Feminism in Fine Arts Education

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

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