

## Brain Wave, A Sketch

In response to Susan Bee's and Mira Schor's questions I first fired off the briefest of outlines that I am adhering to in the following, but as it came time to write I found that what the subject really made me want to do was to ponder my family. I spent a few weeks realizing how many stories I know, as part of a distributed network of experiences. The stories have been formalized. They purport to describe what happened, but their function is the modification of emerging realities, to alleviate pain, to call up known and comfortable patterns, to create good feelings like pride and communality, to instill values in the young that allow the perpetuation of the known, be it a way to stagnate or a way to promote transformations. Stories may be about the past, but they are tools here and now.

What does this have to do with the task at hand? As an artist, part of my job is to create a stock of stories about myself and my work. As a feminist, I am part of a distributed network of experiences. Which memories do I want to promote, and are there any I am sure of? What will they do to emerging realities?

Adelheid Mers  
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ALL CATHOLIC

FAMILY

mother's mother, 1888 - 1977, housewife  
mother's father, 1886 - 1944, mechanic, jobless, proprietor of a failed bar - participates in resistance in WW2  
three daughters (tailor, sales clerk and later secretary at financial institution, secretary at financial institution and later teacher), one son (soldier in WW2, later administrator in leading position at the IRS).

father's mother, 1885 - 1967, farmwife  
father's father, 1883 - 1963, tenant farmer, soldier in WW1  
one daughter (housewife), six sons (all but the youngest are soldiers in WW2, tailor, farmers, I don't know all professions)

mother, born 1928, secretary at financial institution 1946 - 1957, gives up night school pursuit of high school diploma at marriage, housewife, teaching certificate in catholic religion 1975 - 1979 (with full support of the entire family), school teacher.

father, born 1926, dream job: museum director; gives up night school pursuit of high school diploma at marriage, administrator in financial institution, later in leading position)  
one son (academic degree in science, systems developer and administrator in leading position) and one daughter, me (academic degree in art, artist, educator)

### Düsseldorf, Germany

I was born in 1960, and was taught that men and women now have equal opportunities, that I can be anything I want to be, and that hard work leads to success. As a precaution to ensure that I would not be a secretary, I refused to learn how to type while in my teens.

### Academic Education

1979 - 1986  
Universities of Düsseldorf and Cologne  
Kunstakademie Düsseldorf

On my parents recommendation, I studied on teacher track. I could not imagine wanting to teach highschool and a year before completion switched to MFA track, even though I regretted to give up my final seminars in German literature, philosophy and pedagogy.

Throughout my time at the Kunstakademie I had no interactions with female professors. There were only two or three master classes led by women. I don't remember questioning this. I also do not remember looking at art by established women artists. About half of the art students were female. With another student, I made a Super 8 film that staged us in 50 positions women have been depicted in throughout the history of art. It was a lot of fun, and probably mainly her idea.

Absent any information about feminism, I was utterly disinterested. As far as my work was concerned, I was looking for ways to join my desire to read with my artmaking. This was repeatedly discouraged, and I did not think that I succeeded. Much later I realized that I had reached my goal in part at the end of my second semester and had worked through several variations through the rest of my studies, without recognizing it, mixed in with sheer confusion.

After receiving an MFA in 1986, I decided to seek an environment that would be more conducive to my needs.

## A SKETCH

} WORKING CLASS VALUES  
HIERARCHIES,  
NOT NETWORKS

NO EXPOSURE TO  
FEMALE ARTISTS  
OR PROFESSORS  
+  
NO EXPOSURE TO  
FEMINISM

The catalog of the University of Chicago Committee on Visual Arts in **Chicago, Illinois** seemed to promise just that. With a grant from the DAAD, I studied there in 1988/89, spending most of my time in the libraries, reading about the history of ideas, with an emphasis on concepts of space.

At the university, but also in the art world outside of it, I was treated in a collegial manner that was new to me. I liked it and decided to stay in the US.

### Artwork

Reading, sketching timelines, mapping thought processes initially were supporting acts. Making sculptures about areas a person might command took center stage. As sculptures expanded into installation works, viewers entered them and the balance shifted. The installations first suffered, then supported and finally requested human activities.

### Curating

Collaborative exhibitions followed, some with open calls for participation. I began to notice gradations of understanding. I wanted to create situations in which distinct positions could reveal themselves as the constituents of broad and crowded fields.

### Reading and Writing

In 2000, I presented a paper at the Cleveland Institute of Art, "A look at the role of the artist in the age of digital technology". Along with it I showed documentation of open-call exhibitions I had co-organized with the painter, Elisabeth Condon. In response to my presentation, my paper was lauded, but my curatorial practice that was strongly related to the ideas expounded was dismissed as lacking control. Thus, from the same premises two opposing value judgments were derived. Gender being the only distinguishing factor between me and my detractors, I needed to finally acquaint myself with feminist theories.

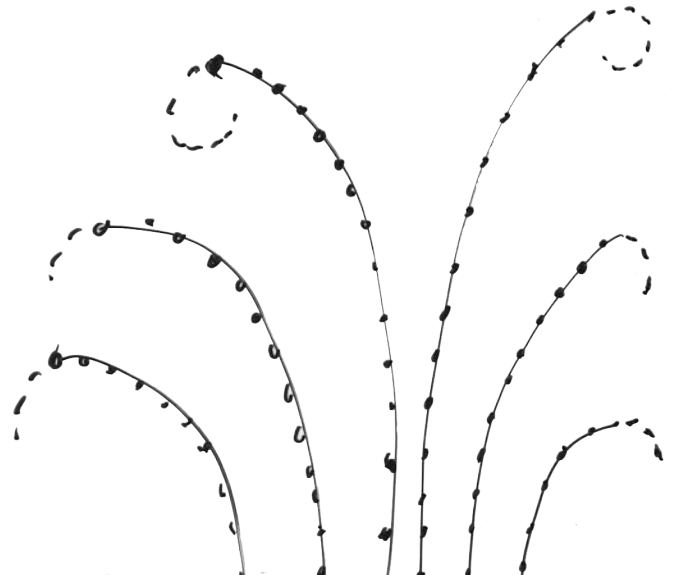
Seeking considerations on values from a feminist position, I first read Carol Gilligan's work. Her descriptions of relational practices resonated strongly with my views and experiences, and also meshed well with previous readings of John Dewey, through whom I had explained much of my practice since I first encountered his writings in 1995. Another paper quickly followed, to be presented in conjunction with a workshop conducted by Elisabeth Condon at the Barnard Feminist Art and Art History Conference: "Smart Thinking, Ugly Work - Formulating a Relativist Aesthetic from Personal Experience". In it I claimed that what matters most is the responsibility each viewer takes for her experience. As an artist and as a curator, I can create situations that highlight the exercise of responsibility as a necessary step to achieve a reward.

### Diagrams

My next paper, "Applied Aesthetics", read at the CAA conference in 2001, further elaborated those ideas. What distinguished it was that it was illustrated with seven diagrams that summarized each paragraph. My friend Alice Berry asked if it had been ok to laugh about them, as they seemed to undermine authority, not to bolster it. Yes, it was.



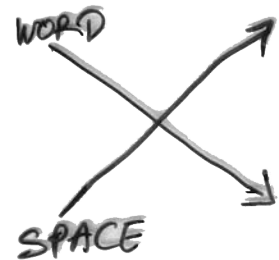
THANKS TO MY FEMINIST  
FORE RUNNERS



FEMINISM  
ENTERS

THANKS TO BARBARA DE GENEVIEVE  
FOR HER READING LIST

JOHN DEWEY WAS A FEMINIST



WORD  
SPACE

More diagrams quickly followed. This was also when I realized that my first year at art school had indeed ended with me making a diagram, a sculpture that reflected my reading of Benjamin Lee Whorf's "Language, Thought, Reality". Acquired interpretive structure invisibly guides perception and experience.

In 2001, Peg Brand invited me to participate in a panel she led with Eleanor Heartney at the "Ethics and the Arts" conference in Tampe, Arizona. The panel was called "Feminists Face the Arts" and the panelists had been assembled to address their work about the human body. I held that my diagrams represented bodies of thought, endo- and exoskeletons, nervous and circulatory systems. I wanted to pay attention to ways of making sense, to words that mediate experience. After first, second and third wave feminism, I was looking for 'brain wave', an approach that does not single out body or mind.

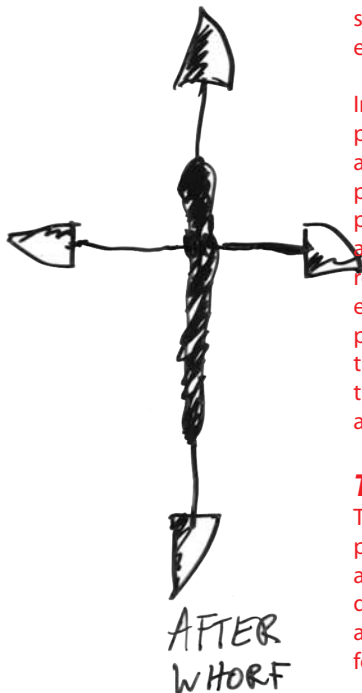
### Teaching

To clearly understand identities, practices and positions as particular, as constructed, as contingent and as potentially malleable, to probe differences, to develop, to test and to reflect stances, to respect and to be respected are central tenets of the feminist classroom.

### Learning and Teaching as Art

I am framing myself as an artist interested in the public possibilities of the didactic. The creation of dialog is an essential part of teaching. I pursue a practice that seeks to create dialogic encounters inside and outside of the classroom. While experimenting with many approaches to making and exhibiting artwork it has become amply apparent that opportunities for dialog are much harder to create in 'art settings' that are geared towards representation, than in 'school settings' that are geared towards presentation and exchange. In fact, that friction has provided me with much of my recent subject matter as an artist.

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VISUAL ART

TEACHING

CURATING

WRITING

DIDACTIC PRACTICES,  
CONCERNED WITH THE  
ARTS OF LEARNING  
AND OF TEACHING