

Killing Success with Kindness:

The Professional Woman's Struggle with Gendered Language in Art & Academia

by

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ABSTRACT

Killing Success with Kindness is an investigation into the use of gendered language in art and academia, exploring what this language is, where it arises, and how it ultimately perpetuates ingrained inequalities. For my thesis project I conducted field and scholarly research on the ways female faculty and students in academia must restrict and tailor their interactions in order to achieve. Through conversations and a Google form questionnaire, I compiled first hand accounts of gender inequality, discrimination, biased interaction, and biased language to further bolster my understanding of widespread female suffering in scholarly settings. After conducting and linking research, I collaborated with another student, Lauren Cates, to create a zine utilizing this research. The intention behind this zine is to compile enough significant information to start a conversation amongst students, hopefully pushing them to consider their use of language more carefully in the future.

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RESEARCH

When one thinks of values held by the world of contemporary art, liberalism and a general sense of progressiveness are often primary associations. Historically, art has typically been considered a method for the world's outsiders to establish themselves and their voices. Despite this, the art world is unfortunately notorious for perpetuating misogynistic trends which are typical throughout numerous fields, especially in academia. It is common for discrimination to take the form of specific language or interactive styles used in verbal or textual conversations, even in professional settings such as in faculty meetings or the classroom. For my thesis, I have spent the past two semesters investigating the inequities present in language and personal interactions between women and femme-aligned individuals and their peers or mentors in the Art department at Appalachian State University. This took the form of one on one conversations specifically devoted to the topic, online rapport, and compiled responses to a Google form developed for this project. In addition to these learning methods, I also conducted extensive research on the topic. This thesis is a synthesis between my communication with those generous enough to lend me their time and words, scholarly research, and my own passion as a female creative.

The first step in my process was to speak with several professors and peers in the art department concerning their perceived relationship between personal gender identity and professional relationships. I did not enter these meetings with any formulated questions or preferred conversational directions, as I intended to keep them as natural as possible. I initially

debated including faculty members from other departments as gender inequality is an ever-present issue regardless of discipline, however, I decided to restrict my project to the Art department as this is an area of higher education in which I hope to teach in the future. In addition to this personal attachment, the general world of art is uniquely tied to gender more-so than many other fields of study,¹ making this a significant connection to highlight. Historically, women were barred from many crucial aspects of art-making, such as studying the nude model² or stylistic experimentation.³ These specific traditions of blatant discrimination occurred largely during the Renaissance, but similar beliefs affected women during the Bauhaus' reign as art school supreme as well,⁴ an institution whose curriculum is considered the basis for most contemporary fine arts education. This link seems of even greater offense considering how much current art education takes from and applauds the Bauhaus for its approach to fine arts teaching.⁵ With the art world so heavily steeped in misogyny and discrimination, it became clear to me why narrowing my research to this world specifically would benefit my project and learning.

In speaking to faculty members, I quickly became overwhelmed at the sheer amount of women who easily recounted specific examples of discrimination faced in our department. Issues of gendered expectations, use of gendered language, interactions with layers of power imbalance, and unfair compensation were brought up frequently by faculty, students, and alumni alike. Many female professors felt they were unjustly evaluated on a semesterly basis on how well they exhibited feminine traits or behaviors, rather than their overall teaching abilities. Several

¹ National Museum of Women in the Arts, "Get the Facts".

² National Museum of Women in the Arts.

³ Vink, Floor. "Why Are Female Artists Underrepresented?" *Diggit Magazine*, (2019).

⁴ Brown, Taylor Whitten. "Why Is Work by Female Artists Still Valued Less Than Work by Male Artists?" *Artsy*, (2019).

⁵ Brown, Taylor Whitten

professors described feeling as though they are expected to display a nurturing, kind persona in the classroom, while also maintaining an overall air of intelligence and professionalism as is expected of all college educators. This “motherly” role is commonly attributed to females in faculty positions on university campuses, and harshly skews the overall reception of female teachers as a whole.

In addition to its occurrence in real life and as part of student evaluations, I found the nurturant expectation a notable issue when compiling responses from the Google form portion of this project as well. I developed this Google form as an adaptation to COVID-19’s effects on university functions, as I could no longer retrieve information in person during the second half of the Spring 2020 semester. While it was initially conceived as a backup, this form supplied an ample amount of helpful information from students it was shared amongst on Instagram. I received 37 total responses from peers, with 70.3% of participants identifying as female, 16.2% identifying as non-binary, and 13.5% identifying as male. A majority of responses offered high quality, thoughtful information, which I look to frequently in my thesis. Below are the questions I asked of Appalachian State students verbatim -

1. What gender do you identify as (or most closely align with)?
 - a. Female
 - b. Male
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Other

2. Can you recall any instances where a professor (or other mentor figure) interacted with you differently, held different expectations, or underestimated you/your abilities because of your gender?
3. What words do peers and mentors use to describe you? If you are an artist/maker, what words do they use to describe your work? How do you feel about these descriptors?
4. In evaluations or when speaking about them to friends, what words do you use to describe male mentors? What about female? Do these words differ? (answer honestly)
5. Do you feel you have to speak or act in a specific way to gain respect in a classroom or professional environment? Do you think your gender affects this?

In developing these questions, I was careful to avoid referring to a specific gender (except for the question pertaining to language used in evaluations, as I felt it was necessary to direct students to separate their thought processes in accordance with the gender of mentors).

Perhaps the most notable trend in my questioning was on the fourth question, where several respondents answered with a clear gender bias in their expectations. The words “caring”, “kind,” and “sensitive” for female professors came up on multiple occasions in the 37 responses I received, while common words used to describe male professors were “intelligent”, “confident”, “arrogant”, and “rude”. Many women reported using these gendered words in their own descriptions of mentors as well, despite acknowledging discomfort with how their gender affected their own classroom interactions in other questions. This pattern of language is so ingrained into society it is difficult for many to recognize or take issue with. While words like “kind” or “nice” are not morally wrong or bad descriptors, they should be considered unimportant when evaluating the effectiveness, impactfulness, or overall skill of an educator.

Kristine Weatherston, a media studies and communication professor at Temple University, took issue with this exact use of language in anonymous student evaluations in a recently published study. Weatherston first developed an interest in investigating the descriptor “nice” due to its recurrence in her own student evaluations, as well as the student evaluations of female colleagues. She noticed many of her own evaluations from students commented on her personality, verbal delivery, and even appearance more often than course content.⁶ Weatherston began researching university statistics regarding evaluations further, recognizing that the results of these methods of judgement often carried a heavy gender bias. She found that, while both male and female professors who students perceived as approachable were better liked overall, this fixation on niceness was specifically make or break for women. While the existence of this bias was unsurprising to Weatherston, as friendliness and submissiveness are traits societally expected of feminine individuals, its existence was massively unfair. Friendliness is hardly a necessary trait for effective educators, as it is not required to communicate knowledge successfully or prepare students for work in their field. The college classroom should be an area where fact and technical skills are relayed accurately, and where creativity and inquisitiveness are encouraged and focused upon, not an atmosphere for a professional popularity contest.

Niceness as a method of evaluation is not only irrelevant, but detrimental for the careers of female university faculty.⁷ Weatherston found that if students didn’t perceive a female professor as kind and approachable, she was significantly more likely to receive negative evaluations than a similarly mannered man. These evaluations can directly affect that professor’s

⁶ Weatherston, Kristine T, “Evaluating Niceness: How Anonymous Student Feedback Forms Promote Gendered and Flawed Value Systems in Academic Labor”, *The Price of Nice: How Good Intentions Maintain Educational Inequity*, (2019), pp. 110–126.

⁷ Weatherston, pp. 110-126

ability to succeed in her line of work, as anonymous student evaluations are often taken into consideration when deciding who receives tenure or a pay raise. Learning that hardworking, competent women could potentially not receive tenure based on a misogynistic valuing of meekness is infuriating to me as both a woman and future educator, especially considering how appalling the overall number of tenured female professors is in the United States. While diversity as a whole in university hiring has seen respectable gains in the last decade, according to a study by Bridget Kelly, an associate professor of education at the University of Maryland, the numbers for tenured women tell a far different story. The overall number of tenured female professors in the United States was at an abysmal 26% in 2016, a number which had dropped 1% since prior research in 2003⁸. According to Kelly, women are frequently hired into positions such as instructor, lecturer, and others which are all non-tenure track. This hiring pattern allows universities to up their diversity statistics without making any significant strides in the gender distribution of tenured faculty, making this push for more constructive feedback in student evaluations all the more important.

When consulting the results of my questionnaire, I found many female students also reported frequent use of gendered words from mentors to describe their work or artistic process in class, meaning this is an issue which begins far before entering the working professional realm of academia. During my own group critiques, I've noticed male professors using words such as "delicate" or "soft" to describe my work. As an artist working with fabric and other physically soft materials I could understand this comment if it were solely in the context of medium and tactility, however, as a senior student in the Art department I doubt primarily material related

⁸ Kelly, Bridget Turner, "Though More Women Are on College Campuses, Climbing the Professor Ladder Remains a Challenge" (Brookings, 2019).

comments are the primary concern of mentors during these critiques. Conceptually, I do not attempt to convey any level of softness or delicacy in my work as these are not important components for me, so descriptors such as these, despite how often they occur, are wholly unhelpful and unnecessary. In asking this question of others, I wasn't sure what number of responses to expect as its inclusion was due to more general curiosity rather than research necessity. As this is a personal experience I've taken note of, I was unsure whether it would resonate with others. Many responses noted a certain level of discomfort with descriptors used in reference to their work, though, especially amongst female students. "Delicate", "sensitive", "free", "emotional", and "sensual" were among many abstract, gendered descriptors appearing more than once in responses from female and non-binary students. While a couple men noted "bold" and "expressive" being typical descriptors for their work, several male respondents either expressed little knowledge or care concerning how their work is described by others, or said they were confused about the question in general. I am particularly angry over this issue, as I find words like "soft" or "sensual" incredibly demeaning regarding my own work and the work of peers. To channel time into not only the physical construction of a body of work but the conceptual development as well, only for a piece to be half-heartedly described as "sensitive" or "emotional" by a paid professional is extremely discouraging. To label work as "emotional" or "free" means nothing, as the mere act of creating anything that will be seen and evaluated by another party requires a certain level of emotional vulnerability, regardless of how personal in concept or development the work in question may be. Because women are stereotypically seen as more "sensitive", "emotional", "free" beings, our work is evaluated within this framework rather than for its own conceptual validity. Whether or not I am "soft" or "delicate" as a singular

person, I am societally viewed as holding and expected to maintain these traits, making them easy identifiers to utilize within an antiquated narrative that has been pre-constructed for me without my input.

If this bias in both language and expectation ceased after surpassing the undergraduate level I would be slightly less agitated, however, mis or under-representation of women's art is an overarching issue in the art world. Statistically, female artists are significantly less likely than men to show work in museums, acquire jobs in artistic fields, or receive fair compensation in any profession.⁹ Women in the US earn 70% of BFAs and 65–75% of MFAs awarded as a whole, but only 46% of working artists across all disciplines are women. Even if a woman is able to break into this statistic and secure a position working in an arts profession, she will typically make almost \$20,000 less per year than her male counterparts.¹⁰ Combining this with the previously stated low number of female tenure-track hires, one can infer the use of gendered language is a key part of the total foundation of a systematic barring of women from positions in higher education.

According to Diana Miller, a writer for the journal *Sociology Compass* in 2016, gendered expectations of women likely barr them from participating at the same entrepreneurial level as their male counterparts as well, as heightened self-promotion and business-related confidence are more readily accepted when harbored by masculine individuals. Miller argues that, because men are more easily received when they are self-confident and persistent in their networking, they are more likely to succeed in the arts as these traits are required of creatives. Since women are poorly received if they are boisterously outgoing or confident in their abilities (at least more

⁹ National Museum of Women in the Arts

¹⁰ National Museum of Women in the Arts.

poorly received than men), they are already at a disadvantage before a networking scenario begins.¹¹

On a more centralized note, students' fixation on gendered interaction and performative niceness at Appalachian State is a trend I found affected numerous women amongst our faculty as well. Every woman I spoke to as part of this project expressed significant frustration with the "niceness" curse. One professor I spoke to described feeling pushed to establish a balance between asserting her power as an educator and coming off as kind to her students. She found this process a daily, exasperating struggle, however, she felt it necessary in order to attain respect in the classroom. She also reported a habit of "self-evaluating" for niceness when presenting in faculty meetings in order to assure her professional interactions would be read as amicable and kind. She feared an assertive demeanor would lead to her colleagues losing respect in her abilities, and she assumed her students wouldn't listen to her if they viewed her as nagging or domineering, so she often found herself mentally rehearsing points solely to adjust for a friendly enough delivery.

This same experience was echoed by a peer I spoke with who works as a sculpture studio monitor. She told me she is usually one of few females working in this studio area, which contributes to an automatic power imbalance in many interactions. While working she has experienced verbal harassment on multiple occasions, been frequently compared to male counterparts, and has had numerous students and faculty members express doubt in her physical capabilities as a monitor and artist. She felt she had to respond to students in a far more careful manner than her male coworkers, as she noticed students were less likely to listen to safety

¹¹ Miller, Diana L, "Gender and the Artist Archetype: Understanding Gender Inequality in Artistic Careers", *Sociology Compass*, (2016), pp. 119–131.

instructions or take her advice on using specific tools if she was too domineering in conversation. She caught herself using a higher pitched tone, smiling more often than felt natural, and using phrases like “please” and “thank you” when correcting students’ use of tools, even during scenarios where a students’ misuse of a tool could have dangerous results, as students typically ignored her or argued if she didn’t perform in this way.

This peer stands as one of many who take issue with the inequity of expectation amongst faculty members in art departments. On the Google questionnaire, respondents of all genders noted a trend in how mentors set expectations for their artistic, conceptual, and physical capabilities. Almost all female respondents noted feeling underestimated in some capacity by mentors, especially when those mentors were male. Performance on manual labor was another issue brought up frequently by women, with many reporting male mentors and professors having far lower expectations of their abilities to perform well when lifting heavy objects, operating machinery, or carrying out other physically challenging tasks in comparison to their male counterparts. If gendered expectations are truly as big of an issue amongst faculty members as several women reported, this is a serious problem which should be addressed as all discipline areas in our department require some level of physical labor. Many women also noted feeling uncomfortable with how male professors treat their verbal participation in class, as several respondents stating they either feel they are not given as much “air time” as men when talking in class, or they are overly praised for simply speaking up or answering questions. Numerous men responded by taking issue with what is expected of them in classes as well, stating they feel they are less likely to receive help or guidance as it is assumed they already hold whatever skill is in question. Gendered expectations significantly affect the education of all students in this way, as

women are often overly scrutinized in some fashion while men are too often left to their own devices.

ZINE PROJECT

In order to synthesize my research along with personally gathered information, I decided to compile specific statistics, quotes, and passages of information I found significant or engaging into a zine. While my initial plan with this project was to make and distribute a physical copy throughout campus during the same time period as student evaluations, the disruption of normal campus functions due to COVID-19 made this original timeline and method of distribution impossible. Instead, I've adapted the final zine into a small, digital publication in collaboration with another BFA student, Lauren Cates, and will be advertising the piece on social media as well as amongst faculty members who helped me throughout this process.

While it is not a medium I am incredibly familiar with, the zine format best suits my desires to create an easily accessible, quickly informative tome of knowledge. My ultimate goal with this part of the project is to deconstruct students' typical patterns of action when it comes to the use of gendered language, and I feel a zine is a comfortable, easily approachable format to achieve this mission.

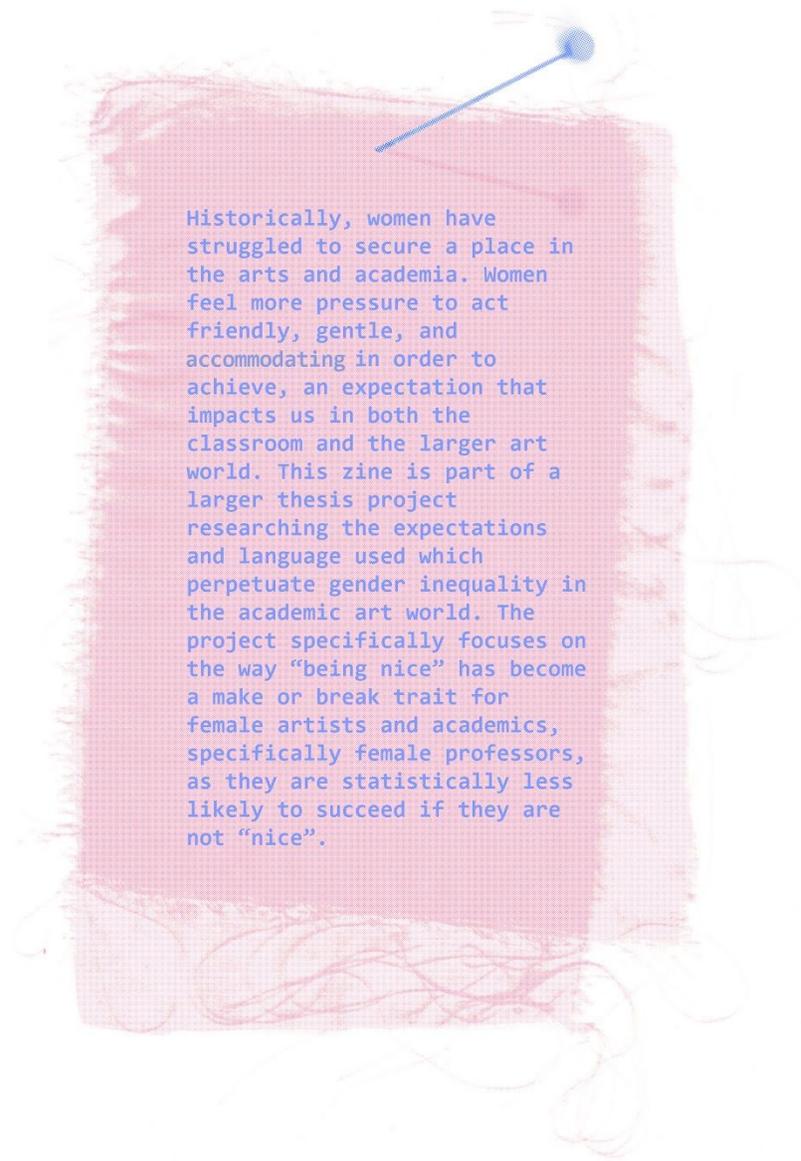
The visual content of this zine is simple, employing a toned down pink and blue color palette and minimal fiber materials as background texture. Through using materials I am familiar with, I felt I could better approach this wholly new method of visually translating information. I also feel a specifically gendered connection in the use of fibers material, as fibers is a female dominated discipline and, perhaps subsequently, often underrepresented. This is a trend which

can be traced throughout history, with one specific root found in Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius claiming that “women don’t think well in three dimensions”, concluding female artists would be better suited to weaving rather than design or architecture.¹² This claim led to many female artists of the times, such as Anni Albers and Gunta Stölzl, following suit in order to continue producing in some artistic fashion. The separation of women’s “craft” and men’s “high art” is an issue I’ve addressed in my own work several times due to my deep interest in its meaning and effect on the contemporary art world. Through utilizing this overlooked medium in a new way, I am connecting components of the process of making involved in this zine with components of the systematic oppression of female artists.

¹² Brown, Taylor Whitten.

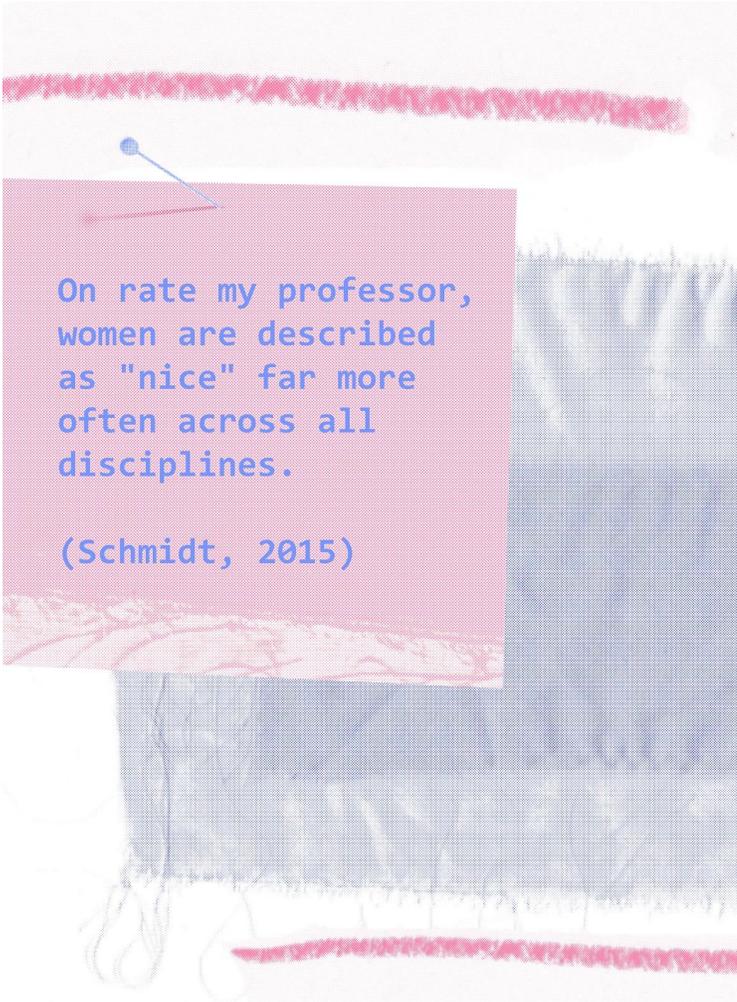


Title pg of Zine “Killing Success with Kindness”



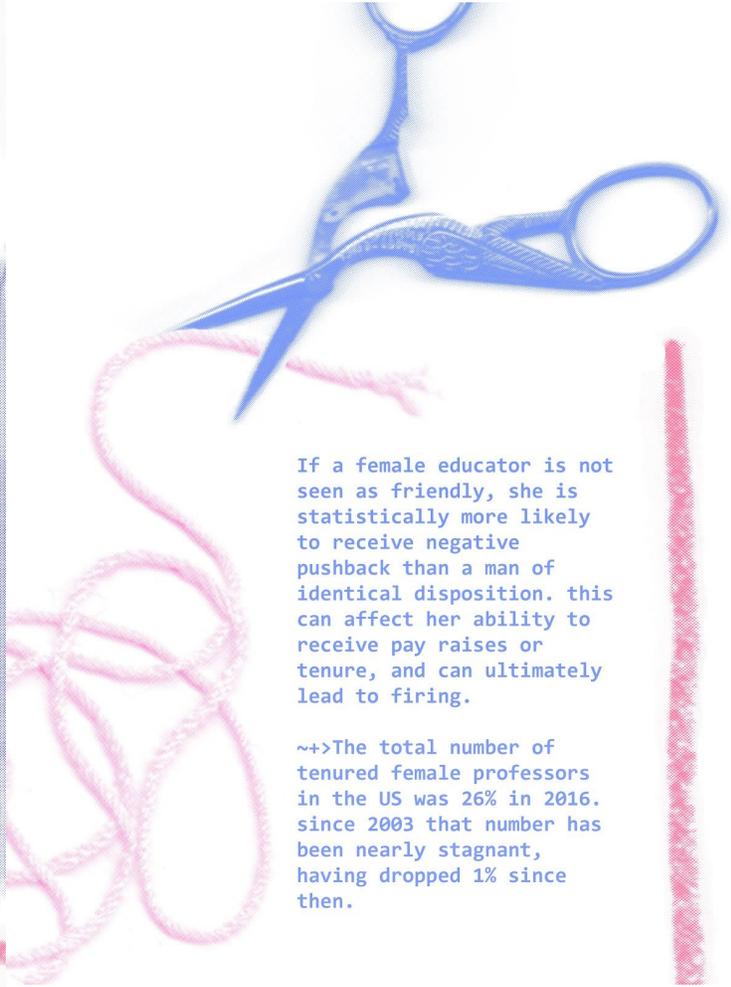
Historically, women have struggled to secure a place in the arts and academia. Women feel more pressure to act friendly, gentle, and accommodating in order to achieve, an expectation that impacts us in both the classroom and the larger art world. This zine is part of a larger thesis project researching the expectations and language used which perpetuate gender inequality in the academic art world. The project specifically focuses on the way “being nice” has become a make or break trait for female artists and academics, specifically female professors, as they are statistically less likely to succeed if they are not “nice”.

First pg with blurb introducing the project, opposite textless page (not shown).



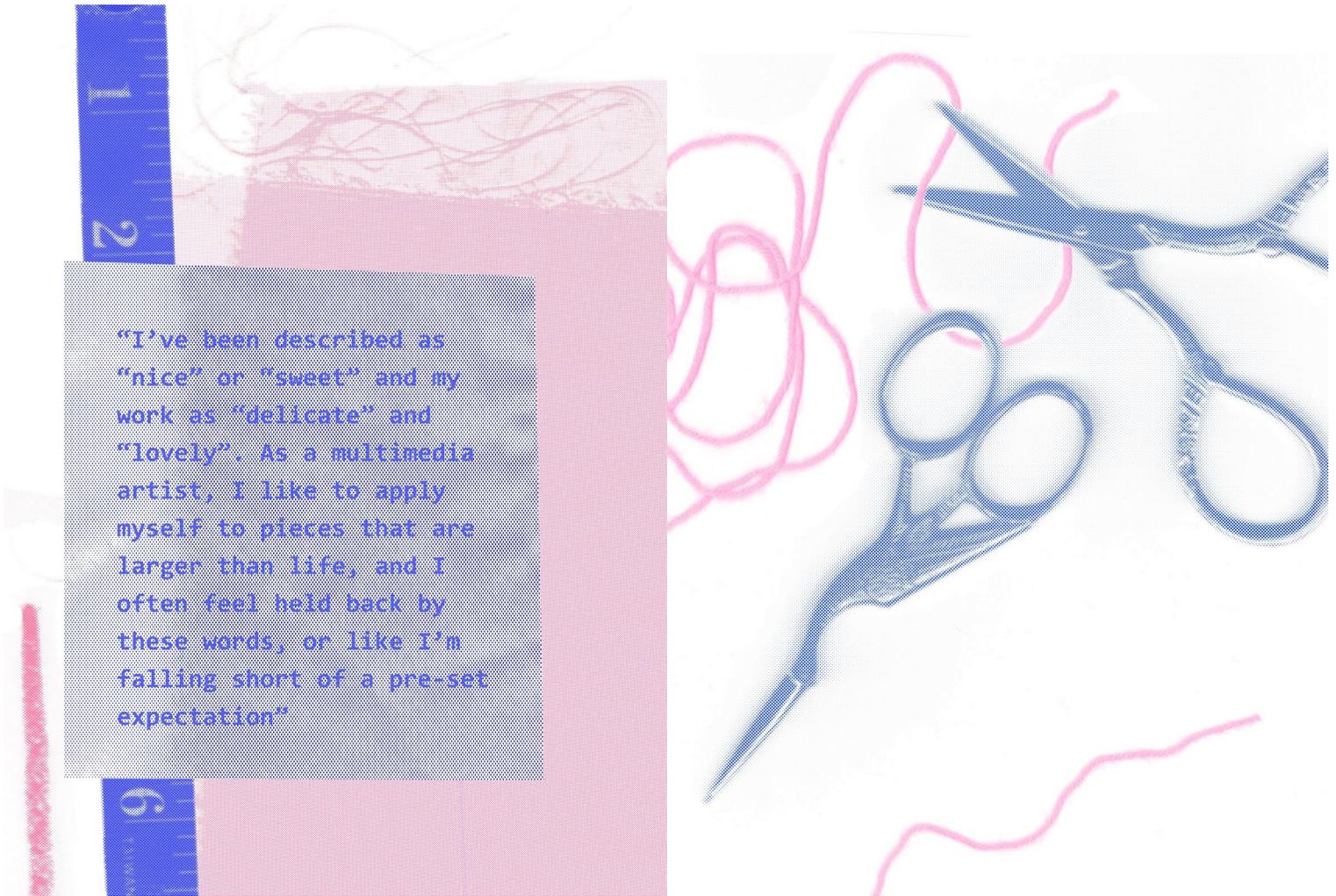
On rate my professor,
women are described
as "nice" far more
often across all
disciplines.

(Schmidt, 2015)



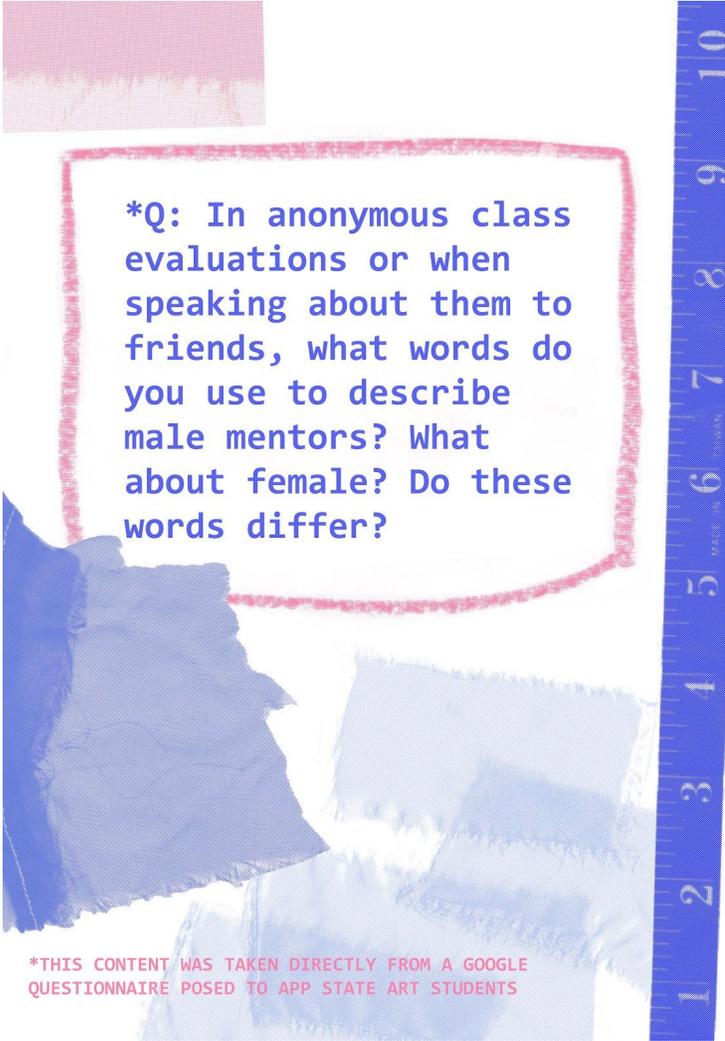
If a female educator is not
seen as friendly, she is
statistically more likely
to receive negative
pushback than a man of
identical disposition. this
can affect her ability to
receive pay raises or
tenure, and can ultimately
lead to firing.

~>The total number of
tenured female professors
in the US was 26% in 2016.
since 2003 that number has
been nearly stagnant,
having dropped 1% since
then.



"I've been described as "nice" or "sweet" and my work as "delicate" and "lovely". As a multimedia artist, I like to apply myself to pieces that are larger than life, and I often feel held back by these words, or like I'm falling short of a pre-set expectation"

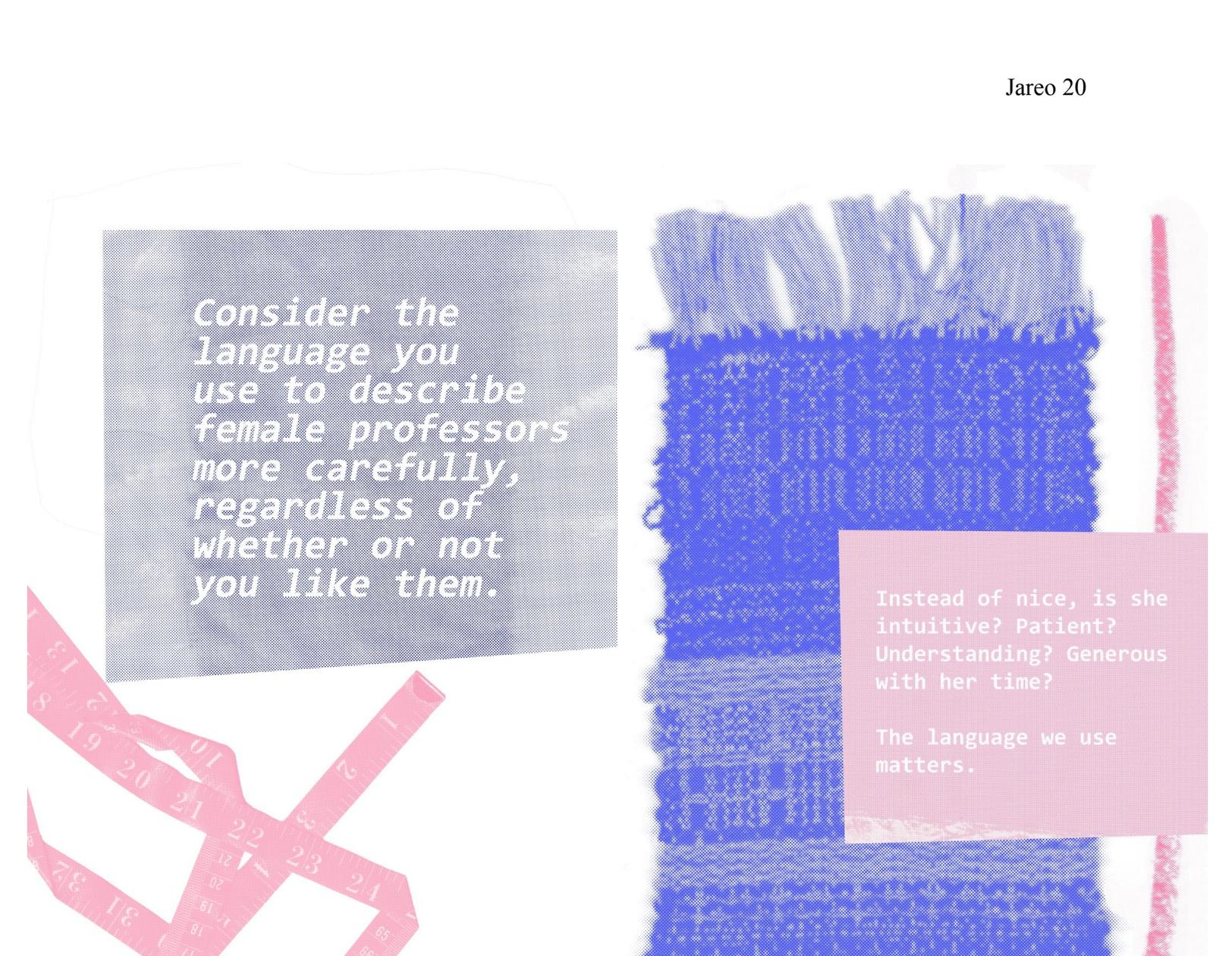
Pgs 5-6 with a relevant quote from a Google form respondent.



*THIS CONTENT WAS TAKEN DIRECTLY FROM A GOOGLE QUESTIONNAIRE POSED TO APP STATE ART STUDENTS



Pgs 7-8 with a question and a few answers from the Google form.



Consider the language you use to describe female professors more carefully, regardless of whether or not you like them.

Instead of nice, is she intuitive? Patient? Understanding? Generous with her time?

The language we use matters.



Back pg with fortune found in my room while gathering materials to scan. Contains humorously relevant quote.

CONCLUSION

As this project comes to a tangible resting point, I have devoted time to considering strategies for its continuation in other forms. As my own artistic work progresses, I've found myself drawn to utilizing more gender, inequality, and language related themes. This is another potentially fruitful outlet for this research and mode of thinking, especially as my work is shifting to consider ideas of value and labor more often, as well. The potential these ideas all have to feed off of one another is exciting to me, and I think would provide an ample amount of content to work with for years. I am also interested in conducting further research in the future, either under the guidance of another university or simply for personal interest. While my impending graduation will pull me away from the world of student evaluations and classroom conduct for some time, I intend to continue opening conversations with others about their use of gendered language. It is necessary to establish a rapport with others about potentially biased habits, and I feel my extensive research will allow me to approach the subject in future conversations comfortably.

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[doi:10.5749/j.ctvpwhdfv.10](https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvpwhdfv.10).