

Feminist Art Education at the Los Angeles Woman's Building

Betty Ann Brown

"the women's art movement of Southern California undertook the creation of feminist education as a high priority The emphasis on education distinguishes the west coast women's art movement from that in New York, for example, which focuses more on the needs of professional women artists to advance their careers . . ."

Faith Wilding¹

Feminism is one of the great movements for human liberation. The "second wave" of feminism in the United States began in the 1960s alongside the Civil Rights Movement and other broad-based initiatives that challenged the authority of the dominant culture. Much of the political action of the decade was sited on university campuses, and the decade changed the face of the academy. (I remember participating in a 1968 sit-in at my college president's office to compel him to institute a Black Studies Program.) In line with the call for egalitarianism (including race, class, and gender), adult education and community re-education were also carried out in community institutions throughout the country. Feminist educators were among the leaders of liberatory education, and feminist artists and historians were prominent among them. The Los Angeles Woman's Building and the Feminist Studio Workshop were among the vanguard in feminist art education.

The first Women's Studies course was offered in the United States in 1966.² Within seven years, there were more than two thousand Women's Studies classes taught at various U.S. institutions.³ By 1970, art historian Linda Nochlin was offering courses on women in the arts in New York.⁴ That same year, artist Judy Chicago organized the Fresno Feminist Art Program (FAP) at California State University, Fresno.⁵ It was the first program of its kind.⁶

In her autobiographical *Through the Flower, My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, Chicago recalled that she and the (male) department chair at Fresno discussed that while many

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young women took art classes, few became professional artists.⁷ Chicago decided to offer an all-woman class. Using her own experience as a model, she focused on “the struggle out of role conditioning that a woman would have to make if she were to realize herself.”⁸ Chicago had the class meet off campus because she had “ample demonstrations of how intimidated many young women are in the presence of men . . . [the male] presence reminded the women of society’s tacit and all-pervasive instruction that they should not be too aggressive, so that the men’s egos would not be threatened.”⁹ She told the women that the first step was to locate and prepare a studio for the class meetings. As the students were compelled to develop practical skills in construction and the use of power tools, their physical self-confidence grew.

During the first class meetings, Chicago and the students began what the artist referred to as “a kind of modified consciousness-raising, which combined the expressing of common experiences with [. . .] trying to help the women understand the implications of those experiences in order to change their behavior patterns.”¹⁰ Chicago believed that consciousness-raising could “revolutionize teaching . . . because [as] one goes ‘around the circle,’ one discovers that the strangest people know the ‘right’ answer.”¹¹

In the second semester of the Fresno Program, Chicago added a research component to the class. The students began to investigate women artists of the past, in order to rediscover their “hidden heritage,” and they started an archive. The archive grew into the first West Coast file on women artists’ work.¹²

Chicago encouraged the students to make art out of their personal experiences, rather than solely out of formal issues—form, line, texture and color—which had little to do with their daily lives. They began to create art about shared female experiences—for example, the sensation of having their personal space violated by a man. Chicago recalled that the students began “showing images of feelings and experiences that none of us had ever seen portrayed before; paintings and drawings, poems, performances, and ideas for films, all revealing the way women saw men . . . The images that day came out with an incredible force,



Judy Chicago standing in the gallery with a selection of her Abstract Paintings from an exhibition titled Judy Chicago—a survey of four decades of art making at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC, 2002. (Source: http://www.judychicago.com/judychicago.php?p=abstract_paintings1.)

as if they had been bottled up and suddenly released. They were so powerful that they frightened me”¹³ (Early feminist art images remain powerful; they continue to frighten. Perhaps that is why they elicit such heated responses from so much of the public. In January 2001, I toured the “Made in California” exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. People crowded around the video tapes of Chicago’s early work, and some of the viewer comments were truly vitriolic. It was the only site in the immense and varied exhibition that brought forth such viewer hostility.)

According to Chicago, the “most powerful work” of the year in Fresno was the performance art work.¹⁴ This led her to conclude that one reason so few women excelled in traditional art educational contexts is that the curricula focused on historically-valued media—primarily painting and sculpture—which were precisely the media that men dominated. It is important to note that in 1974, almost two-thirds of students trained in art and art history in the United States were women, but only 21% of the faculty members were female.¹⁵ When I joined the faculty of the art department of California State University, Northridge, in 1975, there was only one full-time art studio professor who was female. Even in 1999, when we hired two women as studio faculty members, several of the men questioned the women’s technical competence. One man went so far as to suggest that we needed to bring in a male mentor for one of the new female faculty members because she probably could not handle the classes on her own. Such a suggestion was never made for new male hires. However, with the rise of artistic pluralism in the late 1970s and the emergence of new media like performance, video and installation, women artists began to find their creative voices in visual languages previously unheard by the art establishment. Today, women continue to be the majority in art classes and the minority on studio faculties, but the ratios are changing.

Chicago summarized the success of her early efforts in Fresno:

Once I had organized the class, taken it away from the school, given myself and the students a space of our own and a support group, provided them with a positive role model and an environment in which we could be ourselves, growth for all of us was inevitable This suggests that what I stumbled on in Fresno has implications for all areas of female education.¹⁶

Indeed it does.

It was like being at the moment of birth, the birth of a new kind of community of women, a new kind of art made by women.

*Judy Chicago*¹⁷

Chicago invited Miriam Schapiro, a well-known New York painter, to speak at Fresno. Excited by the program Chicago had established, Schapiro convinced her husband Paul Brach, who was then dean at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), to institute a similar structure there, where Chicago and Schapiro could teach together. In fall 1971, Chicago and her new collaborator moved the Fresno Program to CalArts, which is located in Valencia just north of Los Angeles.¹⁸ Several of the Fresno students decided to continue their art education at CalArts. Together with their teachers, they endeavored “to establish an alternative context in which one did not have to choose between ‘being a woman and being an artist.’”¹⁹ (Chicago, Schapiro, and the CalArts students organized the First West Coast Conference of Women Artists for January 21-23, 1972.²⁰)

In order to learn about the history of feminist art education, I augmented my library research with telephone interviews of several of the women involved. I spoke with Los Angeles artists Cheri Gaulke, Robin Mitchell and Linda Vallejo in November and December 2000. Information from the interviews appears in italics throughout this essay.

In early 1971, while she was an art student in Southern California, Robin Mitchell heard a radio interview with Judy Chicago. Robin’s art education experience up to that point had been overwhelming dominated by male teachers. She remembers one professor commenting, “I don’t really like teaching girls; they just grow up and get married. So I’m going to teach the guys. I hope you don’t mind.” Another blithely said, “Art schools are the hunting grounds for mistresses and second wives.” And Robin still has a photograph that one of her fellow students took of the all-male faculty. An image of eight bearded men similarly attired in denim shirts, jeans, and cowboy boots, the photo is titled, “How to become an artist by imitating your teacher.”

When Robin heard Judy Chicago talking about the Fresno Program, she was impressed. She wrote Chicago a letter and received an invitation to Fresno in response. Robin drove her Volkswagen van to Fresno in April 1971. She recalls meeting Chicago and Schapiro, seeing a slide show of the work of women artists and being “blown away” by Schapiro’s abstract paintings. Robin entered CalArts that fall and enrolled

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in the Feminist Art Program. She considers her first semester there “very valuable . . . a haven.” She learned about feminist theory, practiced consciousness-raising and explored new artistic genres.

The second semester was largely consumed by Womanhouse.²¹ Robin learned about and began to produce performance and installation in Womanhouse, where both genres evolved out of Chicago’s innovative teaching techniques. Robin worked in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Her first plan was to line every surface in the room with quilted fabric, but she soon realized that hers was an overly ambitious plan: she simply didn’t have the time. So instead, she covered every surface with abstract painting. One viewer later commented that Robin had created “the artist’s room,” which was a gratifying response for the young painter.



Painted Room, Robin Mitchell, from Womanhouse, 1972 (Source: <http://aal.ucsd.edu/reserves/doc3/>.)

With many of the other students, Robin was flabbergasted by the huge public response and disconcerted by the glare of the public spotlight on Womanhouse. The experience had been so raw and experimental; there had been so many difficult hours of crying and fighting that it was unnerving to see strangers in “her” space. She also remains conflicted about Chicago and Schapiro as teachers and role models. Although she gratefully acknowledges that they changed her life and greatly contributed to making her the artist and teacher she is today, she found both women difficult and overly demanding at times. Neither the CalArts FAP nor Womanhouse was an easy experience for the young student.

Womanhouse opened January 30, 1972. Conceived of as a large scale art project in which women took their societally-imbedded but culturally-demeaned homemaking activities and “carried them to fantasy propositions,”²² Womanhouse was located in a condemned mansion near downtown Los Angeles. Chicago, Schapiro and twenty-one students spent three months cleaning and repairing the long vacant house. As they worked, many of the

students began to resent their teachers. The students became angry about the power wielded by Chicago and Schapiro, irritated by their belief that the two professional artists had more authority than they. Although deeply concerned at first, Chicago came to understand that the only female authority figures many of the students had seen were their mothers, and they had many unresolved feelings about their mothers. Chicago realized that the rhetoric of the feminist movement suggested that all women should be equal, but that she and Schapiro, as accomplished professional artists, were not precisely equal to the young art students. Instead, they were “authorities in that situation.”²³ Chicago further realized that “[t]he acceptance of women as authority figures or as role models is an important step in female education. If one sees a woman who has achieved, one can say: I’m like her. If she can do it, so can I. It is this process of identification, respect and then self-respect that promotes growth.”²⁴

(I have often found it difficult to deal with female students who resent my authority position in the classroom because they, however unconsciously, project their mothers onto me. For example, I was a visiting professor at Claremont Graduate School in the early 1990s. At the end of my two years there, I gave a seminar on Feminist Theory. Most of the women who enrolled in the seminar had already taken at least one class with me, but few had concentrated on feminist theory. We began each class meeting with consciousness-raising, then discussed feminist texts and their relationship to art making. We ended the semester by creating a collaborative art exhibition that we installed in the gallery of my home university, California State University, Northridge. Most of us bonded so deeply that we remain friends; I share an office with a woman who was one of the students in that seminar and am godmother to another former student’s daughter. However, some of the students resented me deeply and continually sought to undermine the process. One young woman went so far as to telephone me at home early one weekend morning and yell at me about what she perceived as my preferential treatment of some of her classmates. The intensity of her voice and her heightened emotionality reminded me of the wounded voice of sibling rivalry. I realized she could only see me as a mother figure, never as a professional whose job was to guide her in deepening her awareness of the art process through examination of critical theory. Judy Chicago’s accounts of her similar difficulties at CalArts helped me understand that the female authority figure is often a target, even for students of feminist art education.)

In 1973, Judy Chicago, art historian Arlene Raven and graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville founded the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW) in Los Angeles. The FSW was

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later incorporated into the Los Angeles Woman's Building, which opened in November 1973 on South Grand View Street, at the site of the old Chouinard Art School. In 1975, the Woman's Building moved to a new location, on Spring Street in downtown Los Angeles. The FSW continued to thrive in the new location.

Cheri Gaulke came to the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW) of the Los Angeles Woman's Building in fall of 1975. Cheri's original intention was to spend a year in Los Angeles, acquire the skills necessary to develop a Woman's Building program, then return to Minneapolis and recreate the institution there. Her class was the first at the Spring Street location; they spent the entire fall semester (September-December 1975) renovating the facility. Although Cheri understood that one of the tenets of alternative feminist education was that students had to build their own space, that such construction was in itself a significant learning experience, other women in the FSW program were resentful. After all, they had traveled to Los Angeles and invested considerable moneys . . . to do what? Clean floors and windows? Build walls? Learn electrical and plumbing skills?



Cheryl Swannack spray painting ceiling during construction of the new space on Spring Street. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

In addition to renovating the site, the FSW students also had to create art for the Woman's Building exhibition planned for the December opening. Cheri and four others created a performance piece that parodied a three-ring circus. Their "The Other Side Show" explored the collisions of public self and private self. Cheri, for example, closed herself into a circus box and appeared to be sawed in half as a metaphor for her internal conflicts.



Curators Nancy Angelo, Barbara Bouska, Cheri Gaulke, and Linda Norlen with the artist. Grandma Prisbrey, March 1976. (Photo by Sheila Ruth. Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

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professionalism. Iskin's advice was particularly cogent while Cheri worked on curating an exhibition of Grandma Prisbrey's Bottle Village in 1976. (Grandma Prisbrey was an extraordinary self-trained artist who created an entire village out of bottles, cement, and other refuse in Simi Valley, to the northwest of downtown Los Angeles.) Iskin also helped Cheri give herself "permission" to do individually-generated art works, rather than solely pieces developed with groups of performers.

When Cheri began classes at the Woman's Building, she was enrolled in Goddard College, an alternative academic program that gave credit for off-site education. In 1977, she completed her master's degree in Feminist Art and Education through her two years of work at the FSW.

For Cheri, the three primary tenets of FSW that distinguished it from her previous educational experiences were the use of consciousness-raising, the emphasis on collaboration, and the focus on creating art out of each woman's personal experiences. She remembers that although there were as many as fifty women enrolled in the program in the mid 1970s, they still took the time to sit in a circle and go around the group, allowing each person to speak to a chosen theme. They often went around the



First day group meeting, second year of Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW). Photo by Sheila Ruth. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

circle a second time before they began to theorize, to extrapolate from the personal to the political. Cheri also remembers that De Bretteville was the first person to raise the FSW students' awareness of the power of the media. De Bretteville exposed the aggressive nature of most mainstream advertising and asserted that there could be a gentler tenor to public communication. De Bretteville also helped Cheri see that she could use public venues, like the mail system and bus stops, to create art, like post cards and billboards, that well integrated the personal and political.

Cheri was soon to become an FSW teacher herself, as a member of the Feminist Art Workers. Like many of the women educated at the Woman's Building, she began as student then moved into roles of increasing responsibility. She offered various classes at the Woman's Building, eventually became Building Manager, and continues to serve on the Board of Directors.

In 1976, the Woman's Building Extension Program began offering art educational classes for students who attended part-time, rather than on the full-time basis of the FSW. By the late 1970s, feminist art education had become a significant academic concern. Georgia Collins wrote "the first article in art education grounded in feminist theory" in 1977; a year later Renée Sandell finished her dissertation on the topic.²⁵ At that time, the Woman's Building classes was attracting a wide and diverse population.

In 1978, the FSW faculty turned teaching and administrative responsibilities over to the Feminist Art Workers (FAW), a group of former FSW students including Cheri Gaulke, as well as Nancy Angelo, Vanalyne Green and Laurel Klick. Judy Chicago was consumed by her work on *The Dinner Party*. Sheila de Bretteville and Arlene Raven continued offering classes, although Raven was most absorbed by her work with the Lesbian Art Project.

The FSW closed in 1981, but the Extension Program classes continued. At that time, the Extension Program was renamed the Woman's Building Educational Program (EP). The EP began by offering classes in the fields of visual arts, performance art, graphics, book arts, video and writing. In the early 1980s, there was a shift toward: professional development, i.e., how to succeed as an artist; commissioned art works, such as the Guiding the Building project which invited several local artists to create sculptures for the facade of the Spring Street edifice; and, funded projects for specific populations.

Linda Vallejo came to the Woman's Building to oversee the funded project known as Madre Tierra Press in 1979. Through Madre Tierra, Linda brought together thirteen Chicanas and taught them how to design and create handmade books. The goal was a series of image and text volumes employing depictions of the Chicano community and women's relation to it. Linda facilitated the collaborative genesis of images and texts. Then she oversaw the plate design, transfer of photographic images to the metal plates, use of letter press, scheduling and printing of the final plates. Among the participants was Yreina Cervantes, who went on to expand her career through use of the kind of art developed in the program.



Linda Vallejo performing at the Opening of Madre Tierra Press Publication Party. (Photo from the Woman's Building Image Bank.)

Linda remembers that it was during her time with the Madre Tierra Press project that she was invited by the Woman's Building to give lectures on Chicana art in general and her own art in particular. It was the first time she had done such public lectures. She recalls with gratitude that the Woman's Building staff and participants were remarkably supportive as she planned and delivered the talks.

Linda, whose own art work was featured in several exhibitions at the Woman's Building and who served on the Board of Directors for several years, went on to become a prominent artist and community activist, as well as a notable spokesperson for Chicana arts.

In spite of its notable successes and considerable contributions to feminist art education, the Los Angeles Woman's Building closed in 1991. The last EP classes were offered in spring of that year. The Woman's Building Board remains active: the Woman's Building papers are placed at the Archives of American Art in Washington, D.C.; the slides are housed at Otis Art Institute and digitized by the Getty Research Institute; and this e-book launched. Then, in 1996, the Woman's Building Board initiated an oral history project to document the history of the institution. As of the publication of this e-book, the oral history project is still underway.

Principles of Feminist Art Education

Urging all of us to open our minds and hearts so that we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions, I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—movements against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement that makes education the practice of freedom.

bell hooks²⁶

The principles of feminist art education were drawn from the revolutionary practices of “second wave” feminism and served to broaden the impact of feminism in traditional and non-traditional educational contexts. Ultimately such principles functioned as vehicles for expanding the influence of feminism on the culture at large.

In 1977, Faith Wilding listed four principles of feminist art education:

1. Consciousness-raising;
2. Building a female context and environment;
3. Female role models;

4. Permission to be themselves and encouragement to make art out of their own experience as women.²⁷

Later Wilding added:

5. Collaborative and collective work; and

6. Exploding the hierarchies of materials and high/low art practices, as well as recovering the positive values of denigrated or marginalized practices.²⁸

Peg Speirs introduced her 1998 study of feminist art education (FAE) with in the following paragraph:

FAE collapses the distinctions between research, art and pedagogy, offering multiples paths of approach and application of feminist theory in some form of action. In the academy, FAE dissolves disciplinary borders that serve to perpetuate separation, competition, and isolation to protect disciplinarity. Not to be understood as a new discipline replacing existing disciplines, FAE is an interdisciplinary location that remains in continual motion so that it cannot be fixed to one particular place, methodology, or feminist. FAE exists inside and outside the academy simultaneously as feminists working for social change in different venues. FAE's shifting location multiples its dimensions and expands its field of knowledge and practice to reach diverse audiences for the purpose of social change.²⁹

For the principles of feminist art education to be incorporated into widespread educational practices requires a radical shift in the traditional educational paradigm. Challenges to that paradigm are by no means new, nor are they limited to feminist practitioners. Brazilian liberationist Paulo Freire sought to expose and disrupt the master/servant hierarchy he witnessed in the traditional classroom in his widely influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire critiques the banking model of education in which teachers deposit data into student "accounts," then seek to withdraw it through testing. "Instead of communicating, the teacher issues communiqués and makes deposits which the students patiently receive, memorize, and repeat."³⁰ Perhaps because I am less economically oriented than Freire, I have always used the preacher/congregation analogy to describe traditional education. The teacher/preacher—often an older white male, who often wears a suit—stands at the front of the classroom, often separated from the students/congregation by a podium. He delivers what he presents as "Objective Truth" as if he were channeling God's Word. The students/congregation are to receive the Word without question and repeat it back in the call/response of examinations.

Jane Tomkins asserts that the banking model is obsolete for most educators today, "but what we do have is something no less coercive, no less destructive of creativity and

self-motivated learning.”³¹ That is what Tomkins calls the performance model, wherein teachers endeavor to demonstrate how smart, knowledgeable and well-prepared they are. Many teachers, she argues, put on performances whose true goal is not to help the students learn, but to show them “how to perform within an institutional academic setting in such a way that they will be thought highly of by their colleagues and instructors.”³⁰ Like the banking and preacher/congregation models, Tomkins’ performance model can be described as a kind of separated learning. But separated learning is not the feminist ideal.

Imagine knowing as an act of love . . . a giving of the self to the subject matter, rather than an ‘objective’ standing at a distance.

*Hilde Heine*³³

Jill Tarule describes the differences between separated and connected learning.³⁴ Separated learning is based on what Tarule calls the “doubting game.” It separates the learner from the delivered information, at the same time insisting that argument is essential to learning. In other words, separated learning is fundamentally competitive and contentious. In contrast, connected learning is based on the “believing game.” Connected learning asks questions like, “How is this experienced?” “What does it make you think?” “How does it make you feel?” Connected learning attempts to include the knower in that which is known. It seeks to establish relationship, to value understanding and acceptance. Tarule, writing with Belenky et al., builds on the work of Carol Gilligan and her colleague Nona Lyons, who “use the terms separate and connected to describe two different conceptions or experiences of the self, as essentially autonomous (separate from others) or as essentially in relationship (connected to others).”³⁵

Tarule notes that many scholars assert that female identity is defined in a woman’s capacity for relationship; by extension, the very act of learning itself can be embedded into relationship. She adds that connected learning may be gender related, but not gender specific. Like Judy Chicago’s Fresno Program and at CalArts FAP, the feminist education at the Los Angeles Woman’s Building was based on connected learning.

bell hooks argues that when we reject the separate learning paradigm, education can become the practice of freedom. Like Tomkins, hooks notes that teaching is “a performative act.” But hooks argues that teachers “are not performers in the traditional sense of the word in that our work is not meant to be a spectacle.” She sees the performative aspect of teaching as precisely that which “offers the space for change, invention, spontaneous

shifts, that can serve as a catalyst drawing out the unique elements of each classroom . . . it is meant to serve as a catalyst that calls everyone to become more and more engaged, to become active participants in learning.”³⁶ Particularly the performance art aspect of early feminist art education provided such a space for change and engagement.

Feminist scholars like hooks and Tarule build on the principles of feminist art education developed at the Los Angeles Woman's Building in order to develop connected teaching/learning praxis and develop student understanding. As Belenky et al, write, “Understanding involves intimacy and equality between self and object, while knowledge . . . implies separation from the object and mastery over it.”³⁷ Expanded for a more inclusive and broad-reaching student population than the all female, all artist environment of the FSW, Wilding's six principles of feminist education might be restated as follows:

1. Teachers can learn to listen—really listen—to the diverse voices of their students. As hooks writes, “It has been my experience that one way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition. It also ensures that no student remains invisible in the classroom.”³⁶

Supporting students in finding their voices can lead to the emergence of what Belenky et al. term subjective knowing: “The move away from silence and an externally oriented perspective on knowledge and truth [to] a new conception of truth as personal, private, and subjectively known or intuited.”³⁷ This move facilitates connected learning.

2. The curriculum can be shifted from Euro-centered, male canons to acknowledgment of the validity of many traditions; from authoritarian paradigms of objective “truths” to recognition that many so-called truths are in fact relative. hooks explains:

Identity politics emerges out of the struggles of oppressed or exploited groups to have a standpoint on which to critique dominant structures, a position that gives purpose and meaning to struggle. Critical pedagogies of liberation respond to those concerns and necessarily embrace experience, confessions and testimony as relevant ways of knowing, as important, vital dimensions of any learning process.⁴⁰

3. Teachers can incorporate many and varied role models.⁴¹ Again, according to hooks,

Multiculturalism compels educators to recognize the narrow boundaries that have shaped the way knowledge is shared in the classroom When we, as educators, allow our pedagogy to be radically changed by our recognition of a multicultural world, we can give students the education they desire

and deserve. We can teach in ways that transform the consciousness, creating a climate of free expression that is the essence of a truly liberatory liberal arts education.⁴²

4. The teacher must acknowledge that, she, too, is involved in the learning process; she must recognize that education is a cycle that moves from life to the classroom and back to life again. As hooks asserts, "The engaged voice [of the teacher] must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself."⁴³
5. Learning can involve collaboration and team work. According to hooks, "Excitement [in the classroom] is generated through collective effort. Seeing the classroom always as a communal place enhances the likelihood of collective effort in creating and sustaining a learning community."⁴⁴
6. Education can focus on dissolving the polarities of male/female, good/evil, culture/nature, master/servant, etc. These are precisely the polarities that Helene Cixous dissects in her compelling "Sorties."⁴⁵

The challenging of this solidarity of logocentrism and phallogocentrism has today become insistent enough—the bringing to light of the fate which has been imposed upon woman, of her burial—to threaten the stability of the masculine edifice which passed itself off as eternal-natural; by bringing forth from the world of femininity reflections, hypotheses which are necessarily ruinous for the bastion which still holds the authority. . . . What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble?. . . . Then all the stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable, the historical forces would, will, change hands, bodies; another thinking as yet not thinkable will transform the functioning of all society. . . .⁴⁶

Today, Robin Mitchell is a feminist art educator. She teaches painting and drawing at the University of Southern California, Pasadena City College, and Santa Monica College. She acknowledges that her time at the CalArts Feminist Art Program shaped her teaching. Because of her experience with consciousness-raising, she is always careful to let each student have a voice. She designs her classes for students to discover what art is, rather than dictating to them what her preconceptions are. She is aware that the student population has changed since the 1970s, that it is much more diverse, and she employs many of the insights she learned as a woman to develop her awareness of multicultural issues. She credits the FAP with strategies for encouraging students to have a voice, to express their opinions with confidence, and to value their personal

experiences. While she realizes that most of her students will not become professional artists, she encourages them to remain creative and to appreciate the value of art in everyone's lives.

Robin is troubled that many of her young female students have had little or no exposure to feminism. She is concerned about all the negative stereotypes about feminism she encounters. She is also concerned about the way in which many [male] artists have usurped feminist art images and processes without giving credit to their origins.

Robin finds the contemporary art world as sexist, ageist, and racist—and as narrow as it has ever been. She admits that it took a long time for her to realize that she was editing her work in a male way in order to be taken seriously. Once she realized that, she discovered a new freedom in her art making. She now paints and draws and sculpts passionate, energetic, “hot” abstractions that are widely exhibited and the subject of substantial critical acclaim.

Like Robin, Cheri Gaulke is a professional feminist educator. She teaches art at Harvard-Westlake School, a private institution in Los Angeles that has approximately seventy students at their grades 10-12 campus. Cheri specializes in video classes; teaching video is a skill she learned at the FSW. She believes that Sheila de Bretteville's commitment to giving a different voice to public communication still has a significant impact of her work as a teacher. De Bretteville's influence can be seen in: Cheri's policy that students must respect and listen to each other, her projects that have students create art out of their personal experiences, and her emphasis on media literacy/critical thinking.

Cheri asserts that her own art production has been “totally influenced” by the FSW, from her video installations focused on environmental concerns to those exploring teen identity, from public art works like her 1994 Los Angeles Metro Rail commission to her first digital book and web site.

Linda Vallejo still offers classes in alternative contexts, at alternative institutions. For fifteen years now, she has facilitated Native American-inspired “sweats” at California prisons. She became involved with sweats while working with a Chicana women's dance troupe that used Mesoamerican imagery as part of the Mobile Art Studios of the Los Angeles Barrio (Chicano neighborhood). The troupe was often included in intertribal ceremonies. At one of these, Linda was asked by an Arizona elder to assist

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in “pouring water” (i.e., facilitating the ritual) in local prisons. Soon, she began offering rituals for the women incarcerated at the California Rehabilitation Center in the city of Norco. Linda’s rituals are multicultural and inclusive. They employ talk circles not unlike the FSW consciousness-raising process, as well as guided meditations for relaxation, several hours in the sweat lodge, and banquets honoring the elders and teachers of the groups. Linda knows that such rituals have become and will remain an integral part of her being. She is committed to teaching native wisdom, to imaging women at the center of all things and to aiding others in finding their spiritual core, the deep meaning in their lives.

Linda continues to appreciate the generous support she received from the Los Angeles Woman’s Building. “You don’t really know the mountain until you’ve started to climb,” she says. “You don’t know how high and how steep it really is. You imagine that there will be several organizations to support you along the way, but the truth is, there aren’t.” As she continues to “pour water” in prisons, she remembers the collaborative community context of her classes at the Woman’s Building. On the eve of several one-person shows, Linda acknowledges that it was the Los Angeles Woman’s Building that gave her some of her first exhibition opportunities and provided the nurturing community necessary for the germination of her successful career.

Although neither the Los Angeles Woman’s Building nor the Feminist Studio Workshop is still functioning, the innovative education they produced continues to influence and inspire. That influence can be seen in both the innovative teaching of former Woman’s Building/FSW students and in the thousands they have instructed. As the influence continues throughout many generations of students, the practice of feminist education expands its transformative impact on the culture.

[From Site to Vision]

the Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture

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¹ Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands, The Women's Artist's Movement*, Southern California 1970-1976 (Santa Monica, CA: Double X, 1977).

² Barbara Ehrlich White, "A 1974 Perspective: Why Women's Studies in Art & Art History?" in *Art Journal* (XXXV/4, Summer 1976): 340. From a paper delivered to the College Art Association meetings, January 1974.

³ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 340.

⁵ At the time, the institution was known as Fresno State University.

⁶ See Renée Sandell, "Feminist Art Education: An Analysis of the Women's Art Movement as an Educational Force," in *Studies in Art Education*, 20 (2): 18-28. Cited in Peg Speirs, "Collapsing Distinctions: Feminist Art Education as Research, Art and Pedagogy" (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 1998), 5.

⁷ Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower, My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Books, 1975), 70.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹² *Ibid.*, 86.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 79-80.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁵ White, 340.

¹⁶ Chicago, 78.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁸ The feminist art curriculum at CalArts ended in 1975, when artist-professors Sherry Brody and Miriam Schapiro left the institution.

¹⁹ Chicago, 100.

²⁰ See Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands*, Santa Monica, CA: Double X, 1977, pp.31.

²¹ *Womanhouse* was an installation created by Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and their students in the Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts. The artists created installations about women's experience throughout a seventeen room mansion in Hollywood, 1972.

Chicago, 104.

²² *Ibid.*, 108.

²³ *Ibid.*, 108.

²⁴ See Speirs, 3-5.

²⁵ bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress, Education as the Practice of Freedom*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 12.

²⁶ Wilding, *By Our Own Hands*, 10-11.

²⁷ Faith Wilding, "The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970-75," in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds. *The Power of Feminist Art, The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 34.

²⁸ Speirs, iii.

²⁹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1982) quoted in Jane Tomkins, "Teaching Like It Matters, A modest proposal for revolutionizing the classroom," *Lingua Franca*, (August 1991): 24.

³⁰ Tomkins, 24.

³¹ Tomkins, 24-25. Jane Tomkins suggests that in place of the performance, teachers make the students responsible for presenting the material to the class for most of the semester. I have found this a particularly effective strategy in graduate level classes. In my experience, however, making students in introductory classes responsible for material they have had little or no previous contact with is inappropriate. I find I must spend some time helping them assemble the "raw materials" of information and a "tool box" of theories/strategies before they are equipped to present material on their own.

³² Quoted in Estella Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers, Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 221.

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³³ Jill Tarule, from "Women's Ways of Knowing," paper delivered at "Women and Education: Learning, Knowing and Teaching for the 21st Century," a conference held at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California, in January 1990. Tarule's theories are amplified in Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing, The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York, Basic Books, 1986/1997), especially 100-130.

³⁴ Belenky et al., 102.

³⁵ hooks, 11.

³⁶ Belenky et al., 101.

³⁷ hooks, 40-41.

³⁸ Belenky et al., 54.

³⁹ hooks, 88-89.

⁴⁰ Teachers must take care not to reproduce stereotypes about oppressed peoples as they work with different cultures. I point to the work of Clark, DeWolf and Clark (Euroamerican scholars at Grossmont College in El Cajon, California) whose article "Teaching Teachers to Avoid Having Culturally Assaultive Classrooms" in *Young Children*, (July 1992):4-6, made me particularly aware of this danger. I also refer readers to Maria Lugones' "Playfulness, 'World-Traveling, and Loving Perception" in Garry and Pearsall, *Women, Knowledge and Reality* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), for discussion of how the disenfranchised "learn" negative self-image.

⁴¹ hooks, 44.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁴ Helene Cixous, "Sorties," in *New French Feminisms*, Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, eds. (New York: Schocken Books, 1980), 90-98.

⁴⁵ Cixous, 92-93.

Betty Brown is an art historian, critic and curator. She received her Ph.D. in Latin American art history in 1977. In the late 1970s, her interest shifted from Aztec art to Chicano art and, ultimately, to all contemporary art. Her books include *Exposures, Women & Their Art*, co-authored with critic Arlene Raven and photographer Kenna Love (1989); the edited *Expanding Circles: Women, Art & Community* (1996); *Gradiva's Mirror: Reflections on Women, Surrealism & Art History* (2002); and the electronic-format textbook co-authored with Robert Pelfrey, *Art & Mass Media* (2005). Her current research examines how artists are portrayed in the mass media. Brown is a Professor of Art History at California State University, Northridge, where she has taught since 1986.