

Eyewitnesses, not spectators – activists, not academics: feminist pedagogy and women’s creativity

Ceasing to be spectators viewing an artistic rendering of sex and violence . . . we too are changed. We are eyewitnesses. Our seeing attests to the actuality of what – however unthinkable – is before us. Our shared reality with the artist can be the bedrock for building a powerful, authentic bridge from personal testimony to political analysis and practice. But first there is rage when we begin to face the truth (about rape).¹

Arlene Raven’s words summarise the essential features of the conjunction between art and feminism. She identifies the importance of contextual and experiential factors in ‘our shared reality’ and the mutual redefining of art and politics which ensues once we challenge the social and cultural boundaries which maintain the separation between living and cultural practice, between violence and art. Raven attests to transformational potential in identifying ourselves as women and with women.

Women/art: crisis

In the art world outside the Academy, while obstacles certainly remain (not least the underfunding of women’s art work² and women’s poverty as temporary, part-time teachers), women artists are now more visible, more influential, and more inspiring than ever.³ Women artists’ collaborative and participatory projects have been both prominent and important. Much of the very best work by women artists is openly rooted in women’s experience and produced within the embrace of a feminist identity and politics.

In art education, however, the stereotype persists of the bearded, white, older, male heterosexual art tutor faced with mainly young white women art students. Female art students have accounted for 50 to 60 per cent of all students since the 1890s (and mainly drawn from the middle and upper classes): acceptable, even necessary perhaps, given the woman as muse/mistress/model/child syndrome so persistent in Western art practice.⁴ The lack of full-time, women tutors, in particular within the fine art studio, compared to art history or complementary studies, suggests a taboo at work.⁵

Opposition to 'independent' or 'feminist' women in art education can still be virulent and damaging." After years of struggling for access to Higher Education as tutors, with very limited numerical and promotional success, and because of women's historical role within men's art and the prevailing concepts of Art, Creativity, and Genus in Western culture, women in art education ate perhaps among the most vulnerable, most colonised of women in academia.

What a shock it was though to realise that the art school was not a safe place, free of racism and sexism and all this from men, many of whom claimed to be the heroes of the working class! Why and how did my women during the 1980s in British art schools become undermined, undervalued, discouraged and in some cases defeated?⁸

The discrepancy between the visibility, community even, of women artists in Britain and the absence and isolation of women tutors in art education⁹ may be partly explained in terms of the difference for men between representation and experience, the imaginary and the material. Women's presence as tutors in art education appears to be organised mainly in two ways: occupational segregation, and what I will call 'art femininity'.

Occupational segregation can mean tokenism, for example, being brought in as a repair kit: 'So in one hour or occasionally one day's teaching, one is asked to redress mis-education, m&information and mis-direction'. It involves particular areas of work being identified with femininity, as 'women's work', even when dominated by male 'heroes' - such as fashion, textiles, jewellery. Others are so identified with masculinity for example fine art, that it is very difficult for men to conceive of women being able to do the job (the equivalent of 'you couldn't lift that' in industry). Tenure will always be the overriding issue': in 1990 there were only five Black women art tutors.¹²

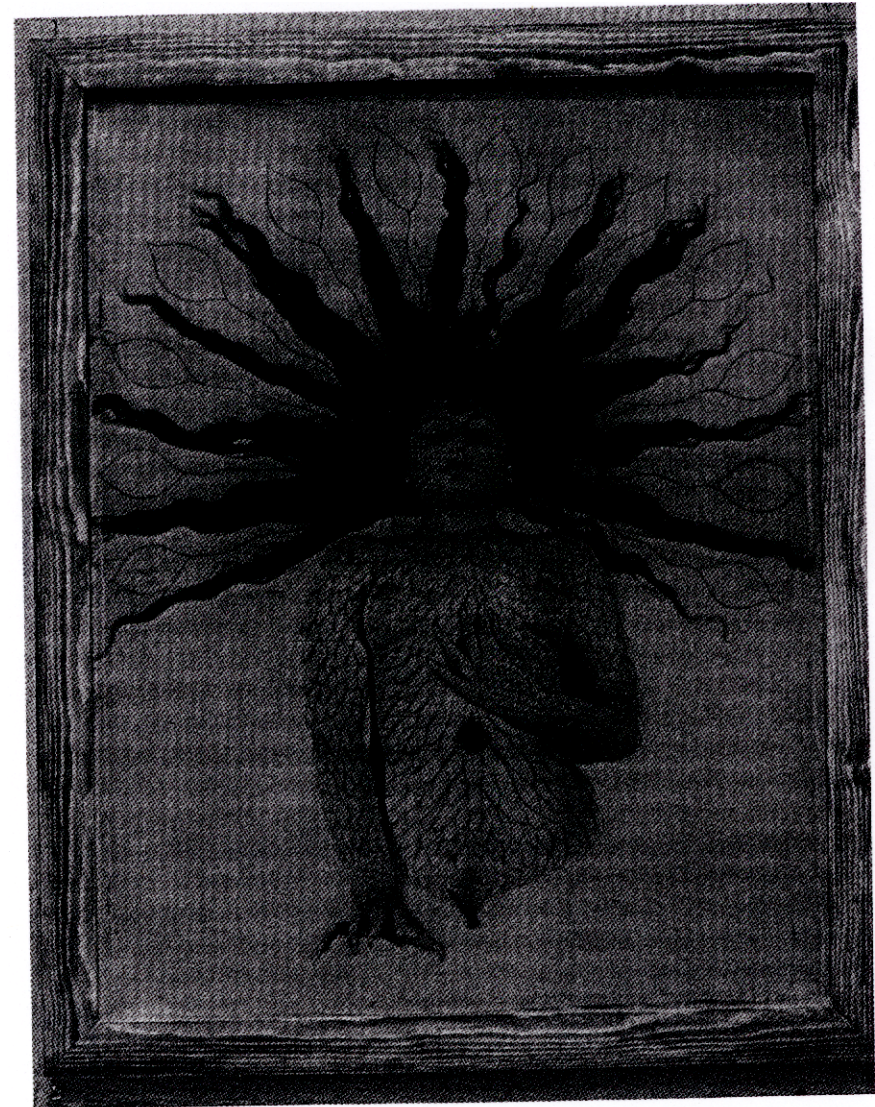
Art femininity, on the other hand, is a 'professional' aesthetic, which condenses two codes, 'art' and 'femininity' (both stereotypically white, affluent and able-bodied, in a spectacle designed to embed the woman within the fine art aesthetic, not a knowledge-maker, but as confirmation of the artist as hero (male and heterosexual).¹³ The pressure on women in art education is to produce/present themselves as bodies/art objects, in terms of a sexualised aesthetic which emphasizes appearance and sexual availability. In the studio, women are expected to be girls, and visually compete with the art; to be unconventional, visually interesting, even shocking, but not speaking subjects.+'

Femininity is consumed here as part of 'a rhetoric of sexuality; encountered in terms of the entire social system (intertextual, institutional - discursive)'. The woman's body becomes 'the terrain on which patriarchy is erected'¹⁶ and this has specific resonance within art education and art; many contemporary women have shown imagination and ingenuity in using their bodies as sites of resistance in their art.

As 'wise women' (artists/intellecutuals/teachers) we realise the incompatibles within Western masculinist binarism: which suggests that these binary oppositions and categories are sexual, not academic; that they should be viewed as pathological

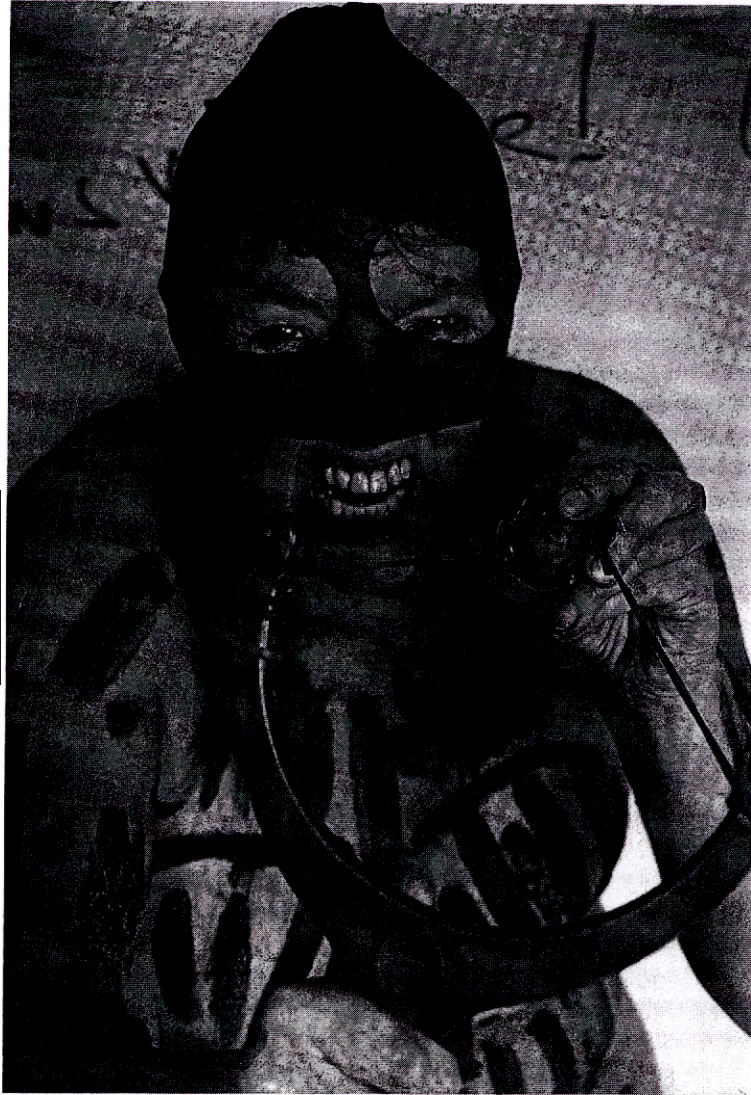
rather than scholarly. Do they also put us into the category of 'women who have dared to come too close?'

The white male psyche produces and experiences us as a turbulence within the Academy: an indecipherable presence/body. The female lecturer provokes and intensifies men's sexual ambivalence: as both the bad woman, the 'castrating woman' (Theweleit's 'red nurse'), who (as female) confronts male colleagues with their own sexuality; and the good woman, sexless and 'pure', the sister, the gentlewoman



11 ADELA KHAN *Black Soliloquy*. Photograph on silk, 1992

(Theweleit's 'white nurse'),¹⁸ who (as teacher/colleague) commands authority and respect, even chivalry. Our presence as teachers embodies us, physically/sexually, as *Nature*. But because the role of teacher confers authority (normally reserved for white men) in relation to what counts as knowledge, our teaching also embodies us intellect&y, as *culture*. This contradictory identity thereby transgresses and throws into question the boundary between nature and culture, so central to white Western systems of thought.



12 JO SPENCE/DAVID ROBERTS *Cultural Sniper*

As *knowledge-makers*, women are *trouble-makers* and denote an epistemological/sexual crisis, which needs to be viewed creatively and positively, as a way forward. The Chinese word for crisis, *wei-ji*, is composed of the characters for 'danger' and 'opportunity';¹⁹ *wei-ji* confirms the proximity of crisis and creativity. This conjunction makes possible a reconceptualisation of both, divesting crisis of its negative and perjorative connotations (something to be avoided or ashamed of), and creativity of its esoteric and elitist connotations. Creativity becomes a function of 'crisis', that is, a situation in which something significant is at stake; crisis becomes both function and feature of creative process as transformational and risky. Women as crisis then becomes a statement of our creative potential, of hope.

As women, our presence and diversity (for example in age, class, colour, disability, ethnicity, sexuality) pose a challenge to the fictive woman produced within men's epistemologies, and disrupt men's appropriation of "femininity" for their own purposes." While the products of our creativity (our art and writing) can be assigned safely to the category 'woman', as live women we may trigger 'the anxiety generated by the erotic woman, capable of orgasm'."

Feminism, interdisciplinarity and art education

The resistance to women as teachers testifies to the liberatory potential of a feminist pedagogy in art education, as the first thing feminist process does is to counter the taboo on women being together for their own purposes. As women, we must claim not just access to materials and methods, to institutions and cultural spaces, but our right of access to ourselves and each other. Women's courage, confidence, creativity and community are vitally intertwined.

In the pedagogic relation between female student(s) and feminist tutor as women, we can do this either on the basis of our common fear (including of each other), as women disempowered by 'femininity'; or our common courage, as women prepared to transgress the prescribed boundaries and features of that femininity, and work towards empowering ourselves and each other. 'But first there is rage': our purposes cannot be simply artistic or academic, for we live in 'a culture whose values produce rape'."

Feminist process involves the production of useful and accessible knowledge/art. Along the way, 'usefulness', 'uses', 'accessibility' are reconceived, breaking boundaries and hierarchies such as aesthetics/ethics, culture/nature, art/ecology." Feminist pedagogy develops collaboratively and creatively. It highlights the sharing of experience, information, ideas, feelings and skills; a sense of mutuality and reciprocity; an equalising of power relations between student and tutor, as we construct a *dialogue* in which the stakes are high and not merely academic.²⁵ With its emphasis on the interrelational and process, feminist pedagogy embodies opposition to the subject-object dualism which underpins white Western thought, and unavoidably also risks being perceived as non-academic and non-professional.²⁶

In coming together we pool our individualities and aspire to community. We discover that 'art is not genetic'²⁷ and that 'we didn't lose our identities by working together, we expanded them'.²⁸ Crucial to this process is the question of our purposes in speaking, and 'to make the liberated voice, one must confront the issue of audience — we must know to whom we speak'.²⁹ bell hooks reminds us that 'the language we choose to use declares who it is we place at the centre of our discourse'.³⁰ As Lubaina Himid suggests, 'Art is about dialogue and there are many entry points. If work addresses a particular audience this does not mean it excludes all other audiences? In this conjunction of voice and audience, we create contexts in which our work can make sense to others.'

Feminism weakens traditional boundaries and demarcations, including subject boundaries (aesthetics/ethics/politics/therapy) and social boundaries (for example between 'private' and 'public'). Feminist process is integrative, and highlights the connections and continuities between different cultural practices and areas of social life.³¹ Feminist art practices in the curriculum can situate themselves not just within Women's Studies, but as Women's Studies. By networking more systematically across the curriculum, art feminists can learn from other women's lives, activism and work, as well as demonstrating the relevance of women's art for those who have never seen themselves as 'artistic': never felt able to 'understand' visual artwork; see art as frivolous compared to, say, family, public transport or welfare policy; or sociology, history, and literature; who see aesthetics as a peripheral and elite academicism dominated by white men.

Feminism offers the possibility of a syncretistic, integrative transdisciplinarity, which challenges racialised gender power relations in society and women's vulnerability within these arrangements. The revision and re-making of our social/cultural forms and relations requires a poetics as much as a politics,³² and aesthetics is central to both. Academic methods which result in women or women artists being discussed merely as signifiers³³ are to be avoided, for this simply repeats the male Academy's concern with 'advancing the frontiers of knowledge',³⁴ with women serving as incidental material for this 'neutral' project.

The work of increasing numbers of female art historians exemplifies the key feminist insight that 'Separability allows context-free abstraction of knowledge reates criteria of validity based on alienation and non-participation, then projected as "objectivity"'.³⁵ But it is possible to contribute to the modern and academically respectable field of Representation, without showing any commitment to women artists³⁶ — or women generally. Working so close to the framework of men's History, male art historians are more vulnerable to incorporation and co-option than female audio tutors, who remain numerically marginal and institutionally scattered by comparison.

In the context of white men's science and its 'objectivity' culminating in 80 per cent of scientific research going towards the war industry,³⁷ women's creativity necessarily embodies our rejection of men's 'objectivity' and its consequences for women and nature. Art can be reclaimed as everyday evidence of 'non-violence as power',³⁸ and as a basis for community, not separation.

Women's community and feminist creativity

It is always the love that will carry action into positive new places, that will carry your own nights and days beyond demoralization and away from suicide.³⁹

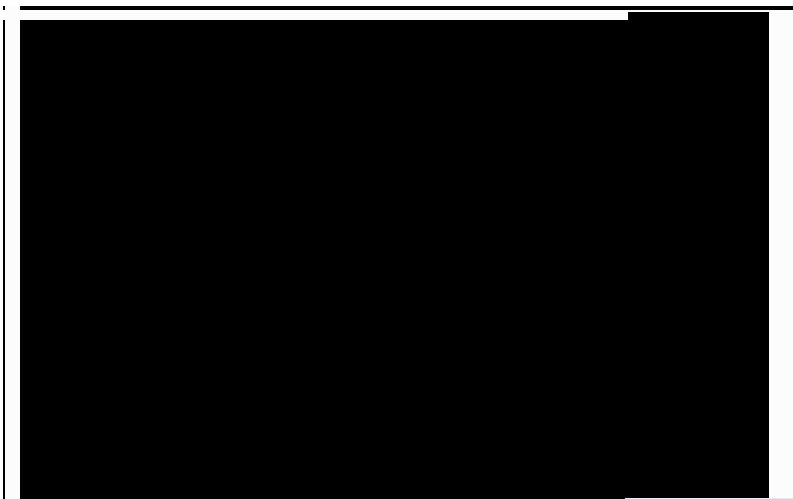
Each time we speak a sister's words or cite a sister's work, we acknowledge the part played by her in our own sense of life and possibility. We acknowledge the collectivity of women's words and actions, which support our resistances and subversions in the face of

a universal experience factor for women which is that physical mobility is circumscribed by our gender and by the enemies of our gender. . . . Everywhere in the world we have the least amount of income, everywhere in the world the intensity of the bond between women is seen as subversive.⁴⁰

In the past 'wise women ran the risk of being declared witches'.⁴¹ I am suggesting this is now more likely to be the fate of women tutors inside the Art Academy than woman artists on the outside. Yet we all must share 'the poet's need to identify her relationship to atrocities and injustice, the sources of her pain, fear, and anger, the meaning of her resistance'.⁴²

As June Jordan stresses, we need to identify and connect with 'what we are trained to ignore, what we are bribed into accepting, what we are rewarded for doing, or not doing'.⁴³ This is the knowledge and courage we need as teachers in the Academy, and it has no less relevance for art and aesthetics (be it fashion or fine art), than any other area of women's life and work.⁴⁴

As eyewitnesses and activists, our art and feminism are life-support systems, which must be cherished and developed in terms of each other, as living politics and creativities. Moving away from powerlessness, without becoming exhausted, bored, or burnt out, involves much more than deconstruction and critique. It requires



collective as well as individual intervention and subversion; the unbridling of our creativity as women, as we challenge the academic voice (women's as well as men's), its exclusions and interests, its purposes and consequences. We have to find our hearts and speak from there, echoing and emboldening each other with hope and insistence that 'We will be.'

Notes

- 1 Raven, Arlene (1988), 'We Did Not Move from Theory/We Moved to the Sores Wounds' (Dedicated to the memory of Ana Mendieta) in *Crossing Over: Feminism and Art of Social Concern*, London, U.M.I. Research Press, p. 158.
- 2 Fanny Adams (6 March 1993) reported that solo shows by male artists formed 93 per cent of all solo shows at the Tate Gallery and 95 per cent at the Royal Academy between 1987 and 1992; *Notions of E-Quality: Women in the Arts*, Arts Council Conference, Birmingham.
- 3 See Sulter, Maud (1990), Preface and Acknowledgements in *Passion (Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity)*, Hebden Bridge, Urban Fox Press, pp. 9–11. 1993 saw conferences for women in the arts held in Birmingham, Exeter, Sheffield and Leeds; *Women's Art Magazine* and the Women Artists Slide Library continued to develop; sadly *Feminist Arts News* lost its Arts Council funding and ceased publication in 1993. See also Allthorpe-Guyton, Marjorie (7 March 1993), 'Let Us Now Praise Famous Women', in *Notions of E-Quality*.
- 4 See Walsh, Val (1990), "'Walking on the Ice": Women, Art Education and Art', *Journal of Art and Design Education*, 9, 2, pp. 147–61; and (1991) 'Femininity and Fine Art: Women Artists and the Female Man', research paper (see 6 below). Part of this latter was presented as a paper (in 1989) at the National Society for Education in Art & Design Annual Conference and (9 March 1989) at Exeter College of Art (now the University of Plymouth).
- 5 Skelton, Pam (May/June 1985), 'Women and Art Education', *NAIFHE Journal*, pp. 18–21; Kharibian, Leah (1991), 'Survival in the Arts', *Women's Art Magazine*, January/February, pp. 12–14.
- 6 Himid, Lubaina (1990), 'Mapping: A Decade of Black Women Artists, 1980–1990' in Sulter (ed.), *Passion*, p. 66. My research project, 'Women's Experience in Art Education and Art: The Relation between Creativity, Pedagogy and Society' (part-funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain) using questionnaire and interviews, provides examples of what we now name sexual harassment.
- 7 See for example, Battersby, Christine (1989), *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, London, The Women's Press; Bronfen, Elizabeth (1992), *Over Her Dead Body (Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic)*, Manchester University Press; Chadwick, Whitney (1985), *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, London, Thames & Hudson.
- 8 Himid, 'Mapping', p. 66.
- 9 While Fanny Adams is now providing documentation about the position of women artists, there is no current systematic documentation available on women art tutors.
- 10 Sulter, *Passion*, p. 10.
- 11 MacGregor, Elizabeth A. (1991) Introduction, *Adrian Piper*, Birmingham & Manchester, Ikon Gallery & Cornerhouse Gallery, p. 8.
- 12 Himid, 'Mapping', p. 67.
- 13 See Lowe, Nick (1986), 'Heterosexism in Art Schools', *Lesbian and Gay Socialist*, autumn, p. 14.

- 14 Women art students I interviewed in 1987 explained their dress codes in terms of what would make them safer on the street/in the studio: how they could dress without attracting men's sexual attentions (Doc Martins, men's jackets, very short hair, no make-up, dark or dull colours).
- 15 Burgin, Victor, cited in Godfrey, Tony (1982), 'Sex, Text, Politics', An Interview with Victor Burgin in *Block 7*, p. 2.
- 16 Rich, Adrienne (1977), New York, Bantam Books, p. 38.
- 17 Carter, Erica and Turner, Chris (1986), 'Political Somatics: notes on Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*' in Burgin, Victor, Donald, James and Caplan, Cora (eds), *Formations of Fantasy*, London, Methuen, p. 203.
- 18 Theweleit, Klaus (1987), *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1: 'Women, Floods, Bodies, History', Cambridge, Polity Press, p. 79.
- 19 Capra, Fritjof (1983), *The Turning Point (Science, Society and the Rising Culture)*, London, Fontana, p. 7.
- 20 See Battersby, *Gender and Genius* and Brodribb, Somer (1992), *Nothing Mat(t)ers: A Feminist Critique of Postmodernism*, North Melbourne, Spinifex; Walsh, Val (18 March 1993), 'Virility Culture: The Convergence of Academia and Managerialism', in M. Evans, J. Gosling and A. Sellars (eds), *Agenda for Gender: Women in Higher Education*, (University of Kent, 1994).
- 21 Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1, pp. 79–138.
- 22 Raven, 'We Did not Move from Theory', p. 158.
- 23 Raven, Arlene, (1988), 'Close to Home' in *Crossing Over: Feminism and Art of Social Concern*, p. 168.
- 24 Walsh, Val (1993), 'Moving Beyond Abstraction: Nature, Art and Creativity. An ecological and feminist perspective', paper presented at the WSN (Women's Studies Network (UK)) Annual International Conference, Nene College, Northampton.
- 25 Kennedy, Mary, Lubelska, Cathy and Walsh, Val (eds), Introduction to *Making Connections: Women's Studies, Women's Movements, Women's Lives*, London, The Falmer Press, pp. ix–xvi.
- 26 See Walsh, Val (1992), 'Transgression and the Academy: Feminism, Feminine Values and Institutionalization', paper presented at the WSN (Women's Studies Network (UK)) Annual International Conference, University of Central Lancashire. Also Kennedy, Lubelska and Walsh, Introduction to *Making Connections*.
- 27 Sulter, *Passion*, p. 18.
- 28 Edelson, Mary Beth cited in Raven 'The New Culture: Women Artists of the seventies' in *Crossing Over*, p. 5.
- 29 bell hooks (1989), *Talking Back (Thinking Feminist – Thinking Black)*, London, Sheba Feminist Publishers, p. 15.
- 30 hooks, *Talking Back*, p. 15.
- 31 Himid, 'Mapping', p. 70.
- 32 Macleod, Katy (1992), 'Innovation and Disclosure', M.Ed. dissertation, Polytechnic South West, now the University of Plymouth, is a perceptive exploration and exposition of a seminar and placement scheme which openly sought to address such interconnections as part of undergraduate art education.
- 33 See Dossor, Dinah (1990), 'Gender Issues in Tertiary Art Education', *Journal of Art & Design Education*, 9, 2, pp. 163–9.
- 34 It is above all Black women who are articulating and promoting a feminist poetics/politics: for example, Audre Lorde, Maya Angelou, June Jordan, bell hooks, Toni Morrison. In their multiple identities as poets, activists and scholars, they activate our possibilities.
- 35 Sugg, Deborah (1990), 'Misrepresenting Representation', *Women's Art Magazine*, 37, (November/December), p. 30.