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Vasari and the Perfect Wife: 'fempathy' as a strategic method in teaching art histories and theories

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This paper outlines the need for alternative strategies for teaching art history and theory in art schools in the contemporary global milieu in which women remain a minority among artists represented in commercial galleries despite their overrepresentation at art school (Reilly, 2015; Countesses, November 2014). I add to many voices in proposing that by teaching art histories informed by contemporary feminist methodologies we will not only continue the revision of received art history but will offer new opportunities for female graduates as they begin their careers out of art school, and work to counter the still extant pressures on women, and some insidious new ones. I point to a current wave of feminist research and art making, which seeks to reposition women, not as subservient to the narrowing models of womanhood and motherhood as proposed by consumer culture, but as thinking, creative agents. I propose a new strategy, 'fempathy,' teaching with compassion, kindness, and importantly humour, which opens up new possibilities and interpretations that counter the constructs of global capitalist pressures. I argue this optimistic approach may inspire a rise in productivity from emerging artists, especially from women whose graduation into real world art careers often coincides with their emergent motherhood. This is a starting point for further research and the implementation of alternative pedagogies.

I am relatively new to the rewards and dilemmas of teaching art history, but I do so with a growing awareness that I could be doing it better, and in such a way that my students, the majority of whom are women, may graduate with an improved chance of continuing in careers in the visual arts. In order to redress an imbalance in representation in the art historical canon I am guilty of perpetuating the 'Smurfette syndrome,' that is, adding a token few women artists to my lectures (Reilly, 2015). Whilst Germaine Greer believes that 'art could only benefit by a concerted attempt to re-people the historical landscape,' this strategy fails to address persistent inequities in the structures of the canon (1979, p. 10). The perceived problems with current art

history constructions have been well noted, and acted upon in the past, and yet inequality persists today (Broude & Garrard, 1992; Dimitrakaki, 2013).

To Linda Nochlin's famous question, 'Why have there been no great women artists?' (Nochlin, 1989) I could add, why have there been no great women art historians? And how would the canon and the way we teach it differ if there were? Second wave feminists made it explicit that Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574), painter, sculptor, the socalled first art historian, could only have been a man in fact, pointing to broader structural problems and the fallacies of progress and genius. Angela Dimitrakaki sees how integral art as a gendered practice is to the 'power relations constituting a gendered society,' (2013, p. 2). Thus we can assume that a history of art written by a woman may still not have been enough to instate women as important actors in the canon. I suggest that if Vasari were not only a woman, but also had time to be a mother, perhaps her Lives of the Artists, Volume II (1568) would have proffered an alternative canon, one that left room at the margins for others to creep in. For example, inspiration for the discussions of the work of Raphael (1483 – 1520) and Sofonisba Anguissola (c.1532 – 1625) may have come (and gone!) between left breast feed and right. Greater understanding may have been arrived at in the hours of sweet and infuriating boredom that descends in an afternoon home alone with a toddler. In order to surmount these problems Giorgia Vasari may have called upon her entourage of women friends and relatives for mutual support. This would have rendered the Lives a more collaborative production, the end result then, may have been more inclusive, pluralistic, and less authoritarian.

This imaginative exercise in itself is not enough, as, according to Griselda Pollock and others, 'even when feminist intentions are present, these do not guarantee that a work of art or cultural practice achieves a subversion, let alone transformation, of gender and related hierarchies,' (Dimitrakaki, 2013, p. 3). Furthermore, while previous feminists have wished to achieve 'equal representation of male and female artists... in art institutions, others saw the very institutions of art as representative of broader structures and ideologies that were inherently oppressive to women (and most men).' For these feminists, the problem was not merely access but 'what one claimed access to,' (Dimitrakaki, 2013, p. 3). In a recent *ArtNews* article, Dr. Maura Reilly, the Founding Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, argues for teaching with inclusivity, 'Teachers can and must offer women's and feminist art courses and teach from a feminist perspective to present a more inclusive canon' (Reilly, 2015). In a positive development over the last 40 years,

more women have access to education in the fine arts, something that Nochlin and others noted they were historically excluded from. Reilly states that 'According to The New York Times, in 2006 women represented more than 60 percent of the students in art programs in the United States' (Reilly, 2015). The *Countesses* blog site states that in 2014, 65% of art school graduates in Australia were women (*Countesses*, November 2014). Reilly sees that 'the institutional power structures that Nochlin argued made it "impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or success, on the same footing as men, no matter what the potency of their so-called talent, or genius," have been shifting,' (Reilly, 2015). What then, are the still extant pressures that continue to sideline women and create what artist, Lise Haller Baggesen, calls the 'mother-shaped hole in contemporary art' (Niemi, 2015) and how can we address these as teachers?

What happens in the space between art school and art career? What causes the enduring inequality in women's representation in the art world? Reilly observes that:

despite decades of postcolonial, feminist, anti-racist, and queer activism and theorizing, the majority continues to be defined as white, Euro-American, heterosexual, privileged, and, above all, male. Sexism is still so insidiously woven into the institutional fabric, language, and logic of the mainstream art world that it often goes undetected, despite the obvious inequities in galleries and the auction houses (Reilly, 2015).

Blog site, *Countesses*, has kept tabs of figures in Australia since 2008, when bloggers responded to that year's Biennale of Sydney, which claimed to 'bring together some of the most revolutionary artists the world has ever known alongside the shining stars of today,' 76% of whom were men (*Countesses* December, 2008). Happily, last year's 19th Biennale of Sydney, *Imagine What You Desire*, curated by Julianna Engberg, included 38 female artists and 45 male artists, 'which shows... a steep improvement on previous years' (Countesses April 2014).

Despite this positive development it seems that just as women began to progress towards equality in the arts through the efforts of feminists of the second wave and beyond, many of these gains have been wrested back by global social and economic trends and pressures. Dimitrakaki cites globalization theory, which charts a trend of feminisation in global capital (Dimitrakaki, 2013, pp. 50-51). In the media this is often couched in positive terms, in headlines such as, 'More women in the workforce than

ever before' (Ministry for Women, New Zealand Government, 2007). However, in calling for feminist art historians to explore this area, Dimitrakaki points to global feminisation's negative implications for women, as they are employed in service industries and the growing weight of shadow work (Dimitrakaki, 2013, p. 51; Lambert, 2015). This leads to the sort of frustration and exhaustion described in Annabel Crabb's study, *The Wife Drought* (2014), and has led commentators to smugly state – See, 'women can't have it all' (Forbes, 2014). For women globally though there are even more dire outcomes of the feminisation of the labour force and of global migration, and a 'subversion' of women's rights (Dimitrakaki, A, 2013). Dimitrakaki (2013, p. 51) suggests arguments around feminisation could be used to examine the 'precarisation of entry-point arts professionals,' despite the fact that today 'art schools and art history classes are dominated by female students.' When statistics have changed little from when the Guerrilla Girls first made their posters in the 1980s, Dimitrakaki believes 'the moment to think strategically has come again' (Dimitrakaki, 2013, p. 247).

Another trend that may be acting detrimentally on art graduates is the loss of confidence of feminism itself, checked by the global capitalist machine. Since the early 2000s, identity politics has shown how definitions of gender are linked to consumption and the superficial pleasures promoted by consumer identity products. Gender identity today is linked to a utopian view of the world and these ideals entice and seduce consumers (Tyler, 2011). Instead of being freed by these ideals, as the mainstream media tells them, women (and men) are instead oppressed by contemporary sexualized and idealized tropes. Mothers, for example, have become a target market for products at once creating and selling to the 'yummy mummy' and more insidiously, the MILF, 'Mother I'd Like to Fuck (Littler, 2013).

These new aspirational types are far from the erotic territory of the body of the mother as described by Julia Kristeva, they have become commodified identities (Kristeva 1986; Littler, 2013). Women themselves are identifying with these seemingly autonomous yet highly sexualized versions of the mother. Rather than being real, empowered alternatives to earlier stereotypes, these may just be new versions of the impossible ideal and women in art schools are not immune to them. These ideals lead to commentators like Crabb admitting to 'wife envy,' a term that really describes the weight of pressures on women to aspire to the models of perfect mother, wife, and professional (Crabb, 2014). Crabb uncovers the fallacy of this model in her article in the Australian Women's Weekly (I read it for the stories!)

where she talks about refusing to clean her house for the magazine photoshoot because such images would perpetuate the lie (Crabb, 2015). Crabb's article uses humour to draw attention to the perception that, 'women spend almost twice as much time on housework and childcare than men, even when they increase their time in paid employment' (Browne, R, 2013).

Another problematic field for gender politics today is choice. At art school, pregnant with my first child and choosing subjects for the following year, a male art school director counselled, 'but you will want to concentrate on your baby next year.' This comment has continued to trouble me over the years, not for what it meant for me personally but for what it reflects in the wider perception of women in the arts. And for the implication that I chose to have a baby and therefore, I was opting out of arts practice. Today the fact that women have choices is often touted as the end point of feminist agitation. However, as Miranda Kiraly and Meagan Tyler point out, 'there is no freedom, no liberation when the available choices are only constructed on the basis of gross inequality' (Kiraly & Tyler, 2015). What they point to is that, while feminism may be becoming popular again, liberal feminism privileges the choice of the individual without acknowledging the context in which these choices are made, and so the structures that underlie ongoing oppression remain unquestioned. 'Ultimately, the promotion of "choice" - and the myth of an already achieved equality - have hampered our ability to challenge the very institutions that hold women back' (Tyler, 2015b). Feminism may even be seen to be mainstream, when pop star Miley Cyrus says she is 'one of the biggest feminists in the world' (Denham, 2013). Cyrus may choose to use her body to sell her music, however we must question the underlying structures that influence these choices.¹

Maegen Tyler believes that choice arguments are flawed because they are based on assumed freedoms for women, which do not exist, that is, our choices are 'shaped and constrained by the unequal conditions in which we live' (Tyler, 2015b). So while I did choose to become pregnant, I *did not* choose to drop out of art school. Instead of

¹ Recently, nude burlesque performer, Maude Davey, explained on Radio National why she felt the need to shave her armpits when performing nude onstage, to remove obstacles for the audience, '(I) shave my armpits because I don't want anything to get in the way of (the audience) accepting me, …' This complicates her statement that she hopes her nude performances are read as 'a declaration of authentic femininity…' When this is questioned by presenter, Natasha Mitchell, Davey tellingly replies, 'It's not just about the audience its also about the vulnerability of the performers' (Mitchell, N, 2015).

being met with the statement that I 'would want to concentrate on my baby now,' real change would have been signified by an art school director who said something more along the lines of: 'Great, your experience will give you so much material for new work. It will be hard but we'll help you. Why don't you bring your baby into the crèche and breast feed in our comfortable supportive women's lounge?' Sound far-fetched? Why?

Art histories are also deeply implicated in helping create the 'mother shaped hole' in contemporary art, in the way we perpetuate the patriarchal institution of motherhood, as painted by men. In Reconciling art and mothering, Rachel Epp Buller concedes that art history certainly does not exclude images of mothers, rather, 'we find all manner of maternal imagery, from Roman matriarchs to endless representations of that ubermutter, the Virgin Mary' (Epp Buller, 2012, p. 1). And yet, these images most often fall into a realm that Andrea Liss and others term 'patriarchal motherhood.' (Epp Buller, 2012, p. 1) Historically in the west the 'myth of the all-loving, all-forgiving and all-sacrificing mother,' is embodied by images of the asexual and submissive Virgin Mary (Epp Buller, 2012, p.1). Epp Buller states, 'Contemporary feminist scholars in art history are finally catching up with their peers in other disciplines in giving critical attention to maternal experiences...' (2012, p. 1). If more art school students and graduates were encouraged to differentiate between the images of patriarchal, institutionalised motherhood and women's real experiences of mothering, and allowed to represent the latter, there may be more room for greater selfdetermination. Just how to do this requires further exploration.

Maura Reilly asks 'How can we go about educating disbelievers who contend that, because there are signs of improvement, the battle has been won?' (Reilly, 2015). It is my observation that there are many women at the moment taking up this call, as we realize there are still gains to be made. These represent a diversity of practices and approaches, such as artists exhibiting under the 'women' umbrella in GOMA's 2012 exhibition *Contemporary Australia : Women*, with subsequent discussions around why the qualifier 'women' is even necessary (Kanowsky, S, 2012). There are a proliferation of websites and blogs that support women's practices globally. *Contemporary Art and Feminism* is an Australian platform supporting a diversity of practices, including, in 2014, workshops with feminist scholars and artists exploring how to teach feminism and how to teach in a feminist way (CAF, 2014). In 2013 Laura Castignini curated *Backflip: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art* at Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Victorian College of the Arts (VCA), Melbourne. Ruth

Skilbeck, co-curator of *Intertwined: Exhibiting Mother Artists*, at the Australian National University School of Art in Canberra sees 'a new movement of Mother Artists is gathering strength in Australia and internationally... (and demonstrates) the range of social concerns that feminist mother artists are aesthetically and culturally addressing' (Skilbeck, 2015). There is an underlying thread of strategic humour running through many of the contemporary collaborations and movements by women artists today, reflecting Jo Anna Isaak's belief that, 'those in possession of the most radical humour may be women' (Isaaks, 1996, p. 3). She states that the diversity of feminist art practices can be seen as 'an ongoing activity of pluralizing, destabilizing, baffling any centered discourse. This work, like all feminist activity, is a calculated optimistic gesture,' deploying the 'subversive strategy of laughter.' This use of humour in art making can also be employed in the making of art histories, along with ideas of 'maternal thinking,' as discussed by feminist Sara Ruddick, representing a 'paradigmatic shift in understanding that makes possible a politics of non-violence' (Epp Buller, 2012, p. 4). These are key constituents in the strategy of fempathy, which may prove useful to women art graduates.

Today the revision of art history and its teaching need to counter both historical tropes and current stereotypes promulgated through historical and contemporary visual culture and popular media. These factors continue to constrain ideas about women, mothers and motherhood within increasingly narrow categories. Fempathy is an optimistic and playful exercise, but one that I believe will continue to advance the feminist political agenda, to reposition identities of women as mothers and artists and their creative and procreative roles within a broad social context (Isaak, 1996, p. 15). I would like to begin to formulate a methodology that allows women to believe, not that their motherhood is an impediment to their careers, but that it can enrich their experiences, motherwork can constitute inspiration for artwork. The Australian playwright, Joanna Murray-Smith, in her recent address to the National Play Festival in Adelaide, stated her belief that 'a writer (and here I add artist) needs only to have an ego that just narrowly outranks their vulnerability' (Murray-Smith, 2015). Our art students need to be given enough encouragement to overcome self-doubt and to counter the oppressions of the broader social issues I have outlined. Fempathy is generous and kind, it helps the ego defeat self-doubt, it allows us to live with hairy armpits in messy homes, because we have art and maybe kids costumes to make. Fempathy allows me to stand up here and share my ideas today. I hope I can harness this to help other women and men in setting down the foundations of sustainable and fruitful art careers. We have come so far to open and diversify

Vasari's canon, but we can still do better in a revision of the art historical and contemporary positioning of the perfect wife and mother.

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