



Gender equality and representation  
within and beyond the University  
of the Highlands and Islands

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# **The impact of feminist art practice and theory on pedagogical practices from a personal and institutional perspective**

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## **Abstract**

In this chapter I examine the impact of feminism on my teaching practice as an artist and lecturer in art schools and universities in the UK. I begin by looking at feminism in relation to my early career in the 1980s, with specific reference to the influence of the women's art movement, and feminist art theory and practice. I identify some of the challenging experiences I faced in academia as a feminist artist, followed by a closer examination of the positive experience in the 2010s when I introduced a new subject,

social art practice, into the art and design curriculum at the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). I consider the UHI MA Art and Social Practice programme, which commenced in 2017, from a feminist perspective, including challenges within the institutional context, and achievements, benefits and changes that have emerged in relation to the educational contexts I discuss.

**Keywords:** Art and social practice, socially engaged art, feminist pedagogy, feminist art, women's art Movement, feminism, higher education

## **Background**

I am a visual artist, born and raised in the United States. Since the 1980s I have been working in UK art schools and universities in London, the West Midlands and Scotland. I currently live and work in Shetland which I first visited in 1985. In January 2001, I abandoned a career in full-time academia to move to Shetland permanently and return to the precarious life of a self-employed artist who engages in

part-time teaching. This move to a community where audiences, both inside and outside the institution, were largely unfamiliar with contemporary art practices proved no mean feat for a non-commercial artist researcher.

I began teaching at Shetland College UHI in January 2001 on the programme that has evolved to become the BA Hons Degree Contemporary Textiles. Shetland College UHI is one of the thirteen partner colleges that together form UHI and offers students a selection of courses from national certificates to postgraduate degrees. UHI has proved a good fit for me. Its emphasis on student centered and virtual and online learning have provided sufficient elbow room for my professional values to develop, enabling me to embed inclusive, collaborative, relational and cross-disciplinary approaches to my teaching and learning.

I am fully aware that I write from a position of privilege, of white privilege and as a highly educated person. I recognise that despite feeling powerless at times, I am empowered, albeit in varying degrees and in particular contexts.

Nonetheless I experience prejudice within the patriarchy of the universities. I see and recognise how systemic race, gender and class prejudice riddle our society, including our educational institutions. I write here with humility, for I aspire to effect change, but I am aware of the small part my work ultimately plays.



Figure 5.1: Recount. Roxane Permar installing part of the work at the former Royal Observer Corps (ROC) Post in Walls, Shetland. R Permar and S Timmins, a Luminare Commission (2013) (Photo credit: Cold War Projects)

## Becoming a feminist artist

“What do you hear when you hear the word *feminism*? It is a word that fills me with hope, with energy. It brings to mind loud acts of refusal and rebellion as well as the quiet ways we might have of not holding on to things that diminish us. It brings to mind women who have stood up, spoken back, risked lives, homes, relationships in the struggle for more bearable worlds . . . . Feminism: how we pick each other up” (Ahmed 2017: 1)

My feminist journey began during the latter stages of the so-called “second wave” of feminism.<sup>1</sup> During the 1980s the art world was characterised by new fields of enquiry in feminist art history, criticism and art practice, all of which impacted significantly on the field of art education. Research and writing unearthed the “hidden history” of

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<sup>1</sup> The second wave of feminism, the first being the Suffragette Movement, was initially concentrated in the United States of America and then spread to other Western countries. It focused on issues of equality and discrimination, including rape, reproductive rights, domestic violence and childcare. The idea that ‘the personal is political’ underpinned these issues and was important for women artists during this period who addressed subject matter such as rape, domesticity and motherhood.

women in art, questioned the representation of women in visual media and analysed power relations in the art world.<sup>2</sup> As feminist artists we strived to gain equality not just for women artists but more widely for those who were not represented in the Eurocentric view of the world. Artists, and not just women artists, began to integrate practice and theory. We realised the importance of theory to gain better understanding of our practice, learn how to work better, and strive for equality. In art education “The feminisms that entered the art school aimed to undo everything: the curriculum, the power relations, the language that was used in relation to art, and the art itself.” (Robinson 2021: 2)

My feminist pedagogical journey began in January 1980 when I unexpectedly began team teaching with another woman artist, Elizabeth Strath, in a life drawing evening

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the publications which were seminal to my journey as a young feminist artist in the 1980s included *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (Pollock and Parker 1981), *From the Center: Essays in Feminist Art Criticism* (Lippard 1976), *Feminist Aesthetics* (Ecker 1985), *The Subversive Stitch and the Making of the Feminine* (Parker 1984), and *Looking on: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media* (Betterton 1987).

class at St Martin's School of Art in London. I was thrilled to be working in the art college, but with hindsight I can see that I was naive about the dynamics of the institution and unaware of the huge transformation I would undergo.

In the early 1980s there was a growing surge in demand among women art students for women lecturers. I found myself surrounded by women artists and art students who were all interrogating women's position in the art world, demanding more opportunities, greater visibility and increased recognition. I acquired work, albeit precariously, on Fine Art degree courses throughout the country in the form of temporary, part-time hours and visiting lecturing. Often these opportunities were initiated by the women students, and on one occasion even paid for by them through their student union.

Many feminist art events, including a major series at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), London, in 1980, were hugely influential to my developing feminist outlook, particularly the conference *Questions on Women's Art*.



Conferences were important occasions, providing a place to learn, find strength and feel a sense of belonging and connectedness. A series of conferences moved across different art colleges, organised largely by women students and women lecturers. We formed women artist groups around the country, and I joined the group Women's Work, one of the sub-groups in the Brixton Artists Collective, where we organised exhibitions, events, workshops and conferences.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The Brixton Artists Collective was a group of artists based in Brixton, London, who ran the Brixton Art Gallery from 1983 to 1990. By 1986, it had nearly 200 members and had exhibited work of 1000 artists. There were open member shows as well as themed exhibitions. The Women's Work group was allocated two exhibitions a year after its first in 1983, and in 1984 we decided to allocate one of these shows annually to the black women artists in the group. In 1986 we published a small book about our first two years of existence, *Two Years in the Life of a Women Artists Group* (1986) [<https://brixton50.co.uk/womens-work-book/>]

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Figure 5.2: Our Territory, Women's Work III. Brixton Art Gallery. General installation view (1984) (Photo credit: Roxane Permar)

Feminist perspectives influenced my teaching in a variety of ways, including my approach to content and the theoretical framework I presented to students. Much of what we did at that time has subsequently been adopted more widely in universities. In my teaching style I tried to actively engage students, even in my lecture courses. I introduced teaching materials which challenged traditional curriculum content in order to encourage diversity of art practice and positive role models for all students. I attempted teaching and learning approaches which fostered non-hierarchical,

open and inclusive learning environments. I treated students with respect, as equals, and I aspired to empower students, enabling each one to fulfil their potential by encouraging self-reflection and critical thinking. I also tried to help students understand their position in relation to the social and organisational dynamics they encountered, specifically in the art world. A colleague once remarked that students were “unteachable” after working with me. I took that as a compliment.

This first opportunity to design and test new approaches to teaching arose in 1984-85 when I was invited to create a new short course targeted at art and design professionals at St Martin’s School of Art in London (Central St Martin’s College of Art and Design). The course, *The Nude and Sexual Politics*, was very successful and ran for three years in 1985, 1986 and 1987. I used feminist theories of art and representation as the framework for a series of investigations, I developed an approach that combined practice and theory in order to break down barriers between

artists and models as a means to interrogate traditional modes of representation.<sup>4</sup>

## **Being a feminist artist in academia**

“To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable. The question of how to live a feminist life is alive as a question as well as being a life question.” (Ahmed 2017: 2)

I quickly realised that a great deal needed changing in higher education and that an hourly paid lecturer with no ‘position’ could have any influence over change. I thus began to seek a permanent post in the belief that I could make a difference. I secured a fixed-term post for two days a week, for two years, which stretched to three in the late

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<sup>4</sup> The title *Nude and Sexual Politics* referenced Kate Millet’s analysis of patriarchal power in *Sexual Politics* (1970). Feminist theories of art and representation drew on such feminist analysis and applied it to the visual arts, critically examining both visual representations of women, art produced by women and the position of women in the art world. The female nude came under particular scrutiny, as it was so predominant in Western culture and indeed a symbol of it. In her feminist critique of the female nude, Lynda Nead cited the feminist approach to life drawing undertaken in this short course, *The Nude and Sexual Politics* (1992).

1980s and early 1990s. For the next ten years, from 1992, I had two permanent posts, one fractional and one full time.

While feminism may have driven me to seek a position of influence, it didn't necessarily help me to function well within established institutions where patriarchy reigns, power hierarchies are firmly entrenched and unconscious bias is usually the norm. I have experienced resistance in all of the universities where I've worked, from subtle, nuanced prejudice to overt antagonism, which I would describe as harassment and bullying. I am not alone in this experience. Many of my women colleagues in academia have also experienced similar resistance. I must hasten to add, that I have also received significant support, too, from colleagues in these institutions. And I have always relied on my network of women artists for mutual support, as I have experienced one challenge after another in academia.

Attempts to diversify curriculum content and bring in examples of practice by women and ethnic minorities were in some cases vociferously decried. Some (male)

colleagues seemed unable to accept the presence of women teaching, to respect or acknowledge our expertise, experience and authority. Others have simply seemed bemused by the fact that we are women, and, I suspect, simply don't take us seriously. One of my (male) referees from an art college in the late 1980s told me he had written in a reference that, even though I was a woman, "I could teach men". And, indeed, at interview I was interrogated about this point. Another of my male colleagues told me I was different from other feminists with whom he had worked because I was "pragmatic".

That pragmatism combined with an 'angry' feminist drive is perhaps what has motivated me to keep going within academia. Fortunately, I have witnessed change albeit more slowly than I'd like. My feminist approach became evident in many ways in the Sculpture Area in Birmingham where I held my first permanent post. Generally the Sculpture Departments in art schools were heavily male dominated. When I arrived to Birmingham in January 1992, about 15% of the sculpture students were women, whereas

there were just over 50% women students in art schools studying Fine Art. By the time I left in 1998, women students formed the significant majority in our Sculpture Area.

Sculpture Departments were equipped with conventional workshops for wood and metal rather than materials that might be considered more “womanly”. I suggested we buy a sewing machine, iron, and ironing board, which happily wasn’t resisted. Perhaps more controversially, after I was put in charge of the area, I introduced training for all students whether male or female, in the use of power tools and construction technologies for wood and metal. The latter caused dissent among some colleagues, but my argument that all students needed to learn how to use all the available tools and equipment won over in the end. I reasoned that we had to fight the presumption that women students didn’t weld because of a ‘natural’ disinclination rather than because no one had ever taught them, or demonstrated belief in their ability to be able to weld.

The materials that sculpture students began to use became much more diverse, including soft materials in addition to welded metal and constructed wood, reflecting growing confidence among the women students as well as the impact women artists had on the discipline. For example, we invited women artists who worked in unconventional ways, such as Cornelia Parker, Tracy Emin and Emma Rushton as guest speakers. The use of ephemeral materials such as dust, textiles and sound became increasingly common, which at the time was a rather brave step.

In 1997 I wrote an article for *Make* magazine about the role and position of women in art education which was republished in 2015 in a collection of articles from the magazine. I praised women artists' positive influence in fueling creative change in the worlds of both art and art education. I asserted that women, by this time, were responsible for introducing new subject matter and making space for plurality of practices in art schools (Permar 2015).



This early experience has widened my thinking and opened doors to work with students who explored not only feminist driven subject matter but also issues related to race and class. By the late 1990s, I could see definite changes for women in the art world. Women had greater visibility as professional artists with concrete signs of increased opportunities and recognition.<sup>5</sup> More women were teaching in art schools, and some were creeping into senior positions.

## **Being a feminist artist in UHI**

“I think of feminist action as like ripples in water, a small wave, possibly created by agitation from weather; here, there, each movement making another possible, another ripple, outward, reaching . . . .” (Ahmed 2017: 3)

I continued to apply my feminist principles as I gained increasing knowledge and skills about pedagogy and institutional dynamics and moved through different

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<sup>5</sup> For example, between 1990 and 1999 two women, Rachel Whiteread (1993) and Gillian Wearing (1997) won the prestigious Turner Prize. Whiteread was in fact only the first woman to win the prize. In 1997 the shortlist was all women (Tate 2017).

positions within academia, eventually arriving at UHI in January 2001. Once again I became an hourly paid lecturer for three days a week, seven weeks a year on the programme which eventually became the BA Hons Degree in Contemporary Textiles at Shetland College UHI. This choice enabled me to relocate to a community I had first visited in 1985 and with which I had become increasingly involved through regular visits and two collaborative art projects, The Nuclear Roadshow with Susan Timmins (1990) and The Croft Cosy Project with Wilma Johnson (1992-95).



Figure 5.3: The Nuclear Roadshow. Roxane Permar and Susan Timmins. Installation at Eshaness, one of 6 sites. Shetland. A Projects UK Live Art Commission (1990) (Photo credit: Roxane Permar)

The move was important because it forced me to redefine and redevelop my professional practice as well as the role research played in my teaching. The move is important because it forced me to redefine and redevelop my art practice as well as my teaching. This move was not regressive, for rather than merely retracing steps in my early career as an hourly paid lecturer, I met new challenges that have required me to develop new and different approaches to teaching and learning. It has included adapting to new situations, such as teaching on a design course and teaching for the first time exclusively with women students and colleagues.

The development of the MA programme, Art and Social Practice, is the most significant outcome in this process of change, and it forms my institutional point of reference for the remainder of this chapter. Social art practice, for the benefit of non-specialist readers, is one which is considered to be 'situated,' a form of creative practice embedded in a location that impacts on the work and gives it meaning. This form of practice involves working with people, is process-

based rather than product orientated, and invites people to take part in engagement through collaboration or participation. Socially engaged practice is described by a variety of terms, including socially engaged art, social art practice, embedded practice or situated practice.



Figure 5.4: Installation for The Windows. Roxane Permar. Central St Martin's School of Art, and Design, Charing Cross Road, London (1990) (Photo credit: Roxane Permar)

The programme has grown out of two modules, one each for undergraduates and postgraduates, originally created during an Artworks Scotland Pilot Research Project, funded

by Creative Scotland, in 2013-14. Findings from the research project revealed that it is possible to teach socially engaged art practice using virtual tools and that synchronous technologies were shown to provide students with the most effective virtual learning experiences. Students told us that we should create an MA programme in this field of practice, which, came into fruition in 2017 with validation of the MA Art and Social Practice.

The programme commenced in September 2017. Currently we are in our fourth year and the programme has grown exponentially. It has attracted an overwhelming majority of women students, and currently there are only two male students out of 43 students in total. This majority may be due to the fact that based on statistics from 2016/17, women form approximately 65% of art students in UK higher education (Robinson 2021: 4). Or perhaps this field of art practice is particularly gendered, as it involves working with people, a form of work conventionally attributed to women's work. The programme team comprises four lecturers, all women.

Feminist principles and values underpin the programme, although when I initially proposed the course, and as we developed it, I did not intentionally set out a feminist agenda. The programme ethos is wholly in step with the feminist approach embedded in my pedagogical practice. Thus the teaching and learning environment is student-centred, non-hierarchical, open and inclusive. These qualities help generate a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for teaching and learning among all of us, lecturers and students alike. Networking, and collaborative and relational teaching are also fundamental to learning and teaching throughout the programme.

Curriculum design for the programme embodies lessons learnt from feminism, too. Plurality of practice underpins content. The need to question, and to test, is important, and feedback from students helps improve the course. In the spirit of plurality and interdisciplinarity, social anthropology, specifically a module about communities of practice, provides students' core theoretical foundation, rather than visual art theory. New subject content is embedded into the

curriculum that is unusual for conventional art and design education, but which is indebted to feminist pedagogy, including reflective practice, ethical engagement and decolonisation. Additionally we foreground island and rural practice, bringing firsthand experience of living and working in small and/or geographically remote communities to a field that has until recently been dominated by urban practice.

The MA Art and Social Practice is the first postgraduate programme in its field designed to be delivered entirely virtually, with students working from anywhere in the world, joining seminars and study groups through video conferencing spaces, and accessing learning resources in online virtual learning environments, in our case Brightspace. Using virtual tools may not seem innovative within the context of UHI, which is geographically distributed and provides tertiary education through a range of modes that has always included online and networked delivery as well as “site-specific” delivery on its thirteen campuses. However, in 2012 when I first began

investigating the idea to use virtual tools to teach socially engaged art, it was unimaginable among UHI lecturers in the visual arts to deliver an art programme without a physical base.

Some of the strengths and qualities of virtual learning and teaching lend themselves particularly well to feminist ways of working. Virtual learning offers flexibility and facilitates networking and connectivity. Artists can work in their own community where they have knowledge and have already developed relationships, a real benefit for social art practitioners. Virtual learning fosters inclusiveness (Stiles 2007). It provides a means to facilitate access to higher education, particularly for students who would not be able to seek a higher degree otherwise. Many of these students are women who have personal commitments such as caring for children, partners or parents that prevent them moving from their home communities to study. Students with mobility issues or chronic illness are equally more able to study in higher education by using virtual tools.



Virtual learning of course brings challenges, as do attempts to introduce new ways of working to established structures or new subject matter to conventional curricula. While in many ways UHI is a progressive institution, it is, like other universities, entrenched in patriarchy. Development of this programme faced numerous challenges in addition to the challenge of virtual delivery for a practical subject. The important point is that some challenges resulted in teaching and learning innovations and have brought benefit.

Some of the challenges can perhaps be seen as gendered, particularly marginalisation. It was difficult to take on new module development, and, ultimately, a new programme from my very marginal position within the university, a common issue for women lecturers. I was a very part-time lecturer, I couldn't access development funding, and I had no paid institutional time to work on the proposal to bring socially engaged art into the curriculum. The approval process for the MA programme was slow, arduous and riddled with setbacks. Nonetheless, this prolonged period enabled me to establish a strong philosophy for the

programme and identify a development team with whom I worked to establish a firm foundation, and thus a successful beginning.

Our programme has repeatedly addressed challenges around marginalisation. It has been difficult to gain genuine understanding and recognition for the subject at all levels within the university. While a handful of lecturers and managers understood the field of practice, or held blind faith in our ability to make the programme work, some lecturers outside our programme, for example, did not understand it, and did not accept that socially engaged art is real art.

There are teaching challenges, too, including the fact that students and lecturers are dispersed across wide geographical regions, with students based in the Highlands and Islands, the rest of the UK and internationally. We have felt the negative impact of virtuality, including preconceived prejudices about its use and feasibility for our field of practice. Fortunately there are benefits to virtual teaching,

and its challenges have encouraged us to develop new ways of working and we continue to experiment.

Values inherited from feminism and feminist art theory of the 1980s have helped to make the MA Art and Social Practice successful and distinctive. Students respond well to the dialogical processes that underpin the programme philosophy, and actively take part in the variety of opportunities for engagement with each other. They are well supported and encouraged, with trust and respect. We listen and have created a variety of mechanisms to collect feedback, and it is important to act on what we learn and to let students know how we do that. These processes not only help improve our programme but contribute to students' knowledge of institutional systems and power dynamics.

The programme is assertively student centred and develops in response to students' needs in order to create relevant learning experiences. It is flexible, enabling new approaches, content and structures to evolve in response

to changes in society, global and local issues, shifts in contemporary art practices and education. Students describe our programme as “life changing” and others call it transformational. Mutual support among students and between current students and alumni not only encourages learning but contributes to the formation of collaborative partnerships. We hope that the relationships that begin when students join our programme will become lifelong. Our aspiration to create a supportive and vibrant community of practice is becoming a reality.

## **Conclusions**

My teaching, research and professional art practice continue to be deeply influenced by feminist theory and activism. The presence of feminism in the university engenders individual and collective empowerment. My engagement in higher education is significantly more effective and rewarding as a result of the way my academic leadership and teaching is informed by feminism.

Core feminist values improve teaching and learning environments, fostering innovative teaching practices, inclusive curricula and progressive course development. Feminist analysis of social and political structures can encourage our students and colleagues to better understand power hierarchies within institutional structures that impact on learning, teaching and professional careers.

Feminists work for change, and as a long-standing feminist, I strive to make a difference to the lives of those with whom I work in the hope that the ripple effect will have wider reaching impact. Thus we can become better equipped to understand our positions as professional practitioners, and students, and be empowered to shape a sustainable career whether in education or as a creative practitioner. In future I hope that our students will contribute to making society better, and to improve our institutions.

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the University of Brighton in the session convened by Professor Hillary Robinson and Professor Marsha Meskimmon, titled Critical Pedagogies in the Neoliberal University: Expanding the feminist field in the 21st-century art school. The opportunity to take part in this session encouraged me to consider our MA programme from a feminist perspective.

I am indebted to my colleagues, students and artist friends with whom it is a privilege to work, and to whom I am grateful for unending support, inspiration and learning.

## **Author bio**

Roxane Permar is an artist based in Shetland. She is Professor in Art and Social Practice and is based in the Centre for Island Creativity at Shetland College UHI where she is a Research Fellow and the Programme Leader for the MA Art and Social Practice. The MA Art and Social Practice is the first postgraduate programme in the field of socially engaged art to be delivered entirely virtually. The programme brings together Roxane's practice-based

research and pedagogy, most recently in the research project, *Repositioning Practice*, funded by the Royal Society of Edinburgh. Her on-going collaboration with artist Susan Timmins focusses on the Cold War period in Shetland alongside northern and Arctic communities. She is part of the core team for the research project, *Home & Belonging*, with Dr Siún Carden (UHI), Sian Wild (WhoCares? Scotland) and the #ShetlandCrew, a group of care experienced young people. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, Advance HE.

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