

“Does This Really Matter?” Art History, Feminism, and Peripheral Positions

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Three episodes

I would like to start with a recollection of three episodes, vaguely connected, that took place in one week of October 2016. The first has no connection to art history, but I hope to prove its relevance throughout my paper, as I believe it dramatically conveys the need for feminism in Argentina in this allegedly postfeminist era. I stress the word “feminism” to counter the gradual depoliticization I see in some academic circles. The second and third episodes illustrate the current state of feminism in the academic world of art history in Argentina, particularly in teaching, the main focus of this paper.

Episode 1. #NiUnaMenos (#NotOneLess) is the name of a series of national protests and a women’s national strike over violence against women in Argentina. On Wednesday, October 19, after a horrifying attack on a sixteen-year-old girl, thousands of women dressed in black and took to the streets to protest violence against women.

Episode 2. That very same week two colleagues, from two different universities, kindly asked me to briefly join their nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century surveys to teach an introductory class on women artists, an invitation by which I felt honored.

Episode 3. Another colleague asked me if I was travelling to any international conferences. I replied I was the happy recipient of one of the travel grants to attend this conference, and then he asked me what I was planning to talk about. When I said that my proposal dealt with

feminism and university curricula, he said, grimacing, that he was happy to hear people were still buying that feminist nonsense.

The latter two of these episodes exemplify the two main trajectories of feminist critique in art-history discourse in Argentine higher education. I call the second episode the “cautious approach,” while the third is the “derogatory approach.” I will analyze these intellectual positions to better understand the context of my own teaching practice, which I will describe at the end of the paper.

The “cautious approach” admits to the importance of the feminist perspective on teaching and research in the visual arts. At the same time, it allots very little space to it. Whether the course is on art theory or contemporary art, the syllabus usually relegates the “feminist unit” to the very end. This does not mean that nobody cares about feminism or, more widely speaking, gender issues, but rather that these matters go largely unnoticed and remain eternally peripheral.

As an undergraduate, over ten years ago, I experienced the same dynamics. Only a handful of progressive and innovative professors (such as Laura Malosetti Costa and Andrea Giunta) opened my eyes to the issues connecting the realms of the visual, gender, and power. For such scholars, these issues were not peripheral to “the important topics” and they did not appear in the last unit, but rather informed their passionate approach to art history. But they were exceptions to the rules I am explaining.

The “does this really matter?” position is more pervasive than you would expect. It quite literally posits that feminism is a trend that will eventually evaporate from art-historical

research. I have been exposed to every possible manifestation of this position: disdain for my academic work, laughter at the artworks that I was researching (particularly from museum professionals),¹ and accusations of my being just bitter because male artists are better. I see here an active resistance rooted in misogyny and in the enduring notion that the artistic canon is a natural phenomenon, as well as some degree of intellectual laziness. Many researchers are reluctant to admit the consequences of the epistemological break, as Bachelard would put it, of feminism, and the subsequent need to reconsider parts of their own knowledge.²

Needless to say, I have also experienced encouragement from many, many scholars, including those whose work has never dealt with feminism. And, most importantly for the topic at hand, I have also experienced appreciation for my teaching and its aims.

Canons, *herstories*, and students

My own involvement with the diffusion of feminist thought began in 2012, while I was a graduate student at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. I was required to teach some undergraduate courses, a condition I fulfilled with three one-semester courses.³ The first had a record number of students, and the other two were quite successful as well. In the first class I would ask the same rhetorical question: “How many women artists have you studied in other courses?”

In 2014 I became an assistant professor at the Universidad de San Andrés.⁴ From this appointment, I was able to design my own Women and Art course, an elective (but regular) subject to be taught once a year.⁵ In addition, I teach Art in Argentina: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, a course I have not designed and whose syllabus currently includes only a few women artists, such as Raquel Forner and Marta Minujín. The curricular revision that

the feminism critique had promised has no place here, for the burden of the canonical histories of Argentine art is very much alive in survey courses.

There are, certainly, very few articles on individual female artists, only a few book chapters that have tried to tackle the topic and a very limited number of monographs. This situation makes integration of these issues rather difficult. However, “the project of bringing feminism into institutions of higher education is not an all-or-nothing venture. It is more like infiltration and subversion than overt attack,” as Rinehart has highlighted.⁶ The two solitary examples, Forner and Minujín, can offer excellent case studies to destabilize the canon, its formation, and its consequences.

I might come across as a schizophrenic professor: I teach a handful of women artists in a course and then, I examine only women in the next. As Adrienne Rich once put it, “We live with textbooks, research studies, scholarly sources, and lectures that treat women as a subspecies, mentioned only as peripheral to the history of men.”⁷ The Women and Art course seeks to challenge that assumption.

Now that I have a platform upon which to build this thematic course, other problems are surfacing. Here I will address only three of them: the danger of separatism, the new feminist canon, and the “does this really matter?” echo.

First, the main drawback of engaging students with the feminist interrogation of art history⁸ through a course like mine is that they are led to believe that women artists have a separate history. How does one present women artists in their own terms, but without ignoring the connections between their careers and those of their male counterparts? And how about the

ways in which misogyny has shaped art history? I have not figured this out yet; my course is mainly a nineteenth- and twentieth-century survey course on women artists, with an extra unit devoted to theoretical and methodological issues.

Second, am I to follow the canon of women artists that so much of the bibliography upholds?⁹ Must I really choose between Frida Kahlo and Norah Borges? And between Judy Chicago and contemporary Argentine photographer María Laura Vázquez? Time is my enemy here: I have one semester to show the diversity of women artists' approaches and intentions. I have come up with a partial solution: I present a number of artists in my lectures, but for their final papers the students must choose one artist who has not been studied in class.

In Argentina (and more broadly speaking, in Latin America) feminist studies in art history are still young and the rewriting of art histories from this point of view has in many countries just begun. As a matter of fact, the lack of bibliography outside the Euro-American canon poses a major problem, which I am unable to solve. I run the risk of repeating this new feminist canon. However, I encourage my students to move away and question it. I present the women artists not as members of some clearly defined and timeless canon, but as examples of some core feminist issues: parity, sexuality, self-determination, class struggles, racism, violence against women, justice, and social change.

Moreover, the course aims to incorporate the principles of the feminist pedagogy, defined by Stanford Friedman as, "non-hierarchical classroom; validation and integration of the personal; commitment to changing students' attitudes toward women, most particularly women's images of themselves and their potential; recognition that no education is value-free and that

our field operates out of a feminist paradigm (as opposed to the patriarchal paradigm of most classrooms).”¹⁰

Thirdly, and closely connected to what I have just stated, I want to confess that I sometimes hear the echoes of the “does this really matter?” position. I am fully aware of the alleged divergence of politics and education that lies at the very foundation of the neoliberal university,¹¹ but as Suzanna Rose points out, the goal of women’s studies is “to motivate students to strive for social, as well as personal, change.”¹² I believe some “objectivity” may be sacrificed to these goals, for sure.

Conclusions

There is a final point I would like to raise here: the privileged background of the many students at the Universidad de San Andrés. While I appreciate the freedom this institution has allowed me, this top-ranked private university attracts mainly members of the economic elite. I often wonder if the only feminist concern of my female students is breaking the glass ceiling. Many seem to be completely unaware that there is such a thing as patriarchy. The neoliberal present is quite frankly selling them the idea of a postfeminist world. I want to challenge this assumption, and to help them unravel the intricate connections among gender, class, and oppression. As M. Jacqui Alexander has bravely put it, “What is the relationship between the women in women’s studies and the women who clean the dorms and classrooms, the women who serve us food?”¹³

The question of privilege in relation to artistic practice comes to the foreground. Feminist interrogation has opened the way for other questions: Who gets into the art-historical discourse of a country such as Argentina? How does gender intersect with other factors, such

as race and class? Who gets to be a woman artist in Argentina? What are valid credentials for entering the art world and who is allowed to be a legitimate artist? I aim at highlighting the intersection of multiple forms of oppression (and achievement) throughout the course.

I would like to comment briefly on the students' response. One student wrote, for example, "It is hard for me to define a concrete level of new knowledge, but [the course] changes the way you see the world, because gender is an issue that pierces through us." I was reminded of Gloria Anzaldúa's words: "Knowing the beliefs and directives your spiritual self generates empowers you to shift perceptions, *te capacita a soñar otros modos* of conducting your life, revise the scripts of your various identities, and use these new narratives to intervene in the cultures' existing dehumanizing stories."¹⁴

I will now return to the first episode, #NotOneLess. I agree with Patricia Mathews when she writes, "I hope to leave the student with a sense that art history and art have relevance outside the narrow confines of the discipline."¹⁵ Isn't that the reason why I am teaching in the first place? Needless to say, I am certainly not in it for the money, for I am only an adjunct. At least from my syllabus, I can say with confidence: #NotOneLess. And my students, I hope, are now keen listeners and shall be agents of the many changes yet to come.

Notes

¹ Once, a highly respected museum professional asked me, while showing me watercolors by a nineteenth-century Argentine woman artist, "Are you really planning to write a dissertation on these artists?"

² Of course, this does not mean "that no one's training and knowledge counted for anything because feminism [overturned] it all," as feminist contrarian Daphne Patai dramatically suggests. See Daphne Patai, "Rhetoric and Reality in Women's Studies," *Gender Issues* 19, no. 2 (2001): 50.

³ They were Women, Art, and Modernity, *Women and Art: Perspectives from Latin America, and Women and Photography*. I taught them with María Laura Rosa.

⁴ My appointment is in the Department of Humanities, but my course can be taken by students who are majoring in law, economics, communication, humanities, and international relations, among other disciplines. My Argentine art survey groups are usually large and very diverse. The Women and Art course is taken by about twenty students.

⁵ The course is divided in two sections: 1) Art and 2) Literature, which is taught by an expert in women's literature, Dr. Claudia Torre.

⁶ Jane Rinehart, "Learning Communities and Internships: Feminist Wolves in Sheep's Disguise," in *Meeting the Challenge: Feminist Pedagogies in Action*, ed. Ellen Cronan Rose and Maralee Mayberry (New York: Routledge), 63–97.

⁷ Adrienne Rich, "Toward a Woman-Centered University," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), 135.

⁸ Lisa Tickner, "Feminism, Art History, and Sexual Difference," *Genders* no. 3 (November 1988): 92–128.

⁹ Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 69, no. 3 (1987): 327.

¹⁰ Susan Stanford Friedman, "Authority in the Feminist Classroom: A Contradiction in Terms?" in *Gendered Subjects: The Dynamics of Feminist Teaching*, ed. Catherine Portuges and Margo Culley (New York: Routledge, 1985), 204.

¹¹ See Goldie Osuri, "How to Stop Worrying about the Neoliberal Present and Start Engaging with It," *Australian Feminist Studies* 22, no. 52 (2007): 145–47. Jocey Quinn notes, "Universities are one of the largest sectors of the service economy, produce workers for the economy and most importantly produce workers who naturalise upward mobility and attribute it only to merit, masking inequality" ("Many More Rivers to Cross: Women and Higher Education," *Gender and Education* 21, no. 3[2009]: 339). Moreover, M. Jacqui Alexander notices: "Since corporatization and downsizing have not escaped the academy, teaching for justice means that we examine the academy as a place of work with its own regimes of labor, its own internal economies. As a place of work, it has its own corporate system of inequities—a stratum of low-waged workers resembling women on the global assembly line, and a stratum of high-salaried managers. It has its own system of valorization, of disciplines, and of identities. What is the relationship between full-time, part-time, and adjunct women who work without benefits of their full-time faculty colleagues—benefits such as access to medical care and research funds or opportunities for professional development?" in *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 113.

¹² Suzanna Rose, "The Protest as a Teaching Technique for Promoting Feminist Activism," *NWSA Journal* 1, no. 3 (1989): 486.

¹³ M. Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 113.

¹⁴ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "Now Let Us Shift... the Path of Conocimiento... Inner Work, Public Acts," in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Ana Louise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 559.

¹⁵ Patricia Mathews, "What Matters in Art History," *Art Journal* 54, no. 3 (1995): 54.