

LIPPY WOMEN: FEMINIST ART ACTIVISM ON A CATHOLIC CAMPUS

SHEILA HASSELL HUGHES

Abstract

Claiming public space—and challenging the relegation of women’s bodies and lives to the private sphere—is an old feminist strategy, one which works by heightening anxieties around the gendered contradictions of the public/private divide. Including images of paintings as well as clips from the artist’s video statement and interview, this multi-media essay examines how a women’s studies program, a campus women’s center, and an undergraduate student at a Catholic university in the Midwest garnered institutional support for a sexually explicit program of feminist art and public pedagogy. The centerpiece of the program, an exhibit of the student’s original mixed-media paintings of genital labia, was an activist installation designed to highlight and critique both the consumption of pornography by male students on campus and the little-known but growing trend of labiaplasty (female genital cosmetic surgery), which, the artist and her collaborators argue, is encouraged by pornography itself.

Catholic and other religiously-affiliated campuses can present a unique double bind for women in so far as they foster anxieties about female agency—and sexual agency, in particular—while also participating in the larger society’s increasingly pornographic visual culture. Situating this campus case study as an instance of feminist art activism, the essay argues that feminist pedagogy can be an effective strategy for navigating

institutional and cultural constraints, such as those operating at religiously-affiliated colleges and universities.

Keywords: feminist art; feminist pedagogy; activism; pornography; Catholic colleges and universities

Lippy Women¹ : Feminist Art Activism on a Catholic University

... [W]hat is meant by “transformative” depends on the standards one applies to measure art’s success in enabling change. For some, anything less than achieving a utopian goal may be deemed insufficient. Activists holding long-term views may conceive of such interventions in more strategic terms, viewing cultural work as an ongoing process requiring continual negotiation, compromise, and adaptation to specific contexts and historical moments. (M. Machida in Flanagan et al., 2005, p. 11)

Emerging from what is often referred to as the “second-wave women’s movement” and “the academic arm” of the women’s movement (Raitt & Phillips, 2008, p. 375; Boxer, 1982, p. 676), women’s studies has always both been informed by and sought to inform feminist social transformation. The degree to which individual programs, faculty, curricula, and extra-curricular activities embody an activist stance, of course, varies across institutional, cultural, and historical contexts. This variation has sometimes contributed to conflicts within the field (Boxer, 1982; Messer-Davidow, 2004). Faced with multiple and potentially competing demands for self-justification from different constituencies, women’s

1. The “lippy women” honorific applies to all the women who contributed to the “Claiming the Labia” exhibit and accompanying program at the University of Dayton in spring 2006. I owe special thanks and acknowledgement to Rachel Ann Dennis, the original “lippy woman,” whose visionary art and radical feminism were the center of the project and the inspiration for this essay. I also owe special thanks to our Women’s Center Director, Lisa Rismiller and to feminist art historian Judith Huacuja (now chair of the Visual Arts Department), who collaborated with Rachel and me to plan the entire program. The names of these and other collaborators are used here with their permission.

studies practitioners² have worked, throughout most of the field's history, both to strengthen and solidify its academic credentials and institutional position³ and also to re-assert its commitment to feminist activism (Messner-Davidow, 2004).

Considering feminist art activism within the larger context of women's studies highlights shared concerns among feminist scholars (including artists), teachers, and activists working in the academy. Defining features of women's studies include the critique, creation, and dissemination of knowledge about women and gender from a feminist perspective; an inclusive, holistic, and critical pedagogy; and an orientation toward justice and improving the lives of women through social change (Rogers & Garrett, 2002; hooks, 1994). Agerstoun and Auther (2001) locate feminist activist art as part of a historical tradition and counter-cultural movement founded in the 1970s and identify a "core set of ideals" that define it (p. vii). Feminist activist art, they assert, must be "simultaneously critical, positive, and progressive" (Agerstoun & Auther, 2001, p. vii). Further, in "stress[ing] performance and group reception and foreground[ing] the values of collaboration, participation, empowerment, consciousness-raising, and the belief in art's ability to create change" (p. viii), these editors of the *NWSA Journal* special issue on feminist activist art underline features of activist-oriented feminist pedagogy that could apply to other forms of feminist meaning making as well. The concerns

2. I mean the term "practitioners" to be broadly inclusive. In addition to faculty with official appointments or status in women's studies programs, this may include feminist faculty who identify with, teach in, or otherwise support women's studies (WS) programs; administrative faculty and staff who lead, implement, and support the missions of academic programs in WS; undergraduate and graduate students who claim WS as their own in various ways; alumnae/i of WS programs; community partners who sponsor WS service-learning, internship, and activist experiences for WS students; the leadership and staff of professional organizations such as the National Women's Studies Association; and others.

3. One mark of the more substantial institutionalization of women's studies is the rise in PhD programs over the past 20 years (Wilson, 1998); another is the more recent trend of moving women's studies programs to department status, often with the addition of tenure lines (Buker, 2003). The National Association for Women's Studies currently lists 19 institutional members officially identified by the term "Department" and many others which do not specify whether they have program or department status (NWSA).

that feminist art activists address are also central to women's studies more broadly: "a wide range of issues pertaining to race, gender, and sexuality and their intersections with social, political, and cultural forms of oppression" (Agerstoun & Auther, 2001, p. vii). What distinguishes feminist art activism from other forms of activism in which women's studies practitioners might engage, then, is the use of a specifically artistic medium.

In presenting a case study of feminist art activism on a Catholic university campus, I seek to explore the tensions inherent in conceptual binaries such as campus/community, private/public, personal/political, theory/action, and classroom/real-world. My goal here is two-fold: first, I want to highlight diverse opportunities for women's studies practitioners to employ local and strategic forms of feminist activism in order to fulfill the intellectual, imaginative, and political promise of women's studies. Secondly, I want to expand the audience for one ingenious work of feminist activist art—Rachel Ann Dennis's *Claiming the Labia*—in order to extend its potential range of impact.

Contexts of Constraint: Religious Mission, Sexual Politics, and Academic Freedom at Catholic Institutions

Before detailing my case study, it is important to clarify several broader issues shaping Catholic higher education today. Each of these frames the more specific context in which our program of feminist art activism was launched. Together, they clarify the need for feminist activism that is locally attuned and highly strategic.

Religious mission is an important concern for feminists to navigate at religiously-affiliated colleges and universities. It represents the institution's tradition and its specific values, and it often determines its ties to non-academic religious communities and stake-holders. Sexual politics are generally less clear and official than mission, but, as I will show in summarizing the history of *The Vagina Monologues* on Catholic campuses, they are closely linked with it and are an equally important consideration for campus activists. Academic freedom is also central to any true college or university today, and so I will briefly discuss what precisely academic freedom means in relation to feminist teaching and

campus activism at religiously affiliated institutions before moving into a description and analysis of our innovative program at the University of Dayton.

Religious Mission

I draw my case study from an example of feminist art activism at the University of Dayton (UD), a Catholic university founded by and affiliated with the Society of Mary, in southwestern Ohio. This was a profoundly collaborative effort that brought together women's studies practitioners—students, faculty, and staff—from different campus locations and domains of knowledge. In telling how we navigated the sexual and representational politics on our campus—working the boundaries of what can be said and shown—I highlight a particular feminist art activist project. In doing so, I raise and address questions about the possibilities for feminist activism and feminist pedagogy in contexts of constraint. The kinds of constraints considered include both the formal/institutional and the informal/cultural.

At religiously-affiliated colleges and universities where engagement with a religious tradition and/or community remains active and significant⁴, as is true at UD, events or exhibits that are explicitly sexual or iconoclastic—and that are accessible to the entire campus and/or larger community—will often draw criticism. Opposition may arise from within (in the form of administrative censure or censorship) or from without (protests from alumnae/i or members of the relevant religious community concerned to protect the institution's character and priorities). And even when a university administration may be otherwise quite open to pushing gendered and/or aesthetic boundaries, if fiscal survival depends upon alumnae/i support, then even a small group of vocal, reactionary alumnae/i can threaten artistic exploration and political activism. Speak-

4. The relevance and impact of religious affiliation varies widely in higher education in the United States, from institutions with faith-statement and/or religious-practice requirements for faculty and/or students (e.g., Calvin College) to those that cast their religious orientation entirely in terms of past tradition (e.g., Kenyon College). Most Catholic universities fall somewhere in between. VanZanten (2011) outlines a range of approaches among institutions with religious traditions and denominational ties.

ers, performances, and exhibits brought to campus from the outside are especially at risk⁵.

Sexual Politics: The History of the Vagina Monologues on Catholic Campuses

To frame my case study, I will first offer a brief history of the ways feminist activism has transpired on Catholic campuses across the U.S., including my own, through one highly visible cultural import: *The Vagina Monologues*. Although a number of Catholic university leaders have supported productions of Eve Ensler's play—often doing so on explicitly Catholic grounds—they have done so in the face of vocal outrage from conservative alumnae/i and harassment and/or public attack from Roman Catholic watch-dog groups. The most well known of these groups, the Cardinal Newman Society, proudly reports that, among the roughly 230 Catholic colleges and universities in the country (ACCU, 2012, para. 1), “15 Catholic campuses were holding productions of the play in 2009, down from a high of 32 in 2003 when [the society] launched its [opposition] campaign” (Student producers, 2009, para. 5). Project Sycamore—an online organization formed in response to the perceived threat to the University of Notre Dame's Catholic identity by its sponsorship of *The Vagina Monologues*—reports that in 2006, mid-way through the six-year period reported by the Newman Society, “12 performances were cancelled, and the play was produced at only 22 Catholic institutions out of a total of 230” (Vagina Monologues, 2012, para. 1)⁶. Each of these campuses—both those that have allowed and those that have shut down productions of Ensler's play—has its own nuanced story of related activism and negotiation, as do many campuses, surely, where students' hopes to mount such a production never materialized at all.

5. The AAUP's Statement on Academic Freedom and Outside Speakers highlights trends and issues related to alumnae/i backlash over campus speakers (AAUP, 2007).

6. Project Sycamore reports 230 Catholic colleges and universities, whereas the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, which aims to list all independent, accredited, degree-granting Catholic institutions, identifies 251 (ACCU, 2012, para.1).

At the University of Dayton, the Office of the President supported an on-campus production of *The Vagina Monologues* in 2003, after sponsoring a campus-wide educational program about the play (Reilly, 2003). This approach was consistent with other Catholic institutions that agreed to host the show as a prompt for structured, critical dialogue about contemporary issues (*The Vagina Monologues*, 2012). Three years later, however, the accumulated weight of alumnae/i backlash seemed to take its toll, when the administration blocked student plans for their annual campus production of *The Vagina Monologues*. Students have since launched the play at alternative venues, but it has not been performed on campus since 2005.

In its place, our students launched a home-grown alternative—a more gender-balanced, less sexually explicit, and less violence-focused production called the *UD Monologues*—with broad campus support (Shimmel, 2006; *UD Monologues*, 2008). The production serves as an important educational tool among UD’s relatively conservative student body, where critical conversations about gender and power are sparse, but the play’s activist function is less prominent. The *UD Monologues* do not openly confront hostile elements of the environment for women at the University. Instead, they encourage dialogue about body, sexuality, and gender among young women and men in more conciliatory ways. As a moderate educational endeavor, the tamed-down monologues have been successfully incorporated into the larger campus culture, and there appears to have been no notable protest from beyond the campus either, over the six years of its annual “V-week” run. The facts that the script is new every season, it is unpublished, and the show is mounted in a small campus theatre space that also serves as a workshop classroom are surely also factors in its longevity on a Catholic campus. Because the show—an entirely student-run project—is promoted through on-campus, informal networks and staged in a small, little-known campus space, it generally operates beyond the watchful eye of donors, alumnae/i, watchdogs, and administration, though this also limits the range of its effect. The *UD Monologues* has managed to “fly under the radar” since 2005.

Academic Freedom at Religiously Affiliated Institutions

Another way to provide protection for controversial events or material is to engage with them inside the bounds of the classroom. This offers a degree of autonomy under the auspices of academic freedom. The original 1940 AAUP Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure makes the following pronouncement regarding faculty freedom in classroom teaching:

Teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter which has no relation to their subject. Limitations of academic freedom because of religious or other aims of the institution should be clearly stated in writing at the time of the appointment. (AAUP, 1970, para. 6)

The “1970 Interpretive Comments” from the AAUP Statement clarify that, by the time the first women’s studies program was founded that same year⁷, “[m]ost church-related institutions no longer need or desire the departure from the principle of academic freedom implied in the 1940 Statement, and we do not now endorse such a departure” (AAUP, 1970, para. 27). Thus, even at most colleges and universities with active church-related missions, academic freedom is protected in the classroom. In so far as feminist issues and activism are the content of women’s studies courses, they are thus protected “in the classroom.”

As proponents of engaged pedagogies across the disciplines know, however, “the classroom” is a metaphorical as well as a physical space. Whether we take students on a field trip to a museum or factory, to a literal field for ecological study, or simply out onto the campus lawn for an open-air discussion, faculty understand that we carry our academic freedom along with us as long as we are specifically engaging with our students as part of an intellectual and pedagogical program. How far might this metaphor of the classroom stretch? While a narrow view would suggest that the *course* – a specific program of study in which

7. A small number of programs were launched in 1970, with San Diego State College (now San Diego State University) founding the first (History, 2011).

students officially register with one or more designated instructors—provides the parameter for the classroom, this seems out of keeping with the current trend in higher education toward building demonstrable skills and the movement, especially on predominantly residential campuses, toward *living and learning communities*⁸. The University of Dayton has embraced both of these approaches, re-fashioning its general education program around a set of learning outcomes to foster both within and beyond the formal curriculum, and establishing a growing number of curricular as well as non-curricular living and learning communities. Both of these developments are in keeping with UD's mission statement:

The University of Dayton is a top-tier Catholic university with offerings from the undergraduate to the doctoral levels. We are a diverse community committed, in the Marianist tradition, to educating the whole person and to linking learning and scholarship with leadership and service. (Mission statement)

Thus, those at Catholic institutions, among others, may find rich resources in their schools' commitments to academic freedom, engaged pedagogy, and the common good. Yet it may be the broader culture or climate on such a campus, rather than any specific legislative stricture, that proves most challenging to feminist action.

The University of Dayton Student Culture and Community

Student culture at UD reflects crucial aspects of the religious mission of the University, especially in its focus on community. The Marianist educational philosophy is summed up thus by the University's online recruitment pages:

You are not alone at the University of Dayton. You are part of a community. As a Catholic, Marianist university, we are deeply

8. Designed to promote a sense of community and to foster student retention and success, living and learning communities vary in approach and scope, but they typically involve a cohort of students living together on campus and sharing some common curricular or extra-curricular learning experience (Brower & Inkelas, 2010).

committed to the common good. We educate for service, justice and peace. We readily adapt and change with the times. We build communities of faith and educate in what we call a "family spirit." We provide an integral, high-quality education on a campus that's known for its hospitality and inclusiveness. (Marianist)

The University of Dayton's student culture, which is socially conservative as well as homey, is both manifest and idealized in the student neighborhood, a residential area that flanks the academic core of the campus. The three closely linked areas consist of rental houses for upper-class students, most of which are now University-owned. These 1930s- and 40s-era houses, linked by narrow streets and enlivened by a gregarious front-porch culture, serve for students as the social and symbolic center of our community. Students and alumni generally view the neighborhood as part of the campus "bubble," as they call it (UD is situated, geographically, between the downtown urban center and an affluent suburb), where the myth of a safe, friendly, and unified campus culture thrives. Students see the student neighborhood⁹, which stands in metonymically for the UD community itself, as a safe zone, in so far it belongs geographically and legally to the University, but also as a free zone, in so far as it belongs culturally to students.

It is here, in the student neighborhood or *ghetto*, as our predominantly White, middle- and upper-class students have problematically christened it, that gang-style sexual harassment is common, pornography use is rampant, and sexual assault is a regular and normalized occurrence. Those few victims who report sexual assault may be accused by their peers of unfairly ruining the assailant's life simply over *regrettable sex*—and this backlash is often aligned with a misguided invocation of the Marianist commitment to community. I know of student experiences of various forms of sexual harassment in the student neighborhood from first- and second-hand accounts told to me, by my participation on the University's Sexual Misconduct Education, Prevention, and Response Task Force (2010-11), and by my service on the University Hearing Board which adjudicates student misconduct cases. While sexual vio-

9. Click on the hyperlink to see images of UD student rental houses.
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/sbluerock/150120931/>

lence is common at college campuses across the country, UD's campus culture promotes silence and denial in particularly troubling ways. Though these are difficult to combat, the University has recently made important commitments toward addressing these through a multi-pronged plan of prevention, education, and response.

The notion of community at the center of the campus ethos is itself internally conflicted. The principle of "mixed composition" is at the core of the Marianist tradition—a religious family of two societies founded by a priest, a sister, and a laywoman—and informs a history of collaboration across differences in culture, class, race, and gender (Gadiou & Delas, 1972; Kauffman, 1999). The ideal of community can be at odds with the desire for diversity, however. Feminist political theorist Iris Marion Young examines this tension, in which the ideal of community inherently "validates and reinforces the fear and aversion some social groups exhibit toward others" (Young, 1990, p. 235). Community requires exclusion of some kind or another, and those most often excluded are others "with whom we do not or cannot identify" (Young, 1990, p. 235).

"Fear and aversion" do manifest in the UD community with some regularity. In response to a series of racist postings on a UD Facebook meme in spring 2012, for instance, one frustrated graduate student wrote the following in a letter to the editor of the student newspaper: "For all of its 'commitment to community,' our administration seems content allowing an atmosphere in which drunk, white students are the only cohesive social group. One only needs to talk with minority, international, LGBT, atheist and sober students to see that we're not all as happy as The Princeton Review claims we are" (Haynes, 2012, para. 6). While all of the groups Haynes identifies here would include women, it is notable that this letter of protest does not specifically list "female students" among the disaffected; nor does it gender the "drunk white" group in any way. On a campus where women represent a small numerical majority, their distinct experience as a cultural minority subject to "fear and aversion" is generally invisible. Women are generally assumed to be equal members of the community and yet are frequently not treated as such. The student community at large, which remains dominated in many ways by heterosexual White males and the females who align with them, still perceives gender

concerns as *personal* rather than *political* in nature, and perceives sexual victimization, especially, as a *private* rather than a *public* matter, that is, one to be resolved among *friends*. The potentially counter-cultural identification with Mary, as the Mother of God, that the diminishing number of Marianist priests, brothers, and sisters on campus make has done little to undermine male privilege at the University of Dayton¹⁰.

This, then, is the context for my central case study: a Catholic university campus where student-imposed cultural limits upon what can be heard and seen within the community exacerbate any restrictions the administration might place upon what can be said or shown. UD is simultaneously a *private* institution and community, immune—in fact and/or in myth—to some of the rules that govern public institutions and civic spaces, and also a *neighborhood* imagined as a communal public sphere devoid of political conflict.

Claiming the Labia & Reclaiming the Female Form: A Case Study of Feminist Art Activism

To expose and combat male domination and the distorted view of women, female bodies, and female sexuality that patriarchy promotes, one brave and visionary UD undergraduate student created a counter-cultural set of images, entitled *Claiming the Labia*. In spring 2006, the artist Rachel Ann Dennis was drawing significant recognition for her mixed-media gallery work, which re-worked mid-20th-century black-and-white family photographs of women posed casually in or in front of houses (see Figure 1).

10. The University of Dayton administration remains remarkably male-dominated as well. As of spring 2012, 6 of 8 vice presidents (including the Provost), 5 of 6 deans, 7 of 11 associate deans, and 23 of 32 academic department chairs are men. The first 17 University presidents were vowed members of the all-male Society of Mary. Daniel J. Curran (2002-present), the first lay president, is male as well.



Figure 1. Dennis, Rachel Ann. Living Space, Valeit St., acrylic and photo emulsion transfer, H 40in X W 30in, 2006, from the artist's collection.

She was also, at that time, completing her BFA as a Visual Arts major in Painting and had recently decided to stay a fifth year to earn a second major in Women's Studies. Our collaborative project began with a conversation, when Rachel approached me, as one of her two academic

advisors and as the Women's Studies Program Director at that time, with a dilemma. She was excited about this a new series of paintings she had just produced, but her Visual Arts advisor had cautioned her not to submit them as her senior project for the University's annual, juried Horvath Exhibition of student work. The paintings weren't her strongest work, he thought, and she suspected that he also thought they might draw too much controversy. Rachel knew she had a right to submit the work, and we both believed that faculty and administrators would defend it on academic grounds. Rachel wasn't interested in making trouble for the Visual Arts Department, however, and she conceded that she had not produced the series with gallery exhibition in mind. She did, however, want to find an audience for the work on campus, and she expressed to me that she especially wanted students to see it.

The Art: Claiming the Labia

Claiming the Labia is a series of mixed-media paintings representing a diverse set of women's labia. Rachel had been inspired to create them when a friend confessed that her boyfriend had criticized the irregular look of her labia. Rachel then learned, through investigation, about the increasing popularity of female genital cosmetic surgery, or "labiaplasty," and she quickly deduced that the standard for normalcy was surely the product of pornographic images—themselves surgically and/or digitally altered. *Claiming the Labia* grew out of Rachel's determination to raise awareness about this issue and to protest both labiaplasty and the culture of pornography¹¹ that feeds it (see Figure 2).

11. G. Dines (2010) uses the term "porn culture" to identify the ways in which our mainstream popular culture has become very much like soft-core pornography in its representations of women and girls, even as hard-core porn has grown in size, profits, and violence.

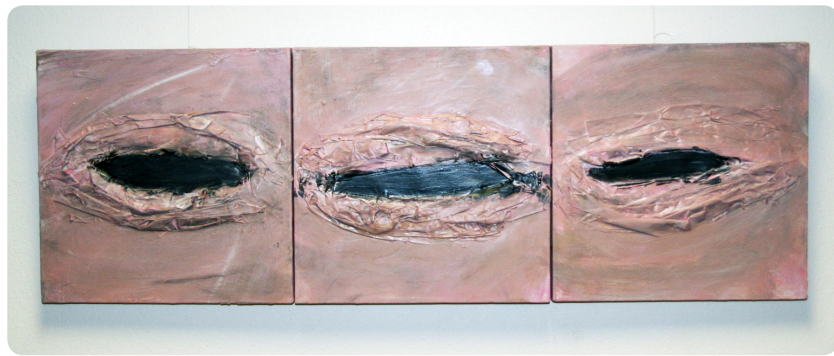


Figure 2. Dennis, Rachel Ann, *Labia Installation Triptych*, mixed media, 3 canvases, H 12in X W 36in, 2006, from the artist's collection.

The individual paintings were formed on small canvases of varying sizes, using paint and crumpled pages torn from the pornography magazines Rachel collected in our student neighborhood. Once she began asking her male peers for their print porn, the amount of it she unearthed stunned her. Students began leaving garbage bags full of porn magazines on her front porch, and her paintings—which she claims formed themselves—came fast and furious in response. The artist specifically identified some sub-sets within the series by their source. “Penthouses from Irving,” for instance, slyly names both the internationally published magazine and the local consumers: students living in a campus house on Irving Street (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Dennis, Rachel Ann, *Penthouses from Irving*, mixed media, 4 canvases, H 9.5in X W 40in, 2006, from the artist's collection.

In the feminist artist's hands, however, the stereotypical porn transforms into an array of expressive female lips: some grimacing in shock, others frowning in sadness or anger, and still others grinning in self-pleasure (see Figure 3). Another sub-set of paintings comes from an unidentified source, but its title, *Porn Dropped off at House*, nevertheless suggests the ubiquity of porn in the student neighborhood, where Rachel herself lived (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Dennis, Rachel Ann, *Porn Dropped off at House*, mixed media, 3 canvases, H 8in X W 25.5in, 2006, from the artist's collection.

Aligned one after another in series, the finished pieces presented a compelling set of three-dimensional, variously colored lips ... and also a ridge of unblinking eyes staring back—questioning, critical, or comforting—at the viewer. Clearly, they needed to be displayed *en masse*, and they needed to be framed politically, if not literally.

Reclaiming the Female Form from Pornography

To pull off such a show, we invited a feminist art historian and the director of the UD Women's Center into our conversation, and, together, we planned to exhibit the work in the Women's Center. Occupying several offices along a wide L-shaped corridor in an older building in the center of campus, the Women's Center provided an ideal spot for the exhibit. Because our Women's Center serves students, faculty, and staff with programs and popular meeting rooms for booking, people com-

ing to the Center for a variety of purposes couldn't help but encounter the exhibit. Unlike most other academic buildings, however, there was a single entry to the exhibition space, which was monitored by student workers in the evenings. Therefore, the risk of vandalism was minimal. The Women's Center was and is also a multi-purpose space, enhancing its existing service, activist, and academic functions when the Women's Studies Program moved into two of the suite's offices in 2004. Indeed, it was our co-location and the improved communication that resulted from it, which made this Women's Studies-Women's Center collaboration so successful. The exhibit also developed the Women's Center's potential as an art space¹², which—after the initial investment to install picture rail and track lighting in the corridor—has hosted exhibitions regularly since 2006.

Rachel was thrilled with the opportunity to show her work at the Women's Center. She exhibited 15 artworks, which amounted to less than half the total number, and she submitted a more formal and visually complex mixed-media painting to her department. That piece, *Living Space: Valeit St.* (see Figure 1), won "Best in Show" in the 2006 Horvath Exhibit, but Rachel was equally pleased with the thoughtful and interactive reception to our simultaneous, alternative show.

We knew from the beginning that the exhibit could not stand alone. In order both to support Rachel's political goals and to shield the work from potential censorship, we needed to build an educational program around it. This would provide a University-mission-focused rationale for the exhibit as well as the buttress of academic freedom. Our savvy Women's Center director, Lisa Rismiller, had formerly worked in the Office of the President on campus, and she began strategizing immediately on how to win official support. Rachel wrote an artist's statement, and she and Lisa met with the President to talk about the work, its inspiration, and our hopes for the show. Not only did the University President agree to stand by the exhibit in the face of potential protest, but he offered to co-sponsor it and pay for a professionally-produced video,

12. Click on the hyperlink to see images and descriptions of the Women's Center space. <http://womenscenter.udayton.edu/resources/ReserveRooms.asp>

including the artist's statement and an interview¹³, in which Rachel speaks about the inspiration for the work, her artistic process, and her dual roles as artist and activist.

To make best use of this resource, we set up a television at the entrance to the Women's Center corridor and played the video on continuous loop for the duration of the show. In addition to a guestbook inviting visitors to sign and/or comment, we supplied print flyers with the artist's statement and information about other aspects of the program. This arrangement made it nearly impossible for someone to see the paintings without considering the social context, and it ensured that should any elderly Marianist brothers wander down from their residence on the third floor, they would be warned before coming face to face with the labia horizon (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Dennis, Rachel Ann, *Labia Installation 2*, mixed media, installation, 2006, from the artist's collection.

13. Click on the *artist's statement* and *interview* hyperlinks (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGcrISI6cN0> and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gz6Pmr51vb8>) on this page to view the two-part video, *Claiming the labia* (Rismiller & Hughes, and Kurtz, 2006). I have obtained IRB approval and consent to name participants involved in this program.

The Women's Center provided the additional funding and substantial logistical support for the accompanying program: including an opening reception (which we co-hosted in the Center) and a panel discussion in a recital and lecture hall at the close of the exhibit. The Women's Studies Program recruited participants for the panel, spread the word among faculty and Women's Studies students, and provided academic sponsorship for the whole program. I moderated the panel, which included the artist, a visiting faculty member who is a fine artist and feminist art historian, a philosophy professor/anti-porn activist, and a clinical psychologist from the UD counseling center who specializes in body image issues. Photographic images of the labia paintings were projected as a slide-show behind the panelists throughout the evening, which included Rachel talking about her creative process, each panelist offering a response to the exhibition and explaining how it is related to the kind of work she does, followed by time for response, questions, and discussion. Dominant themes from the evening's discussion included shock at learning about the practice of labiaplasty, comparisons to genital mutilation practices in other countries, and concern about the ways media representation of women's bodies—pornographic and otherwise—mediate women's experience of their own flesh.

The artist's primary goal in creating and showing her work was to critique labiaplasty and the broad impact of pornography on women's lives, but the paintings also functioned more explicitly to expose the extent of print pornography use¹⁵ among male students on our Catholic campus and to prompt critical discussion about representations of female bodies in an academic community where the Virgin Mary is presented as the model¹⁶. Whatever the potential for a feminist reclamation of Mary,

15. Presumably, on a campus identified as one of the nation's "most wired" (Casey, 2002), Internet pornography use would also be significant.

16. Founded by the Society of Mary (SM) – the male branch of the Marianist Family, which also includes the Daughters of Mary Immaculate (FMI) – the University of Dayton promotes Mary as a model, for both men and women, of openness to God and others. Marianist priests and brothers, like Marianist sisters, take Mary as their spiritual guide. It is the faith and responsiveness of Mary, in her willingness to mother God, that is given primary focus, rather than her virginity. Nevertheless, open conversation about female sexuality remains strained in most quarters of campus.

she typically functions as a singular image of maternal virtue through virginity and submission—a feminine icon whose crucial female body is erased in ethereal folds of blue. Rachel's representation of labia, by contrast, imagines female bodies and sexuality as an expression of women's unique, diverse, and full selves. The multitude of multi-hued labia look back at viewers, inviting us to see ourselves as unique, irregular, and fully human. The lips speak to us, urging us to resist plastic representations of the ideal Madonna (Mary) or whore (the surgically modified porn image).

The programming surrounding the exhibit opened with a small but enthusiastic reception, attended by about 25 faculty, staff, students, and Dayton community members. Turnout for the evening panel, which we called, "Reclaiming the Female Form: Art Takes on Pornography," was similarly small (about 25), as we had expected, but the quality of the conversation was excellent. As the art historian on the panel concluded in her spoken remarks, "by involving a great number and variety of audience members and participants, these works merge the practice of studio arts and community dialogue, strengthening the link between cultural production and community" (J. Philipp, personal communication, April 11, 2006). The program thus became a secondary site for engaging with the artwork itself, as participants drew a new, collaborative set of interpretations and implications of the work for our own lives and community.

Our program also effectively served its additional purpose as a pedagogical shield, with none of us feeling any direct negative repercussions. If the President's Office heard complaints, they were not passed down to us. Our lesson? *Going public* by taking feminist pedagogy out of the classroom in formal and literal but also careful ways, allowed us to leverage our academic freedom so as to avoid censorship and backlash. Moving into the corridors and into an evening program open to all members of the University and to the public gave us broader access and exposure in order both to educate and protest around a social issue that directly affects our students, without necessarily being perceived as *feminist activists*—a role that many UD students, alumnae/i and administrators would find threatening and which could therefore draw negative attention to our program. Women's studies professors often talk about teaching as a form of feminist activism; with this program, we achieved

that, while also turning activism into an opportunity to teach.

Reflections and Implications

Claiming public space—and challenging the relegation of women's bodies and lives to the private sphere—is an old feminist strategy, one which works by heightening anxieties around the gendered contradictions of the public/private divide itself. And of course our program *went public* in this sense, as well, representing and exposing women's *private parts* to public view in order both to salve women's body-image wounds and raise awareness and critique of pornography and labiaplasty. In doing this, we questioned the mass publication and marketing of women's bodies through pornography (something that is ironically defended on grounds of its *private* consumption). As Rebecca Whisnant, the feminist philosopher and anti-porn educator/activist on the panel put it, "It's official: women now have no private space; no aspect of our bodies is off-limits to the harsh judgment of what Sandra Bartky [1990] calls 'the male connoisseur,' whether he resides in our bedrooms or in our heads" (R. Whisnant, personal communication, April 11, 2006). We also challenged the manufactured ignorance (Tuana, 2004) about women's bodies, and about the *normal*, that is produced by pornographers' mass dissemination of surgically altered, digitally re-touched images of the labia of young women. In this, we acted in the tradition of the women's health movement, creating "liberatory knowledge" to counter mass-produced ignorance about women's bodies (Tuana, 2006)—but with a focus on the institution of pornography, rather than of medicine.

Our approach to feminist activism also cost us something, though. After all, overt controversy generates energy and attention, and some of that can be very useful to protest and to education. Perhaps we would have drawn a larger crowd if we had been less careful and consultative, had there been picketers outside the exhibit, or if we had prompted diatribes in print or online. But I doubt we would have generated such high-level or sustained discourse on the issues if we had worked entirely underground, as rebels to the institution. And I am quite certain that we would have drawn much tougher scrutiny for future activities—perhaps, in time, even threatening the very existence of our Women's Center

and/or Women's Studies Program. Recently, for instance, a transgender speaker invited by the campus feminist organization was cancelled by the upper administration when alumni began calling and administrators, who had not been prepared in advance, were unable to offer a defense for the program.

Some feminist artists and activists doubt the value of the academy as either a site or support for transformative work:

Despite the climate of unreflective production and consumption, however, I do not think the "transformational potential" of activist art has diminished; the transformative potential is there; it is simply no longer welcome in the academy. What this means for feminist artists is that they must be willing, as in the past, to forego the framework of the academy to produce effective forms of cultural critique. (J. Gonzalez, in M. Flanagan et al., 2007, p. 10).

If we accept the academy, like the gallery, as simply a sphere of either traditionalism (where a progressive politics of inclusion and transformation are unwelcome) or commercialism (where education is a commodity rather than a liberatory practice), then there is, indeed, little room for feminist cultural intervention. But if we look to the established but still growing interdisciplinary field of women's studies as a resource, if we consider cross-cutting collaborations, and if we engage feminist activism as a strategy to span the private and public, personal and political, theory and action, we may, in the long run, live up to the transformational potential of feminist art. The exhibit and program we launched at the University of Dayton in spring 2006 is one example of how "negotiation, compromise, and adaptation to specific contexts and historical moments" (M. Machida in Flanagan et al., 2005, p.11) enabled a group of lippy women to face up and speak back to male-dominated religious tradition and to a pornographic culture of commodification.

References

- Aagerstoun, M. J., & Auther, E., (2001). Considering feminist activist art. *NWSA Journal*, 19(1), vii-xiv.
- AAUP. (1970). 1940 Statement of principles on academic and freedom and tenure with 1970 interpretive comments. Retrieved from <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/-contents/1940statement.htm>
- AAUP. (2007). Statement on academic freedom and outside speakers. American Association of University Professors. Retrieved from <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/comm/rep/A/outside.htm>
- ACCU (Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities)(2012). Colleges and universities. Retrieved from <http://www.accunet.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=3489>
- Bartky, S. L. (1990). *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Boxer, M. J. (1982). For and about women: The theory and practice of Women's Studies in the United States. *Signs*, 7(3), 661-695.
- Brower, A.M., & Inkelas, K.K. (2010). Living-learning programs: One high-impact educational practice we now know a lot about. *Liberal Education*, 96(2). Retrieved from http://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/le-sp10/LESP10_Brower.cfm
- Buker, E. (2003). Is women's studies a disciplinary or an interdisciplinary field of inquiry? *NWSA Journal*, 15(1), 73-93.
- Casey, S. M. (2002, Oct.). Connectivity in universities. *Electrical Contractor*. Retrieved from <http://www.ecmag.com/?articleID=5046&fa=article>
- Dines, G. (2010). *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality*. Boston: Beacon.
- Eschle, C., & Maignushca, B. (2006). Bridging the activist-academic divide: Feminist activism and the teaching of global politics. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 35(1), 119-137.
- Flanagan, M., & González, J., The Guerrilla Girls, Machida, M., Meskimmon, M., Rosler, Spivak, G. S., & subRosa. (2007). Feminist activist art, a roundtable forum, August 24-31, 2005. *NWSA Journal*, 19(3), 1-22.
- Gadiou, L., & Delas, J.C. (1972). *Marianists in a Continuing Mission*. (R. Sargent, Trans.) Dayton, OH: Marianist Resources Commission.
- Haynes, N. (2012, Feb. 23). "Facebook comments display racism," letter to the editor. *Flyer News*, 59(30). Retrieved from <http://www.flyernews.com/articles/volume/59/issue/30/category/opinion/id/7440>
- History. (2011). San Diego State University Women's Studies Department. Retrieved from <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~wsweb/history>
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kauffman, C. J. (1999). *Education and Transformation: Marianist Ministries in America since 1849*. New York, NY: Crossroad.
- Marianist Educational Philosophy. University of Dayton. Retrieved from http://www.udayton.edu/explore/marianist_philosophy.php
- Messer-Davidow, E. (2004). Women's Studies and activism: An interview with Ellen Messer Davidow. *NWSA Journal*, 16(2), 1-14.
- Mission statement. University of Dayton. Retrieved from <http://www.udayton.edu/explore/mission.php>
- NWSA on-line directory. National Women's Studies Association. Retrieved from http://nwsa.org/AF_institution_Directory.asp
- Raitt, S., & Phillips, L. (2008) Preface. *Feminist Studies*, 34(3), 375-81.
- Reclaiming the female form: Art takes on pornography. (2006, April 11). Panel discussion at the University of Dayton. Sponsored by the Women's Studies Program and the Women's Center.
- Reilly, P. J. (2003, March). "Are Catholic campuses leading students astray?" Catholic college report. Special issue. Cardinal Newman Society. *Catholic World Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.scribd.com/doc/4097566/Catholic-College-Report-by-Cardinal-Newman-Society>.
- Renzetti, C.M. (2011, May). Editor's introduction. *Violence Against Women*, 17(5), 547-549.

- Rismiller, L. & Hughes, S.H. (Producers), & Kurtz, M. (Director) (2006). Claiming the labia [Motion picture]. (Available from University of Dayton Women's Center, 300 College Park, Dayton, OH 45429-0322)
- Shimmel, A. (2006, Feb. 24). First-ever 'UD Monologues' is a sure hit. *Flyer News*, 53(31). Retrieved from <http://flyernews.com>
- Smith-Shank, D.L., & Keifer-Boyd, K. (2011). Unsettling feminisms. Editorial. *Visual Culture and Gender*, 6, 1-5. Retrieved from <http://vcg.emitto.net>
- Student producers cancel Notre Dame performances of "Vagina Monologues" (2009, April 7). *LifeSiteNews.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/archive/ldn/2009/apr/09040712>
- Tuana, N. (2004). Coming to understand: Orgasm and the epistemology of ignorance. *Hypatia*, 19(1), 194-232.
- Tuana, N. (2006). The speculum of ignorance: The women's health movement and epistemologies of ignorance. *Hypatia*, 21(3), 1-19.
- The Vagina Monologues on Catholic college campuses. *Project Sycamore*. Retrieved from: http://www.projectsycamore.com/pages/vm_campuses.php
- Vagina Monologues stir debate. (2002, Spring). *Notre Dame Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://magazine.nd.edu/news/15763/>
- Wilson, R. (1998, Nov.). Ph.D. programs in women's studies proliferate on the campuses. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 45(14), 10.

Author's Bio

Sheila Hassell Hughes is Associate Professor and Chair in the Department of English, and former Director of Women's and Gender Studies, at the University of Dayton. She holds an M.A. (Toronto) in English and a Ph.D. (Emory) in Women's Studies. Her research focuses on gender and religion in women's literature; feminist theory, pedagogy, and curriculum; and girls' studies. She has published articles and poems in journals such as *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the U.S.*, *SAIL: Studies in American Indian Literatures*, *African American Review*, *American Quarterly*, *Violence Against Women, Religion and Literature*, and *Literature and Theology*. See more at <http://almastreet.wordpress.com/>.

Photographs are the property of artist Rachel Ann Dennis. Permission has been granted to the author for their use in this essay.