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# GENDER, CREATIVITY, AND GENIUS

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## The Nature of Genius

Webster's New World Dictionary (Neufeldt & Guralnik, 1998) tells us that the concept of genius comes from an ancient Roman belief that a guardian spirit is assigned to a person at birth and has strong influence over that person's destiny. Webster goes on to define the person of genius as

one who has "great mental capacity and inventive ability" and "popularly, any person with a very high intelligence quotient" (p. 563). These attributes, for Webster, do not appear to be sex-linked. However, when I ask my students to list the names of geniuses, they always list men. Einstein, Picasso, Steven Hawking, and even Charles Schultz, the creator of the Peanut's comic strip have been some of their answers. Never have they listed a woman.

Battersby (1989), Soussloff (1998), and Koos (1998) have traced the idea of "genius" through history and explained how and why the notion of genius has consistently been linked with maleness. Genius was linked to seminal

fluid, which was linked to creation. The woman's role is passive. Her body is metaphorically the flower pot -- the container with damp and moist dirt, and the man is the active farmer planting seeds. In a book called *The Nature of the Genius* (Gemant, 1961), the author explained that while many women seem to be smart, there is a rational explanation. Most gifted women aren't really women! "Eminent women scientists are nearly always plain or have definitely masculine features. They are actually half men, physically and mentally, their primary sexual organs happening to be female" (p. 114-15). Karen Horney (1978) a pioneering female psychotherapist sarcastically pointed out: there is "scarcely any character trait in woman which is not assumed to have an essential root in penis-envy" (p. 247). It is not the penis that women envy, but rather access to knowledge and the possibilities of acting on that knowledge. Women have fought throughout history and cultures for access to art education and for the chance to make their livings with their art. In past times, many women had to leave their homes to pursue their art education in other countries and it was not until this century that women in the West had reasonable access to an art education beyond traditional women's work.

Heroines have fought harder for knowledge than they have ever fought for love and lovers over the ages...Eve was expelled, as was Pandora, from the Garden of Eden because she sought knowledge forbidden to woman, but granted to man for no other reason than his sex" (Goodrich, 1993, p. xix). Women art students are still struggling for equal access. According to the *Guerrilla Girls* (1998, p. 90), women artists' work is still collected and shown less than male artists' work, and the price of women's artwork is almost never as high as that of males.

Nochlin (1988) in her landmark article "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" considered the question of creativity, genius, and talent. She sites several male art historians and biologists who argue eloquently and scientifically demonstrate "the inability of human beings with wombs rather than penises to create anything significant..." (p. 147). We know from the work of many contemporary feminist critics and historians that there were creative women of genius and talent throughout history and cultures but their biographies and artwork are rare in textbooks and in art education curricula.

This is no accident. "Women's intellectual [and artistic] contributions were not just forgotten but were actively suppressed" (Seigfried, 1996, p. 23).

While creative women artists may indeed have been systematically erased from our histories, there is hope. Even if historians or cultures "killed authors and have burned their books, the only thing needed was a single copy that survived in somebody's pocket, or in somebody's memory, in order to keep the stories alive" (Goodrich, 1993, p. xxvii). Many informative works by contemporary art education scholars including Collins & Sandell (1984, 1996), Zimmerman & Stankiewicz (1982), Zimmerman (1989, 1990, 1991) and others are available, but unfortunately they are not widely disseminated. A powerfully written article about the artist Hae-Seok Rah, brings to light her struggles for the freedom to pursue an artist's life in early 20th century Korea (Choe, in press) and there are many more stories being told every day. However, in most instances, neither teachers nor students have had access to these women, their ideas, or their artwork within formal art education literature or visual imagery.

Locating women artists whose work was attributed to their male counterparts, such as Judith Leyster (Chadwick, 1990, p. 20) and reminding us of the existence of artists such as Sofonisba Anguissola has improved the content of contemporary art history textbooks. However returning creative women of genius and talent back into the art education curriculum is not easy. Even though art and artist "exemplars" have become more gender inclusive in the past few years, the numbers of women artists and thinkers represented in curricula is still very sparse. An unreflected assumption of contemporary nearly every contemporary culture still equates creativity, talent, genius, and even competency with men.

## **The Test of Time**

Several years ago, I presented a slide-lecture at a conference focusing on the HIStorical nature of creativity and genius, concurrently introducing a number of women artists. A mature art teacher in the audience challenged my feminist herstory with the patented patriarchal comment, "Well, if they haven't stood the test of time, then they probably weren't as good as the men." My responses to her response, which included the location of power

structures, especially within the artworld hierarchy, did help her re-think her position, but it was very difficult for her. She countered my statements with the modernist and time-honored argument about the subject matter of women's artwork. She parroted the criticism that women artists who make personal statements through their artwork are not really artists because they are not responding to the universals of significant form, but are "showing off" or have such small imaginations that they cannot think beyond their own bodies and experiences. She insisted that Art was not craft, and that BIG was better than small. She had been carefully taught.

This woman was actually a thoughtful critic of my presentation. She had learned exactly what her culture, her education, and her professional training had taught her. She is not unlike most of my own students, men and women (Smith-Shank, 2000). When students enter my classroom, they bring with them considerable cultural baggage. Each of my students has memories and experiences that contribute and enrich classroom conversations. However, they are also bring preconceptions and beliefs, which sometimes stop their curiosity, inhibit their exploration, and bind them to ideologies that inhibit their intellectual and creative growth. Many of their strongest beliefs are about gender issues.

The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce reminds us that "the primary function of thought is the production of belief. The purpose of belief is "to secure new habits that can put thought to rest" (Corrington, 1993, p. 36). What this means is that, as teachers, we need to be particularly careful when we discuss gender issues so that students, rather than automatically protecting their ideas, become uneasy with misogyny. Learning happens when students become so uneasy with their habitual thinking that they move toward new, more comfortable beliefs and habits. Making sure that the old, gender-biased beliefs and habits do not withstand "the test of time" is the educational goal.

## **Feminist Art Criticism & Boundaries**

"Feminism" is a word that automatically elicits unreflected beliefs, habits, and passionate responses. Coming up with one definition is an impossible task. Since feminism is a living and changing tradition, there are many varieties of

feminism. To be a feminist it is not necessary or even possible, to agree with every position. At a general level, to be a feminist is to believe that there are gender inequities that exist within cultures and want to make changes, not only in the artworld, but also within our global cultures. Feminist artwork is about critiquing existing social orders, and includes many styles and individual creative expressions that often transcend traditional ideas of what has been included as art in the past (Collins & Sandell, 1996). Feminist artwork questions the boundaries and categories of art. Feminism and feminist art intentionally cause discomfort with habitual attitudes and beliefs while also questioning artificial and counterproductive disciplinary boundaries.

To facilitate the disruption of habits, some women are making art about issues that aren't pretty, but are loaded with context, content, and ideas. It is really important that teachers discuss issues about the content, the context, the media, and the reasoning behind the artwork, as well as the visual artwork itself. I have found that ugly art is a good place to start a conversation. Many students never have a discussion about challenging artwork until they reach the university but it can and should happen earlier. In order to challenge historic conceptions of creativity, genius, and gender it is essential that art teachers take students beyond the notion of art as being a simple arrangement of elements and principles.

Meaning and context has to enter the conversation about art for all students. Both boys and girls can learn that good art can be about issues such as aging, racism, reproductive rights, motherhood, physical and sexual abuse, standards of beauty, and the control of language (Tucker & Tanner, 1994, p. 18). In the United States, these issues are rarely addressed, except within courses which students self-select for feminist content. Images by historical and contemporary women artists from all cultures can and should be included as a regular part of schooling. Their imagery illustrates the significance, power and the importance of creative imaginations that use bodies and experiences as conversation starters. Remember too that these ideas are not only issues for women. Within this context it is also possible to talk about male body images that surround us constantly.

## Heroines

In spite of feminist culture-work, most people can name few women artists, if any, and the public perception is still that Capital A Art is created by men. An artist is considered male unless labeled "a woman artist." It is really important for young girls and women to have role models that are female. We all need heroines. When I studied at the university, my artist hero was Picasso and I wanted to be just like him (see Smith-Shank, 1998). I didn't realize for years that being like Picasso wasn't exactly what I wanted, nor was he a useful role model for a budding feminist! When I was at university, no women artists were discussed in my classes and there were few, if any represented at the museum. I didn't know any women painters (dead or alive) and I had no women professors in studio art. I did have many women role models in art education including Mary Rouse, Jesse Lavano-Kerr, Laura Chapman, June King McFee, and Enid Zimmerman, among others, and I continue to value their influence, but I really could have used a studio-oriented heroine too. In a book aptly titled *Heroines*, Goodrich (1993) gives us the character traits of a true heroine:

[She] must have possessed and demonstrated her possession of an admirable personality and person. She must have proven herself more or less indifferent to danger and at some point able to triumph over it. She must have proven fearless before strictures which she has adjudged unfair or wrong. She must have scorned blind fortune and any hostile gods whatsoever. She must have acted positively in some situation calling for a cool head and a firm step. (p. xxiii)

When I read Goodrich's definition of a heroine, I reflect upon all the biographies of the women artists I know. There is not one that does not fit this definition. Our male and female students must learn about hidden-stream creative artists who have lovingly embellished their homes with quilts, clothing, weaving, and pottery. They should know about contemporary mainstream women artists who have found their voices, and they should learn about women artists whose work has been recovered from time through the efforts of feminist art historians and critics. Unless these issues are addressed in art education, they will not be addressed at all for most

people.

## **Final Thoughts**

Martin Luther wrote in 1533, "Girls begin to talk and to stand on their feet sooner than boys because weeds grow more quickly than good crops," and Pythagoras wrote in the 6th century BCE, "There is a good principle, which created order, light, and man. And an evil principle, which created chaos, darkness, and women" (The Guerrilla Girls, 1998, p. 7). Luther, Pythagoras, and others who equate creativity, talent, genius, and even goodness with maleness were and are wrong. As teachers, we need to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn about male AND female artists of creativity, talent, genius, and spirit. We need to nurture the guardian spirit of creativity which is assigned to both genders at birth and which has strong influence over the destiny of both girls and boys.

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