

Article

Dear Sister Artist: Activating Feminist Art Letters and Ephemera in the Archive

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ABSTRACT

The 1970s Feminist Art movement continues to serve as fertile ground for contemporary feminist inquiry, knowledge sharing, and art practice. The CalArts Feminist Art Program (1971–1975) played an influential role in this movement and today, traces of the Feminist Art Program reside in the CalArts Institute Archives' *Feminist Art Materials Collection*. Through a series of short interrelated archives stories, this paper explores some of the ways in which women responded to and engaged the *Collection*, especially a series of letters, for feminist projects at CalArts and the Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths, University of London over the period of one year (2017–2018). The paper contemplates the archive as a conduit and locus for current day feminist identifications, meaning-making, exchange, and resistance and argues that activating and sharing—caring for—the archive's feminist art histories is a crucial thing to be done: it is *feminism-in-action* that not only keeps this work on the table but it can also give strength and definition to being a feminist and an artist.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1970s Feminist Art movement continues to serve as fertile ground for contemporary feminist inquiry, knowledge sharing, and art practice. The California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) Feminist Art Program, which ran from 1971 through 1975, played an influential role in this movement and today, traces and remains of this pioneering program reside in the CalArts Institute Archives' *Feminist Art Materials Collection* (henceforth the "*Collection*"). In this essay, I first describe the origins and historical contexts of the Feminist Art Program and the contents of the *Collection*. Following this is a case study, told through a set of interconnected stories that explore several women's uses of and affective resonances with items from the *Collection*—especially a set of letters—over one year. Through this case study I ask: how are women encountering, responding to, using, and transmitting feminist art archival materials today?

THE FEMINIST ART PROGRAM

In 1970 at Fresno State University, California,¹ sculptor and painter Judy Chicago founded the first feminist art program in the United States—the Feminist Art Program. Chicago had struggled as an artist in California in the 1960s, a climate in which she states, “women artists were simply not taken seriously.”² In order to be taken seriously, Chicago writes that she “severed her artmaking style” from her “personal impulses as a woman,”³ leading her to ask: “what was the point of being an artist if I could not represent my experiences as a woman?”⁴ Inspired by feminism, women's history, and envisioning an art community of women who would implement feminist theories and practices in their work,⁵ Chicago started the Feminist Art Program to help young women students construct “an artistic identity that fuses their gender with their art,” and hoped that she too would be able to accomplish this in her work.⁶ In 1971, at the invitation of painter Paul Brach,

¹ Now California State University, Fresno.

² Judy Chicago, “Feminist Art Education: Made in California,” in *Entering the Picture: Judy Chicago, The Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 101.

³ Judy Chicago, *Institutional Time: A Critique of Studio Art Education* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2014), 8.

⁴ Chicago, “Feminist Art Education: Made in California,” 1.

⁵ Chicago, *Institutional Time*, 20.

⁶ Chicago, *Institutional Time*, 9. For more on Chicago's FAP at Fresno, see: Faith Wilding, “The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970–1975,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1996), 32–47.

then Dean of the School of Art at CalArts, Chicago brought her Feminist Art Program to CalArts, and with faculty member and painter Miriam Schapiro, co-established and co-led the CalArts Feminist Art Program for two years.



Figure 1. Judy Chicago (left) and Miriam Schapiro (right), 1972.
Image courtesy of the CalArts Institute Archives.

Chicago and Schapiro directed the program until 1973 when Chicago left CalArts. Schapiro continued the program for two years, and when she left CalArts in 1975, the program dissolved.⁷

Members of the CalArts Feminist Art Program produced a number of groundbreaking artworks, performances, and publications over the program's four-year existence, including the renowned site-specific installation and performance space,

⁷ Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Woman Artist's Movement in Southern California, 1970–1976* (Santa Monica, CA: Double X, 1977), 35–36.

Womanhouse (January 30–February 28, 1972). *Womanhouse* took place in an abandoned and derelict privately owned seventeen-room Los Angeles mansion that Feminist Art Program students renovated and reconceived as a feminist art project reflecting women’s feelings, dreams, anxieties, and conceptual ideas about the home, in the physical context of a real house.⁸ Described as “part happening, part environmental art, and part California funk”⁹ in its exhibition style, *Womanhouse* featured installations and performances by the students¹⁰ as well as by Chicago, Schapiro, and three Los Angeles artists—Sherry Brody, Carol Edison Mitchell, and Wanda Westcoast—who were invited to participate.¹¹ Besides the 10,000 people that attended the installations and performances, *Womanhouse* received coverage on local and national television networks including PBS and was featured in *Encyclopedia Britannica* as well as *Time*, *Life*, and *New Woman* magazines.¹² A second notable Feminist Art Program production is *Anonymous Was A Woman*, a 137-page exhibition catalog for the 1974 CalArts Women's Art Festival. The catalog contains two parts. The first, entitled "The Festival," comprises black and white photographs and artwork images. The second, "A Collection of Letters to Young Women Artists," is a set of seventy-one letters of personal experience and advice solicited by Feminist Art Program students from distinguished women artists, writers, dancers, filmmakers, and designers.¹³

⁸ Nancy Youdelman and Karen LeCoq, “Reflections on the First Feminist Art Program,” in *Entering the Picture: Judy Chicago, The Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists*, ed. Jill Fields, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 74.

⁹ Paula Harper, “The First Feminist Art Program: A View from the 1980s,” *Signs* 10, no. 4 (Summer 1985): 772.

¹⁰ The student artists included: Beth Bachenheimer, Susan Frazier, Camille Grey, Vicki Hodgetts, Kathy Huberland, Judy Huddleston, Janice Johnson, Karen LeCoq, Janice Lester, Paula Longendyke, Ann Mills, Robin Mitchell, Sandy Orgel, Christine Rush, Marsha Salisbury, Robbin Schiff, Mira Schor, Robin Weltsch, Faith Wilding, Shawnee Wollenman, and Nancy Youdelman. Feminist Art Materials Collection, 1971–2003, CalArts-003. California Institute of the Arts Institute Archives.

¹¹ Hannah Hamblin, “Los Angeles, 1972/Glasgow 1990: A Report on Castlemilk Womanhouse,” in *Feminism and Art History Now: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice*, ed. Victoria Horne and Lara Perry, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 167; Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, “Womanhouse,” Exhibition Catalog (Valencia, CA: California Institute for the Arts, 1972).

¹² Feminist Art Materials Collection, 1971–2003, CalArts-003. California Institute of the Arts Institute Archives.

¹³ See *Anonymous Was A Woman: A Documentation of the Women’s Art Festival – A Collection of Letters to Young Women Artists*, ed. Miriam Schapiro (Valencia, CA: Feminist Art Program, California Institute for the Arts, 1974). Other Feminist Art Program projects include *Ablutions* (1972), a pioneering performance about rape and violence against women by Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, Sandra Orgel, and Aviva Rahmani, and the publication, *Art: A Woman’s Sensibility* (1975). For more on these and other Feminist Art Program works, see: Josephine Withers, “Feminist Performance Art: Performing, Discovering, Transforming Ourselves,” in *The*

Alongside concurrent feminist art-making and women artists' fight against discrimination in the art world (including protesting about their lack of representation in museum and gallery spaces¹⁴), the Fresno and CalArts Feminist Art Programs instigated what would become a national Feminist Art movement. Intertwined with the greater women's movement (also known today as "second-wave" feminism),¹⁵ the 1970s Feminist Art movement, which has been called the only "genuine mass art movement" in the United States in the 20th-century,¹⁶ heralded a substantial change in the history of Western art: it was the first time that women's personal experiences, particular events, and narratives drawn from daily life became the subject of art. The content-driven, socially conscious, and politically charged aesthetics of 1970s feminist art blurred the boundaries between high art and craft and incorporated complex forms of art practice such as site-specific work, durational performance, and installation. It also deconstructed traditional representations of women and reclaimed the female image, insisted on the significance of content, embraced art-making as a collaborative practice rather than the product of a sole male "genius," and engendered a plethora of women's art groups, exhibitions, newsletters, cooperative galleries, publications, and institutions geared towards sustaining and furthering women's art practice and production.¹⁷ Or as art critic

Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994), 158–173; Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, "Introduction: Feminism and Art in the Twentieth Century," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994), 17.

¹⁴ In 1970, for example, Lucy Lippard, Faith Ringgold, and other New York-based women artists and artists' groups staged a protest against the small number of women exhibitors in the Whitney Museum's Sculpture Annual Exhibition. Laura Cottingham, *Seeing through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art* (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2000), 102; Grace Glueck, "Women Artists Demonstrate at Whitney," *New York Times*, December 12, 1970, 19.

¹⁵ In short, the so-called "first-wave" of feminism (late 19th and early 20th centuries) focused on suffrage and property rights and the "second-wave" of feminism (1960s–1980s) focused on reproductive rights and the family, sexuality, economic and legal equality, the workplace, and homophobia and racism both within and outside of the movement. For a brief overview of some of the intersections and overlaps between the Feminist Art movement and the broader women's movement during both the first- and second-waves of feminism, see Jill Fields, "Introduction," in *Entering the Picture: Judy Chicago, The Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists*, ed. Jill Fields (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 6–11.

¹⁶ Cottingham, *Seeing through the Seventies*, 99.

¹⁷ Examples of some of the feminist journals include *Womanart*, *Feminist Art Journal*, and *Heresies*. Galleries included SoHo 20 and A.I.R. (Artists in Residence Gallery) in New York City and Womanspace in Los Angeles, among others. See: Judith K. Brodsky, "Exhibitions, Galleries, and Alternative Spaces," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994),

Lucy Lippard poignantly put it: “feminism questions all the percepts of art as we know it.”¹⁸

As introduced, traces of the 1970s Feminist Art movement and the CalArts Feminist Art Program reside in the CalArts Institute Archives’ *Collection*. While in my role as CalArts’ archivist from 2009 to 2018, I was in continual interaction with the *Collection* as well as with the scholars, artists, curators, archivists, students, and writers who regularly sought out and used its materials for online and print publications, class lectures and projects, feminist workshops, and exhibitions around the world. The *Collection* has remained the most heavily researched, reproduced, and loaned collection in the Institute Archives over the past ten years, with its materials featured in a substantial number of monographs, journal articles, and websites as well as in exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum, the Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston), the MAK Center (Los Angeles), and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts (Chicago), to name just a few. Given the high visibility of numerous materials from the *Collection*, it has become well-known both within and beyond feminist and art circles and discourses.

What follows is a series of short interrelated archives stories. The stories explore some of the ways in which women responded to and engaged the *Collection*—especially a series of letters—for feminist projects at CalArts and the Women’s Art Library at Goldsmiths, University of London, where I was invited to lecture and participate in a feminist art workshop. I constructed these stories over the period of one year (2017–2018) using data collected through: 1) participation observation sessions while I simultaneously assisted researchers and curators in the Institute Archives and participated in the above mentioned feminist art workshop, 2) conducting in-depth interviews with two users of the *Collection*, and 3) engaging in my own research with the *Collection*. Through these stories, I seek to surface the particular feminist histories, relationships, subjectivities, and concerns invoked through uses of the *Collection* to contemplate the archive as a conduit and locus for current day feminist identifications and meaning-making, exchange, and resistance.

CONTEXTS AND CONTENTS OF THE *COLLECTION*

The *Collection* comprises five archival boxes (approximately 4.5 linear feet) of brochures, correspondence, exhibition catalogs, invoices, newsletters, black-and-white photographs, magazines, posters, and ephemera that document the influence of

104–119; Carrie Rickey, “Writing (And Righting) Wrongs: Feminist Art Publications,” in *The Power of Feminist Art: The Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1994), 120–129.

¹⁸ Lucy Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art* (New York, NY: The New York Press, 1995), 172.

feminism on arts training and art-making within and beyond CalArts from 1971 through 2007. Although a majority of the collection's materials document phenomena related to CalArts' Feminist Art Program, there is also a substantial amount of materials about other local and national feminist art events, practices, and perspectives. As with every archival collection, however, the *Collection* has its limitations. It lacks documentation of every CalArts related feminist event and is short of photographs or other materials depicting the daily aspects of the Feminist Art Program, such as faculty and students in class or working in their studios. As well, there are very few administrative records related to the Feminist Art Program; what is there focuses mainly on the sale of Feminist Art Program publications. The *Collection* also lacks syllabi, class plans, personal papers, and artworks created by women in the program, an unfortunate lacuna that could provide insight on how Feminist Art Program members pedagogically and artistically challenged structural and hierarchical inequities in art practice and education. Nonetheless, the *Collection* contains a significant number of items important to feminist/art history, such as the exhibition announcement for, photographs from, and newspaper and magazine clippings about *Womanhouse*, the feminist newspaper, *Everywoman* (1971–1972), and the publication mentioned above, *Anonymous Was A Woman*.



Figure 2. Invitation to *Womanhouse*, 1972. Image courtesy of the CalArts Institute Archives.



Figure 3. *Kitchen* by Robin Weltsch and *Eggs to Breasts* by Vicki Hodgetts. *Womanhouse*, 1972. Image courtesy of the CalArts Institute Archives.

The *Collection* offers evidence of the creation and implementation of feminist art pedagogy, the managing and outcomes of an arts program, and provides perspectives on feminism and feminist art practices from a diversity of viewpoints spanning four decades. It also demonstrates the Feminist Art Program's connection to the 1970s Feminist Art movement and broader women's movement and how women actively forged those movements.

Much about the provenance and custodial history of the *Collection* remains a mystery. It is unknown as to how, when, and from whom the Institute Archives acquired any of the *Collection's* materials. What is known is that it was not until 1997—over twenty years after the closing of the Feminist Art Program—that CalArts became aware it had materials from the Feminist Art Program, when graduate student Karina Combs found documents in the Institute Archives.¹⁹ Despite this discovery, the *Collection* did not come

¹⁹ In 1997 the Institute Archives was a much different place than it is today. It was situated in a small room in the library, was unfamiliar to most on campus, and all of its materials were unprocessed and lacked finding aids save for rudimentary content labels taped to some of the boxes and cabinet drawers. In addition, the archive was managed by a librarian who solely provided reference service and did not process materials. Combs' discovery, however, prompted the 1998 CalArts event, the *F-Word: Contemporary Feminisms and the Legacy of the*

into existence until eleven years later, in 2008, when the CalArts Library hired contract archivists to process some of the contents of the archives. Unfortunately, the archivists did not leave behind any information about the provenance of the materials and little about the processing of the *Collection* except for a note in the finding aid stating that library staff (and it is unknown as to whom) preliminarily arranged the collection.

STORY NO. 1: PRESENT ABSENCE/ABSENT PRESENCE

I stumbled upon her by accident, years ago, in the archive. I stumbled upon her by way of a dedication to her in *Anonymous was a Woman*, written by her classmates in the Feminist Art Program:

no cause to hope
no cause to despair
frustration, the only legitimate total
the horror of an endless loose end

it's hard to feel you lost
and I can smile, that you,
laughing shy moth
suddenly bold, would bolt,
straight to the light

(Ms. Nova, send us a card)

A member of our program, Connie Marsh, mysteriously disappeared last March while out painting near CalArts. It is with great sadness that we dedicate this book to her.

Los Angeles Feminist Movement, which was a week of film and video screenings, music performances, exhibitions, and a symposium organized by CalArts students, alumni, faculty, and participants from other Southern California art institutions, with the aim of reflecting upon the 1970s Feminist Art Program and creating dialogue between different generations of feminist artists. See: Mira Schor, *A Decade of Negative Thinking: Essays on Art, Politics, and Daily Life* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2009), 25; Kaucyila Brooke, "She Does Not See What She Does Not Know," *X-TRA* 6, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 24.

I forgot about Connie for several years. However, what had been in my blind spot came into view, a “haunting” to borrow sociologist Avery Gordon’s term, which among other experiential modalities, is an “animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely.”²⁰ Haunting raises ghosts, cutting across and altering our sense of “linear time...the way we normally separate and sequence the past, the present and the future,”²¹ writes Gordon. She goes on to explain that the appearance of ghosts informs us that what’s been “suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present, messing or interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.”²² The experience of haunting, then, produces several ruptures: it not only changes and heightens our social awareness and psychological state, but transforms our usual perception of time and complexifies the order of things—a feeling of being ‘out of joint’ as it were—a feeling of a present past that draws us affectively toward “something else, something different from before” that generates a “something-to-be-done.”²³

Archival scholar Verne Harris also thinks about haunting and ghosts—in the archive. Building upon Jacques Derrida’s notion of “hauntology” (an ethical call to action towards justice, democracy, hospitality, and forgiveness), Harris imagines the archive as having four different types of hauntings, which he terms, “primary spectral movements.” The first spectral movement comprises the absent creators—the ghosts—of an archive who nonetheless speak through their traces left behind and as well through the interpreters of these traces. The second spectral movement concerns an archive’s exclusionary and fragmentary nature and the “ghostly voices” of what has been excluded or lost that “whisper around the fragments.”²⁴ The third movement entails the ghostly voices of the archive’s unknown or undocumented contexts or contextualizations yet to come. The last movement, the “ghostly voices of other places, of lineages, of origins,”²⁵ gestures toward the archive’s deep connection to its originary locations. Harris stresses that attending to the ghostly aspects of the archive out of hospitality is a responsibility and ethical imperative in archival practice,²⁶ or returning to Gordon, a “something-to-be-done.”²⁷

²⁰ Avery F. Gordon, “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” *Borderlands* 10, no. 2 (2011): 2.

²¹ Gordon, “Some Thoughts on Haunting and Futurity,” 2.

²² Gordon, 2.

²³ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

²⁴ Verne Harris, “Hauntology, Archivy and Banditry: An Engagement with Derrida and Zapiro,” *Critical Arts* 29, no. 1 (2015): 20.

²⁵ Harris, “Hauntology, Archivy and Banditry,” 20.

²⁶ Harris, “Hauntology, Archvy and Banditry,” 21.

²⁷ Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

STORY NO. 2: CURATING THE COLLECTION

In 2017, I initiated the CalArts Library's *Curating the Institute Archives Project*. This student-led project entailed students choosing and curating materials from the Institute Archives for two permanent exhibitions in the library, one in the Special Collections and Institute Archives Reading Room and the other in the Library Quiet Study Room. CalArts graduate visual arts student (now alumnus) Ekta Aggarwal curated the exhibition, *Feminist Conversations: Reaching Back, Looking Forward* with items from the *Collection* for the Special Collections and Institute Archives Reading Room. Describing her curatorial vision and choices she stated:

I created this exhibition because I am interested in feminism. I think everything I do, even if I don't know it, comes from my personal experience of being a woman, and when I became interested in the *Curating Project*, I thought that I wanted to communicate something about the experience of being a woman. So, I decided to go through the *Feminist Art Materials Collection*. When I found the publication, *Anonymous Was A Woman...* this title really spoke to me because in my country [India] women's labor does go unnoticed, both inside and outside of the home. This title is so true; women are anonymous.

While interacting with *Anonymous Was A Woman*, Aggarwal came across Connie's dedication and asked if I knew anything more about and what happened to Connie. I had no answers, save for the dedication in *Anonymous was a Woman*, which also contains a black-and-white image of Connie sitting on a horse and a description and image of Connie's artwork for the Women's Art Festival.

As Aggarwal stated above, the title of *Anonymous Was a Woman* spoke to her, but that was not all; she also found the content of "A Collection of Letters to Young Women Artists" in *Anonymous Was a Woman* resonating with her experiences as a woman. "A Collection of Letters to Young Women Artists" are 'open letters'—a genre of letter writing that straddles the space between being public writings and private letters. Often published in books, newspapers, or magazines, open letters have a multidirectional communicative function: they are pronouncements to be read but not answered by writing back. They are also generally instructive and written by someone in a preeminent position to a specific community, collectively addressing the community.

Trading "on values and meanings shared in common,"²⁸ open letters have often been used in feminist communities.²⁹ Given their public nature, feminist open letters not

²⁸ Liz Stanley, "The Epistolarium: On Theorizing Letters and Correspondences," *Auto/Biography* 12, no. 3 (2004): 207.

²⁹ One such example is Phyllis Chesler's book, *Letters to a Young Feminist* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 1997).

only highlight a particular feminist system of care for and among women but also emphasize women's desire to communicate their beliefs and build community and solidarity across distances and temporalities.

Letters comprise a significant literature of the second-wave women's movement.³⁰ Cultural studies scholar Margaretta Jolly notes that in the 1970s in particular, feminist activists, writers, and academics "explicitly began to connect the form of the letter with evolving ideas about women's writing, women's way of doing politics, and women's way of relating."³¹ Jolly further calls out a particular 1970s feminist epistolary³² culture, a social practice of feminist letter writing that helped foster (and today reveals) second-wave feminist relationships, movement-building, and networking as well as women's desire and demand for care. She states (*italics in original*):

The *form* of these letters, their *symbolic function* and *reception*, as much as their content, is crucial to their meaning. These written relationships express an emerging network and in turn play a part in constructing a gender-class consciousness. But they are also texts that negotiate less obvious identifications and desires, needs, and demands. In this, they tell us about unconscious aspects of group making and group excluding. Feminist letters make not just a virtual but an imagined community in that sense. They act as unconscious expressions of women's *expectation* of care, or even demand for it, rather than an ethics of care as response to another's need.³³

Indeed, *Anonymous was a Woman's* open letters provide a window into some of the ways in which women artists in the 1970s were enacting feminism, relating to and caring for one another, and reflecting upon and enacting change in their social, personal, and artistic milieux. Wanting to recreate interest in these letters, Aggarwal incorporated four of them into her exhibition, such as this letter by writer Deena Metzger:

Sisters: We come together to open all the doors that have been traditionally locked against us: the door into ourselves, the door into our body, the door

³⁰ Margaretta Jolly, *In Love and Struggle: Letters in Contemporary Feminism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 2-3.

³¹ Jolly, *In Love and Struggle*, 9.

³² The term "epistolary" comes from the Greek word, "*epistolē*," which means letter. Epistolary is associated with the writing of letters and phenomena related to, contained in, or conducted by letters. For more on epistolary and in particular feminist epistolary, see: Margaretta Jolly, "Confidantes, Co-Workers and Correspondents: Feminist Discourses of Letter-Writing from 1970 to the Present," *Journal of European Studies* 32, no. 125-126 (2002): 267-282; Jolly, *In Love and Struggle*.

³³ Jolly, *In Love and Struggle*, 13.

between us, the door out into the world. Art is the key...Art is a way a woman extends herself into the world. The woman artist is centered in her body, in her womanness, in her woman strength, and she moves from that knowledge. She creates images, not for their sake alone, but as a bridge to others and between others. Woman's art is often open, because it desires a response—it is a conversation with the world.³⁴

Aggarwal also wanted to reestablish interest in another CalArts feminist project through her exhibition, the 1998 week-long feminist art symposium and exhibition entitled, *The F-Word: Contemporary Feminisms and the Legacy of the Los Angeles Feminist Movement* (henceforth, "*The F-Word*"). *The F-Word* also generated open letters. Organizers of this event asked participants to send them the names of three texts (broadly conceived, any mode of cultural production) that strongly informed their relationship to feminism, including how they encountered the texts and what kind of impact the texts had on them. During *The F-Word*, the organizers displayed the letters in a "reading room" and then bound them into a publication. Aggarwal used several of these letters in her exhibition, including one by installation artist and curator Karen Atkinson:

Dear Feminist Committee,

I have had a very hard time picking three things that I have read that inform my feminism. Life experience weighs further. 1. Being old enough to have been denied a job solely on my gender. 2. Growing up immersed in a church background where I had a hard time reconciling the gender inequities of those teachings (and this was not a Catholic religion). 3. Not finding any women artists mentioned in my art history classes. So I guess that the 3 readings which most influenced my feminist perspective would be: The Bible, Janson's Art History, and the Newspaper.³⁵

Inspired by and wanting to contribute to CalArts' feminist epistolary tradition and sharing of knowledge, Aggarwal and I decided to each write a letter about what motivates us as feminists/artists and included them in the exhibition. Finally, Aggarwal also incorporated three posters into her exhibition: one from the CalArts feminist symposium and exhibition, *Exquisite Acts & Everyday Rebellions* (2007), to which she wanted to draw attention; another from the *F-Word*; and the third from *A Festival of the Arts/Anonymous*

³⁴ Deena Metzger, "Letters to a Young Woman Artist," in *Anonymous Was a Woman*, ed. Miriam Schapiro, (Valencia, CA: Feminist Art Program, California Institute of the Arts, 1974), 106-7.

³⁵ Feminist Art Materials Collection, 1971-2007, CalArts-003. California Institute of the Arts Institute Archives.

Was a Woman (1974) that contains black-and-white pictures of the Feminist Art Program students who contributed to *Anonymous Was a Woman* interspersed with images of famous women artists.

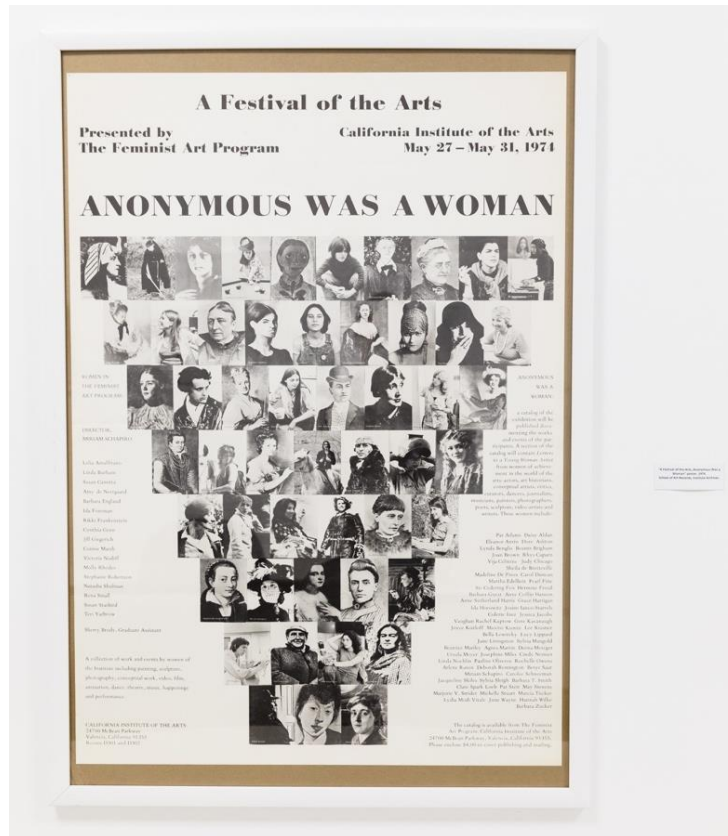


Figure 4. Poster for the 1974 *A Festival of the Arts* and *Anonymous Was a Woman* as part of the *Feminist Conversations: Reaching Back, Looking Forward* exhibition, 2018. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Aggarwal's *Feminist Conversations: Reaching Back, Looking Forward* offers a diverse visual and textual compendium of feminist/art perspectives, activities, and lineages that implicitly and explicitly express a network of relationships between women and contemporary art practice and discourse across forty-six years. Recalling Harris, her exhibition offers hospitality to the *Collection's* spectral movements by making more

visible the creators and subjects of the *Collection's* materials and establishing a place for feminist/art voices, encounters, and meaning-making.

STORY NO. 3: HAUNTING AND LETTERS REDUX

In Fall 2017, artist, archivist, and community organizer Ego Ahaiwe-Sowinski came to the Institute Archives in search of evidence of Black women artists in the archives, and to document connections between women artists represented in the Institute Archives and the *Women of Colour Index Collection* which resides in the Women's Art Library³⁶ at Goldsmiths, University of London Library Special Collections. The *Women of Colour Index Collection* comprises press clippings, catalogs, notes, photographs, and slides by and about UK women of color artists who have often been neglected and omitted from the broader narrative of art history.

Many of the *Collection's* letters called out to Ahaiwe-Sowinski as they did to Aggarwal. In particular, an open letter written by Deena Metzger and published in the book, *Art: A Woman's Sensibility*, caught her eye, an excerpt of which states:

A woman's letter is musing, contemplative, exploratory. It laughs, breaks sentences, interrupts itself, thinks, analyzes, caresses, suggests, responds. It is a conversation. It is revealing. Intimate. A community of women artists writes a letter to another community of women artists who write letters back...[a] dialogue...[a] response. Exchange.³⁷

While working with Ahaiwe-Sowinski in the reading room as she pored over the *Collection's* materials, Connie's absent presence came back into a view, cutting across and unsettling the rhythm of our shared archival labors. When Ahaiwe-Sowinski happened upon the dedication in *Anonymous Was a Woman* and was troubled by it, she asked what I knew about Connie and the circumstances surrounding her disappearance. Since my last encounter with Connie, I had searched the Institute Archives for more materials related to her and had asked several CalArts faculty and administrators if they knew anything about her disappearance, to no avail. I had also called the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department in search of police records related to her case but was told that they did not

³⁶ The Women's Art Library began as an artists' initiative that developed into an arts organization to provide a place for women artists to deposit unique documentation of their work and published catalogues, books, and a magazine from the early 1980s until 2002. Today, the Women's Art Library holds materials representing the work and lives of thousands of women artists from around the world.

³⁷ Deena Metzger, *Art: A Woman's Sensibility*, ed. Miriam Schapiro (Valencia, CA: Feminist Art Program, California Institute of the Arts, 1975), 1.

have any files from the 1970s as anything from that long ago had been destroyed. However, the *Los Angeles Times* published three articles between April 9–25, 1974 that fill in some of the details. Early on a Wednesday morning, Connie told her roommate that she was going to Pico Canyon (near CalArts) to paint. The next day, deputies found her car in Pico Canyon, with her painting supplies and easel scattered outside her unlocked vehicle and her undisturbed purse and wallet on the front seat. There were at least three searches for Connie by her family and friends, the CalArts community, and the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. The Sheriff's Department search, which totaled more than 1,700 hours, comprised 130 members including search and rescue teams, foot patrols, mounted posse as well as bloodhounds and helicopters.³⁸ On December 17, 1974, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that two hikers found Connie's skull buried in a shallow grave about 10 miles from where she had disappeared.³⁹

STORY NO. 4: A TRANSATLANTIC FEMINIST ART EXCHANGE STUDY DAY

At the invitation of Ahaiwe-Sowinski, in February 2018 I brought copies of materials from the *Collection* to the Women's Art Library to participate in an event she developed and was leading entitled, "Decolonising Translation, Decolonising Feminist Art Archives: A Transatlantic Feminist Art Exchange Study Day." Fifteen women from diverse backgrounds and communities (arts, activist, academic) attended the event. We began the day by introducing ourselves to one another, which included sharing our thoughts and activities around feminism and archives. After this, Ahaiwe-Sowinski invited us to collectively explore the *Collection's* materials, feminist art materials from the Women's Art Library, and items from her own archives that she had placed on top of four tables in the room. She then asked each of us to choose one thing that spoke to us in some way and to write a short response to it to share with everyone. Several women responded to the *Womanhouse* exhibition catalog (see Figure 5, bottom left corner), with one participant writing:

I was struck by its overt domesticity and how the home can be re-imagined as a place of creativity, of strength and possibilities. An action which I interpret as a challenge to institutions of art which act as gate-keepers of culture.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, "Art Students Join Search for Coed," April 9, 1974; *Los Angeles Times*, "Search for Missing Coed Will Expand," April 13, 1974; Jeffrey Hansen, "CalArts Family Won't Give up Hope for Missing Coed: Missing Coed Still Sought," *Los Angeles Times*, April 25, 1974.

³⁹ Tom Paegel, "Skull Found, Identified as That of Missing Woman Art Student," *Los Angeles Times*, December 17, 1974.

⁴⁰ Study day participant, Women's Art Library, February 17, 2018.

After sharing our responses, Ahaiwe-Sowinski gathered our chosen items and with them curated a small exhibition for the Women’s Art Library that brought into proximity and conversation past and present feminist art imaginaries and activities in Los Angeles and London.



Figure 5. Women’s Art Library exhibit, London. Photograph courtesy of the author, February 2018.

The study day also included a poster-making workshop led by printmaker and artist Aida Wilde in which the physical, tangible, and affective dimensions of the feminist archival materials were central to the creation of a small number of evocative and politically-charged posters, bringing to mind the work of the London-based *See Red Women’s Workshop*, a feminist poster and printshop collective founded by a group of women in London in 1974.⁴¹

⁴¹ For more on See Red Women’s Workshop, see Jess Baines, “Experiments in Democratic Participation: Feminist Printshop Collectives,” *Cultural Policy, Criticism & Management Research*, no. 6 (2012): 29–51.



Figure 6. Study day posters, Women’s Art Library, London. Photograph courtesy of the author, February 2018.

We ended the day with letter writing. Inspired by Metzger’s above-mentioned letter in *Art: A Woman’s Sensibility* and a desire to create a space for reflection and exchange among participants, Ahaiwe-Sowinski invited each of us to write a letter to our past or future selves which we would then read aloud. Some women did write to their younger or older selves; however, others wrote to their mothers as well as to everyone in the room. The reading of the letters—affektive and compelling performative acts—accentuated the many ways in which a letter can be an expression of self, a rallying cry, a witness, and a messenger of the writer’s beliefs, feelings, and conditions:

Dear Me,

I don’t know how I got myself here, but I don’t think this is originally what I wanted. But this is my whole life right now, and it feels important, being at Women’s Art Library and looking at WOCI—the Women of Colour Index. There are good moments and some very painful moments. Today I don’t want to talk about the painful moments, but its emotional always when women get together and talk collectively about the violent, rampant discrimination we face. I feel

battered to be honest, with the amount of sly insidious oppression, I and we face from white men and women in these institutions [universities]. I begin to strongly question how long I will last, not in these colonial institutions, but on the planet. Yes, this is morbid, but to clarify, I'm not suicidal; however, these institutions are designed to kill us. Then where do I stand when we talk about decolonisation? I'm not sure what else to say to myself; I'd like to sit in my studio, make clothes, make artwork, and see my friends. But something has to give, here and now. We need to build and organize for a better future, making sure our histories are sustained, preserved, and looked at...I'm so grateful and thankful I found this library [Women's Art Library], met Aida, Michelle, and Brianna. I hope our sisterhood will last forever.⁴²

Through the writing and transmitting of letters, women relocate and re-inscribe themselves in the world. The *Collection's* letters and the current-day letters inspired by them such as the one above, not only reveal and construct feminist relations and worlds, positionalities and intentions, knowledge and emotions, but also track women's methods of doing politics and caring for one another across temporalities and geographies, and draw attention to the complexities of personhood, power, agency, and hope.

CONCLUSION

In her acclaimed autobiographical essay, poet, writer, and feminist Adrienne Rich famously wrote that: "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for women more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival."⁴³ Aggarwal's and Ahaiwe-Sowinski's looking back and re-visioning with the *Collection* created unanticipated relations and affinities between women across eras and locales as well as new feminist/art narratives and encounters. As such, not only did their work engender new memories and ways of remembering this particular feminist/art history, but their endeavors are also helpful towards thinking about what of this history—for those who oversee feminist art materials—is worth keeping: acts of survival. As discussed, both women created exhibitions with the *Collection*. An exhibition, writes curator Solvej Helweg Ovesen, is a "condensation of discourse, action and negotiation of different perspectives." She goes on, stating that to make an exhibition is "to create a structure through which you can look at the world, look through to the other side of conventions, and experience and develop

⁴² Study day participant, Women's Art Library, February 17, 2018.

⁴³ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 35.

alternative models of being in the world.”⁴⁴ Finding present energy in a past world of feminist art production and activism, Aggarwal and Ahaiwe-Sowinski created new spatialized, visual, and textual structures from which to view that world, contemplate connections, similarities, disjunctions, and differences between then and now, and experience feminist/art imaginaries through the archive: acts of survival.

This essay’s four archives stories not only reveal how second-wave feminist matter in the archive still matters and resonates with women today, but how this legacy can be redeployed towards various aims. These stories of contemporary interactions and imaginings with the *Collection* call to mind Harris’ observation that the archive “is not so much a record of the past - although it is that, or does that - as it is the condition of a liberatory future that wants to be made.”⁴⁵ However, not only are these engagements with the *Collection* about a potential “liberatory future” but are—and perhaps even more so—about now, about mobilizing the archive to keep past and present feminist voices, ideologies, experiences, and practices visible and circulating today.

More and diverse mobilizations and dissemination of feminist art archives are needed, especially of feminist art archives located in colleges and universities as academic settings remain primary sites for the transmission of feminist thought.⁴⁶ As women artists continue to face marginalization, underrepresentation, and discrimination in the art world,⁴⁷ it is critical for academic archivists to make available and widely promote feminist art collections under their care via online and physical exhibitions, social media, developing term-length classes with such materials, and collaborating with colleagues with feminist art history research or teaching interests on projects or class assignments. With the current rise in public discourse of feminism (in the news, in social media), an uptick in feminist artistic practice, and in our era of the Women’s Marches and the #MeToo,⁴⁸ #SayHerName, and Time’s Up Movements, finding ways to activate and

⁴⁴ Solvej Helweg Ovesen, “100+ New Statements,” in *Men in Black: Handbook of Curatorial Practice*, ed. Christoph Tannert, Ute Tischler, and Kunstlerhaus Bethanien (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2004), 225.

⁴⁵ Harris, “Hauntology, Archivy and Banditry,” 19.

⁴⁶ bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), viii.

⁴⁷ A recent study of the diversity of artists in the collections of 18 major US museums revealed that 85% of the artists are white and 87% are men. Chad M. Topaz et al., “Diversity of Artists in Major U.S. Museums,” *PLoS ONE* 14, no. 3 (2019).

⁴⁸ Although beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting a connection between the #MeToo movement and second-wave feminist practices around sexual assault, as exemplified, for example, in the above-mentioned Feminist Art Program’s performance piece, *Ablutions*, (op. cit. footnote 13). *Ablutions* included audio recordings of women recounting their personal experiences with rape and was a way of speaking out against rape and its devastating effects

share—care for—the archive’s feminist/art histories is a crucial thing to be done: it is *feminism in-action* that keeps this work on the table and gives strength and definition to being a feminist and an artist.

on women. Although today this might not seem radical, in the 1970s, people rarely acknowledged that rape existed, let alone talked about it.

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