

“My Personal Is Not Political?” A Dialogue on Art, Feminism and Pedagogy

Irina Aristarkhova and Faith Wilding

This is a dialogue between two scholars who discuss art, feminism, and pedagogy. While Irina Aristarkhova proposes “active distancing” and “strategic withdrawal of personal politics” as two performative strategies to deal with various stereotypes of women's art among students, Faith Wilding responds with an overview of art school's curricular within a wider context of Feminist Art Movement and the radical questioning of art and pedagogy that the movement represents

Using a concrete situation of teaching a women's art class within an art school environment, this dialogue between Faith Wilding and Irina Aristarkhova analyzes the challenges that such teaching represents within a wider cultural and historical context of women, art, and feminist performance pedagogy. Faith Wilding has been a prominent figure in the feminist art movement from the early 1970s, as a member of the California Arts Institute's Feminist Art Program, Womanhouse, and in the recent decade, a member of the SubRosa, a cyberfeminist art collective. Irina Aristarkhova, is coming from a different history to this conversation: generationally, politically and theoretically, she faces her position as being an outsider to these mostly North American and, to a lesser extent, Western European developments. The authors see their on-going dialogue of different experiences and ideas within feminism(s) as an opportunity to share strategies and knowledges towards a common goal of sustaining heterogeneity in a pedagogical setting.

First, this conversation focuses on the performance of feminist pedagogy in relation to women's art. The complex interplay between the status of 'woman' in the art world, in an art school, and in the contemporary culture as a whole, often hijacks a feminist educator into a defensive position, from the start forcing her to justify why to have art classes devoted *only* to women's art. On the other hand, one should

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be cautious when presenting women’s art as ‘just another type of art,’ a one more art work, equal to ‘men’s art,’ as it would do no justice to the impact of the feminist art movement on contemporary art, especially performance art. This conversation between two educators attempts to consider these difficult questions, and next propose new performative strategies for feminist pedagogy, namely, “active distancing” and “strategic withdrawal of personal politics.”

By feminist pedagogy here we mean reflexivity of gendered situation of embodiment and our own position in teaching, marked by class, race, and gender (hooks, 1994; Spivak, 1993). By performance pedagogy we mean, in addition to an awareness of embodiment, an emphasis on the interactive and dynamic situation of power and knowledge that any learning environment enacts. Historically, such understanding of performance pedagogy combined art theoretical approaches with performance art (Garoian, 1999). Feminist art movement, especially feminist performance art, has been often presented as a radical departure from traditions of ‘mind’ that places body and/as woman as politically and culturally inferior. The concept of distancing presented in this dialogue is inspired by Luce Irigaray’s work, among others, who claims that it is important for women to create productive borders and distances that will allow them to resist the tradition of ‘fusion’ and ‘collapse’ into each other, as pre-cultural and pre-political subjects. “Active distancing” as a pedagogical strategy also serves as a way of protecting heterogeneity and guarding spaces in-between, so that articulation of differences among women is not collapsed into the (class, race, sexuality, or ability-based) sameness of *us*, against some convenient *them*. Moreover, this distancing is not of the sort that claims to be striving towards ‘objectivity,’ while denying one’s own implication within power structures and interests, and this conversation tries to address this complex point as well.

In the next section of a dialogue, a more challenging strategy and the one on which the authors at first disagree (the Withdrawal of Personal Politics) deals with the critique of the danger of co-opting the “personal is political” platform into what could be called as the ‘confessional pedagogy,’ thus reproducing the tradition of personal confession that Foucault unpacked so well. “Personal is political” platform has been very important in bringing the political and socio-cultural dimension to what seems, at first, to be a personal issue (such as virtual absence of individual women artists in the major national museums, or domestic abuse). However, in this conversation we ask a difficult question: To what extent is “MY personal is political” anymore, in a contemporary classroom, if its presentation borders confessional and narcissistic, rather than political. Once again, we understand that the question of performativity (that points to a uniqueness of each situation) is very pertinent, and as we disagree in our conversation on this issue, our differences are productive. Irina Aristarkhova feels that the strategic, performative withdrawal of her own personal political agenda might become an important gesture of productive opening, once again, towards an attempt to sustain heterogeneity within the classroom. She feels that her own agenda should not be foregrounding in the

pedagogical space as a kind of ‘norm,’ even before the learning process has begun. Faith Wilding, on the other hand, argues that without the dimension of personal history and its validity, we might fall back towards a false sense of objectivity and neutrality. Moreover, this strategy, she is worried, might support a backlash against feminist pedagogy on the basis of its open political agenda. Her own history within the feminist art movement and the examples that she presents should be a legitimate and significant part of her pedagogy, but she is ready to re-consider that in favor of Strategic Withdrawal of Personal Politics, if it helps to open up a space for more unexpected, dissenting, and alternative interpretations.

Finally, it is important to stress that Active Distancing and Strategic Withdrawal of Personal Politics, as proposed by Irina Aristarkhova, are temporary and strategic, and therefore, performative in a Foucaudian sense—they are not meant to be theories, or methodologies, working in all contexts all the time. Rather, they are meant to open up a further commentary and reflection on the performativity of the classroom situation, which has been extensively discussed by various authors. These strategies have been developed in order to undercut patriarchal (authority-based, hierarchical) pedagogy in two ways: first, by resisting false claims of objectivity that come from a sense of a common, homogenous group in a classroom—“you should be/think/act like me” based on our fundamental sameness as women; and second, by welcoming students’ interpretations and therefore, a learning curve, to be as much mediated by their own differences and knowledges as by the syllabus, students’ politics become no less important than that of a professor. Our own position of power is already reflected in the classroom and we found that teaching an art class is particularly challenging in relation to unsettling the personal narrative of a ‘genius’ that is often reproduced even in examples of women artists that tried to subvert such narratives. This is also meant to strengthen the critique of a narrative of the personal, individual genius that Linda Nochlin unpacked so well in her groundbreaking text (Nochlin, 1971 and 2006). Inscribing personal in a confessional way might feed the culture of the genius back exactly to when women artists (for example, Guerilla Girls and SubRosa) deconstruct it. While white middle class women re-discover themselves in classes devoted to women-artists, now is the time, possibly, to step back and re-consider our pedagogy and our politics. This conversation, without attempting to answer these questions, is an effort to approach them head on, using the platform of collaboration that has been productive for ten years, between an artist and a scholar, who are both teachers. This is a conversation and is meant to keep its rhetorical drive, to remain a dialogue with its vulnerabilities and a history of friendship. It strives to be an example of efforts to sustain heterogeneity of feminist and pedagogical community exactly at a place of articulated differences between us: culturally, ethnically and pedagogically. We hope that others will find it useful too, probably thinking along similar lines in your own classroom, that is marked by the presence of performance, pedagogy, theory, feminism and art.

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Irina Aristarkhova (I.A.)

Faith Wilding (F.W.)

I.A. Once a year I teach a senior class on contemporary women artists. This class was established at Pennsylvania State University by Micaela Amato, Professor of Visual Art and Women’s Studies. I feel special about teaching this class as it is an example of institutional continuity that is stressed so much in feminist pedagogy. After having taught it in the US and previously in Singapore, I am realizing I might not be alone in having a few difficulties specific to teaching a women’s art class. I would like to share with you two strategies that I have tried to employ to make my teaching more effective. In a somewhat risky manner, I call them “active distancing” and “strategic withdrawal of personal politics.” Even though I see myself primarily as a theorist and this is what I do with pleasure, it seems to me that the most important learning process in a class that is devoted to women artists would occur as a result of learning about their art works. Therefore, the right balance between case studies, art historical and theoretical material is the key; one decides on this balance according to his or her own pedagogical objectives.

A number of feminist researchers and writers in the past (among them would be Andrea Dworkin, Mary Daly and Julia Kristeva) discussed how the concept of “woman” is standing for all that is culturally “disgusting” and “horrifying,” like bodily fluids, childbirth, merger of nature and culture, and so on. Therefore, taking larger cultural issues into account, one is not surprised at a “horror” students often feel in relation to being called or referred to as a *woman* artist. Actually this is the hardest part - to move beyond the woman as an *abjectionable* category, playing on Kristeva’s notion of the “abject.” Hopefully, through our various classes this is the most important educational transformation that can occur; that is, the concept of the woman artist would move beyond this “horrifying and abjectionable” status of Woman that haunts creative professions. Unlike those who consider the word “woman” permanently corrupted by patriarchal culture and therefore a good candidate for being taken out of usage at all, I follow others who insist on taking it back by working with it long enough. I am not naïve and understand that this is probably the key issue, especially when it is coupled with other signifiers of transgression of white heterosexual paradigm. This paradigm states what or who are normal or abnormal. But at the same time I feel that negative stereotypes which students seem to project onto themselves or others as ‘women artists,’ as well as on the feminist art movement in general, require specific pedagogical strategies to address this problem without creating generational or educational

disconnect. Furthermore, I noticed that the certain negativity they feel towards “women artists” and “women’s art” as concepts, polarizes us in ways that might debilitate the learning process. These stereotypes find their way into research papers and other work. No matter how long we discuss concepts, history of ideas, the problems with the concept of ‘genius,’ with ‘woman’ being defined in opposition to, or complementarily to a man, a final paper would often conclude: “Her work shows that she transcended her sex/gender towards universal qualities of art and could be called (proudly) an artist, not just a woman artist.” One woman, who introduced herself as a 75 year old art enthusiast, was auditing my class. Paula (let’s call her that) remarked on the idea of curating women artists’ exhibitions: “I told my friends yesterday that we were going to discuss women artists’ exhibitions and they felt it was such an overdone topic. It’s completely over, and it’s even embarrassing.” From all that she said the key word, for me, was ‘embarrassing.’ I asked myself: How, pedagogically speaking, can we address this ‘embarrassment’ without spending the whole class on it but still disarming it, in a way?

Certainly, not everyone feels that embarrassment. However, I often find myself in a situation no pedagogue would want to be in: as if I am trying to prove something or, sometimes, becoming a therapist to a bunch of art students. Do you think it is due to a glaring absence of introductory classes that could expose our students to women’s art history? This problem keeps us from moving on to discuss individual art works, art collectives, etc. Before unpacking above-mentioned strategies of “active distancing” and “withdrawal of personal politics” (and I am very interested in what you think of that), I am wondering what other components of this situation are.

F.W. Well, the problem about stereotyping feminism: Even in the ‘70s, unenlightened as we were in many ways, there were already a lot of differences among feminists and different factions of feminism. It was not as articulated, obviously, as it became later, but there were a lot of feminists who’d been in the anti-war movement, in the civil rights movement, who were reading Simone de Beauvoir, who were already thinking about the social construction of women, lesbian feminists and black feminists. There were the Marxist feminists and the socialist feminists; there were so many differences, so many platforms and manifestos. But the media has long since stereotyped feminism. Why should we feel ashamed about our mistakes? I always bristle when I read these phrases that lump everyone together, ‘feminists thought that... etc.’

There’s no history of teaching about women artists from earlier grades on. So one always has to begin by trying to establish that there is a long history

of women artists and a feminist art movement; and to make sure that everybody is on the same page with this idea of: “Why have a class for women artists? Why call oneself a woman artist?” One feels that one always has to start there, and establish the defense or the rationale for it. That takes up the whole class, and you never get to the next step. I remember the early days of Women’s Studies departments being fought for and established in many universities. We had to rationalize it then by arguing that the history of women has been erased and silenced, along with that of ethnic minorities. Women’s Studies discipline was a legacy of the student, civil rights and women’s liberation movements that no longer exist as such on campuses.

- I.A.** I agree there are various ways employed to disable that history in a classroom. Interestingly, women’s studies departments, together with other ‘studies’, still represent a legacy to the social movements you mention. However, in other parts of campus—art school included—I often feel that “Woman” is standing between me and students, between us and art, disturbing my students as “artists” and disturbing “art” as such. This disturbance has to be re-worked as fruitful rather than disabling. There is a certain air of resistance in women’s art, and in particular, feminist art classes, sometimes revealing itself as a provocation. It is what Slavoj Žižek calls the “I know, but...” formulation. When we know all the facts (for example, about situation of women artists, their virtual absence in major museums, exhibitions, art history publications, with all the consequences for women students’ careers) BUT still choose a path as if these facts do not exist or matter.

Therefore, I was searching for a pedagogical strategy that would harness resistance, disable self-negation, and channel “I know, but...” energy somewhere else. Of course, there is nothing new in my search, various professors approach their teaching in myriad ways, but for me it was also a conceptual search, it was about innovating my feminist pedagogy. It crystallized when I was re-reading a curatorial essay that I usually give students in this class. This essay is from a brilliant exhibition book “Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art In, Of, and From the Feminine” (De Zegher). In her “Introduction” the curator and editor M. Catherine de Zegher presents us with a dense discourse on art history, theory, on various artists, their aesthetics and her curatorial concept (19-41). The last could be summarized by this final essay’s sentence: “Developed through poetics rather than polemics, the exhibition is certainly not a definitive survey but an unpredictable assemblage of positions permitting multiple convergences and divergences while asking for an open play and transformation of meaning” (39). Just a page before, however, de Zegher,

as if in an attempt to answer some possible polemics or probably, a deeper ambivalence towards a Woman within an Artist, especially within her essay's terms of reference, turns to the issue of justification of having a so-called gender-based selection of artists. It probably seems logical that within a desire for "unpredictable assemblage" and a "transformation of meaning" one should not have such a seemingly reductive approach as an old-fashioned idea of women only art exhibition. In her own words: "It may seem paradoxical to argue against the separation of the world into exact oppositions and then confirm the binary system by selecting work on the basis of gender" (37). What could be clearer than this? However, here is where I stumbled. Something in this sentence begged me to pause. Suddenly, after many pages of dense aesthetic, historical and theoretical text, this sentence did not fit. It is highly probable, I thought, that the curator was asked, or asked herself, on a few occasions, by very smart persons like herself, with regards to explaining, or at least, addressing this so-called paradox: a women-artists exhibition. Today, in our sophisticated non-binary age of fluid subjectivities! It is also probable that de Zegher was not asked about this at all, but wrote this sentence only to answer potential reductivism of critics and polemicists who might want to dismiss women artists in her exhibition for being chosen as "mere" women, therefore not "real" artists. Whatever reasons and rebuttals came after that sentence, it was more than a rhetorical opening for me. This paragraph, seemingly inconsequential for this "Introduction," so small in size, stacked within concluding points on contemporary theory and women's history, was, nevertheless, there. She was, indeed, providing explanations, bordering justifications, on *why* to have *gendered* exhibition. *Naturally*, it seems, one would need to explain oneself? De Zegher's explanations were nuanced and persuasive, but I could not pass the first sentence. Then I started re-reading earlier pages of this "Introduction," thinking that maybe I could find an indication where this unease with women as a category comes from. Much earlier in the text de Zegher asks: "Is it possible to deracialize and to degender difference and think it in positive, nonreifying terms? To seek work in which 'sameness' and 'difference' are in a perpetual state of mutual negotiation where one neither swallows nor ejects the other?" (21). Re-gendering and de-gendering difference is not the same, I was thinking. The last few decades of feminist theory and practice were hardly about "de-gendering," as many have argued, there is only one gender so far—male—through which others are derived. Thus, it is a work of "re-gendering." Disposing of gender is not what the exhibition or writing was about. While exhibition itself seemed to be doing re-gendering, the author's unease with this situation—of having only women-artists—seemed to be coming from this desire of ideal 'de-gendering.' Maybe, I am stretching it too far here. Though this desire to de-gender and de-racialize seems to contradict the

very theories of difference that de Zegher championed in her text. Nevertheless, it was only a moment in a much larger project, where “re-gendering” was being done, shown, written, in a gesture that was without justification, until justification came to mind, lurking in our dissatisfaction with “women,” when we think of ourselves as a category. Of course, what is to like? Who wants to be a category? But we need to think of ways to allow for an “open play and transformation of meaning” without this background of conceptual embarrassment with having an exhibition of *only* women artists. M. Catherine de Zegher helped me with my pedagogy through inserting this sentence in her “Introduction.” We are in a situation where it might be constructive to avoid justifications at all costs to follow our desires for positivity and transformation.

- F.W.** “Inside the Visible” was an important exhibition in which each artist was presented as an innovator, a pioneer. I always show the good video of it in my class and we discuss it. Major contemporary art historians such as Miwon Kwon, Yves Alain Bois, Guy Brett, Susan Suleiman, and others speak incisively about the work of the artists on that videotape. This show introduced many of us to artists such as Lygia Clark from Brazil.
- I.A.** Absolutely, this catalogue is very important in my teaching. It is through de Zegher’s impulse I have realized that no matter how articulate one is, when one moves towards *defending something* by using a ‘better explanation,’ this is when one is caught in a trap. Linda Nochlin was one of the first persons in recent history to recognize this trap arguing against ‘insertion’ of women artists into traditional art history while at the same time doing it, just like Virginia Woolf wrote against an expectation of incorporating women into literary canon. The question itself might be strategically ignored or answered by another question: “Why not teach about or curate women artists?” This is the first part of *active distancing*, of disassociating oneself from this need to justify over and over again.
- F.W.** Well, Linda Nochlin writes that women have had a different history socially and that we haven’t had great women artists in past (Western) history because of the social history of the conditions under which art was made before the 20th Century. But she does say that there have been very interesting artists and discusses them within the context of the social conditions under which they made their work. So the question is: Why do we still feel we have to start such classes with the question ‘what is woman?’ and why do we have to make these justifications. Why can’t the subject be dealt with historically, like “Happenings” for example, which starts out: “Around the late 50’s early 60’s, Allan Kaprow decided to start making ‘Happenings’” etc. Okay, so “around the late 60s and early 70s there began

to be something later called ‘the feminist art movement,’ and women artists did this and that, and it has since been mainstreamed and written about in many books and shown in major exhibitions.” Feminist art has influenced mainstream art in so many different ways (though these are often unacknowledged) and it should just simply be acknowledged as part of postmodern art history. End of story. Then we won’t have to teach these classes anymore. But it hasn’t been and it’s probably not going to be for a while.

- I.A.** Yes, the stereotype of the feminist art movement of the 70s pigeonholes any specific pedagogical citing that one might have. On the one hand, we have many students who want to feel confident and succeed in the art world, and they look out for us to help them with this. On the other hand, “women artists” and “feminist art movement” have problematic, repressed histories on art campuses. And we have a catch-22 situation: women art students want us to prove to them that they are worthy of success as artists while at the same time identifying with anti-women sentiment and stereotypes in art. This is an unhealthy situation of losing generational legacy between women artists through a lack of institutional respect. But it also leads to negativity that is not generative (leading to transformation of meaning) but destructive. When senior women art students cannot name more than ten, or often two, women artists in total, in the year of 2007, why are we really taking their tuition on art campuses? It should be considered a scandal!

Through learning about the artwork itself, its production process, its social, political, cultural context, through networking, we move on to something new. It is through women’s making that any pre-existing definition of gender and its tradition is challenged, including the category of women. It is challenged *through* women’s art. And I think that this necessity to justify to students the value of women artists *before* we learn more about specific art works is what has been so problematic for me, because then they are resisting, we are imposing, and it cannot really work very well pedagogically. I have to actively, extremely pro-actively, try to distance myself from the situation of justification in order to harness negativity through disassociation.

Certain passivity, stepping back from ‘the cause’ is important to me, I have to understand why we are doing what we are doing, pedagogically. Because I do not have the kind of conviction that it should be taught no matter what, like some kind of established truth. Your generation fought for these kinds of classes. This class exists in my school because of struggle and work of the artist Micaela Amato. She passed it to me. And now I am not sure. I

wish, in addition, live drawing classes would go through a little amount of pondering, or large art history survey courses. Let’s say after M. Catherine de Zegher, someone else does a large women artists’ show, interesting whether there would still be an urge to ‘justify why.’

- F.W.** Well there have been several big women artist exhibitions in the year 2007 that actually use the word “feminism” in their titles: “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” at MoCA, LA, (and traveling to The National Museum of Women in the Arts, and PS1 in New York); and “Global Feminisms” at the Brooklyn Museum, NYC. 2007-08 is the year of the woman artist, at least in the US! I am in the WACK show and was at the opening along with many others of the women artists in the show and we were overwhelmed with the positive reception of the show. There were over 5,000 people at the opening, and hundreds of students and people young and old streamed through that show and seemed very engaged. There were strong reviews in all the major newspapers on both coasts and in the art magazines. It was a revelation for people to see the actual feminist work of which they had only read heretofore, or had seen small black and white photos of. I performed a “re-do” of my Waiting performance (which was also in the show) and received amazing participation and engagement. To me this great interest proves that the work itself holds up, that it is strong, passionate, engaged, and aesthetically risky and innovative. The show also makes clear how profoundly feminist art of the 60s, 70s and 80s has changed and influenced mainstream art. It is clear that the work is its own justification.
- I.A.** The style seems important, this as-a-matter-of-factness.
- F.W.** I agree that we should refuse to justify or rationalize. Nobody asks, “Why should we continue to teach Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Benjamin, etc?” The answer is because they’ve influenced everything that we think about every day (at least in the West). One can use the same argument about women artists and feminist thinking.
- I.A.** However, the problem of being embarrassed with participating in feminist or women only exhibitions persists. One student came up with a beautiful reason why not to waste one’s time with such exhibitions: it’s bad for your CV. I was the only one in class who laughed when she said that. Others did not think, like I thought, that it was a joke.
- F.W.** Yes, a feminist artist friend once gave me the advice: “Just purge everything that has to do with feminism from your CV and you will be better off.” And I thought, but I would have no CV left! It would be gone! In

retrospect, I know it is precisely because I persevered and was true to my feminist politics and my work that I have gained respect and even economic and spiritual rewards.

- I.A.** To come back to “active distancing” and “strategic withdrawal of personal politics:” distance is an important and positive concept for me; it started with my experience of teaching a feminist aesthetics class at Lasalle-SIA College of the Arts in 1999. Having a productive space, a distance between ourselves helps us to remain comfortable with our differences and interpretations. Being in a position of authority in a classroom, I try, as many of us do, to be careful not to overpower students with my personal politics and aesthetic choices but leave them to make up their own mind. This can only be done to a certain extent, but trying to do this consciously is a challenge for me (after all, it is difficult to maintain distance not as a hierarchical but rather heterogeneous gesture). Of course, one can say that active distancing sounds like going back to erasure of emotions and passions from teaching, back to the masculine model of ‘objective, aloof professor.’ But in a classroom today filled with young women and men prepared to share their personal experiences, I find that withdrawal of my personal politics helps me to instill a certain amount of intellectual discipline towards scholarship. More than ever we need an approach to support systematic learning that usually takes time and effort. The rewards are there but one needs to work hard. I know “discipline” is a scary word, but without concentration of effort in practice and theory we would not have had the feminist revolution. It is about work, after all. A position of active distancing is combined with hospitality as a practice and a concept in the classroom. We need a distance between ourselves in order to come together, apart, and back.
- F.W.** The concept of “active distancing” simultaneous with hospitality is very interesting to me. Students’ interest in my personal history in the feminist art movement can distract them from the critical and intellectual work I’m trying to introduce to them. The notion of “strategic withdrawal of personal politics from the pedagogical space” is more difficult for me. I can learn from you about that, because I would like to know how you think one could separate one’s personal politics from the pedagogical space—especially when teaching feminist politics and activist art. Increasingly, this stance is being required now of American professors by conservatives in academia (e.g., David Horowitz and his list of 100 most dangerous professors); the demand is to teach the subject matter and not emotions or beliefs about the subject matter. In regard to teaching women’s history or feminist art, this is a struggle for me. I always speak from my context and point of view, which reflects how I have studied and absorbed this

knowledge, and what I’m connecting it to in my own life, work, and research, and why I’m even interested in this subject.

The beginnings of feminist pedagogy were so rooted in consciousness-raising. It was so important to tell our stories—women’s stories—and to bring forth a shared experience and subject matter; to begin to look at the personal in a more politicized (social) way. I still think it’s important that people understand what that actually means. Many of our students are completely immersed in the personalistic/individualistic: “I want to do work about my personal, everyday life, and experience.” Many of them seem so desperate—men and women, girls and boys. I’ve sat on the exhibitions committee at my school for three years, and we get hundreds of proposals that say: “Well my work is about my personal experience in everyday life and all the little things that happen to me.” I get so angry about that I just want to throw them out the window. We live in a big world, we live in a difficult time; there are all kinds of issues and questions about social and political life to make art about. The personalized, self-reflexive thing is superficial, gossipy, and totally seductive! But that’s not what feminism is about for me. That’s not what “the personal is political” is about for me.

I find it hard to speak in a clinical (objective) way about feminist art history—there is a different history of knowledge production there. Partly because I was instrumental in being a maker of feminist art history, I have, necessarily, a lot of embodied and anecdotal knowledge about it, which is also an important kind of knowledge: the knowledge of lived experience. Along with the theoretical and formal consideration of this history, there is also the lived experience (which my students know I have) and which I know I have. Because of this I have developed interpretations that are not neutral, shall we say. I don’t think you’re arguing for a neutral impartiality, necessarily, but I struggle with this concept of active distancing. We’re not just talking about facts; we’re talking about interpretation and experience.

- I.A.** Please do not misunderstand me—my position is very specific to this particular moment we are dealing with when teaching women’s art classes. Since very few students know of women’s history in art or in thought, their negativity and their stereotypes are welcomed too. I am open to them but I ask just for a little time—one semester usually—to keep them suspended. I am open to failure in a classroom because I think that the culture of success, especially in a pedagogical sense, is restrictive to the risks of experimentation. This kind of strategy should not to be mistaken for indifference on the part of an educator. One of my lectures is titled “*My personal is not political.*” It usually creates an intense discussion in class on

what it meant (“personal is political”) and what it means today, to deconstruct personal issues as a social, cultural, political problem rather than “my” problem. This comes from my evaluation of the last decade of middle-class white heterosexual women’s situation, to simplify my point. I feel that *my* personal issues are not as important and I hope that a few of my students will pick up on that. I would like to move on from the issues of body image, for example, towards issues of feminist alternatives in social, political and cultural arena. Through a strategy of suspending my personal politics as much as possible, so that the field is open, I hope to welcome feminist alternatives that are outside of my personal agenda, as well as very different from it. I am there, personally, all the time, in my syllabus, in my voice and body; it is too much already of “me.” How could it become less about “me?” This has always been a part of feminist pedagogical project, I think, to unpack the supposed neutrality of patriarchal power within teaching, to challenge authority of professor as someone who tells the truth by default, unquestioned. I understand it is a problematic strategy, there is a risk involved, to become a kind of professor that you mentioned. But it is exactly what women’s studies classes are known for: discussion, interaction, seminar-style teaching even in large classes. As a pedagogue, don’t you want them to figure out their own interpretation?

F.W. Yes, I do, and I usually hold back mine and ask many questions at the start. I say: “Let’s look at the work, let’s look at the writing about the work, let’s see how various art historians and art theorists have interpreted the work, how we think about it.” I am having this experience myself now when reading art critics and historians interpreting my work—even though they never even saw my actual (70s) performances, they only saw the documentation. For example, in the case of my “Waiting” performance, art historian Jane Blocker wrote some very interesting pages on a performance that she had never seen anything of except the black and white photo and the printed text. I think that’s a very interesting situation, when you actually have an artist that’s being studied who has written, spoken about, and interpreted their own work, and who then reads somebody else’s interpretation of their work, someone from a different generation.

I.A. It relates to the teaching too—students make their own sense of what our classes are about, it is not as synchronized as it might seem to us when we teach. As for the art work, it lives on its own, often in interpretations that make it totally different, and you treat it as a gift too, those (mis)interpretations. That is why I try to have this ‘active distancing’ strategy, since my course and myself are far from being the same; it is a collective complex situation, where I am (supposedly) in power. Of course, a lot depends on a personal style of each educator. Teaching, to a certain

extent, could be both narcissistic and pseudo-authentic. And as feminists we surely do not want to substitute one academic ‘star’ professor model with another, while at the same time unpacking objectivity claims within pseudo-neutrality of patriarchal pedagogical model. “Active distancing” for me has both elements: giving a breathing space to my students, without overpowering them with my institutional power and, in addition to that, doing it actively, consciously, with a clear articulation of my position of ‘no justification.’ As you can see, I am still working on it; it is not something molded into some system for me. I am just trying. It’s an interesting point that you made about how you discover the way other people write about your work. The artwork exists insofar as it remains relevant; and as someone wants to keep it, to ‘give birth’ to it, to you, in a way. Teaching is no different, if it happens. Isn’t it what artists want?

F.W. Birth is a good analogy. It’s fantastic: the experience of having somebody write about your work, and actually reveal to you something about your work that you had never thought about, and contextualize it in a way that you had never thought about—that is extremely interesting to me, and incredibly instructive in terms of the work I’m doing now. As artists, we need critics (even bad ones), we need theorists, and we need people who are approaching our work without anecdotal connection to it. That’s what was so interesting to me about Jane Blocker’s writing about my work: She was contextualizing it in regard to Barthes’ *A Lover’s Discourse*. Writing about it in a completely different, but very contemporary way that inspired me to incorporate some of Barthes’ text in my (2007) “re-do” of the “Waiting” performance for the WACK show. This is what I call a productive engagement between generations.

But to come back to “strategic withdrawal of personal politics.” I do think that because of my actual lived experience in the feminist art movement for thirty years I can supply valuable contextual information; and I do perhaps bring more experiential information in addition to the texts, documents, and interpretations. I am incredibly grateful for, and informed by scholars like Jane Blocker, Rebecca Schneider, Amelia Jones, Helen Molesworth, Miwon Kwon, who are all very smart art historians and cultural critics and theorists who have made it their business to deeply research and think about this feminist art history. They seek out women artists who are a part of this lived history, look at their work closely, and write about it. Rebecca Schneider has written a lot about Carolee Schneeman and Hannah Wilke, for example. It’s immensely valuable to have this interpretation at a kind of distance, as you put it, “active distancing,” and yet extend this hospitality towards the ideas and struggle, and the achievement. To withdraw my personal politics in the classroom certainly would give a space to the

students to suggest their own interpretations and to test my hospitality towards different ideas.

I tend to get very impassioned in the pedagogical space. What I've started doing is saying out front: look, this is lived history for me—I want to know what it is for you, why you are here taking this elective course? There have been too many years of students saying feminism is irrelevant and embarrassing. I don't force this discourse on any one any more; I let them ask for it. Often the most resistant ones will come to me two years later saying 'now I understand what you were talking about,' and 'now I've been reading those readings you handed out,' and 'now I've been experiencing.'

I don't have that experience of forcing it on them anymore, because they come themselves to an elective course. At Cooper Union I didn't teach feminism, I taught drawing. The drawing class was about whatever the students were making, and there were lots of self-declared feminists in there—I still keep in touch with them, Wangechi Mutu, Kristin Lucas, and more. These women students wanted to talk about feminist issues because it was part of their subject matter. At Cooper they knew more about feminism because there *was* a class there (taught by Laura Cottingham who also made the film "Not For Sale") and it was the early '90s, and feminism was in the air again with the founding of WAC (the Women's Action Coalition) and drum corps actions at rape trials, etc. They were influenced by this renewed feminist activism. I just needed to point them toward more resources for their work.

I remember that in the first feminist art program in Fresno we began both an art history research project and a reading group in order to familiarize ourselves with women artists and writers from the past and from different cultures. Now, post-WACK! I'm interested in how and whether feminist art history is going to be re-contextualized, whether there will be new research, new thinking about the histories. I was invited to a symposium at California Arts Institute in March (2007) in conjunction with the "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" show—(there are many symposia, panels, lectures, and shows about women artists in the US and Europe throughout 2007-08). The students planning the CalArts symposium said: "It will be divided into three sections, a historical section, a contemporary section, and a section in which we're going to talk about the future." How more linear and stereotyped can you get? Of course they wanted me to speak on the historical panel, but I wrote back and said, "Well, I think it's great that you're doing a symposium, but I'm not going to speak in the historical section. I want to speak about current work, current issues, global issues of feminism, because that's what I'm involved with now. I don't want to keep

being dragged back into the history as though I were dead and as though I hadn't developed in my thought and work since then. Of course everything I do is informed by history, but the constant reification of the generational division like that is really “anti” how I myself teach and work. I teach a class called “Next Feminisms,” and of course we talk about feminist art history; but we come at it through what's happening now and what the students and women's experiences and concerns are now. We read what feminist art critics, historians, and gender theorists are writing right now and what women activists are doing in the world. We look at a lot of work; they do performances, and present their own work, and we discuss it in this context. Painter and feminist theorist Mira Schor (who has been my friend since we were in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts together) writes about this too, how there's this strange amnesia about what we are doing now, and how we are enclosed in this stifling “wave” metaphor that brackets us historically—sometimes even with dates (unhappily these arbitrary dates were also one of the criteria for selecting work for both WACK and Global Feminisms shows)—and “generation-alizing,” as though we had no life in the present, no thought in the present. I think something really valuable is being missed, if all we are allowed to talk about is history.

- I.A.** Writing history chronologically often creates the very linearity/hierarchy which we are trying to overcome. What might be employed as a technique of sorting out information in a survey course becomes an epistemology, a way of approaching knowledge and experience—first wave, second wave, etc. It becomes a strategy of handling heterogeneity of responses, of sorting out styles. Unquestioned, it is dangerous for feminism, I agree with you. In the same “Introduction” I quoted from earlier in our conversation, M. Catherine de Zegher presents her curatorial process and exhibition structure through metaphor of “(S)everal recurrent cycles rather than a linear survey with its investment in artistic originality and genealogies” (20). There is a lot at stake in how we ‘sort things out’ in our histories and present times. That is why for me, de-personifying my class content is important. It is not about trying to be more “neutral” but rather to refuse being “fixed” through paying too much attention to my own personae. I must say it is very difficult since academia often assumes a certain celebrity culture, when students cluster in “star academics/artists” classes.
- F.W.** We want to be “working in our time” (*Ich will wirken in meiner Zeit*) as Kathe Kollwitz said. But about the engagement with the not dead... Interestingly, Jane Blocker and I had a fantastically productive conversation when we first met. She didn't know me, and she didn't write me and say “Can I interview you? What do you think about your work?” (I get asked that constantly by students everywhere who are writing about my work and

I tell them: Do your research, and I'd be interested in what you think about it and what you make of it.) But Jane Blocker is a scholar who has researched feminist performance art, and brought a lot of other resources to it. It's interesting that I am so instructed by people like Jane, or Rebecca Schneider who haven't asked me first "So what do you think you're doing?" but who say, "I have studied this work, and whatever documents I can find, and this is what I make of it. This is how it strikes me. This is how I contextualize it. This is how I place it." As feminists, we don't have to solve all the problems, and answer everyone's questions... Students should be told to do their research and make their own interpretations.

- I.A.** Yes, but then also, the times change. Our students today are different from what you were in the 1970s when it comes to 'expressing themselves.' Today personal experience has become a common topic in a classroom; professors are expected to relate almost any kind of material to students' everyday life, making knowledge as 'applied' as possible. This is exemplified by the questions asked during student's evaluation of our teaching.
- F.W.** Well, even in the Feminist Art Program in Fresno in 1970, we struggled with what consciousness-raising was for. Judy Chicago, to her great credit, always brought it back to making work. For example, after everybody in the room who had been raped talked about it in public for the first time ever, Judy told us to go home and make a piece about rape or being assaulted on the street and our first performances came out of that. Rape had been a completely silenced subject and women had been silent about it and never challenged it publicly. So it was important to tell those stories, and it's important to politicize them and not just keep them in the realm of personal. That's what consciousness-raising was about—to try to learn that process, to look at what the shared social and cultural conditions are of women's lives and women's experiences, and to make art about them.
- I.A.** Violence against women remains a paramount problem, even after decades of your generation's important work. It is a huge issue. The lack of awareness is a testimony to our societies and systems that cover it up. I am not saying that therapy for the victims of sexual violence is not important. And I know that these are very risky questions to ask, difficult questions. But it is also a testimony to a society that treats this social, cultural, relational and political problem often in exclusively individualized fashion: for example, through psychotherapy where economic or political realities are rarely discussed. It reproduces the private-public separation where treatment often targets "private, family history" matters and mainly appeals to personal effort, personality augmentation and individual transformation. It is exactly what feminists are up against when arguing for a society-wide

change in the way violence against women is handled. Again, this is not to underestimate the importance of ‘the personal’ but rather to ask ourselves again what we mean by it for specific situations.

F.W. But consciousness-raising did that, though. We talked about rape as a structural, social result of the patriarchal family ownership system. And we read Marx, and Engels, and Simone de Beauvoir on this subject, too. Groundbreaking art works came out of these consciousness raising (CR) sessions. For example, “Ablutions” performed in 1972 in Los Angeles and the city-wide activist performance work by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz: “Three Weeks in May” in LA in the early 70s. CR was not meant to be “confessional,” it was bringing unknown information to the surface where it could be analyzed and politicized. Now we have so much feminist scholarship and research and so many different self-help and legal structures in the culture and feminist health clinics, and rape counseling and crisis centers, self defense classes—CR led to social and political action as well as art work

Additionally, we live in a confessional, tell-all, show-all culture—just think about MySpace and YouTube and all the talk-shows. Everyone wants to show his/her wound. I try not to do that in class anymore. I teach quite differently now than I used to because of these different circumstances. I try to work with students on what is hidden and unknown now about the conditions of women, for example.

I begin with feminist theory; do a lot of reading, look at a lot of very different kinds of work and women’s activism, and discuss it. I have the students do research and presentations together. It’s true that many of the students want to drag the discussion back to their own personal experience—which is sometimes appropriate. They want to personalize things partly because it is easier for them than tackling the intellectual and political questions, the structural questions, and really working their way through an Irigaray essay. I’m trying to teach them how to talk about theory and art and ideas. At the same time, I don’t want to lose the connection to their own art making and their embodied experience. That’s what I’m trying to figure out—this idea that it’s not abstract, it’s not all in the head.

I appreciate that you’ve been thinking about this so profoundly. I learn a lot from that. Mira Schor and I have been having this conversation for years, because Mira is also so angry and bored with this issue, and I am too to a certain extent— Mira just wants to teach painting. I’m not teaching feminist art as in “Women Artists 101.” I think I would slit my throat if I had to do that over and over again, so I’ve tried to come at it in a different way with

this “Next Feminisms” class which is about cyberfeminism, women’s activist performance, women and technology, global feminisms, issues of trafficking, migration, urbanization, labor, etc. If someone teaches “Women Artists” it should be an art historian and it should be integrated fully into the survey courses, and into visual culture classes.

I.A. It is still about the “F” word, feminism, and the social-cultural-political transformation that it stands for, especially for those who are in power. I feel that it stands along other -isms that haunt us: communism, anarchism, socialism, internationalism, and so on. These words target certain holy cows (private ownership, heterosexual bourgeois family, liberal market-driven economy) as points of debate rather than ideal order of things. Surely, in other cultural contexts feminism might have different connotations and local histories (I am thinking of Russia as one example). However, what “F” word does to art is something even more transformative. Do we need to see existing advancements to be gone before we understand that fundamental changes have not happened as yet? At least, in art schools, where more than a half of art students are women.

F.W. Yes, way more than half of all college students actually. So, in the end, to come back to your first questions; in my classroom, the “F” word is the elephant in the room that nobody wants to talk about—yet we talk about it endlessly in unproductive ways: Shall we call ourselves feminists, or not? What do we do by calling ourselves feminists? What does that mean? That’s the elephant in the room. I’ve dealt with it performatively, I’ve had everyone sit there for twenty minutes and write down whatever associations they want to make with the word feminist. Then we go around the room and read them. It’s hilarious, and touching, and infuriating, and a very interesting exercise. Some people read, and some people perform, and it completely diffuses this anxiety about: ‘I think I’m really a feminist but I don’t know what that means and what to call it, and whether I want to call myself one.’

So, no more justifications. I put a course on the schedule called “Next Feminisms” (or whatever) and I make a course description about what I want to talk about. And 18 or 20 students sign up, then that’s a mandate. If nobody signs up, I don’t teach the course. It’s what you’re saying: You don’t have to teach a course on “women artists,” but if you do, and if the students come, then that’s a mandate. They’re there, and they’re not forced to be there, so why are they there? So let’s go ahead with the program. And as for shows... these feminist shows or these women-only shows, as my friend Irina says: WHY NOT?

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