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# A Contemporary Review of Feminist Aesthetic Practices in Selective Adult Education Journals and Conference Proceedings

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## Abstract

This feminist content analysis of selective adult education journals and conference proceedings draws on feminist aesthetic theory to develop a deeper understanding of women adult education scholars' work with/in the arts. Four major categories identified were community cultural development, aesthetic civic engagement and knowledge mobilization, arts-based research, and art education. Within these were multidimensional and at times contesting themes of cultural justice, identity and agency, elitism and postmodernism in museums, artistic quality and collective process, personal and social transformation, and pleasure and subversion. Women's diverse cultural practices contribute not only to liberatory or emancipatory struggles in feminist adult education but also to discourses of feminist aesthetic theory that all but ignore the educational potential of the arts.

## Keywords

feminist adult education, art education, community cultural development, aesthetic engagement, knowledge mobilization, arts-based research

The arts are integral to the academic and community work of many feminist adult education scholars. Although these women have published extensively on this work, to date no comprehensive analysis has been undertaken despite the important contributions their efforts make to the development of theory and practice. This study used a feminist content analysis approach to selective adult education journals and conference proceedings and drew on feminist aesthetic theory to develop a deeper understanding of women adult education scholars' work with/in the arts. Feminist

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aesthetic theory offers a critical analytical framework for investigating women's aesthetic educational practices by problematizing and offering insights into the place, value, and utility of the arts in contemporary society.

This article begins with a summary of theoretical discussions in feminist aesthetics, followed by an outline of the research methodology and design including data sources and the place and role of the researcher. It then presents the findings and concludes with a discussion of the implications of this work. Feminist scholars suggest comprehensive analyses are important because they uncover the breadth, depth, and scope of diverse areas of women's work and the contributions these make to the field of adult education (English & Irving, 2007; Hayes & Smith, 1994; Taber & Goutro, 2005). This study is significant because it provides an overdue review of a growing and important area of women's educational work from their own standpoints as women. It also deepens knowledge of the potential of the arts in terms of working with women and other marginalized communities and the challenges women face in doing this type of aesthetic educational work. Finally, it brings a new theoretical framework to feminist adult education—feminist aesthetic theory—which enables the broadening of analysis in terms of artistic work.

## **Feminist Aesthetic Theory**

Feminist aesthetic theory offers a flexible analytical framework for investigating the diverse and often contradictory cultural work of women adult education scholars. Scholars working with and through the arts have identified a number of complex and contested areas, bringing personally and socially concerned perspectives that broaden the emphasis and character of aesthetic debate (Felshin, 1995; Lippard, 1984; Mullin, 2003).

Women's oppression is central to contemporary feminist aesthetic theorizing. Grounded in uncovering the "complex codes that govern the allocation of meaning to sexual difference as represented in [all aspects] of the arts" (Pajaczkowska, 2001, p. 4), feminists have challenged women's lesser station in the art world (Nochlin, 1997). Lippard (1984) problematizes what she sees as a socially constructed division between art and craft. Assigned subjective values create "false distinctions" that result in derogatory labels of women's arts and crafts pursuits such as hobby, decorative pastime, or gossiping sessions. Carson and Pajaczkowska (2001) add "the stock-in-trade of art history is the specialist stuff of an individual artist and these are men" (p. 25). Nochlin (1988) asks why there are no great women artists and responds by suggesting the answer lies in our aesthetic institutions and education processes that continue to place at the center the so-called "masters" (p. 150). Over time, women have internalized their absence and lower status, consistently apologizing for artistic inadequacies or avoiding public attention (Hollows, 2000).

One of the most important achievements of feminist artists to date has been to repoliticize craft on the level of production by reinstating value in the sphere of everyday practice (Felski, 1989; Hollows, 2000). And yet scholars caution against this movement toward a purely functional aesthetic. They question the elevation of

traditional crafts such as knitting to the status of art object as valid, challenging whether craftwork can even be considered “feminist” (e.g., Barrett, 1992). At the heart of this debate are notions of traditionalism, instrumentalization, and judgment.

Gillespie (1995) argues that feminists who, in their fight against male centeredness, “reject or ignore artistic or aesthetic tradition, run the risk of losing the wisdom of the past” (p. 122). Laughlin & Schuler (1995) concede that although “traditional aesthetic discourses need to be profoundly transformed, it is unlikely that a politics which does not take the traditional topics seriously will prove resourceful and resilient enough to oppose the arrogance of power” (p. 19). Other scholars focus on how we construct and value art. They argue that aesthetic value is an ingredient value, not a use value. Works must be assessed by proper standards, which, although not objective, arise from understood delimitations of aesthetic judgment that can be taught. Artistic works of value combine color, design, technique in unique ways by a skilled, trained, and talented artist (Felski, 1989; Laughlin & Schuler, 1995).

Prompting condemnations of diluting the value of art and the work of the artist are feminists “with one foot in the art world and the other in the world of political activism and community organizing” (Felshin, 1995, p. 9). Nochlin (1997) draws attention to feminist arts activity over the past three decades as a liberating force. Gains have been chiefly emotional, personal, psychological, and subjective, centered on present and immediate needs. Nowhere is this more true than in the pollination between arts and research. The arts have become an important tool for artist researchers to explore their psychic interiors, emotions, and senses of self-expression (e.g., Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008). This work contests normative methods and techniques by raising alternative validity claims around what constitutes a rigorous qualitative data gathering or representation instrument (Felski, 1989).

Counterdiscourses suggest feminists seeking social or political transformation should not concern themselves solely with the aesthetic and the personal (Felshin, 1995; Felski, 1989; Lippard, 1984). Women critique dominant ideologies that underpin traditional aesthetic judgments and modes of representation by offering feminist alternatives. One of these is to challenge elite discourses of the arts that prevent artists from working collaboratively or collectively and reaching out to large audiences. Far from rendering the arts mundane or diluting the artwork of its “aesthetic” value, working collectively and collaborative gives visibility to women’s artwork as it strengthens efforts for social change (Laughlin & Schuler, 1995). To argue otherwise, Lippard (1984) suggests, is simply a way to maintain prevailing, paternalistic notions of aesthetic judgment and relationships with the “masses.” She is particularly critical of educational processes firmly anchored in didacticism whereby the artist—who is gifted and educated and “knows” what is correct technique and beauty—passes this down to those who do not.

Two other feminist alternatives are political and activist art. Behind both activist and political art practice is a steadfast belief in the arts as a tool or catalyst for change. The arts are not simply a matter of jazzing up factory walls to improve the aesthetic working environment but to address fundamental problems or inequalities (Lippard, 1984).

Political art is made by an individual artist and most often identified as art that explores "political subject matter but is not made in a way that involves political action" (Mullin, 2003, p. 191). Activist art on the other hand also explores political topics but seeks public participation in both the creation and reception of the art, generally making no "sharp distinction between the process or creating a work and the product" (Mullin, 2003, p. 190). But some dispute this latter point, arguing that activist art, unlike political art, must be process oriented not "object-product-oriented" if it is to be effective (Felshin, 1995, p. 10). Going further, some feminists artists suggest realism constitutes a necessary or inevitable medium for feminists to uncover social issues. Defiant messages graphically depicting women's oppression garner the most immediate and necessary reaction and action (Felshin, 1995; Felski, 1989). Yet others see this overt, didactic approach as problematic. The power of art lies in the more interpretive realm of "intimate and prolonged investigation rather than volatile, ephemeral demonstration" (Philips, 1995, p. 287).

## Method and Design

### *Data Sources*

I chose the major adult education journals and conference proceedings for this study. The journals were the *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education*, *Convergence*, *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, *Journal of Adult and Continuing Education*, *New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education*, *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, *New Zealand Journal of Adult Learning*, *Studies in the Education of Adults*, and *SCUTREA E-Journal*. Annual conference proceedings were produced by the Adult Education Research Conference, the Canadian Association for the Study of Adult Education, and the Standing Community on University Teaching and Research in the Education of Adults (SCUTREA). These publications are all research oriented, with the exception of *Convergence*, a mixture of research and practice. They were selected based on two criteria. First, I was interested in specifically looking at women's scholarly writings, so I limited the study to articles and papers. I included conference proceeding papers not only for the scholarly merit but also because they contain more works by students, often an underrepresented aspect of scholarly contribution according to feminist scholars (e.g., Butterwick, Fenwick, & Mojab, 2003). Second, and linked to the point above, it is acknowledged that these journals and proceedings have been around for much longer than 30 years with very wide, global circulation, which means they have been making an impact on the theory, research, and practice development of adult education for quite some time (Hayes & Smith, 1994).

By limiting my study to adult education journals and conference proceedings, I realize I will have missed articles and papers in other types of publications. In addition, by limiting the scope to publications that have been around for decades, I have

missed some newer publications, although as noted above, they have less global impact simply because they have not been around. A second and linked limitation was the volume of material. I perused 85 articles and papers. Each one contained a plethora of rich ideas that were not possible to address in a single article, so some have been omitted. Future studies exploring materials such as Web sites and other popular and academic publications as well as focusing more deeply on the broad categories I uncovered in this study would greatly add to scholars' understanding of women adult educators' aesthetic practices.

### **Data Analysis**

Feminist content analysis is an approach to texts that "asks questions that would otherwise go unasked" (Leavy, 2007, p. 224). The analysis is guided by the identification of major categories and themes relevant, in the case of this study, to the broad field of feminist adult education as it has been conceptualized by many women worldwide over the years (e.g., Hayes & Smith, 1994; Watlers & Manicom, 1996). Categories and themes are "generated through an inductive process involving constant comparison and discovery" (Hayes & Smith, 1994, p. 205).

I used the following steps in this study. I selected the major journals and proceedings and then identified relevant articles and papers using the following keywords or identifiers: *artists, arts, crafts, photography, drama, theatre, video, media, quilts, aesthetic, painting, murals, dance, sculpture, storytelling, novels, literature, and creative writing*. I then developed five questions to guide my analysis of the articles and papers:

1. In what areas are women working?
2. What are the key themes or types of focus?
3. Can this work be seen as feminist?
4. What is the potential or value added of the arts?
5. What are the challenges in this work?

The first three questions relate to areas common within feminist theory and adult education. The latter two aim at the specifics of working with and through the aesthetic. I used emergent as well as a priori forms of analysis. The former is based on an existing theoretical lens of feminist theory and the latter on identifying, coding, and recoding themes as they emerge (Leavy, 2007).

### **Place and Role of the Researcher**

I have been researching, teaching, and publishing in the area of arts-based adult education since early 2000. I therefore play a dual role in this study: the researcher and a "subject/object," as a number of the articles included in this study were my own. This comprehensive analysis proved to be an interesting and somewhat

clarifying exercise. It is often assumed that in the academy—unlike working in the voluntary sector, from which I came—we have infinite amounts of time to sit back and reflect on our own work. But this, at least for me, is seldom the case. It was not until I undertook this project that I was able to take stock of where I was in terms of my own writing on arts-based adult education, to see where my own work fit into the larger scheme of women's adult education activities and the value and diversity of what I was bringing to the table. It also enabled me to challenge some of my own assumptions about what I believed in terms of arts-based adult education against the views of other women.

## Findings

Four major categories emerged from the data, each containing a number of themes. The first was community cultural development with a focus on justice for artisans, cultural agency, and the artist as educator. The second was arts-based research, where we find an interesting dance along a personal/therapeutic and sociopolitical/educative continuum. The third category was civic engagement and knowledge mobilization, which emphasized collective arts projects and public engagement. The final category was art education, which included learning to make artworks, learning about artworks, learning through art, and learning in situ.

### *Community Cultural Development*

Power (1997) defines community cultural development as the coming together of educators, artists, diverse “art forms and cultural values to not only create depictions of community but as process tools for communication and action” (p. 169). An example is Myths and Mirrors, an organization made up of feminist artists and adult educators in a low-income neighborhood in Sudbury, Ontario (Clover, Stalker, & McGauley, 2004). These women create opportunities “to engage residents in the collective creation of artworks that explore modern myths, engender a sense of community identity and provide a public form for the voices of the marginalised” (p. 91). Of particular importance is the transformation from cultural consumers or recipients to culture makers, creators, and agents that Stuart's (1987) work builds. She looks at video as a tool of community cultural development “which can encourage choice rather than impose remedies from the outside. It captures the process that leads to decisions as well as the decisions themselves. It invites others to consider themselves potential collaborators” (p. 63). The potential of the art is to promote “greater equality between the producers and the consumers of the information” (p. 63).

Artists are key to community cultural development. Barer-Stein (1989) has found that although artists “rarely see themselves as adult educators. . . . The communication of the aesthetic experience through a process of learning is precisely what is depicted by an individual proceeding through the process of learning and *being supported* [by an artist]” (pp. 6, 9). Effective artist-educators develop a special kind of

relationship or partnership between themselves and their students that forms the catalyst for not only good technical work but also reflection and meaning making (Sgroi, 1998). In more traditional cultures, artist-educators were often the elders, women taught by their mothers or grandmothers and who in turn pass their craft-making skills, a key aspect of culture, to the next generation (Cowan, 2005).

Embedded in community cultural development is the concept of cultural justice. Artisan and fabric crafts have been traditional forms of artwork for women for centuries as well as an important aspect of their socioeconomic and cultural development worldwide (Stalker, 2003). For women weavers and artisans in India (Jongeward, 1998) or the impoverished Appalachian region of the United States (Lane, 2006), cultural justice is the maintenance of and respect for traditional practices in the face of globalization and mechanization. Cultural justice includes economic justice—the right to a livelihood through one's art and craft (Lane, 2006). In addition, learning and maintaining traditional crafts are sources of internal empowerment that enable people to design their own creative and cultural development rather than having it imposed from outside (Cowan, 2005; Hamilton, 1987).

### Arts-Based Research

Knowles and Cole (2008) assert that the arts as a form or tool of research are still not widely used. And yet the arts have been used as a method of research by women adult educators since the early 1980s. What is interesting in this category is that there is not so much a specific theme as an interesting continuum. At one end of this continuum is research as a process of self-reflection. In this instance, artist-researchers use a creative medium to explore their own experiences. For example, Lander et al (2005) explore their own psychic interiors through writing and poetry to understand practices of end-of life care. The lens is psychology, the exploration therapeutic and personal. Rykov (2006) moves one step further along this continuum through her work with cancer patients, referring to her research as therapeutic-educative intervention. Although this “does not cure anyone of their cancer,” it does expand identity beyond victim to the “musical people they inherently are” (p. 194). Although the power of poetry and writing in the former lay in their ability to come to a greater self-understanding, the power of music is its ability to transform a stifling identity. Edging us along, Elvy (2004) uses photography and video to visually display the sociopolitical histories and experiences of women *brigadistas* during the 1961 Cuban Literacy Campaign. Photography is a type of language that through imagery validates the social movement work of women. Photography is powerful because it reveals “the unspoken, when words alone fall short” (p. 134). Barg (2004) nudges us even further along the personal/therapeutic-political/educative track. Her research work with mothers is shaped by dual feminist aims of developing greater self-knowledge and a stronger sense of identity while challenging existing patriarchal assumptions about, in this case, the role of “mothering.” Barg presents her data in “poetic narrative,” arguing this “simplified, impactful and truth-telling nature [of poetry] has the capacity to convey

meaning to readers that is intuitive powerful and prophetic" (p. 29). Shaw and Martin (2005) call this art's ability to "catalyse the connections, or translate, between three dimensions of the creative democratic disposition: the sociological imagination, the narrative imagination and the reflexive imagination" (p. 86).

### *Aesthetic Civic Engagement and Knowledge Dissemination*

A thread of empowerment through collective art production, community outreach and public engagement runs through much of the writings. One tool particularly favored is popular theatre. Butterwick and Selman (2002) use this methodology to pursue

questions about coalition and community in women's action movements because it allows us to express and integrate our history, passions, insights, knowledge and ideas. We aimed to engage these human qualities reflexively and responsively . . . and move past social paralysis. (p. 10)

Popular theatre as a process lends itself to working on risky and dangerous issues such as inviting the women in the audience into the investigation of the constructive, "even erotic practice of conflict embedded in social movement work" (p. 12). The dramatic action repositions audience from spectator or witness to actor, from distanced to intrinsic. Baird (2002) builds on this work in her discussion of a theatre piece, titled *Voices Inside*, with incarcerated women. The piece aimed to shatter the silence and invisibility of these women and showcased "social realism as the most important form of art" (p. 8). By emphasizing the actual daily lived experiences of incarceration, the women were able to challenge the dehumanizing that goes on inside. Although new understandings were palpable in the audience's reactions, it was interesting to note a somewhat negative comment by one audience member about artistic merit. As suggestive in the work of Baird and Butterwick and Selman, throughout the papers and articles, there is push and pull between the need for a quality project (e.g., Cole & McIntyre, 2003) and the belief that empowering methods or processes are what contribute most to a change in consciousness.

Still in the dramatic vein but taking a slightly different turn, Roy (2000) highlights the work of the Raging Grannies in Canada. This is a group of elderly women who have taken to the streets with "an arsenal of witty satirical song and a dynamic imagination for theatrical actions and protest . . . [to] educate the public about socio-environmental issues" (p. 6). The Grannies engage audiences in skits and musical numbers that simultaneously raise awareness of particular issues and mock stereotypes of older individuals. Embedded in their work is the concept of defiance, and this is picked up by others in two very different ways. Clover (2000) outlines an arts-based adult education project where women environmentalists, artists, educators, and sanitation workers came together to paint their concerns about the environment onto garbage trucks. They deliberately chose imagery for the city-owned trucks of an extremely volatile public issue around waste. When the trucks went on display, this overt

counternarrative was seized on by the media, and this "nice little arts project," as it had been referred to, sparked a public debate with major political consequences. Stalker (2003) illustrates defiance much differently. Women worldwide have been using coded messages, "metaphorical narratives" that need to be interpreted as tools of defiance (p. 26). For example, "a dainty, utopian embroidery of a tidy and perfect farmhouse can transform to an act of defiance when stitched under an oppressive regime that is destroying similar scenes in real life" (p. 27). In this way, women's fabric crafts offer an alternative to more confrontational approaches in "subtle yet strong ways" (p. 30).

### Art Education

Art education, the final major category to emerge from the data, has three dynamic dimensions. The first is learning to make art. Jongeward (1994) suggests art making is an important educational process because it brings "joy and a sense of wholeness" (p. 238). Grace (1993) describes this as "the thoughtfulness required in making something; the enjoyable effect of being able to fully concentrate on the making process; and the sense of pride and achievement earned on completion" (p. 67). This aesthetic activity is about attending to art for its own sake rather than its instrumentality (Brown & Brownhill, 1998).

But art making for others is more than just making something for its own sake. Sgroi (1998) highlights the important risk and challenge of making art. A group learning setting and pressure by the artists to make an excellence product can be, as one participant in Sgroi's study noted, "scary as hell [because] in the visual arts, your failure is tangible" (p. 27). Clover, Aitken, and Winchester (2005) take this further in their explorations of what making art brings to the lives of poor and homeless women. Their lives are often dominated by learning activities geared toward developing marketable skills. Art therefore becomes a subversive act that breaks with "conventions of what women's social service agencies are supposed to be doing" (p. 49).

Art is also seen as a deliberate medium to teach and "learn something else" (Lawrence, 2005, p. 80). One of these is critical visual literacy skills around symbols, metaphors, and myths that guide or explain society (Brown & Brownhill, 1998). Although often a way of reinforcing stereotypes of women, Wright (2006) shows how a TV program such as *The Avengers* can "facilitate the formation of a critical feminist identity" (p. 459). Programs such as this are powerful "portals of learning" because they in fact challenge or reset norms of legitimate subject positions of women in society.

Learning in place is a motif in feminist adult education that, not surprisingly, takes an aesthetic turn in the literature explored for this study. Museums have a long tradition of nonvocational and lifelong learning through the interpretation of exhibitions, organized talks, workshops, art history courses, and lectures (Grek, 2004). But they are also, as feminist aesthetic theorists note, sites of struggle among tradition, modernism, and postmodernism.

Although recognizing that museums are often products of history that simply conform to normative conceptions of aesthetic and social order that need to be changed,

Lahav (2003) cautious against the contemporary postmodern move. Releasing the "shackles of elitism associated with the traditional one line story of art [and creating] new more 'people-centred,' transparent and pluralistic understandings" has led to a fragmented learning experience. Having "melted all that was solid and profaned all that was sacred . . . in [this] time of post or liquid modernity, we are forced to accept that there are no fixed ideas or missions. There is no predictable future, no agenda for renovation." Learning in museums has become like a trip to the supermarket shop: "We are invited to choose which story or theme we fancy [which often] leaves people feeling increasingly insecure and undirected." But Grek (2004) theorizes an education that includes a "postmodern sensitivity" vis-à-vis accessibility and interpretation with a staunch modernist critique of elitism and tradition. Indeed, it would include "pedagogical practices to give visitors the aptitudes . . . for the symbolic re-appropriation of their resources" (Grek, 2004). Kozar's (2001) work takes up beyond merely symbolic reappropriation. As a result of participating in a literacy project in a museum, four women "became museum-based researchers [who] set about asking questions, finding answers and knowing and sharing a few more of the stories of their community" (p. 98). Essentially, they reworked exhibitions to show local artisan traditions in a new light and developed new exhibitions on non-White cultural histories of the area that had been excluded. But given the richness presented by the women authors writing in this area of museum education as well as the other areas, it was disconcerting, albeit understandable, to find disclaimers on the cognitive value of the arts in general and the seriousness of museums as legitimate sites for scholarly attention (e.g., Dufresne-Tasse, Lapioint, & Lefebvre, 1993).

## Discussion and Conclusions

During a talk in Toronto in 1993, the feminist poet and writer M. Nourbese Phillip argued that culture should never be seen as an insignificant site of struggle although its power often lies in masking that very fact. She believes wherever oppressions exist, there will be cultural exploitation and destruction because a people bereft of culture is more exploitable and pliable. For many of the women authors in this study, culture is central to the emancipatory challenges of contemporary society. In today's neoconservative climate of cultural unification and mass dissemination, it is encouraging to see women adult educators using artworks as counterforces that reposition women and others as cultural actors and makers. Community cultural development is a process of revitalizing and revalorizing traditional cultural activities and, by extension, cultures themselves. The guiding theory is justice—cultural, economic, and artistic. This view of people as makers of culture—as artists—challenges feminist aesthetics that often limits itself to a focus on artists as culture makers, albeit they may do it with or through community (e.g., Felshin, 1995; Mullin, 2003). What these women have opened is a new perception of the place and role of the artist—who is the artist in fact—in community cultural development practice.

Having said this, a strength of cultural and aesthetic agency is the artist who engages with community or pushes women to take creative and artistic risks. If the artist as a critical aesthetic and social educator is such a powerful force, why were there so few writings about the artists? With the exception of Cowan's work on women elders teaching traditional crafts and Sgroi's references to artists teaching art making, the only other study to focus on the artist as educator is Barer-Stein's, and that was a male artist. For an answer, we can turn to feminist aesthetic theory. First, Carson and Pajackowska (2001) have found that the majority of studies are of male artists. But it could also be a fault of feminist aesthetic theorists who give little attention to the educational or learning dimension of the arts. Is this, to paraphrase Nochlin (1988), because there are no great women artist-educators? Certainly not, and studies that explore the work of women artists as educators—in both institutional and community settings—would not only expand our understandings of who the adult educators are but also bring an underrepresented element to feminist aesthetic theorizing.

Voyages of self-discovery and therapeutic intervention in arts-based research are by far the most commonplace (e.g., Cahnmann-Taylor & Siegesmund, 2008). There is certainly a component of this in the literature reviewed for this study. But as the feminist movement can attest, profound social change comes not from simply staying at the level of the individual but from turning the gaze outward. In the case of education, digging deeper into tacit norms and implicit assumptions, such as patriarchy, constitutive of society is the means (Thompson, 2007). And this understanding does seem to drive more of the work of many of the women in this study. Theirs is a movement away from simply producing lovely poetic passages of personal experience toward an artistic identity formation and political consciousness-raising tool. Their work strengthens beliefs that arts are rigorous and legitimate tools that can contribute to gender and other forms of awareness or justice.

The dilemma Lippard (1984) once raised was how to use the arts or integrate art and politics without sacrificing artistic quality or merit, however defined. This issue is complex and often boils down, as illustrated in this study, to the product versus process and realism versus symbolism debate. Based on this study, I would argue the needs for artistic quality, realism, and process and activist goals and strategies are contextual rather than exclusive. In other words, it depends on the context, the purpose of the project, and the ultimate use of the art piece. If the artwork is meant to be didactic, to be easily and quickly understood, then realism, rather than quality, may be of the upmost. A poignant and clear message and an engaging process such as those by the Raging Grannies (e.g., Roy, 2000) are more important to momentum at rallies than more coded, metaphoric pieces that require concerted reflective time. Realism is also something that will grab media attention, as Clover's article showed. In addition, adult learners can produce skits during workshops around issues that are entertaining if not professional because the process of engagement was what mattered most. The play is a result of dialogue and working together, not a piece for public viewing. However, there are other times when quality would matter. It would matter to someone who wanted to sell a craft or publicly display her or his artwork.

Here, one would want to have a sense of pride in a work well crafted. Second, the more coded or subtle a message in an artwork, the more artistry is required for people to make meaning from it. Think of a poem that juxtaposes seemingly contesting views on first reading but reveals deeper connections when perused. Finally, and linked, in a work of art beautifully crafted, the message is far less likely to be dismissed. If a theatre piece, as suggestive in a comment by an audience member in Baird's (2002) work, is considered to be of low aesthetic merit, the message runs the risk of being lost or ignored. Having made these distinctions, however, I would argue that there would be much potential in linking artists with adult educators in all cases. Placing equal value on the product and the process, learning to craft a strong message in fine piece of work would contribute much toward a well-rounded or holistic approach to arts-based learning and education (Butterwick & Dawson, 2005).

A major contribution this study makes to feminist adult education practice is to illustrate the potential of the visual arts to disseminate "outcomes" of research or learning that go well beyond what articles or workshop reports can do. When has a written workshop report contributed so dramatically to political change as one collective painting on the side of a garbage truck did? This is not to belittle articles and reports but simply to point out, as the authors did continually in their writings, the innate qualities the visual arts possess in terms of engaging an audience—prison guards or the general public—in more creative interpretive processes. In many ways, they make tangible, visible, and more concrete often unseen systems of meaning, such as the politics of waste disposal that are infinitely easy to ignore in our lives. Carson and Pajaczowska (2001) call this the seen's complex relationship to the unseen. They also remind us that "for many people, the visual aspect of culture—its imagery, signs, styles and pictorial symbols—is the most powerful component of the complex sophisticated systems of communication" (p. 2). Women adult educators' entry into the public domain with their visual arts raises a challenge to cultural consciousness that visually problematizes issues through new acts of knowledge dissemination and awareness raising "that cannot be simply forgotten or revoked" (Felski, 1989, p. 12). If feminist adult education is about re-creating and reimagining the world vividly and for all to see, then we have learned that the arts are a formidable tool.

Although there were disparaging remarks about the arts in the writings, the vast majority of the work presented ran very much counter to pervasive educational images of evening classes where elderly ladies paint pretty pictures of flowers. Although no one disputes learning should be a joyful and uplifting experience, in the hands of these feminist adult educators learning to make art or using formal artworks as learning portals becomes a subversive, sociopolitical act. Not only is this a creative way to challenge the "skills development" mandate, but it actually works to create new, artistic identities in people who might otherwise never see themselves as artists. Although not without their problems, artists are important culture makers and actors in our societies, and many are at the forefront of change (Felshin, 1995).

Can we say that this complex network of individual, cultural, and social learning activities is feminist? For Mullin (2003), artworks are feminist if "they focus on sex and gender and work toward politically progressive change. Some expose gendered stereotypes and gendered expectations. Others envision alternatives to sexist social practices" (p. 190). Although the majority of the articles in this study did focus on gender justice, challenging sexism and stereotypes, or used a feminist framework (e.g., Wright, 2006), others did not. A case in point is authors who problematized museum content and education but made no specific reference to women. Do we exclude these based on Mullin's definition, or is a work feminist because it is undertaken by women who address inequities and injustices even though they extend beyond sexism? Are the arts feminist because they allow women to exercise a variety of options for political and cultural change on terrains not limited to so-called women's issues? My answer tends toward yes, but I think it is time for feminist adult education scholars to talk about this.

Taken together, the women's writings define the parameters of aesthetic practice in feminist adult education and reveal a richly various character. The arts represent a rigorous and valid tool of research, a critical aesthetic and cognitive process of dialogue and civic engagement, a creation to strengthen identity, agency, and visibility, a challenge to but also perpetuator of injustices and omissions, a vital cultural addition to the discourse of community development, and a force for change in the public realm. Perhaps most importantly, the women's works in this study align the arts with liberatory or emancipatory struggles and broaden the discourse of feminist aesthetic theory.

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