

Feminism in Fine Arts Education

Lynn Hughes, Kathryn Lipke, Barbara MacKay,

Cathy Mullen, Elizabeth Sacca, Nell Tenhaaf and Katherine Tweedi took part in an informal discussion on feminist interventions in studio and art history at Concordia University in October 1989.

How do you perceive the relationship between feminist practice and feminist teaching?

- Feminist practice points to issues that will become clearer as critical issues and theoretical issues later on.

Now there is so much tension about the relationship between theory and practice. The tension is how to integrate them, how to take into account the theoretical issues when one is producing work. The students find that to be the central, most problematic aspect of feminist practice now. In the 1980s there has been a vital and complex theoretical underpinning elaborated — how does one take that into account to produce some work? It makes students self-conscious and anxious that they are not doing it right. However if one permits oneself there is a way to be informed by the theory, fundamentally be ahead of it.

- There continues to be a need for courses that focus on feminism *per se*. The moving forward of the issues of feminism happens on many fronts and I hope that doesn't sound like delusion. There is a necessity for isolating the issues and at the same time there is a necessity for an integration and they do take place on parallel tracks and do inform each other. I don't think it is necessary to try to pinpoint when there will no longer be a need for specialized courses.

- A continuing problem with integrating feminist content, especially in studio areas, is that the majority of courses are taught by men. A rough count of full-time male and female Studio and performing arts instructors is 20 women to 50 men. I would be very hesitant about favouring one approach over another until there is a balance of representation among faculty members.

- And in the meantime, the fundamental thing is not to lose our recent history. There is a strong tendency within a neo-conservative "post-feminist" context to claim that the integration has happened, that the issues are now understood and integrated and part of a mainstream approach, which I don't think is true at all. Therefore, there is a tendency to simply obliterate and forget what were posed as issues in the 1970s. There is a lot of resistance to going back and I find that my students — in an astounding way — are not interested in the feminist imagery of that time.

- An example of this?

- Anybody from the 1970s, ranging from Judy Chicago through some of the body art performing artists. The students come to me and apologize for not liking any of the imagery. They have a

range of reasons. Some of them are bored by it — it's not "now," it's not contemporary. Others are offended by the blatant look at sexuality in body art and some of that body art crosses over into the masochistic domain, self-mutilation, and they close their eyes and won't look at it. It's something they have never looked at in themselves. The resistance itself surprises me — I don't know if it is simply youth, but whatever it is, I take it as a challenge to make that material pertinent again.

- There is something in the imagery that threatens them.

- There is the sexuality. It is also a question of taste. I think that "taste," especially when they are young, is something they are sensitive to. So they look at it and think it looks pretty hippy; that's not what they are. On that level it's boring to them. And because it's quite recent, they don't really see it as history. So it is a real process of them synthesizing what that era was about.

- I see a real shift back in time of about 20 years — young women wanting to be wives, mothers and homemakers and the feminist issues are not important to young women. I find that discouraging. Having two daughters of my own I've tried to instill ideas about gender equality in them by example, by a way of life, and a feeling that for them it would be different. I told myself that I would put up with the inequality but felt that things would be better for my daughters. There is still job inequality in salaries as well as in many other levels, and so the return to traditional values is rather astounding. Maybe the sexual promiscuity of the past decade with its diseases is part of going back to these values.

- I have certainly encountered that in my classes, which are specifically named feminist or for women. It is a bit of an anomaly when the students present themselves and then proceed to say "I'm not a feminist." This leads me to believe that they don't in fact understand their beliefs as acquired values, or as a shift in self-positioning or self-identification. I quickly realized that I could not conclude that their anti-feminism is deep-rooted. You can't identify this as how they really are at the core.

- Can I ask about men in the courses?

- The course here is open to men, but various people have said to me that it is nice when they don't turn up. Some women have a preference for all-women situations in a context of ease and support. There seems to be a general phenomenon that men tend to shy away from studio courses that address feminist issues. It is different in lecture courses — the crucial difference seems to be whether it is a lecture or studio. There is more distance in a

lecture course. You can sit and receive the information.

- I have found in studio work in improvisation that when women do personal work in a class where men are also present that certain blocks can occur. There is a largely unspoken feeling from the women that they don't trust that the men are going to be able to receive some of their personal material. There is often pain, despair, mistreatment, abuse in the material and somehow the men in the group get nervous about that. Perhaps they think, "Is it me?" Is that something I would have done?" So there is a kind of shutting down, a kind of protection.

- I recently attended a conference on family therapy. Typically a large proportion of those attending were women and the large proportion of the keynote speakers were men. There was no place in the formal program for women to get together and talk about feminist issues in family therapy. So an ad hoc group was put together and those who wanted to, came, including three men. The woman who had organized the session asked the men to leave, which they did with good grace. Some of the women in the group accepted this, saying that they were glad of the opportunity to spend some time with other women to discuss the issues. Others were very upset, saying "I don't know why we have to reject men — it's not what I feel." For me the problem was one of viewing a temporary desire to talk alone with other women as a rejection of men. Sometimes it's simply that there's less to explain in an all-female group.

- It's such a big issue to resolve. It reflects back on one's own concerns — whether one is going about this in the right way. I find when I'm in front of this group I swing from "Oh, I hope these guys don't take over" to "They are not saying anything." It's hard to assess when some kind of balance has been achieved.

- On the subject of integration into the mainstream, where does the knowledge of how to integrate feminist courses into the mainstream come from? I find that I have fundamentally learned this on the job.

- The Status of Women Committee seemed to have made it their "thing" to talk about curriculum changes in the sense that you ask — what is it and how is it done? There has to be some sort of specific attempt. It is the same problem — most of the people teaching are not women and probably men are not going to come to curriculum workshops on feminist issues. In the past there has always been a low turnout, for a number of reasons, not just because they are resistant to it. It may be that they simply don't know where to start or perhaps they have a feeling of inadequacy. So we were thinking of having some sort of workshops. However, I don't think it is something you can make obligatory.

- My favourite definition of feminism is that feminism is about choice. That's the underpinning — and to be forced to work against that in order to make this happen seems to be too big of an adjustment to make. So you are left with "it's not obligatory," "we're not forcing you to do this."

- We know that women's issues need to be supported from "up there" but we also know that it has to start in departments, it has to start in individual courses. But what do you do when there is

Even in teaching an introductory studio course, I discuss the abstractions of race and culture.

strong resistance? A young woman of 18 may fear the word feminism because of what her father or uncles or boyfriend have to say about it — she may fear losing her "significant others." I have some sympathy with her. I have less sympathy with mature male colleagues when they scorn feminism because of an implicit need for power, or when they assume

that there's "no need" for feminism, when they refuse to see that the harassment and demeaning of women students is a continuing problem, that assumptions continue to be made that women's art work is "too feminine," i.e., bad.

- The question is, how do you move past this resistance?

- Maybe one way to do it is to talk about the whole thing as part and parcel of change, so that feminism doesn't become this thing that we are trying to force down people's throats. Rather we can talk about change in terms of proportion of people of different races, different age groups and how the university population is changing, how things are changing outside the university in terms of women working. Say look! the world is changing and let's think about it, so that it's part of a bigger thing.

- There are a few people doing feminist teaching, then there is the administration that has some interest, then there are a lot of people whose teaching is not open to feminist content. That's a big problem. Would there be ways to encourage the development of feminist content?

- You can invite people to come to your class but of course there is a resistance to doing that. It's hard to do that in a studio course. How do you bring in feminist issues and what are the feminist issues in painting, for instance?

- To begin with, I bring in slides of women painters. I talk about what "quality" is, and I try to help the students see quality in new ways. Many people teaching have over a lifetime developed their sense of what quality is and that "this is it." Years ago a young man came to me for a critique and his was the most interesting work I had seen in ages just because it was so imaginative — it was extremely personal and just great stuff. I told him that it was great and we had a talk about it. Then he confessed to me that he had asked somebody else's opinion, an older member of the faculty who had told him that he would never be an artist and that he should stop. It was based on this person's notion of quality, what art should look like, that didn't correspond to the young man's. It was a much more traditional concept. I don't think I was looking for style, more the fact that the student was extremely imaginative.

- Whenever I do a still life, I suggest that it always will have content. Still life is not culturally, historically a way to practise how to draw things well when they don't move. It has lots of content. In order to illustrate it: I bought a confirmation dress. I explained to my students that if we had a bigger budget we could do something very striking such as placing the confirmation dress next to a side of beef. I wanted a really strong simplified example for them to say, "Wow, I look at this and right away the content hits me, I know still life is about something."

- Do you give your students readings? Would you turn to

feminist discourses or theoretical texts to back that kind of thing up?

- It depends on the level of the class. Nevertheless, even in teaching an introductory studio course, I discuss the abstractions of race and culture. And I talk about the romantic and classical traditions. I want them to understand that these are more than art history terms, that they are about the rational and the irrational and those connect to everything. And of course, the rational and the irrational are feminist issues too.

- To go back to the confirmation dress and the side of beef as an example of a still life...what would you discuss in terms of content that would make the content different for a male or a female interpreting that?

- I tend to talk more about the way it relates to traditional art history. That was simply an example of a still life being very obviously charged with meaning, so I'm not sure of the content of that one. It sort of came off the top of my head one day. I think I would talk about the content of a still life reflecting new things about the world, a world that is changing a lot. Or, I might set up something that has specifically to do with cultural mix. For example, I once had a Chinese student from China — extremely conservative, young, but it was as if he was 65. And he was doing what I call "French-Irish nudes" — amazing academic nudes with pink-blushed skin. They were amazing technically. It was a school where he was being very much encouraged. And it was a bit pornographic, the encouragement, I mean, some of the male teachers would come around and say "um, ooh." I asked him do a still life that was about his being a Chinese student in America. I told him to go to Chinatown and find things about his culture and then go around and find things that meant North America to him.

- My field of teaching is a little bit odd — textiles — and it has been discriminated against for years and years as women's work, so we are almost trying to go in the other direction to gender balance. Whatever the gender, though, what I teach is a sense of worth in what you are doing, that your statement, whatever that statement is, is important. Learn how to communicate it. You have chosen textiles. Let's concentrate on what you have to say. Some students will concentrate on more feminist issues; other students' content doesn't have much to do with it. In terms of that, we did look up the Berger film on how women are perceived in painting, which was quite an eye-opener.

- Do these issues have to do with feminism *per se*? Or is the concern non-discrimination?

- My concern is that culture should look relative to where you are looking at it. That is a fundamental feminist issue, to get the students to realize through their practice, through their theoretical work, that representations carry ideology. Once they see that, then they can start to work with decoding, recoding, figuring out how this is pertinent to them specifically.

- I am very interested in problems with race and other cultures, invisible minorities. For me that is included in feminism.

- As a type of discrimination?

- I think the problems are all knit together.

- For years and years for me, feminism has been part of intuitive

The lesbian women bring the most positive energy to these difficult issues of sexuality.

practice. It has been about individuals and non-discrimination.

- Yes, I see in the same way that feminism and socialism are closely related in my own ideology.

- To me feminism not only has to do with discrimination, but it also has to do with being female. It is not a negative term at all, but I think it has become associated with being negative. Maybe there needs to be more of an education about what the term really means so that generally people don't back off and become afraid of it.

- In terms of the general population, people tend to be afraid of the term feminism. I wonder if a subtle shift in terminology would help that, in terming the whole thing discrimination.

- I think you are right. The term that has been used a lot in the theory that has arisen out of feminism, but has become broadly significant is "difference" — it arose specifically around sexual difference, and how it is coded. It is now broadening out to account for many different kinds of differences, so that's an area of terminology that might be used.

- I wonder if anyone has anything to share about sexual orientation? I've had a lot of experience with this issue since I started teaching feminist courses. More and more there is a very strong lesbian presence. Lesbian women's voice is very clear and their position is very clear. It is not a conflict with the heterosexual women, though in some discussions it is hard to find common ground, because the lesbian voice can come across as so different, so decided. It becomes a group voice and one that heterosexuals are not privy to and in some ways have no way to enter from the point of view of affecting that voice. I find it a very stimulating and enriching situation, it is an area where I am learning on the job, slowly. The lesbian women bring the most positive energy to these difficult issues of sexuality. It's not even that, it's more where we move from deconstruction to a positive space, an affirmative space. In my lecture course it's a tension because the students realize they can come to me on a personal basis and ask me for information, but it is very hard to give it space, to give homosexuality of either ilk space in a large group situation.

- Why is that?
- The human resistance from the majority. But I try to give it space and we do it by discussing general issues of sexuality. It is so much on the current agenda, but basically I'm leaving it to the students to decide if and when they want to declare themselves.
- In studio courses I have found that lesbians are usually declared, they have already declared themselves in some sense and are often very strong individuals. I've had instances in studio courses where we're looking at work and I ask them to picture someone who is meaningful to them and they come back and say, "this is my lover." They are very explicit about it.

- They are reading you as being open.

- Is feminist teaching, then, simply, "I am open to the other?" Basically, if that is the definition, then how do you bring it back through curriculum? How do you say you must be open to the other?

- Just say it. That's not a bad start.