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n.paradoxa's 12 Step Guide to Feminist Art, Art History and Criticism

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Step 1: Where are the women artists?

Start by asking yourself what do you know about women as artists?

Where can you find information on women artists as producers of culture?

Why are there separate books on women artists and so few women including general surveys of art?

If you learnt about only a few women artists at school or college, why were most of the examples you learnt about from the standard text books so often men?

Everyone needs role models for their art practice: particularly as the basis for becoming an artist. Did you know enough about any women artists for them to become yours?

Begin by reading some popular books on the history of women artists:-

Whitney Chadwick *Women, Art and Society* (London/New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992, 2002)

Guerrilla Girls *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* (UK, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1988)

Wendy Slatkin *Women Artists in History: From Antiquity to the Present* (Prentice Hall; 2000)

Germaine Greer *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and Their Work* (Tauris Parke Paperbacks; 2001; Secker and Warburg, 1979)

Nancy Heller *Women Artists: An Illustrated History* (Abbeville, 2004)

Isabelle Graw *Die Bessere Hälfte. Künstlerinnen Des 20. Und 21. Jahrhunderts* (Dumont, 2003)

Catherine Gonnard and Elizabeth Lebovici *Femmes Artistes, Artistes Femme: La Creation en France, 1900-2000* (Paris, Edition Hazan, 2008)

Frances Borzello *A World of Our Own: Women As Artists* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000)

Or women artists on their own journey as feminists

Judy Chicago *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (NY: Garden City/ Doubleday/ Anchor, 1986)

Gisela Breitling *Die Spuren des Schiffs in den Wellen - eine autobiographische Suche nach den Frauen in der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin, 1980)

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Step 2: Are there stereotypes about women artists?

Art history has often included the women who were the muses, models, wives or mothers of male artists.

What do these "roles" tell you about women's importance in the history of art?

Do these terms for women, who all became artists, form a "limit" on how to think about their art practice?

To counter this, try to find out what they produced, not how they can be characterised as women. Consider that what is said about individual women's characters or their work - attractive, decorative, pleasing, exotic - could well be stereotypes about women of their time or class or cultural/ethnic group. Examine the evidence of what they produced/achieved when compared to their immediate peers i.e. people working at the same time and in the same geographical region.

Don't be afraid to question your own assumptions about women or "the feminine" or "appropriate female roles".

Consider how or why you have made identifications with certain writers, artists or types of art form.

Here are some books which offer different theoretical approaches to a feminist art history of women artists:-

Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: RKP/Pandora, 1981)

Griselda Pollock *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Arts Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999)

Katy Deepwell (ed) *Women Artists and Modernism* (Manchester University Press, 1998)

Norma Broude and Mary Garrard *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (New York: Icon Harper Collins, 1992)

Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (eds) *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art After Postmodernism* (University of California Press, 2005)

Mathilde Ferrer & Yves Michard (eds) *Feminisme, art et histoire de l'art* (Paris: Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1994)

K. Imesch, J. John, D. Mondela et al. (eds.) *Inscriptions/Transgressions: Kunstgeschichte und Gender Studies* (Peter Lang: Kunstgeschichten und Gegenwart Band 8, 2008)

Linda Nochlin *Women, Art, and Power* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989/ New York: Harper and Row, 1988)

Step 3: The Feminist Critique of Genius as exclusively male

Question at all times that 'biology is destiny' and that "genius" is only male.

Genius is made, not born - contrary to all current myths in the media and contemporary public education. To be recognised as "genius" means a lot of people have written, discussed, seen and elevated a particular person's work to a very high status. These are claims for the values in particular works being made by many people. To be declared a "genius" is the result of these cultural debates and has little to do with being born male or female.

Don't become too distracted by the need to prove that there were "great" women artists or female geniuses. Celebration doesn't always help and may create just more stereotypes, token figures or a top ten of "great women artists" without relation to Art made in a specific time or place.

The feminist critique of genius in art, can be found in the following key texts:

Linda Nochlin 'Why have there been no great women artists?' *Art News* (Jan.1971) vol. 69 pp. 22-49: Republished in E. Baker and T.Hess (eds) *Art and Sexual Politics* (New York, London: 1971): L.Nochlin *Women, Art, and Power* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989/ New York: Harper and Row, 1988): in Amelia Jones (ed) *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003)

Christine Battersby *Gender and Genius* (London: Women's Press, 1989)

Valie EXPORT 'Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Frau und Kreativität' from *Künstlerinnen International, 1877-1977* exhibition catalogue (Berlin: Charlottenburg, 1977)

Carol Duncan 'When Greatness is a Box of Wheaties' (*Artforum*, Oct 1975) reproduced in Carol Duncan *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in the Critical Art History* (Cambridge University Press, 1993)

Catriona Moore 'Supermodels: Women Artists Enter the Mainstream' in R. Butler (ed) *What is Appropriation?* (Sydney: Powers Publications and Institute of Modern Art, 1996)

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Step 4: Consider the relationships between gender and genre as well as producers and consumers

Art is produced on every continent and in every culture. How do these very different and diverse notions of Art, include or exclude women as the people who make Art as opposed to those who view it? Why have certain media or certain practices, like weaving or embroidery, been considered appropriate activities for men or women at different times in history or in different places in the world today? Ask yourself if there is a relationship between the gender of the producers and the types of Art (or genres) that their numbers are dominant in? Is this linked to an idea of “appropriate” genders for producers and consumers or to ideas of innovators and followers?

Why are certain qualities in art - pastel colours or large metal sculptures, for example - aligned to or with the “feminine” or the “masculine”? Is this the result of the artists who produced work of this kind being male or female or a critic's evaluation or value judgement about a feminine / masculine sensibility in the work?

Consider the question of audience in this way. Is all art for everyone? Does art have particular audiences in terms of class, gender or race? Why shouldn't some art have a particular appeal to women: as some art does for men?

Why are you drawn to particular ideas or types of form?

Take a look at the following texts:-

See Chapter 2 in Roszika Parker and Griselda Pollock *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: RKP/Pandora, 1981)

See Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff 'Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture' (1978) and Lisa Ticker 'Modernist Art History: The Challenge of Feminism' (1988) and Sylvia Bovenschen 'Is there a feminine aesthetic?' (1976): All reproduced in Hilary Robinson (ed) *Feminism - Art - Theory: An Anthology, 1968-2000* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2001)
G. Elinor, S. Richardson, S. Scott, A. Thomas and K. Walker (eds) *Women and Craft* (London: Women's Press, 1988)

Roszika Parker *The Subversive Stitch* (London: Women's Press, 1984)

Eli Bartra (ed) *Crafting gender: Women and Folk Art in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003)

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Step 5: Images of women vs. women as cultural producers

When you visit contemporary art museums, read art history books or start browsing the internet for information, start to consider the relationship between women artists as producers of images in contrast to the images of women in the works on the walls or pages.

Which is more prominent? Images of women, particularly their faces or bodies or women's creative production?

How does this compare to the work of men and how they appear in images of men in the same spaces?

What are the dominant representations of women:- as allegories, as mythic figures or goddesses, as muses, as people confined to the home, as workers, as people with or without power, in subservient or powerful roles, as ideals of physical beauty or as figures of action, wit and intelligence?

This is a question of the form of cultural representations of bodies as much as women's "visibility" in numbers of images.

Does the gender of the maker influence the type of representation?

Why not read?

Sylvia Eiblmayr *Die Frau als Bild: Der weibliche Körper in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Germany: Reimer, 1993)

Carol Duncan 'The MOMA's Hot MAMA's' in Carol Duncan *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in the Critical Art History* (Cambridge University Press, 1993)

Lisa Tickner 'The Body Politic: Female Sexuality and Women Artists Since 1970' *Art History* Vol 1 No 2 June 1978

Lynda Nead *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1992)

Marina Warner *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London: Picador, 1985)

S.Kent and J.Morreau *Women's Images of Men* (London: Writers and Readers, 1985)

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Step 6: What does art say about procreation as opposed to creation?

Don't think negatively about women as mothers. Women have been having children as long as they have been making art.

Instead question why there is such a sharp boundary between creation/procreation in the accounts of great male artists?

Why do popular myths about artists (particularly male geniuses) seem so incompatible with the myths about motherhood?

Many artists do have children and some of these are and have been women.

It is not the case that to succeed as artists, women should not have children (even though this became a "mantra" in education about women in the late 19th Century and for much of the 20th Century in the West): many women do not have children by choice or circumstance, but many successful women artists also became mothers.

What does Art have to say about motherhood? Is motherhood a taboo subject for art or have women had very different things to say about motherhood when compared to men?

Some specialist reading on this subject:-

Andrea Liss *Feminist Art and the Maternal* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008)

Marina Warner *Alone of all her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary* (London: Vintage, 1976)

Mary Kelly *Post-Partum Document* (London: Routledge, 1983)

Rosemary Betterton 'Prima gravida: Reconfiguring the maternal body in visual representation' in *Feminist Theory*, December 2002; vol. 3, 3: pp. 255-270.

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Step 7: Levels of representation and visibility of women artists in cultural institutions today

Acquaint yourself with the unpleasant realities of women's marginalised position in the world.

In most of the world's democracies, women artists are 40%-50% of the population of professional artists, even if their representation on the walls of museums is, on average, 20%.

The proportion of works by women artists in major collections in Europe vary from 7% (Tate Gallery, London) - 20% (Centre Pompidou, Paris) - 40% (Tretyakov, Moscow).

Don't be depressed by this negative situation: maybe these statistics will fuel your political passion for change.

Women (and women artists) may have less money, less economic, social or political power in terms of visibility but this does not mean they lack creativity and imagination.

Whatever you do don't accept that the status quo should stay as it is. Change is inevitable because women's place in the labour market is changing, but ask yourself, will the work of women artists still be collected and shown as the world changes?

Equally don't confuse the economic success of a few women artists today with the fulfilment of "equality" or the "success" of feminism. Prominent women artists do not want to be "representatives" of their sex, nor of "feminism": they want people to look at their work and judge them as individual artists.

For most of the last 500 years, there have been popular and successful women artists in every generation. Their reputations and the evaluation of their work often changed after their lifetime: typically, they were ignored or overlooked after their death!

**For reading material, go to n.paradoxa's Statistics page.
web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/statist.htm**

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Step 8: Feminist art is a political question.

Feminist art cannot be defined by one media or a specific approach - unlike many modernist art movements from Impressionism to Abstract Expressionism. Feminist art emerges in the 1960s. It has been shaped by and has a relation with the politics of the women's liberation movement as well as the changing contemporary art practices of the last four decades.

Feminist art practice introduced new subject matter into art which came directly from the impetus of the women's movement's analysis of many social/political questions:- the representation, ideology and iconology of violence against women, rape, incest, domestic labour, homeworking and homelessness; a re-evaluation of the labour/industry of women; a critique of traditional femininity (especially in revived and critical use of traditional women's crafts); the representation of motherhood, of relationships between mothers and daughters, between women, as lesbians, how women create images of men, questions of women's attitudes to racism, Xenophobia and representing the colonised/coloniser, women's sexuality from vaginal imagery to menstruation, to pregnancy, to images of sexual pleasure; replaying images of women from traditional mythology, fairy tales or new interpretations of earlier women artists.

Feminist practices in art also initiated collaborative, and sometimes collective methods of working which sought to challenge the notion of the notion of Art as the product of the individual Genius toiling alone in the studio, through the development of group workshops, through group art projects or exhibitions developed through the use of consciousness-raising techniques or in specific new techniques and approaches, like photo-therapy.

Politics here includes political change in the position of women as well as broad definition of cultural politics including questions about the politics of representation. To understand these relationships, you need a political education as much as a cultural one.

Feminist art is not just an Anglo-American phenomenon of the 1970s, it can be found in every decade since then and in most countries where an international profile for contemporary art has been developed.

Important key texts on feminist art and politics

Lucy Lippard *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: Dutton, 1976)

Lucy Lippard *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: New

Press, 1996)

Catriona Moore 'The Feminist Artist' in *Indecent Exposure: 20 Years of Australian Photography* (NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994)

Helena Reckitt (ed) (Survey: Peggy Phelan) *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2001)

See Michele Barrett 'Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics' (1982) and Martha Rosler 'Well is the Personal Political?' (1980) both reproduced in Hilary Robinson (ed) *Feminism - Art - Theory: An Anthology, 1968-2000* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2001)

Now start looking amongst the 600+ books which cover different countries or regions in the world in n.paradoxa's online reading lists.

web.ukonline.co.uk/n.paradoxa/

Many useful books will be exhibition catalogues: see n.paradoxa's international exhibition list for details.

Find some anthologies of feminist art here on n.paradoxa's lists.

Find information about special issues of other art journals on feminist art and feminist art journals past and present.

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Step 9: Identifying Gender Difference may not be the same as Feminist Critique

All societies have systems in which gendered differences form part of their social and cultural structures. This is known as the gender order. Identifying the gender order is one of the first tasks in feminist critique, but naming it does not change this order, it only raises awareness that it exists.

People discuss the gender order all the time: 'what men are like/should do...what women are like/ should do...'. Feminists are not the only people who comment upon or write about the gender order: religious doctrine, political discourses, literature, film and many other activist or protest groups have lots to say about the gender order and "appropriate" roles for men and women. Many other kinds of discourses use this gender order to argue that men and women should have complementary roles within the status quo; some patriarchal and oppressive models for "equality" are based on men and women occupying separate and different roles in life and culture.

Don't confuse any discussion of gender or differences between men and women with feminist arguments for women's equality or social change (as a question of social justice or a redistribution of resources).

Feminism is different in how it discusses the gender order because it has not only highlighted the persistent asymmetry in the gender order but also offered arguments about where specific social, political, legal and financial injustices lie for women and how to fight or challenge them.

There is also the question of recognition in culture: If women are different from men as artists: is this in terms of their sensibility? approach? ideas? subjects or subjectivities? What do we mean by these terms? How important are these differences as differences in the value we place on Art today?

You are now going to have to engage with the complex territory of feminist theory produced in the last twenty-five years: here are some starting points in a debate which continues today....

Teresa de Lauretis 'The Technology of Gender' in de Lauretis *Technologies of Gender* (London & Basingtoke: Macmillan Press, 1987)

Rosi Braidotti *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1994)

Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Routledge, 1990)

Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* (Routledge, 1990)

Chela Sandoval 'Cyborg Feminism and the Methodology of the Oppressed' in C. Grey (ed) *The Cyborg Handbook* (New York: Routledge, 1994) pp.407-421

See also Griselda Pollock *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Arts Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999)

Many useful books on feminist art will be exhibition catalogues: see n.paradoxa's international exhibition list for details.

Find some anthologies of feminist art here on n.paradoxa's reading lists.

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Step 10: Can you distinguish between art “in/of the feminine” and “feminist art”?

Is it possible to speak of a feminine art practice? How can this “feminine” be identified or known? Is the “feminine”, a set of characteristics? Are these fixed or changeable? Can “the feminine” only be defined by reference to the fact that it is not a masculine one or that it is art produced by a (biological) woman? Is the feminine defined by possessing a different sensibility (from men)? Doesn't this idea of the “feminine” depend on the idea that there are two cultures in operation: one masculine, the other feminine? Doesn't this idea of "the feminine" reinforce the feminine stereotype?

If you define culture differently as one entity, then how you think about culture will change. There is dominant culture (White, Western, mainstream - perhaps) but there are also sub-cultures and counter-cultures, alternative movements, or even moments of resistance within this idea of culture and its dominant norms. In this second scenario the dominant culture could be defined as patriarchal and feminist art emerges as a counter-movement to the cultural dominance of men and their values: a movement of resistance against the limited and stereotyped thinking about women in the dominant culture.

Is “feminist art” a shorthand term for valuing art by women in a culture which marginalises them? Or is it a specific form of cultural intervention by women which speaks about and challenges women's situation in the status quo? Shouldn't we be looking at the effects of art made by women on cultural, social and human understanding? If this is the case, which is more important, the art and what it says or the gender of its producer?

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Step 11: What is the “subject” of feminist art history and criticism?

One obvious answer is that feminist art history and criticism is about “art by women” but women artists have been written about for a long time now by many male writers, and this writing has not been “feminist” in its approach to their subject.

So writing about women artists alone does not make art history “feminist”.

Feminist art history can be defined as a political intervention in arts’ histories. It is about actively changing the picture and understanding about women artists in relation to the art of their time and place. It is about reintroducing the work of women artists, reviving interest in what they produced and challenging how they have been understood as artists.

Women artists (and writers) are very different from each other but gender differences are sometimes most apparent between women and men who share the same class, education, background, nationality or ethnic group. Attention to forms of sexual difference have been the subject of much feminist research in art history: offering comparative and very detailed analysis of gender in particular historical and social circumstances. Differences in race, class, ethnicity, religion and sexuality are intertwined in feminist analysis of women’s art production.

If feminist art history is defined by politics, which branch of cultural politics do you align yourself with: liberal, neo-Conservative, Socialist or Marxist? A politics of the left (social democrat or communitarian) or one of the right (Republican or authoritarian)?

How would you define your feminist politics in terms of the role of culture in everyday life, culture as part of the politics of globalisation, a bio-politics, the cultural turn in theories of power/oppression and control, a critique of heterosexuality as the norm or an advocacy of gay rights, theories of social and political liberation, the expansion of women’s rights as human rights, attitudes to religious and sexual tolerance, to racism and bigotry.

Think about how these ideas might define or redefine your approach to a feminist art history and its subjects.

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Step 12: Internationalise your view of feminist art and consider the inter-disciplinary character of contemporary feminist theory.

Feminist art is present in most countries where contemporary art is displayed and where those countries seek representation internationally.

Feminist art has been central to the strategies and identity of contemporary art of the last forty years.

Feminist art exhibitions have been organised in many countries worldwide. Major exhibitions examining the history of women artists and drawing attention to contemporary generations of feminist artists have been happening for forty years now.

Feminist art history is part of a larger field of research within feminist theory in all disciplines, drawing on psychoanalysis; critiques of ideology; structuralist and post-structuralist theories of language, subjectivity and sexuality; cultural studies, post-colonial studies and theories of visual culture; new social and political histories; issues in contemporary aesthetics, politics and philosophy; debates about globalization and social injustice and ecological debates about the future of the planet.

Now that you've read these twelve steps: it's time to take a few more.

Read some of the debates in *n.paradoxa*, the only international feminist art journal in the world where discussion of women artists is situated in relation to feminist theory.

If you know the online version, try the print version as it has entirely separate articles and different content (or vice versa).

n.paradoxa in print is available to purchase at www.ktpress.co.uk