

NINE WOMEN ARTISTS

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University Art Gallery, SUNY-Binghamton

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Josephine Gear
Director
University Art Gallery

INTRODUCTION

NINE WOMEN ARTISTS -- AN EXHIBITION OF SOCIAL-CHANGE ART

SUNY-Binghamton's "Nine Women Artists" exhibition has an "older sister," a London exhibition I saw in the fall of 1980. "Issue": Social Strategies by Women Artists" was hosted by the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London (the ICA), and organized by Lucy Lippard, New York art critic. Although this show of twenty-four women artists was international in nature, it included a sizeable New York contingent. A two-day symposium, attended by most of the artists, focused on the problems and objectives of women's social-change art.¹ The majority of artists were critical of social practices and attitudes in Western society. Their perspectives, verbalized in the symposium, provoked, in turn, a response from the public. Art-making as social practice was a major topic of discussion. Artists were questioned about the interaction between themselves and their particular communities. What is the process by which an artist "selects" a community? Is this process ever reversed? Is it difficult for artists to relinquish control over decision-making in order to work closely with a community? Does art effect tangible changes? How do artists get public feedback (so vital to this kind of art) if they do not work with an identifiable and local public?

From the London experience arose the desire to stage something similar at SUNY-Binghamton. Two ideas emerged: to organize an exhibition which developed the themes of the London show (the present exhibition is the result) and to integrate the exhibition-preparation with a course in the Art and Art History (the course, "New York Women Artists" was given in the spring, 1981). Both events were designed to promote discussion and debate.

The criteria used in selecting artists for both the SUNY-Binghamton and the London exhibition was similar. We looked for women artists who were aware of possibilities for social change either because of their direct involvement with the Women's Movement, or because of their development as artists in an environment in which Women's Movement ideas were more or less taken as a given. We were not as interested in artists whose practice was exclusively concerned with "women's issues" (for example, equal rights for women). We were not drawn to artists who saw such issues as isolated social phenomena. We wanted women artists who worked from a more sophisticated understanding of society, enabling them to see that social injustices practiced on women are linked to the injustices suffered by other groups in society.

Because the criteria for selection was so similar, it was natural that the New York artists in the London exhibition form the nucleus of the Gallery show. But this exhibition's distinguishing trait was an emphasis on either individual distribution methods or those of the New York Alternative artworld's. (This term is discussed later). In other words, we did not choose artists who relied on the New York commercial gallery network as the primary means of exhibiting their work.

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This insistence on non-conventional distribution is implied by the nature of social-change art itself.² In general social-change artists have four basic aims: 1) that the subject and media of art draw from everyday life experience; 2) that this art reach a large generalized American public as distinguished from the smaller art public, composed of the culturally-aware upper-middle and middle class; 3) that this art heighten awareness of social conditions, and, 4) that this awareness stimulate action to change these conditions.

These social-change artists have taken stock of movements and events in the New York artworld, as well as the larger world in which we all live. Ultimately, however, their social-change art is launched from a concern over the mounting array of problems ordinary people face today. These are the years when federal and state governments attempt to define social change by deprivations and cut-backs: this time the middle class will not be exempt. For this reason a more generalized public may be receptive to social-change art since prosperous times have been erased along with indifference. Problems of housing shortage, rising food costs, unemployment and work of the routine kind attract social-change artists as well as the nuclear war threat, the erosion of family life, individual rights (including reproductive rights) and racial injustice.

Some social-change artists, however, have temporarily discarded the expectation that a powerful image can bite through the wax of social indifference and arouse people to indignant action. Instead these artists have experimented with communication which involve others in the making or enacting of artworks. By cooperating with members of a particular community artwork assumes local significance. Neighborhood people contribute ideas and labor to build an installation, or paint a mural for their block, or in the making of a photographic series, a video or Performance piece about themselves. While they remain the subject of the artworks, they still contribute decisions on how they should be framed. Many of the artists in this exhibition have made artwork of this "participatory" kind.³

All of the artists in this show have devised at one time or another either their own distribution system or utilized the Alternative artworld's in order to gain direct access to the general American public. Most of the art represented in this show has obtained the maximum visibility of such public places as neighborhood streets of New York, subway stations, storefronts, offices and supermarkets. In each instance routes and sites are carefully selected. Some art (not necessarily that which is represented in this exhibition) reaches a wide public through the mail service.⁴ Yet, again, other art has been exhibited in Alternative Spaces, which are sometimes entirely funded and organized by their artist-members.

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Art of the upper-middle and middle-class aesthetic is not of vital concern to social-change artists. They extend this disregard

to the established, institutional artworld. This is not to say that these artists have never used the New York artworld; some do to maintain college teaching positions or to gain a different kind of visibility for social-change art. But most social-change artists are active in the Alternative artworld. Having grown considerably in the last fifteen years, this world consists of "members" of the artists' community who are disenchanted by the mainstream artworld and especially by mainstream artists who are merely looking for an experimental space in which to show their new and untried work. Members of the Alternative artworld tend to be politically aware people, but are not exclusively so. Although many, if not the majority, are white middle-class men and women, there are also increasing numbers of Black and Third-world artists.⁵

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The distribution systems themselves have made demands on the form of social-change art. The extensive use of photocopies and photographs as media and the poster and broadsheet as format have often been conscious political decisions. In order to understand more about social-change artists' reasons for their aesthetic decisions, we must turn to the recent history of Conceptual art when, in the mid and late 60s, artists' lack of control over art-distribution systems began to be an issue in the New York artists' community. (This was also an issue for artists in London and Holland). At the forefront of the critical discussion were the Conceptual artists.⁶ Elements of their critique devolved into the tenets of their art practice.

In Conceptual art the Idea is primary. Dominance of the Idea is guaranteed because of the modes in which it is expressed; the syntax of written language, diagrams, working drawings, photographs, video and Performance. It is an art stripped or pared down to its Idea. Conceptual art has very much the look (new in the history of art) of being a working art. It is diagrammatic and instructional in appearance. Further, it is a functioning art which exists as a record or document of the process involved in the evolution of its own Idea. (One must keep in mind that most traditional art expresses the arrived Idea, and that the evolutionary stages are consigned to the secondary status of sketch or modello). To the non-initiated, all Conceptual art seems to eschew sensual considerations and ignore traditional aesthetics. It is true that some Conceptual artists intend such an effect. In order to gain control over their work these artists employ art forms with limited appeal to the usual art-buying public.

Obviously, Conceptual art and social-change art overlap in terms of interest, concern and method. The important difference is that although Conceptual artists come to their form of art through professional desperation, they continue it in the name of professionalism. Social-change artists, working with the same media, are quite differently motivated. Their goals have less to do with professionalism (since they see professionalism as a trap) and more to do with finding ways in which art can communicate effectively and democratically to a wide and diversified general public.

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The undergraduate course, "New York Women Artists," critically examined the objectives, methods and achievements of the artists. To facilitate this, students met and talked individually with the artists not in an academic environment, but on the artist's own ground: her studio or office. This interview format combines scholarly enquiry with field-work. The course, new in kind for the Department, also performed the experimental function of piloting schemes for future exhibition-related courses. The first half of the semester we sought a common basis for the interviews through reading and discussing selected texts. One of the faculty artists, Katherine Kadish, from an interviewee's point of view, generously advised us on the kinds of questions to which artists would be most responsive. Each member of the class reviewed portfolios compiled and provided by the artists. Through this variety of methods, especially the debates and discussions, we produced a set of "core" interview questions. The interviews were taped, transcribed in full by the student and, then, with guidance, the student prepared and edited the interviews for publication.⁷ Students were permitted to write their own introductions in a manner they themselves believed would be the most illuminating to their subject for an undergraduate readership.

The course, while not without faults common to any first "run", nevertheless proved a success. Students participated with much enthusiasm and dedication, despite the enormous workload. The products of their activities reside in the edited interviews which follow this introduction and form the significant part of the catalog.

More specifically, the real pedagogical value of the course was the lengthy and spirited discussions on social-change art. Our starting points were the "old and hoary" questions raised by the London exhibition "Issue." But those who are involved in art, who think about it, analyze it, or examine it in any deep measure over lengthy periods of time, find they need continually to reexamine these questions. What, for example, is the role of art in our society? Who is the audience for art? How does art reach that audience? The London exhibition -- and now the SUNY-Binghamton exhibition -- provide new platforms from which to examine these questions.

Contemporary mainstream art does not question the purpose of art in the same manner. The questions which arise from mainstream art tend to be more secondary. What does it mean? What is it about? In part, the failure of mainstream art to be deeply provocative is due to its conforming rather than its rebellious relationship to traditional aesthetics.

If Modernism rejected art's traditional functions of covering perceptions of the recognizable world it, at the same time, retained art's traditional ability to appeal to the sensual. This created great confusion among the art-public. Consequently, they now no longer expect to understand much of what contemporary art is about and sometimes they feel deeply angry about this exclusion from understanding. Nevertheless (and this is the important point for us) the audience is never able to dismiss Art because it still manages to communicate, deeply and powerfully on a sensual level. (This communication may not always be recognized at

a cognitive level). This curious situation gives rise to one of the paradoxes of Modern Art: its public generally accepts art which -- though it may move, excite, uplift or overawe them -- is not entirely understood by them. Moreover, it is art which they do not feel they have the power to question. In this climate of acceptance, disbelief is suspended and no serious questioning arises because the conditions for serious discourse are never created.

By contrast, during the two-day symposium in London, it became very evident that no such problem existed between social-change art and its audience. Discussion and debate were lengthy, lively and informative. Quietly listening to it all, it occurred to me that social-change art reverses the usual order of things: it clearly presents a focused and comprehensible view of our social world while, by conscious choice, it deemphasizes the contribution of traditional aesthetics. It is this reversal, quite as much as its content, which accounts for social-change art's ability to break through the silence of acceptance and to carry with a release from our received notions and values. It is hoped that the present exhibition in SUNY-Binghamton will stimulate a continuation of this.

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¹The Institute of Contemporary Arts, director Sandy Nairns, hosted both the exhibition and the symposium. The Greater London Council as well as public and private interest groups supported the two events.

²The title "social-change:" is not chosen by the artists themselves; in fact they are a little indifferent to this classification which art critics have pinned on them. They also live with other names: Outreach and, occasionally, Activist.

³See in particular the interviews with Lyn Hughes, Nancy Linn, Anne Pitrone and Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

⁴One of the artists, Martha Rosler, has reached such a public with her series of mailed postcards.

⁵There also exist a number of support organizations; such art groups of recent origin in New York City are, Co Lab, Fashion Moda, Group Material and P.A.D.D. (Political Art Documentation/Distribution).

⁶I found Ursula Meyer's Conceptual Art, New York, 1972, generally helpful in reordering my thinking on Conceptual art.

⁷There were ten students in the course and, originally, ten artists in the exhibition. We regret to report that one artist Candace Hill-Montgomery, interviewed by Susan Glosser, recently withdrew because of serious illness. We wish her a speedy recovery, and we miss her contribution.



X-Person (#18)
1981
Xerox 1080 print

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH SHARON GILBERT

Jeri Slavin (JS:) interviewed Sharon Gilbert (SG:) in her studio in Brooklyn, NY, April 21, 1981.

"I think that artists in a lot of ways are very free thinkers . . . able to cross barricades of ideas. For someone to be able to say 'I don't like this old style! What can I do to re-invent?' is a sense of adventure which is very revolutionary in itself. Artists have always been determinists in society, one of the few groups of people that create."¹ Out of the barrage of news media coverage, the anxiety of the people around her, and her own fear, Sharon Gilbert created a revolutionary statement in 3-Mile Island Reproductions 1-8, an eight-page unbound book of photo collages collected during eight days of newspaper coverage of the Three Mile Island nuclear reactor malfunction in March, 1979. Also connected with the nuclear issue was Ms. Gilbert's window installation at Printed Matter Book Shop,² which simulated a cracked window and showed two oversized pages from her notebook containing a 'nuclear alphabet.' "Books are very accessible; they are cheap, and you can sell a book for a very small amount of money. You cannot sell a piece of artwork for anything near two or three dollars. And the range of things that open to you is endless."³ Waste⁴, a book constructed out of one photocopied piece of paper is the embodiment of this idea. Conceived of and produced in Germany where Ms. Gilbert was working on a grant from Freiburg University, the book contains straight statistical information about nuclear waste. The smallness of the book juxtaposes effectively the vastness of the information within.

More recently, Ms. Gilbert has been critiquing society in '80' Faces,⁵ a book of collages collected from the types of faces that continually crop up in the newspapers. "There are certain types of people that you never see in the paper. Real women, older women, real children."⁶

SG: I would have to disagree. I think that a passionate statement about anything, if it's done in an individual manner, and if it's done in right terms, can make art. Whether it is successful art is another question.

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JS: Were the pieces 3-Mile Island Reproductions 1-8, Waste, and '80 Faces places the first time you've worked with collage?

SG: I'd done collage intermittently. . . . I'd always enjoyed doing it, and it was something that I had played with in recent years. But always on different terms. I had always loved all of Marx Ernst's stuff, and surrealist collage. I'd always been an admirer of Schwitters. But, I didn't share the sentiments of Dada. The sense of absurdity was not really mine, and I think that is why I could never really get a grip on it. . . . But somehow with recent events here in the States, collage became the only way I could deal with it. And so the 3-Mile Island Reproductions 1-8 book was done. And I found myself in new places.

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JS: How do you feel about your sculpture now (referring to Sharon Gilbert's earlier work)? Do you miss it?

SG: I don't feel I've left it. On some levels I still feel I deal with things very physically. I have a very physical sense of what I'm making. I felt that the windows I did in Printed Matter are extremely sculptural. . . . In some ways this working with collages has been a very liberating experience, because I really feel there are no boundaries to what I can do. When I was dealing with sculpture, I was very much bound by certain physicality. What I was doing had very much to do with what the material could do and what I found in the material. Now I see the issues that I'm dealing with. And they are much larger issues that I ever dealt with in my sculpture. And they're much more multi-faceted! I have to have more 'tools' at hand, and that interests me in a new way.

¹From the full interview with Sharon Gilbert by Jeri B. Slavin, April 4, 1981.

²Printed Matter, artists' book shop, 7 Lispenard St., New York, NY.

³From the full interview with Sharon Gilbert by Jeri B. Slavin, April 4, 1981.

⁴Waste, English edition printed in New York, September, 1980.

⁵'80 Faces, printed in New York in 1981. Currently Ms. Gilbert is still working with these ideas.

⁶From the full interview with Sharon Gilbert by Jeri B. Slavin, April 4, 1981.

⁷Sharon Gilbert teaches art to groups of Senior Citizens.

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NTAL IS A SIGN OF LIFE
YOURSELF MEANS YOU'RE A
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ES YOU DO CRAZY THINGS
CONDUCTIVE TO CREATIVITY
FEAR IS CALMING
UABLE BECAUSE IT LETS TH
DANGEROUS TO SOCI**

"Truisms", Franklin Furnace Window, NYC

December, 1978

Black & white photostats, posters, audio

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH JENNY HOLZER

The meeting between Jenny Holzer (JH:) and Robin Hatchett (RH:) took place April 18, 1981 in Jenny's apartment.

Jenny Holzer is an outreach artist¹ living in lower Manhattan on Ludlow Street, a long, eerie, and noisy block. Standing in the door of her apartment in an old and worn building, Jenny graciously greets me saying, "Come on in."

Jenny Holzer is a tall woman, dressed in white jeans and a red sweat-shirt the day I saw her. Her apartment is a very individual place. Paragraphs from her books, mounted and hung on the walls, punctuate the room as do graphics by other artists. It's a warm room, immaculately clean, organized and unselfconsciously decorated. Near a window is a big pillow sofa and white glass-topped desk with a small healthy plant standing on it. Behind her chair are objects that catch your eye; one is a work called, "Affluent College Students,"² consisting of paragraphs printed on a solid metal plate, a favorite piece of Jenny's.

Jenny's presence fills the room as the interview begins.

RH: What does outreach artwork mean to you?

JH: Outreach art would be different ways to distribute art work rather than just putting it in art galleries and museums. For example, this might be using the mail or putting up posters or being on the radio. Outreach art also might use subject matter that is particularly interesting and helpful to large numbers of people. It also can be art of any type--startling art--that helps people see differently.

- RH: Would you consider yourself the type of artist who's willing to contribute your time to outreach art work regardless of the consequences you encounter?
- JH: It's a challenge to try and do this stuff. It can be hard to keep out of trouble and, of course, it's difficult to figure out what means to use to get information out. You might use commercial mailing lists or cable T.V., etc., whatever's appropriate for what you're trying to project. I think that commercial mailing has already worked well for politicians and non-profit groups. Outreach is an ongoing experiment to see what works for you, what is a good means of communication and what is a method that others can use.
- RH: How do you feel about theory?
- JH: Sometimes it's useful and sometimes it's not. It can be helpful to have some kind of structure to follow or it can be destructive and inhibiting. I feel, though, that you should have some kind of overview so you can see how closely things now are related to history.
- RH: How long have you been interested in outreach work?
- JH: Since around 1975 or so. I was in graduate school when I started to think about public places to put work. I also was wondering about what kind of work was appropriate for public sites.
- RH: What kind of schools did you attend? Did you study art at high school level?
- JH: I attended a regular high school. I did a little art but I didn't concentrate. Most of my time in college was spent studying liberal arts and by my third year I became involved with art proper.
- RH: Do you think younger feminist artists will learn from outreach artwork?
- JH: Outreach art might be an appropriate way for feminists to distribute information and to display a particular attitude about how the world should operate. Making the work itself also might help to clarify someone's thinking.
- RH: Do you feel that outreach art work is beneficial to you? Do you benefit from it mentally? And, financially, how does it work out?
- JH: For money, I teach at a SUNY college³ and do typesetting and get bailed out from home from time to time, and I've sold books and some art. This type of work definitely is not the thing to do to get rich in the art world. However, it's reasonable to attempt, to see if you can organize your ideas, find a form and a vehicle to present them. And, there's the advantage that I hang my posters in the street and get written comments on them and other feedback and this way have more and different people interested in my work and ideas than artists do who only show work in galleries.
- RH: What are the kinds of attitudes you encounter in your everyday life concerning outreach artwork?

JH: Usually people mistake my work for some kind of propaganda or official pronouncement. I don't mind this because people tend to pay more attention to what is actually being said when they don't think it's art.

RH: Are you married?

JH: No.

RH: The Constitution of the United States states that all men are created equal but says nothing about women. Do you consider it necessary for a law to be created to give equality to women?

JH: Women must have equal rights under the law.

RH: What kind of understanding would you expect your audience to get out of your work?

JH: I'd like them to understand some of my private concerns and I would like to put out some general ideas about what is important to think about and act on. Some combinations of urgency and optimism and a sense of the ridiculous probably is good.

¹Two examples of her work are Black Book (1978), and Living (1980, a collaborative piece produced with Peter Nadin.

²"Affluent College Students" (1980).

³Empire State College, New York, New York.

Radiate n' Bake

... an almost instant shortcut to earth life ...

Penetrating, home-style radiation. Cook quickly with alpha, beta & gamma rays. A perfect added touch for a nuclear family treat.



It is difficult to believe that a mushroom-like dish is so simple to create -- as a deft finishing touch to any culture. Look for the mushroom shape. There's "free" radiation inside. Makes any explosion more of an occasion. Your nuclear family and all earth life are bound to be destroyed.

**** If you want to end this false reasoning and save your life, sign the reverse side of this card and send to Sec'y. Halg.**

Radiate n' Bake

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH LYN HUGHES

Joyce Kaufman (JK:) interviewed Lyn Hughes (LH:) in Brooklyn, April 24, 1981.

Lyn Hughes is a young woman from Virginia, who used to eat bologna sandwiches on Wonder bread. But then she moved to New York City and became an outreach/social change artist. Lyn studied at the School of Visual Arts in the Big Apple. Photography is her specialty. Her shooting has ranged from male and female nudes, to dancers, to documentary stills of workers at the Fulton Fish Market. It was from these relatively traditional photographic ventures that she made the switch to outreach artwork. "I wanted this work, I needed this work, I was looking for this work," said Lyn, "it was just a matter of time before I got to this point. I realized that I just could not make pretty photographic images any longer." Lyn's raised feminist consciousness makes a major contribution to her work. Lyn's art takes her along many diverse paths. She has put up posters in the subways that are a protest against the demeaning ways women are used in advertising. She has taught classes in advanced media at art colleges. And she is presently organizing and working with several political art groups. Her talents are many, and even upon a first meeting you can just see her enthusiasm bubbling to the surface.

JK: How did you get involved in the art world, and when did you start doing outreach art?

LH: At the outset let me say that I did not begin as an "outreach" artist. In fact, I did not begin as an artist at all. The transformation point at which one becomes an artist is an interesting area to explore. I think it was at that time in my life when I had ingested, digested and began a process of eliminating those conditioned behaviors and patterns which I had learned both directly and indirectly from my environment. I introduced myself to art when I moved to New York and began dancing at Alvin Ailey's American Dance Center on 59th Street and simultaneously became involved in photography. I loved dance. I loved photography. I was intrigued with movement and space. I was intrigued with altering space with my body and with my camera. It was a natural evolution that I began to combine the language of dance with the language of photography. I decided at that time that I wanted further training in photography so I entered art school in New York City. My training extended the boundaries of photography when my concentration became intensive in the humanities. In the summer of 1979 I began to collaborate with Joan Braderman, a film theorist at Visual Arts and a member of the Heresies editorial collective of women artists formed to work on issue number 9.¹

LH: Documentary photographs of found images on the street were published in that issue, as well as altered advertising images I recycled from magazines and newspapers. Since that time I have been combining ads, media text, and personal commentary to get a different way of looking at advertising, the related economic activity and values central to the production, distribution and maintenance of the capitalist system; values which are created for the purpose of control. Sexuality and the myth of the American Dream is covertly constructed into the forms of commonplace social architecture whose demand has been created and determined elsewhere. Advertising billboards are the contemporary art/architectural replacement for hieroglyphs and building ornamentation. My repulsion of and infuriation towards this system led me to public destruction of certain of these images in the form of graffiti. I made before-and-after documentation of each piece which I signed and numbered. It took on a performance aspect when people would stop and watch and question and oftentimes argue and debate my intentions. I have found it necessary to use public space rather than be used by it.

JK: What are some of the most recent things you've been doing?

LH: I am a member of P.A.D.D. (Political Art Documentation/Distribution), a group of artists and writers networking to organize artists around the globe. In April there was a call-to-work based on the theme of taxation. A two-week individual or collaborative public project was to be made and documented and presented in a one-day slide presentation at Karen DiGia's Gallery.² My piece was based on the 2% federal tax that is placed on our telephone bills. In 1966 President Johnson laid a 10% tax on telephone utilities to help pay for the Vietnam War. It was a clever way to spread out the responsibility of each citizen in supporting the war. After the war was over the tax remained, although each year it has been reduced. Reagan denied the removal of the tax this year and so it remains at 2%. I designed a set of stickers to be placed in the two information sections on public pay telephone booths. The piece was entitled "Tax Sale - 2% Off!" and was installed in 250 telephone booths around Manhattan.

My most recent work is based around current reproductive rights issues that are presently surging in Congress. Anne Pitrone and I began our collaborative work with a performance piece at St. Patrick's Cathedral on Easter Sunday. We made long black dresses, with silver padlocked chains around the waist, hats with veils; carried giant Easter lillies and held a banner made from a blood-stained sheet that read "Victims of the Human Life Amendment." We were in mourning for those women who have lost their lives through illegal abortions and who will lose their lives through illegal abortions if the Human Life Amendment is passed. We stood on the steps of St. Patrick's from noon until 1:15 p.m. Two filmmakers documented the event. Our aim was to find out what people are thinking about the issues, what their positions are and to talk about our positions. The right is extremely organized, what with one million moral majority card holders in the U.S.; and we encountered quite a few. We had extensive positive and negative interactions with individuals in the crowd and left, both exhausted and excited, realizing the should and shouldn'ts, do's and don'ts, of public spectacle work. But basically people were very supportive and enthusiastic about our intentions.

JK: It's great that you got positive reaction to your performance piece. We were worried about how people would react to this kind of art.

LH: Well, this subject matter is extremely serious. Women are going to be wearing their stoves on their backs forever at this rate; never to get out of the kitchen. With men deciding our fate we will not be able to achieve self-fulfillment. A woman's life will be predetermined with learned helplessness as the norm. Women will continue to be seen as only complements to their husband's success.

Anne and I have continued our work together. We have recently formed a group called "Carnival Knowledge" -- artists and writers interested in new methods of political organizing. We are planning a winter carnival with the New York Coalition for Reproductive Rights on January 22-24, 1982 in celebration of the 9th anniversary of the 1973 Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision.³ We are taking the idea of a woman's bazaar, a form which has relatively negative connotations in this society, and celebrating a traditional method of women's organizing and communicating. "BAZAAR CONCEPTIONS" will be strictly connected to issues of reproductive rights--abortion, sterilization abuse/population control, birth control, reproductive hazards on the job, lesbian rights and sexual freedom -- to name a few.

JK: We've used terms like "outreach" and "social change" to describe the work of the artists who are in this show. What kind of an artist would you call yourself?

LH: I am inclined not to use labels. I am interested in reaching as many people as possible, to raise public awareness levels about certain issues. Film is an excellent tool for that purpose -- therefore my interest in documentation. Working collectively with other artists and political groups is an entirely different approach to artwork. . . your way of communicating changes, your inner dialogue changes. It's an expansive and exciting method of working.

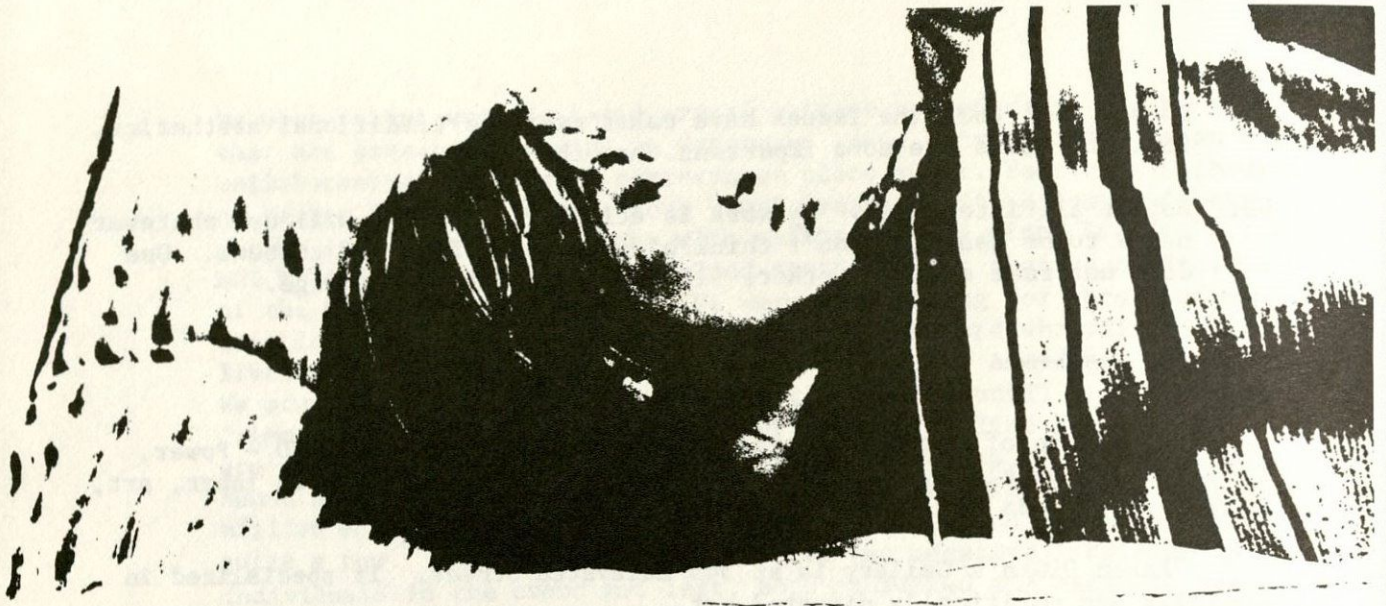
JK: Do you feel that the issues have taken over the traditional aesthetics, that the ideas are more important than the form?

LH: No, it all integrates. My work is eclectic in that I will use whatever needs to be used. I don't think of separating form and content. One does not take over the other. It's all part of the message.

¹The title of Heresies #9 was "WOMEN ORGANIZE/WOMEN DIVIDED - Power, Propaganda & Backlash." The issue focused on issues relating to labor, art, media, propaganda and their effects on each other.

²Karen DiGia's Gallery is at 345 Lafayette Street. It specialized in socially and politically directed art.

³The Roe v. Wade case, the deciding case in the Supreme Court for abortion rights, is No. 70-18, argued Dec. 13, 1971 - reargued Oct. 11, 1972 - decided Jan. 22, 1973 in the United States Supreme Court for the United States of America.



Scars, 1980
1980
Photostat

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH KULAS

Tami Goodger (TG:) interviewed Elizabeth Kulas (EK:) Friday, April 3, 1981.

Elizabeth Kulas is a contemporary outreach artist, currently residing in New York City. Her experience and dealings with the capitalist system, and with people in general, have given her reason to speak out in favor of all oppressed people in America today. She, herself, was a victim, having been hospitalized by an I.U.D. device which nearly killed her, and left her sterilized. Along with the other social-change artists, Elizabeth does not make the type of art that is meant to hang on gallery walls. She is more interested in communicating to as many different kinds and classes of people as possible. Creating objects that can be handed to people that don't cost very much money, like xeroxes or small books, is the idea behind her work. She belongs to various groups¹ in the city such as Political Art Documentation/Distribution (P.A.D.D.),¹ a group that collects art, political in nature, from all over the country. P.A.D.D. is a kind of resource center where people can get to know each other, work together and find out what is happening in socially-concerned political art, today.

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TG: I read your story on the Dalkon Shield; is most of your artwork based on your experience with the Dalkon Shield?

EK: Since it was a rather large experience in my life, a lot of my work is about that, but not all of it.

Right now I'm working on some drawings which are about my own personal experience in dealing with the fact that I'm living next to the Indian Point Nuclear Reactor which could go up at any moment, and how I, as a woman living in New York City, deal with that.

Historically, my work has been about people. It first started out because I felt that the world didn't understand itself, that people didn't understand each other, and we were all upset and confused about ourselves, each other, our differences and our existence. I felt we were all unable to understand that each person, although unique, has similarities and that we should, through understanding, come to accept what is good in us and work together and grow together.

Essentially, I try to create and develop within that realm of art which speaks of the problems we have. My Dalkon Shield stories and poetry were appropriate because they exposed how the system affects people's lives and how it is a corrupt system. I feel that capitalism in America today is very corrupt and hurts a lot of people around the world, as well as in the U.S. I, myself, having been a victim, have found a clear voice to speak out with. We speak strongest from our own experience.

I've worked with a lot of groups in the city, women's groups, doing graphics that go in the newspapers, and things like that. The kind of outreach art we are trying to do with P.A.D.D. is bring art out into the streets, because it has existed so long within a limited context and environment, where people have been forced to go in and look at it.

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TG: When did you first want to be an artist?

EK: I grew up in a small town in Massachusetts, and my family was really poor. As a child I was in control of my time and play for most of the day. To me this meant, essentially that I was in full control of my creative time; all day long; no job, no one else telling me what to do. ... When I was about six I said, "Well I want to show people what I think they've forgotten; because it's been taken from them that we need creative time, time to do all kinds of interesting things." I guess that's where I first got the idea of being an artist. I thought an artist was someone who said, "I'm not going to fit into a necessarily pre-conditioned existence. I'm going to really invent myself." Well, I found this was not necessarily true about all artists but it was the kind of artist I wanted to be. I also felt a need to improve the conditions of life I was aware of, and ... when I was about seven I said, "I am going to commit my life to working towards bettering the conditions of the people that I grew up with and that I love." I knew I wanted to communicate to these people that eventually one can be more, and there is a way to be more. I think that led me into political art, and understanding why the working class is the working class; which is where I grew up, and what I was part of. It (doing the political story), gave a reason for the existence that I had gone through and it gives my life meaning now.

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TG: Were you headed in the same direction before you were hospitalized?

EK: Yes. The hospitalization didn't totally dominate where I was heading. It simply made it all crystal clear. Before that, I was very socially conscious. I was conscious of the fact that I wanted a better life for everyone, and that my art was trying to say that. When the IUD experience happened, I really understood that we can all get hurt in an accident. But what that did was put me into another category. I became one of the victims of the system. They make products that hurt people, products that exploit and destroy the earth, products that are sent around the world and destroy people's lives in the name of profit. I started studying what was really happening to the U.S., not what we get in the newspapers, but what we get in the alternative political press. I started to get a picture of who really owns the U.S., that is, the corporations and what they do. It made me realize what the source of a lot of agony in America is; for sure, my own personal agony. I did a lot of work on that and I realized that at this point in time it's very critical for an art to exist that tries to lift us out of the condition we're in, this control of our lives by capitalism. It's not healthy for us.

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TG: Are you as much for the women's movement as you are against imperialism?

EK: I'm for all kinds of movements. Yes, I am against imperialism; I worked with the Anti-Imperialist Cultural Union for two years. I used to argue to change the name. It's not good to walk around with a negative name, I think it's better to have a pro-name. I'm pro-women's liberation. Women have suffered a form of oppression, historically. They have not been considered equal to men, obviously. They have suffered many repercussions because of that; many bad developments in self-growth. I'm definitely pro-women's liberation and pro-women getting together, talking about it, learning and understanding this...and growing.

Right now I'm trying to develop, and am actually getting a pretty successful development of a women's group at the place where I work. It's pretty progressive. We're just getting together and talking about developing leadership skills, and learning how to speak in a group. There's so much we were told we couldn't do, that we realize we can; but we need each other's support in order to do it. We need to practice it and develop it.

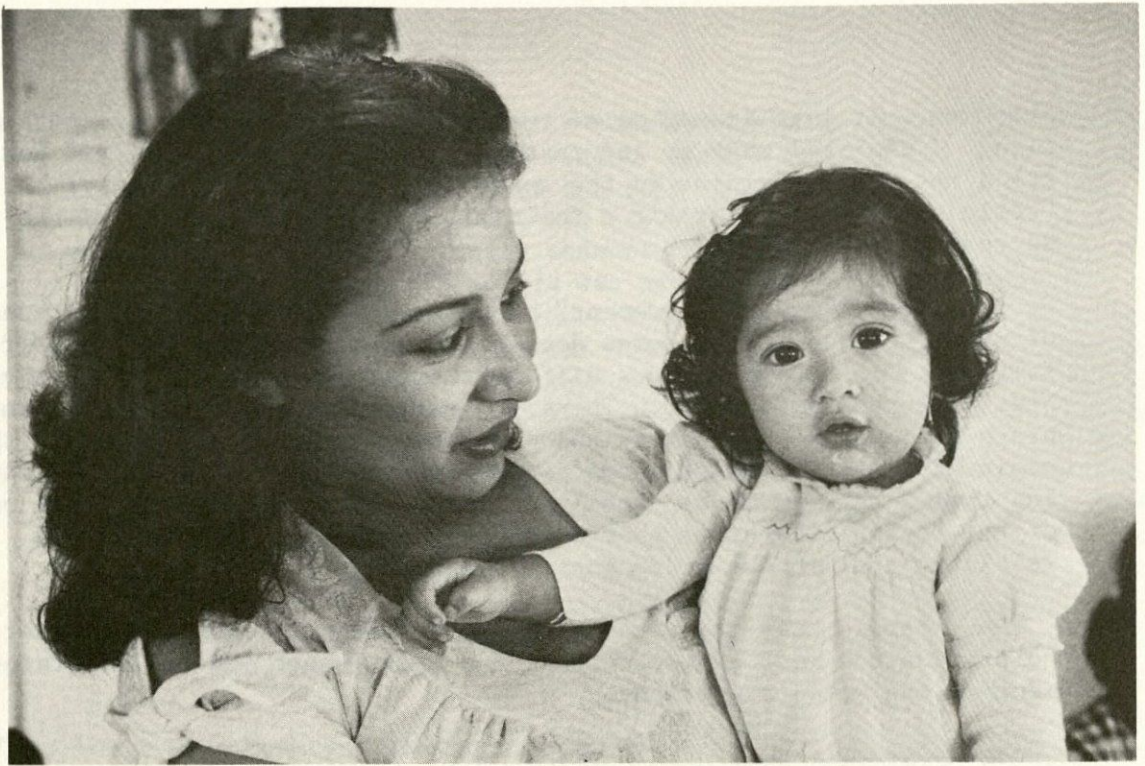
I have a problem with the term "feminism" because it limits the struggle to women and I want to be part of lifting racism, sexism, chauvinism, classism and oppression of men that definitely parallels that of women. So I don't really consider myself, necessarily, a feminist. I consider myself a progressive woman artist. People are simply the vehicles for an ideology or various combinations thereof and I want to be very conscious of what is operating through me. I don't want to be feminine, because "feminine" is a word that has historically embodied attributes that women were supposed to have that men didn't have. What I found in my dealings with men and women is that we all have qualities that are very similar. They've been interpreted and channelled differently. The word "feminist" didn't necessarily seem to me to be the best way to describe being a progressive woman. We're just taking the word "feminine" which was always an op-

pression. It just dawned on me yesterday that it was a real contradiction. I realized what my gut reaction to it is. All my life I had tried not to be feminine in the sense of the traditional way of being "feminine." To call myself a feminist later on was, "What? I can't do that."

The term "women's movement" encompasses all the different types of women, whereas every woman does not necessarily consider herself a feminist. There are various different types of feminists that have been invented and defined. There are separatist feminists, and feminists who want to make it in the capitalist system. They support the capitalist system. which I don't. Essentially, I feel it's like saying that I want to be as equally exploited as men. . . . I think one of the healthiest things that is happening now is that people are rebelling against the roles that are set up in society. . . .

Note: The order in this last excerpt has been slightly changed in order to provide the best comprehension of a much longer and fuller statement on the woman's movement.

¹The origins of this group were in Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, a group of artists, writers, poets and some filmmakers who met regularly from the mid-1970's on; to discuss and work on issues in art and politics.



Linn

Wanda and Ellenita

October 8, 1980

Photograph

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH NANCY LINN

Eve Daniels (ED:) interviewed Nancy Linn (NL:) in her apartment in New York City on April 5, 1981.

Once a week, from August 1979 through March 1981, Nancy Linn, Leica camera in hand, visited the Well Baby Clinic at Bellevue Hospital in New York City to take pictures of teenage mothers and their babies. The clinic provided the mothers with health care for themselves and their babies and information on parenting. Nancy Linn's photographs were an integral part of the program in that not only did they provide a visual record and a means of identification for hospital records, but they also helped provide positive self-images for these young mothers.

Nancy Linn is the director of Printed Matter, a New York City based retail store and distribution service for books by artists. The photographs are done in her spare time and, in the case of the clinic, for free; the hospital reimburses her for most of her film. She is working on many series of photographs, of which the pictures from the Well Baby Clinic is but one.

Among her series (a form which she prefers: "When I'm dealing with one thing over an extended period of time, I learn more and grow more in my work"), is one of photographs of Madonnas in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Nancy Linn glued 150 of these photographs on the walls and windows of West Broadway, between House and Canal streets, one Sunday evening. At the end of one week they had all disappeared.

"West Broadway is an interesting street because many young Hispanic and Puerto Rican women look for work as sewing machine operators there. The job offers are pasted up on the windows and walls, so people are used to looking. I walk to work that way and I could see the pictures too. These are serious projects for me, and I can use the street as a way of trying different ideas out. It's fun, and it's better than sitting at home with all of these pictures. I hope they enjoy them!"

In this way, in addition to her work at the clinic, Nancy Linn reaches out directly to her audiences and touches them in a special way.

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NL: I received my Masters in photography from Cranbrook in Michigan. I did enough commercial and newspaper work to know that I didn't want to have to make money taking pictures. I taught and learned the history of photography, and then got a job here in New York cataloging the photographs, albums and books in a large photographic collection,

ED: Who is your favorite artist and/or photographer?

NL: I like the French photographer Nadar. He worked in the 1850's and 1860's. He had a way of making you believe in the humanity of the people in his photographs. He let the personality of the sitter come through. His portraits have been a strong influence in my work,

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ED: What prompted you to do these portraits of mothers and children?

NL: A very close friend of mine runs the Well Baby Clinic. The clinic offers a group of teenage mothers and their babies, for about a year and a half, medical attention and social services. There had been one other group before this one, and I knew she had had a photographer, but I didn't pay too much attention at the time. My son and I returned in August, 1979, from Paris to New York, and another group had just begun. My friend told me she needed a photographer and asked if I was interested. I wasn't working, I didn't have an apartment...I didn't realize how hooked on it I was going to get! I've really enjoyed it, and it's been a fabulous learning experience. When I got my job at Printed Matter, I asked for time off, Wednesday mornings, and once a week; I'd go over to the clinic and take pictures. It has kept me taking pictures, which is good.

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ED: Did you have an interest in the subject of mothers and children before the clinic experience?

NL: Yes. I remember seeing women and children on the street and thinking it would be great to be able to take their pictures, but, I knew I couldn't take the kind of pictures I wanted to take on the street.

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ED: Do you chat with the mothers before you take their pictures?

NL: Oh yes. Always...They talk about their kid, I talk about mine. I want to share things so they don't feel I'm just there to take their pictures. I want to hear their stories and problems, and ... They get to know me, they become more confident, and we become friends. I want to deal with them as people, first, so I can take their pictures. In the beginning when the mothers aren't real confident about what I'm doing, they'll look at the baby, or hold the baby up and look at it. They don't want to look at me. So I put the camera down and reach out to them and say, "Look at me, smile." I'll get someone behind me to get the baby to smile, and then I'll take the picture. I say thank you. I try to reach out and touch them physically because the camera is such a mechanical thing, getting in the way. I want them to know that we're doing this together, and that works well.

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ED: Do you pose the mothers and children?

NL: No. I ask them if they would like their pictures taken. The first audience for these pictures is the mothers, and I want them to look as good as possible. I want them to like the pictures. This also fulfills the picture's function as drawing cards to get the mothers to come back to the clinic ... I ask them to pose, I want them to present themselves to the camera. They can fix their hair, or fix the baby's so they look the way they want to be seen.... If they're not in the light, I'll run around to get the light behind me or sometimes I'll move them around the room a little bit to clear the background. And I'll ask them to smile.

ED: How do the mothers respond to these pictures?

NL: They like the pictures. They take pictures home every week, and some of them have albums of the pictures that I've taken. Now and then I'll get pictures that aren't flattering. I'll tell them, "You know the pictures I took last week? They weren't that good. Let me do some more. I can do better." And then sometimes they'll bring their baby in a special outfit and I'll get a picture of that. Or if a special friend comes too, I'll take a picture of them together. I'll do anything to make them pleased with the whole situation, with having their pictures taken. It's a big plus for both of us. ... I like the idea of being able to take someone's photograph and give them back the pictures. They know what you're doing and they have something as well. It's not just, "I'm taking your picture," it's more of a community effort, ... a project between us. They know how they want to look, and I know how I want the photos to look, and we put it together. We work something out. It gets very rewarding.

ED: Where do the mothers see the pictures?

NL: They're in photograph albums. I send the film to Kodak for processing, and the next week I bring the pictures back to the clinic. I keep some of the pictures for myself (I get signed releases from the mothers and the hospital); Bellevue keeps some pictures for its records and the rest are put in albums. All of the albums are out on a table in the clinic when the mothers are there so they can go back to the very beginning and look at their baby when it was a couple of weeks old. It also works very well with new mothers who come into the clinic. They can come in, sit down and look through the books. The albums help them understand what's going to be happening at the clinic and with the group.

ED: Have you exhibited these photographs publicly, in a gallery for example?

NL: I did exhibit some of them in a show in Kansas. I sent one to begin with, because they wanted a publicity photo. And someone on the staff wrote back and asked me if they were my babies! He couldn't understand why someone would take pictures of someone else's babies. If you take pictures of a baby, they have to be your own! I've met with resistance to baby pictures in this way. People just don't see them.

ED: They won't even look at them?

NL: Well, they'll just look through them and say, "Oh, baby pictures." The format puts people off because it's a snapshot format. It works beautifully with the mother because they're used to snapshots. But in terms of showing it to an art audience--it puts them off. Babies put them off. ...

ED: I never thought of the mother and child subject as putting people off!

NL: Let me say then that people don't deal with it seriously. A snapshot is a snapshot. A baby is a baby. If it isn't yours, why bother? There are certain images that artists deal with, and if you get outside those images ... you usually meet resistance of some sort.

ED: In reference to the women's movement, I recall you saying, "Thank heaven for Women's Lib!" How has the women's movement affected your photographic work?

NL: The Women's Movement has made me more sensitive to women and women's issues. My own parenting has made me aware to the kinds of pressures these women will be facing and the responsibility you have as a mother. To have something to do with a clinic that makes things a little bit easier for these women makes me very happy.



Naidus

"This is Not a Test"

(installation at Anna Leonowens Gallery,
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada)

April, 1978

Photo: Paul Hess

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH BEVERLY NAIDUS

Tom Persico (TP:) interviewed Beverly Naidus (BN:) in her Brooklyn studio
April 24, 1981.

Beverly Naidus has been involved in various forms of art since her school days. She attended graduate school for art at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design.

However, her political views and social ideas led her away from traditional art practices. Outreach art, which she has been doing since 1976, allows her to express her feelings and thoughts in her art on social and political issues.

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TP: It seems that many outreach artists deal with oppressed people. Do you feel this is because you yourself feel oppressed as a female?

BN: I wouldn't say specifically as a female. I would say as a human being . . . although there are situations where I feel very self-conscious about my gender, particularly when I am chosen as a token, when I'm

in the minority - as a female. But most of the work I do comes out of a certain frustration with the way things are and the way things out to be, and with the differences between my values and the values of our culture or society. That affects everybody, men as well as women. And, then take the roles we have to live with, and the possibilities that are offered to us, versus what we really are educated to expect. There is a very large disparity between the two of them.

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TP: You were saying that you don't get enough criticism of your work. Do you mean negative criticism?

BN: I mean people in the art community don't criticize each other enough. Outreach art, art, that is, that has to do with everyday life and its social problems or political problems is just going through a resurgence right now; and the people working in it haven't been secure enough to attempt to criticize each other's work face to face. It's very difficult, it's a difficult area to delve into. I noticed that while I was in the show in London,¹ there was very little dialogue among the people who were participating in the show. And it was a unique opportunity for that to occur. The artists could have really sat down with each other. There was the time to do it. And they didn't. There was a sense of...well, an inability to tackle all of the issues raised by the work. I felt the same kind of hesitation, I didn't know how to criticize other artist's work. Was I going to criticize it because the mode was wrong and didn't effectively reach the audience? Or because the context was inappropriate? Or because the message was too unclear? Or too didactic?

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TP: Do you find being in the "Second Platoon"² that you don't get as much effect?

BN: No. I mean, for sure when I first started working in graduate school I had people tell me, "Oh that's the old Feminist shtick, you know, Feminist art again." People were putting it down. But I had to go through that. I had to listen to people telling me that it was already done. To find my way with it. But as far as the work I'm doing now, it's to my benefit that I'm in the second group of people coming in, because people do take me seriously. I don't know if other people would have taken me so seriously, had the women's movement not existed. I would have had to work twice as hard to get that attention and respect. So, I think it's all to my advantage.

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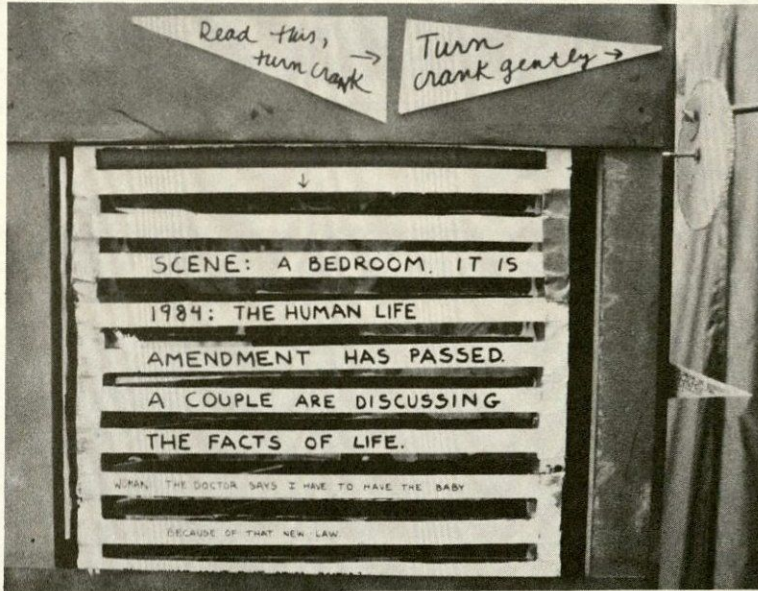
TP: I also read a criticism of your Apply-Within³ saying that it pointed out the problem but didn't offer a solution. Do you have a solution?

BN: No, no I don't. People have asked me in the past, not only in the article but in person, whether it's fair to raise all these questions and not offer a solution. But I feel it's my responsibility first to raise the questions and then to let people figure out what they have to do. Because I can't, I'm not a preacher. I'm not a therapist, and I'm not a prophet. I just don't have answers to the very complex situations that exist in the world today. I feel that people have to find their own way. I can't be so arrogant to assume that I know what that way is. It's the sense of being among others that I want to create;

³An installation in Franklin Furnace, 1980 (a gallery at 112 Franklin Street, New York City) dealing with the problem of job hunting.

⁴Printed Matter, a bookstore of artists' books, 6 Lispenard Street, New York, NY 10013.

⁵Ralph Stedman, cartoonist, is a social commentator for the Rolling Stone magazine. He often works in association with Hunter S. Thompson, a Black humorist.



Carnival Knowledge

View of peep show "The Facts of Life." The peep show contains information about the current anti-female legislation under consideration in Congress: The Human Life Amendment, The Charity Bill and others. The audience enters a bright blue tent and cranks venetian blind system to read the information.

Photo: Lyn Hughes

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE PITRONE

Anne Marie Reilly (AMR:) interviewed Anne Pitrone (AP:) in New York City, April 5, 1981.

Anne Pitrone is an artist and writer who lives in New York City.¹ In the past, most of her work consisted of large poster series which she installed through parts of the city in Soho and the Lower East Side. At the time of the interview, Anne was embarking on very different work. She plans a traveling carnival about various political issues.

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AMR: Do you consider yourself a political artist or an outreach artist?

AP: I never heard of the term outreach artist. What is that?

AMR: It's an artist whose work attempts to deal with social issues.

AP: That's an interesting category; I don't really know. The impetus for my work comes out of my own history. It just so happens that many things have affected my life I consider to be "political," like Catholic school, or Robert Moses (who changed the way my whole town looked when I was growing up). I don't do "political" art as opposed to my "own" art. The inspiration for my own work has come from social issues...and from a political point of view, these have always inspired me to write, or to work, and I feel it's a very generative process, I don't separate them.

AMR: Do you ever do any other kind of art?

AP: I always thought an artist was someone who could draw well. My uncle is a painter and I was an apprentice to him from the time I was six until I graduated from high school. I learned all sorts of things from him. I never liked to draw though, since I was always too impatient. I liked to do sculpture or something similar. But, I was never interested in making something look like something that I saw. I was never interested in making a picture of a pot that looked like a pot, for instance. To me things didn't seem to be what they looked anyway. You look at that pot, you see all the experiences with that pot, all the things that remind you of the pot. You see that little crack in it, and remember cracking it and that experience. It's a completely valid way of thinking and I think it's important to realize that we can imagine about things. Art is a medium for expression and I think that the way things are set up socially these days, you have to be able to express how you feel or you will go crazy.

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MAR: Why do you do this kind of art?

AP: There are two reasons. One, it gets me more involved, and second, it's a new medium. It's a kind of medium that I am making up as I go along. In order to talk about all the things I want to talk about, I keep changing my medium. I want to cover something and I have to expand the medium a little more in order to talk about a political issue more effectively. So I'm constantly changing or altering my art a little bit..

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AMR: What is the purpose of your art? What effect do you want?

AP: I like to get reactions to my work. Artists have an effect on other artists; and an effect on different people who see the work in general. Artists can also affect the people in the neighborhood in which they live. People on my block know me and they feel comfortable telling me what they think about my work. I like that, ... listening to people's reactions.

The effect of (social-change art) is to expand the definitions of art; and I also think that's the general effect on people who see it. To expand the definition of art is important ... because there is a lot of creativity that people don't use. They are intimidated by "art." Their ideas and imaginations are just being zapped by the way our society is set up. Everyone has creative potential, and, getting in touch with it releases energy, and that energy could be very important to society. Released creativity energizes society, it makes people get what they want, it makes people feel good about themselves. It's very hard to develop that once it's cut back, as it has been for a lot of people. We don't get a chance to develop creatively without somebody telling us, "You have to do it this way, or it's not art." I think that's bad for society in general ... I know my work is addressing this question because already people are asking me, "Is this art?"

¹Some of her writings are gathered in, The Recession Diary and Other Economical Writings, N.Y., Little Caesar Press, 1981.



Losing: A Conversation with the Parents
(with Susan Lewis and Peter Hackett)
1977
Color Video

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTHA ROSLER

Jeff Allen (JA:) interviewed Martha Rosler (MR:), in Brooklyn, on April 17, 1981.

For ten years Martha Rosler has been creating and communicating work that is directly implicated in what is happening in the world and her own life experiences. In order to perfect her work, Martha Rosler has developed a variety of talents, which enable her to perform the operational tasks within her media; two of which are printing and typesetting. "It's not a matter of dabbling so much as I don't like to have people do my work, so if (it is) at all possible for me to do it myself, I prefer to do it myself."¹

The imaginative versatility of Martha Rosler was seen in her performance piece, "Watchwords of the Eighties," at the Elizabeth Erwin High School, February 27, 1981. Martha Rosler emerges onto the auditorium stage dressed in dark clothes and a ski cap carrying a giant simulated tape recorder, while a sound and music track entitled, "On the Cusp of the Eighties--A North American Anti-Righteous Rap Song for the Rest of the Hostages," plays over a P.A. Simultaneously, disco lights flash, and slide images (i.e., Ronald and Nancy Reagan, the emblems of countries on the Avenue of the Americas, newspaper headlines and analyses, and images of tape recorders like the one she carries) are projected onto a screen. During the performance Martha Rosler dances, throws the recorder away, picks it up and hides or crawls behind it, while also at various times stopping to write graffiti-like phrases, such as "Elegance," "Quality," "Recession," "Repression," and "Solidarity," through the images projecting on the screen. Martha Rosler calls this a simple piece.

The "collage" performance of "Watchwords of the Eighties," exemplifies the focus of an artist concerned with social change; with the expression of an art form that interprets and critiques the social conditions of everyday life, instead of creating an art for the exclusive pleasure of a socio-economic elite.

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JA: How long have you been materializing your ideas, putting them in concrete form?

MR: Since 1973 or '74.

JA: '74 was the earliest piece I've seen anything about. What motivated you to articulate your feelings on world situations?

MR: That's the way I see the world, starting from myself and moving outward. I develop an idea of how things work, why things are the way they are, and then my work proceeds from there.

JA: But you don't see any major things that have pushed you? You see, not everyone articulates their ideas.

MR: I used to be a painter, but then, I guess, the effect of the Vietnam War was that I felt I had to do work that was more directly concerned with things happening in the world. Then, soon after, feminism also propelled me to do work that had to do with my own life. Eventually I began to use words and photos in my work, though not necessarily together.

JA: And it sort of spiraled...?

MR: The work became more and more involved in the use of language and photographic media. Now I use them quite a lot, whether moving imagery or still imagery, and text with or without images. Video seemed like an ideal medium. Films are expensive to do, and video also has the advantage of being like television.

JA: Right, it mirrors that phenomenon that is in everyone's life. Yet you've also used postcards.

MR: Yes, I'm not bound to one medium, I think that would run counter to what I'm trying to do in my work.

JA: You're more "communication bound."

MR: Yes, I'll use whatever seems to get the point across.... There are different ways to do it. For example, I do performances as well, which is the opposite of TV in the sense that the audience is present--theatrical forms and television are very different.
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JA: Where did you get the idea of postcards? I'm really interested in that, in just sending serial-type segments in postcard form.

MR: Mail art was popular at the start of the Seventies because people were trying to get away from the kind of art that was made for galleries and that was a commodity in its own right. They also wanted to avoid getting stuck in one geographic spot. In that respect it revealed a kind of ambitiousness, I suppose, but in another way it was a reasonable response to the fact that the whole art system was controlled by a few wheeler-dealers in New York, while international communications and travel were making that system obsolete. Artists became interested in distribution. Some of them picked a low-art form, postcards, and that intrigued me. Postcards are a low form, so I made mine very low--there were no pictures, just words....

JA: Do you think that opened you up to new ways of working?

MR: Yes; I was doing postcard novels at the same time that I was doing performances. Performances are really confined to one place, but I don't think that doing postcards, which can be mailed anywhere, as well as single-location performances is a contradiction.

JA: It's part of the variety, the wide scope, of your work; you don't want to get caught in a corridor.

MR: No, I don't; that's true.

JA: What type of performance art were you doing at the time?

MR: I did "A Gourmet Experience," which was an installation and performance.² I did garage sales, two of them.³ I did "Vital Statistics," which eventually became a videotape.⁴

JA: At the time it was just a performance?

MR: Yes.

JA: Of similar....

MR: It was the same.

JA: Exactly?

MR: No, not exactly. In the videotape I do things that can only be done through editing. I also add a voiceover that gives the work another dimension. The final work relies less on audience response and interpretation and somewhat more on commentary.

JA: Where was it done?

MR: It was done at the Art Gallery of the University of California at San Diego. I was somewhat taken aback by the erotic responses of some of the men in the audience, especially among men whom I knew... I was surprised. It was, after all, California, and having a woman take off her clothes didn't strike me as presenting such an unusual sight, yet somehow they couldn't handle it....

JA: Really? What kind of response did you get?

MR: There was a lot of heavy breathing. When I made the work into a videotape I tried to direct interest away from the spectacle of nudity. As I said, I added a voiceover, and I also used an unremitting long shot to create distance. I think it worked.

... ..

JA: Do you believe all art should be politically motivated?

MR: I don't want to tell other people what to do. I think art covers a spectrum of human concerns, and I think people should do the art they want to do. I'm not interested in most art that is about decoration, but I don't think it shouldn't exist.

JA: To each their own, so to speak?

MR: I think the impulse to make art is very basic. It covers a great deal of what people do in their lives. Whether it results in something that gets recognized as "art" or exhibited is beside the point. And the idea that all people who call themselves artists should restrict themselves to making art about social issues is not only narrow minded, it's impossible. There are a lot of other impetuses behind the art that people do.

... ..

JA: Do you consider video your favorite medium or are they all equal?

MR: I don't really have a favorite medium.

JA: A conglomerate of all five media I have written down: photos, slides, verbal or written texts, postcards....

MR: Audio...

JA: Video, film, performance, and audio....can you explain your use of the term "decoy" about some of your work?

MR: I've used the metaphor of a decoy because it suggests that the work seems to be something familiar but then you realize that in addition

MR: to being that thing -- a garage sale, say, or a postcard with a note about someone's doings--it is also something different, usually a critique of the thing whose form it mimics.

¹From the tape transcript of the full interview with Martha Rosler, April 17, 1981.

²"A Gourmet Experience," two-hour performance and installation, "Feeding" its audience a repetitive diet of sounds, images, and themes, such as the relationship between producers and consumers; cookbooks are a form of illusory travel and fulfillment, the imperialist heart of the interest in foreign cooking in the United States.

³"Monumental Garage Sale," a week-long event that contained an embedded critique of exchange relations, Art Gallery of the University of California, San Diego, 1973. "Traveling Garage Sale," the garage of La Mamelie gallery, San Francisco, 1977.

⁴"Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained," first presented as a live performance in 1973. Videotape, 1977. The work makes reference to the construction of the female self in male-dominated society and extends its critique of power relations to the dehumanization of different groups of people, of both genders, by social processes and institutions, among them medical, military, and industrial processing as well as educational testing and channeling based on ideological theories of race.



Ukeles

Touch Sanitation
1979-81

Photo: Marcia Bricker

EXCERPTS FROM AN INTERVIEW WITH MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES

Johanna Mustacchi (JM:) interviewed Mierle Laderman Ukeles (MLU:) in her office at Sanitation Headquarters, New York City, March 19, 1981.

Mierle Laderman Ukeles has created a new art form exemplifying the connection between necessity and art. In a continuous effort to render daily repetitive tasks of general maintenance honorable, she has reached out into a new field with her Maintenance Art. The artist explains that the idea for Maintenance Art developed through two separate experiences. First and foremost was her intimate experience with bearing and raising children. These "chosen" changes in her life created a great conflict between her commitments as mother and artist. The struggle to choose between these two roles culminated in their merging to form the Maintenance Artist, where her everyday tasks of maintaining (keeping alive and healthy) her children actually became her art.

Her second experience was that of an almost sudden, intellectual realization of how maintenance workers in this country are oppressed, downtrodden and shown no respect for the immensely necessary work they do. She admits that the Women's Movement aided her in coming to this realization, which was similar to a "click" of feminist consciousness that many women experience at the sudden realization of sexism.

It was this realization about maintenance that led her to write the "Manifesto for Maintenance Art" in 1969, and from that time until today, all her work has dealt with exposing types of repetitive maintenance work and documenting the people who spend their lives doing such work, and, most importantly, with trying to communicate to the society at large that such work is honorable and genderless.

Ukeles' work takes the form of multi-media performances, installations and writings about the concept of maintenance. Such a concept encompasses anything from personal experience through nature's cycles, to cities-in-crisis, to myth. Her latest major project was "Touch Sanitation" where, in a year long performance, she not only shook the hand of every single sanitation man in New York City, but also came as close as any untrained worker could to experiencing the work lives they lead. By encapsulating within a repetitive image the importance of these men's work, and of our unending dependency on their service, she hopes that society will grant them due respect.

* * * * *

MLU: [Speaking on the roots of Maintenance Art]:

. . . What happened to me was, I had the finest liberal arts education that the country can provide; I was a history major; I started all over again and got some degrees in Art. I was super-educated in both liberal arts, history, international relations and art. And nothing, nothing prepared me to deal with this human being, myself. . . . I decided at the time I got married that I was going to divide myself in half. Half would be the artist and half would be the mother. . . . But this led to my feeling split and removed. . . . I had a studio at home at one point, and I would go into the studio, close the door and then feel I was supposed to become the artist; and I felt very much that I was two separate human beings. At that time my image of myself as the artist was really a continuation of the Jackson Pollock model. The sort of free artist who pushed into the unknown, who acted with extreme risk, and who worked by destroying what went before. In this process your own bodily energy gets transformed into the work and this makes it alive (which I really still believe in). . . . I have these conflicts within myself too. Also, I was petrified that my working or work-life would be destroyed when I became a mother. I had to fight to continue being an artist. And I was right, I was absolutely right about that. For a lot of people its hard and they quit, because they're not supported as artists, especially this is so if they're women artists. . . . So what hit me right before I wrote this manifesto was, if the artists in 20th century contemporary, avant garde art, has the right to call anything art, . . . intellectually name something art (naming is an almost magical act which sort of removes art from its previous context and enables you, or the society, to view it in a different, more ambiguous, or somehow different way) - then damn it, I have the right to call my experience legitimate. If the artist has those rights (I think that 20th century art is about a certain permissiveness and freedom of action for artists to do whatever the hell they want to do). . . My experience (freely chosen at one time, although I didn't know how hard it was going to be) - has to do with being within relationships, with doing things that could be as boring as hell. And, it also has to do with not knowing, whatsoever, how my mind fits into the life that I'm leading; and it has to do with getting all involved with this repetitive

maintenance. And, if I have that right as an artist to name my art; then I say that's it; and I name it Maintenance Art. In other words I'm calling it Necessary Art. And then let's look at it. I felt that I could freely have a flow between my life and my work. They could feed each other. I would be able to examine the whole notion of maintenance in society, in a way that didn't deny either my brain (which maintenance does deny), or my commitments which got me into personal maintenance.

Maintenance is necessary work. Society cannot live without this kind of work. This is honorable work. This is not female work, this is work done by both; maintenance in genderless work. It is necessary and needs to be honored and supported.

... ..
On the notion of freedom; I believe that art is the articulation of freedom; period. That's my definition, no matter what, how, when, who, or anything else and that's its purpose; and that's why it's good in society. But that notion of freedom. . .of human freedom, of asking what does this mean to be a human being? You know, what is freedom about in relation to these constraints, that one happens to get by living on the planet Earth -- always remembering one dies? If that notion of freedom isn't a notion that everybody has for themselves, then it's meaningless. And that's where I think I have a contribution to make, in making that vision of a sort of feminist alliance with people who do necessary work, that will cut across genderlines and occupational lines.

[On explaining how "Touch Sanitation" came about.]

This is what happened. I did a project in a skyscraper with all the maintenance workers there, and there was documentation in the Whitney Downtown Museum. The point was that I refused to go obediently inside the museum (which was located on the second floor of the skyscraper) and stay in my "place." Rather, I used the museum as a focusing environment and I moved out from there throughout the entire building trying to do something about equalizing work relationships in the building. Anyhow, a reporter wrote an article about that and said, if maintenance can be thought of as art (this was when the City was going bankrupt and things were very, very tight and there were a lot of layoffs), then, perhaps the Sanitation Department, which doesn't have much money, could call its work a performance and qualify for a grant from the N.E.A. . . . I thought why not? What the hell? So I sent a xerox of this article to the Commissioner of Sanitation. And they called me up and said: "How would you like to make art with 10,000 people?" So I said, "I'll be right over." That was in 1977....

JM: Whom do you hope to reach with your art?

MLU: Everybody. . . . When I did "Touch Sanitation" I conceived of the sanitation man as both participant and audience, right? But also the rest of society too, I wasn't doing this thing secretly. . . . One might say if I spent two and a half years with sanitation men that I'm using them as a kind of maintenance worker not for themselves; but by them-

selves. I'm also interested in them specifically because I regard them as one of the purest examples of maintenance worker, and sanitation as one of the purest examples of maintenance work.

JM: You know there was so much media coverage of "Touch Sanitation" and whether it was good or bad, it was still there. Did you want it for you, or for the sanmen?

MLU: I wanted to say something. . . I thought that what I was doing was simple, was so simple that it couldn't be misunderstood. It was misunderstood, it was misinterpreted. I was shocked, but you learn fast. . . . I simply had a message, I wanted to get it across and that was sort of that. I didn't understand that they (the press), would regard me as a "weirdo." But I did open up a space to get out my message, and the sanitation men got a little direct access to the public, which they didn't have before.

I think it's time for us artists to move right into society. Right into people's workplace, everywhere. I think there should be art everywhere you turn. I think there should be artists. . . one reporter wrote there should be an artist in every work system. I believe that. People want visions, and need visions to improve perception. Get people to think about everything right in the work place. Not at your leisure time in ten minutes, you know, half an hour on a Sunday; but every minute should be meaningful. That's my utopian desire, and I think that art has developed enough to do that.

JM: ...Politics and art are so combined. . . what is overtaking what? . . . It seems that the politics have just taken over the air.

MLU: On the one hand I feel that the artist needs uncontrolled freedom to be able to articulate freedom. On the other hand, there is a danger of a list of "acceptable subjects." And I think there really is a danger of "pre-digested" acceptable subjects. Certain causes are in, certain causes are out. And this is something that the feminists have a very great deal to say about. Because we have been out for so long, we're very sensitive about being unfashionable and out. . . .

I don't think we're allowing the politics to take over the art; though it certainly could happen. Personally I'm equally as interested in aesthetic problems in "Touch Sanitation" as I am with anything else.... The entire enterprise from beginning to end was as aesthetic as it was anything else. Each choice about how to go, and where and when; from modelling and patterning my performance process on the sanman's work processes, to constructing 10 "sweeps" around New York City in order to reach all 59 districts; all of these choices are aesthetic choices and create a time-space public sculpture on the body of the real City. The why becomes socio-political (it probably does in all art). But the "why" is also embedded within the piece, in the form of the piece. That's what makes it art and not a "sociological study." I don't make a separation between politics and art... I would say, as a group (the group of artists in the SUNY-B exhibition), we are opening up new aesthetic areas rather than not being interested whatsoever in aesthetics.

JM: What exactly is the meaning of the handshake in "Touch Sanitation?"

MLU: Mostly a handshake is a societal equalizing gesture. And for a performance artist, . . . one talks about the hand of the artist, the touch of the artist. When one is a performance artist, when one's body becomes involved in the work itself, that's probably the most central thing that the artist can offer, the creating hand. Now for my part that's what I extended. The hand as a sort of concentrated symbol of the artist, the creating self. But generally a handshake in society is something that's done among equals. Now, for a woman to shake hands with men is symbol to me of an equalizing system between men and women. Specifically with the sanitation men, I was making a very simple, strong point; and that was that the sanitation man's hand belongs to the sanitation man. . . . not to the garbage-waste and, also, that it is extended at his volition. Also a shake is weird, it's complicated. It's strength, and then also a release. . . . you show power and trust within the grasp. . . . To me, I felt that this repetitive handshake, again and again, the endless handshake, was a model of this endless work. You see in the handshake I found my primary model, an aesthetic model, almost an abstraction of the repetitive nature of maintenance work, and yet it was simple enough to pierce through all the resistance in society.

