

# Collapsing Distinctions: Feminist Art Education as Research, Art and Pedagogy

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## Collapsing Distinctions: Feminist Art Education as Research, Art and Pedagogy

Peg Speirs

I trace the impetus for this dissertation to the moment I first became aware of the term “feminist art education” while reading Judy Chicago’s most recent autobiography *Beyond the Flower* (1996). The combination of words stunned me. It posed a new way of thinking that I had not considered before, especially in terms of my own pedagogical practice. Chicago, a feminist studio artist, wrote that she had invented the term feminist art education. For me that shifted feminist art education (FAE<sup>1</sup>) into a context other than that thought of as art education because traditionally art education is understood as educating all members of society about art regardless of their career goals, rather than just educating artists. In contrast to this, Chicago is a studio artist who was interested in teaching women to be feminist artists. As I thought about myself, my new found language and my identity as a feminist at the university, my first response to these ideas came to me in the form of a declaration: I am a feminist and an art educator. Then turned into questions: Is what I do feminist art education? What is feminist art education? More specifically, what is feminist art education in terms of studio practice? What is it according to traditional art education?

My research took two directions as I read works on feminist pedagogy such as the feminist ethnographies by Frances Maher and Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault *The Feminist Classroom* (1994) and Kathleen Weiler’s *Women Teaching For Change* (1988). These readings, in fact, influenced the feminist methods with which I approached this research for they are based on the tenet that all knowledge is constructed. They also challenged traditional pedagogical theories that failed to include gender as a category of analysis.

Feminist pedagogy, for me, is the application of feminist theory to teaching. In my research I chose to ask feminists involved in art about their teaching, ground my research in feminist theory, and use feminist pedagogy as a theoretical framework for examining the teaching of art that challenges traditional approaches. As I considered all the conditions surrounding each woman that I interviewed, her “positionality,”<sup>2</sup> an approach to analysis came into focus; one that is situational and relational, framed contextually and in an historical moment in time. As I analyzed my data through a feminist postmodern lens, I realized how each of the women practices her pedagogy is in relation to her positionality; her

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<sup>1</sup>I affectionately give feminist art education its female acronym FAE.

<sup>2</sup>In the data analysis of Maher and Tetreault’s (1994) study of feminist teachers and their pedagogies they defined their use of the term “positionality” to describe a person’s specific position within any context as relational and moving, “defined by gender, race, and class and other socially significant dimensions” (p. 22). The positionality of the teachers and the students interviewed and observed and the researchers themselves, their relationships to each other and their contexts within their specific institutions, classrooms, and the interviews are all considerations of position in their study.

multiple identities such as artist, teacher, critic, historian, philosopher, and her identity as a feminist, the institution where she teaches, the particular program she is in, the courses she teaches, the course content, her relationship with her students and they to each other, and everyone's relationship to the content.

I began my search for feminism in studio teaching by reading any material I could find on the early feminist art education programs written by the women who participated in the programs in the early 1970s at Fresno State University (now known as California State University, Fresno), the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), and the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW). As I read this material, questions surfaced such as: "Are these women still participating in FAE at other institutions?" "Who did they teach and does a new generation of FAE exist?"

As a second and simultaneous route, I began to read articles with feminist content by feminist art educators in art education journals. In reading the early literature on FAE and realizing that different paths and interpretations for different audiences were taking place, I decided to redefine FAE so that it is more inclusive, can serve as a bridge between feminists in studio and art education, and at the same time, reach a more inclusive yet diverse audience. From my position as an art educator in 1998, I have the luxury of looking at more than a twenty year history of a body of feminist scholarship published in art education. This allowed me to work toward theorizing what FAE is in 1998.

## Methodology

### Feminist Interview Research

What qualifies research as feminist? Garber (1992) reminds us that "feminism is a chosen position" not one we can automatically assume for another or assign (p. 211). In the search for an inclusive definition of what constitutes feminist research while simultaneously rejecting the notion of an authority deciding what (and who) is or isn't feminist, Shulamith Reinharz (1992) and Georgia Collins and Renee Sandell (1997) use the idea of self-definition, of identifying oneself as feminist as a grounding. While Reinharz proceeds in her comprehensive review to limit her definition by including only research published in feminist journals, feminist methods that have received awards, and positions self-identification as more appropriate than identifying methods, Collins and Sandell (1997) expanded the idea of self-definition to include "research done by people who are willing to call themselves *and their research* [italics added] 'feminist' and have a stake in developing the positive significance of this appellation through their inquiry" (p. 194). A generous view of what constitutes feminist research becomes problematic the moment we include everyone. While I understand that they are trying to avoid a definition for the "plurality of feminisms" that exist, Rosalind Delmar (1986) points out that not all women's actions or campaigns are feminist and the word "feminism" has been used as a blanket term to cover all women's activities. She writes,

If feminism is a concern with issues effecting women, a concern to advance women's interests, so that therefore anyone who

shares this concern is a feminist, whether they acknowledge it or not, then the range of feminism is general and its meaning is equally diffuse. Feminism becomes defined by its object of concern—women—in much the same way as socialism has sometimes been defined by an object—the poor or the working class. Social reformers can then be classified as feminists because of the consequences of their activities and not because they share any particular social analysis or critical spirit. (pp. 8-9)

By looking at feminism as a “diffuse activity”<sup>3</sup> rather than separating feminists and feminism from women’s issues, generous inclusivity has the potential of including research that can actually subvert or reinforce domination (whether intentional or not) over women. Not all research conducted by those who call themselves feminist or those who write about women’s issues should be considered feminist research. Delmar continues,

On the other hand there are those who claim that feminism does have a complex of ideas about women, specific to or emanating from feminists. This means that it should be possible to separate out feminism and feminists from the multiplicity of those concerned with women’s issues. It is by no means absurd to suggest that you don’t have to be feminist to support women’s rights to equal treatment, and that not all those supportive of women’s demands are feminists. In this light feminism can claim its own history, its own practices, its own ideas, but feminists can make no claim to an exclusive interest in or copyright over problems affecting women. Feminism can thus be established as a field, but cannot claim women as its domain. (p. 9)

From this we can ask, what does it mean to do feminist research? Patti Lather (1991) writes,

Very simply, to do feminist research is to put the social construction of gender at the center of one’s inquiry. . . . Feminist researchers see gender as a basic organizing principal which profoundly shapes/mediates the concrete conditions of our lives (p. 71)

This action grounds feminist research in feminist theory. According to Delmar and Lather, to call something feminist means that it is not just about women and for research to be considered feminist it should be grounded in feminist theory. Ideally then, feminist research should contribute to the body of scholarship called feminist theory.

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<sup>3</sup>Rosalind Delmar (1986) uses the term “diffuse activity” to describe how the definition of feminism has been diluted to become too inclusive.

## The Interviews

As I thought about how I should approach this research, the overarching question of this dissertation “What is feminist art education?” pointed to its own path. I would ask feminists to talk about their teaching of art. Who would be my teachers on this journey? For the first time in my academic life I realized that I could choose who I would like to learn from and I did not have to limit myself to just one campus or program. Open and receptive to the path that created itself, my teachers emerged as I began to read, ask questions, and interview. My teachers include nationally and internationally known artists and scholars from across the United States, who teach the arts both in art education and studio. I interviewed feminist artists Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Arlene Raven, Faith Wilding, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, Suzanne Lacy, Mira Schor, Amalia Mesa-Bains, Cheri Gaulke, Jerri Allyn, and feminist scholars in art education, Georgia Collins, Renee Sandell, Elizabeth Garber, and Yvonne Gaudelius. Primarily they teach at the art academy or university in both undergraduate and graduate levels; one teaches in an art education program for teenage students, teachers and the public at an art museum; another at a private high school; and some teach privately in seminars.

The women I have chosen to interview represent feminist art education at its roots in different contexts<sup>4</sup>, and form a genealogy that webs to include three generations of feminist art educators. I analyzed these multiple voices from multiple sites for the purpose of generating feminist theory. In analyzing my data, themes as well as contradictions within those themes emerge as I teased out the complexity of multiple voices. As I interviewed, the web grew in size as women suggested others to interview and provided phone numbers. Only two women did not respond to my requests for an interview.

Although I presented each participant with a list of questions prior to the interview, I qualified the list by stating that the interview would include these questions but not be limited by them. When I conducted the actual interviews, my intention was to follow the list of questions and supplement the list with additional questions sparked by the responses I received. Occasionally that worked, but in most cases, as the conversation flowed, answers to some questions were revealed in the context of another question, and not by the specific question posed. The interview questions included the following although I did not hesitate “to incorporate questions as new topics arose” (Reinharz, p. 21):

1. What is feminist art education?
2. How did you become aware of it?

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<sup>4</sup>Chicago, Schapiro, Raven, de Bretteville, Lacy, Wilding, Schor, Gaulke, and Allyn all participated in the early feminist studio art programs at Fresno, CalArts and/or the Feminist Studio Workshop as students or teachers or both. In a newly created school, California State University at Monterey Bay, Mesa-Bains heads the art program that Lacy co-developed with Judith Baca as a new arts education model. Collins, Sandell, Garber, and Gaudelius combined art education and feminist theory and have produced a body of feminist scholarship in art education.

3. When did you first participate in this form of education?
4. Are you doing it now?
5. Has it changed over the years?<sup>5</sup> If so, how?
6. How has feminist theory informed your views/participation in feminist art education?
7. Has current research in feminist pedagogy informed your views/participation in feminist art education?
8. Do you consider yourself an educator as well as an artist/critic/historian?
9. Where and when have you taught?

The questions for my interviews were based on my preassumptions going into my research. They may not have been necessarily the “correct” questions or even adequate questions for the scope that FAE encompasses. The questions themselves did not directly lead to answers but served as springboards to get to that information, a catalyst for getting the conversations to flow, and to go where my participants responses would lead me. If the participants only answered the questions, which happened on occasion, I would have had very limited information. I chose the questions thinking that the results would go in a particular direction and support my idea of FAE as feminist pedagogy. I had not considered FAE to be anything beyond teaching in the studio or classroom and initially thought of the theoretical framework of feminist pedagogy as adequate. As my data redirected my path it caused me to consider the possibility of a more expansive framework for this research.

### **Limits of the Study**

The limitations of this study could serve as take off points for myself and for others to continue this line of inquiry using additional avenues of investigation. Limited by time, I was not able to follow up on every referral given to me by the women I interviewed in this study. Additional women from the early feminist programs, feminist artists of color, women active in the feminist art movement on the West coast, feminists who kept the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles alive and functioning for almost twenty years, and feminist art historians all could be included in multiple and various combinations as continuations of this study. Also, in terms of feminist art educators, time prohibited me from interviewing women that I would have liked to have included after reading their work.

What could be considered a possible shortcoming in my research is my non-critical stance where I view all sides to formulate a theory of FAE. It could be argued that some forms of FAE are more effective than others. Generational differences in relation to the feminist theory applied to FAE, actions such as pedagogy in the classroom, the art work produced, the writing for publication, could be examined, challenged and critiqued for what informs particular work and

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<sup>5</sup>Interviewees were free to interpret this question as referring to their perception of FAE in general or as specifically referring to their actual practice.

what the limitations are of that work. Historically, I am limited in this study because I cannot go back to examine a particular period in feminist history, such as that which was later termed “essentialist,” and view it as a whole because we have grown beyond that theoretically. My perspective is inclusive of but broader than early feminism and I cannot deny my perspective as theoretically oriented by continuing generations of feminist thought. My study did not include all the feminist theory available for informing FAE, and in some cases particular works by particular authors were only briefly mentioned. More in-depth areas of focus such as the combination of feminist theory, technology, art and education are vital for women’s participation in what directly effects their lives. It is imperative that feminists inform themselves and make this information available to other women. My study does not include all the possible examples of FAE in action, especially in terms feminist theory in relation to art.

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When I found that the responses to my questions did not necessarily take me in the direction of feminist pedagogy or included other directions as well, I continued to use the questions as a catalyst to generate the information I did get because they spurred conversation, not because I was looking for particular responses. As I read and reread the transcripts from the interviews, multiple themes emerged many of which overlapped with each other. Some paralleled themes from other research on feminist pedagogy (Maher and Tetreault, 1994; Mandzuik, 1991; Shrewsbury, 1993). Pedagogy is one strand of FAE, but its form takes on multiple dimensions. As my research unfolded, I began to comprehend the breadth of FAE. To understand the breadth of FAE we need to go beyond the classroom or studio walls. I began to look for a broader framework for grasping the potential of FAE and found feminist action research more encompassing. FAE’s shifting locations amidst the broader framework of feminist action research multiplies its dimensions and expands its field of knowledge and practice to reach diverse audiences.

While I understand that pedagogy and content are the context in which feminist pedagogy is practiced, they also became themes through which we can understand FAE. Pedagogy can be translated into the question, “How is art taught differently in FAE than in traditional art education?” Content becomes rewritten as the question, “How is a curriculum based on FAE different from traditional art education?” In conducting research such as this, complexities surface with multiple sub-themes embedded within each of the larger overarching themes of interdisciplinarity, empowerment/power, community/collaboration/collective, difference, resistance, feminist theory, and technology.

Boundaries collapse within the life of the feminist art educator, between her<sup>6</sup> research, her work in a creative form, and her teaching. Feminist art educators take on multiple roles of the artist, teacher and researcher simultaneously. Research is a word that surfaced over and over again as the

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<sup>6</sup>By no means am I suggesting that only women can be feminist art educators. My use of a female pronoun is in reference to the women interviewed in my study.

feminist art educators described what they do and what their students do in preparation for their projects. Broadly interpreted, by combining the word feminism with art education, FAE is activism in many forms informed by interdisciplinary sources and the effort of feminists in art working for social change. Its form can be an article for publication, an artwork, a classroom assignment, a curriculum, a web page, a collaborative work, whatever is the most appropriate form to express that work in a particular venue.

Feminist art education *is* feminist action research. I use these words as a strategy for understanding the complexity and multiple dimensions of FAE. Abstracted one step further, interdisciplinary research that generates feminist scholarship for the purpose of social change is feminism but not *all* feminist research is FAE. Feminist research does not have to be art-related but FAE is one outlet for feminism. On what issues and how a feminist art educator chooses to work for social transformation depends on the feminist art educator and includes multiple ways of implementing feminist theory into action. In whatever form or strand FAE manifests into, whether it be an art project in the community, the pedagogy one practices in the classroom, or writing for publication, research is the path(s) one takes for social change. The goals for social change are situational or positional, and determined by location, the feminist involved in the project, community, discussion, consensus, and multiple other factors that route the process. Research is necessary to figure out how to proceed because the path is not fixed nor predetermined for action. The path is determined by the feminist(s) involved in the research and by anyone working in collaboration or in a participatory sense as an active member, including an audience. FAE is research and taking action for the purpose of social change. FAE=Feminist theory in action and its implementation in a creative form. The action varies as do the theories informing the work.

Finally, feminist research prepared me for the fact that FAE has multiple definitions while it also contains contradictions. As a part of the process my goal was to expose the reader to “the existence of variety” in feminist thought while also keeping in mind my “aim . . . [is] comprehension not agreement” (Garber, 1990, p. 22). In working to attain this goal, I present the reader with the following:

- \* a broader understanding of feminist theory. This includes the understanding that theory is created by experience and action as well as from other theory.
- \* a broader understanding of activism/action. This includes generating theory in the academy.
- \* a broader understanding of FAE. This includes more than twenty years of contributions that art education has made to the understanding of FAE.
- \* a broader understanding of feminism. This includes drawing on a variety of feminist thought but not ranking them as inferior or superior.
- \* a broader understanding of feminist scholarship. I suggest that in FAE feminist scholarship should include art work.
- \* an expanded definition of FAE to include action in multiple creative forms: the pedagogy in the classroom, the research (process) for a creative work, and the

creative work itself in the form of a book, a chapter, an article for publication or presentation, a curriculum, an artwork, and/or also in any multiple combinations.

### Directions for Future Research

A study that includes more K-12 feminist art teachers is yet another avenue to pursue in relation to this research. My study included only two feminist teachers who taught at the high school level, and included none at the elementary or junior high level. The data collected from this vein of inquiry could greatly affect the findings in the field of art education research and could possibly produce different results from those that I found in my study. The realities of teaching art at the K-12 level in classes of adolescents, pre-teens, or young children in relation to feminist issues is a relatively underdeveloped area. Also, it could be argued that my study only begins to compare traditional art education theory and practice to feminist art education theory and practice and more in depth analysis is needed in this area. As others read this study or re-analyze the data I have collected, other paths of inquiry will expose themselves. What I have attempted to do in this dissertation is to frame a theory of FAE while remaining aware of the limitations of this study.

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