

## Notes on Teaching Art and Feminism<sup>1</sup>

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*One is like so many that one is not one, never one, always one of a number. One is one of many but not the same as any other, never the same, not exactly. One is peculiar, both one thing and another, here and there, real and imaginary. Certainly one terminates. Everyone has an end. One falls everywhere resting anywhere but one never keeps the same in the same place like the others. One simply does not have a choice. Rising one falls and collects. Dropping to gather, one changes, and one evaporates, and each one is constrained by the same gravity as any other. Gregg Bordowitz from More or Less, LTTR, 9/2005*

After I got invited to give a lecture at the Reykjavik Art Academy in 2005 in the context of a symposium asking **“What kind of Art Academy would women create?”** I could not help but think about Leontine Sagan’s 1931 “Mädchen in Uniform.” A movie saga of a Prussian boarding school run with discipline and order where only one of the all female staff — the beautiful Fräulein von Bernburg — shows some heart and causes the main character a 14 year old girl to fall in love with her... That thought of course made me smile, as I know that this was not the scenario, that I was invited to address in the context of this conference. But my thought was revealing to me an actual need to examine some of the prepositions made by the title of this conference. I obviously, and I admit deliberately, put aside the symposium’s founding motivations for now — the obvious and also subtle discriminations in regards to gender that are present in institutions teaching art, and even more so in the field of art (the art world at large) that we are addressing. I will get back to those issues in a little while.

For now later, I will take a little detour, following some of the foundational questions that come along with the discussions of “women’s rights” and “feminism.” Of course I will only be able to touch on some and on those even only slightly within the frame of this paper. Nevertheless what I will try to suggest is that it is these rather foundational questions that have the potential to be most productively aspects of this debate. Also and especially in face of the current (2007) celebration of Feminism, that seems to encourage a canonization rather than the much needed space that these debates actually still need, or should I say, again and again will need.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> based on a lecture delivered for **“What kind of Art Academy would women create?”**, Art Academy Reykjavik, Iceland. October 2005

<sup>2</sup> a phenomena, that deserves attention in itself, but unfortunately I will not be able to address it here.

“What kind of Art Academy would women create?” This title implies that if an exclusive group of people specified as “woman” to come together and create an alternate (oppositional?) system of education, the changes or better the shift in education lies exclusively in the very identity of these actors as “woman”. It is this assertion literally unfolded as such, that I have difficulty to follow even in the hypothetical. Actually I have to resist it, not to claim a polemical opposition but to actually move through what the problems are that these assertions point to and why to use them as a start detours what I personally think is at stake in terms of gender and education today, especially within the field of Art.

**“Any act should assume unified terms to get started.” or  
“What happens when I say “woman” in a classroom today?”**

Grown up in the seventies with feminism already established as an “institution,” I was too young to be part of the identity politics of the early eighties. Instead of the then clearly needed and useful claims to the identity as “woman”, I rather had found my understanding of gender (and therefore myself) in an discursive space of the late eighties and early nineties with different ideas on these categories, informed on the one side by the *Gender Trouble* of Judith Butler and the challenging questions asked towards language by Monique Wittig, in the *Straight Mind* and Denis Riley’s *Am I that name?*. Of course, I was also living and growing within an environment that had significantly changed since the feminist struggles of the seventies (and partly due to their achievement) and had moved the contested sites in which I would then need to locate my very personal (or maybe generational) struggle in relation to my right to be who I am. This personal experience points now to a challenge that teaching today folds forward again towards yet another generation, today’s students that I am working with at the Malmö Art Academy and the United States. That means that I have to be aware and acknowledge the move and shifts that my students have made, in terms of the struggle for rights and recognition in a changed political environment, but also in terms of the identities in relation to gender now available to them. I understand these identities they attach themselves to, as well those they create, as contextual, never merely descriptive. And it is only through this understanding of a mobility in these identities and the impossibility and limits of language and terminology faced with such complexities, that I will be able to actually raise issues around discrimination based on gender productively in the present moment, for my students and for myself. The students and I in our multitude of understanding ourselves as gendered create/inact a pool that has to be in its difference (not unity) the point of departure for any understanding and discussion around the subjective oppression of individuals based on their gender. The conception of gender among our student population needs to acknowledge from the teaching side that mayor and subtle shifts have occurred and that the students’ conception of who they are in terms of gender

is not necessarily that of the teachers, even if similar terminology is used. I have always felt that within Feminism, each generation anew has to realize and locate their very own place and need of struggle in terms of their identities. And only after these places and needs are located they will be able to and interested in relating themselves to the larger histories of Feminism, never before.

Acknowledging these different and shifting identities (including my own), the question for me has been: How do I work with those differing identities without slipping into relativism but rather find a thread, an alliances and a form of organization that relates, and therefore creates a discussion across difference (without a desire to unify) that can challenge the dominant order without re-inscribing reversed stereotypes or yet another form of hierarchy.

When using “woman” with students, I have to unfold the term, historically and ideologically as it is in its abstraction factually a catachresis, strained or paradoxically used, without an actual referent, standing in for concepts in relation to different traditions of thoughts. In my experience the binary marked by the male/female distinction has created in the fight of discrimination a circling immobility, especially in the younger generation. When saying “Woman” it doesn’t necessarily address every woman, female, queer, lesbian, trans man, or sometimes even myself, which shows that the binary system of language that describes the divided subject (man/woman) ontologically (even though differentiate in those disciplines) can not be folded successfully onto the identities at stake in the political struggles with which we are dealing with today.<sup>3</sup> “Woman” here historically has shown itself as a term that excludes. Working myself through these thoughts, it becomes clear that the point to start and work with when addressing discrimination based on gender in the classroom today is to ask who are actually the individuals that are patronized and discriminated against within the still often patriarchal environment we work in. And then from this place of recognition to reveal which structures exactly we would like to challenge, resist, rewrite and overcome and how.

**“What’s your problem?” or  
“Don’t we live in a post-feminist area?”**

I am very aware of and subjected to the discrimination that exists within the arts. This field of praxis is fundamentally structured along intersecting axes of gender, race, sexuality, class, ethnicity, ability,

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<sup>3</sup> Denise Riley. *Am I That Name?: Feminism and the Category of Women in History*. University of Minnesota Press; Reprint edition (August 2003)

nationality, age, and other lines of privilege and power. Starting from recognition of individual art practice, visibility and value, these discriminations effect the majority of practitioners, including also the professorships at a large number of Art Academies. This discrimination is a bleak fact, that is part of my professional life as an artist. But nevertheless addressing it in the classroom, this fact is treated by some (and not few) today's students as an urban legend. Because they assume that there is actually a choice to participate or not, to be above this kind of discrimination. And this priveledge of choice is given through and because of their very own individual excellence as artist that will and can exceed the nitty bitty of labeling. — Discrimination/Sexism can be a challenging issue to address in the classrooms because it is messy, often conflated in the context of art with claims of quality, and when addressed by a female professor sometimes disregarded as defensiveness, and/or result of personal lack of success. Also as a condition or problem raised, it does not have “a” solution, neither does it offer a thing to do differently, and there is no and has never been a functioning, self sufficient alternate system. And then unfortunately as a topic or better actually as a practice, even at times among some fellow artist, Feminism has become highly unfashionable to address or engage, because there seems no end to the sexism anyway and a confrontation with curators or gallerist or colleagues along its lines is considered not worth it — a nuance — and it finds often closed minds and has for years.

For the occasion of this paper, I went out and did a little bit of fieldwork. I asked a group of 15 students that I work with at the Malmö Art Academy (Sweden), what they thought needed to be challenged around gender within education. The answer in ways I had heard before. There was a strong resistance against the term “Feminism” as it seemed for most of them a term that is historic and not useful today because the female students did not feel discriminated against in this way and believe that they are judged just and only on the quality of their work. Feminism, they said, simply prescribes for some to be the victims and for others to be the predators, no matter how much the male students themselves felt bothered by the mainstream “macho” attitudes and values. Their spontaneous response to feminism was that it, in itself, was discriminating them. They all articulated in one way or another that it seemed that the logic of an old-fashioned way of feminism was constantly reinscribing a divide, that was not their experience and also not productive but rather keep them hostage in stereotypes they felt utterly uncomfortable with. But at the same time what became also apparent in this conversation was, that this take on gender issues supposedly liberated, leaves the students on the other hand isolated and without tools in the struggles that all of them in one way or another seem nevertheless to experience. Another interesting outcome of this conversation was that there was a definite resistance from all students to acknowledge their involvement in the discrimination they are subjected to, and that therefore they are themselves consciously and unconsciously are complicit.

Given that response, that I think in some ways is typical for some part of this generation, I have to ask: How can I work with terms like feminism, often considered already as an ideology or institution itself, unaware of its own edges and limits? What does it take in this environment to put the actual drive (or may I say passion) of Feminism — the fight against discrimination based on gender — into action? How can I support the students (independent of their gender) to be prepared for the highly gendered and segregated environment of the art world if they refuse to acknowledge these conditions? and on a broader level: How can one respond to the challenges of the never-ending sexism without oneself falling into roles that are already written, conditioned through the power one tries to resist, stereotyped and immobile and therefore reinscribing instead of deconstructing gender hierarchies?

**“What privilege isn’t.” or  
of “Unlearning one’s privilege as one’s loss.”**

With these challenges given from the inside and the outside, I find it helpful to look at Spivak’s notion of “unlearning one’s privilege as one’s loss.” She writes: *Our privileges, whatever they may be in terms of race, class, nationality, gender and the like, may have prevented us from gaining a certain kind of Other knowledge: not simply information that we have not yet received, but the knowledge that we are not equipped to understand by reason of our social position.*<sup>4</sup> Spivak suggest that in coming to see one’s privilege, one may see how one is limited and shaped by a particular view or discourse, and that other ontologies and epistemologies exist, in fact, compete against one’s own. The idea of “unlearning one’s privilege as one’s loss” marks a meta-perspective on the hierarchies of modern society, since it may be interpreted as a question. To address gender discrimination on the basis of privileges offers an entry into the debate bypassing morality and a simple notion of political correctness by classifying discrimination as a lack of knowledge, a blind spot, a lack, a loss in fact. And this opening towards knowledge releases the deadlock of prescribed bipolarities and offer a broader perspective onto the situation and space to find themselves within this debate.

Following Spivak’s example, in very broad sense, students need to recognize these limitations of their positions within the patriarchal system, and how these limitations apply on all possible ends and therefore also concern and effect all the students (and all teachers). To arrive at discrimination as a collective problem addressed via a debate of beliefs, prejudices and assumptions of norm and their formation, naturalized in one’s own perception, seems a productive strategy. Another potential offer through these debates is the

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<sup>4</sup> Spivak Reader. edited by Donna Landry & Gerald Maclean. (Routledge, New York) p. 4-5.

understanding that within a political struggle, identities such as Woman, Trans, Queen, Man, Queer, Female, Male, Lesbian, Gay, and any nuance in-between can be recognized not as fixed and determined, but as strategies to work with in relation to gender and identity. They can be understood as an individual solution, one could say, to a universal condition. Thus what gender *means*, how it is performed and experienced, both individually and structurally, can be acknowledged as consistently under negotiation and therefore also not restrained. As a consequence the need for unifying concepts of identity within a traditional feminist debate can then be replaced by a more appropriate and more productive building of alliances along lines of equality, recognition and rights that run across acknowledged difference based on the multiple possibilities of biological, sociological and political identities. What we need today in terms of strong positions within a struggle is not the collective validation of any one “oppressed identity” but we need the collective validation of difference and understand and communicate it to our students as a powerful tool in a political struggle and not as something that automatically will fall into fragmentation.

What I describe here is of course a longer process in need of repetition. Yvonne Rainer said once, that all we can ever be is “recovering sexist, racists, classists etc.” I always appreciated this comment as it liberated me from the conception of an ideal reality that should be reached as an ultimate goal, something like an ideal condition (*paradise*). It allowed me instead to see the goal in the process itself: to create an ongoing awareness of discrimination around oneself but also importantly within one’s own perception. The aim is to include the modes of challenge within ones practice, not as a burden, but a fact. I see this establishment of a space of continuous negotiation most productive also in a teaching environment. To quote Spivak once more: *an uncoercive rearrangement of desire, the repeated effort in the classroom*.

After giving the term “woman” and the modes of discrimination some consideration, I would like to return to the institution and its structures and suggest a new set of questions: “What kind of institutions do we need that do not reinscribe the hierarchical violence of patriarchy?” and “What structural changes need to be made within institutions to not reinscribe discrimination and sexism?” “How can we foster the already existing forms of feminist organizations within the art institutions?”

### **“Liberal Feminism” or “Anarchist Feminism.”**

Given my little example from the celluloid world in the beginning, we know that institutions or environments exclusively run by women are not necessarily feminist institutions. One could say that Feminism is a structure, a process, a form of organization that is driven by values and ideas of gender

equality and also by the need of a response towards the oppression of patriarchy. Kara Stern's 2005 doctoral thesis, *Chased by fate? A life history of Sheila Sadler and the founding of the Village community school*, offers an interesting investigation into several community schools in New York City founded and lead by women over the last 30 years. The study analyzes the different leadership strategies and the effect they had onto the community of the school and the pupils graduating. Following the sociologist Kathleen Iannello's examination of feminism and organizational theory, Stern differentiates among two branches of feminism: "Liberal feminism" as the equal rights work that took place during the 70s and 80s aimed at "reducing or eliminating patriarchy from larger governing institutions" (Iannello, p. 39). A definition of feminism that still resonates in most minds when confronted with the term today and often prompts resistance. And: "anarchist feminism," which as a movement focuses on organizational theory and the "development of structures that avoid the kind of coercive power transmitted through hierarchical organization."<sup>5</sup> It is this second term that I find interesting for us to investigate when thinking of possible structural changes. What Iannello is suggesting is an organization built around empowerment rather than power. For Iannello, power represents domination and is typically wielded in hierarchical organizations, whereas empowerment is a characteristic of non-hierarchical institutions and represents the ability to actually accomplish something and offers space for growing into and recognizing one's abilities. Iannello concludes that this form of organizations is aimed to build institutions that fostered a shared sense of ownership, and that turned teachers, administrators and students into team, members and stakeholders, with the aim to create an environment in which the members form connections between and amongst one another, connections that are based on mutual trust, and an agreed set of rights and values, a collective caring for the institution. And it is these elements that challenge discrimination at its core, as all members are active participants within the institution and actively create and are responsible for the atmosphere within. Iannello names these elements the seal of a feminist approach to institutional organization.

I can see the challenges a radical re-organization of institutions in this way would ask for, but I think it is worth while to consider some of the suggestions and carry their values into a practice of teaching. With the classroom we can work with forms of organization that tend to the building of teams and members of a learning collective in which teachers are one part, aware of discriminating micro structures and equipped to tackle collectively one by one, if they occur. To foster these dialectical structures within the academies, and to mark their value and necessity, is to create a supportive space for collectivity that the students can carry on and use as a means into their professional life. And as an artist, I know how much that is needed in the field. Even though this suggestion to work collectively and through empowerment in terms of building

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<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Iannello. *Decisions Without Hierarchy: Feminist Interventions in Organization Theory and Practice* (Routledge, New York), p.45. as referred to in Kara Stern.

critical forms of organization seems relatively simple, trying to realize it while teaching, surrounded by the highly individualized art world, that has its strong echo in art academies, is quite challenge and a real task.

*Feminist education-the feminist classroom-is and should be a place where there is a sense of struggle, where there is visible acknowledgment of the union of theory and practice, where we work together as teachers and students to overcome the estrangement and alienation that have become so much the norm in the contemporary university. Most importantly, feminist pedagogy should engage students in a learning process that makes the world "more rather than less real." In my classrooms, we work to dispel the notion that our experience is not a "real world" experience. This is especially easy since gender is such a pressing issue in contemporary life. Every aspect of popular culture alerts us to the reality that folks are thinking about gender in both reactionary and progressive ways. What is important is that they are thinking critically. And it is this space that allows for the possibility of feminist intervention, whether it be in our classroom or in the life of students outside the classroom.<sup>6</sup>*

I would like to conclude, agreeing with Kara Stern's suggestions that the potential in a feminist institution lies not exclusively in the identities that enable it, or the values that it teaches, but first of all in its modes of organization. And within these forms of organization we need not to exclude but on the contrary, we need to build alliance among colleagues that to be truly successful need to include in my opinion women and men and all the rest of us.

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<sup>6</sup> bell hooks. *Toward a Revolutionary Feminist Pedagogy*. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989, South End Press)