

**FEMINIST
PERSPECTIVES
IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS
AND THEORIES OF ART**

II. EDITION

2013

Author

WHITNEY CHADWICK

Title

**REVISITING FEMINISM, ART HISTORY AND
THE STORY OF A BOOK**



**AZKUNA ZENTROA
ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO**

My intention in the context of this year's seminar in the multi-year project "Feminist Perspectives in Art Production and Theories of Art" is not to present a scholarly paper, but rather to speak more personally about my own journey across a pedagogical territory that links the terms "feminist" and "art history." In 2012, while struggling to complete the revisions for the Fifth edition of my book *Women, Art, and Society* (1990),¹ I came upon Anne Marie Slaughter's (2012) thoughtful, if controversial essay "Why Women Still Can't Have it All" in *The Atlantic Magazine*.² In a strange quirk of fate, the arrival of the journal coincided with that of the proposed cover for the Fifth edition of *Women, Art, and Society*. The juxtaposition of the two covers was, to put it mildly, unsettling and I quickly consigned the small jpeg of the cover design (over which I have neither control nor editorial rights) to MAC's convenient online trash bin. A few days later, when a furor over *The Atlantic* cover erupted in the national media, accompanied by an extensive deluge of mixed online postings, I undeleted Polish artist Elzbieta Jablonska's photograph from the series *Supermother* (2002) and took a more reflective look at her image and my cover.

The *Atlantic* and the Thames and Hudson covers appeared to have little in common other than the fact that, on first glance, both—one an art work by a woman artist, the other a commercial designer's creative approach to selling magazines—reiterated a familiar cultural trope that seldom acknowledges social constructions of women's professional and maternal roles as anything other than oppositional. And yet both covers drew on familiar and popular culture sources. The Thames and Hudson cover rested on a postmodernist appropriation of a conventionalized Italian Renaissance images of the Madonna and child, represented as a woman in a superman costume holding a naked child in front of a kitchen counter complete with a cut up apple. The *Atlantic* cover offered up a cavalier treatment of motherhood as a fashion accessory (a woman in a business suit carrying an expensive leather tote bag that held an unhappy toddler). Both covers conjured up a period in the 1970s when I, and many of my feminist friends, had struggled against an earlier generation of professional women academics many of whom appeared to embrace a kind of superwoman ethos about merging the challenges of professional and familial lives.

Feminism was supposed to change all that. Many of us who were part of a first generation of post-World War II feminists fought the characterization of the "superwoman" as outdated. We didn't want to "have it all" we argued, we wanted our choices, or lack of choices, to be differently constructed. The very idea of "having it all," and the cost of aspiring to such a thing in a culture that could hardly be termed "gender neutral," seemed to many of us both unrealistic and unrealizable. Not to mention the fact that the imagery used to reinforce such suppositions was almost universally white and middle class.

With this history in mind, I regarded these two visual examples as outdated and retroactive. Initially I saw the *Women, Art, and Society* cover as publisher's attempt to redesign a now 27 year old book as "hip," digitally enhanced postmodernism for a new generation of readers. At the same time, I assumed that much of what one reader referred to as the "OMG Blame Feminism again" packaging of *The Atlantic*, and its cover, resulted, not from the content of the essay, but from the same editorial and commercial incentives that had previously led to exaggerated headlines in mass media press outlets that trumpeted "The End of Men" and "The War Against Boys."

Early reactions to *The Atlantic* cover were mixed. They focused, at least initially, on the author's position of privilege as a Princeton Professor and former director of Policy Planning at the State Department, and her failure to consider conflicts between professional and family responsibilities outside the context of middle class/professional privilege. It seemed to me that if the intention was to open a dialogue about the relationship between women's professional and familial lives in the first decade of the Twenty-first century, titling an essay on the subject "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" implied a certain futility about raising the issue in the first place.

My puzzlement over the *Women, Art, and Society* cover appeared to be shared by readers of the November issue of *The Beat*, an American online journal of comics culture in which a photograph of my cover of appeared in an article titled "Artist Elzbieta Jablonska Confronts Gender Roles with Her Superhero Art."³ Two brief examples of the cover's reception point to the fact that the writers are responding,

¹ Chadwick, Whitney (1990). London: Thames and Hudson, 1990.

² July-August.

³ www.comicsbeat.com (last accessed 14 November 2012)



perhaps unconsciously, not to Jablonska's image as art, but to the book publisher's manipulation of it. The first writes; "I don't understand. How is this 'confronting' anything? Has the artist in question never read comics?" A second reader weighed in with; "THANK YOU. I fail to see how this sort of tripe 'confronts' anything. I agree with the question about whether or not *she* (unknown whether the respondent refers to Jablonska or Chadwick) ever read comics. And, to be blunt, those costumes are tacky Halloween junk. She wouldn't last more than three seconds on a cosplay stage...."⁴

The coincidental appearance of the two cover images within a few days of each other drew my attention, first, to the odd ways that two sets of visual signifiers for the relationship between maternity, femininity and professional agency had been packaged almost forty years after a generation of feminists had challenged the assumptions implicit in such representations. Second, it reinforced the ever-growing role of commercial images in mediating the consumption of visual culture. I will return to the implications of this, but first a little history.

My initial reading of the *Women, Art, and Society* and *Atlantic* cover images was also shaped by the fact that the appearance of the Fifth edition of the book marked an ending for me, a decision not to revise it again. The fact that a project with which I have lived for a quarter of a century has now ended, or will be taken over by someone else, also contributed to my decision to try and say a few words about my life with this particular book. After all, we had a long relationship, a history that traversed some 26 years (longer than many marriages); a trajectory that took us from the first feminist art history course I ever taught to my retirement in 2006.

The decision not to revise the book again was not made lightly. As I grappled with the question of what to do about *Women, Art, and Society*, I realized that in its twenty-six year history I had almost never spoken about it publicly, except in classroom contexts. And yet its origins, history and relationship to my life as a feminist, a teacher, and a writer (I don't mean to make it sound like a clandestine lover though I did, more often than I would like to admit, find myself in bed with it, or some piece of it, editing pencil in hand) are also part of a larger history.

Although I am generally inclined to resist making predictions about the future, the two cover images I have shown you, and to which I shall return, have in fact raised questions for me about what has changed, and what has not, in art history and feminism since 1990 when *Women, Art, and Society* first appeared.

Before we return to those covers, I want to raise a few points about the decisions that went into structuring the book, and how they have played out in its subsequent history. *Women, Art, and Society* was commissioned by editor Nikos Stangos a year after the publication of my *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (1985). It was conceived by the publisher as the first book on women artists in the Thames and Hudson World of Art series, a multi-volume collection of relatively short, historically specific titles designed for a general audience.

My own relationship to the proposed project was mediated by a somewhat different set of concerns. Although I found the prospect of writing a major historical study while juggling the California State University's heavy teaching load problematic, there were many arguments in favor of going forward. The most compelling of these was the fact that when I moved from the East Coast to California in 1978 to accept a job in the Art Department at San Francisco State University, I had inherited a course on the history of women artists. And despite protests about my own ignorance regarding the subject (women artists had not been part of my graduate school education), it was difficult to argue against contributing to filling what was clearly a need. Although the faculty member who had initiated the course earlier in the decade had left the university, demand for it remained high among undergraduate art majors, art history majors and postgraduate MA/MFA students.

Although the widely reported strike that had closed the university over demands for an Ethnic Studies department in 1970 was long over, the campus remained politicized. With strong Ethnic and Women's studies, and arts programs the need for a course on gender and art was clear. Frustrated by my own lack of knowledge about the history of women artists before 1900, I struggled to put together a course that

⁴ Ibid.



would link European and North American history to a wider world, as well as to the political activism that had shaped the department, the school and the programs with which I was now affiliated.

I was also aware of my own complicated relationship to this history. Although I thought of myself as an active feminist when I settled permanently in California in 1978, my politics had been formed within the context of 1960s and 1970s radicalism, as well as the Civil Rights and anti-war movements, rather than in academic debates. After receiving my BA in 1965, I moved west with my best friend, and was immediately swept up in a stew of political protest ameliorated by heavy doses of sex, drugs and rock and roll. The so-called “day job” that paid my rent had nothing to recommend it as a potential career, and a night life as part-time student at the San Francisco Art Institute quickly led to the realization that I really *didn't* know what I wanted to do with my life. Still in 1966 financial aid was abundant, and graduate school began to look ever more attractive. I applied to schools that offered financial aid packages, returned to the East Coast a year later, and began to confront the gaps in my education. With a few exceptions, women artists had played almost no role in this experience.

Meanwhile, the 1960s and early 1970s were a stewpot of alternative philosophies and methodologies—social history, Marxism, communism and, increasingly, feminism. And there were collective spaces within which to explore these possibilities. Consciousness raising groups, political action committees, affirmative action programs, book and discussion clubs offered a heady brew.

I'll skip my graduate school years; they were long and complicated. They were also the source of my growing awareness of the obstacles that continued to confront women. And they spanned a decade that included the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, Cambodia and multiple political assassinations, among other events. Consciousness was being raised in many ways, and skepticism was very much in the air.

It wasn't long before I confronted a male professor's patronizing comments to myself and the other woman in my first graduate seminar. “Don't expect teaching positions when you graduate,” he said dismissively. The next morning I woke up, looked around more critically, and discovered that the only female faculty member in the art history department was an untenured lecturer who taught the Western Art survey course, and inhabited an office so far down the hall that it was actually in the Art, not Art History Department, *and* on the other side of the faculty men's bathroom. Of female role models there were few in evidence.

I did get a job, initially a one-year visiting lectureship at MIT. By that time my own feminist education had advanced to the point where it wasn't difficult to see that the MIT Architecture department was also sadly lacking in female talent (no women faculty taught core courses in architectural design, and there were *no* tenured women in the Architecture department). But there were young radical women in Cambridge. While teaching at MIT I joined a Women's Group, and took on Affirmative Action in my department with another female faculty member. I gave my first feminist talk (under pressure from female colleagues to account for how a feminist could work on a movement so apparently deeply misogynist as surrealism) and published my first article on images of women.

Relocating to San Francisco I accepted Nikos Stangos's proposal to write *Women, Art, and Society* because I did not have a text that worked for the kind of course I wanted to teach; a course that would accommodate undergraduate students from a range of disciplines, as well as MA/MFA candidates in the arts. And I also wanted a course that would coordinate with the Women's and Ethnic Studies programs at the university.

I gave Thames and Hudson three conditions: First, the book had to function as a textbook. This was complicated because at the time the publisher, while advertising the World of Art series as books that might be used in courses, insisted that they were NOT in the business of producing textbooks. They eventually agreed to make an exception and today, like most trade publishers, they regularly publish text editions. Second, I asked the publisher to assume all the costs of the book's production, including researching and paying for illustrations (this was essential because my university had both heavy teaching loads and almost no research funding). Third, although all final decisions as to content would remain in my hands, I wanted the book to exist as part of an ongoing dialogue with students.



When I moved to California after received graduate degrees that were both funded through financial aid programs, I was impressed by what the State of California offered in the area of public higher education. For many years the California higher education system was widely regarded as among the best in the world and, although this began to change with the loss of funding for public education that began in 1978 with the passage of Proposition 13, there was still a sense of optimism in the universities.

When work on *Women, Art, and Society* began I had fifty engaged, committed and lively students in a Women and Art class. I presented the book project to them as a hypothetical “what if?” What if we could design our own textbook? How would we do that and what would we want? What does feminism mean to us when we think about artists and art history? We set up a class project based on our reading and our discussions about what such a book might look like, and what it should contain.

From the perspective of today the early 1980s appears far in the past. What I saw the morning of the first class was lecture hall filled with students, many but not all of them women, who ranged in age from nineteen to seventy-five, many of whom were the first in their families to attend college, and all of whom wanted information about women artists. In some cases they were angry about their lack of knowledge in this area. In other cases, they were in search of role models. They represented a wide diversity in class, ethnicity, race, sexuality, etc. and, because a significant number of them anticipated working in the arts, they felt they had a personal stake in the subject. And they were willing to make a significant commitment to making it happen.

Initially I thought of my task as a kind of negotiation between the students’ need for information, and my responsibility to accommodate the methodological and theoretical approaches that were reshaping both art history and feminist inquiry in the 1980s. Were I to embark on such a book project today, I would no doubt worry less about new theoretical approaches, and much more about the explosion of information that is reshaping our lives and affecting the way that we approach both material culture and history.

I spent two semesters over two years working with students in shaping what they invariably referred to as “*our*” book. The first year, we read and discussed at length what our ideal textbook for the course would look like. We had intense discussions about learning. The students insisted that the book must contain all the available resources that they had unearthed through their research (this put us on a collision course with the publisher’s insistence that the book be “general” and the notes kept to a minimum). We set up a class project focused on bibliography. After discussing the concept of the “state of literature,” the students proposed what they thought were essential sources/resources for an historical study of women, art, and society. Intense discussions followed. What must be included? What might be set aside? What were our priorities? How would our choices affect learning outcomes, research, and pedagogy?

We visited libraries, museums and public archives. The class read journal articles and discussed how the authors addressed their subjects. We invited guests to speak. Darlene Tang, the university art librarian, talked about libraries and acquisitions policies; historian Mary Felstiner lectured about her research on the painter Charlotte Salomon and the Holocaust; writer Millicent Dillon shared her biography of Jane Bowles with us.

The next year’s women and art class proved equally engaged. I suggested that instead of writing term papers, each student choose an artist they believed deserved inclusion in a one-volume history of women and art, prepare an annotated bibliography on that artist, and an argument for the artist’s inclusion. The result was a substantial set of references, and another lengthy negotiation with the publisher. In the end, the Bibliography and Sources section of *Women, Art, and Society* appeared as originally submitted, though the font had been reduced to the point where the students suggested that the price of the book include a magnifying glass.

The two years in which the book-in-progress served as a collaborative class project had many outcomes. One of them came when, in the early days of our bibliographic research, an Asian American student named Min Paek appeared in my office. She wanted to develop her bibliography around Asian American women artists, but an exhaustive search had turned up neither articles, nor books, nor exhibition catalogs on the subject. She had an idea about how she wished to proceed. She proposed a search of all the biographical dictionaries of contemporary artists in the library in which she would look for Asian-American surnames and contact information. Then she would contact the artist and ask if there were a female Asian-American artist in the household. Where she had names, but no contacts, she would consult telephone directories, etc. Where she had exhibition information, she would contact museums and galleries.



I was skeptical; she was determined. For a while nothing happened. Then one day she appeared in my office with a big smile and a pile of letters. The stories they told were remarkable. The first women artists to respond were, for the most part, married to artists and not necessarily of Asian parentage. Often they were working in relative isolation, juggling family responsibilities, children, outside jobs, etc. Many spoke eloquently about the fact that this was the first time that they had ever been asked about their postgraduate lives as artists. They remembered the Asian-American students they had known in art school, and were often able to supply contact information.

The short term result: Although she sent out many more letters than elicited replies, and although the sample was hardly scientific, Min Paek compiled the first extensive list of Asian-American women artists that I and my colleagues had seen. The longer term result: after receiving BA and MA degrees from San Francisco State, she became an artist and one of the founding members of California Asian American Women Artists Association. She went on to serve as Executive Director of the Korean American artists and writers Association, and as visiting Professor of Korean Studies at Ca'Foscari University in Venice. She is also the author and illustrator of *Aekyung's Dream*, the first children's book for Korean American youths.

It was experiences like that of Min Paek and other students that kept the book alive for me, and connected to my life as a teacher, through the long months of research and writing. But there was another critical element in its conception, and that had to do with its structure. World of Art books were presented as introductions to a field: Mayan Art, The Bauhaus, Impressionism, etc. I was happy with the idea of an introductory text, but there many questions about what shape such a text might take. By the mid-1980s, many of us had shifted away from the art history survey as we had known it. Like many of my colleagues, I increasingly drew on the "case study" as a model that circumvented conventional notions of art historical narrativity and chronological progression, and that offered greater flexibility in calibrating the relationship between information and analysis. At the same time I was drawn to the survey format precisely because I wanted a book that could be used to across a wide spectrum of Humanities, Arts and Women's Studies classes.

Women, Art, and Society was conceptualized at a moment when feminist art history was redefining itself as an academic subject. A more deconstructive approach argued against surveys and survey texts. I remember attending seminars, presentations and College Art Association sessions devoted to the "problem" of the art history survey. Still my own research suggested that, despite the obvious need for more sophisticated approaches to intellectual content, the majority of undergraduate students continued to be introduced to art history through some form of the survey. Aware of my own ignorance when I had confronted my first class on women artists, I wanted a book that could be used in as wide a range of situations as possible.

The result was a decision not only to write a survey text, but to consciously model it on the most conservative example I knew, H.W. Janson's (1962) *History of Art*. This was the man, after all, who had famously declared to artist Eleanor Dickinson at a College Art Association meeting in the early 1970s that there were no women artists worthy of inclusion in a one-volume history of western art. At the same time that I loosely adopted Janson's historical periodization, I was also happy to have other available models—from Hugh Honour and John Fleming's (1982) *The Visual Arts: A History* to early feminist art histories, including Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker's (1981) *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology*; Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin's (1976) *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, among others.

If *Women, Art, and Society* was to have a life outside art history departments, it needed a familiar format, familiar enough that someone with no interest in feminism or women artists, if challenged by a female student about course content (as seemed to be happening with some frequency by the 1980s), might find their way to the book and find its format both familiar and useful. That this happened, and has been noted by others, remains central to my commitment to the book as, in the words of art historian Darby English, "... a category of required readings whose fundamental incompatibility with the governing pedagogy seems to go completely unnoticed by that pedagogy."⁵

I was fortunate in having close colleagues in the Bay Area who had historical and/or area specializations quite different from mine. The book's pre-publication readers are acknowledged in those tiny notes at the back, but I owe a special debt to three colleagues at Mills College who talked me through more issues and read more drafts of chapters than I had any right to expect: Moira Roth, who is the book's

⁵ Darby English, College Art Association Annual Meeting Presentation, New York, 2012.



godmother and guardian angel in the areas of twentieth century and contemporary art and multiculturalism; Mary-Ann Milford Lutzker in Asian art, and Joanne Bernstein in the Italian Renaissance.

It was they who when, five years after publication had passed as if in a flash and it was time to produce a new edition of the book, asked if I might be interested in having their senior seminar work on the new edition. This marked the beginning of a new series of “interventions” into the text by new groups of students working under close faculty supervision. It both provided a forum within which to explore how the book was being used in contexts other than that of my university, and it brought new perspectives to bear on the book’s format. I had decided that the next edition of the book needed to take up contemporary critical theory and postmodernism in a more serious way, while also incorporating a more diverse contingent of contemporary artists around issues of diversity.

Maira Roth proposed engaging the Mills College senior art history seminar students in a series of critiques in which they would select individual chapters of *Women, Art, and Society*, and conduct a comparative analysis of the material provided in WAS, and that offered in other selected art history survey texts. Once again new ways of framing individual sections of the book provided me with considerably more insight into how the it was being understood and used.

Five years later, when the next revised edition was due and I wanted to expand the book in more international directions, Mary Ann Milford Lutzker and Maira Roth suggested that their seminar students supply the basic bibliography in a series of selected areas in Asian contemporary art. This they did, again with extraordinary energy and commitment. While the students were copying up a storm, I set about situating the results of their research in the context of the internationalizing of contemporary art within the explosive growth of recent biennial and triennial exhibitions. This allowed the book to step into the recent present in new ways.

Here again the opportunity to engage directly with students over the text, and to read the results of *their* research, proved enormously energizing for me. It also reinforced my need to feel that the book was still engaged in a kind of organic and expanding collaboration. Like all books, *Women, Art, and Society* has led a life somewhat independent of authorial intentionality, and the ways that the book has circulated and been used remain both interesting and complicated.

Although I originally aimed for a text that would make available different levels and kinds of content to widely varying audiences, this did not always play out as I had intended. For example, since the California junior college system is a “feeder” system for both the California State University system and the University of California systems, I hoped that the book might have a role in that process. However, when *Women, Art, and Society* was first selected as a required text in an art history courses in the junior college system, it was submitted to a mandatory computer program that counts multi-syllabic words. Unfortunately, it failed the test...“too many multi-syllabic words”...and was relegated to “recommended” but not “required” status.

There is, however, a somewhat ironic postscript to this story. Although the book has been translated into Chinese, Spanish and Korean, it is in English as a second language, that the book is now required reading for all arts and humanities undergraduates throughout Scandinavia. There it satisfies a requirement, “that all visual culture courses move the art historical canon toward an updated understanding of the gendered art world.” The official policy on equality at Lund University, one of the oldest universities in Sweden, calls for an even distribution of influence and power between the sexes. The goal is the teaching of modern visual culture and the history of art, as not only defined by gender, race, etc. but as actually contributing to the production of ideology in these areas.⁶

This concern is not restricted to Scandinavia but operates to a greater or lesser degree across the EU nations, which brings me to one of the challenges that confronts us as teachers and feminists in the United States. When in 2001 I gave a keynote address at an international conference on Women and Art in northern Sweden, I met with artists, art historians, critics, journalists and representatives from the Swedish Secretariat for Gender Research, a government office that was working with the EU on standardizing educational, social, economic, etc. policies across the member nations. From Gunnel Karlsson, the Director of the Secretariat, I learned of the large amount of data that

⁶ Lindberg, Anna Lena. 2010. “Moving the Canon: Visual Culture and Student-focused Learning. Pp. 162-178 in *Contemporary Feminist Studies and its Relation to Art History and Visual Studies* edited by Bia Mankell and Alexandra Reiff, Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2010.



has been generated through studies into gender representation, employment, education, etc., in EU countries and the policies that were being based on that data.

I know of no equivalent in the United States, no government studies that systematically track graduate degrees in the visual arts and art history, employment histories, salaries and income at various levels of arts education, the number of PhDs and MFA's graduated every who are employed, and in what capacities and for how long. I periodically hear of statistical research in relevant areas, but it is seldom collated or updated. And although our professional organization, The College Art Association of America, has done a tireless and invaluable job of paying attention to these kinds of questions and issues, no organization can supply the level of statistical analysis that is available to government departments.

Thinking back to the 1970s, I remember the energy that feminist and activist collectives and organizations put into documenting discriminatory practices. And of course, the Guerrilla Girls, and their followers, have done a brilliant job of actualizing comparative statistics though, alas, within a relatively small pool. In the end, without sustained statistical research, policy decisions become suspect, and informed discussion become complicated. When this lack of current data is combined with an explosion of information, opinion and manipulation, as it is today, it becomes even more difficult to assess.

I want to conclude by returning briefly to Elzbieta Jablonska's cover image *Home Games*, part of a series that circulated in a dozen Polish cities as large public billboards, and was also displayed in museum and gallery exhibitions. As billboards the works resituated this imagery within a broader public dialogue over changing roles for women in the New Poland. And they did it by laying claim to public space as a site of for the renegotiation of meaning.

The group of artists around Jablonska have become known for their ironic commentaries on the status and roles of women in a traditional society that has undergone enormous transformations in the decades since the emergence of a democratic form of government in Poland after 1989. While most critics have identified the Supermothers with an attempt to reconcile housekeeping and child-rearing with a professional life, Jablonska's work has also been contextualized in relation the myth of Matka-Polka (the archetypal Polish Mother still prevalent in Polish culture). In the end Jablonska's work has helped engender a new public discourse in Polish culture by that includes new, post-democratic ways of renegotiating gender assumptions.

Jablonska's images remind us that feminism today occupies many spaces within worldwide visual cultures in which almost every image in the visual realm is up for reconsideration. I cannot predict where future feminist interventions in the arts will take us, but I feel sure that all of us will need to pay much more attention, not just to acknowledging new media's exploding information bases, or bemoaning their effects, but instead bringing the resources of analysis and critical thinking that we possess to fields of knowledge that are not defined by nationalist boundaries and/or entrenched ways of thinking about history, images and gender. In order to do that we need to think about visual cultures as new generative technologies through which to rethink our assumptions about all of those things that we rushed to theorize in the 1980s in feminist art history classes. We need perspectives that are ever more inclusive, more international, more willing to admit the widest possible range of theoretical, methodological, experiential and political perspectives.



Reference List

Chadwick, Whitney. 2014. *Women, Art, and Society*. London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 2014.

Janson, H. W. 1962. *History of Art*. New York: Harry Abrams