



Essay Writing

Creative Arts



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

Annotated example

The third year Creative Arts essay on the following pages was written in response to the question:

Discuss the contributions of feminism to contemporary arts, emphasising the work of two or three artists. List theoretical terms used, and provide definitions in your discussion.

OUTLINE

Orientation

Role feminism has played in making women artists visible in art history.

Thesis

Feminism's contribution to contemporary art is such that it helped to initiate modernism.

Point 1

Feminism and the notion of 'privileged vision': challenging male centred culture.

Point 2

Historical perspective: women's participation in the fine arts should be seen in a social and cultural context.

Point 3

Under-representation of women artists may be due to the criteria by which art is judged (i.e. predominantly from a male perspective).

Point 4

That art made by feminist women represented a cultural change: that is, the perspective of women was introduced (supporting information: contribution of the Guerrilla Girls)

Point 5

Artist Barbara Kruger: contributes to contemporary culture by commenting on aspects of our culture.

Point 6

Artist Judy Chicago: contribution to contemporary culture.

Conclusion

Feminism has contributed to contemporary arts, in particular feminist artists Chicago and Kruger.

Writer's reflection on changes achieved for women.



ANNOTATION TO THE ESSAY

The annotations in the right-hand column below highlight significant features of the essay, such as structure and how evidence for the argument is incorporated. Those in 'text boxes' provide further comment on features such as academic language and referencing conventions.

Example: student essay

Feminism has contributed to all aspects of contemporary life. The perennial debates permeate our thinking consciously and unconsciously. Until the feminist art movement of the 1970s there had not been a voice articulating, or representative of the female experience. Since feminist historians have begun to address the flagrant absence of women from art history, the arguments and analysis have provoked heated debate. A conundrum now facing women artists could be that now their work is unavoidably read primarily from a feminist perspective.

Feminist art has had important influences on contemporary art. The feminist historians Broude and Garrard (1994) suggested that feminist art and art history helped to initiate post-modernism in America. The basic tenets of post-modernism, such as the understanding that gender is socially and not naturally constructed, the validation of non-'high art' forms (e.g., craft, video, performance art) and the questioning of the cult of genius and greatness in Western art history come from the breakthrough of feminism. They argued that feminism challenged the given of the privileged male and forced a re-evaluation of a culture that viewed the world from a white heterosexual male perspective (Broude & Garrard 1994).

Foster (1983) asked if this position can be shifted in a patriarchal order that privileges vision over the other senses, "for investment in the look is not privileged in women as in men" (p. 70). Feminist theory has addressed this idea of privileged vision and the way women are represented and objectified in art. Some women artists refuse to represent women in their art as they consider that in our culture it cannot be free from "phallic prejudice" (p. 72):

Images and symbols for the women cannot be isolated from images and symbols of the women ... it is representation, the representation of feminine sexuality whether repressed or not, which conditions how it comes into play. (Foster 1983, p. 71)

In her history of women painters, Germaine Greer (1979) attempted to address the question of women's participation in the fine arts, placing the known artists in a social and cultural context. Before the 19th century women artists were unable to express their own creativity, being dependent on existing patriarchal family structures. Technical training was impossible to access without the benevolence or inclusion into a formal structure (Lucie-Smith 1994).

Greer (1979) replaced Linda Nochlin's (1971/2021) essay question, *Why have there been no great women artists?* with what she considers the true questions:

What is the contribution of women to the visual arts?
If there were any women artists, why were there not more?
If we can find one good painting by a woman, where is the rest of her work?
How good were the women who earned a living by painting? (Greer 1979, p. 6)

Orientation

introduces the topic and the writer's reflection on the issue

Thesis

feminism contributes to contemporary art by helping initiate modernism; thesis mainly developed from perspective of two art historians

Point: feminism has addressed the notion of 'privileged vision' (in context of challenging male-centred culture)

Supporting information (how)

Point: women's participation in fine arts should be seen in social and cultural context

elaboration of point



Example: student essay

Greer (1979) says that the real questions are based not on the actions of great art entertained by the “layman”, which are essentially prejudices, but in the sociology of art. Lucie-Smith (1994) comments that this statement skilfully avoids the problem of aesthetic value. Women in Western society are no longer financially or socially dependent on patriarchal structures, but the questions that Greer asks still have resonance.

writer reflects on the issue

Furthermore, there remains an imbalance between the ratio of successful women artists compared to male artists and the ratio of successful women graduates compared to male graduates. In 1995 a survey of British Fine Art graduates showed that statistically women were well represented in art studies, the availability of evening classes and part time study having enabled more women to study. Over 65% of the graduates were women, and the proportion of art practitioners was about 50:50. However, as successfully practising artists they numbered well below their male counterparts. In 1991, 84% of solo shows in top London commercial galleries went to men (Deepwell 1995). As equal opportunity policies are in place in subsidised galleries, arts organisations and educational institutions, the implication of these statistics could be that the quality of the artwork by men is superior.

*topic sentence
background information to next argument (examines imbalance of successful women artists to ratio of women graduates)*

There are other considerations which need to be taken into account. The changing social and economic conditions which have made it more viable for women to gain an education do not automatically change the status quo changes, nor do they result in the rejection of traditional attitudes that have excluded women. The criteria used to judge artists' work needs to be assessed. Art history is dominated by male artists, and predominantly taught and written by men. This inherent male imagery defines art practice. The infrastructure needs to be re-appraised.

Point: under-representation of women artists may be due to evaluation criteria applied to art work + writer's reflection

These issues suggest that a different approach is required to investigate women's art history. Indeed, feminist art historians have maintained that a different perspective is required to reconstruct women's art history. Feminist critics noted that it was objects made by men that were considered art, while those made by women were designated as craft or for domestic purposes. As art history tended to be an account of art objects it was a preponderant history of men's activity (Carter 1990). With the advent of the feminist movement in the 1970s, women artists began to avail themselves of domestic skills such as needlework and interior design which had previously been categorised as non-artistic; and historians rewrote art history to include these neglected areas of female artistic practice.

topic sentence: (beginning point that a different perspective is needed to reconstruct women's art history)

In the 1970s, the artists' critics and historians involved in the feminist movement believed that art made by feminist women represented a radical new beginning. The goal of feminism was said to radically change culture and the culture of art itself by introducing the perspective of women. The consequence of this idealism would be 'universality': a gender balance in art and culture (Broude & Garrard 1994).

Point: art made by feminist women represented a cultural change + Supporting information (how)



Example: student essay

While art history is being rewritten and researched by feminist historians and artists, women artist satirical groups attempt to influence and comment on the male dominated nature of the art establishment. For example, groups such as the New York-based *Guerrilla Girls* attack the art establishment with wit and exuberance. Their mission is to make the art community accountable for their tardiness in not having equitable representation of women artists. The Guerrilla Girls are a group of women artists and arts professionals who make posters about racial and sexual discrimination in the art world. With carefully researched statistics, the Guerrilla Girls campaign against the art world, exposing individuals and institutions that under represent or exclude women, and 'artists of colour', from exhibitions, collections and funding. Their first posters materialised in 1985, signed *the conscience of the art world*, proclaiming statements such as: "these galleries show no more than 10% women artists", with a list of the galleries underneath (Guerrilla Girls 1995).

Point: satirical groups, such as Guerrilla Girls, influence perspective of art world
discussion of Guerrilla Girls' contributions and impact

The Guerrilla Girls have become part of the institutions that they set out to denounce, and their posters are often collected by the galleries that they denigrate. Last February they were asked to do a project for the first issue that *The New Yorker* has ever published on women. The poster was designed as a fourth century frieze with the Guerrilla Girls in various poses of battle with male antagonists. "How to enjoy the battle of the sexes", is the overlying text (Guerrilla Girls 1996).

Writer's reflection on issue: irony of Guerrilla Girls' work being sought after by art world

Also from New York is the artist Barbara Kruger, sophisticated and chic, she first gained notoriety in 1981 in a group show called *Public Address*, in a gallery in New York. Using high contrast black, white and red images appropriated from magazines and manuals and overlaid with blocks of black type, she shrewdly analyses and comments on aspects of our culture. Her most famous epigram, a parody of Descartes, was 'I Shop therefore I am'.

Point: Kruger contributes by commenting on aspects of our culture

Barbara Kruger with Cindy Sherman have been said to be the two artists whose work most closely exemplifies the issues of social construction of gender. They are the artists included in every text that is seen to be relevant to the avant-garde and are participants on many panel discussions on feminism and post modernism (Broude & Garrard 1994). Kruger is considered a formidable political artist, though she rejects the term political artist: "there are those of us who want to do work about sexism or money or power or race ... It's about challenging a certain subjectivity of the human condition" (Trioli 1996, p. 20). Her statements (e.g., "Your comfort is my silence", "You are an experiment in terror", "You make history when you do business") have been described as feminist, post-structuralist and inflammatory (Trioli 1996). As her work is superbly finished and presented, the viewer is caught off guard by the content. The visual appreciation is quickly subdued by the force of the words. Kruger uses the colours and visual imagery associated with fascism to augment her theme, and the advertising techniques of strong visual imagery and short, sharply honed captioning.

Elaboration of point

Discussion of Kruger's work and impact

Paradoxically her work, like the Guerrilla Girls, has been applauded and collected by the audience she set out to vilify and denigrate. Shoppers in Fifth Avenue in New York carried bags printed with her design 'I Shop therefore I am'. Her images and installations have appeared in galleries around the world, and she regularly designs editorials for the *New York Times* (Trioli 1996).

Writer's comment: Kruger's work is now sought after by art world

Kruger's artwork has also had a strong feminist message for contemporary politicians. During the 1992 U.S.A election campaign in response to President George Bush's anti-abortion stance, Kruger made a piece for *The New York Times* in which a young George Bush is saying: *I have just decided to go into*

Point: political dimension of Kruger's work



Example: student essay

politics, my career is going really well, but I have just found out I am pregnant – what should I do? Over the top of the picture, Kruger placed the question *Any suggestions?* (Trioli 1996, p. 20).

Kruger has not only made significant contributions to contemporary art as an artist, but she has also contributed as a writer. Her book *Remote Control* (Kruger 1994) is a collection of essays on contemporary life. A reviewer of Kruger's book described it as, "a feast of insight into gender, sex and contemporary culture, staged as sneak attacks filled with devastating grace, acuity and wit" (Vance 1994). Kruger asks, "who speaks? who is silent? who is seen? who is absent?" (Kruger 1994, blurb), the answers being a commentary on how cultures are constructed through pictures and words.

Point: Kruger's feminist perspective is evident in contemporary art both visually and in her writings

Kruger's artwork has contributed and impacted on the contemporary art world. Dettmar (1994), commenting on Kruger's work, described her as an artist with something urgent to say, an artist who speaks directly and powerfully about the complexity of contemporary life. Dettmar, a university lecturer in America, says that Kruger has realised the importance of being earnest in an age of "anything goes". He considers that, for his students, this straightforward approach is appreciated in the wake of Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades, John Cage's chance operations, and Brian Eno's oblique strategies (Dettmar 1994). Kruger is an accessible and coherent artist in a world that is complex and where art is frequently incomprehensible.

Evaluation of Kruger's contribution to and impact on art world

Another prominent feminist artist is Judy Chicago, born in 1939, who began studying art from an early age. In her autobiography, she recollects the attitude of male students and teaches in her art classes at university to their female peers. Only the men were expected to have professional opportunities as artists; and her fellow students were antagonistic towards her aspirations to be a serious artist. The two female staff were disregarded by their colleagues and the students (Chicago 1973). After some of her paintings, which had references to phalluses, vaginas, wombs and other body parts, were rejected and reviled by her instructors, Chicago abandoned painting. One instructor had reacted to her work by saying, "lcc-ch, that looks like a womb" (Chicago 1973, p. 37).

Point: artist Judy Chicago was discouraged as a female artist in a male domain

In 1966 Chicago had had a one woman show and been in several group and museum shows. She had begun to recognise that her work was contrived to align herself with her male contemporaries, as she felt she would be rejected if she allowed herself to allow her femaleness to pervade her work. Eventually this façade began to crack and elements began to appear in her work that unwittingly betrayed her femininity (Chicago 1973). Chicago also found support in the early feminist texts which reflected her own struggles and addressed her personal endeavours as a woman artist.

Background information: Chicago came to recognise the importance of feminism to her work

The artwork that has assured her a place in feminist art history, if not in general text, is her quintessential installation, 'The Dinner Party' (Chicago 1979), a history of women in Western civilisation. The process towards this work began in 1972 when Chicago began studying the technique of China painting, intending to extend a series of paintings entitled *Great Ladies* into one hundred abstract portraits on plates, each paying tribute to a different historic female figures. Since plates are associated with eating, Chicago wanted to use images of women on plates, the allegory being of women swallowed up by history. China painting on household objects also seemed to be an apt analogy to describe women's domesticated circumstances (Chicago 1979).

Discussion of Chicago's major work: The Dinner Party

influence of China painting and household objects

By 1974 the concept for 'The Dinner Party' was beginning to evolve as a reinterpretation of The Last Supper from the point of view of women who

parallels between The Dinner Party



Example: student essay

throughout history had prepared the meals and set the table. Thirteen men were present at the last supper; there were also thirteen members in a witches coven. Chicago saw these negative and positive connotations as appropriate for the duality of the women's achievements and their oppression (Chicago 1979).

and The Last Supper

The original plan was thirteen plate settings with the name of each woman embroidered on the tablecloth with a phrase indicating her achievements. The number was soon realised to be inadequate to represent the various stages of Western civilisation. An equilateral triangular table was devised to symbolise a goal of feminism, that of an equal world, with thirty nine place settings. The components of the settings would include embroidered runners, sculpted and painted ceramic plates, flatware and chalices, napkins and cloth. The table was to stand on a floor inscribed with the names of other women of achievement. The women inscribed on the plates were to be seen to have emerged from the foundations laid by those inscribed on the floor (Chicago 1979).

Description of The Dinner Party

Nine hundred and ninety nine women's names were to be inscribed on the floor. The criteria used in selecting the women were:

- Did the women make a significant contribution to society?
- Did she attempt to improve conditions for women?
- Did her life illuminate an aspect of women's experience or provide a model for the future? (Chicago 1979, p. 98)

The intention was to symbolise women's history: barriers such as language, fragmented information, limited research skills and personal biases precluded it from being anything more comprehensive.

The project quickly expanded from a modest concept of celebration of women in history to something that took five years to achieve and the commitment of many skilled ceramicists and embroiderers, and researchers. By the time of its completion, some four hundred people had been involved. The researchers into women's history for the project were overwhelmed by the vast amount of information that related to women's achievements and contributions throughout history, a history that had been allowed to be trivialised and obscured for so long.

'The Dinner Party' is considered the most ambitious and widely known example of feminist collaborative art. The process of collaboration was disputed by some, and in 1984 a critic compared Chicago to Christo whose projects required legions of helpers (Broude & Garrard 1994). Chicago had total control of the project and people were assigned to specific tasks. The criticism may be literally correct, but the motivation of the workers was the prospect of the art effecting a social change.

Evaluation of The Dinner Party

The main contribution of feminism to contemporary arts is that it has challenged the traditional paradigms of art, that of the privileged male view. The arguments that feminism uses also expose the inequities of other oppressed sections in the community such as indigenous people, migrant and handicapped groups. It demands a re-evaluation of a society that has denied an equal forum for all.

CONCLUSION : feminism has contributed to contemporary arts

The two artists that I have selected are both distinctly feminist and political artists, in that they use their art to address the inequities and failings of our society. The artists are disparate and exemplify the impact of feminism. Chicago uses traditional female domestic skills and imagery that are evocative of the feminine, whereas Kruger uses techniques that are not identifiable as "women's art". Both Kruger and Chicago are beneficiaries of the feminist art movement

contribution of feminist artists Chicago and Kruger to contemporary arts



Example: student essay

which allowed women's issues a forum and forced women's issues onto the political platform.

Society is radically being restructured by advance in technology, and for women to maintain the momentum they need to be participants, if not the engineers of the technology. Feminist writers such as Dale Spender are urging women to become computer literate. Spender says unless women leap into cyberspace with the same enthusiasm as men that they will again be marginalised. Knowledge is power and language is the path to that knowledge (Spender 1995). Spender includes in her book the appeal of graphic designer William Hilson:

Designers, particularly female designers, need to get directly involved in the experience of the net ... they need to get involved in large numbers if they intend ever to play a role in shaping the form or the content of Metaverse in a significant way (Spender 1995, p. 71).

The Guerrilla Girls have recognised this and have a website that is linked to other sites that are specifically related to women's issues, and also use it as another venue to display their posters. Kruger also has a strong presence on the web with information about herself as an artist, and articles about her by various commentators.

Feminist theory and postmodernist analysis are inextricably linked by shared doctrines, and their influence in redefining our society. The presumptions are being re-evaluated and history is being scrutinised. The dominance of the western male posture is no longer unquestioned. Identity and gender are fluid concepts that defy definition, and the paradigms have shifted.

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Writer's reflection on changes achieved for women

advocates computer literacy and internet proficiency

Internet and involvement of Kruger and Guerrilla Girls

Writer considers conclusion in wider cultural and social context

Reference list should always start on a new page and use hanging indents (as here). Justification of text is not necessary.



Example: student essay

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