



**Editorial:
Feminist Counter-narratives in Visual Culture**

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Feminist visual counter-narratives are courageous acts of agency toward empowerment from lived experiences of discrimination within dominant systems of power. To counter is an act of resistance to dominant ideologies and practices. Visual culture counter-narratives are active engagement with the dematerialized, materiality, and context in which events and interactions occur. Feminist visual counter-narratives reclaim self-worth worn hollow by societal forces (see Figure 1). During a walk along the Pacific coast in Seal Rock, Oregon in 2018, I came upon an Ana Mendieta-like silhouette formed into the rocky shore by the ocean's ebbs and flows; and took a photograph. To me, how I composed the photograph suggests a woman's body, her breasts, and growing womb; and raises questions about who is present, or absent, or belongs, or is erased. The enduring absence is a haunt of what existed as the seawater rests in the immediacy of the moment within the trace of a woman's body. The image of composure is fleeting and lasting.



Figure 1. The untitled photograph by Karen Keifer-Boyd (2018) is of a natural formation, she noticed as she walked along the tide-changing coast near Seal Rock, Oregon, created from the Pacific Ocean's rhythms of movement over time.

Ana Mendieta documented with photographs and film her *Siluetas Series* (1973-1980) of more than 200 female silhouettes she carved, burned, and formed into the sand, ice, mud, limestone, vegetation, and other organic layers of the Earth. The silhouettes have a simultaneous ephemeral presence and absence by the earth, air, and sea's interconnected movements, which reclaim the female body forms Mendieta created. Ana Mendieta (1948-1985), born in Cuba of White European heritage, was marked non-White within a racist context of being a Cuban exile and a United States citizen raised in foster care.¹ Mendieta's art of the absent body avoids being marked and essentialized by race or nation categories (Blocker, 2012; Hyacinthe, 2019). Such purposeful unmarking in her artwork deconstructs fixed categories for the reconstruction of a counter-narrative in which Black, Brown, and White racial constructs become elusive concepts. Thus, Mendieta exerted her presence through a visible absence, unmarked by societal inscriptions. Interventions in cultural marking by artists are productive in exposing what is unmarked, as well as what is absent from portrayals of humanity. The *Siluetas* are feminist critical race counter-narratives.

Francesca Brunetti's article, "***Drawing as a Device to Deconstruct Gender Stereotypes: The Case of the Southern Italian Woman***," in volume 17 of the *Visual Culture & Gender* (VCG) journal, is a feminist counter-narrative of reclaiming the pejorative term *terrona*, and revisioning the *terrona* stereotype within Italian culture of women as aggressive, sexualized, and maternal. Sadly, the demise of U.S. federal constitutional protection for the past 50 years with the overturning of *Roe v Wade* in June 2022, may result in state actions in the U.S. that harken back to Article 544 of the Italian Penal Code, a law that was dismantled in 1981 in Italy, in which a man who raped a woman could avoid going to jail by marrying her (Sarogni, 2018). In the U.S., despite public outcry, states that had not repealed pre-Roe abortion bans and other states that set-up "trigger bans" may

¹ During the *Cold War* (1947-1991), Ana Mendieta's parents were prominent in the politics and activism against Fidel Castro's one-party communist regime (1959-2008) in Havana, Cuba. Her father was imprisoned for 18 years in a Cuban political prison for his involvement in the 1961 blotched invasion at the [Bay of Pigs](#) on the South coast of Cuba. At age 12, Ana and her 14-year-old sister Raquelin were sent to the U.S. by their parents. Through [Operation Peter Pan](#), a collaborative program run by the U.S. Government and the [Catholic Charities](#), Mendieta and her sister spent their first weeks in refugee camps before moving to several orphanage institutions and foster homes in Iowa in the United States.

evoke the *matrimonio riparatore* (wedding of repair) that Brunetti discusses in her article. In the U.S., the newly mounted abortion bans in 2022, which force a woman or girl to carry a fertilized egg to term and birth a baby, may lead to enforced marriage to the rapist, death to the mother, trauma, among other dire consequences to those who do not have the means to leave the state to have a safe abortion (Center for Reproductive Justice, 2022). According to the Center for Reproductive Justice (2022), there are 13 states in the U.S. in which abortion became illegal in 2022, and 14 more hostile states to people with fertile wombs—and to those who care about daughters, mothers, spouses, sisters, among others—who may be forced into birth labor.

The feminist labor studies in VCG's volume 17, present feminist counter-narratives of labor by focusing on the ethics of labor, labor of caregiving, affective labor, sex labor, and domestic labor. Satya Shikha Chakraborty writes of queer labor in 17th century Mughal paintings. Brunetti's article on care labor is furthered by Lauren Stetz and Michele Mekel's (2022) article, *The Gendered Pandemic: The Ethics of Caring (Too Much)*, also in *Visual Culture & Gender's* volume 17. While three of the five articles interpret visual culture through feminist counter-narratives of labor and care, all five articles in VCG volume 17 present feminist counter-narratives of sexism and racism.

Affective labor is work that a person does to suppress their feelings to create calm in others (Bessette, 2020). Affective labor is seldom recognized, rewarded, or compensated in a White patriarchy capitalist system such as is the case in the United States. Through a *feminist ethics of care* lens, Lauren Stetz and Michele Mekel (2022) in their study, *The Gendered Pandemic: The Ethics of Caring (Too Much)*, published in volume 17 of VCG, examine more than 300 artworks in the *Viral Imaginations* archive generated by the creative energies, urges, and desperations of Pennsylvanians during the first two years of the pandemic. They selected works in the archive by those who identify as women, whose experiences are "often omitted from historical accounts," to uncover forms of affective labor and the emotional and physical complexities of the toll and perseverance of such labor (Stetz & Mekel, 2022, p. 25)

Satya Shikha Chakraborty, in her article in VCG's volume 17, "**Queer**

Labors: Female Intimacy, Homoeroticism, and Cross-dressing in Mughal Courtly Paintings,” also explores labor—sexual, domestic, and care labor—in Mughal paintings of female intimacy, in India’s aristocratic relationships between mistresses of the courtly reign and maid servants. While her study focuses on paintings, primarily from the 17th century, she describes that in current times, “female couples in rural India have faced death-threats from family members and have even been murdered in ‘honor-killings’ for this supposedly anti-Indian practice” (Chakraborty, 2022, p. 33). The Mughal paintings are counter-narratives that challenge contemporary militant Hindu groups and patriarchal societal perceptions in India that same-sex intimacies are not part of India’s history and culture. Counter-narratives can take many forms as do histories of counter-narratives and counter-narrative histories.

Feminist Remix Counter-narratives with Memes

Remix art are counter-narratives. A remix is a creative resistance and cultural production that exposes dominant oppressive cultural mores and envisions non-hierarchical systems of integrative power for co-creation of a just society. Remix is an important strategy that feminists have used to challenge sexism and racism and other systems of oppression and to pursue social justice. Feminist remix as affect dissonance methodology includes the vantage points of those who have been excluded from knowledge production, reveals and critiques hierarchical power structures, recognizes differences in sociocultural material conditions of lived experience, exposes the unmarked, and critiques prevalent cultural narratives that establish social norms (Keifer-Boyd, 2021).

In collaboration with artist and art education scholar Richard Kabiito, and students in his courses at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda, along with students in my undergraduate courses at Penn State University, during the Fall of 2021 and Spring of 2022, we engaged in a feminist remix counter-narratives project. Each student created an image of a section of the body. The images were then shared, and students remixed and assembled the drawings into characters for an online exhibition. Figure 2 includes five of the characters from Fall 2021, and the first character on the left side of Figure 2 is from my first pedagogical experiment with feminist remix counter-narratives that graduate students created in an online art education course.



Figure 2. Students in Keifer-Boyd and Richard Kabiito’s art education courses created the feminist remix counter-narratives that opened much dialogue between students in Uganda and the United States.

Students from Uganda and the U.S. then discussed and created stories together with the characters in response to the following prompts.

1. Imagine the character in different places. How might the **surroundings** shape the meaning of the character?
2. Give your character a **personality**, a tone of voice, and an attitude. Or speak from the character’s perspective. What does the character know? What kinds of adventures has it had?
3. Imagine a **conversation** between two or more characters. What would they say to each other?
4. How would you **feel being** the character? How might it affect your body, thoughts, or emotions? How might it affect your relationship to others?
5. Which drawing **surprised** you and why?

Through dialogue and reflexivity, students creatively explored their feminist remix counter-narratives in a back-and-forth exchange using Zoom as the platform to connect with each other. For example, one of the U.S. students began with

referring to the character with what looked like a boom box head, who loves music and blasts it out of their head. Another in Uganda stated that the head reminds him of someone he met who blasted music in her ears and was injured and had to have surgery on her ears. From the U.S. a student remarked, the feet express their struggle through dance. From Uganda, a student described: “I made the clock about morality on how girls can keep themselves and be ready for the right time to have children. Most girls rush without waiting. I wanted to communicate they can be safe and cautious, allowing oneself to have a career before having children.” Another from Uganda noted she made the middle area by the heart, the main center of life for humanity, which is protected by the shield. After the group discussed several characters, they each contributed to a story developed through dialogue. The Ugandan and U.S. students each chose a character for a co-created story. The Ugandan group chose the boom box head character and the U.S. students chose the character with what we called *bombs on her bums*, which referenced having AIDS. In synopsis, the characters met at a bar, and one asks: “what time is it?” and the response is “a time for fun” and they join together, dance, and become best friends. There was laughter and fun, among discussion of serious concerns, and in the process, students learned about each other, and even offered to teach each other how to dance.

Memes are remixes of popular visual culture. The challenge of memes is to convey points of view of communities typically belittled, devalued, and ignored. **Stacey Cann** and **Juan Carlos Castro** in their article, *It's Just a Joke: Challenging Sexism through Counter-narrative Memes*, in this volume 17 of *Visual Culture & Gender*, discuss the circulation of memes as producing social norms through visual culture and caution how counter-narrative memes while intended as subversive humor can be interpreted as disparaging humor that reinforces sexism in bicycling culture.

Critical Race and Intersectional Feminist Critique of Transhumanism in Superhero Movies by **Sophia Strachan**, **Giang Nguyen Hoang Le**, and **Fiona Blaikie** in volume 17, analyzes four films: *Black Panther*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and *Wonder Woman*. In this case, the counter-narratives are potential interpretations of transhumanism that they define as “a super-powered human, able to transcend conventional human capabilities and accomplish physical, psychic,

intellectual, and emotional feats of strength and perseverance such as extra sensory perception and the ability to fly” (Strachan, Le, & Blaikie, 2022, p. 65). The authors chose the films to discuss as they felt the movies were empowering and inspirational to them in different ways because of their particular lived experiences. In the end, the further one’s positionality is to the dominant social narrative the greater the need to share one’s own experiences, and the closer one is to the hegemonic patriarchal social narrative, the greater the imperative to seek, view, and listen to feminist critical race counter-narratives.

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About the Editor

Karen Keifer-Boyd, Ph.D., Professor of Art Education and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at The Pennsylvania State University, co-authored several books: *Teaching and Assessing Social Justice Art Education: Power, Politics, Possibilities* (Routledge, 2022); *Lobby Activism: Feminism(s)+Art Education* (NAEA, 2021); *Including Difference* (NAEA, 2013); *InCITE, InSIGHT, InSITE* (NAEA, 2008); *Engaging Visual Culture* (Davis, 2007); and co-edited *Real-World Readings in Art Education: Things Your Professors Never Told You* (Falmer, 2000); and has more than 80 journal publications. Her research focuses on transdisciplinary creativity, inclusion, feminist art pedagogy, transcultural dialogue, action research, and eco-social justice art, and has been translated and published in Austria, Brazil, China, Columbia, Finland, Oman, and S. Korea. She is a recipient of a National Art Education Foundation grant (2017-2018) for social justice art education and a National Science Foundation grant (2010-2012) regarding gender barriers in technology. She is the recipient of several awards from the National Art Education Association (NAEA) including the 2020 Eisner Lifetime Achievement Award, 2015 Art Education & Technology Outstanding Research Award, 2014 Women's Caucus June King McFee Award, NAEA Distinguished Fellow Class of 2013, and the 2013 Ziegfeld Award. She was the 2012 Fulbright Distinguished Chair in Gender Studies at Alpen-Adria-Universität Klagenfurt, Austria, and a 2006 Fulbright Scholar in Finland. Current collaborative projects include developing online teaching resources: *Wo/Manhouse 2022*, *Augmented Encounters*, and *Indigeneity & Disability Justice Art Exhibition*.

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