



**EXAMINING GENDER ROLES:
THAT NAGGING FEELING THAT I AM NOT A “TRUE ARTIST”**

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BOOK REVIEW

Women Contesting the Mainstream Discourses of the Art World

Penelope Josephine Collet (2005). Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press. 343 pages. ISBN 0 7734-6249-X

Penelope Collet utilizes the metaphor of a “stream” throughout her book, *Women Contesting the Mainstream Discourses of the Art World*. Referencing a passage from Virginia Woolf’s autobiographical writings (see Woolf, 1985), Collet (2005) writes that living as a fish within a stream, we know what is around us and we live the experience, yet we do not always know how to describe the stream. Throughout the ten chapters, Collet walks the reader through her research process. She explains that the impetus for this study began when she saw her daughter go through the same struggles she experienced while attending art school: “Upon reflection, I realized that my own teaching did nothing to redress this imbalance in art history” (2005, p. 1). As a woman and educator in the arts, Collet is seeking out the stories of other women who describe themselves similarly but have had different experiences. By asking them questions about their experiences, Collet hopes to be able to better understand the stream. She states that the goal of the study was to discover methods to assist women in moving forward “in the traditional institutions of art reception, the appreciation of art, and art making” (p. 3).

To this end, Collet asked five questions:

1. What are the women’s understandings about the social, aesthetic, and professional contexts of their lives?
2. What broad patterns of experience and influence emerge for each of the artists?
3. How do the women view their positions as artists in relation to their perceptions of the dominant discourses? What role does self-reflexivity play in this positioning?
4. What factors are perceived by the women as influencing their positions? What influenced these perceptions?
5. How and to what extent do the women engage in new discursive practices and life practices to understand and negotiate their positions? (2005, p. 4)

Collet’s analysis of her conversations with nine women artists and art educators focus on their emancipatory language (Fairclough, 1989). She uses an “open-ended, situationally specific, conversational method” in order to document, in the women’s own voice, how they incite their own emancipation (Milbrandt & Anderson, 2005, p. 109). Collet intends that her exploration of the emancipatory language of nine women artists living and working in Australia contribute to the “limited body of art education research in Australia by telling previously ‘untold’ stories” (p. 316).

Participants in the study included three late career artists defined as being born between the two world wars, four mid-career artists born after WWII in the “baby boomer” era, and two early career artists born in the 1970s. The stories of these artists and art educators are told as they respond to relatively open ended questions about their experiences as art students, to their art making and exhibiting endeavors, and to their personal sense of accomplishment.

The author utilized a conceptual framework based upon subjectivity, agency, and self-reflexivity. After beginning the case study with

colated responses from the nine artists, Collet revisited the participants in order to read back their words as well as her analysis so that the participants could consider their earlier responses and reflect/respond to her writing.

Collet believed that her second set of interviews would result in dialogue that was reflexive and would impact her respondents' art making and teaching. My own assessment of this goal is that she was not able, within the confines of this study, to reach the goals she initially envisioned. She is able to begin to see reflexive responses, but it would take additional interviews and much more time to conclude that the participants' work and lives had been impacted. While it was possible for Collet to do second interviews with only four of the nine original participants, the author states that "I felt this was particularly valuable for the four women because within the space between the interviews, the opportunity to reflect upon issues raised and then to respond to my interpretations, made possible shifts in the women's understandings" (p. 309). These possible shifts came when the participants discussed how this experience had encouraged them to think more critically about their own teaching and art making. In general, the participants agreed with Collet's interpretations. However, all of the women felt the need to elaborate on earlier statements so that they would be understood. This is one of the most interesting aspects of the "follow-up" dialogue. There is empowerment in speaking back to the researcher and clarifying a position, while learning about oneself from the interpretation.

In Collet's opening paragraph she reflects upon the nature of writing and states that we all come to our work with "a view colored by life experiences" (p. 1). The participants that she engaged for this study have certain things in common. They all identify as women artists, they earned art degrees at a university, and they continue to make art. Aside from these similarities, their stories are different. Even experiences that may appear similar are described differently. For example, when asked about how their art making was impacted as a result of their relationships and children, one respondent stated, "It was impossible when I was home with small children to find time to do creative work," while another stated, "I really devoted my time to the youngsters" (p. 176). These voices illustrate just two sides to one issue and that is part of the stream, the

joys and frustrations of being an artist and a mother. When asked about whether they were overlooked as art students, some responded that they had been overlooked, but it made them strong and independent learners while also contributing to feeling less confident and less of a "true" artist.

As I read, I identified with that nagging feeling that I am not a "true" artist. Like the participants, it started in school. I pursued a Bachelor of Science (B.S.) in art education rather than a Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.) degree. I wanted to make art throughout my life and I knew I wanted to work with children. However, I experienced some professors who believed that art education majors chose this option because they could never make it in the "art world." It became clear as I took my studio classes that B.S. and B.F.A. students were treated very differently. The art education students were often ignored. The ones who showed a strong aptitude in a studio area were told that they should consider changing majors. Even today, working in the university, I struggle with art faculty peers who are surprised that an art educator would exhibit her artwork. I feel the need to confront this attitude through modeling that one can be both an educator and an artist. Yet, as Collet illustrates, identifying as a woman artist relies upon multiple relationships and can change throughout a lifetime.

The book begins by describing the study as a whole and offers the reader a window into how the chapters are organized. It is followed by an extensive review of the literature, separated into topics including: the "lost histories" of women in art with a focus on Australian women artists, the stereotyping and the disparagement of women, societal expectations, the art school, marriage, having children, and "dilettantism" or the impossibility of ever being perceived as more than an amateur. She follows by further examining the history of women in the arts from the "spectacle" of the woman artist as an abnormal condition to the "feminized" position of craft as low.

In chapter 4 she describes her work as utilizing a feminist methodology and defines how she has come to understand her methodology. She argues that the assumption of objectivity is a sexist notion because it reflects a historically biased, male oriented, scientific methodology that dismisses relevant factors based upon individual experience. These experiences offer insights into uniquely female experiences and there-

fore should be studied to broaden understandings of what is involved in becoming an artist.

Followed by a critique of Fairclough's (1989) reading of Foucault, Collet looks at subjectivity, ideology, agency, self-reflexivity, power, and emancipatory discourse through a feminist lens. In Fairclough's work, the participants are not "merely passive subjects" (p. 94). They act as agents and can negotiate relationships within the discourses. Collet sees herself as the "participant interpreter" recounting not only how individual participants respond to questions but recognizing her role as researcher and the unavoidable parameters she had to set to conduct the study. In this way, the impact of the discourse also depends upon how it interacts within the existing reality. The goal of viewing discourse as contextual on many levels enables a feeling of agency, or exerting personal power, within the participants and the writer.

In chapter 7, entitled "One's Own Voice," she categorized the participants' discourse into topics such as: childhood, schooling, exhibiting, and family. She both substantiates and problematizes the categories through discourse analysis in sections titled, "Mainstream Discourses" and "Negotiating Interpretations." In chapter 7, the interviews are analyzed through the issues raised in earlier chapters. In chapter 9, "Negotiating Interpretations," Collet shares the women's responses to her interpretations. Some of the women in her study felt misunderstood and were then able to clarify their meaning, others reconsidered why they had made certain statements and reflected on what they really meant, while others took the time to further discuss the topic. The follow-up offered an in-depth understanding of the process of interviewing and illustrated the need for reflection and dialogue for a clearer understanding of the respondents' responses. The book ends with original interview transcripts that are revisited and critiqued by the participants.

Collet shares how she "found" her topic, established her theoretical framework and questions, negotiated emerging methodologies, analyzed the discourse and finally, included her participants' self-reflexivity by asking them to respond to their own words and her analysis. The inclusion of the self-reflexive discourse is vital to her process. She argues: "Self-reflexivity is important for this study because it provides a possibility for increased agency of the subject thus enabling and promot-

ing aspects of the feminist emancipatory project" (p. 100).

The book was published as volume 43 in the Edwin Mellon Press series titled *Women's Studies*. It illustrates the struggles and complications involved in feminist research, such as sustaining participants' involvement over time. Collet is forthcoming about this issue, inviting readers to see both strengths and flaws in her methodology. By exposing this "Achilles' heel," Collet offers a strong example of the complexities of narrative feminist research. It is a useful exemplar for beginning researchers who are undertaking a topic that involves analysis of participants' dialogues and who want to consider feminist research processes and practices.

References

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