to gain for photography the status of art, and then it widened to champion the anti-photographic in painting. Stieglitz had exhibited Matisse, Picasso, Picabia and Brancusi, all before the Armory Show in 1913. The same controversy that that show released had been fought in Stieglitz's galleries before. Merely being exhibited by Stieglitz, then, insured O'Keeffe's coming to the attention of most of the prominent critics, but it did not automatically insure favorable reviews. As a matter of fact, the usual fare was something like this: "Mr. Stieglitz . . . has captured another 'wild man'."⁷² Or, "One is more or less certain to find the last thing in art at the little galleries. . . . If one might hope it really was the last—of this sort—there would be some

⁷²Stieglitz, July, 1909, p. 43.

consolation."⁷³ And in a milder vein "291" is described as "a sort of sanctuary or no-man's land that offers a temporary resting place to any and every strange new thing that comes along."⁷⁴

The most unfavorable reviews always generated from those reviewers associated with the academicians, and these reviewers held the most influential positions on the newspapers. Mable Dodge Luhan states that to them Winslow Homer and George Inness were still the idols of the art columns.⁷⁵ With this in mind it seems significant that Stieglitz kept the O'Keeffe drawings for several months before exhibiting them in May, 1916. "He waited to show the O'Keeffe drawings," says Seligmann, "until the art season was over and the critics were laid off."⁷⁶ In Camera Work Stieglitz acknowledges this point. He says, "In spite of the lateness of the season when the chief art critics of the New York papers had already been laid off for the summer . . ."⁷⁷ This hardly seems a coincidence. Stieglitz had a very thorough knowledge of the workings of the

⁷³Ibid., p. 43.

⁷⁴Ibid., October, 1916, p. 60.

⁷⁵Luhan, p. 25.

⁷⁶Seligmann, p. 23.

⁷⁷Stieglitz, October, 1916, p. 12.

practical aspects of art and the art market. This knowledge was developed into his philosophies about the relationship of dealer to artist. To Stieglitz the role of dealer included protecting the artist from the exactions of business. The artist symbolized purity and sincerity and Stieglitz felt these qualities could be damaged by an unsympathetic world. It is probable, then, that Stieglitz waited until the critics were laid off to insure reviews by the more impressionable younger critics, many of whom were personal acquaintances.

If we accept Stieglitz's knowledge in this aspect, it is also possible to assume he knew what he was doing in opening up the avenues for psychoanalytical and sexual interpretations. We know that Stieglitz himself can be associated with these ideas but not in the extremes to which they were carried. However, since Stieglitz was in the forefront of the new movements coming through America he may have had the shrewdness to realize the benefits of placing the O'Keeffe works in the middle of these increasingly popular topics. On the other hand, Stieglitz was not the kind of dealer who was given to playing the market in this sort of way. All that can be said regarding this aspect is that Stieglitz himself associated O'Keeffe's works with sexual awareness.

O'Keeffe enjoyed more than verbal success. Ten years after her first exhibit her paintings were in the Brooklyn

Museum, the Barnes Foundation, the Phillips Gallery and innumerable private collections. By 1927 her paintings were selling for \$3,000 and as high as \$6,000, which was paid for a canvas of the Hotel Shelton. The next year she sold her Calla Lily paintings to an American in Paris for \$25,000.

It is clear that O'Keeffe was successful and we can only attribute this success to the success with which her works were initially presented.

CHAPTER IX

INTERPRETATIONAL INFLUENCE ON O'KEEFFE

An interesting aspect of the study of critical interpretations is their possible influence on the artist. In O'Keeffe's case, the psychoanalytical and sexual interpretations were attached to her earliest works (Figs. 4, 5, 6) without her knowledge. If we study these works and compare them to the works she produced immediately after her arrival in New York in 1918 (Figs. 1, 2, 3) we are struck by the fact that while all six are abstract, the first three most readily suggest organic forms found in nature, while the last three seem to be more graphic representations of sexual organs.

Another interesting fact is that while Figures 1, 2, 3 suggest immediate sexual associations, it is O'Keeffe's later flower pictures (Fig. 7) that are most often cited in discussions of her sexual symbolism. This is most likely explained by the reluctance of the media to involve itself in direct discussions of sexual forms, breasts and vaginas. It is much easier to talk of phallic symbols expressed through flower forms.

O'Keeffe may have decided to fulfill the interpretations confronting her on her arrival in New York.

Another influence that could have equally affected her painting is Charles Demuth. Demuth was a frequent visitor to the Stieglitz galleries and O'Keeffe became a close friend. As she describes it:

I was very fond of Charles Demuth. He was amusing, very elegant, though he had a club foot and diabetes. When he came to town he'd eat things he shouldn't, so he'd stay 'till he got sick, then go home. Demuth and I always talked about doing a big picture together, all flowers. I was going to do the tall things up high, he was going to do the little things below.⁷⁸

Demuth's fondness for O'Keeffe is expressed through his Poster Portrait of her done in 1924 (Fig. 16).

While we immediately associated Demuth with his architectural paintings, during this early period he was best known for his flower works. A. E. Gallatin writing in 1927 states: "Demuth's studies of flowers are no doubt the examples of his work which are most familiar to the public, for since the earliest days of his career he has been engrossed in the delineation of flower forms, and this interest shows no signs of abating."⁷⁹ (Fig. 15.) Demuth's analytical approach familiar to us through his architectural works are also present in these early flower pictures. Leaves and petals are broken down into

⁷⁸Seiberling, p. 53.

⁷⁹A. E. Gallatin, Charles Demuth (New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1927), p. 6.

flower-like shapes and Demuth's primary concern is the relationship of these forms rather than the portrayal of a particular flower.

An even more telling relationship between Demuth's flowers and O'Keeffe's is found in William Carlos Williams' description of a Demuth painting: "In my painting of orchids which Charlie did—the one called Pink Lady Slippers 1918—he was interested in the similarity between the forms of the flowers and the phallic symbol, the male genitals. Charlie was like that."⁸⁰ Here the same associations which were later applied to O'Keeffe's work are applied to Demuth's flower paintings in the very year that O'Keeffe arrived in New York. This points out a possible inspiration for O'Keeffe's flower paintings and also the fact that sexual interpretations were in vogue. O'Keeffe nicely rounded out the phallic picture—Demuth's flowers were similar to male genitals, O'Keeffe's to the female organs.

Clarification of O'Keeffe's reaction to the interpretations of her flower works or her inspiration for them will have to wait until a study of her correspondence is possible (see Appendix). Until then, her only recorded comment is the one written in the 1939 catalogue to her works: "You hung all your own associations with flowers on

⁸⁰ Emily Farnham, Charles Demuth: Behind a Laughing Mask (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), pp. 3-4.

my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower—and I don't."⁸¹

⁸¹Goodrich and Bry, p. 19.

CHAPTER X

LATER INTERPRETATIONS

In a review in the New Republic, Lewis Mumford writes:

Miss O'Keeffe's paintings . . . would tell much about the departure of Victorian prudery and the ingrowing consciousness of sex, in resistance to a hard external environment; were Sherwood Anderson's novels destroyed, were every vulgar manifestation in the newspapers forgotten, were the papers of the Freudian psychologists burned, her pictures would still be a witness.⁸²

This review was written in 1927. By the 60's and 70's O'Keeffe's paintings were no longer taken as symbols of the consciousness of sex and her early works were no longer interpreted in this light. What remained as witness to the so-called departure of Victorian prudery were the reviews themselves.

Current writers stress the deeply personal quality of her art and the clarity of her style. The current evaluation of her early works generally follows the type of discussion written by Lloyd Goodrich and Doris Bry. They evaluate those first charcoal drawings as follows:

⁸²Lewis Mumford, "O'Keeffe and Matisse," The New Republic, Vol. 50, March 2, 1927, p. 42.

Almost all of these drawings are abstract. Their forms suggest those of nature, but without specific imagery. They are marked by . . . a sense of movement—not representation of moving things, but movement in the forms themselves. In Drawing No. 13 the three separate elements—the undulating rising form, the succession of swelling bud-like shapes, and the series of acute angles—move in differing yet related tempos and in contrapuntal style.⁸³ (Fig. 5.)

The suggestion of psychoanalytical or feminist symbols is entirely absent.

It is interesting to note that we now have an entirely new point of contact between the same work of art on the one hand, but a different set of people and times on the other. Presentation now involves photographic reproduction, interpretation involves art historians, and reception involves readers and art book buyers. We still have a point of contact between a work of art and society but the specifics have changed.

The key to any evaluation of contemporary interpretation of O'Keeffe's early work is that it is no longer the art critics who are reviewing her work but the art historians. There is a greater tendency to see her works as fitting into the broader scope of art movements through stylistic discussion than relating to her times through theoretical similarities.

O'Keeffe is one of the few American artists at this time who did not study or travel in Europe. Frances O'Brien

⁸³Goodrich and Bry, p. 10.

carries this step further by insisting that, "She did not want to be influenced by European artists. . . ."84

O'Keeffe presents rather frugal fare in any discussion relating her to the European movements; she knew the European moderns but ignored their stylistic peculiarities. The only modern movement that O'Keeffe is now linked to is the more indigneous one of Precisionism.

Martin L. Friedman, who organized a retrospective exhibit of Precisionist paintings in 1960, sees O'Keeffe's involvement in the following way:

Through all the arrivals and departures of the painters within the Precisionist context, O'Keeffe and Sheeler, working independently and in increasing isolation, have come to represent the two main currents of Precisionist expression. Extreme simplification of form, unwavering sharp delineation, and carefully reasoned abstract organization are the stylistic qualities most conspicuously common to the work of both. And still, within the Precisionist microcosm their painting could be described as the traditional romantic-classic duality. For the most part, O'Keeffe's images of a monumentalized natural world are concerned with the primal forces of creation and decay. In contrast, Sheeler's architectural and mechanical subjects are chaste celebrations of the more immediate and tangible spirit of modern technology.⁸⁵

Unity of texture and photographic similarities, enlargement of detail and sharpness of focus, are the two stylistic elements that are most often discussed with regard to the Precisionists.

⁸⁴O'Brien, interview.

⁸⁵Martin L. Friedman, The Precisionist View (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 1960), p. 14.

Friedman describes unity of texture applied to the painting surface:

The pictures are brought to an icily defined and flawless finish, with virtually no evidence of the brush strokes or the trials and hesitations of arriving at the finished stage. In its complete subordination of the medium, there is little revealing in the sensuous qualities of pigment, and the process of painting is skilfully buried under the polished surface.⁸⁶

O'Keeffe's approach to the canvas illustrates this aspect. Francis O'Brien describes how O'Keeffe "starts from the left hand upper corner and works down to the right lower corner. This is all part of the idea of uniform texture. If she feels something must be reworked she sands that area down to the canvas first."⁸⁷

These ideas also parallel Stieglitz's on the subject of technique. He states:

It is the intensity of feeling expressed which lives. It is not the technique. Technique is a dead thing, no matter how masterly it may be in itself. At first it may attract, but eventually it repels . . . because it is not vital. It is like a vaudeville stunt. All right as far as it goes, and very wonderful. But it is not sufficient; if one requires from life more than surface qualities.⁸⁸

Another aspect of the precisionist movement was the influence of photography. Sheeler was an accomplished

⁸⁶Ibid., p. 13.

⁸⁷O'Brien, interview.

⁸⁸Norman, Alfred Stieglitz: . . ., p. 19.

photographer himself and worked with Edward Steichen and Paul Strand, both outstanding photographers and close associates of Stieglitz. O'Keeffe's relationship with Stieglitz undoubtedly brought her into the same contact with photography. There is a definite similarity between certain aspects that were being developed in photography at this time and many of the precisionist characteristics, as for example the enlargement of architectural detail, crisp lines and edges and uniformity of texture. There seems to be some question, however, as to how much O'Keeffe owes to the ideas that were being established through photography and how many of these were coincidental. Katherine Kuh in an interview with O'Keeffe asked her whether her use of isolated blown up details found in her flower pieces had been influenced by photography (Fig. 7). O'Keeffe replied that her flower pictures were a response to the feeling in the city where huge buildings appeared almost overnight, and her desire to make people take note of something they normally would pass by. "I don't think photography had a thing to do with it,"⁸⁹ she adds. Barbara Rose provides a comment on this aspect:

Although Georgia O'Keeffe has denied that photography provided the example for her enlarged close-ups of flowers, there is an undeniable

⁸⁹Katharine Kuh, The Artist's Voice (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 190.

similarity between certain of her compositions, both floral and abstract, and the photographs of her husband, Stieglitz, and his colleagues Strand and Haviland. The uniformity of texture and suave, simplified modeling, not only in O'Keeffe's flowers but in the paintings of Charles Demuth and Joseph Stella, suggest undeniable affinities to the transformations effected by the camera. The frequency with which the composition based on the cropped photograph, the rectangle selected out of a larger scene, appears in American art makes it clear that in many ways representational art in America is as closely tied to photography as it is to illustration.⁹⁰

Daniel Catton Rich, O'Keeffe's biographer, also states that "O'Keeffe . . . unquestionably was affected by his [Stieglitz] clean, new vision in photography . . . we can sense her responses to the clear focus and luminosity of the camera."⁹¹

While these photographic qualities can be found in O'Keeffe's work (Fig. 13), they may be indigenous rather than borrowed. As Henry Geldzahler states: "But while sharp focus, two-dimensional control, and extreme enlargement are evident in much of O'Keeffe's best work, it would seem that she was as much of an innovator in these matters as any photographer."⁹² Doris Bry suggests the opposite

⁹⁰Rose, p. 59.

⁹¹Daniel Catton Rich, Georgia O'Keeffe (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1943), p. 21.

⁹²Henry Geldzahler, American Painting in the 20th Century (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1965), p. 131.

approach, that O'Keeffe's work affected the photography of Stieglitz:

O'Keeffe's early strength and certainty in the abstract idiom, evolved during her years in Texas and the South (1914-1916), may be mentioned as another possible influence on Stieglitz's work, since abstraction first reaches its consistently conscious expressive use in his photography only after 1917 (Figs. 9, 10). The interaction between two formed, independent, and creative person's work, such as Stieglitz's photographs and O'Keeffe's paintings, should not be underestimated.⁹³

O'Keeffe provides a comment on the similarity of their subjects (compare Figs. 11, 12 with Figs. 13, 14). She relates how "Once Stieglitz got ahead of me. He shot a door before I could paint it. He had a remarkable color sense, much more subtle than mine. Sometimes we were involved with the same compositions but mostly he was busy with his things and I was busy with mine."⁹⁴

While O'Keeffe seems not to have been directly influenced by any one artist she also seems not to have had any direct influence on other artists or movements with the possible exception of Arthur Dove. Friedman writes in a footnote to his book on Precisionism: "Curiously O'Keeffe never had any direct disciples, although the woods were full of pallid imitators."⁹⁵ It is interesting to compare

⁹³Doris Bry, Alfred Stieglitz (Washington, D. C.: National Gallery of Art, 1958), p. 17.

⁹⁴Seiberling, p. 53.

⁹⁵Friedman, p. 15.

several of O'Keeffe's early works with Dove (compare Figs. 6, 17 with Figs. 18, 19). The similarities of shapes and movement is too close to be purely accidental. O'Keeffe's Drawing No. 15 was painted in 1916 and From the Plains was done in 1919. The Dove paintings are both dated several years later; The Wave was done in 1924, and Silver Storm was done in 1923. From the dates alone, O'Keeffe's influence on the Dove works seems probable.

The two artists seem to have had a mutual respect and understanding of each other's works. When Dove first saw O'Keeffe's early works he commented, "That girl is doing without effort what all we moderns have been trying to do."⁹⁶

In 1920 Dove retreated to his houseboat and lived in semi-isolation with his second wife, Helen Torr. In a letter to Stieglitz dated October, 1923, Dove writes: "The O'Keeffe painting looks better than ever, especially in the boat here by the light of our lantern." In an editorial note it is mentioned that an O'Keeffe was the only painting Dove kept on view.⁹⁷ Which O'Keeffe painting Dove had is not known, but it is possible to conjecture that it was similar to From the Plains and that Dove's Silver Storm

⁹⁶Seligman, p. 44.

⁹⁷Wight, p. 49.

is a direct outcome. O'Keeffe also had a marked preference for Dove's work. O'Keeffe had a pastel by Dove called The Cow, done sometime in 1925. O'Keeffe," said Stieglitz, "had had that picture on her mantel for sixteen months, longer than she had lived with any other—most of them enduring only a day. When she was taking the picture down at the end of sixteen months, she said, 'Why, it's a cow!' It had not occurred to her to ask what it meant, she did not look at pictures that way."⁹⁸

In general O'Keeffe's style can be described as independent and isolated. She felt a closeness to the ideas of Demuth and Dove, but they do not find expression in her paintings. Dove's Silver Storm and The Wave are the closest any other artist has approximated her style. It appears that while O'Keeffe was placed among the leading artists of this time, her contemporaries looked elsewhere for guidance. This may have had something to do with the interpretations placed on the O'Keeffe works. As Rich writes: "Few at this time were willing or able to see her as she wanted to be seen—a pure painter."⁹⁹

⁹⁸Seligmann, p. 36.

⁹⁹Rich, p. 21.

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion we can comment on the group of assumptions made at the beginning of this paper.

It seems clear from an understanding of how Stieglitz's galleries operated and his influence on the people that went there that he is responsible for the initial interpretations of O'Keeffe's works. These interpretations suggested viewing the works from a psychoanalytical framework and with an emphasis of the external fact that O'Keeffe was a woman.

Stieglitz's personal interpretations differed significantly, however, from the interpretations of the critics. This difference is centered in the fact that Stieglitz saw O'Keeffe's works as an individualized perception, while the critics saw her works as one individual's contribution to a generalized perception, that of woman.

Finally, it was the choice or application of these interpretations that accounted for O'Keeffe's success. They put O'Keeffe in the middle of the discussion of sex, psychoanalytically and from a feminist angle. This kept her in the public's eye as an available symbol for either point of view. The Freudian theorists saw her abstract forms as

expressions of a distinctly feminine approach to sex. The feminists saw O'Keeffe's artistic success and independence as manifestations of the new modern woman.

O'Keeffe did not involve herself in these discussions. She felt her paintings spoke for themselves, yet she had the perception to see the involvement of these external factors in the reception of her work: "I could have been a much better artist and not so successful."¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰O'Brien, interview.



Fig. 1. Abstraction 1922



Fig. 2. Blue and Green Music
1919



Fig. 3. Grey Line With Black,
Blue and Yellow 1923

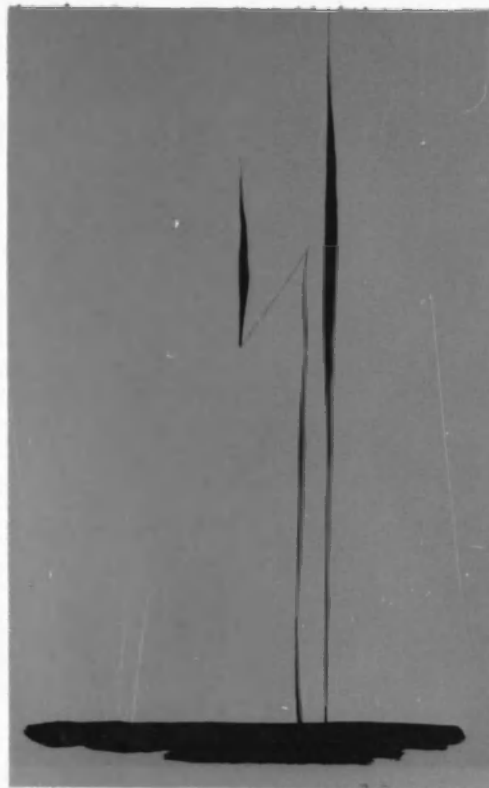


Fig. 4. Blue Lines 1916



Fig. 5. Drawing No. 13 1915



Fig. 6. Drawing No. 15 1916



Fig. 7. Black Iris 1926

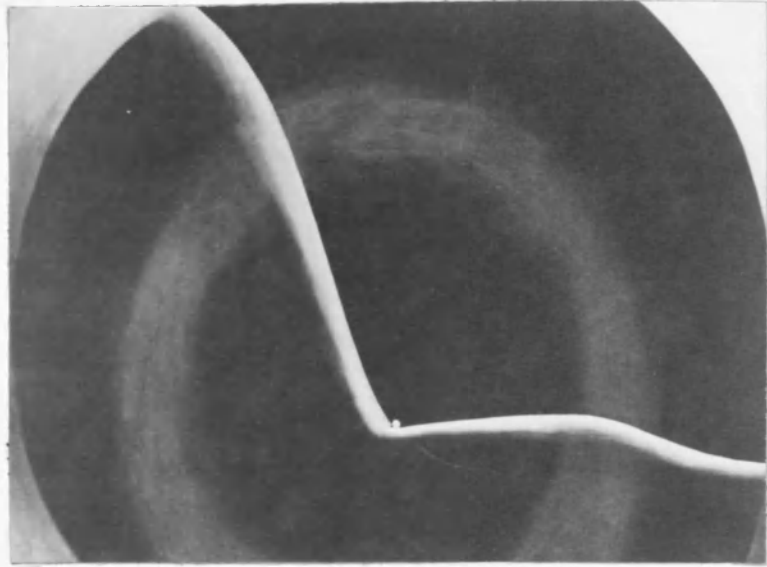


Fig. 8. Black Abstraction 1927



Fig. 9. Alfred Stieglitz:
Georgia O'Keeffe 1921



Fig. 10. Alfred Stieglitz:
Equivalent 1927

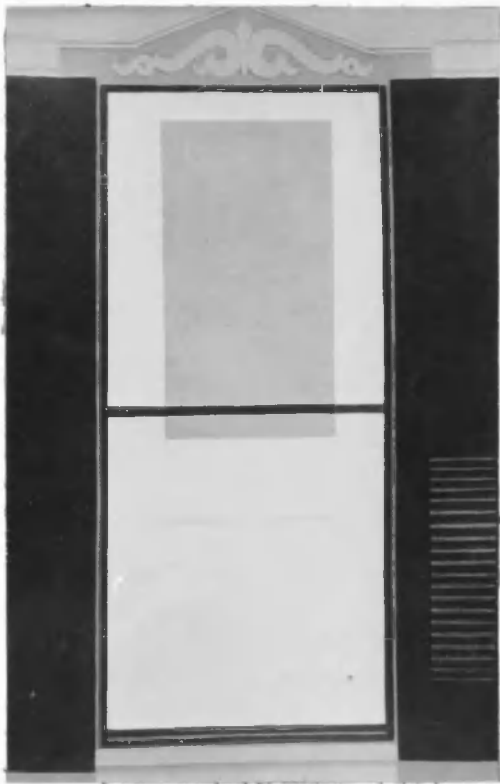


Fig. 11. Lake George
Window 1929



Fig. 12. Alfred Stieglitz:
Kitchen Door, Lake
George 1934



Fig. 13. New York Night
1929



Fig. 14. Alfred Stieglitz: Night-
New York 1931



Fig. 15. Charles Demuth
Cyclamin prior to 1926



Fig. 16. Charles Demuth: Poster
Portrait of O'Keeffe 1924



Fig. 17. From the Plains 1919



Fig. 18. Arthur Dove: The Wave
1924



Fig. 19. Arthur Dove: Silver Storm 1923

APPENDIX

CORRESPONDENCE

Reply to a letter sent to the Curator of the Stieglitz Archive in the Yale University Library asking for access to the correspondence between Georgia O'Keeffe and Alfred Stieglitz.

THE BEINECKE RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY

Rutherford D. Rogers

University Librarian

YALE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

New Haven, Connecticut 06520

Herman W. Liebert

Librarian

1 February 1972

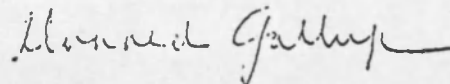
Miss Ruth Tatter
Art Department
University of Arizona
Tucson, Arizona

Dear Miss Tatter:

I have your letter of 27 January and am interested to know that you plan to write a thesis on the relationship between Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe. Unfortunately, the key documents for such a study, the correspondence that passed between them, is not available for use by scholars. When Miss O'Keeffe gave us the correspondence in 1952, the letters were to be sealed until five years after her death, but Miss O'Keeffe has now decided that they are not to be opened until 1 January 2020.

Of course there is a great deal of material in the Stieglitz Archive that illuminates in one way or another the Stieglitz-O'Keeffe relationship, but to locate and evaluate such items would of course necessitate your going through the papers yourself.

Yours sincerely,



Donald Gallup
Curator
Collection of American Literature

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