

Feminist Education at the Feminist Studio Workshop*

by Ruth Iskin

BRIEF HISTORY

THE FEMINIST Studio Workshop (F.S.W.) was founded in Los Angeles in 1973 as an independent educational institution for women working in the arts and humanities.¹ Our goal was to create a learning environment for women that would be free of the constrictions of male-dominated institutions and that would nourish a feminist community in which women could generate feminist art – art that expresses women's experiences and perspectives. During the first three years, 105 full-time students from the U.S., Europe, and Canada participated in our one and two-year programs. Students could work on degrees through our affiliation with several nontraditional colleges – Goddard, Antioch, and International College. In addition, approximately fifteen hundred local women participated on a part-time basis in courses, workshops, and special programs.

The need to find a working space and a base for the Feminist Studio Workshop led to the concept of the Woman's Building – a center that would house various L.A. feminist groups, make a public statement about the strength and cohesiveness of the women's movement, provide a model for independent feminist institutions, and create a focal point for feminist activities in Los Angeles. The organizations which relocated at the Woman's Building were: Womenspace (the first independent gallery and

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performance space for women in the arts on the West Coast), Gallery 707 (a commercial gallery devoted to the exhibition of women's art), the L.A. Women's Switchboard (a telephone information service for feminist groups and services), a branch of Sisterhood Bookstore (a feminist bookstore), Grandview Gallery (a woman's cooperative gallery), and a feminist therapist who rented an office in the Building. Later on, new organizations joined: a chapter of N.O.W., a women's coffee shop, and Woman-tours (a woman's travel agency), while others left or closed down. The F.S.W. School, housed at the Woman's Building, included studios, a Woman's Graphic Center, and the Center for Feminist Art Historical Studies. The Woman's Building also provided for community gallery and performance spaces as well as the Extension Program.²

Our original plan for the organization of the Woman's Building was to create a Board of Lady Managers composed of representatives of the tenant organizations and community women.³ We thought that the work of shaping and maintaining the Woman's Building would be the shared responsibility of individuals and their organizations. It became clear, however, that the tenant organizations preferred to defer leadership responsibility to the F.S.W. and to remain essentially in the role of renters. Thus, when we moved to a new location in the summer of 1975, the F.S.W. staff-collective formally assumed the responsibilities of directing and running the Woman's Building.

The move to a building in downtown Los Angeles in the center of several ethnic neighborhoods provided the opportunity for us to redefine our spaces and their purposes. Based on two years of experience, we were better able to shape the physical space to serve our needs, reflect our values, and implement the goals of the Building as an alternative feminist institution and as a public center for women's culture. The move also provided an impetus to search for additional feminist organizations to join the new Building, since by that time many of the organizations originally renting space had moved or disbanded. In the new building we were able to house four large community galleries, a spacious performance area with the capacity to hold four hundred people, the Woman's Cafe, the offices of two feminist therapists, a branch of Sisterhood Bookstore, Canis Gallery, Olivia Records storage space, a much expanded Extension Program, and the F.S.W. School. The School included a Graphics Center with printing and

darkroom facilities, a Video Center, a tool room, and the Center for Feminist Art Historical Studies which provided access to women's art books and slide collections.

The Woman's Building and the F.S.W. have been funded primarily through tuition, membership fees, and admissions to events rather than through grants or outside fundraising. Those grants we have received have been earmarked for special projects rather than for regular day-to-day maintenance costs of the Building.⁴ A major fundraiser, the "Building Women" concert financed the materials used for the renovation of the new building.⁵ All the work — design of spaces, construction of walls, sanding of floors, scraping and painting — was done by volunteers from the F.S.W. and the larger L.A. women's community. Women learned construction skills and, in a concrete way, experienced one of the goals of the F.S.W. and the Woman's Building: creating a female community focused on work and shared values.

THE NEED FOR FEMINIST EDUCATION

All of us who teach at the F.S.W. were trained and have taught in traditional academic institutions, and it was because of our experiences as students that we created an alternative educational situation. We found that education has been hampered by the dominance of masculine values.

Women have not been educated to be the makers of culture and politics, but have instead been trained to better perform their roles as wives and mothers. In the field of art, women traditionally have been accepted as models, as inspirations, as subject matter, and as collectors — all functions which support male artists and their art. The assumption that female art students will not become artists themselves but rather end up marrying (an artist, perhaps) underlies the interaction of male art teachers with their female art students. Women have been discouraged from serious pursuit of a career and have been deprived of the kind of financial, emotional, and professional support that male students expect and receive.

Even if women are able to transcend the obstacles of male-dominated educational institutions and are able to use their skills in the world, they suffer from the constrictions of sexism in the kind of work they can create. Women's work is most likely to reflect the dominant values of culture or, at best, the struggles

that women go through in their efforts to sustain a nuclear family and to gain recognition in a male system.

THE PURPOSE AND GOAL OF FEMINIST EDUCATION

The purpose of feminist education is to create and participate in cultural revolution. Towards that end, feminist creative activity takes place in the context of a community in which women can support one another, validate individual and common experience, create from that experience, and share their work with the public When women are primarily in a feminist support community, their work reflects female/female support and the different sense of identity which one has in that situation. This is a new and different kind of art, reflecting a new social structure – feminist community structure.⁶

At the F.S.W., feminist education is aimed primarily at the arts. We define the function of art as raising consciousness, inviting dialogue, and transforming culture. We believe that it is not possible to end women's oppression unless feminism reshapes culture, and that the creation of feminist art is essential to this process. Our goal for feminist education at the F.S.W. is to create a feminist learning structure/environment out of which women will emerge to participate in feminist leadership through their work. The focus of feminist education at the F.S.W. is to assist women in developing their strength, leadership, expertise, and creativity; to help them make a transition from victimized, powerless outsider to effective, powerful participator in reshaping the world according to feminist values.

THE F.S.W. STRUCTURE AND PROCESS

Women's conventional education and female role conditioning set up specific attitudes that have limited our aspirations and roles. Women have been brought up to expect that their lives will be shaped and that they will be taken care of by someone else, first by parents and then by husband. Women are taught to assume passive rather than independent roles in the world outside the home. Women are not expected to take risks or meet demands for achievement, success, competency. They are raised to be helping mates, to put their husbands' careers and their childrens' needs before their own.

Feminist education seeks to counteract and undo this kind of conditioning as a prerequisite for women attaining their full

potential. The first-year program at the F.S.W. is designed to perform that function by giving support, demanding growth, work, and achievement, and encouraging a critical analysis of women's oppression. The F.S.W. is structured around the interactions of the whole group. Our work has encompassed such diverse fields as painting, drawing, sculpture, environmental work, performance, art history, photography, film, video, graphic design, printing, writing, dance, music, and organizing. The diversity of disciplines is determined by the interest and participation of students and not by the availability of a teacher in a certain field.⁷

The F.S.W. has four ongoing structures: the entire F.S.W. group (for all staff and students), community meetings and small consciousness-raising (CR) groups (both of which are conducted without staff participation), and staff meetings. Other forms such as the critique, the project-oriented group, skill classes, and a large-group project are generated at different times of the year or change format from term to term.

The school year is divided into three segments, each of which has its own emphasis. Initially, we focus on a large-scale group project which will culminate in a presentation to the public. In the second period, we concentrate on acquiring skills in small-group classes, followed by a month-long period of individual work during which students meet with staff members of their choice once a week. Finally, we emphasize bringing the work (both individual and collective) to completion and preparing for a group presentation to the public.

THE F.S.W. GROUP

Meeting regularly in the large group helps create a sense of group identity and community. Whenever possible we start and end the day with the entire group present. Much of the learning about leadership, organizing, identifying one's own feelings and power, and improving one's work, takes place in the group discussions of feelings, problems, and ideas. These discussions challenge the assumption that women should not assert themselves and provide a space for women to overcome their fears of speaking in a large group. At times we use CR (even in meetings of fifty people) to provide a safe, supportive, non-judgmental atmosphere in which women can articulate their thoughts and feelings.

The focus of the large group varies during the year. Sometimes there are joint presentations by staff members about women's culture; at other times there are brainstorming sessions about the group project. Different periods are used for sharing work and receiving feedback. Each year, the first day of the F.S.W. is devoted to a marathon in which each woman introduces herself to the group by showing her work. Later, after a period of independent study, the women bring in new work to share their development and achievements. The group as a whole tries to move forward and grow in much the same way that individuals move forward in struggles with their own work.

THE COMMUNITY MEETINGS

In the community meetings, the students use the time as they see fit. Students have chosen to explore different modes of intragroup communication and organization or to discuss their relationship to the Woman's Building. The meetings play an important role in forming a sense of camaraderie and self-sufficiency, a feeling of caring, power, and responsibility. The fact that the staff is not present may enable students to express uncomfortable feelings about the F.S.W. and its staff before the women are ready to share these feelings in the presence of the staff.

CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING

During their first days in the F.S.W., women are divided into small CR groups which meet once a week throughout the year. The CR group in the F.S.W. functions as it does elsewhere – as a safe and appropriate setting for the expression of feelings and as a politicizing experience through which women identify with each other. But as one part of the larger educational structure of the F.S.W., CR takes on an additional role in the process of feminist education. Through CR women connect with their personal experiences and realize the commonality of those experiences. This both frees the women to do work and provides material from which work is made. Thus CR is used as a technique in the process of making feminist art. Because CR is a leaderless structure, each woman can give and receive support. At the same time, CR exists here within an overall structure of feminist education which is not leaderless. The leaders (the staff) combine giving support with making demands. The combination of the two is what accelerates progress.

Four CR topics – money, work, sexuality, and authority – appear to be the basic and most charged issues that come up in the process of feminist education. We deal with these topics at the beginning of the program in a marathon CR day in which the staff also participates. In a feminist structure outside the patriarchal commercial system, the issue of money is a subject for careful analysis and a source of strong feelings. Since women have been prevented from fully participating in society in terms of *both* making money and making decisions about spending it, they face material and emotional difficulties around this subject. Important questions get raised: Should we charge money? How do we charge without excluding some women? Is it all right to value feminist services in monetary terms? What about the need to recycle money inside the feminist community? Our purpose is to deal with the issue of feminism and money responsibly and at the same time make it possible for women to survive in the present monetary structure. We face the fact that a fixed tuition fee is required to participate in the F.S.W. program. Ideally each woman should be able to pay according to her means, but it simply would not be possible to operate the school or the Woman's Building without minimum funds for expenses and salaries. We ask women concerned with this issue to join us in the work of obtaining funds rather than remaining immobilized and angry about it. (Recently we were awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts for scholarship funds.)

The topic of work is related to money. We need to work in order to survive. But other issues related to work are also raised: How can we do our own work? How is our work linked with our professional identity? How do we receive criticism and recognition for our work? How do we respect and value that work?

Sexuality, another subject for CR discussions, is dealt with as it is related to work: How is sexuality seen as a theme in women's work? How has it been used to divert women's attention from work and achievement? (For example, women often seek power through sexual affiliations rather than through their own accomplishments.)

The discussion of authority centers on the difficulty women have in asserting their own authority and in accepting authority exercised by other women. We make a distinction between having authority in a certain area (e.g. education, art, writing) and being authoritarian or dictatorial. Since women are not raised to

command authority but rather to support and be subject to the authority of others, this issue lies at the heart of every feminist's struggle. For women, the taboo against having authority is so strong that they feel threatened and fearful when they see another woman who represents authority. They identify with her, and the initial reaction is to rebel against and to stop the female authority. Through the process of feminist education, this response can turn into an understanding that we can each have authority. Our purpose is to get a woman to the point where she can be her own authority and also support other women's growth.

THE CRITIQUE

It is primarily through the critique that women learn to improve their work. We have experimented with both large and small groups and have found that the small, ongoing critique class, in which each member agrees to bring work to every session and give as well as receive criticism, works best. Regular and punctual attendance is required in order for the critique to work. The sole function of criticism in the F.S.W. is to assist the student in developing her work. Effective criticism takes place when we face directly and are able to eliminate dynamics that usually go unacknowledged in critiques: unarticulated positions, biases, and feelings from which the person giving criticism speaks, power plays, and a sense of competition between students as well as between teacher and student.

The student whose work is up for criticism usually experiences fear connected to her work: fear of being inadequate and inarticulate, fear that the work is unclear or inferior because it does not speak for itself, fear that the work is trivial, unprofessional, or not feminist. In a traditional critique situation these feelings are left unspoken; each participant acts upon them, while not fully recognizing them, and assumes that the experience is unique to her. The first step toward clearing the way for helpful criticism is to prompt the sharing of these feelings at the beginning. For example, the first session in which we ask women to show their work is preceded by a session in which the women express their best and worst fantasies about showing their work to the group. When everyone realizes the commonality of their apprehensions and hopes, the shared experience creates a comfortable feeling – and even comic relief. This frees the women to actually look at the work, hear the criticism, and participate in giving feedback.

Because hearing responses to one's own work is such a charged experience and therefore selective, some women tape record the feedback and listen to it again later on.

At the beginning of the critique, the artist is asked to present her work and to explain her intentions and process, the content and the formal means she chose. After her presentation the group gives feedback. In order for the artist to be able to listen to criticism, it is important to start out by acknowledging what is there in the work before talking about what is not there. Then suggestions can be given about ways to improve the work and additional directions it could take. These might include other awarenesses that could be brought to the work in terms of content, examining whether the media is used in a way that is appropriate to the work, asking whether and how the work communicates what the artist intended, and discussing if she is satisfied with what the work expresses.

Sharing information on how a similar topic has been treated by other artists, both male and female, helps clarify the consciousness that is brought into the work and the tradition through which the work will be apprehended. For example, one of the participants shared a series of four photographs showing herself and her children viewed through the bars of a child's playpen, as if both mother and children were prisoners inside the playpen.⁸ The artist was dealing with the topic of motherhood and expressing her identification with her children with whom she felt equally confined. We began by articulating this feeling and then analyzed the similarities and differences between the way this artist dealt with the subject and the way it has been dealt with in feminist literature and in visual art. [Treatment of the theme of mother and child in Western art includes religious glorification and expression of pain in the subject of Mary with the infant Christ; the child and mother as objects glorifying the head of the household – the father – even in his absence from the painting (Renoir); the child and mother as victims of sickness, poverty, general social injustice, and human misery (Käthe Kollwitz); the mother and child as a complete world to themselves, with a heightened element of consciousness in their interactions, (Mary Cassatt); and finally, the shattering of the idyllic mystique of mother and children in the family context (Marisol and Dorothea Tanning).] The artist who brought her photographs to the critique was acknowledged for her own point of view, and her work

was also set in a historical perspective through comparison with other treatments of the theme. Then we discussed aspects which were not fully present in the work and which could broaden its content such as: How is the mother not only similar to the children in feeling restricted but also different in her role of responsibility and power? What is the relationship of the sense of confinement of mother and children to the social structure in which this is experienced? And how can that context be integrally expressed?

This example demonstrates how we facilitate the creation of feminist art. Each artist is encouraged to develop her work by expressing her personal experience with a consciousness of the social context in which it occurs. We do not prescribe or favor the expression of one experience over another, nor of certain media to express the experience. Rather, we see our role as assisting the exploration and expression of women's experience and points of view through art.

THE GROUP PROJECT AND THE NATURE OF COLLABORATION

Group projects have always played an important role in feminist education. In 1971, women in the feminist program at California Institute of the Arts, their teachers Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago, and several invited artists from L.A. transformed an old condemned house into "Womanhouse."⁹ Womanhouse was an environmental art work that reflected women's feelings, sense of oppression, fantasies, and dreams associated with "the home." At the F.S.W. we build upon this heritage.

During the first and third year of the F.S.W. program, the group project was the renovation of the building in which our program was housed – the transformation of the space into which we had moved into a "building of our own." Planning the spaces to serve our needs and making a public statement about our identity and values, as well as doing the physical renovation, were integral aspects of the group project. The women in the program participated in all stages of the work. They learned how to build walls by constructing frames and attaching sheet rock; they learned how to tape, plaster, scrape, and paint walls, sand and varnish floors; they learned how to use power tools, paint signs, and organize for the opening to the public. The women who worked on the project began to overcome the sense of alienation that most women have about using the strength of their bodies and learning the simple

skills needed to use power tools. The group renovation project also provided an opportunity for the women to confront their fears, frustrations, and discouragement about being able to complete a large-scale project. This experience was a valuable prelude to the struggle that they would undergo in the remaining part of the year in doing their art work.

The most important aspect of the experience of the group project is the transformation of the physical activity of the project into a sense of building a community: the feeling of pride in collaboration, the sense of pushing beyond one's limits, the experience of the power of the group as a whole, the kind of sisterhood that develops among women covered with dust, scraping the same ceiling while sitting on the same scaffolding. This sharing of responsibility and effort among women, of exhilaration mixed with exhaustion, cannot be adequately described in words.

In addition to working on the building, the F.S.W. women were doing CR, making their art, and receiving critiques on their work. By the time the building was opened to the public, they had completed work for an exhibition, installed it in the gallery, and presented performances and readings of their own writings.

The experience of the group project transformed the forty-five women, who two and one-half months earlier had come from different parts of the country, into a community. It became a community in which women cared for one another and supported one another on a project that reflected their common goals and values, overcoming difficulties and sharing successes.

Each group project is timed so that we begin and end the year with an experience of collaboration. At the beginning of the year, the function of the project is to encourage large-scale endeavors on the part of individuals and the group. Toward the end of the year, (after a period of learning skills and doing one's individual work), the group effort demonstrates the students' accomplishments. Once again, this work is shared with the public. The group project reunites the group while at the same time providing space for each individual's work. It shifts the emphasis from each student's wish to please the teacher to each woman's responsibility to herself and to the group. The competition among students – encouraged in traditional education by the measuring of individual achievement only, through exams and grades – is eliminated by placing a high value on cooperation and the success of the group effort, while at the same time allowing for individual achievement.

The group project provides a format in which women can confront not only the problems that arise in working collaboratively but also those connected with their independent work. The two issues which surface specifically around collaboration are women's fears of losing their identity to someone else or to the group and of taking over and imposing their ideas on others or on the group. Most women experience both fears at various stages of the project. The group project allows the women to work collaboratively, individually, and in a combination of the two.

Various forms and modes of collaboration have been explored by women at the F.S.W. In one collaborative effort, women wove their individual writings, which had been reworked numerous times with the group's input, into one coherent reading presentation. They had previously presented a public reading that was the result of even more direct collaboration. Each woman wrote on the same theme, the experience of losing her virginity. Then they passed their work on to another woman whose task it was to discover what the essence of that experience was for *her* and to alter only those parts that could not possibly have applied to her. Then the papers went through the process once more. What remained was a distillation of the experience. Women saw their similarities and differences, and what they finally expressed was a fusion of their experiences.¹⁰

Another collaborative effort was created for the opening exhibition of the new building. Five artists (Ann Isolde, Cynthia Ann, Meridee Mandio, Anne Gaulden, and Emily Chaison) created about twenty-five small images of women corresponding to some of those invoked in Anne Waldman's poem "Fast Speaking Woman." Initially, they planned to weave the images together in a quiltlike manner. But as the number of images grew, and each woman's style and focus became evident, they decided to preserve their individual identities by assembling each artist's images on a separate panel and hanging the five panels (identical in size and format) next to each other. They included small square mirrors (the same size as each image) interspersed among their images on each panel in order to extend the creation of images to the spectator, allowing the viewer to literally view her or himself among those images. The result was a collective work which also exhibited each artist's work independently.

Ann Isolde, one of the five women who originated the piece, recounted the experience:

We were trying to work collaboratively and stay independent at the same time. There were enough images for a large number of people to work on, and we decided to collaborate because it would have taken one person too long to do it alone. We were able to work in our own private space and then get together for meetings where we made various group decisions, like what the format would be, how many images each person would do, what the theme was, what materials we would use. After that we selected our images from the poem, democratically, by going around the room, each woman choosing an image when her turn came.

When we brought the images to the F.S.W., the collaboration went beyond our group, as we got critiques from others. This gave my imagery and work a whole new direction. When there are a lot of ideas, and various people are involved, the project is enriched. All along we were communicating on the phone about how we felt and what images we were making. This kept us going, and we inspired each other. Finally we got together to decide how to put all the images together. At first we were going to do it like a quilt, with each person giving her images to someone else; then we decided to keep each person's work together in order to keep individual styles apparent.

There were difficulties in that collaboration takes a lot of time; you have to find out what everyone feels and thinks, which is hard under deadline pressure. We had problems around money, buying materials and making sure that we kept track so that each person got paid back what we owed her, etc. We got along pretty well; people helped each other. We were not just making our own piece. The collaboration was a teaching/learning situation.

SKILL PROJECT-ORIENTED AND THEORY CLASSES

In the skill and project-oriented classes, the traditional classroom dichotomy between student and teacher is transformed. Designer Sheila de Bretteville described this in a graphics workshop on typography:

I asked the women to bring a statement from their journals, which they would then set in type. The task was to deal with how you make the private public through graphics; what is the effect — tone and form — when you make your work available to a broad audience, rather than to yourself. They transformed their statements into a poster, a billboard, or a multiple-printed piece. The class became a community with the class time and place giving the structure, rather than a teacher giving information. Each week they were the audience for each others' work and gave each other responses as to whether the message could evoke a response from a broad audience.

Since one of the goals was to enter into a dialogue with the audience, they did not want to yell the idea so loudly that there would be no place for the response of the viewer. We dealt with the importance of the conversational tone, and the interactional mode in graphics. Each student found her own solution, did her own piece, and what was shared was time and space. Interaction between all members of the class provided the form.

Learning from others in the group, including the authority figure, decentralizes authority and knowledge. In an all-female group the project-oriented class resulted in much more exuberant participation than in the male/female group at Cal Arts. There we tended to find more defined jobs for everyone, whereas in the all-female context we worked more closely together, and women often changed jobs.

Education in feminist theory took place in the Issues class, which was also a training ground for leadership. Women learned to overcome obstructive group dynamics and purely personal investments. They also learned to listen to, and to forcefully articulate, points of view. Arlene Raven, who led the class, described its purpose and process:

The purpose of the Issues class was to allow us to deal with important topics in the women's movement, the peace movement, the humanistic movement, and in art, in a way that would place us in a specific relationship to those issues. Instead of simply articulating our positions, presenting the issue, and relating the bibliography (the academic approach), we assumed ourselves to be people who are particularly concerned with *acting* on those issues in terms of how we lead our lives, do our work. First, we separated our own psychology from the discussion of the issues. One of the things we did was to find out what our attachment to the whole area of debate was. We sought to make sure that we were, in fact, talking about the issue at hand rather than giving other messages, such as: "I want attention," or "I am smart," or "I feel stupid." We discussed the interaction among ourselves and cleared that away through exercises such as pretending that we had points of view that we didn't really have, and arguing from those. Then we looked at people debating in the class and analyzed the interaction . . . The issues that we discussed had to do with political life, with the women's movement, and art. Some of the issues were trashing, lesbianism, the power of art, and the difference between politics and culture, which is an ongoing debate in the F.S.W. We never reached any particular conclusions because that was not what the class was about. The class was meant to encourage acceptance of different points of view and an ability to articulate them in such a way that we could really see what those

points of view were. Each woman arrived at a conclusion when it was appropriate for her. We opened up the field for discussion . . . Women were listening to each other, and this respect for one another created flexibility. The need to have one narrow point of view subsided when women did not have to fight for that respect any more. Then we were able to really understand some issues.

THE PROCESS OF FEMINIST EDUCATION

Each year at the F.S.W. women go through what we have named "the process of feminist education." Briefly described, it is the fear, anger, anxiety, and pain women experience when they first face their own feelings of being oppressed, powerless, and immobilized. These feelings are stimulated when a woman sees herself in relation to other women who are leaders – women who appear to be strong, powerful, capable, and self-confident. Anger is usually directed at the woman who represents the realization of a taboo: a *woman* who is in charge of her own power which is manifested in leadership. These women are seen as symbols of the power figures of the family and of society and are therefore mistaken as oppressors by women who have not yet freed themselves to use their own power and leadership abilities. This process, which we have recognized in our experience of feminist education at the F.S.W., is a crucial one for each woman to work through. Within the women's movement, it has often brought out feelings of disillusionment and deep pain, and it has been responded to by what is called "trashing" and pinpointed as a partial result of "the tyranny of structurelessness."¹¹

This problem is the experience that any oppressed person has when first coming into consciousness about being oppressed, and it is behavior that can be the first step toward liberation. Because we see this process as an inherent and necessary part of feminist education at this point in history (however tired we are from playing a part in it over and over again), we have developed ways in which we feel it can be dealt with actively, rather than simply *reacted* to. The method we use is twofold (and works well in the context of an educational environment with recognized leaders): we give permission for the feelings to arise and encourage the expression of pain and anger. At the same time, we analyze the source of those feelings in the oppression of women in society.

The second part of this process is to assist each woman in moving from a position of feeling oppressed, which is at the source of

her anger and pain, to transforming her sense of oppression into an ability to take leadership and power and to act on those abilities rather than on her feelings of victimization. After listening supportively to the expression of the feelings that come up, and after introducing an awareness of women's oppression, we make demands on her to grow and change. We demand that each woman take full responsibility for her feelings of immobilization and powerlessness, granting the recognition of oppression. We demand that each woman move from a position of blaming another (society, parent, teacher/leader, stronger peer, etc.) to a recognition that only she herself can ultimately make things different for herself. We are there to support growth and change, as well as to demand the transition from "mutual oppression to mutual support."¹²

During this process, blame tends to be directed at the authority figure in the situation. Most women tend to get stuck, even if temporarily, in the anger stage, out of fear of moving forward in a direction utterly contradictory to everything that women have been educated to be. While it is important to recognize the role that male-dominated sexist society plays in women's oppression, it is counterproductive for women to continually indulge in the role of the victim. This simply perpetuates victimization and oppression. Support for women developing their potential, their work, their leadership abilities, and their capacity to exercise those in the world are at the heart of feminist education.

By the end of the first year at the F.S.W., the students are stronger and know from their own experience what the process of feminist education is. The women who return for their second year are most likely to complete the process successfully. During the second year they are able to devote most of their energy to the development of their work, as well as being able to play an important role in helping the first-year students through this painful process. It is easier for the women who are in their first year at the F.S.W. to listen to women who have moved through the process recently than it is to hear it when voiced by the figure who symbolizes authority – the teacher. It is useful also for the second year women to have a chance to experience themselves in comparison to women who are in the initial stages. The counteracting of female role conditioning and the constructive development of work and leadership are simultaneous parts of feminist education.

Artist Bia Lowe describes her experience of this success at the F.S.W.:

When I came to the F.S.W., I felt like I was exposed physically. I felt a constant sensation of weakness and vulnerability which was overwhelming. It frightened me, but mostly it generated feelings of anger; and maybe it was just that for the first time there was permission to be angry. Being allowed to express myself stimulated a lot of old pain about my oppression. After a while, I dealt consciously with a lot of stuff about authority; before, I had reacted to authority by acting out, and sometimes by being rebellious.

My experience in the second year had a lot to do with seeing other women from the first year at a different stage. A lot of them were not in touch with their oppression, and/or their sexual identification as women, which made me feel less helpless, and also a little bored. It was a process that I recognized, one that I didn't necessarily want to reenact. I felt like I had more opportunity to make choices – whether or not I wanted to continue to feel helpless and other-identified. I wanted to take on responsibility for the Building – the Building being a metaphor for *my* development – and I realized nobody else was going to take care of me unless I was willing to. I was angry at the Building when I first came because it wasn't taking care of me, or itself in some ways. And then, later on, I wanted to take responsibility and felt crazed because I was so worried that *it* (i.e., *me*) wasn't going to succeed. When I took more active responsibility for certain aspects of the Woman's Building, I experienced other women's anger at the Building and at me. I realized that the success of the Building was only as good as the ability of the women participating to move out of the space of our own frustration. Finally, the issue of anger and helplessness gave way to just getting the job done. At that point I became involved in seeing what value my efforts really have.

NOTES

1. The methods and ideas discussed in this article are based on my experience as a member of the staff collective of the F.S.W. and were developed with my colleagues. The F.S.W. was founded by designer Sheila de Bretteville, art historian Arlene Raven, and artist Judy Chicago. Chicago left at the end of the first year, and at that point artist Suzanne Lacy, printer and graphic artist Helen Roth, writer Deena Metzger, and I joined the staff.
2. This is a description of the Women's Building during its first two years of existence.
3. Modeled after the Board of Lady Managers which initiated the Woman's Building in Chicago in 1893 (part of the World Columbian Exposition). The name Woman's Building was also chosen as a tribute to the 1893 building – a feminist,

woman-governed building dedicated to women's history, culture, work, and achievement. The 1893 Woman's Building was a temporary structure on the World's Fair grounds. It housed exhibitions, statistical data, women's writings, and patents of the work of women in over forty countries. Arlene Raven and I created a documentary exhibition of the 1893 Chicago Building.

4. We brought in and spent about \$134,000 during the year 1975-76. This was a significant growth compared to the \$47,000 of the previous year. Only 15 percent of the 1975-76 budget came from grants. We were astonished at the size of these figures since the Woman's Building is always running on minimal survival funds and much of the work is either volunteered or severely underpaid. We realize that we must build a solid financial base since the kind of energy and work needed to sustain an institution like the F.S.W. does not make it possible to hold an additional job.

5. The "Building Women" concert was organized by women from the L.A. community and the Woman's Building: Olivia Records, Bobbie Birleffi, Kate McDonough, and Cheryl Swannack. The performers, like the organizers, donated their work. They were Holly Near, Lily Tomlin, Meg Christian, Margie Adam, and Miss Alice Stone's Ladies Society Orchestra.

6. Arlene Raven, member of the F.S.W. staff collective, "Notes on Feminist Education," unpublished.

7. Through the Extension Program we offer a wide range of courses and workshops taught by experts in their fields. One of the purposes of the Extension Program is to augment and complete the course offerings for the women in the F.S.W. For example, when two dancers came to participate in the F.S.W. last year and we did not have a dancer on the staff, we scheduled additional dance classes in the Extension Program.

8. The photographs were made by Terri Hawthorne, one of the participants in a special ten-day intensive workshop, "Feminist Education: Methods and Techniques," held in June 1976.

9. See Judy Chicago's description of the process of Womanhouse in *Through the Flower, My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (Doubleday, New York, 1975). The California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California, has published a catalogue and a slide package, and Johanna Demetrakas has made a film about Womanhouse.

10. This description comes from Deena Metzger who guided the process in the Journal Workshop.

11. See articles by Joreen (Jo Freeman), "Tyranny of Structurelessness," *Second Wave*, vol. II, no. 1 (1972) and "When Sisters Turn on Each Other," *Ms. Magazine*, April 1976 and readers' responses to her article in *Ms. Magazine*, September 1976. See also, "What Future for Leadership?" *Quest: A Feminist Quarterly*, vol. II, no. 4 (1976), interview with Charlotte Bunch and Beverly Fisher. The problem in the women's movement is magnified because women are so prone to see themselves as the cause of the problem and by extension see the women's movement as the cause. We need to understand that the problem stems from women's oppression and the struggle to solve it is necessary to the process of making possible work relationships among feminists.

12. Term coined by Arlene Raven to describe this process.