

Gendering, Careers and the Art School Curriculum

Jude Adams

South Australian School of Art, University of South Australia

Kaurna Building

Fenn Place

Adelaide

SA 5000

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Abstract

Tertiary art education, the development of an arts industry and the expansion of the market have changed the nature and purpose of art schools. One indication of this change is the increase in professional and career-based courses within the art curriculum. At one level these courses are a positive development, making particular knowledges explicable and available, while providing new career paths for young artists. A more problematic assessment, however, is that they professionalise auxiliary roles traditionally regarded as 'feminine'. Further reinforcing the association of professionalism and femininity is the pressure on art schools (in line with universities' vocational and corporate-based practices) to emphasise the values of flexibility, cooperation, communication and consumption over avant-garde notions of originality, assertiveness and independence. This raises the question of the university art school's involvement in constructing a new subjectivity wherein a multi-professional, flexible, fluid identity replaces the singular role of artist. The proposition of the professionalised and feminized art school was put to students in an Honours Research Methods course with the findings informing this paper. In the rapidly changing workplace of the university there is little time for pedagogical reflection, so it is often these liminal spaces (of/between teaching and research) that foster inquiry and critique. Hence this paper, while addressing the topic of the art school as a gendered site will also consider how new emergent disciplines open spaces for reflection and curricular correction.

Gendering, Careers and the Art School Curriculum

In “The feminization of art education”, the author, Pen Dalton claims that secondary art education in Britain has undergone a process of feminization¹. Aspects of what the author refers to as ‘the feminine’ are evident not only in terms of content as exemplified by a diversified and fragmented curriculum, but also within the discourse of art education itself. With feminization, the rhetoric of empowerment, flexibility, cooperation and teamwork replaces the language of individualism, self-expression and originality.

Given the historical, and now well-documented, gender bias of education this might seem a welcome development; a necessary corrective to a traditional, patriarchal system. However, the author claims that although this feminization process has produced many benefits, including a more inclusive curriculum, overall power structures in education remain intact and indeed have become increasingly centralized, bureaucratic and inaccessible. According to Dalton, art teachers have been reduced to feminized service workers. “They have the executive role of carrying out and managing the delivery of curricula that have been written and structured centrally by unknown others, ‘elsewhere’”². Service work encourages feminine caring behaviours at the expense of independent or authoritative action, leading to teacher disempowerment³.

Equally concerning is that “art education is increasingly engaging with the discourses of consumption”⁴. Due to time restraints and an overloaded curriculum focusing on breadth rather than depth, the teaching of consumer practices, “consumption, appreciation, discrimination, discussion, responsiveness and altruism”⁵ has replaced the focus on production, critique, context and concepts. Moreover, the current system requires teachers to become maternal manager/teachers favouring modes of creativity that can be harnessed to meet the needs of business and the market, over creativity that is critical and intellectual⁶. The author concludes that a feminized art education, encouraging a consumerist approach to art via a lightweight curriculum, may not necessarily be beneficial for either students or teachers regardless of gender.

“The feminization of art education” prompted me to consider if a similar process had occurred at the tertiary level of art education. If so, and in light of documentation that

suggests women artists still suffer career disadvantage ⁷, the question arises, has feminization helped or hindered female art students?

There are considerable differences between secondary and tertiary art education, however, some of the claims made by Dalton are recognizably present within the art school curriculum. Thus taking the South Australian School of Art (SASA) as a case study this paper will be an initial, exploratory, speculative investigation of the proposition that some aspects of the university-based art school have been subject to feminization. Contrary to expectation, this doesn't automatically advantage women students and indeed may reinforce traditional gender roles and practices within the art school.

Two factors that contribute to the feminization of art education as referred to by Dalton, are the cumulative and fragmented curriculum and the introduction of feminine / maternal values. Such values are also evident in the art school curriculum, most noticeably in relationship to industry and career-based courses, which, although professionally desirable have also contributed to curriculum over-load. Hence the first part of this paper will investigate these courses in relationship to Dalton's critique. The second part of the paper will summarise the process and findings from the proposition put to students in the *Research Methods Honours* (RMH) (2008) course as a research exercise - that the art school is gendered feminine yet 'artist' remains masculine. The paper will then address issues of identity and career commitment.

Feminization of the art school curriculum

Dalton argues that the secondary art education curriculum has become overloaded with often unrelated, piecemeal, "competing and contradictory practices" ⁸. The tertiary art curriculum is similarly crowded with the unproblematic layering of new courses onto established structures. In response to developments in education and the arts industry, an increasing number of professional and career-based courses have been added to the curriculum. At one level these courses are a positive development making particular knowledges explicable and available, while providing new career paths for young artists. However, a more problematic assessment, particularly for women students, is that they professionalise auxiliary roles traditionally regarded as feminine, privileging collaboration, consultation, flexibility and empowerment.

These 'caring and sharing' skills identified as maternal/feminine⁹ are closely aligned with the skills of "flexibility, holism, teamwork, cooperation, empathy, communication, creativity empowerment, responsiveness, listening skills"¹⁰ lauded as the new business and management skills. Their adoption by both education and business indicates the shift from old-style management of "authoritarian models to 'flatter' management styles"¹¹. These are the models of management and administration also favoured by arts organizations, particularly smaller organizations such as artist run spaces, art galleries, contemporary art spaces, community arts organizations and arts advocacy bodies. In professional practice or development courses such as *Professional Practice*, *Curatorial Studies* or the *Art Industry Internship Program*, students are introduced to the arts industry and to the practices, information and advice they will need to engage with arts organizations either as employee, team member or client.

The skills of communication, cooperation, team work and flexibility are undeniably useful for students to learn, whether for career planning and development, project management or workplace experience. These are also the skills that underpin the support roles for art - traditionally the muse, model, patron, curator, collector that are binarily identified as feminine. Some of these roles carry significant cultural capital¹² but overall they are regarded as secondary to the primary role of art producer. The aim of the supportive role is to nurture the talent of others, to be the interface between the artist and the public and most importantly, to bring caring and commitment - emotional labour, to the job¹³.

Reinforcing this identification of the auxiliary or support roles as feminine, and hence professional development electives as also feminine, is the high proportion of female students enrolled in these courses. In *Curatorial Studies* (2008) only two of the fourteen students were male. Given that the majority of art students are female¹⁴ this statistic is not particularly revealing until compared with courses that can be considered gendered masculine. Courses in new media (eg *Internet and Digital Media*) come closer to achieving a gender balance and often more than a third of the enrolments for sculpture and photography courses are male. *Curatorial Studies* therefore, would appear to be more in line with courses in textiles which are either all-female or as with *Artists Books*, exhibit the same gender ratio as *Curatorial Studies*. The *Internship Program* similarly, attracts a higher percentage of female students. In

2005, only one of the eleven students was male and in 2007 and 2008 all participants were female.

Arguably then, the professionalisation of the art school curriculum via career development courses, has been accompanied by a process of feminization. The question that this association of femininity with professionalism raises is; are courses that are centered on auxiliary roles and functions simply reinforcing a traditional gender division within art? Or, to view professionalisation more favourably; given the changing educational and cultural landscape, are such courses contributing to the construction of a new artistic subjectivity, wherein the singular artist is replaced by a more, fluid, flexible identity comprising multiple roles (eg artist/curator/administrator)?

The gender and curriculum research exercise

The proposition of the art school as feminized formed the basis of a research exercise for RMH students. Included with support material that contextualised my 'hunch' and provided information on gender as a category and a structuring concept¹⁵ students received a newspaper article claiming that "Despite being the dominant sex at art schools, most women fail to realize fully-fledged art careers"¹⁶. The article alerted students to the apparent contradiction between art school as a feminized site, both in terms of the above proposition and in terms of student population, and to the fact that more than thirty years after it had first been raised, gender inequality in the visual arts remained an issue.

Drawing on the Venice Biennale as a case in point, Westwood's article addressed gender inequality in the visual arts; highlighting family and domestic responsibilities as the main obstacles to women establishing successful art careers. Previous research into the "unequal ratio of successful women to men in creative fields" had arrived at the same conclusion, noting that the "conflict between family roles and professional roles seems to be the primary answer to our first question: Why are there so few creative women visual artists?"¹⁷.

Addressing the proposition of the feminized art school within the emergent discipline of art-as-research provided the ideal context for deconstructing the ever-present myth of creative genius. In addition, considering pedagogical issues within the framework

of research methodologies reinforced the teaching-research nexus by “encouraging students to emulate the problem-solving and enquiry approaches of the applied researcher”¹⁸. The research exercise involved asking students to clarify the topic, to consider the contextual material and relevant data, and to decide on the research questions and the methodology that would best yield results.

In seeking an answer to the question (of whether the art school was gendered feminine), students proposed a range of methodologies including questionnaires, surveys, discourse analysis, content analysis and case studies. They suggested looking at course material, school promotional material and mission statements for evidence of gendered language or teaching styles. To see if the research finding that women’s careers are less well-established was borne out locally, they suggested tracking graduate career paths.

Prompted by this exercise students discussed whether they thought gender-inequality or gender-blindness was an issue within the school. Two responses stand out: first, students noted the sexual division of labour within the art school, with technical staff male, and administration staff and most junior academic staff female. Second, they observed that the percentage of library books on artists was weighted heavily in favour of male artists. In general, students expressed a preference for courses where there was a staff gender balance and felt that rather than encountering any gender bias or blindness they were actively encouraged to pursue a feminist/feminine focus or direction in their work.

This emphasis was reinforced by a cursory appraisal of student research topics which indicated a preference for feminine topics or themes. To clarify; feminine topics refers to subject matter, themes or concerns that are seen as stereotypically feminine or associated with the gendered body, the personal or domestic sphere or female-identified media. The partial, the fragmented or the detail; as opposed to the whole, the abstract, or universal, are also characterised as feminine¹⁹. The students’ research topics evidenced an interest in the personal, the body, domestic or interior space, still-life, decorative patterns and textiles, family, maternity and female icons. Of twenty two topics, seven were concerned with self-identity, four with domestic space, three with family concerns and two with illness. Only five research topics could be classified as masculine; that is, exhibiting an interest in formal or technical

investigations, public space or with cultural interests specifically identified as masculine or male-inflected.

Clearly, art with a gender focus or that can be identified as feminine or dealing with women's issues is no longer silenced, rejected or overlooked. Added to this, the above anecdotal evidence of staff encouragement of students to follow feminine/feminist directions in their work, indicates an environment that fosters these concerns. The dominance of research topics that are inextricably bound up with the category of the feminine, therefore, supplies further evidence of the gendering of the art school curriculum as feminine.

Gender, identity and career commitment

This paper argues that professional practice courses such as *Curatorial Studies* and the *Internship Program*, (which support and showcase art and promote the feminine qualities of collaboration, cooperation, empathy and empowerment) plus the preponderance of feminine or gendered research topics, are indicative of a process of feminization. However, while this transformation of the curriculum may have produced an educational environment more conducive to female students, research suggests this apparent advantage appears not to have translated into art world success.

Professional practice courses are undeniably beneficial to students in terms of providing them with work experience opportunities, enhancing employability skills and providing career options. But can the argument be made that in reinforcing traditional female roles, they divert attention away from the focus on individual creative effort and the production of original art objects?

Psychological profiling of artists has demonstrated that artists need to be extraordinarily confident and committed in order to succeed²⁰. F. Barron's study of male and female art students noted that although their work was of an equally high standard the women were more diffident about their work and had less self-confidence. (Research in related disciplines confirms this picture of female lack of confidence²¹). According to Barron, gender difference "came in the intensity of the commitment of the young artists to their work"²² and this "intensity of purpose seemed to be a clue in deducing the reasons for the ultimate successes of male artists"²³. Indeed, career dedication to the exclusion of all else, is commonly

perceived as a masculine trait²⁴. Jane Piirto's research found a committed approach had to begin early and extend well past graduation into the artist's working life, "a time when commitment and regular effort in the field of creativity really matters"²⁵. And this is where women artists often come unstuck, for their commitment may be tested and compromised by the inevitable conflict of trying to balance professional roles and family responsibilities. As Westwood notes, "In a culture that traditionally requires women, as the centralizing factor in the family to dedicate her gaze to partners and children, anxiety arises when she turns to her own concerns, visions, and imagination"²⁶. Thus, women's experience of guilt and conflict, due to the competing demands of mother and artist²⁷, can inhibit and dilute the commitment necessary for success. As Piirto, concludes, "The necessity to achieve early and to continue producing, and the necessity for commitment and intensity in pursuing a career that calls for creativity, may work against women"²⁸.

The question therefore arises; how well does art school prepare young women students to overcome self-doubt, to develop a committed and uncompromising approach to their work and to anticipate and deal with the situation of role conflict without losing focus? In light of the above arguments, professional development courses might disadvantage young women by encouraging career diversity and collaborative creativity at the expense of the career artist's single-minded dedication.

An alternative reading of this situation, and a better outcome for women artists, is that the (old) notion of a professional identity, narrowly focused on the singular vocation of artist is currently undergoing renovation. Identity is becoming more fluid and multivalent and an increasing number of art graduates are opting for multi-professional representation such as - artist/curator/writer, art administrator/curator or artist/art consultant²⁹. Nonetheless, in order not to disadvantage women students (who are already over-represented in terms of professional diversification) this shift in professional identity should be gender-balanced and accompanied by research into new paradigms of creativity and new ways of measuring artistic success.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the introduction of professional practice courses that attract women students, plus the high proportion of feminine or gendered research topics are evidence of a process of feminization. More research will be needed before any such claim can be made with authority. The research exercise conducted with HRM students pointed to a range of possible research avenues including: content and textual analysis of course material for evidence of gendering, statistical analysis of the ratio of male to female academic and general staff, analysis of gender representation in decision-making positions, analysis of teaching styles and delivery of material in terms of gender modes.

This preliminary study offers some indication of a feminized curriculum which challenges expected outcomes in terms of gender equity. More in-depth sample analysis or a comparative survey may confirm or contradict my initial findings as well as highlighting the benefits and/or drawbacks of feminization. However, the fragmented and overcrowded curriculum, a consequence of educational and visual art sector changes, isn't without its positive aspects. What it may lack in context and depth it makes up for in breadth by introducing issues of difference in terms of gender, race and ethnicity. Moreover, professional practice courses are of undeniable benefit in terms of the university's vocational premise and graduate employment outcomes. Plus the reality facing art graduates today is that, if a career in the visual arts is to be viable it necessitates a mixed portfolio of arts-related occupations. Nevertheless, in order to rectify gender inequity - encountered in the art world if not in the art school - as educators we should try and find ways to introduce discussions of 'life issues' and the advantages of motivation, commitment and intensity into the art school curriculum.

Finally, the overcrowded and cumulative curriculum doesn't only present a problem for students; it also poses a problem for academic staff trying to carve out research time. New courses, new pedagogies, and new fields of endeavour, by their very nature unstable and in flux, may provide opportunities for research and reflection. These liminal spaces, where staff and student interests overlap, can facilitate ongoing enquiry, critique and curricula correction.

Endnotes

¹ Pen Dalton, Chpt 5 “The feminization of art education,” in *The Gendering of Art Education; Modernism, identity and critical feminism* (Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2001), 109-135.

² Dalton, 123.

³ Francis Thurber and Enid Zimmerman, “Empower not in Power: Gender and leadership Roles in Art Teacher Education,” in *Gender Issues in Art Education: content, context and strategies*, eds. G. Collins and R. Sandell, (Reston, VA: NAEA, 1996), 147.

⁴ Dalton, 113.

⁵ Dalton, 114.

⁶ Dalton, 115.

⁷ Jane Piirto, “Why are there so few? (Creative women: Visual artists, mathematicians, musicians)”, *Roepers Review*, vol 13 no 3 (1991): 1-10, <http://web.ebscohost.com.ezlibproxy.unisa.edu.au/ehost/results?vid=2&hid=104&sid=0a47222b-4775-4003-b582-719a8aa685ef%40sessionmgr2> (accessed June 26 2008). Donald P. Eckard, “Artists’ Income and Gender: Schooling, Sexism and Self-Sorting,” (n.d.): 5, <http://faculty.frostburg.edu/soci/rmoore/Article1.htm> (accessed June 25 2008).

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Chris Westwood, “ARTS”, *The Australian*, 6 October 2005, 14.

⁸ Dalton, 116.

⁹ Dalton, 124, Thurber and Zimmerman, 152.

¹⁰ Dalton, 111.

¹¹ Dalton, 111.

¹² Brigid Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace, *Women Artists and Writers: modernist (im)positionings* (London: Routledge, 1994), 11.

¹³ Dalton, 121.

¹⁴ Blackwell and Harvey, 323.

¹⁵ Gill Perry, *Gender and Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 24.

¹⁶ Westwood, 14.

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- ¹⁷ Piirto, 4.
- ¹⁸ Peter Lee, “Elaborated version of the Teaching and Learning Framework”, (2007): 5, <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/scholarship/> (accessed March 19 2008).
- ¹⁹ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 13.
- ²⁰ F. Barron, *Artists in the Making*, (San Francisco: Seminar Press, 1972): 34, cited in Piirto, 3. L. J. Harris, “Two sexes in the mind: Perceptual and creative differences between women and men” in *Journal of Creative behavior*, 23(1) (1989), cited in Piirto, 2.
- ²¹ Katherine Sarikakis, “In the land of becoming: the gendered experience of communication doctoral students” in *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education 2* (1&2) (2003): 38, <http://web.ebscohost.com.ezlibproxy.unisa.edu.au/ehost/results?vid=2&hid=4&sid=5f297486-1b87-4fcf-ac73-4f508abab21b%40sessionmgr109> (accessed May 28 2008).
- ²² Barron, 34 cited in Piirto, 3.
- ²³ Piirto, 3.
- ²⁴ Ann E Calvert, “An Art Curriculum Model for Gender Equity” in *Gender Issues in Art Education: content, context and strategies*, eds. G. Collins and R. Sandell (Reston, VA: NAEA, 1996), 156.
- ²⁵ Piirto, 7.
- ²⁶ Westwood, 15.
- ²⁷ Piirto, 4, Westwood, 16.
- ²⁸ Piirto, 7.
- ²⁹ Vanessa Brady, *Graduate Pathways to Success*, South Australian School of Art (2008), <http://www.unisa.edu.au/art/graduate/vanessabrady.asp> (accessed 29 May 2008).