

# **THE VALUE OF SEXUALITY: PENETRATING NORMS WITH ARTS-BASED ACTION RESEARCH**

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ABSTRACT

Relying upon feminist and queer theory, this article explores feminist pedagogy in art education practices. More specifically, the research investigates how engaging with sexuality and gender in education relates to the uncovering of social structures, power dynamics, and normativity. This arts-based action research dives into the praxis of the three-day course entitled Sexuality and Art with university student participants from degree programs in art education, graphic design, applied visual arts, and industrial design. By integrating values from feminist pedagogy, such as ethics, agency, contextuality, and the interconnectedness of individuals, art education can create equitable environments that challenge dominant societal narratives.

## Introduction

In contemporary society, characterized by a delicate balance between heightened individuality and a deep-seated yearning for community (Anttila, 2021), art education emerges as a critical lens on this juxtaposition. This article delves into the intricate landscape of art education to examine the evolving discourse surrounding sexuality and freedom in relation to society. This research centers on laying bare the ways in which societal influences shape perceptions of normativity and power with the aim of fostering a deeper understanding of the interplay between society, sexuality, and education in our ever-evolving cultural landscape.

The focus of this article lies in investigating the encounters of adult students who participated in the university course titled *Sexuality and Art* which was designed and taught by the author of this study in the University of Lapland. Spanning a duration of three days, the course attracted a diverse range of students from bachelor's and master's degree programs. The notion of arts-based action research collaboration with participants, who in this case were students of art education, graphic design, applied visual arts, and industrial design, was chosen to benefit the creation of new practices and collecting data. In this article, the terms "course" and "workshop" are employed interchangeably. "Course" accentuates the academic context, while "workshop" underscores the concentrated and time-bound teaching approach, particularly focusing on artistic practice.

In what follows, I will explore integrating sexuality-related subjects into art, considering normativity, societal influence, power dynamics, and artistic autonomy. The research question guiding this article is: How does creating art related to sexuality intersect with students' understanding of social structures, power dynamics, normativity, and gender? Through arts-based action research, I aim towards practices that bring out the complex relationship between sexuality and art education. Some images of the installation are included in this article, but I feel that while pictures can give an idea of what the installation was like, they cannot adequately convey the materiality and multi-layered nature of the work.

The research is deeply embedded in Finnish art education. Equality and societal awareness have been considered as important values of Finnish art education. (Hiltunen, 2009; Jokela & Huhmarniemi,

2020; Saarinen et al., 2021; Suominen & Pusa, 2018) Underscoring the necessity to address these aspects within pedagogical practices. There is a growing interest in critical, queer, and feminist pedagogical practices, yet the scholarly literature addressing this area in the Finnish context remains limited. This has also been noted by Suominen and Pusa (2018), who concluded that most Finnish art institutions have actively embraced this agenda, although some notable resistance towards addressing queer has also emerged: "Whilst there has been tremendous support and a general acceptance of diversity, art educators, including scholars and practitioners, have also resisted openly and critically addressing queer in the context of art education" (p. 19). This article offers a contribution to the extensive body of research attempting to broaden normativity through queer and feminist lenses.

In this study, I examine the importance of recognizing that teaching sensitive subjects requires a situational ethical framework. The concept of situational ethics as proposed by Badiou (1993/2004), emphasizes the significance of understanding individual experiences and perspectives in ethical decision-making. It suggests that ethical judgments should be derived from specific contexts and circumstances rather than relying solely on predetermined moral principles. This framework extends to subjects that may be closely connected to students or have the potential to evoke conflicts.

In my position as a researcher-pedagogue, multiple roles—that of an artist, a pedagogue, and a researcher—are intertwined. I have a teaching background and pedagogical credentials spanning art, music, and sports for children and adults. My artistic background encompasses contemporary art practices, such as performance, live installation, and community art. At the time of writing this article, I am a doctoral candidate in arts, also studying to become a sexual advisor, with this research intricately connected to my academic journey.

## Theoretical Framework

My research draws insights from feminist and critical theorists such as hooks (1994), Grosz (2005), Amster et al. (2009), Ilmonen (2019), Kendall (2020), Rossi and Sudenkaarne (2021), and Rossi (2022) to emphasize the importance of self-reflection, critical analysis, and deconstruction of hierarchies within educational institutions. By challenging existing ways and traditions, my research

contributes towards creating a more equitable and socially active educational system. The examination of power dynamics aligns with contemporary anarchist theory, which recognizes and challenges hierarchies within systems and individuals (Amster et al., 2009).

In addition, my research acknowledges that power can exist in a non-oppressive manner, as identified by Foucault (1977). However, teachers must remain open to evaluating whether the structures they uphold cause harm to those involved. Engaging in dialogue with students and involving them in decision-making processes aligns with the principles of feminist pedagogy, which aims to create inclusive learning environments and avoid unnecessary domination. The use of arts-based action research in this study facilitates the assessment of potential harm and enables reflection on the learning space.

Feminist and queer theories resonate deeply within this research. They align with my ethics and with the focal point of the course: sexuality and art. Grosz (2005, p. 213) proposes substituting the “science of sexuality” with the “art of sexuality,” offering a more comprehensive and inclusive viewpoint. While Grosz’s discussion primarily centers around women, she acknowledges that this perspective extends to all genders, challenging limitations imposed by conventional male representations. The selection of the term “art” to challenge generalizations is momentous. I explore whether embracing the idea of art as a counter to the monolithic ideals of science can illuminate the perception of artistic values within the global context.

Ruiz (2014) writes that “professional philosophy sleepwalks; its somnambulatory practices stroll silently, policing checkpoints without the burden of consciousness of its actions and practices” (p. 199). I would like to take this as a call to action, urging critical examination of established norms and traditions. What arises when individuals contest hierarchies amid entrenched institutional structures? While this can yield tension, it is crucial for ongoing, fair assessment. Moreover, these theories offer insight into my pedagogical decisions. Notably, feminist and queer theories encompass more than gender or queer oppression; they embrace broader marginalized experiences, non-conformity, and existence beyond societal norms.

Incorporating feminist theory is essential, acknowledging its deep understanding of biases and constraints in Western, white, male-dominated research

and writing. This approach permits an exploration of foundational knowledge, deconstructing dominant structures to scrutinize problematic assumptions inherent in our thinking. Scholars such as hooks (1994), Mohanty (1988), Scott (1986), and Goldman (1969) have made significant contributions to this understanding. While it is less common to find research narrowing down queer or feminist pedagogies, art education, and sexuality, Zebracki’s (2020) work comes quite close as it addresses critical pedagogy, public art, and sexuality. He notes that sexually inflected public art can be seen as evoking heterodox critiques of sexuality, gender, and space.

Moreover, my work draws from the Foucauldian perspective, which recognizes power and dominance as nuanced (Foucault, 1977). This viewpoint underscores the idea that power dynamics are not purely negative or oppressive, thus broadening our understanding of their operation across diverse contexts. Foucault’s seminal work reveals power’s manifestation as subconscious domination, even without explicit oppressors (Foucault, 1976/1990). May (2009) contends that not all power is inherently harmful. Underscoring the immersive nature of power, he posits that power relations permeate most practices. These relations encompass interactions and dynamics where power is present, exercised, maintained, and distributed within social contexts. May further asserts that these practices shape us, but not all power is oppressive; individuals are influenced by power through its embeddedness in social structures, institutions, and daily routines. This implies that power often inconspicuously pervades society. May (2009) emphasizes the importance of consulting those impacted by power dynamics to identify oppression. This aligns with Badiou’s situational ethics (1993/2004), which prioritizes understanding individual experiences over assumptions.

My foundational understanding is informed by the principles and concepts of queer theory (Aldrin Salskov et al., 2020; Nelson, 2013; Pietilä & Poikela, 2016; Pinar, 1998;), which is closely tied to feminist theory—notably feminist relational theory (Koggel, et al., 2022; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000). Both theories foster a secure yet bold environment for artistic creativity, aligning with my research with values like equality, respect, critical thinking, non-conformity, and activism. I also integrated them into course planning and assignments. These values challenge (hetero)normativity and internalized societal structures in society and art. Linking theory and praxis is valuable, not just institutionally

but also in teaching and arts-based action research. Feminist relational theory (Koggel et al., 2022) illuminates oppressive relationships, structures, norms, and potential discomfort. It emphasizes ethics, agency, contextual understanding, and interconnectedness. Interconnectedness gains significance in my research. Given its often communal nature, art education underscores the intertwining of individuality and community (Hiltunen, 2009).

### **Methodology: Arts-Based Action Research**

This study uses arts-based action research as outlined by Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2020). They define it as employing artistic practices for data collection or analysis and engaging community members actively in research. This methodology is effective for developing new pedagogical practices.

In their seminal work introducing arts-based action research, Jokela and Huhmarniemi (2020) draw attention to Leavy's (2009) characterization of the distinction between qualitative research, quantitative research, and arts-based research. According to Leavy, while quantitative research aims for value-neutrality and qualitative research is inherently value-laden, arts-based research emerges as inherently political, consciousness-raising, and emancipatory. Recognizing the value-laden and political nature of arts-based research is paramount in the context of this study.

The arts-based action research methods embrace diverse creative approaches, including letter writing, storytelling, partner-based poetry, collaborative installations, crafting protest letters, and individual artworks. To comprehensively document the research journey, I maintained a reflective diary capturing observations, reflections, and interactions. Students' reflections were shared in face-to-face discussions and in writing. Moreover, students independently photographed their art to assert authority over their imagery. Here, feminist pedagogy aligns with the chosen method, as these tools prompt exploring self-group-society connections. Thus, interconnectedness shifts from philosophy and theory to practice.

Leavy (2018) outlines a descriptive framework capturing the distinctive traits of arts-based research. According to Leavy, arts-based research forges micro-macro connections, evokes emotions, cultivates critical awareness, raises consciousness,

and fosters empathy. Many of these traits align with feminist values. Arts-based action research also disrupts stereotypes, questions dominant ideologies, engages participatory methods, and embraces diverse interpretations and meanings in line with the goals of feminist pedagogy. These traits parallel the course objectives, highlighting the synergy between methodology and pedagogy.

The data includes installation photographs taken by both myself and the students. In the photographs showing only parts of the installation and not the entirety of it, students themselves chose the composition and how their image was cropped. Reflections on the installation result from collective analysis, augmented by written assignments wherein students explore their process and offer detailed perspectives. Additionally, the data concluded of "a protest letter" written assignment, coursework conversation notes, and student experience evaluations. Finally, students documented their individual work through photos and videos, coupled with written analysis of the work.

The analysis presented in this article centers on the installation and the data associated with it. To achieve this, I have focused on data sections where students and I collaboratively reflect on the key aspects of feminist pedagogy: challenging dominant ideologies, participatory practices, and diverse interpretations. These reflections arose during discussions around the work and conversations on societal issues that took place during lectures. Techniques and artistic methods will not be analyzed in this paper. The depth of the data requires separate articles to fully address all aspects of the workshop. Thus, I will not extensively delve into individual student artworks.

### **Sexuality and Art Course**

The focus of the course Sexuality and Art was on examining sexuality through ethics, self-determination, normativity, and boundaries. A boundary, within the context of personal limits, involves agreeing on comfort levels in interactions, information sharing, and intimacy. Unlike "rules," which are imposed externally, boundaries prioritize self-care. They empower individuals to decide what is acceptable and appropriate for themselves. The course included lectures and discussions covering the ways in which artists representing different eras and practices have approached sexuality, minority

experiences, age, oppressive societal norms, and more. Students collaborated on a group installation and presented individual artworks by the end of the course.

The learning objective was that on completion of the course, the student would:

1. Understand the frames of the intimate, the personal, and the public.
2. Know the basics of sexual ethics.
3. Be able to interpret the norms related to sexuality and engage in a rich debate.
4. Be able to articulate their ideas about sexuality.
5. Recognize their boundaries in a group and be able to act within them with courage and without conflicting with them.

My pedagogical choices were created to effectively support these aims. Yet there were instances where I unintentionally made assumptions. The depiction of the process of recognizing and readjusting those assumptions is important for the core of improving pedagogical practice. For example, my notion of what might be triggering proved to be quite off the mark. I had prepared for it to concern individual aspects, such as a student's minority position. Instead, the parts that did require care and conversation more than others had to do with the majority status, societal awakenings and institutional power. These encounters are described more thoroughly later in this article.

In course planning, I integrated feminist pedagogy into assignments, emphasizing agency, autonomy, challenging norms, and using education and art for societal change. Discussions on gender arose during the workshop, prompting further expansion of dialogue. Both feminist pedagogy and arts-based practices allowed diverse viewpoints to coexist and influence the work. The three-day course was initiated with a task: composing a personal letter to one's sexuality. This promoted individual autonomy and reflection, remaining private and not included in the research data. Personal exploration, rather than traditional academic writing, was encouraged, fostering deeper subject connections. Post-workshop, students responded to their letters, illuminating unchanged and transformed aspects during the artistic journey.

The group comprised eleven students from bachelor's and master's degree programs. The group included Finnish individuals of European descent, ages from 20 to 50, encompassing women, men, and nonbinary students. Their diversity stemmed from regional backgrounds and diverse identity politics, shaping perspectives on sexuality and gender. Finland's regional differences in norms were evident. The group's heterogeneity underscored the relevance of situational ethics, as the group members' differing views on gender and sexuality lacked uniformity.

To acknowledge the diversity of students' gender identities and to avoid presumptions regarding gender, nonbinary pronouns are used when referring to the students, consistent with their self-identification during the course. Pronouns are exclusively determined by individuals and should not be assumed. It is vital to acknowledge the profound influence of gender on our worldview (Saarinen et al., 2021). Approaching teaching in a gender-neutral manner could overlook prevalent societal issues related to gender, race, ethnicity, and disability. This rationale led to my choice of nonbinary pronouns, encompassing a variety of pronouns beyond "she" or "he," such as "they/them." Another approach might have masked all genders using a non-gendered method to avoid gender-specific references. However, as explained above, I opted against that. Declaring the course as a secure space for chosen pronouns was a conscious political assertion, signifying my commitment to challenge societal norms in my pedagogy. A study conducted by the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (Saarinen et al., 2021) found that the discussion on gender equality is often perceived as a personal, emotion-driven issue rather than a societal one, even though these emotions and conflicts should be an integral part of societal development efforts. The research additionally observes that the quiet resistance and differences in personal opinions from the general consensus, signal a need to pay more attention to advancing gender equality.

I incorporated Love Oracle cards (Figure 1) from the Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma into the round of introductions on the first day of the course. These cards featured public figures spanning different eras, such as Cleopatra, Mata Hari, Sigmund Freud, Beyoncé, Elton John, and more. The diverse selection represented various social classes, ages, genders, sexualities, races, ethnicities, and lived experiences. Each student chose a card that complemented their introduction, sharing their name,



Figure 1. Love Oracle cards for the introductions on the first day. Photo by Katri Kauppala, 2023.

pronouns, degree program, and artistic medium. This activity infused the introductions with a visual and artistic dimension, bringing a sense of lightness and diversity to the session. hooks (1994) reminds us that the professor, lecturer, or teacher must genuinely value everyone's presence. This is the foundation of engaged pedagogy.

To maintain a sense of place and time in the workshop, I drew inspiration from Doreen Massey's perspective on spatial and temporal dynamics (Massey et al., 2008). Massey's ideas shed light on the interconnectedness of place, time, and space, emphasizing that they are not fixed entities but rather constantly shaped and reconfigured by social, cultural, and historical forces. By integrating diverse public figures from different eras through the Love Oracle cards, I aimed to highlight the fluidity of societal norms and challenge the notion of universal rigidity.

Massey's work contests fixed places, stressing the significance of acknowledging diverse experiences within particular locations. She advocates a nuanced comprehension of space and time, acknowledging their shaping by power dynamics, history, and social engagement. Embracing this outlook, the course prompted participants to recognize varying societal norms across countries, cultures, and eras. This approach fostered a profound grasp of evolving social dynamics and intricate connections between place, time, and social norms.

## Dig Deeper: The Installation as a Negotiating Space between Self, Others, and Norms

Throughout the course, we delved into the relationships between laws, rules, and boundaries within the context of power dynamics and control. Our discussions encompassed identifying rules that affect others and differentiating between externally imposed rules and self-established boundaries. Recognizing the necessity for shared understanding, equity, and autonomy, our emphasis was on fostering a collective space that thrives on self-determination rather than dominance.

To approach the topics of the course through the lens of artistry and artistic processes, students collaborated to build an installation (Figure 2). This artistic expression embodied the idea of relational autonomy, where individuality is interconnected with others. This concept comes from feminist relational theory but is highly applicable to art education and any artistic group work. The installation created during the course also served as a

Figure 2. Detail of the first stage of the installation by the group in the classroom with the gradual addition of layers throughout the course. Photo by Katri Kauppala, 2023.





Figure 3. The hook of patriarchy and the cloth representing sexuality. These meanings were given by the students.  
Photo by Hanna Postma, 2023.

deconstruction of the traditional notion that only the teacher is responsible for classroom dynamics. Arguing along similar lines, hooks (1994) recognizes that, while there are some aspects that are mainly the responsibility of the teacher, the group is equally responsible for the excitement and dynamics.

Students' autonomy in selecting and presenting content was upheld throughout. The installation encompassed diverse perspectives. Examples include a yellow cargo strap symbolizing patriarchal society, sexuality depicted as a cloud-like frost cloth, and the university as a white paper extending to a three-dimensional string table. Collective interpretation of the work mirrored feminist theory and arts-based research values—collaboration, shared knowledge, and non-hierarchical systems—allowing multiple interpretations to coexist.

Intimate themes of sexuality were artistically explored, encompassing sexual pleasure, femininity, fertility, intentional and unintentional suppression of sexuality, and the intricate facets of human sexuality. This marked a significant introduction of feminist ideology into practical art, where diverse sentiments and crafting styles coexisted boldly yet

respectfully. Dominance was notably absent, and adaptable material use posed no issues. Aligning with hooks (1994) and engaged pedagogy, there must be an ongoing recognition that everyone influences the classroom dynamic and that everyone contributes. These contributions are resources. Used constructively they enhance the capacity of any class to create an open learning community. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all participants thrived in this context. Some experienced that their creative potential was stifled by factors like pace and noise.

The installation evolved gradually. As per students' reflections, it emerged as multilayered work, embodying coursework, artistic portrayal of sexuality perceptions, and political, societal, and normative dimensions. One student's work was particularly highlighted, addressing the hindrance of personal sexual expression within the artwork's chronological structure. The following quote illustrates how the student in question reflected on the issue:

When I contemplate boundaries and their concretization, strings, threads and all sorts of ropes seem to me to be an excellent tool for that. ...The material of the threads and ropes varies, for example, in terms of thickness. When I set boundaries for myself concerning different things, some boundaries are much stricter than others. Some boundaries are clear and connected to other boundaries, just like in my work.

The assistance provided by others can be characterized by respect and collaboration. Despite the presence of highly personal elements such as Shibari—a Japanese-originated rope bondage tradition—and sexuality as an identity, the placement of objects or symbols within the installation was carried out communicatively, with a strong emphasis on respecting the boundaries of the artists involved. In cases where someone wanted to penetrate “the hook of patriarchy” into someone else's “sexuality” (Figure 3), consent was sought, and a negotiation process took place to ensure mutual agreement and respect.

The presence of ropes and threads was intriguing because they held different symbolic meanings for different students. From a feminist theory standpoint, non-conformity and challenging norms were evident. Some saw ropes as constraints and societal norms, symbolizing expression limitations. Yet, for others, they represented protection, personal

boundaries, and freedom of sexual expression, as in Shibari. Diverse interpretations mirrored students' unique viewpoints, showcasing intricate personal expression and layering artistic meanings. They effectively visualized the interplay of personal and communal elements, demonstrating interconnectedness. In the installation, words such as "seksuaalisuus" (sexuality) and "palaveri" (meeting) framed by the thread also serve in recognizing polarized themes, such as sexuality and gender, or accepted and narrow-minded.

One student's reflection on the installation highlighted the institution as a space where a student group converges around a deeply personal theme. This prompted analysis and critique of the "art institution bubble," as worded by the student, contrasting it with patriarchal society and the societal pressures which men endure. The student pondered the interplay between the artistic realm and wider societal dynamics. According to Koggel et al. (2022), feminist relational theory situates interpersonal relationships in social and institutional networks and structures that impact and shape each other. They also have implications for accounts of factors and features of oppressive relationships. As an educator, I found that recognizing the connections between different systemic structures marked the uncovering of previously overlooked elements.

### **Incorporating Societal Norms into Discussions about Sexuality**

The theme of showing light and finding security was introduced by a student, describing how a lantern brings comfort and its light helps when one is uncertain about which direction to take. Subsequently, I engaged in a profound discussion with her, as she was surprised by the societal and normative aspects I presented. She posed a valid question: Why not approach sexuality on its own, detached from culture and society? I explained my choice in planning the course, clarifying it was not intended as a spectrum of right and wrong but merely as teacher-selected elements. I assured her the artistic direction was her choice, not bound by my or the workshop's frame. Recognizing consent and boundaries within the course, I highlighted her freedom to withdraw if needed. Discovering a boundary does not dictate a direction; it only offers choices. It offers a moment to pause and reflect. She stayed, and her final artwork seemed satisfactory for her.

Eldridge (2009) underscores a pivotal argument concerning the nexus between art, morality, and society. He contends that a comprehensive exploration of the interplay between art and these foundational aspects necessitates a rigorous examination. Art, according to Eldridge, should ardently embrace values and emotions as its method of situating itself within the broader context of human existence. He astutely observes that the art we create ought to serve as a genuine reflection of our inner selves rather than a mere superficial gesture adrift in the swamp of existence. Hence, the contextualization of sexuality within the framework of societal norms and communal values can be substantiated. This perspective posits that within the realm of higher education, the objective extends beyond mere self-reflection; it encompasses the imperative of creating art.

As students reflected on the installation, the complex layers of sexuality, boundaries, and their interaction with societal norms started to unfold. This process facilitated a deeper grasp of how these boundaries are interwoven into the fabric of society and influence our perceptions and interactions. One student contemplated merging the intimate subject, new group, situation, and personal experiences with boundaries, which prominently emerged in the challenge of commencing the work. She described her experience as navigating uncertainty, chaos, and heightened sensitivity, encompassing sensory and emotional aspects. She deemed this process significant, as it not only heightened her awareness but also addressed the initial workshop questions. Schnurer and Hahn (2009) succinctly compile the critique directed at contemporary academic disciplines, suggesting that they often bolster the principles of a compliant capitalist ideology. This alignment frequently arises from conforming to a restrictive normative framework as one of the contributing factors (Schnurer & Hahn, 2009). Adapting art pedagogy to align with nonconformity and critical theory entails a comprehensive exploration of normativity and boundaries. It hinges upon the acknowledgment that a monolithic perspective is neither required nor advisable, advocating instead for an impartial and self-reliant stance.

Some students noted that they often become aware of boundaries after they have been crossed—a theme that would recur in subsequent assignments. Overall, the method of working incrementally, pausing to reflect, enhanced a sense of security and necessary autonomy for the bravery and insightfulness of art. Despite the tight schedule,





Figure 4. Group installation on the last day, including the individual work by Sirpa Lehto. Photo by Katri Kauppala, 2023.

the students' artistic boldness mirrors their courage. It also implies that the course instilled trust, fostering a safe, conducive environment for creative expression. The following picture (Figure 4) was taken on the last day of the course.

## Unresolved Issues for Further Research

As a researcher-pedagogue, I find that further evaluation is needed concerning specific aspects stemming from the assignments given to the students, like composing protest letters to the teacher and subsequent group discussions. Conflicting opinions arose about the course structure: Some preferred a focused, lecture-based approach to a single topic like sexuality. Conversely, others found the inclusion of artistic work highly effective and engaging. This divergence can be attributed to varied academic practices, but what stands out is the students' understanding of their position and their awareness of the importance of considering the objectives before tackling sensitive or personal subjects. Assessing objectives and readiness for such work, even before the teacher's involvement, is vital as it might not be directly influenced.

During a particular instance, a student shared a personal experience reflecting a narrow and biased perspective of the group. This prompted me to ponder whether we should solely respect the experience or also acknowledge its potential offensiveness in a political context. Another student later reflected on this experience in a written assignment and reported having felt unable to present any comments during the conversation and mentioned having hoped that I would have addressed the issue. This scenario underscores that no theory can fulfill every student's needs, and groups must navigate conflicting perspectives. Exposure to reflective and open teaching environments fosters skills in positively challenging ideas and receiving as well as responding to opposition. Interestingly, the latter skill appears less practiced.

Another student shared a similar reflection, expressing concerns about his limited vocabulary regarding gender identity and sexual diversity, fearing that this lack would cause unintended offense. He highlighted the ways in which the classroom environment heightened his awareness, which led to challenging established hierarchy and normativity. Heteronormative thinking ceased to dominate the group. This underscores that, while feminist pedagogy endorses embracing discomfort, which is vital for societal discourse and artistic expression, managing this emotion necessitates intentional practice. Kendall (2020) writes about the intersectional feminist approach to respectability politics. She articulates a crucial observation concerning the regulation of narratives, frequently favoring the dominant culture. This proclivity is evident not only within marginalized communities but also within the classroom environment, where the discourse is typically guided by the teacher. The significance of avoiding the mainstreaming of classroom culture cannot be overstated, particularly considering our predominantly heteronormative, white, patriarchal society. Acknowledging this reality often necessitates a deliberate effort to break free from it.

Here, Foucauldian positive power is also relevant, functioning amid the tension between eager and hesitant students, stability-seekers, and disruptors. While the teacher maintains direction, permitting individuals their journeys. An equitable artistic sphere cannot be equated with pleasing every student; it entails accommodating diversity where possible. As Shannon, writing in contemporary anarchist studies, notes, the endeavor to foster an anti-authoritarian atmosphere within a university

setting can at times evoke a sense of a complex and contradictory undertaking (Shannon, 2009) due to the inherent hierarchy of the classroom. As a resolution, their suggestion revolves around initiating a dialogue regarding the limitations inherent in the academic environment and embracing critiques of both the institution and pedagogy. This, in turn, is seen as a means of cultivating the fortitude necessary to extend these discussions beyond the confines of academia.

Furthermore, the exploration of boundaries sparked diverse reactions. While I intended to illuminate the topic and facilitate exploration, one student perceived my actions as a perverse attempt to provoke reactions and deliberately push boundaries. The expression “pervert” was used by the student in the assigned protest letter. It is essential to emphasize that such intentions on my part directly conflict with my ethics; boundary crossing did not occur in the course itself, despite extensive discussions on the subject. This was ensured through clearly stated voluntary participation in discussions, artistic work, and subject matter. The assignment, inspired by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed’s (2021) work and aligning with my methodology, required students to write a protest letter. Ahmed delves into the challenges and significance of creating room for formal complaints within an academic environment. I perceived this as a means of dismantling both my role as an educator and the broader academic hierarchies. This task inherently called for a strong stance, implying an activist perspective. Before the assignment, the student whose protest letter was discussed above posed a thought-provoking question: “How thick is your skin?” I interpreted this as an exploration of assignment parameters, seeking comfort in testing the boundaries of myself, pedagogies, and research. Confidence while respecting others was at the core of this moment.

The protest letter itself displayed profound thought, intelligence, and a playful engagement with the subject matter of the course. The inclusion of the expression “pervert” in the letter, which typically pertains to sexual deviance, added a layer of complexity and nuance to the student’s expression. Notably, the Finnish word “pervo” can also be translated to queer, which carries a very different connotation in gender studies, and as a research and political term (Rossi & Sudenkaarne, 2021). As I reflected upon my motivations as both a researcher and a pedagogue, I recognized the deep intertwining of these roles when addressing topics related to non-conformity and challenging norms. My stance

on these matters is inherently political, as I firmly believe that unquestioningly adhering to norms is not conducive to artistic or personal growth, not to mention societal progress. The notable fact was that I, as an educator, also embody a structure that can be perceived as potentially harmful. Consequently, the students may find it necessary to challenge and seek to change the existing boundaries they see, even within themselves, as they also can be simply respected. This understanding highlights the transformative power inherent in their engagement with the educational space and raises unresolved issues that merit further investigation.

## Conclusions

This research emphasizes the value of feminist pedagogy and critical pedagogy in promoting an inclusive exploration of sexuality, power, autonomy, and societal roles within the context of art education. These pedagogical approaches align with the notions of care, empathy, security, and autonomy, which makes them particularly suitable for art education. The artistic perspective cultivated in educational settings that embrace freedom, disobedience, and anarchy plays a significant role in this process. A meaningful finding in this study was that, despite students’ confidence in discussing sexuality, some struggled with the idea of societal censorship and control, demonstrating trust in a society valuing freedom. Patriarchy, religion, family, and heteronormativity influenced their artistic work, prompting a desire to challenge normativity. Within this course, boundary breaches originated internally, necessitating pedagogical strategies, fostering self-awareness, growth, and ethical decision-making while addressing boundary inclinations.

In summary, this study reveals the complex challenges surrounding societal norms in an era marked both by individuality and by a yearning for community. I argue for recognizing certain aspects of sexual expression as fundamental human rights, promoting freedom of choice without societal barriers. This recognition possesses the potential to permeate other facets of society, furthering the cause of equity, and helping counter the rise of political extremism born from the isolation of those confined within normative thinking and resistant to embracing diversity. Moving forward, ongoing dialogue and respect for individual autonomy are vital for a more inclusive and equitable society.

When viewing artists as important societal commentators, it becomes important that they possess the fluency to identify societal issues, the courage to challenge them, and the skills to express their perspectives effectively. Understanding the structures that shape cultures and societies does not undermine the aesthetic value of art, but rather enriches it by acknowledging the interconnectedness of our world, including elements like racism, ableism, and patriarchy, which affect individuals and often operate without democratic input.

Ethical pedagogy cannot be reduced to a singular notion of good teaching, as the concept of good varies individually. Treating others with respect and safety varies among individuals, and collective goodwill can inadvertently cause harm. This

echoes the concept of situational ethics where ethics demands self-reflection and adaptability rather than seeking predetermined outcomes. Situational ethics responds to the call for creativity, continuously renewing ethical art education as a dynamic process.

In conclusion, feminist art education inherently involves emotions, discomfort, and disruption. It aims to stir awakening, reorientation, and the disruption of tranquility without patronizing or shielding recipients. In higher art education, where students already possess their own worldviews and artistic experiences, it is crucial not to impose preconceived notions onto the classroom.

I will leave you with the last picture (Figure 5) and provocation from the installation: Dig deeper?

Figure 5. A part of the group installation by Luna Vääräniemi and Anna-Sofia Nurmela stating *Dig deeper?*  
Photo by Anna-Sofia Nurmela, 2023.



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