PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN FEMINIST ART PROGRAMS

Planning for Public Participation and Community Engagement
in Contemporary Feminist Art Programs

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Abstract

The arts administration field severely lacks the contribution of feminist critique as well as its own disciplinary research specific to feminist art. A work-in-progress, this project seeks to help address that gap by examining through descriptive research the public participation and community engagement activities of US-based, self-identified, nonprofit feminist art programs active today; how these program aspects closely reflect new trends in arts participation research and future funding; and the implications of that correlation for feminist art programs, including potential benefits to funding and resource development that will help maintain current programs and develop new ones that advance art and feminism.

Research methods include literature review in feminist art theory, history of US feminist art programs, and recent research in arts participation and participatory media. In turn, I am currently conducting two case analyses of current feminist art programs, both using data collected through primary source documents and semi-structured interviews with program staff. While a preliminary analysis of one case site is a major focus of this paper, field research has not yet taken place. Thus, in this paper, I share preliminary findings of a larger project in progress.

I conclude with predicted benefits to feminist art programs that, with further research, will develop into comprehensive recommendations for the sustainability and enhancement of feminist art programs based on their relationship to new research in arts participation.
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Introduction
As a feminist arts administrator, I am struck by a dearth of feminist critique in my field and a lack of research specific to feminist art. In response, my terminal project toward a master’s in Arts Management explores intersections in feminist arts programming and arts participation, looking at feminist art through an arts management lens to develop an informative report and guidelines that might help sustain, enhance, and expand feminist art programs and their goals.

By arts management (which can also be termed cultural or arts administration), I am referring to a specialized but highly dynamic field of research, theory, and professional practice concerned with the strategic, administrative, managerial, and leadership aspects of operating arts and culture organizations, institutions, projects, programs, and advocacy initiatives across nonprofit, for-profit, public, and community sectors, as well as its particular histories, theories, and politics.

With this project, which looks at US-based, nonprofit or independent, self-identified feminist art programs, I am conducting case analyses of two active programs, specifically in connection with their public participation and community engagement activities. At this stage, case analyses include only primary document analysis; the next phase will involve semi-structured interviews with lead staff. My project is guided by the following questions:

a) How do feminist art programs plan for and incorporate public participation and community engagement experiences? How is this similar to or different from past feminist art programs?

b) Emerging research in arts and culture signals significant philosophical, programmatic, and philanthropic shifts resulting in new understandings of participation, engagement, and community in the arts; what are the implications for feminist art programs, especially given the fundamental role of public and community engagement in feminist art both past and present?

c) How can current feminist art programs leverage this new research to support their own sustainability and enhancement, and thus the future of feminism?

In the interest of time, I will not share historical and theoretical background on US feminist art programs; and in light of my audience, I will also spare you the section on why feminist art matters. Instead, I will briefly synthesize some key concepts in recent arts participation research followed by partial analysis of one case study site.

Key Concepts in New Arts Participation Research
Several recent publications in arts participation research entreat arts organizations and funders to re-examine arts participation and shape programming and funding accordingly. Media research institutes are also publishing frequent reports on the changing use of digital tools informing
participation and engagement with arts and culture. From this data, several key themes arise that closely align with many active feminist art programs. I will share just three today:

1) **The distinction between artist and public is dissolving.** Audiences no longer want to watch, listen, or look passively; rather, they seek to actively engage in creative processes with artists and other participants, whether by generating their own artistic content, acquiring new skills, dialoguing with artists and publics, or designing and documenting their experience (Irvine Foundation, 2011; Simon, 2010). This can be linked to the notion of “pro-am,” or professional and amateur artists co-creating (Irvine Foundation, 2011), or collaborative processes between artists and audiences that subverts notions of “expert” and “non-expert” (Simon, 2010). Reports variously identify this emphasis on co-creation as Active Arts Programs (Irvine Foundation, 2011), the Creation mode of participation (NEA, 2011), or users as Creators (Simon, 2010).

2) Elevated participation modes are even more prevalent online or through electronic media (NEA, 2011), where they manifest as live audio and video streaming; personally curated channels of independent video art in the public domain; blogs and reviews; shared content via social media; sampled or re-mixed found images and sounds; self-published web zines and journals; and collaboratively created content across disciplines (Irvine Foundation, 2011). Even in place-based contexts, many people communicate their experience afterward through a variety of media platforms. Data also indicate that US populations with lower levels of income and educational attainment are more likely to participate in arts via broadcast or recordings (NEA, 2011), including online audio and video.

3) A new report from the National Committee on Responsive Philanthropy (2011) pressures arts and culture foundations to re-examine giving in light of statistics revealing that more than half of US arts and culture funding supports only the top 4% of arts organizations (the biggest and wealthiest), most of which uphold the Western art canon at the expense of other racial and ethnic groups, cultural traditions, genders, sexualities, and artistic practices. The Committee urges funders to re-structure giving models such that the majority of funds granted or donated support programs focused on “minority” art forms (such as traditional arts), artists (including women), and audiences; they aim to diversify all three while making cultural activity and experience more accessible to marginalized groups. This report also pushes for increased funding to programs that promote social change through art, including grassroots activism and community building.

**Case Analysis: Feminism & Co.**

**Feminism & Co.: Art, Sex, Politics** (Fem & Co) is a public program of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Denver, founded and co-curated by feminist scholars Elissa Auther and Gillian Silverman. Auther describes Feminism & Co. as “a program series that explores feminist issues in popular and visual culture, social policy, and the art world through creative forms of pedagogy that move beyond the traditional format of a museum or university.” According to
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Auther (2010), Fem & Co seeks to “cultivate and elevate public dialogue around feminist issues” and “advance common ground between scholarly and public discussions of feminism” while addressing the failure of most museums to present critical content that attracts a broad audience. Fem & Co seeks a playful approach to critical issues without diluting their seriousness.

Public participation and community engagement are central to Fem & Co’s mission, design, and execution. Its commitment to connecting broad audiences with feminism, art, and politics via entertainment and pleasure is reflected in all program aspects, including leadership; curatorial strategy; setting; local/regional emphasis; publicity material; and web presence.

I will now share examples of how these program areas embrace public participation, community engagement, and related themes, then align these activities with the arts participation research just discussed so as to illustrate their intersections and make the case for leveraging such research to enhance funding and support for feminist art programs.

Leadership

Auther and Silverman are both professors at Colorado universities. Their shared leadership and curatorial model recalls a rich history of collaborative, non-hierarchical organizing fundamental to early feminist art galleries, collectives, and programs. In turn, they are part of a long history of women in the arts and academia who brought feminist theory, activism, and education to college classrooms and curricula while organizing feminist art opportunities off-campus and in communities.

Auther’s and Silverman’s hybrid roles help bridge the cultural gap between universities and surrounding areas; coupled with a collaborative approach, they demonstrate community-oriented leadership and knowledge-sharing that dissolves distinctions between experts and non-experts, reflective of Fem & Co’s program goals as well as trends in arts participation research.

Content and Curation

Fem & Co regularly features community members, artists, activists, and scholars.

- *Muscle!* asked participants to think about gender and power through the juxtaposition of female professional bodybuilding and the activist work of Latina Initiative, a community organization devoted to fostering Latina civic engagement.
- *Craftivism* featured discussions and hands-on workshops with women crafters, examining domesticity and contemporary craft through a feminist lens.
- *Girls, Girls, Girls* included a presentation by the director of a nonprofit for adolescent girls as well as a panel of local girls and their mothers discussing their dolls.
• *Toys and Tupperware* examined the history and culture of female-dominated, home-based sales jobs with presentations by women in Tupperware, makeup, and sex toy sales.

• *FemCo Playlist* explored music from the perspective of women rock and hip-hop artists, industry professionals, bloggers, and art and music historians, most of them local.

(MCA Denver, 2011; The Lab at Belmar, 2008)

This sampling exemplifies Fem & Co’s role as a platform for women with vastly different relationships to cultural issues to share their expertise in an informal setting that encourages dialogue, participation, and co-creation while emphasizing feminist politics and perspectives. The convergence of speakers, presenters, and performers, addressing a single issue from rarely juxtaposed perspectives can generate new feminist vocabularies and cultural lexicons.

In turn, by merging critical issues and both traditional and experimental practices with pop culture, and by presenting experiences that find equal significance and value in the contributions and perspectives of local artists, scholars, community members, children, and adults, Fem & Co makes complex discussions of feminist politics and contemporary visual culture both accessible to a broad and diverse public and contingent upon their active engagement.

**Space**

Fem & Co is thoughtful about the politics of space. By presenting the program at a downtown museum, they move critical conversations about art and gender to a public institution charged with reaching local residents and the larger community, not just students and faculty. While museums on the whole are heavily bound up in the politics of high and low art, accessibility, and representation and are often guilty of perpetuating privilege, pretension, and exclusivity, Fem & Co injects the museum space with overtly progressive politics, feminist sex and pleasure, low art, live performance, pop culture, marginalized identities, alcohol, talking, and touching, transforming the museum into a more accessible and inclusive community space.

To cultivate an intimate, informal, social yet critically engaged experience with wide appeal, Auther says Fem & Co considers how people like to spend their leisure time, a critical component in arts management. The result? A bar at every event; and in line with what Auther calls an “irreverent, sometimes ironic” attitude infused with social commentary, “men always drink free” (2010).

**Local Connections and Community Partnerships**

Many museum-based public programs almost exclusively feature formal lectures by visiting speakers that attract niche audiences and involve little interaction, maintaining a problematic power dynamic of outside (urban) expert come to educate (regional) locals. In contrast,
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Feminism & Co.’s local and regional artists, activists, and scholars validate local knowledge and cultural assets and promote skill-sharing that can spark future collaboration.

A local focus also helps contextualize complex social and political concerns through the lens of community culture and the voices of its members rather than outsider experience, thus promoting dialogical art and the potential for participation. When Fem & Co featured a local Latina activist group, the audience could discuss gender and power in the context of demographics, race relations, cultural dynamics, and social politics specific to and apparent in their own community.

Marketing and Publicity

Feminism & Co. publicity materials demonstrate a conscientious awareness of how visual identity can influence public response, especially when challenged with attracting a broad audience to both a museum (an institutional space steeped in a legacy of exclusivity) and to critical content made frequently inaccessible by demanding theoretical and historical background. I argue that Fem & Co’s image visibly strives to connote its effort to make critical engagement with feminism, art, and social politics less intimidating and more entertaining.

The program’s announcement cards communicate a warm, friendly, and inviting experience with just a hint of provocation. Illustrated with thick lines, warm tones, rounded shapes, and bursts of bright color, the image features a black woman in the foreground, wearing headphones and knitting, enveloped in a dense fusion of retro, crafty aesthetics evoking psychedelia, crochet, quilting, and applique. Behind her, creamy white tendrils envelop the Earth. In orange-tinted red and a block of deep blue, the Feminism & Co. logo typeface conjures a ‘70s rock band t-shirt or modern design magazine. Below the logo, in capital letters, reads “ART + SEX + POLITICS.”

The card’s visual and cultural cues communicate Fem & Co’s curatorial themes: “women’s work,” craft, informal arts, popular music, global politics, representations of women in contemporary culture, and intersections of art, race, and gender. The illustration visually popularizes feminism and uses text sparingly, leaving room to interpret, respond, and fill in the blanks. No one is forced to decipher theoretical texts or conceptual images; simple language combined with popular content and style makes art, sex, and politics translate, first and foremost, as a lively, intriguing, smart, sexy, fun, and assertive conversation to which anyone can contribute.

Online Presence

Like the arts participation research previously discussed, several recent forecasts on the new public and participatory media landscape reflect similar emerging trends for arts and culture, most notably the imperative need for arts programs to respond to changing participation and engagement patterns among audiences, artists, and communities to achieve goals and objectives.
Among other things, these reports tell us that: web-based programs engage broad new audiences, make content more accessible, and add context and depth to experience while motivating repeat participation (nPower, n.d.); that as the newly dominant online media form, video allows users to generate compelling stories that make it critical to social change efforts (Institute for the Future, 2009); and that collaboratively created and widely distributed media technologies are instrumental to fostering participatory behavior (Center for Social Media, 2009).

These and similar reports increasingly agree that a robust online presence is integral to generating new and diverse audiences and cultivating critical conversation and community connection. I’ll consider this now in connection with Feminism & Co. and similar programs.

A web search for Feminism & Co. yields the program’s Facebook page; a couple of old articles and blog posts; a page on the MCA Denver website; a page from the archives of its former host site in Denver; and a handful of short YouTube videos. While their old website links to three social media accounts (Facebook, Twitter, and an empty YouTube channel) and archives video and audio podcasts, the current MCA Denver site provides only a brief program overview—no program dates, photos or video, forums, comments, or links to press, blogs, or social media.

These results demonstrate that while Fem & Co are conscious of the new “if you don’t have a website, you don’t exist” mantra, they have not yet developed a multimodal media scheme that allows for widespread knowledge of and engagement beyond their immediate community. Even current participants would benefit from more dynamic online content that meets audiences’ changing expectations, such as numerous nodes of entry and access to content; multiple participation modes; and opportunities to archive and share content that sparks dialogue outside the program’s physical and temporal confines.

Ongoing online forums could help Fem & Co achieve its goal of generating broad public dialogue. The program could also harness the power of video, moving beyond documentation of live presentations to additionally produce short, made-for-video versions that apply Fem & Co’s curatorial model to a new medium—a group of women discussing a cultural topic from diverse perspectives, perhaps each of them from a different part of the country—and then leading a live chat with online audiences. This enriches the notion of community engagement as a hybrid form of place-based/online involvement, permitting both more frequent programming as well as increased access for those who cannot attend, whether because they are locals who lack the means, or fans further afield who want to hear from Denver feminists and artists.

Given the near ubiquity among media researchers and scholars of the forecasts I’ve just discussed and their likely influence on arts and culture organizations and funders, it is imperative
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that feminist art programs begin or continue to implement, integrate, and manage media in connection with their program activities, goals, and messages.

Even for programs like Fem & Co that are not outcomes-oriented, digital media facilitates sharing of curatorial models and content among feminists, artists, audiences, and organizations within and beyond the physical community, publicizing the program and attracting place-based participation while expanding community activity, connection, and dialogue. More online media could garner Fem & Co greater exposure and partnerships among arts and culture, feminist, and community funders; increase interest in the programs’ artists, scholars, and presenters; and support the spread of feminist art, research, politics, and culture.

Implications for Feminism & Co.
In her conclusion to a 2010 conference presentation, Elissa Auther (2010) asked the following:

*How does Feminism & Co. relate to a history of feminist pedagogy that has always imagined itself oppositional and results oriented (i.e., an activist model)? Is it possible to imagine a feminist pedagogy that aims to create a space for dialogue that is not exclusively organized around activism or measurable outcomes?*

I have some thoughts that I think bring this presentation somewhat full circle. Immediately, I think of early feminist critiques that debunked Modernism’s mythic male genius and his masterpiece, shifting attention to process, to work that revealed and reveled in imperfection, fluidity, and frustration with art world mandates. Auther’s questions evoke the feminism in process, and she responds reflexively, un-fixing Fem & Co as a revolving practice, not an outcome.

Feminism & Co. could consider this a valuable and meaningful correlation between feminist programs past and present, a link to its history signaling the endurance of feminist art, thought, and revolution that still carry meaning and consequence. In turn, a privileging of process resists metrics, logic models, quantitative data, and other formulaic, universalizing tools routinely used by funders to evaluate nonprofit programs. In this sense, a process-oriented program that cultivates, as Auther (2010) says, “a space for dialogue” is a feminist act.

However, as the research I shared corroborates, funders are set to catch up with the new arts participation. As a multimodal spectrum, participation will influence operation and evaluation models much friendlier to process and qualitative response and more open to programs like Fem & Co that differ culturally and diverge operationally from standard practices.

Yet, to invoke the spirit of more traditional arts management practice, there is value to knowing if goals are being met. Fem & Co must define what a broad audience means for them, then
collect qualitative data to determine who attends, who doesn’t attend, and why, and if their creative pedagogy makes an impact. Do participants better understand art and feminism after attending? Do they engage in dialogue with other participants or share what they learned at home? Are they inspired to further engage with art and feminist issues? In sum, did Fem & Co provide a transformative experience, especially for those who would not otherwise seek or have access to critical thought and discourse on art and gender? If results don’t match goals, changes to content, web presence, or publicity materials can be tested. Of course, research requires time and money, all the more reason for feminist art programs to be conscious of funding trends.

Implications for the Future of Feminist Art
Feminist art, artists, and programs continue to incorporate many participation and engagement elements identified in arts participation research: collaboration and co-creation that dissolves artist/audience and expert/non-expert dichotomies; pioneering use of new media to theorize, discuss, document, archive, and make art, culture, and feminism; and art as both a subject of and vehicle for critical dialogue or action focused on community building and social change.

While I cannot yet share firm conclusions or formal recommendations, I will leave you with a preliminary list of possible benefits to feminist art programs that strategically identify alignment with and leverage of emerging trends, theories, and research in arts participation.

- Arts and culture funders will strategize new giving models that funnel significantly more money into organizations and programs of smaller size and budget that focus on, for example, women, the LGBT community, traditional arts, and contemporary craft.
- Many feminist art programs as they currently operate will qualify for more funding, decreasing internal competition; new grants will emerge that fit feminist models, sparking an increase in both the maintenance of current programs and the founding of new ones.
- Availability of resources for electronic media will increase which, in line with statistics, can make space for new programs designed by and for younger audiences as well as those with lower levels of income and educational attainment; in turn, funding for online marketing, publicity, outreach, and social media will be more widely available, enhancing opportunities to reach new audiences and cultivate online communities.
- Funders will likely allow for program outcomes and evaluation more conducive to feminist methods, or to those like Fem & Co that deviate from results-oriented models.

I am pursuing this research because I know, we know, that feminism and art still matter, that both are under real and serious threat, and that we need more and better programs, with both critical and enjoyable participation, dialogue, and engagement at their core, to support and advance the artists, feminists, and feminisms in our communities. While I empathize with the struggle to reconcile radical politics with strategic methods or managerial practices, we need to continue
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identifying gaps in feminist inquiry across disciplines, blowing through these undisturbed fields, and making feminism’s presence known.
References


