

Women's Work: The Gendered Discourses of Art Museum Education

**Graduate Research Paper
Seminar for Research in Art Education
2006**

Today, it is commonly acknowledged in the field that art museum education is a profession most frequently occupied by women, but there has been little historical investigation into the myriad discourses that molded and shaped it into “women’s work.” As with any profession, particularly those primarily practiced by women, the perception of their work as “feminine” directly affects the status and esteem of that work by colleagues and society at large. While women’s history and status in the art world began to be explored as part of the second-wave feminist movement of the 1970s, these writings have focused primarily on women as subjects (Mulvey, 1975), as artists (Nochlin, 1971), as art educators (Collins & Sandell, 1984), and as art historians, professors, art museum curators and directors (Sherman and Holcomb, 1981). Art museum educators remain curiously and conspicuously absent from the literature.

In this project, I investigate the ways in which contemporary art museum educators are situated within a gendered art museum hierarchy. My experiences as a professional art museum educator are a critical component to this research, as these experiences and my struggle to understand them both personally and professionally drove me to the research trajectory that I currently pursue. I believe that perhaps the biggest stumbling block toward improving and changing the profession is that we as practitioners have little sense of our history, of how we are situated within larger societal discourses, or even within the art museum context. Utilizing an adaptation of post-structuralist historian Michel Foucault’s notion of genealogy, informed by feminist and critical pedagogical theories, I will examine the history of art museum education specifically

during periods of substantial growth and development in order to identify, mine, and problematize the discourses that shape art museum education. My goal is to disrupt traditional narratives of art museum education (Newsom & Silver, 1978; Zeller, 1989, Cherry, 1992), creating a new conceptual space for informing and empowering art museum educators.

It is somewhat telling that few people know what an “art museum educator” actually does. While job descriptions for the staff of the local art museum are far from most peoples’ everyday concerns, the public is generally familiar with the terms “curator” and “director” in relation to art museums, even if they do not know exactly what responsibilities those positions entail. Art museum educators are currently the main facilitators of education in the museum context, a directive that encompasses a variety of practices. Their objectives include providing opportunities for the interpretation of art through written and spoken contextual information, such as gallery guides, teacher packets, online activities, tours and gallery talks; organizing and offering a wide variety of public programs including lectures, music events, hands-on workshops, educator workshops, and film screenings; and collaborating with community constituents such as philanthropic, educational, and social groups. Although specific efforts vary due to the highly individualized nature of each museum according to its location, size, collection, etc., museum educators are generally responsible for creating opportunities for lifelong learning, from pre-school age children to senior citizens. Qualifications of art museum educators vary—historically, one had a master’s degree in art history (Mayer, 2005), but increasingly degrees in art education or museum studies are considered adequate (Ebitz, 2005).

Another requirement, certainly unofficial but fairly obvious nonetheless, is that in order to be an art museum educator, one should be a woman. Though there are no published statistics on the gender of art museum education practitioners, professional conferences, e-mail lists, informal networks, and museum directories are filled with the names and faces of female practitioners, in addition to references contained in a small number of publications (Coleman, 1939; Sherman & Holcomb, 1981; Glaser & Zenetou, 1994; Danilov & Armitage, 2005). As a new graduate student in the mid-1990s, I attended my first national art education conference and was surprised not only at the sheer number of women who attended sessions for art museum educators, but also that they all seemed to be very well-dressed, in their mid-twenties to early thirties, and white. I wondered if women had always comprised the majority of art museum educators, and if so, why? As a doctoral student and an art museum educator, I continued to attend conferences and became active in the professional association in which many art museum educators belong. I began to explore the intricate historical connections between women and art museums, particularly as they existed in the realm of education. To my knowledge, the gender composition of art museum education professionals, though it has mentioned and stated as fact (Glaser & Zenetou, 1994), has never been questioned or problematized—it is simply assumed as a given.

If you were to ask almost any art museum educator about her biggest professional challenge, she will probably tell you it is frustration over the fact that education is considered a “second-class” position in the museum staff hierarchy, with directorial and curatorial positions occupying the top tier. A silent but pervasive hierarchy in art museums positions art museum educators in a lower echelon of prestige, respect, and remuneration as compared to their curatorial counterparts. This system serves to not only

to demoralize educators and demean their work, but also often creates a situation where their input into exhibitions, collections and even interpretive programs is undervalued. Why is it that art museums, with their stated emphasis on public education, so frequently fail to recognize the contributions of these particular staff members? The answer, I believe, is historically and directly related to the gender of most education practitioners in American art museums.

Marc Pachter, currently the director of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery, claimed "once it became allowable for women to work in an intellectual arena, they naturally came to museums because, in American society, cultural work is traditionally women's work...in the United States, culture was often considered frivolous. And as something frivolous it was consigned largely to women" (Weber, p. 33, 1995). This quote suggests that women were initially constructed as ideal educators in art museums because education itself was not considered an "intellectual arena," but simply an extension of the nurturing, educative role ascribed to women, firmly entrenched in the practices of American education and culture.

In order to understand the ways in which contemporary art museum educators are situated within the art museum context, it is crucial to investigate the historical development of the field. While there is a fair amount of information on the feminization of certain professions, particularly teaching and librarianship, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Garrison, 1974; Perlmann & Margo, 2001; Prentice & Theobald, 2001) it is only partially useful to explain the role of women in art museum education, since it still does not go beyond a descriptive explanation of why this phenomenon exists. My challenge and hope in this project are to not only describe the

discourses that shaped art museum education as a field, but to identify the gendered practices that inscribe and reveal power within the art museum context. I propose to do this through critical research methodologies that "...can be understood best in the context of the empowerment of individuals" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 305), and are influenced by a number of disciplines' postmodern theories. This research is no exception, drawing from feminist theory, critical theory in education and art education, postmodernism, and personal experience. The following frameworks provide a foundation from which I structure my research.

Feminism and Feminist Theory

Because this project specifically investigates the discourses that created a profession largely occupied by women and because I seek to bring about change as a result of my research, it is firmly situated within the realm of feminist inquiry. The fact that this research is grounded in feminist theory is also a personal decision and commitment on my part as the author. Feminist theory provides an overarching theoretical framework for this study, positing that "women" are acted upon by patriarchal discourses in larger society and that they both subvert and resist the roles offered to them. Fundamental to this research is the notion that race, class, and gender are ultimately inseparable hegemonic discourses and that knowledge is a form of power.

While constructs that trouble traditional notions of sex and gender, such as gender performativity and embodiment (Scott, 1986; Riley, 1988; Butler, 1999), are informative to this project, living bodies are not the only things that may be ascribed a gender. Types of thought, certain activities, and physical or conceptual spaces or locations may be

viewed as either feminine or masculine. The ideas of historian Joan Wallach Scott are particularly useful to theorize the “gendering” of art museum education, that is, to discuss how relations of power in the art museum become gendered. According to Scott (1986), the word “gender” suggests more than just biological differences between women and men. Gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power (a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated) (p. 169). It provides a way to decode meaning and to understand the complex connections among various forms of human interaction (p. 170):

If we treat the opposition between male and female as problematic rather than known, as something contextually defined, repeatedly constructed, then we must constantly ask not only what is at stake in proclamations or debates that invoke gender to explain or justify their positions but also how implicit understandings of gender are being invoked and inscribed” (p. 174).

Scott’s discussion of gender as a category of analysis suggests that there are specific ways in which power is signified, and proposes that people are constructed as “masculine” and “feminine” subjects within relationships. Further, Scott posits that gender is similar to race and class in that they are three intimately linked axes of power inequality. This notion has fundamentally influenced the way that poststructuralist scholars, particularly feminists, conduct inquiry—race, class, and gender, distinct yet inseparable, are the “Holy Trinity” of much current critical scholarship (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005, p. 314).

Critical Pedagogy

The work of critical pedagogues such as radical educator Paolo Freire (1970) began to informally affect teaching philosophy and practice in education and art education in the early 1970s. An “attempt to theorize...the reproduction of class structures in education” (Dalton, 2001) critical pedagogical methods encourage students to question the dominant narratives of education and society. These ideas seeped into the consciousness of art museum educators in the 1970s, as reflected in the emergence of what historian Terry Zeller defines a “Social Education Philosophy” in art museum education. At its core, this philosophy was “people-centered, focused on social issues of race and class, and employed art as an instrument of change (Zeller, 1989, p. 66). This is evidenced by accounts of practitioners who endeavored to reach out to audiences that they perceived of as neglected, including those individuals with low levels of education, in difficult socioeconomic situations, older adults, and people with disabilities, while at the same time questioning their own teaching methods and pedagogical authority (Newsom & Silver, 1978).

Richard Cary’s definition of critical pedagogy in art education proposes a philosophy that is idealistic, radical, flexible, democratizing, and “...*for* teaching more than *about* teaching” (p. 8). He encourages art educators to engage in critical inquiry and adopt contemporary ideologies that reflect concerns about power, belief, and truth, while balancing “...practical needs with desires to visualize possibilities and then chart courses toward them” (p. 7–8). This philosophy is echoed in current art museum education writings that position learners as active agents rather than passive subjects, consider

multiple perspectives and encourage dialogue and active participation, and relinquish the authoritative voice of the museum (Xanthoudaki, Tickle, & Sekules, 2003).

Postmodern Thought

Current efforts are focused on elucidating the impact of postmodern thought on the field of art museum education (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Moore & Barrett, 2003; Mayer, 2005) and determining the impact of these theoretical changes on educational and interpretive practices (Xanthoudaki, Tickle, & Sekules, 2003). Art museum educators influenced by postmodern theory are finding ways to incorporate that thought into everyday practices by paying more attention to the comments and concerns of their visitors, teaching their docent volunteers to link concepts and themes in the galleries to every day experiences, and devising more democratic methods for discussing works of art. They are encouraging directors and curators to consider multiple perspectives and a broader range of objects when creating exhibitions and are insisting on a greater variety of objects and cultures in their special exhibition programs. They are suggesting that education, inspired by postmodern thought, may enable the visitor as learner to move from the periphery of the museum's mission to the center.

An unexpected influence of postmodern thought on art museum education is the possibilities that it creates for art museum educators to disrupt the internal hierarchy of the museum. Because the transmission of art-historical knowledge is no longer perceived as the only purpose of museums, the skills and understandings of art museum educators are becoming more necessary and integral to the mission of museums. Because postmodern thought emphasizes the exploration and revelation of power imbalances, the "inferior" position of art museum educators is problematized and reconsidered.

Concurrently, art museums as institutions are experiencing a paradigmatic shift (Weil, 1990; Weil, 2002; Anderson, 2004). In 1970, Joseph Veach Noble expanded the museum's longstanding mission to collect, preserve, and display to five primary areas: collect, conserve, study, *interpret*, and exhibit (italics mine) (Weil, 1990). While the responsibilities of the museum as an institution expanded to include interpretive efforts, they are still presented as the purview of the museum's expert staff. Much more recently, Dutch museologist Peter van Mensch reduced these to three essential functions: "...to *preserve* (to collect being viewed as simply an early step in that process), to *study* (a function that remains unchanged) and to *communicate* (the third function being a combination of Noble's final two, i.e., to interpret and exhibit)" (Weil, 1990). The change in terminology represents a shift in thinking about visitors as active learners, since communication is a negotiated process between two parties. Most recently, Hooper-Greenhill (2000) suggested that museum pedagogy is perhaps the most important function when she encouraged a transformation into "post-museums," which she described not as buildings but as political sites where visitors construct meaning through individual lenses (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

Personal Experience

Finally, my personal experiences greatly inform this study. Indeed, if it were not for the encounters that I have had as a woman, a professional art museum educator, and an emerging scholar, this research would not exist. According to Collins & Sandell (1997), "Feminist research often seeks a fusion of the personal, the professional, and the political, of lived experience with academic theory" (p. 196). I follow in the tradition of other feminist author/researchers who have inserted their personal voices into their work

as a form of resistance, proclaiming their agency within an academic patriarchal hegemony that traditionally has denied the immeasurability and intangibility of the human voice in favor of a modernist paradigm in which all knowledge is unchanging, quantifiable, and objective.

I am developing an adaptation of post-structuralist historian Michel Foucault's notion of genealogy (1977) for this project. Major characteristics of genealogy include the rejection of the search for historical origins in favor of examining discursive practices maintained in what he termed the *archive*, or the "systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and as things (with their own possibility and field of use). More simply put, the archive is the set of discourses actually pronounced" (Flynn, 1994, p. 29). Foucault was able to link seemingly unrelated events through archaeology and pronounce relationships that traditional history did not find, "...whose conclusions it more rearranges than denies and whose resources it mines for its own purposes" (Gutting, 1994, p. 32), in effect producing a *counter-history*. Further, the counter-histories formed by archaeologies serve as a form of social critique by questioning the narratives offered by traditional history. My genealogy will examine the history of art museum education specifically during periods of substantial growth and development in order to identify, mine, and problematize the discourses that shaped art museum education. My goal is to trouble traditional narratives of art museum education, creating a new conceptual space for informing and empowering art museum educators. I'll examine the myriad discourses that shaped both the profession and practitioners in two distinct periods of rupture: the early 1900s and the decade of the 1970s. For each time period, I will:

- Critically read primary and secondary sources, or texts such as books, personal accounts, and professional museum publications and journals, paying particular attention to the ways in which art museum education, as a field and a practice is situated and gendered.
- Search for, note, and describe trends, changes, and ideas or events that are emphasized in the literature.
- Identify the ways in which art museum educators are constructed as subjects in the art museum context, focusing on the museum environment as the site where power is enacted and resisted at the intersection of relevant discourses.

I will then (re)construct a historical narrative for each time period, interspersing relevant autobiographical stories, recollections, and inspirations. In that way, my own construction and subjectivity as an art museum educator will parallel the discursive formation of the profession. Additionally, I will be adding a personal voice to the very few extant personal, written accounts of art museum education (Dana, 1917a; Dana, 1917b; Godwin, 1936; Ramsay, 1938; Low, 1948)

Rationale for each time period

The time periods that I explore in this project are those in which art museum education emerges at the forefront of museum operations, during which major public institutions enacted a people-centered, or populist, philosophy of art museum education. According to art museum education historian Terry Zeller,

a philosophy of art museum education should not be defined only in terms of its methods—its pedagogical and psychological theories and practices—but in terms of the

values it promotes, the content/substance it seeks to convey, and those whom it seeks to reach—as well as the methods it employs in reaching them” (1989, p. 47).

Various authors have presented “stages” of development for American museums and art museum education (Low, 1948; Zeller, 1989; Cherry, 1992), suggesting that there was a foundational stage from the late 1800s to the early 1900s wherein museums were just beginning (Low, 1948). In this stage, embracing education and developing public programming, without necessarily theorizing the actual processes of education and learning, was important for the recruitment of both public and private financial support. Before long, museums were financially solvent and the goal of creating active educational activities became much less crucial. The cycle repeated itself with the onslaught of the Depression and World War II, when the government supported museums that offered opportunities for escaping, if only temporarily, the vice grip of poverty and joblessness; then again in the 1970s with new governmental and financial commitments to civil rights and equal access of public institutions. It is the early 1900s and the 1970s— periods of rupture or great change, when art museum education became paramount in the museum context—that I propose to investigate.

References

- Anderson, G. (Ed.). (2004). *Reinventing the museum: Historical and contemporary perspectives on the paradigm shift*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Berry, N. & Mayer, S. (Eds.). (1989). *Museum education: History, theory, and practice*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cary, R. (1998). *Critical art pedagogy: Foundations for postmodern education*. New York, NY: Garland Publications.
- Cherry, S. (1992). A history of education in American museums. In P. Amburgy & et. al. (Eds.). *The history of art education: Proceedings from the second Penn State conference, 1989* (pps. 292–295). Reston, VA: The National Art Education Association.
- Coleman, L. V. (1939). *The museum in America: A critical study (Vol. II of III)*. Washington, DC: The American Association of Museums.
- Collins, G., & Sandell, R. (1984). *Women, art, and education*. Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Collins, G., & Sandell, R. (1997). Feminist research: Themes, issues, and applications in art education. In S. D. LaPierre & E. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Research methods and methodologies for art education* (pps. 193–222). Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Dalton, P. (2001). *The gendering of art education: Modernism, art education, and critical feminism*. Buckingham; Philadelphia. Open University Press.
- Dana, J. C. (1917a). *The new museum*. Woodstock, VT: The Elm Tree Press.
- Dana, J. C. (1917b). *The gloom of the museum*. Woodstock, VT: The Elm Tree Press.
- Danilov, V. J. & Armitage, S. (2005). *Women and museums: A comprehensive guide*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press
- Ebitz, D. (2005). Qualifications and the professional preparation and development of art museum educators. *Studies in art education*, (46)2, 150–169.
- Flynn, T. (1994). Foucault's mapping of history. In G. Gutting, (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (pps. 28–46). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977). Nietzsche, genealogy, history. In *Language, counter-memory, practice: Selected essays and interviews* (pp. 139–164). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: NY: Continuum.
- Garrison, D. (1974). The tender technicians: The feminization of public librarianship, 1876-1905. In M. S. Hartman & L. Banner (Eds.), *Clio's consciousness raised: New perspectives on the history of women* (pp.158-178). New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Glaser, J. R., & Zenetou, A. A. (1994). *Gender perspectives: Essays on women in museums*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Godwin, M. O. (1936). *The museum educates*. Toledo, OH: The Toledo Museum of Art.
- Gutting, G. (Ed). (1994). *The Cambridge companion to Foucault*. Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2000). Museum pedagogy and cultural change. In *Museums and the interpretation of visual culture* (pps. 124-150). London, New York: Routledge.

- Kincheloe, J. L., & McLaren, P. (2005). Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (Third edition) (pps. 303–342). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Low, T. L. (1948). *The educational philosophy and practice of art museums in the United States*. New York, NY: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Mayer, M. M. (2005). A postmodern puzzle: Rewriting the place of the visitor in art museum education. *Studies in Art Education*, 46 (4), 356–368.
- Moore, J. M. & Barrett, S. H. (2003). Postmodernism and art museum education. In M. Xanthoudaki, L. Tickle, and V. Sekules, *Researching visual arts education in museums and galleries: An international reader* (pp. 197–212). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen*, 16 (3), 6–18.
- Newsom, B. Y. & Silver, A. Z. (Eds.). (1978). *The art museum as educator: A collection of studies as guides to practice and policy*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Nochlin, L. (1971). Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? *Art News*, 69(9), pp. 22–39.
- Perlmann, J., & Margo, R. A. (2001). *Women's work? American schoolteachers, 1650–1920*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Prentice, A., & Theobald, M. R., (Eds.) (2001). *Women who taught: perspectives on the history of women and teaching*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Ramsay, G. F. (1938). *Educational work in museums of the United States: Development, methods, and trends*. New York, NY: The H. W. Wilson Company.
- Riley, D. (1988). “Am I That Name?” *Feminism and the Category of “Women” in History*. New York: MacMillan Press.
- Scott, J. W. (1996). Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis. In *Feminism and History*, p. 152-180). Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sherman, C. R., & Holcomb, A. M. (Eds.). (1981). *Women as Interpreters of the Visual Arts, 1820–1979*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Weber, J. (1995). Changing roles and attitudes. In Glaser, J. R., & Zenetou, A., (Eds.), *Gender Perspectives: Essays on Women in Museums*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Weil, S. E. (1990). *Rethinking the museum and other meditations*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Weil, S. (2002). *Making museums matter*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books.
- Xanthoudaki, M., Tickle, L., & Sekules, V. (Eds.). (2003). *Researching visual arts education in museums and galleries: An international reader*. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Zeller, T. (1989). The historical and philosophical foundations of art museum education in America. In Berry, N. & Mayer, S. (Eds.), *Museum education: History, theory, and practice* (pps. 11–89). Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.