



# Tales We Tell: Imagining Feminist Pasts, Writing Feminist Futures

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## ABSTRACT

The future of feminism depends not only upon its pasts, but also upon how these pasts are imagined in our present. One of feminism's lasting legacies has been its critical interventions into methods of historical inquiry. However, as this issue suggests, feminism currently faces a "critical moment of erasure." Feminist historians often remain trapped in divisive and decidedly non-feminist models of thinking about histories since the 1970s. This essay combats a lack of examples of "doing" feminist art history by demonstrating strategies that disrupt the writing and researching process. Drawing from my current research experience with women artists in Mexico, I demonstrate how methods such as oral history, grounded theory, social movement, and postcolonial theories, provide the tools necessary to imagine tales of feminist pasts in ways that better solidify their relevance to a shared present and future.

Key Words: Mexico, oral history, strategic practices

## RESUMEN

El futuro del feminismo depende no sólo de sus pasados, sino de cómo estos pasados se imaginan en pos de nuestro tiempo compartido. Los legados del feminismo son sus intervenciones en métodos de investigación histórica, sin embargo, como sugiere este número de *Nierika*, el feminismo está enfrentando un "momento de eliminación". Los historiadores feministas permanecen atrapados en modelos divisivos, y decididamente no feministas, de pensar las historias desde los años 1970. Este ensayo intenta combatir la carencia de ejemplos del "hacer" la historia del arte feminista, articulando estrategias que interrumpen el proceso de escritura e investigación. Usando mis propias experiencias con mujeres artistas en México, demuestro cómo métodos de "grounded theory", teorías postcoloniales y de movimiento sociales, proveen las técnicas necesarias para imaginar los pasados feministas que solidifican su importancia a un presente y futuro compartido.

Palabras claves: México, historia oral, prácticas estratégicas

The future of feminism depends not only upon its pasts, but also upon how these pasts are imagined in our present. During her lecture “Is Feminism a Bad Memory or a Virtual Future?” art historian Griselda Pollock spoke of the problematic place those who participate in the “making” of feminist histories find themselves, as they attempt to utilize the lessons of feminist theory in the interpretation of creative histories.<sup>1</sup> How might feminist art historians encounter, sift through and make sense of the memories of feminist pasts, in order to shape a critical account of these histories for the future? Feminism’s lasting legacy has been its critical interventions into methods of historical inquiry. However, and as this edition of *Nierika* suggests, other perspectives, such as queer theory, that take gender into account and have been privileged in the study of art were, in fact, developed largely as a result of the legacy of feminist inquiry—and yet they often do not credit the importance of feminism to their development.<sup>2</sup> In 2007, Pollock herself echoed this sentiment, claiming this contemporary problematic positions feminist inquiry within a “critical moment of erasure” both in the academy and popular sphere.<sup>3</sup>

This lapse in memory regarding the legacy of feminism is bolstered by the concurrent complexity of its relevance to the new millennium, evidenced by the eruption of the term *postfeminism*, particularly within a Euro–American sphere. American art historian Amelia Jones spoke of the creation of the term *postfeminism* in 1994 as being emblematic of a general cultural backlash against feminism. She attributed this, in part, to the discursive means by which the apparent “death” of feminism has been promoted through the reduction of feminism as a unitary construct that has been executed both in popular media and art discourse.<sup>4</sup> The term *postfeminism* has gained traction since the 1990s, prompting interdisciplinary responses from feminist scholars. American feminist historian Joan Scott has discussed this moment in terms of a paradoxical institutionalization of theoretical feminism within the academy, yet a turning away from practical feminism—in the attack on women’s studies departments and a generation of young women rejecting the feminist label.<sup>5</sup> Sociologist Misha Kavka agrees with Jones’ arguments, stating the use of the term “post” offers to “situate feminism in history by proclaiming *the end of this history*.”<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, feminist sociologist Deborah Siegel furthers the use of “post” solidifies an assumption that women’s movements have been successful, and therefore, feminism is no longer necessary.<sup>7</sup>

In her analysis of *postfeminism*, Kavka explicitly connects this questioning of feminism’s relevance with the writing of its histories:

The splitting of feminism into ever more particular sites of difference has given rise to a search for origins, to attempts to write a history of second-wave feminism that will “stick.” Our moment in feminist history, in fact, can be characterized by a struggle to figure out the present situation—often articulated as a concern about whether there is still such a thing called “feminism”—by writing the past.<sup>8</sup>

British feminist theorist Clare Hemmings also considers this crisis of feminist historiography in her book *Why Stories Matter: the Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (2011). She suggests the stories feminists tell are caught within tropes that define feminism in narrative terms of loss, indicative of current *postfeminist* declarations.<sup>9</sup> Art history reflects a similar solidification of loss in the writing of feminist pasts in what has since been dubbed in popular culture as the “feminaissance”<sup>10</sup> of the mid-2000s—marked by an abundance of retrospective

<sup>1</sup> Pollock, Griselda, “Is Feminism a Bad Memory or a Virtual Future?” Lecture at the Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City, November 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Convocatoria *Nierika*: *Revista de estudios de arte*. Número sobre Feminismo y políticas de memoria e imaginación, 21 June 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Pollock, Griselda. “Notes from a Feminist Front.” Lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, *Feminist Future Symposium*, May 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Jones, Amelia. “Postfeminism, Feminist Pleasures, and Embodied Theories of Art” in *New Feminist Criticism: Art, Identity, Action*. New York, Icon Press, 1994, pp. 16–17.

<sup>5</sup> Scott, Joan. *Women’s Studies on the Edge*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Kavka, Misha. “Feminism, Ethics and History, or What is the ‘Post’ in Postfeminism.” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 21.1 (2002): 29–44, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Siegel, Deborah L. “Reading Between the Waves: Feminist Historiography in a ‘Postfeminist’ Moment” in Leslie Heywood & Jennifer Drake (ed.), *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. Minneapolis, Minnesota University Press, 1997, pp. 55–82.

<sup>8</sup> Kavka (2002), pp. 30.

<sup>9</sup> Hemmings, Clare. *Why Stories Matter: the Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Groskop, Vic. “All hail the feminaissance,” *The Guardian*, May 11 2007.

exhibitions that sought to define a narrative for so-called “second-wave” “feminist” art.<sup>11</sup> These exhibitions, while important in their attempts to construct histories that account for feminist art and bring these works to the public in major venues, unfortunately mostly missed the mark in terms of activating new methods of presenting works. Most were constructed around well-known, Anglo-American feminist artists and ended up asserting an inverted version of the Western, male dominated art historical canon from a feminist perspective. During a conference titled “The Feminist Future”, held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York at the height of this period in 2007, Griselda Pollock again spoke about the current crisis of feminist memory. In her lecture “Notes from a Feminist Front,” Pollock argued that in the efforts to master the past, feminist historians have merely been repeating the “worst habits of art history.”<sup>12</sup> Trapped in divisive and decidedly non-feminist models of thinking about feminist histories since the 1970s, feminist art historians are, in part, responsible for the erasure of feminism’s international relevance in the present.

In attempts to rationalize and historicize a feminist past, feminist historians too often are forced to rely on the traditional tools of art history: assembling facts, documents, names, dates, and stories, to be built into what resembles an archive and history. While this yearning for an archive of unknown histories is valid, the notion of this archive as a true and objective account of a feminist past is an illusion. Rather than providing what is longed for — a structure for both knowing and engaging with this previously unknown past — traditional methods place fixed bounds onto practices in ways that deaden their relevance to feminism’s shared present and future. This becomes a repetition of retrospection — an understanding that these actors and their works *can* be located and positioned within a coherent narrative that all too often leads to their being confined within the archive, and subsequently forgotten. In fitting these histories into a coherent narrative, historians often reduce feminist subjects as representatives of a singular history for feminism, rather than feminisms.

As Mischa Kavka suggests, feminism would be better understood as “a term under which people have in different times and places invested in a more general struggle for social justice and in so doing have participated in and produced multiple histories.”<sup>13</sup> Pollock has suggested the writing of such multiple, contingent and international perspectives on the intersections between feminisms and art history are vital to feminism’s future survival within the academy. The question remains, how might historians write these pasts in ways that do not repeat hegemonic narratives, nor interfeminist creativity in the grave of history, but rather engage with feminist memories in a manner that is invaluable to feminism’s present and future? I argue that the writing of feminist history is not just a remembering of the past, but a remembering of initial lines of feminist inquiry — inquiries that posit feminism not as a set of prescriptions, but as a “critical stance” committed to interrogating and disrupting prevailing systems of gender committed to the production of *new* knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Part of what feminist scholars lack are examples of strategies that utilize feminist theories as methods in disrupting the writing of art’s histories from the research process through to the final published

<sup>11</sup> *Personal and Political: The Women’s Art Movement, 1969-1975* (NY, 2002); *Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art in the 1970s* (NY, 2002); *Venice Biennale* (2005); *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism* (Musée de Belles Artes de Bilbao: 2007); *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art* (Dorsky Gallery: 2007); *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* (MOCA, Los Angeles, 2007); *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (Brooklyn Museum of Art, 2007); *The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts Museum of Modern Art* (MOMA, 2007); *Elles@Pompidou* (Centre Pompidou, Paris: 2009); *Rebelle: Art & Feminism 1969-2009* (Arnhem Museum for Modern Art: 2009); *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: MoMA 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Pollock, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Kavka (2002).

<sup>14</sup> Scott, Joan. *Women’s Studies on the Edge*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2008.

product. In this essay I will share the strategies I am working through in my own writing and researching of feminist pasts. Working self-reflexively and collaboratively, I will draw upon examples from my current dissertation research with women artists in Mexico City. I will demonstrate how strategies from outside art history, such as oral history, grounded theory and social movement theory, as well as a reengagement with postcolonial theories, may provide tools that work towards resisting normative narratives and articulating feminist pasts for our shared present and future.

### Interrogating Narratives: Grounded Theory as Feminist Strategy

When working with histories of the recent past, historians often have the benefit (and challenge) of interacting with the subjects of their research. I chose to begin my research as many do, working directly with the artists themselves, asking them to recall their memories and stories through oral history interviews. As a practice, oral history differentiates itself from the traditional interview in that it involves a process where at least *two* subjectivities are present and active with one another. Collecting oral narratives to gain an understanding of women's cultural histories has long been a method of feminist inquiry; however, not all women's oral histories are necessarily feminist.<sup>15</sup>

Historian Susan Geiger explains in order for oral history to be feminist, considerations need to be taken into account regarding the objectives of the researcher, questions asked, the relationship between the subject and researcher as well as the "products" of the research itself —when oral history is eventually translated into written history. Geiger argues oral history can only become a feminist *methodology* when it meets certain criteria:

[Oral history becomes a feminist methodology] if its use is systematized in particular feminist ways and if the objectives for collecting the oral data are feminist. Feminist objectives include at least one of the following characteristics: they presuppose gender as a (though not the only) central analytical concept; they generate their problematic from the study of women as embodying and creating historically and situationally specific economic, social, cultural, national, and racial/ethnic realities; they serve as a corrective for androcentric notions and assumptions... by establishing or contributing to a new knowledge base for understanding women's lives and the gendered elements of the broader social world; they accept women's own interpretation of their identities, their experiences and social worlds as containing and reflecting important truths, and do not categorize and, therefore, dismiss them, for the purpose of generalization, as simply subjective.<sup>16</sup>

Feminist practices of oral history pertaining to the artist as subject allow for critical disruptions to the traditional artist interview. The structure of the traditional artist interview suggests it is possible to ask the appropriate questions to eventually find an objective truth about the artist and their works. The artist's position as the authority and subsequent explanations of their practices are used to explain their works in ways that fix their meanings. These explanations can then be generalized for a group of artists, or in the discursive formation of an art "movement" that may or may not have actually existed historically. As a counterpoint, feminist oral histories allow for artists to speak from their own *constructed realities* in ways that remain simultaneously critical to the imagining of a history for their work, but not over-determined as a final reductive statement on their lives and works.

During my own oral history conversations, artists are given the opportunity to speak to their varied definitions of feminism as linked to their experiences as artists. I often ask artists

<sup>15</sup>Berger, Sherna Gluck, ed. *Women's Words: the Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York, Routledge, 2001.

<sup>16</sup>Geiger, Susan. "What's So Feminist About Doing Oral History?" in Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Margaret Strobel (eds.), *Expanding the Boundaries of Women's History*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992, pp. 306.

to describe their definitions of feminist art. Mónica Mayer, an artist positioned at the center of a prolific period of feminist creativity and activism in Mexico City, explains:

For me, feminist art is whatever we do that we want to consider feminist art. Often... this has to do with women's issues, or gender issues, from a critical point of view. The kind of work I am interested in... is the work that is not just thematically, but also formally proposing something. That the form, or the strategy of the work, also reflects a critical attitude towards things – a feminist perspective on the result, on the process, on the distribution, on the whole thing... art as a whole process and phenomenon, not just a product.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Interview with artist, 20 April 2015.

Feminist history, like feminist art, is not simply a product, but is equally the formation and implementation of strategies that make the *process* of constructing that history feminist itself. In order to maintain feminism as both the form and content of my own research, I have opted to look for constructed and embodied realities rather than discernible and definitive truths. Taking a cue from postmodern theories, of which feminist theory was an integral part, feminist inquiry interrogates the notion of there being a single, linear, narrative history based upon facts —and instead locates history as fluid and relational. This concept helps uncover what Griselda Pollock argues feminist art historical inquiry often lacks —the “lived dimension” of feminism that exists in the untapped stories of the living archive of artists’ memories.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Pollock (2007).

Telling stories remains at the heart of the discipline of history —the crafting of narratives used to rationalize, archive and inform others about important historical moments in art. Historian Hayden White has posited that while historians are certainly able to find facts within the archive, once those facts are woven into a narrative, historians necessarily encounter a roadblock in the attempt to construct “objective” histories. According to White, the notion that historians are able to articulate a transparent account of the past is an illusion. In order to make histories intelligible, historians, both consciously and unconsciously, conform historical facts to their own preferences, biases and desires for that story.

For art historians, the goal is to tell a story, one whose content is based on true events, artists and works. This fact allows the products of art historical inquiry, historical accounts scholars write, to masquerade as truthful simulations, rather than *constructions*, of the past.<sup>19</sup> In the opening chapter to his book, *Stories of Art*, James Elkins asks his readers to draw a map of art history that avoids using progressive timelines. This map is not one of a “true” art historical narrative, but is a product of the reader’s imagination, reflecting their preferences, interests and knowledges. Elkins states “your version of art history has a lot to say about *you*: who you are, when you were born and even where you live.”<sup>20</sup> For feminist art historians, conceptualizations of history will necessarily reflect various allegiances, choices, and perspectives that influence the writing of feminist art histories. These perspectives need not be discarded in favor of a supposedly “neutral” version of history, but rather an awareness of these perspectives will be what keeps feminist lines of inquiry alive. It is not yet lost that feminist art historians were those first responsible for pointing out the “mental maps” canonical writers had projected onto the art history, that worked to most often reflect Western, white, male privilege. Reclaiming this initial line of questioning reactivates the strength of feminist investigations —the ability to utilize deconstructive thinking to question the neutrality of history and embrace the concept of constructed and subjective realities and histories.

<sup>19</sup> White, Hayden. “The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory.” *History and Theory*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Feb 1984) pp. 1–33.

<sup>20</sup> Elkins, James. *Stories of Art*. New York, Routledge, 2002, pp. 31.

The gathering of women's oral histories began long before second-wave feminist organizing; however, story telling has played a major role in legacies of feminism. Whether utilized in consciousness raising groups or African American women's oral traditions, women's stories craft solidarities and link together otherwise unknown memories to find common affinities, work out where differences lie and discover what they mean for collective feminist struggles. While stories enter into consciousness as factual accounts, they are in actuality representations, imagined perspectives and constructed accounts of the past. In her essay, "The Evidence of Experience", feminist historian Joan Scott also argues against orthodox historical methods, instead calling for strategies that enable the historicization of experience in ways that make visible subject-positions so that we might "understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced"<sup>21</sup>. Scott argues that the experience of the individual must be drawn into the historical conditions of that experience, but not in a way that offers a closed or resolved reading. In my own attempts to conceptualize contingent feminist histories in ways that resist problematic power relationships between the researcher and subject, I draw upon grounded theory methods as adapted by sociologist Kathy Charmaz.<sup>22</sup>

British art historian Ella S. Mills is currently developing the relationship between grounded theory and the artist interview as part of her doctoral research focused on British women artists of color (under the supervision of Professor Griselda Pollock). Mills's research proposes what she terms a "methodology of listening" with new and innovative ways of thinking with the artist interview, and the writing of art history itself, through an engagement with grounded theory methods. Quoting Charmaz, Mills states:

"Researchers can use grounded theory strategies without endorsing mid-century assumptions of an objective external reality, a passive, neutral observer, or a detached, narrow empiricism. If instead, we start with the assumption that a social reality is multiple, processual, and constructed, then we must take the researcher's position, privileges, perspective, and interactions into account as an inherent part of the research reality. It, too, is a construction. As Clarke (2005, 2006, 2007, 2012) stresses, the research reality arises within a situation and includes what researchers and participants bring to it and do within it. Thus, relativism characterizes the research endeavour rather than objective, unproblematic prescriptions and procedures. Research acts are not given; they are constructed."<sup>23</sup>

The principles underpinning Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory are to recognize that both the interviewee and the interviewer's realities relayed through the loosely structured interviews are constructed realities embedded in their lived experiences. From this perspective, using grounded theory completely undoes the art historian's search for an absolute truth – there is no truth to be *discovered*, rather the conversation is *co-constructed*. Furthermore, the interviewer is aware of their role in the co-construction of reality and is both transparent and reflexive about the process. This position is in opposition to more traditional (artist) interview research methods whereby the interviewer is assumed to take an 'objective' approach, hence they might neglect to consider their influence on the unfolding dialogue and their own implicit motivations. The co-created conversation, however, crucially extends beyond the normative restrictive space of the artist interview. Charmaz's articulations of relativism and constructed realities are absolutely fundamental in working towards an art history that does not place one person's experience as either other to one's own central experience, or regard it as representative of an entire community of otherness.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Scott, Joan. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Summer, 1991), pp. 773-797 (p. 792).

<sup>22</sup> Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. London, Sage, 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Charmaz (2014), pp. 13.

<sup>24</sup> In conversation with Ella S. Mills (30 November 2015) in relation to her doctoral thesis, "Dialectics of Belonging and Strategies of Space: Cultural Memory, B/black Women's Creativity and the Folds of British Art History 1985–2011" (submitted 2016, University of Leeds).

As Mills argues, grounded theory methods strategically reconfigure the research process as a place of conversation, rather than discovery. By rejecting the idea of objective neutrality so often brought to bear in the artist interview process, grounded theory frees the historian to participate in the co-construction of histories with the subject. Not working towards finding an ultimate truth or meaning behind an artist's life and works, the emphasis is placed on contingent productions of meaning from a variety of producers.

While it is clear art is fundamentally entangled with the bodies, emotional experiences and socio-political contexts of those who make it, grounded theory provides a method that does not reproduce irrelevant categorizations so often tied with analysis of women artists. In the case of my interviews with artists in Mexico City, rather than entering into the process with a set of questions that would inevitably steer the conversation away from the artist and towards my own preconceived outcomes or answers, the interview is based on a set of synthesizing concepts defined as essential to my project's needs. These are grouped into themes that guide our recorded conversations, and are based around processes of identity formation —how these women came to identify themselves in a variety of contexts, as artists, women, feminists (if applicable), national and classed subjects, and how this relates to their experience with the practice of art making from a feminist perspective.

In my research, I am attempting to conceptualize a history that focuses on a group of women who were interested in feminism, who created work with a feminist consciousness in mind, and who often worked together on projects, or at least in close proximity to one another. With these facts in mind, it is easy to generalize groups into "movements" —which may go counter to the realities and complexities of these artists' lived experiences. Often, groups are very loosely defined, ephemeral or temporary. As grounded theory is rooted in an understanding that all historical accounts from subjects will be a construction of their particular reality, identities emerge for subjects in ways that do not transform one woman's experience as the same for all women in that location or time. It is in the combination of these memories, when drawn together in conversation with one another that build a more complex and rich picture of shared feminist histories.

The critical emphasis on non-neutrality and collaboration within grounded theory also stabilizes the notion "self-reflexivity" within the research process. The researcher is always an inherent partner in the construction of feminist histories —as someone with an objective to commit these memories to paper. Rather than an objective observer, I am a collaborator in my conversations with artists, and will have points of connection and divergence to and from the material. My own constructed realities as a (relatively) young, middle-class, white, American, feminist, woman, bring preconceived notions of cultural symbols, issues, identities and works. The traditional artist interview process works to mask these facts. Even if self-reflexivity is acknowledged, this acknowledgement still tends to place an aura of authority within the hands of the subject/artist, rather than recognizing the shared dimension of exchange that takes place during the interview process. Grounded theory, drawing in part from post-colonial feminist methods, identifies the situated knowledges of both researcher and subject in the dynamic and shared project of constructing histories. Rather than seeking out an unknowable truth, all of these perspectives are given space to guide the writing process towards more open-ended and complex conceptualizations of a shared past and the place of art within it.

## Art and Social Movements: Strategies for Writing Feminist Cultural Resistance

Strategies from outside the discipline of art history and gender studies often engage feminist histories in ways that reveal new methods of interpretation that enrich the writing of its histories. Any inquiry into feminist creativity is necessarily caught within the particular political struggles for rights relative to the context of those creating feminist work. While art historians often acknowledge these themes as present in individual artworks or oeuvres as a main concern for artists, they often fail to engage that critical political encounter as a framework with which to interpret art.

Within the field of social movement scholarship, the 1980s signaled a “cultural turn” — where scholars looked towards in depth examinations of how culture, creativity and identity influenced contentious politics.<sup>25</sup> Poststructural and deconstructive methodologies profoundly altered the study of visual culture and society, pushing social movement theory as well to consider the concepts of fragmented identities, alternative perspectives and the influence of agency on change within dominant ideologies.<sup>26</sup> This methodological shift focused on analyzing the effects of cultural aspects on the origins, methods and outcomes of social movements. Examining identity formation also became uniquely important after this time, as people mobilized around both political and cultural/identity based concerns (women’s rights, racial justice, LGBTQI rights, etc). This period was also marked globally by a generation of post-1968 artists working within art collectives to mobilize their work towards political change that often directly intersected with broader social movements of the time.

New social movement theories provide a space for understanding how creativity can contribute to political mobilization —resisting the dogmatic instance of the divide between the two. As the types of art practices feminist art historians are concerned with are often defined, at least in some way if not explicitly named, as feminist, the distinct political position that naming entails should be acknowledged. Feminist creative agents, in all their varied forms, can be interpreted in terms of social movement actors, defined loosely as a network of individuals who focus on and carry out actions that work towards social change. Under this definition, methodological frameworks become available that assist in exploring previously untapped lines of inquiry for interpreting feminist creativity and histories. These methods can help identify important issues regarding the connections between art and politics, and provide methods of analyzing creative efforts that erupt alongside and often within social movements in non-traditional ways.

Developments in social movement theory that attend to the use of culture as a tool for collective organizing blend well with the study of feminist creative production. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, subaltern anthropologist James Scott suggests that scholars can methodologically expand the limits of what normally constitutes protest.<sup>27</sup> From his work with subordinate group uprisings in Latin America, Scott outlined different genres of ideological resistance, arguing scholars should look for *hidden transcripts* to reveal more nuanced meanings of protest. For Scott, the “public transcript” is that which constitutes open and public interactions between dominators and the oppressed. A *hidden transcript*, therefore, is a critique of power that goes on offstage, which the power holders might never see or hear.

Certain practices by women artists could be considered under the rubric of *hidden transcripts*. In the case of feminist art practices from Mexico, the works that have generally become more well-known and widely historicized are those which have been executed as public actions. For example, two of Mónica Mayer’s most celebrated works are *El Tendedero*

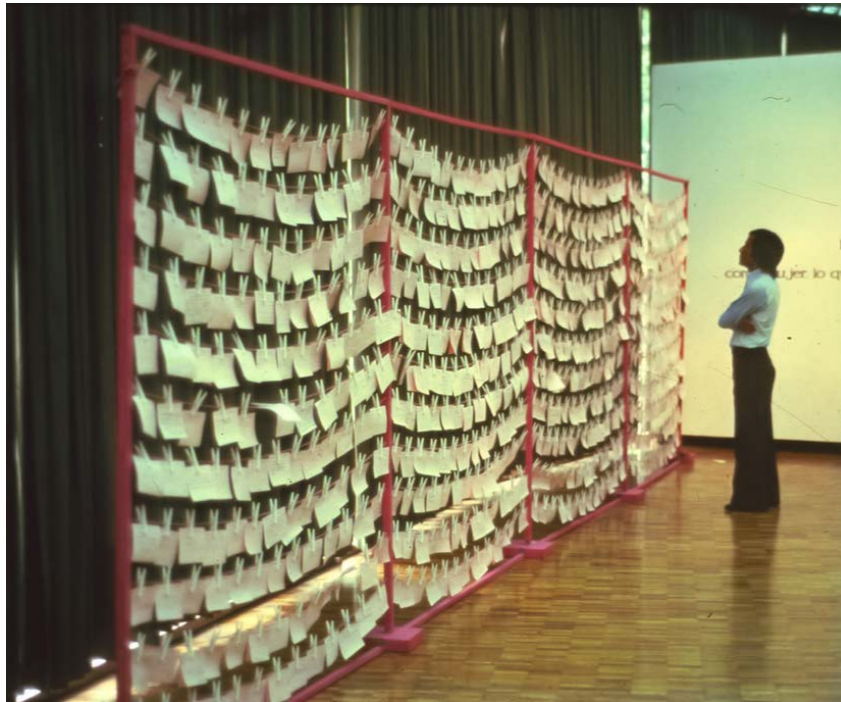
<sup>25</sup> Johnston, Hank and Klandermans, Bert. *Social Movements and Culture*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Critical scholars in the development of this realm of social movement scholarship include: Sonia Alvarez, Robert Benford, Ron Eyerman, James Jasper, David Meyer, William Roy, & James Scott.

<sup>27</sup> Scott, James C. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992.



Figure 1. Mónica Mayer,  
*El Tendedero*, 1978,  
Mixed media installation  
(Image courtesy of Victor  
Lerma)



from 1978 (Fig. 1), and her ongoing performance project *MADRES!* begun in 1983 with Maris Bustamante as part of their feminist art group, Polvo de Gallina Negra (Fig. 2). For the installation work, *El Tendedero*, Mayer asked 800 female residents of Mexican City to fill in pink cards answering the phrase: "As a woman, the thing I most hate about my city is..." She then used clothespins to attach the responses to strings stretched along pink poles inside the gallery space at the Museo de Arte Moderno. An overwhelming majority of women wrote about the threat of violence and sexual harassment throughout the city. Combining humor, performance and social activism, Bustamante and Mayer's project *¡MADRES!* was a long term intervention that worked towards challenging and disrupting culturally oppressive myths

Figure 2. Polvo de Gallina  
Negra, *¡MADRES! Madre  
por un día*, 1987, Still  
from video recording of  
performance (Courtesy  
of the artist)



of motherhood within Mexico. The artists were able to reach a widespread public audience, appearing on a television show hosted by Guillermo Ochoa, where they famously converted Ochoa into a “mother for a day” while discussed the project in front of nearly 200 million viewers.<sup>28</sup> While these works are incredibly important, their overemphasis in scholarship works to clouds the appreciation of Mayer’s overall oeuvre, which includes practices that both publically and privately enacted disruptions to the patriarchal status quo.

Putting Scott’s *hidden transcripts* into practice, another of Mayer’s works, *Las bodas y el divorcio* (1980–2015), reflects a critique of patriarchal power that went on offstage, privately and artistically. This work chronicles Mayer’s marriage to her partner, Victor Lerma, and their subsequent “divorce” as a performance that has been reactivated over a number of years (Fig. 3). In 1980, official wedding ceremonies in Mexico included the words of Melchor Ocampo, requiring women to agree to the following statements:

Woman, whose main gifts are abnegation, beauty, compassion, wisdom and tenderness must and will obey her husband and give him pleasure, assistance, consolation and advice. She will always treat him with the reverence owed to the person who provides for us and defends us, and with the delicacy of one who will not awaken her own rough, irritable and harsh temper.<sup>29</sup>

In the performance, Mayer and Lerma called attention to the patriarchal constructions and restrictions that lay beneath these normative processes and passages in personal life. While the two did say these words in their legal marriage ceremony, they also staged a performance event that deployed and subverted these martial constructions. In the invitation to their wedding, Mayer announced participants would be attending the “birth” of “Mrs. Lerma”:

<sup>28</sup> Bustamante, Maris. “Non-Objective Arts In Mexico 1963–83,” in Coco Fusco (ed.), *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*. London, Routledge, 2000 (pp. 204–218) p. 215.

<sup>29</sup> Mayer, Mónica and Lerma, Victor. *Dossier from of Las bodas y el divorcio at the Amory Center for the Arts*. Pasadena, California, USA (2015).



Figure 3. Mónica Mayer and Victor Lerma, “Mrs. Lerma” from *Las bodas y el divorcio* (1980–2005), Archive of Pinto mi Raya (Mexico City), (Courtesy of the artist)

<sup>30</sup> Invitation text, courtesy of the artist, 1980.

<sup>31</sup> This work would be re-performed within gallery spaces around the world in subsequent years.

<sup>32</sup> Mayer, Mónica. "On Life and Art as a Feminist," *n.paradoxa*, 9 (1999), pp. 47–58.

<sup>33</sup> Roy, William G. *Reds, Whites and Blues: Social Movements, Folk Music and Race in the US*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010.

Although peculiar, marriage presents a very interesting opportunity: the birth of "Mrs. Lerma". Since that name does not belong to me, nor is it a personality I know, I feel totally free to create the Mrs. Lerma I need. In this society, when a woman marries, attitudes towards her change. Unfortunately, she becomes more credible not because of her own achievements, but because she now has a man. However, we must understand that while this phenomena is the result of patriarchy, it also happens because marriage – that ritual that one supposedly performs as a passage into adulthood – marks the age when one acquires certain responsibilities towards society. I am not completely sure of the different attitudes I will have to face as Mrs. Lerma, but I am starting to prepare for them.<sup>30</sup>

Mayer solicited responses from wedding guests as to what characteristics this new identity should have. This collective feminist act of identity construction occurred in the context of a relatively private event, amongst friends and family. While the initial scope of the work was limited,<sup>31</sup> this quiet disruption, viewed under the lens of *hidden transcripts*, demonstrates how collective critiques of power can be radical even if they are not enacted fully within the public sphere. By activating feminist dialogues amongst those closest to them, Mayer and Lerma resist the neutrality of patriarchal constructions and suggest ways these practices might be revolutionized in the everyday.

If scholars pay careful attention to what lies beneath the surface of public resistance, a range of activities that might otherwise escape our gaze as investigators could be revealed. Sites of everyday resistance, such as humor, folktales, consciousness raising groups, and, I would argue, artworks and informal artist networks, craft new narratives that run alongside and enhance interpretations of the combination of public protest and feminist art. Locating networks of collaboration amongst women interested in both feminism and art reveals material that contests the binary separation between political protest, artistic expression and personal lives. During the 1970s, Mexican photographer Ana Victoria Jiménez worked along with numerous collaborators to produce the feminist newspaper, *Cihuat: Voz de la Coalición de Mujeres*. At times, Mónica Mayer provided drawings to run alongside feminist articles, and it was within its production she stated she began to locate outlets for the integration of her political and artistic concerns (Fig. 4).<sup>32</sup> In 1979, Mayer created a series of collage artworks entitled *Genealogías* (Fig. 5). These works disturbed the binary between politics and art, the personal and political, as she manipulated images drawn directly from her participation in public protests for abortion rights that had been documented in the press. Mayer intervenes in the images, subtly directing the viewer towards the image of her mother, who is seen in the background. The genealogy referenced is a lineage between mother and daughter, however Mayer places this within the context of a wider social movement —a relationship linked through feminist ties, found hidden within the public sphere of protest and media coverage.

Social movement scholars have argued that creative expression can be conceptualized as a social relationship. In *Reds, Whites and Blues*, sociologist William Roy states culture is relational and active —it is something that we both "do" and use to interact with one another, rather than possess inherently.<sup>33</sup> Art historical inquiry often forgets it is within that relationship of cultural production that artists interested in social change often find the means to act in political terms. Art is all too often conceived of as a byproduct of a movement. What if we were to consider how the practice of feminist art making helped feminist agents to forge ideologies, networks, and alliances prior to the movement itself?



Figure 4. *Cihuat*, No. 8, 1978, Archive of Pinto ml Raya (Mexico City, DF), (Photograph of the author)

It is productive to consider this line of questioning with Latin American feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa's notion of *conocimiento*. Anzaldúa defines *conocimiento* as a complex form of embodied knowledge, created through the combination of social and political action with lived experiences. This form of subversive knowledge, according to Anzaldúa, is specifically reached through creative processes. She states:

A form of spiritual inquiry, *conocimiento* is reached via creative acts—writing, art making, dancing, healing, teaching, meditation, and spiritual activism—both mental and somatic (the body, too, is a form as well as site of creativity). Through creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself.<sup>34</sup>

Anzaldúa recognizes that subversive knowledges are inherently woven into and crafted through acts of artistic creativity, that in turn inherently link the personal to the political. In his 2012 book, *Art and Social Movements: Cultural Politics in Mexico and Aztlan*, American sociologist and art historian Edward McCaughan uses Anzaldúa's *conocimiento* in an analysis of the recovery of devalued knowledges in relationship to art practices and political organizing of Oaxacan painters Nicéforo Urbieto and Marcela Vera. This analytical application of *conocimiento* could be expanded to attest to the role visual culture plays within active feminist mobilizing, and art's bea-ton at the intersection of the personal and political.

<sup>34</sup>Anzaldúa, Gloria. *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*. New York, Routledge, 2002, pp. 542.

<sup>35</sup>Mayer (1999) pp. 50.

*Conocimiento* not only pertains to the recovery and reactivation of lost or devalued knowledges, but also, as Anzaldúa states, to the *active* creation of personal and collective knowledges rooted in social, political and embodied experiences. Within my study of artists interested in feminism in Mexico City, some have articulated that they did not know exactly what “feminist art” might mean when they began creating it.<sup>35</sup> Their practices were located within experimentation, in discovering and imagining, individually and collectively, what feminist artistic practices could be. Artistic expression was not just a product, but the physical space for enacting a social relationship rooted in the varied politics of feminism, and also the embodied *conocimientos* that collectively forged positions, practices and actions. Feminist inquiry might, in this way, also explore how creative expression itself works to build tradition and networks, creating diverse channels of communication that extend outwards through time and space. How much more complex and inspiring would the stories of feminist art history be if the role art played in diffusing the ideologies of movements working towards culturally based transformations of discourses, intimate relationships and social structures were to be critically analyzed?

### Still Under Western Eyes: Strategies for Disrupting Hegemonic Discourses

One of the greatest interventions to the writing of histories was provided by feminist and postcolonial scholars in the 1980s and has transformed the ways international feminist subjects are interpreted. In her pivotal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak historically argued the “Third World woman” is always constructed as a distant “Other,” waiting to be discovered. In attempts to represent this woman, even postcolonial critics enter into a paradox in which they essentialize the subaltern woman, simply repea-

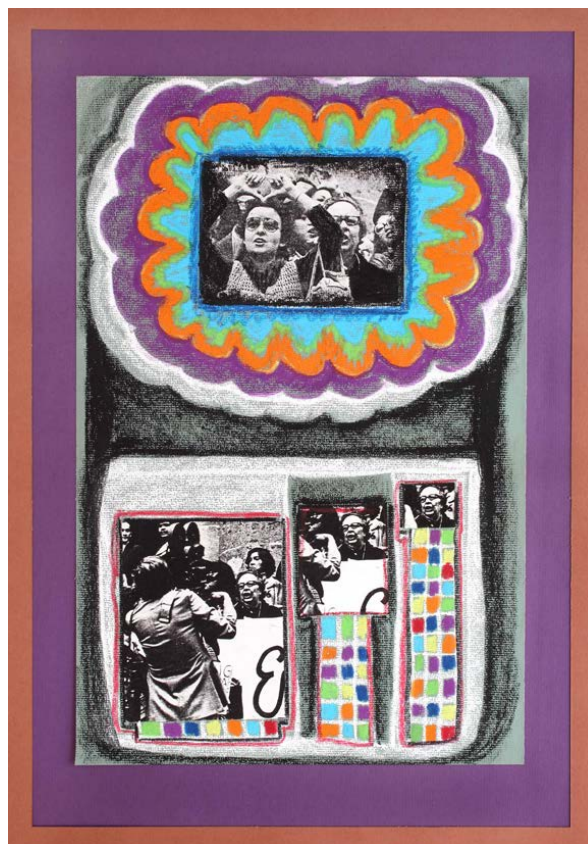


Figure 5. Mónica Mayer, *Genealogías*, 1979, 60 x 80 cm (Courtesy of the artist)

ting the colonialist discourses they critique –assuming Western(ized) intellectuals can serve as a transparent medium through which the voices of the oppressed can be represented. Thus, Spivak argues, the subaltern cannot speak, as she is only ever spoken *for* by elite intellectuals.<sup>36</sup>

In 2010, Spivak responded to her critics by returning to this essay, articulating that it is not that subalterns lack the personal agency necessary for speech, but that there is *still* no valid institutional framework for understanding of their resistance, so they cannot be recognized or heard by those in power.<sup>37</sup> Latin American postcolonial and feminist theorist Nelly Richard argued a similar position, stating postmodern interests in the recuperation of marginal subjects have still not effectively modified the discourses or categories of power.<sup>38</sup> These sentiments mirror Griselda Pollock's analysis of the current situation for feminist art historians. Now, nearly 35 years later, there has still been no fundamental disruption at the level of discourse in which a marginalized subject might be able to be represented, or represent herself, without reenacting colonial or patriarchal discourses.

As the imperatives of feminist and postcolonial theorists have not yet been achieved, looking again to postcolonial theories with a critical awareness to the complex relationships between researcher and subject might work towards transforming the ways in which scholars write feminist past. Drawing from Ranajit Guha's initial definition, the "subaltern" could be viewed not solely in terms of subordination or a single hierarchical position, but rather as "a relational concept informed by intersections of power."<sup>39</sup> Taking this perspective on requires the researcher to remain constantly aware of how power slips and reformulates itself within different relationships —offering moments of disruption to dynamics within investigations of and with artists.

Postcolonial feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty has been instrumental in articulating how those writing discourse are responsible for misrepresenting the struggles of "Third World women", denying them subjectivity and agency and homogenizing their experiences.<sup>40</sup> Mohanty's writing is full of pragmatic techniques for Western feminists to methodologically situate themselves in a position to better engage with feminist histories of those with whom they may not share close affinities. Mohanty argues for a research method that retains an activist stance of solidarity regarding feminisms generally, but that remains reflexively and contextually specific. She famously advocates for "intersectionality" in constructing the category of women in "a variety of political contexts that often exist simultaneously and overlaid on top of one another."<sup>41</sup> This is, in part, based on transforming the term "Third World" into the "One-Third/Two-Thirds World" model, which argues identity is always rooted in multiple and simultaneous sites of both oppression and privilege.<sup>42</sup> Nelly Richard also advocates for an embrace of feminist appropriations of poststructuralist theory that emphasize identity as "*construction, positionality, and relationality*... as the active transformation of the basic facts of corporal biography through cultural symbolizations that are changing and changeable."<sup>43</sup> Within this critical reimagining of identity, Richard argues fixed categories that work to homogenize subjects and their actions —such as "*the feminine identity, the Latin American identity*"<sup>44</sup> —can be dismantled.

I have found these strategies to be productive in building the framework of my own investigations. My project necessarily interrogates a certain socio-political moment in a place outside of my own center, and the subjects who have participated in the making of that moment are located within multiple identity positions that shift when considered locally, nationally and internationally. Historically, Mexican artists interested in feminism in the 1970s and 80s inhabited a borderspace between an active Leftist feminist movement that

<sup>36</sup>Spivak, Gayatri. "Can the subaltern speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 1988, pp. 271–313.

<sup>37</sup>Spivak, Gayatri, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Revised edition," in Rosalind Morris (ed.), *Critique of Postcolonial Reason in Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

<sup>38</sup>Richard, Nelly. "Postmodern Decentrednesses and Cultural Periphery: The Disalignments and Realignment of Cultural Power" in Gerardo Mosquera (ed.) *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*. London, INIVA, 1995, pp. 260–270.

<sup>39</sup>Guha, Ranajit. "Preface," in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*. Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. vii.

<sup>40</sup>Mohanty, Chandra. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1991.

<sup>41</sup>Mohanty, Chandra. *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, pp. 32.

<sup>42</sup>Mohanty (2003) pp. 227.

<sup>43</sup>Richard, Nelly. *Masculine/Feminine: Practices of Difference(s)*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2004, pp. 65.

<sup>44</sup>Richard (2004) pp. 66.

<sup>45</sup> McCaughan, Edward. "Navigating the Labyrinth of Silence: Feminist Artists in Mexico." *Social Justice*, 34.1 (2007): 44-62 (pp. 55).

<sup>46</sup> Giunta, Andrea. "Feminist Disruptions in Mexican Art, 1975-1987" *Arteloge*, No. 5 (2013).

<sup>47</sup> Min Ha, Trinh T. "Not You/Like You: Postcolonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity & Difference" in McClintock, Anne; Mufti, Amir; Shoha, Ella (eds.), *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, & Postcolonial Perspectives*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

<sup>48</sup> Mohanty (1991), pp. 53.

often dismissed their identity as artists as bourgeois, and a politically aware Leftist art world that rejected their feminist consciousness as irrelevant to political concerns. Mayer has reflected, "If in the Left, it was considered bourgeois to discuss feminism, within the feminist movement, it was considered bourgeois to discuss art. 'Serious' feminists, like 'serious' leftists, seemed to regard the artists' work as frivolous."<sup>45</sup> The lack of attention given to works by these artists in contemporary scholarship<sup>46</sup> reinforces this double negation. I contend the root of these inconsistencies lies in a continued reliance on hegemonic narratives surrounding the writing of cultural histories, which are fundamentally rooted in identity politics.

Postcolonial feminist methods of investigation enable identities to serve not as static locations linked to fixed biographical meanings, but as shifting and contingent platforms from which to enter into open-ended critical analysis. As these artists are positioned along a continuum of social majorities and minorities, the "One-Third/Two-Thirds World" model forms a constructive framework for examining identity as it relates to visual discourse. For those who identify as urban, middle class artists, formally trained at the prestigious art schools in Mexico City, they may have experienced local privileges that contributed to their rejection by feminist activists. Conversely, their status as women with feminist concerns may have forced them into the margins in relation to their local and/or global male contemporaries. Certain identities, such as working mothers and artists, necessarily factor into decision-making strategies in varying ways as evidenced in their artworks, an area where there still remains critical work to be done in relation to women's art practices. By negotiating rather than dismissing these varied identity contradictions, the research process resists repeating over-written categorizations. This method ultimately accounts for the distinctive participation of these artists in critical discourses in ways that do not assume their status as either victims or agents, but rather looks to the area in between to discover more complex histories of feminist practice.

During my interviews with artists I must always remain acutely aware of my own expectations of subjects and inevitable position speaking from a hegemonic center. It is key that I speak with artists as producers with their own situated knowledges, rather than generalized experts on, for example, "Mexican womanhood." Theorist and filmmaker Trinh T Min Ha argues the suggestion that non-Western subjects have an inherent "insider knowledge" that makes them an authority on a vast location needs to be disrupted.<sup>47</sup> She suggests a dissection of the binary relationship that often forms between a subject and an author in a practice that considers identity as a transgressable border. Through grounded theory methods, I am able to situate myself within the interview process, and later look at the interviews as texts —line by line— in an analysis that constantly gazes back and forth between the subject and myself. The production of feminist scholarship is not just the production of content, but "a directly political and discursive practice that it is purposeful and ideological."<sup>48</sup> This method of research, situated within postcolonial feminist discourses, allows space to consider the tales feminist art historians tell as an integral part of the lived dimension of feminism.

## Conclusions: Metaphors for a New Millennium

Feminist histories are often trapped within the metaphors that have been historically created before them. To keep feminism relevant, new paradigms, discourses and terminologies need to be invented for situating its histories. Historians and theorists are currently involved in interrogating the dominant, and often divisive, metaphors of "generations" and "waves." Waves have been challenged as too permanent a boundary line in describing feminist

generations, and instead historians have attempted to locate narratives that are more fluid and constructive.

Eileen Boris and Premilla Nadasen have suggested Afro-centric metaphors such as hair, strands and interwoven braids that articulate a history that is not static; as well as rivers, signifying varied forms of struggle that are always moving, flowing and, at times, converging.<sup>49</sup> Feminist art historians have argued for metaphors that work with the current moment of *postfeminism*. Amelia Jones suggests a variation with her term, *parafeminism*. She explains *parafeminism* as, “a conceptual model of critique and exploration that is simultaneously parallel to and building on (in the sense of rethinking and pushing the boundaries of, but not superseding) earlier feminisms.”<sup>50</sup> Griselda Pollock similarly argues for new ways of conceiving this moment of “erasure” for feminism that disturbs the “post” in *postfeminism*. She posits the term *after-feminism* in a discussion of the “after-effects” of the “massive intellectual revolution” that came out of the feminist movement that impacted nearly every discipline.<sup>51</sup> Drawing upon trauma discourses,<sup>52</sup> she argues society will always be profoundly located *after* and *in conversation with* the rupture feminism historically enacted. Rather than encouraging oppositional camps, these theorists consider the “feminism of what is to come” —through elective affinities, co-emergences, and co-alliances.

With these alternative metaphors, feminist histories conceive of ways to exist both side-by-side and beyond feminist histories in ways that build upon and learn from the past, without necessarily announcing their deaths. Feminist memories, thus, have the possibility of becoming a constructive resource in the ongoing social, political and cultural projects of future feminisms. These new metaphors, in combination with alternative methods such as those drawn from grounded theory, social movement theories, postcolonial interventions, and others unnamed here, offer models for conceptualizing shared histories that might assist in accounting for the multiple positionalities of feminist agents across time and space in more complexity.

Feminist art historian Peggy Phelan rightly states that while “rationality gives us ways to make categories. . . art gives us ways to resist them.”<sup>53</sup> Feminist creativity challenges rationalisms, positing new and unforeseen directions for feminisms futures. To further revolutionize art history, feminist scholars might continue to work towards thinking about feminist creativity not as an “ism” to be organized by institutional mechanisms, but as a concept with which to think *through* a vast amount of creative practices. In remaining engaged in a process of telling these stories not just to the public, but also to one another, feminist historians can uncover concrete strategies in an ongoing dialogue that furthers the construction of shared histories. It is through this method of collaboration that the historical record will plot out what Pollock names as a complex universe of feminist creativity, that shows “the lights of feminist engagement. . . flashing on in different places and at different times” collectively weaving “together a global text of international feminist work.”<sup>54</sup> The legacy of feminist inquiry is in part the crafting of history as a web of memories and relationships, arranged in a vast array of critical constellations, with full knowledge that the history of a singular feminism cannot, and should not, be written. ■

<sup>49</sup> Laughlin, Kathlee and Gallagher, Julie. “Is it Time to Jump Ship? Historians Rethink the Waves Metaphor.” *Feminist Formations*, Vol. 22, No. 1, Spring 2010, pp. 76-135.

<sup>50</sup> Jones, Amelia. *Seeing Differently: a History and Theory Identification and the Visual Arts*. New York, Routledge, 2012.

<sup>51</sup> Pollock, Griselda. “After Feminism.” Lecture at *Institute of Arts and Ideas* (April 2014).

<sup>52</sup> In particular the discourses of Theodore Adorno regarding representation after the Holocaust.

<sup>53</sup> Phalen, Peggy and Reckitt, Helena, eds. *Art and Feminism*. London, Phaidon, 2001, pp. 51.

<sup>54</sup> Pollock (2007).