The question implied in our title is more a clarion call, an open-ended research enquiry that we have begun thinking about through a series of informal research events. The first workshop, organised by Victoria Horne at the University of Edinburgh, brought together postgraduate and early-career researchers to meet and discuss the epistemological questions raised when 'Writing Feminist Art Histories'. In response to a productive session that touched upon a range of historical and contemporary historiographical concerns, in May 2013, Kuang Vivian Sheng, Catherine Spencer, Kostas Stasinopoulos and Amy Tobin arranged a second event at the University of York. One of the primary aims of these workshops was to reflect upon the merits and obstacles endemic to writing history from a feminist perspective. However, equally important is the potential that these events offer for developing a supportive and critical network of feminist researchers through a series of loosely connected episodes.

In this brief exposition we attempt to explain the impetus behind the workshops and situate this collaboration within a broader UK history of collective feminist knowledge production, as well as in relation to the current critical demands of feminism. In the sections below we explore the complex significance (especially for feminist researchers) of analysing the form and content of art historical knowledge production and its written traces, in order to acknowledge the limits and exclusions of the discourse. This is a brief and focused article; however, we believe that feminist scholarship must always begin as a commitment to the broader political position rather than simply addressing internal disciplinary concerns. In the conclusion, we therefore begin to indicate the challenge that has always implicitly underscored feminist participation in the academy, but which has certainly gained increased visibility since 2008; namely, the impact of neoliberal agendas upon individualising the structure of research and
teaching. Can feminism continue to exist within the mainstream institutional structure of the academy? Can we rethink these structures, without being reduced to an 'ism'?

**the problematic: writing feminist art histories**

The renewed Euro-American women’s movement of the 1970s had unprecedented effects within both the visual arts and academic spheres, and many feminist writers re-presented art’s histories through a radical historiographical project that interrogated the very bases upon which cultural beliefs about art were founded (Nochlin, 1971; Gouma-Peterson and Mathews, 1987; Pollock, 1988). In particular, over the past four decades, both feminist and postmodern enquiries have drawn out the never fully clear distinctions between historical ‘reality’ and its literary ‘representation’. As historiographer Dan Karlholm has concisely stated:

> [Art history] refers to a threefold phenomenon: a collective producer (the community, institution, or discipline of art history) produces representations (art history texts, picture compendia, etc.) of what is *allegedly* an actual history of art (or art history) that exists beyond these discursive phenomena. (Karlholm, 2006: 12)

Karlholm’s emphasis indicates that the crucial problem for art history arises from its inevitable failure to fully comprehend the moments of art’s production, and the discourse must therefore maintain an illusory (or ‘alleged’) representational truthfulness. Art’s past is consequently represented through a discipline of ‘art history’ that obscures its own production and thereby naturalises its very structures. Intervening at the point of production (the writing of art history) is therefore essential to reconfiguring historical knowledge from within a feminist perspective, and denaturalising its gendered assumptions. Feminist discourse is, of course, not immune to this obscuration, and a constant process of self-examination and self-critique (often initiated by collective work) is necessary in order to critically assess the circulation of power across feminist knowledges.

Despite feminist historians’ profound critical engagement with the discursive structures of the discipline, it is difficult to define a singular feminist approach since feminism is not fixed as a particular methodology; rather, it is a strategically adopted political position from which to write. Fundamentally, it is feasible to state that feminism is concerned with exposing the ideological and socially constituted powers that consistently (re)instate the feminine (and, particularly, female subjects) as inferior, and which thereby produce gendered hierarchies throughout every social space—crucially extending from this, intersectionally, are relations of race, class and sexuality. However, consensus on how to translate this theoretical understanding into historical practice is hard to reach. Perhaps this
Disparity is attributable to what Dimitrakaki (2013: 4) has recently termed the ‘ideologically divided terrain’ of feminism. In accepting this description we must acknowledge that feminism has developed differently and unevenly across various places/times (due most critically to those relations of race, class and sexuality), and it is only by understanding both the impact of these historical developments and our writing of them in the present that we can assert the relevance of feminist knowledge for twenty-first-century contexts. We know that collectivising knowledge production can destabilise the belief in a singular, objective authority and offer instead politically situated examinations of the past, but it also (crucially) allows us to disrupt our own assumptions by staging an encounter between various voices and positions. Feminist political content within historiography therefore simultaneously requires close attentiveness to the political forms of knowledge accumulation and transference within the academy.

The majority of writers involved in producing feminist art history have emphasised that feminism is not focused on adding to the existing narratives of a discipline that (re)articulates masculinist knowledge and power, but should focus instead on intervening within and recreating art historical narratives from an invested feminist perspective. For example, Mary Kelly does not refer to ‘feminist art’ but stresses the shifting position of art ‘informed by feminism’; Lisa Tickner favours the ‘feminist problematic in art history’; and, likewise, Griselda Pollock prefers ‘feminist interventions in art history’ in resistance to the more reductive ‘feminist art history’. It is evident that a precise terminology is required to articulate the political imperatives at stake in writing against the master narratives of art history. A feminist art historical approach must not only write the history of its women practitioners but also interrogate the representation of gender difference historically, a task that may also contribute to our understanding of sex and sexuality today.

These fluid approaches (of always becoming) provide both stimulation and structural difficulties for those attempting to write feminist art histories, and such questions regarding terminology, narrative and methodology recur frequently across the literature. More recently, however, the public face of feminist art (in ‘blockbuster’ retrospective exhibitions, for example) has at times historicised the previous four decades without due consideration of these debates. Hemmings’ (2011) book meticulously unpacked the narrative assumptions embedded in feminist theory’s narration of its own past moments, and, drawing inspiration from this study, we hope to make greater sense of how feminist art history has been written and what these historiographical forms imply or occlude. Thus, the aim of this research network is to discuss the difficulties and merits in encountering the mutable strategies of feminist historiography and to collectivise this epistemological challenge. According to Donald Preziosi, the discipline of art history arose in relation to the consolidation of the modern European (white, male, colonialist) subject (Preziosi, 1989). To challenge the power and authority of this
rehearsed discourse, it is therefore necessary to rewrite the disciplinary script of art history.

**the model: collective knowledge production**

Such knowledge as British feminists acquired in the early 1970s was procured by our forming reading groups and collectives, established in the radical tradition of workers’ self-help groups and feminist consciousness-raising. We formed reading groups to study Marx, Lacan, and Foucault. We went to conferences organised by film societies in order to come to terms with psychoanalysis. We read magazines like *Screen*, *New Left Review*, and *Red Rag*. A combination of collective self-help and intellectual bricolage re-educated a range of activists and intellectuals seeking the means to resolve the dislocation between what was officially on offer as knowledge—be it of art, history or society—and what we need to be able to say understand because of the crisis we were living through. (Pollock, 1996: 17)

It is impossible for us to appraise feminist art history writing without considering, and drawing encouragement from, the rich history of feminist collectives in the United Kingdom. Although the WFAH initiative is not yet a fully fledged collective enterprise, this is our ultimate ambition in organising these workshops and why we have chosen to collaborate on writing this statement, learning along the way that co-writing is far more difficult and time-consuming, yet more idea-sharpening than writing alone. As Griselda Pollock describes above, in the early 1970s collectives were formed out of dissatisfaction with the state of the discipline and were founded on a pedagogical basis, their members seeking to simultaneously re-educate themselves and produce innovative art historical knowledge. One such group was The Women’s Art History Collective, established in 1973 in London by Denise Cale, Pat Kahn, Tina Keane, Roszika Parker, Pollock, Alene Straussberg, Lisa Tickner and Anne de Winter. This diverse group was composed of artists, art historians and critics, and grew out of a shared desire to ‘explore the relationship between contemporary women artists and the special problems they face, as well as the overall cultural role and position of women and creativity’ (Harrison, 1977: 3). By re-evaluating the historical construction of women’s art—usually categorised as craft-based, or entirely absent—the collective sought to restore women to the art historical canon. Through this reintegration (and in relation to contemporaneous theoretical and artistic activity), the collective developed an understanding of the ideological suppression of gender endemic within the foundations of modern art history. This critical re-evaluation of the *form* as well as the content of the discourse of art history was eventually written up in the individual or dual-authored papers and books of its members (Parker and Pollock, 1981; Tickner, 1988).1
Over the past four decades the shared and dedicated space of the collective has consistently proved important. Although it is organised by anti-hierarchical principles, the collective structure is a hybrid, functioning variously as a site for consciousness-raising (The Women’s Workshop of the Artists’ Union) and artistic production (the Women and Work Collective) in the 1970s, as well as a locus for coordinating diverse events (Women’s Art Change) in the 1980s and as a framework to organise academic interest (Feminist Art and Histories Network) in the 1990s. Since the early 2000s many more feminist collectives as well as social media initiatives have emerged across the United Kingdom, although, to the best of our knowledge, no research initiative has been established to investigate the historiographical concerns of feminist art history. In each context the collective has provided a shared space of identification and investment to foster knowledge production outside the governing principles of mainstream institutions.

Historically, feminist interventions in the history of art emerged differently in the United States, where Linda Nochlin established an academically sanctioned course researching women’s art at Vassar College in January 1970 and Muriel Magenta launched an evolving programme of events, ‘Women–Image–Now’, at Arizona College in 1974 (Magenta, 1987; Nochlin, 1994). In contrast, the UK initiatives mentioned above were extra-institutional, taking place beyond the lecture hall or formal curriculum. Because they were not rooted in the academy, the collective model instantiated through these schemes articulated a fluid structure and arguably demanded heightened commitment to both one another and the group. These radically contingent spaces were forged to question and undermine the institutional (gendered) paradigms of art history. However, the forms forged at this moment did not become self-sustaining. Perhaps they fundamentally could not, without the economic and structural support of the university; or perhaps they can be thought of as transitory moments of critique and production that should not evolve into established structures.

This issue of institutional complicity or critique is always problematic for feminism, and perhaps never more so than in the currently conflicted environs of neoliberal academia. In contrast to these precedents, our workshops were hosted and funded by the universities in which we work, although this was only possible by keeping costs extremely low and asking attendees to fund their own travel. As PhD and early-career researchers, we framed the events as opportunities to forge connections and critically engage with other scholars (at any level) as well as those working in the arts more broadly. In some ways, then, these events corresponded with recent agendas in higher education policy encouraging public engagement and research with ‘impact’. However, we are also interested in analysing the reproduction of non-hierarchical research collectives in higher education in order to question how collectivity can remain an organisational model that fosters criticality, and how it can provide a model for intervention rather than a perfunctory space for dissemination. This is a theme we would like to explore in a future workshop.

1 Dual authorship has been a strong point of resistance in feminist art history. Renowned pairings include, for example, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, and Deborah Cherry and Griselda Pollock.

2 To paraphrase Tucker’s (2009: 4) introduction to *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, in which he clearly defines these concerns: the philosophy of historiography examines the epistemology of our knowledge of history, the reliability of the methods historians use to infer beliefs about the past, and is ultimately an examination of our descriptions, beliefs and knowledge about the past. Of course, in art history, the visual is added to this analysis.

3 Details of the ‘impact’ agenda can be found on the UK Research Councils website: http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/ke/impacts/, last accessed 31 March 2014.
The collective model is not simply an alternative to mainstream organisations but must be understood as a complexly intersecting instantiation of (feminist) form and content. Collectives have consequently been structured by rules that consciously define the group, allow discussion, and concurrently demand the articulation and close interrogation of roles and responsibilities. The demands of working collectively therefore parallel the theoretical and ideological debates developing in the broader Women’s Art Movement of the 1970s. For example, the proposition, ‘Should women depict the female body in their art and if so how?’ can be aligned to ‘Should women’s organisations use power structures evident in mainstream culture and how is this negotiated?’ In addition, demands that address the exclusion and oppression of difference in the liberation movement are more than evident in the maintenance of collectives. The gender focus of earlier groups sometimes provided a locus for conflict, assuaging the analysis of racial, class-based or sexual oppression. Instead of shared spaces of support and criticality, debate was narrowed into gender opposition, which did not always recognise the different investments group members had in the structures of power. By articulating a network of participants, we hope to provide space for difference while also encouraging critical approaches to political writing. Pollock’s characterisation, above, of the collective as model for instituting new research through self-reflexive interrogation reflects the demands of writing feminist art histories. The question is how this can be mapped onto a much-altered cultural and pedagogic setting.

**writing feminist art histories: 2010s**

A loose trajectory of collectivity over the past four decades might notice a shift from face-to-face collaborations to networks connecting participants across distance. Writers including Boltanski and Chiapello (2006) and Sholette (2011) have helpfully explicated the cooptation of network relations within the managerial ethos of the (globalised) contemporary art world. However, although the cooperative model has unavoidably been mimicked and commodified, collective knowledge production can still be integral to the anti-hierarchal and pluralistic project of feminism, assuming that we continue to (re)interrogate the form’s usefulness, lest it undermine the effectiveness of feminist social critique. How can we make the network form of collectivity work for us, ‘ideological neighbours’ living across distance, today (Brown, 2012: 34)? One question we have struggled with, for example, is whether the research collective could be based primarily online, or whether it requires the affective benefits of gathering in person. Beyond the historiographical research that forms the basis of our meetings, we also need to probe the character and formation of our collectives: How are we connected? Through what channels do we collaborate? Who do we include and exclude? We must hold these questions in mind as we rethink the potential of the alternative, fluid space a collective provides.
As women working in the academic sphere we cannot help but be aware of the pressing quandaries arising from budget cuts and increased tuition fees. As feminists, we feel it is necessary for our discussions to probe the limitations of our department curricula (too often still teaching 'feminism' briefly as an optional theory or method), the difficulties of organising across UK (or even international) university departments and the problematic institutional complicity that each of us, as wage-earners, is forced to assume. In the 2010s what is the role of a university scholar? As the public face of feminism continues to gain currency (through online protest, organising, and a constant stream of blogs and newspaper articles) what is the relationship between public activism and intellectual enquiry, political agitating and theoretical tools? Could we be accused of inverting the renowned WSPU slogan to 'words not deeds'? How can we make feminist art history work, rethinking both knowledge form and content from a political position, while understanding that scholarly work need not be instrumentalised in the pursuit of an end-goal? We hope that these questions and many more will form the basis of future discussions.

The key issue in the WFAH initiative (following, for example, the trenchant research by Hemmings, 2011: 134) is how we can better understand the theories and methods used to write and remember feminist history—optimistically presuming the importance of historical memory for a successful feminist politics of the present, while acknowledging that 'knowing how these narratives work does not precipitate their transformation'. One issue that arose through our workshop discussions and that exemplifies the challenge entrenched in feminist history writing is that of narrative desire: as feminist art historians, do we hope to uncover particular narratives embedded within a women artist's work and/or biography (struggle, heroic achievement, bravery, sisterly camaraderie), and are we disappointed if our subjects (almost inevitably) fail to meet these high expectations? This is not to say that feminist art history is reducible to work of women artists, but the political analysis of their art production can destabilise the prevalent myths of conventional art history, particularly if addressing the inclusion of intersectional subjects that are often occluded even within feminism. Jo Applin's research, delivered at the first workshop, looked at artist Lee Lozano's boycott of contemporary art and of other women, a profoundly troubling circumstance to engage from a feminist perspective and one that cleverly contests the pleasure we usually hope to find in our historical artistic subjects and their narratives.

It has been variously noted that, since the global financial crisis of the mid-2000s, feminism has undergone a cultural resurgence. Yet particular scholars have concurrently noted the limitations of this reappearance. McRobbie (2008) talks about the 'undoing of feminism’, as a superficial, masquerading feminism-as-consumerism threatens to undo the core politics of the movement. Fraser (2013) suggests that a 'politics of recognition' has thrived at the expense of a 'politics of redistribution', and that this has allowed feminism to be reduced to identity politics rather than destabilising broader systems of oppression. Although they
employ different disciplinary grammars, McRobbie and Fraser reach comparable conclusions about the displacement of politics in feminist discourses. Feminist art historians in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s have been profoundly engaged in testing the limits of art historical knowledge, working collaboratively to create a shared space that pushes at the boundaries of the discipline. It is imperative that feminism in the 2010s, while necessarily widely taught, does not become reduced to an optional tool or methodology. One way, we believe, to stop this from happening is to engage other scholars both intra- and inter-generationally within an informal environment to discuss and interrogate our individual and collective motivations for writing political art histories.

The 'Writing/Curating/Making Feminist Art Histories' conference took place at The University of Edinburgh on 27 and 28 March 2014. Details on further events and publications can be found at the research blog: www.writingfeministarthistory.wordpress.com

acknowledgements

We are gratefully indebted to the advice of Jo Apollin, Katy Deepwell and Angela Dimitrakaki, all of whom commented on earlier versions of this article. Thanks must also go to everyone who attended and contributed to the workshops.

authors’ biographies

Victoria Horne is a PhD Candidate and Teaching Fellow at the University of Edinburgh. Her college-funded thesis examines the impact of feminist politics upon the production of art historical knowledge across various institutional sites, and is currently titled A History of Feminist Art History: Remaking a Discipline and its Institutions.

Amy Tobin is a PhD researcher in the department of History of Art at the University of York. Her thesis, entitled Working Together, Working Apart: collaboration, exchange & the gift economy of Feminist Art (1970–1980), is focused on the intersections and creative exchanges between British and American feminist artists, and is funded by the AHRC. She is part of a working group on collaboration between the Courtauld Institute of Art (London) and CUNY Graduate School (New York), and a recipient of the AHRC’s Library of Congress International Placement award 2013–2014.

references


doi:10.1057/fr.2014.7