



ENCOUNTERS WITH FEMINIST ART AND FEMINIST ART CRITICISM

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Abstract

Feminist art criticism offers embodied encounters with feminist art that interrogate issues of identity, power, and privilege in relation to personal affect, memories, and experiences. From a study of audio recordings of university students' responses to feminist art guided by feminist art critical approaches, the authors present an example of facilitating feminist art criticism and an analysis of the impact of the art encounter.

Keywords: feminist art, feminist art criticism, feminist art pedagogy

Awakening Feminist Art Criticism

Feminist art education scholar Elizabeth Garber (1990) advocated for feminist art criticism in art education because “feminist criticism poses not a single method but draws on a variety of critical approaches whose foci are understanding art in relationship to social values and ideologies, to power struggles, and to economic, class, gender, ethnic, and racial considerations” (p. 19). Garber (1990) further explained the three bases of feminist art criticism, those being social analysis, political activism, and self-knowledge. Social analysis of art, critiques stereotypes and derogatory portrayals of women as well as investigates whether women and other marginalized groups present their subjectivity and agency both in and outside the art world. Political activist feminist art criticism considers the impact of actions evoked by feminist art. Self-knowledge feminist art criticism values personal subjective experience and critical consciousness as meaningful to interpreting and connecting to art. Feminist art criticism builds awareness and exposure to the inequities many women experience in society, making that oppression visible through writing, speaking, performance, and other modes of critique.

While we, the authors, are at different phases of our careers, we both identify as feminist art educators and are inspired by Linda Stein's art. Artist Linda Stein is dedicated to gender justice. She creates art that encourages upstander behavior. Her art, from the 1970s to the present, explores themes of protection, otherness, vulnerability, sexism, and gender identity. Zena Tredinnick-Kirby is a White woman, in her late 30s, mother of two young children, and is a Ph.D. candidate in Art Education at The Pennsylvania State University. Linda Hoeptner Poling is a White woman, in her mid-50s, mother of two grown children, and an Associate Professor of Art Education at Kent State University. Both have taught art in K-12 schools and art education courses at universities. We begin with Zena's feminist awakening, her nutrient moments that fueled her drive to examine feminist art and feminist art criticism.

Zena's Feminist Awakening

A spark was ignited within me upon the commencement of my graduate studies when I had a lucid awakening resultant of my coursework, required literature, and museum visits. During the early stages of graduate school, I became aware of the lack of feminist art within the art historical canon, because the canon that represents ideals of beauty and knowledge, also reflects a bias in favor of art created by those who have occupied the most socially, politically, and economically powerful positions in culture (Routhier, 2019). My feminist awakening caused me to reflect on my prior ten years of teaching art history in a secondary level school. I scrutinized the high school's required curriculum that I taught from a feminist perspective and discovered that not only was I not teaching the students in my art history courses about feminist art, as there was none within the mandatory curriculum, but, also, there were significant issues of misrepresentation of the female body and the art that I taught in the required art history curriculum.¹ I proudly realize now that I am a feminist. I identify as a feminist. I aim to make feminist art as prevalent in art history textbooks and scholarship as the many 'old masters' artwork that dominate the foundational core of the canon in art history taught in U.S. schools. I am committed to research and engage with literature about women artists and feminist art. Consequently, my own feminist awakening has also changed my perception of being a woman; I now recognize that I live in a patriarchal society and I can identify the inequality that surrounds me. Aware of inequality in social, health, environmental, economic, among other interlocking systems, I must advocate for my own sisterhood and women in the arts. This is now my passion; I want to learn and teach about feminist art and women artists.

¹ The largest misrepresentation within my required curriculum was the reclining-nude. Over sexualized and idealized with an exaggeration on specific portions of the female body intended for the male-gaze.

Women have long been making art before the feminist movement of the 1970s. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (1981), in their ground-breaking work *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*, highlighted that it was the feminist art historians of the 1970s who exposed the erasure of women in the arts during the rise of Modernism during the 20th century. Linda Nochlin furthered laid bare sexism in the art world in her salient essay, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," published in *Artnews* in 1971, which inspired a cascade of works to follow devoted to highlighting women artists who were overlooked, undervalued, and intentionally ignored in art history (Arakistain, 2018), including the notable work *Women, Art, and Society* by Whitney Chadwick (1990; 1996). Invariably, this scholarship brought to light that women made art, yet society largely left them out of the canon.

Even though ample documentation exists regarding women artists for more than 150 years, it was not until the late 1960s that "women became permanently and centrally involved in art theory and practice" (Arakistain, 2018, p. 7). By the 1970s, women artists both in the U.S. and in Europe for the first time came to be known as feminist artists who practiced their art from and within feminist awareness perspectives (Dekel, 2013). Reckitt et al. (2018) in their international survey of feminist art from 1857 to 2017, note that in 1969, "domestic politics" in the U.S. enflamed artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles. In Ukeles's written manifesto, she addressed Maintenance Art, the stuff of life that consumes women in traditional domestic roles. Ukeles and other feminist artists emerged within the 1960s Women's Movement, a movement toward social and economic equality for women. However, inequality still exists in the art world.

Art historian Fisher Sterling (2019) laments, "the truth is that women have never been treated equally in the art world, and today they remain dramatically underrepresented and undervalued in museums, galleries, and auction houses" (p. 1). The incognito group Guerrilla Girls, in existence since 1985, continue their feminist consciousness-raising efforts to expose gender inequities in professional art spaces, their projects most recently chronicled in *Guerrilla Girls: The Art of Behaving Badly* (2020). One need only visit the [National Museum of Women in the Arts \(n.d.\)](#) to find current statistics that are regularly updated, illuminating not only gender inequity in the art world in the United States and United Kingdom,

but also in major museums around the world, revealing inequities in the following categories: art fairs, awards, and publications; education; leadership; demographics and compensation; museums and galleries; art market; and education.

In 1970, Judy Chicago launched the Fresno Feminist Art Program, which she brought to California Institute of the Arts in Valencia in Fall 1971, along with many of the students in the Fresno program. Miriam Schapiro joined with Chicago to provide a feminist art program. The students with Chicago and Schapiro explored feminist art pedagogy and during the Spring 1972 semester created the notable feminist art, *Womanhouse* in which each room of a large house became a site for feminist art installations and performance. Chicago boldly declared these programs as feminist art education, solidifying them as early examples of curricula and pedagogy that prepared women-identifying students to become professional artists (Chadwick, 1996; Keifer-Boyd, 2014; Meyer & Wilding, 2012; Youdelman & LeCocq, 2012). Feminist artists, art historians, and art educators during this pivotal time of the 1970s built an activist zeitgeist that manifested then, and continues to evolve today, a sense of urgency for equity in art and education. For example, Linda Stein founded a feminist art program in 1972 in New York City, which she incorporated as a non-profit in 1978, titled *Have Art: Will Travel! Inc.* (HAWT). The mission states: “Using art as a starting point HAWT envisions justice by addressing issues of power/vulnerability, masculinity/femininity, warmaker/peacemaker through the lens of victimization and oppression, including racism, sexism, ableism, classism and trans/homophobia” (HAWT, 2021, para. 2).

An important development born from the Feminist Art Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s was the experimentation with multiple senses and sensibilities. Feminist art includes a wide range of mediums, practices, and content, and performance art, site-specific art installations, and interactive art emerged. Touching/seeing/hearing/feeling art, being inside site-specific art installations, and the body as a site and medium of art continue to be hallmarks of feminist art (Reckitt et al., 2018). Feminist artist Linda Stein’s non-hierarchical approach to allowing viewers to engage physically with her art provides an overall experience with many senses involved. The smell of the leather close to the participant, the various mediums felt through touch, and the 360-degree view is exemplary of art involving many senses, as contrasted to the ubiquitous one-

dimensional interaction with art in a museum.

The specific feminist artwork that was the vehicle underpinning the feminist pedagogy and feminist art criticism activities of this inquiry was that of New York City-based artist Linda Stein. Stein’s wearable sculpture, *Knight at Ease 652* (see Figure 1), is feminist art that encapsulates performance, installation, and interactivity to protect from patriarchal forces. The piece was part of a 2018 exhibition held at the Hub-Robeson Gallery on the campus of The Pennsylvania State University. The exhibition, *Overlap: Life Tapestries*:

brings together a group of self-identified feminist women artists whose artistic practices are richly charged, not only in their realization of the ways discrimination is characterized and informed by national origin, race, social position, and historical forces, but also in their understanding of how their socially inscribed bodies intersect. (Sabbaghi, 2018, p. 1)

Stein, like other feminist artists, challenges inequalities, seeking to abolish the patriarchy through artwork and educational experiences, and museum interactions. The thirteen artists showcased in *Overlap: Life Tapestries* convey and speak their message of struggle and hardship throughout their lives. Stein’s piece was positioned alongside the wall, the armor suspended from the ceiling, allowing the artwork to freely dangle with a darkened cast shadow of the iconic figure of Wonder Woman in the backdrop. *Knight at Ease 652* stands prominently with an intense stare into the distance. Art historian Margo Hobbs Thompson (2009) critiques the series in which *Knight at Ease 652* belongs, stating, “she guides the viewer toward empowerment in the face of sexism, homophobia, racism, and other forms of institutionalized oppression” (p. 3).



Figure 1. *Knight at Ease 652*

Wood, metal, leather, acrylicized paper, archival inks, velcro straps
78" x 30" x 28"

Artist: Linda Stein, 2009

Feminist educational scholar Elizabeth Mary Grierson (2018) asserts that “feminist approaches to rights have long sought to disclose, question, unsettle and displace normative discourses of patriarchy, yet problems of inequality persist” (p. 1). Stein, likewise, illuminates inequality, a societal order of how women are stereotyped in the history of art and in U.S. culture. Stein’s work stands resilient and unwavering by placing a bold emphasis on a sensual, curvy, figurative form that suggests a woman’s body. She situates and intertwines a myriad of mediums to suggest how women can be strong and empowered. She uses media such as stainless steel as a reflective medium with black muted leather and *Wonder Woman* comic strips from the 1940s. The use of these combined mediums creates a unified message of power through the reflective qualities in which viewers are literally able to see their reflection through the stainless steel. The black leather is tough and strong and *Wonder Woman* becomes the Superhero woman in society. *Knight at Ease 652* signifies strength and protection amidst the patriarchal society, plastered with images of *Wonder Woman* being the guardian and protector on a Roman soldier-like shield. At first glance, the audience is captured by a sense of protection and strength, which is exhibited and portrayed through the toughness of the dark rugged-worn leather and the hardness of the stainless-steel metal.

Interactions by numerous groups and individuals with one artwork in particular, *Knight at Ease 652*, by Linda Stein, furthered this inquiry into pedagogical potentials of feminist art. Stein encourages engagement with the sculptures that she creates, which are made with the intention to interact with them and wear in the museum or in her New York studio. The opportunity to experience the art from inhabiting the work is “feminist pedagogy of attention to embodied ways of knowing” (Shrewsbury, 1987, p. 6). Typically, physical distance between art in museums and galleries is required, touch not being allowed. However, Stein encourages audience physical engagement with her art when she is present at an exhibition with her sculptures.

A total of ten undergraduate students and ten graduate students at Penn State were the participants in this inquiry, all pursuing studies in art education. The undergraduates were enrolled in the junior-level course, *Visual Culture & Educational Technologies*. The other group, graduate students, were enrolled in the graduate-level course, *Including Difference*. Both courses were taught by

Dr. Karen Keifer-Boyd. In addition to these two groups of students, Linda Stein attended the opening reception, which also was attended by 100 guests. Having undergraduate students, graduate students, and the artist as part of the research provided a range of responses in the feminist art criticisms, due to participants' ranges in age, educational levels, and life experiences. All participants in the inquiry identified as women and had racially and ethnically diverse identities, including European American, African American, East and Southeast Asian, Iranian, and Afghan.

Enacting Feminist Art Criticism

Letters to the Art: Encounter "Overlap: Life Tapestries" activity, created by a team of three students² in an art education graduate course, *Including Difference*,³ began with an invitation to write a letter to one artwork contained in the exhibition. Gallery participants looked at all the art in the show and found one piece to write a letter to as if the art was a person. A facilitator gave each student-participant a sheet of paper, a pen, and an envelope and asked each to handwrite a letter to an artwork of their choice within the exhibition. The practice of writing a letter to an artwork was a process of interpretation, open to any response, personal or impersonal. Once the letters were written, the students gathered, and an assigned facilitator invited a volunteer within the group to read a letter written amongst the group to be shared and read aloud. After reading the letter, the students collectively tried to figure out which artwork the letter was addressed. The process of gathering, listening, and further analyzing the letter to the artwork proffered a robust association of the specific composed letters and their relation to each artwork. This activity by its very nature was devoid of hierarchy, and instead was characterized by community and shared dialogue as participants openly discussed their ideas and impressions.

Given Linda Stein's and participants' permission to be videotaped, students in the courses volunteered to use a 360-degree camera to record the dialogic feminist art criticism. The students shared the 360-degree footage with each other, including Zena who was a student in the course, to use in their creation

of immersive experiences viewed with virtual reality headsets. An immersive experience is "an illusory environment that completely surrounds you such that you feel that you are inside, and part of it. It is a way to sensorially experience the impossible" (Drumond, 2019, p. 1). Zena collected, analyzed, and interpreted both the audio data from the 360-degree video footage and the handwritten letters involved with *Knight at Ease 652*. Sound studies scholars, Stephanie Daza and Walter Gershon (2015) explain: "listening to audio and turning it into data, then carefully transcribing what is heard. Sound collection implicates the body differently than visual and texts" (p. 240). Zena removed the ambient noise during the exhibition from the recordings to focus solely on the interactions and discussions concerning Stein's, *Knight at Ease 652*.

In what follows are excerpts from the handwritten letters to Stein's, *Knight at Ease 652*, beginning with Zena's encounter:

October 4, 2018

The energy I felt from Knight at Ease 652 was arousing and gave me chills; the sculpture portrays a strength that exudes protection. As I observed the art, I reflected on how culture has always been overtaken by the patriarchy, which evoked many emotions. I stood in front of the piece, staring at the power she defined, speaking to me in silence. Galleries are well known to be soundless, contemplative spaces; however, I envisioned many boisterous, powerful women in that space as the artwork came to life, making their voices heard. An instantaneous relationship with Knight at Ease 652 transpired within minutes of watching her. That moment shared with her removed me from where my two feet stood and brought me to a world where I was free from oppression. I felt freedom, I felt safe, and I felt a connection that I had not felt with any other artwork depicting protection that I had ever experienced.

This self-knowledge, intersecting with social analysis, reflects principles of feminist art criticism described in Elizabeth Garber's (1990) work. Below is an example of the dialogic exchange generated by a participant's letter:

² *Letters to the Art: Encounter* Creators: Alvaro Jordan, Xalli Zúñiga, and Elham Hajesmaeili: http://cyberhouse.arted.psu.edu/difference/encounters/Letters_encounter_XZ_EH_AJ.pdf

³ <http://cyberhouse.arted.psu.edu/difference/>

October 4, 2018

Dear Night of Eve,

I find it interesting looking at you as others see you differently, probably, but to me you look like a piece of armor. This fits wonder woman well as a warrior at the same time it also conflicts with her real outfits especially the classic one which you highlight and also the public persona she has been given for years of having your story dictated. A far cry from your sorcery, which is based on two bisexual women raising a family with her as a creator together. I like how you look strong layered and are able to protect, but also unfinished and not protecting everything, just the essentials. I'm sure others can relate to that feeling too, especially other women. It does feel strange to claim as people so often do that women without armor are stronger than one covered up.

Karen Keifer-Boyd read aloud the “Dear Night of Eve” letter to the class and posed the question: “Does anyone know which piece the letter is addressed to?” A student responded, “the piece over in the corner with the armor on it and comics.” The majority of participants agreed that the letter was vividly speaking to *Knight at Ease 652*. Keifer-Boyd offered further reflection, building on the encounters, students’ responses, and the letters:

These letters I am sure have brought out reflections sometimes the artist doesn’t even know. You don’t always have to rely on the artist’s statement, which is a little capsule of what the artist is putting out in the public. Linda Stein’s themes in her art are about vulnerability, otherness, and protection. Stein plays between these themes in her art. During the art exhibition, if she is present, she will allow people to wear her sculptures. (2:39)

It is important to note that Stein was present at the exhibition. She offered a palpable experience and encounter, and within the moments the armor is placed upon students, they exclaimed they felt powerful. Some described that they felt an increased sense of strength and willpower. Incredibly, as a group, participants expressed that while in the presence of *Knight at Ease 652*, they could not be oppressed by a patriarchal society. Zena witnessed a literal transference of strength

from sculpture to body as students interacted with Stein’s work. Students identified a sense of safety while wearing *Knight at Ease 652*. The scrutiny of women by society was the most frequent topic in discussions surrounding *Knight at Ease 652*, indicating a strong alignment with feminist art criticism principles, particularly social analysis of women in society (Garber, 1990).

When a participant placed the armor on herself, Stein explained to her that she could move around freely, that she could do anything while wearing it. Another participant in the group watching the woman move wearing the protective armor-like sculpture asked, “Do you feel like you could take over the patriarchy?” The student replied, “no, but yes, at the same time.” After the student was content with her time in the armor, she passed it along to the next student. A third student placed the layer of armor on herself and immediately raised her fist up in the air, similar to a stance of the Statue of Liberty. Another student remarked, “powerful, hold that pose, you look radiant.” Stein then commented on her radiance and then asked, “Do you feel comfortable?” The student replied, “Yes.” Stein then encouraged the student to walk to the original site in the gallery where the piece was hanging, to get the full experience of the piece. Stein’s role in participants’ encounters with her work became a mutually empowering event—she, too, clearly was transformed as could be seen by her own positive body language. Stein’s feminist beliefs and values of equality and a non-hierarchical environment engaged the group. What is important to note is that during the activity, participants involved in the exhibition and encounters transcended their bodies from their present environment to a non-physical reality by wearing and interacting with Stein’s body shield, *Knight at Ease 652*. Encountering the art in this way, with the feminist art criticism activity within the feminist art pedagogical strategies, enabled deep, meaningful, and personal learning to happen.

Embracing Feminist Art Criticism

A touchable experience, the embracing of artwork, fingers guiding upward and downward as one explores the textural qualities of the artwork is a sensorial experience that needs to be further explored through feminist art encounters. So often, a textural element in an artwork can only be seen at a distance in a museum dictated by ropes and glass. However, curiosity is within us as humans, and we desire to touch and feel the world around us. We cannot turn touch off. The feeling

of the ridges, bumps, weight, sharpness, and smoothness of materials sends signals to our brain, and our encounter with artwork becomes visceral. We learn through touch, “part of our learning experience, beginning from infancy. As we mature, we rely less on touch and more on looking and listening, but the desire to touch objects in which we are interested is never far away” (Zimmerman Art Gallery, 2021, para. 3). The fading in curiosity and desire is still present. Therefore, a need for an increased push and visibility for tangible feminist pedagogical encounters with art needs to be further considered.

Meaningful encounters with feminist art have transformative potential to create lasting and deep meaning in those who partake in the encounters. Participants in this inquiry came to understand Linda Stein’s *Knight at Ease 652* through social analysis, and subjectively, constructing deeply felt personal experiences, once they literally placed the form onto their own bodies. The letter writing to art and wearing of a sculpture, provided a unique feminist pedagogical experience that generated curiosity and interest in feminist art. Throughout the experience, Stein encouraged students to engage with her art through touch. Students investigated the art through their fingers of the rugged leather and the stainless-steel portions of the armor, making their experience truly memorable. The participants’ one-on-one encounter wearing Stein’s sculpture created a closer understanding of *Knight at Ease 652*. A full circle view and embodying Stein’s art made for an experience that many people have not had, that is, to be *within* a sculpture.

Feminist pedagogues work to eliminate hierarchy, resulting instead in a sense of shared community with students, increasing the likelihood that vulnerable insights and self-knowledge will be shared willingly, for example, resulting in deeper learning, in addition to larger social analysis insights. Political activism often results from feminist art criticism, from consciousness-raising that comes from learning about feminist art in combination with deeper self-knowledge that results from feminist art criticism (Garber, 1990). In this study, students engaged with Stein’s art through such a feminist art criticism approach. It is our hope that using feminist art criticism as carefully constructed feminist pedagogical encounters with feminist art will generate new insights about self and society.

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About the Authors

Zena Tredinnick-Kirby is a Ph.D. candidate in Art Education at The Pennsylvania State University. She holds a Master's degree in Art Education from The Pennsylvania State University, where she received The Professional Master's Excellence Award in 2018. Zena is a passionate feminist art educator who taught Advanced Placement (AP) Art History and 2D-Design at a secondary level in New Jersey for ten years. She assisted in redesigning the AP CollegeBoard curriculum for Art History. In addition, Zena authored an online course, *Introduction to the Visual Arts*, at The Pennsylvania State University. Zena currently resides in New Jersey, where she is, also, an adjunct faculty member at The College of New Jersey in Art Education. Zena's research focuses on designing an inclusive feminist teaching art residency at her home in New Jersey with her two children. The passions and lived experiences of her children generate their curriculum in creating interdisciplinary art encounters collaboratively. At the center of Zena's research, she analyzes her pedagogy in action through the lens of Nel Noddings's (1984) feminist theory, *ethics of care*.

Linda Hoeptner-Poling, PhD, Associate Professor of Art Education at Kent State University, is past president of the NAEA Women's Caucus, past president of the Society for Educating Women, Distinguished Fellow for the Ohio Art Education Association, a HERS Institute Alum class of 2018, a Brain Health Research Institute member at Kent State University, the 2018 Ohio Art Education Association Ohio Art Teacher of the Year Awardee, and the 2021 NAEA Women's Caucus Maryl Fletcher De Jong Awardee. She also holds a certificate in Gerontology and has been a reviewer for various art education journals.

Linda's research threads include feminist activism, narrative inquiry, the symbiotic relationship of motherhood and academia, inclusion, and art education for those with Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. She is a co-editor of the 2021

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