

Rebecca Solnit & Carrie Schneider share thoughts on art, human connection & reading during recent community conversation

By [Gloria Muñoz](#), January 29, 2016



Schneider (left) and Solnit in conversation at the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Florida.

A few weeks ago I had the pleasure of witnessing a conversation between two people I greatly admire: artist [Carrie Schneider](#) and author [Rebecca Solnit](#).

The conversation, which was inspired by Schneider's exhibition "Carrie Schneider: Reading Women," took place at the Museum of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, Florida and was presented in collaboration with [Book Club @ MFA](#) which is organized by a local literary organization, [Keep St. Pete Lit](#).

"Reading Women" is both a response to the [lack of women in our literary canon](#) and a call to action for women artists to continue to work towards progress and equal representation. Inspired by Linda Nochlin's 1971 historical text "[Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?](#)," Schneider's work moves the conversation forward and shows that we still have a long way to go.

Schneider and Solnit talked about this at length, and addressed topics ranging from women in art to the importance of stillness. There was a palpable sense of awe in the audience, made up mostly of women, which filled hall. The entire first row was occupied by a feminist club from a local high school.

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Here are a few reflections and insights from the conversation...

On reading women

"Carrie Schneider: Reading Women," features a series of photographs and a video projection of women reading books by women. The women were photographed in natural light and in their own spaces. Schneider said the women featured in her project are both friends and acquaintances who agreed to let her be a fly on the wall as she photographed and filmed them reading for a few hours.

The titles of the photographs include the reader's name, the book's title, author, and year of publication. Interestingly, a few of the women were reading books by Solnit.

The project examines and questions the role women play in the world of art. "Questions like, 'why are there no woman artists?' are still relevant today," Schneider said. From there, the conversation shifted into a dialogue about how women are portrayed in visual art. Schneider and Solnit discussed how, traditionally, women have been fixtures of beauty in art. The audience laughed (with dismay) in recognition of the all-too-familiar image of a sensual women positioned for a male audience.

"Women are often there for the viewer, who is most often a man," Solnit said. "It is radical to see women who are being realized for themselves." The women in Schneider's exhibit are not there to "service the male gaze." Quite the contrary: the photographs of women reading in deep concentration aim to "disable the male gaze," Schneider said. The women in the photographs are not asked to smile or pose; they are simply asked to be themselves.

On endangered stillness and solitary time

During their conversation, Solnit asked Schneider why she chose to have the women reading in the photographs. In a time of short-circuited attention spans and constant streams of notifications, Schneider said she set out to observe women reading in deep concentration.

I admit, when I first viewed Schneider's photographs of women reading, I was flooded with a sense nostalgia.

Schneider described how nowadays, an intense distraction and immersion in technology has become commonplace. It is acceptable to text while speaking, have your phone on the dinner table, and check your email while playing with your child at the park. "How difficult reading has become because we are constantly interrupted by technology," Solnit said.

Solnit went on to describe how "solitary time has become an endangered species." Yet, [being alone is critical to the creative process](#) and to our lives as human beings who need a balance of introspection and connection. Both Schneider and Solnit agreed that it takes a fine balance to maintain "the beautiful binary of human contact and human solitude."

With computers in our pockets, and on our wrists, we are in a time of constant connection where deep concentration is becoming passé. "People are anxious to be connected but not deeply connected," Solnit said.

The act of reading is one we take for granted. "Literacy is power and that power is still contested," Solnit said. She mentioned [Malala Yousafzai](#) as an example of how women continue to struggle for equal access to literacy and education. Solnit reminded the audience that libraries, spaces she describes as havens of "democracy and access," are not available to everyone.

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Rena reading Zadie Smith (*White Teeth*, 2000); Meghan reading Edith Wharton (*The House of Mirth*, 1905)

On the punctuated equilibrium

Schneider and Solnit both agreed that women wrestle with staggering inequalities on a daily basis. Progress has been made and organizations, like [VIDA](#), help fuel the change, yet, the journey has been long and slow.

“Punctuated equilibrium” is a term geologists use to describe a slow and stifled patterns of change that involve static periods punctuated by abrupt change. In her conversation with Schneider, Solnit described the history of equality for women and feminism as a conversation of punctuated equilibriums. The exposure of rape on college campuses, reproductive rights, and marriage equality are signs that we are in a shifting moment. Unfortunately, it seems to be [crisis](#) that pressures us to change history.

In her book “[Men Explain Things to Me](#),” Solnit describes “the slippery slope of silencings” to express how often women are silenced and alienated from conversations.

“Every woman knows what I’m talking about,” Solnit writes. “It’s the presumption that makes it hard, at times, for any woman in any field; that keeps women from speaking up and from being heard when they dare; that crushes young women into silence by indicating, the way harassment on the street does, that this is not their world.”

This passage came to my mind during the conversation as a reason for why progress has been so fractured and slow.

As I left the room, the high school feminist club, a group made up of young women and men from different backgrounds, stayed glued to their seats, perhaps still mesmerized, perhaps deciding how they will change the world.

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Alyssa reading Patti Smith (*Just Kids*, 2010); Yala reading Susan Sontag (*The Volcano Lover: A Romance*, 1992)