

1983

## Woman to woman: Talking art

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# WOMAN TO WOMAN

## talking art

In the last year and a half Vancouver women have organized two presentations of lesbian artist's work. The latest **Woman to Woman** series ran from October 4 to November 4, 1982. Housed in the *Woman in Focus* gallery, it included two sequences of paintings, drawings, sculpture, photographs and installations; workshops on censorship, eroticism and lesbian history; discussion nights for contributors and audience; a literary evening and musical performances.

The central value of these shows has been the exposure and stimulus that they afforded lesbian artists. They allow an arena for art which would be repugnant to dominant galleries and concentrate on providing mechanisms for feedback from those who had seen the work. Audiences included lesbians from within and outside the feminist milieu, participants in the Vancouver art scene and people interested in culture and/or curious about lesbian identity, who heard of the show through straight media channels. Advertisement was city-wide, including radio programs and the **Vancouver Sun** show demonstrated the ways that a vibrant social movement can stimulate cultural expression.

Sara Diamond, contributing editor for FUSE magazine conducted an interview with Betsy Warland, Ellen Woodsworth, Lorraine Chisholm and Cheryl Sourkes. These four women had acted as curators and organizers of the events. Their cultural interests and histories vary widely.

*Betsy Warland began writing in Toronto about ten years ago. She helped to organize the Women's Writing Collective, providing courses and a support system as an alternative to existing male-dominated learning environments. Betsy was involved in Landscape, an event which drew together women, lesbian and ethnic poets, and later, in publishing Canada's third anthology of women's poems. She is currently organizing Women and Words, a Canada-wide conference of women writers planned for 1983.*

*Cheryl Sourkes is a Vancouver photographer. She has worked independently in this medium for fifteen years. In this time she has organized both her own and other women's shows.*

*Ellen Woodsworth has been active in both the lesbian and women's movement for many years. Through working on Woman to Woman she has come to define herself as an artist*  
FUSE Summer 1983

*as well as as political organizer. Her medium is clay. Ellen feels a strong antipathy to art galleries, considering most art and art spaces to be inaccessible. She has no formal art training and pursues sculpture for the pleasure of creating her own work and sharing others' creativity. She has curated previous feminist art shows in Vancouver.*

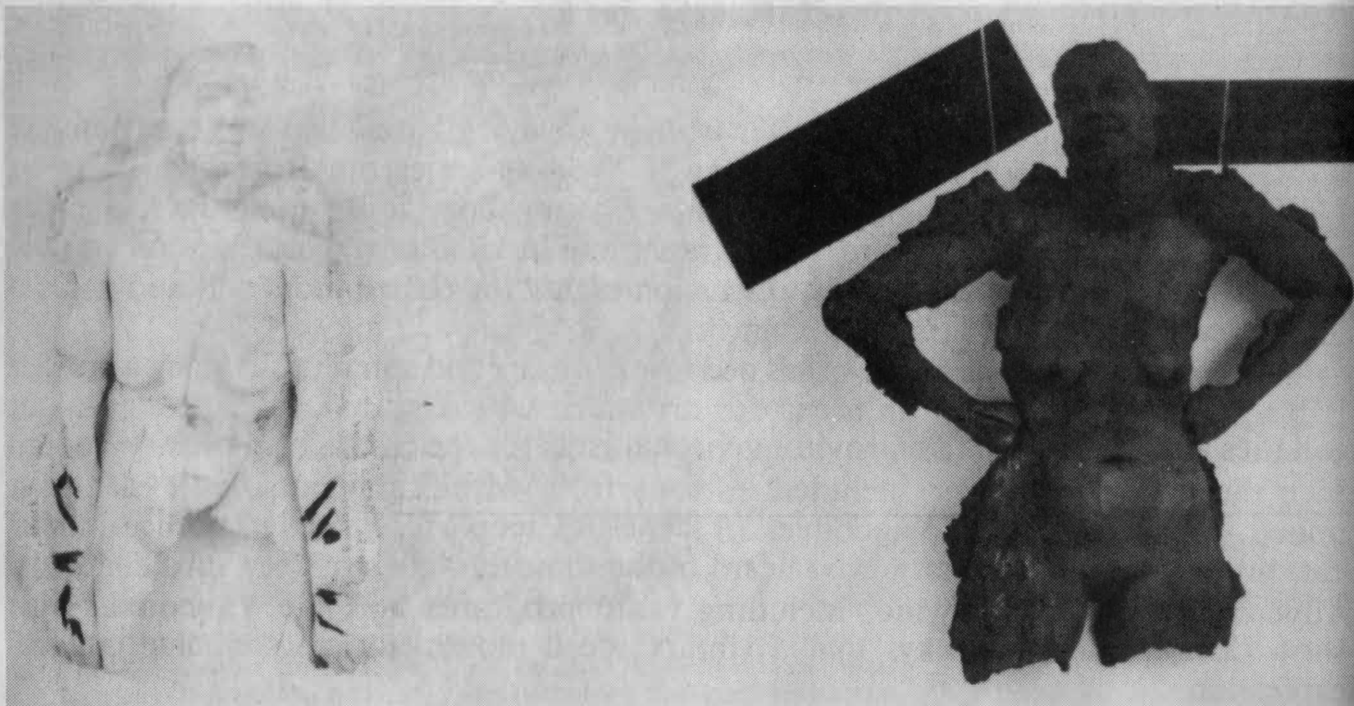
*Lorraine Chisholm studied at various art schools over a nine year period. She became increasingly convinced that art could be a subversive force outside of the art establishment. As a feminist her interest was in art by and for other women. She assisted in organizing Festival '82 in Nova Scotia and became involved with the Woman to Woman show when she arrived on the West Coast.*

*The following interview raises a series of relevant questions for lesbian artists. These include: where should feminist and/or lesbian artists locate themselves in relation to society; is art*

*most effective as part of a feminist subculture; on the fringe of society looking inwards to provide a critical perspective; as part of the mainstream? What is crucial to lesbian identity: is it our sexual orientation and sexuality, do we need a broader definition of ourselves; how do we work with patriarchal society's focus on our sexuality in oppressing us? How does lesbian art intersect with women's relationship to culture as a whole? Is our eroticism the root of our creativity; are there other elements to our impulse as artists such as anger or conceptual analysis? How do lesbian artists deal with pornography in creating erotic art; is it possible to provide alternative images of women's sexuality; what role does objectification play in all forms of sexuality? Should lesbian artists challenge a traditional ideology of art as subjective expression and art as consumer items? If so, how? How do we define and engage our audience?*

On the behaviour mod ward they had this system where they gave us tokens for doing what they wanted and they took them away for being bad. You had to pay tokens for anything you wanted to do, even taking a bath. I remember I had this green plaid skirt and matching sweater, I used to get tokens for wearing it because they were trying to change me into their idea of a proper woman. So this morning I appeared at breakfast all tarted up and this nurse said, "Oh! You look very nice!" in this really phoney voice she always used for the patients. Then she told me I'd look better if I shaved my legs. I remember feeling all embarrassed and stupid, even though I'd decided long before that, that shaved legs were very silly. After breakfast I signed out the razor and went off to the bath. I think at that point I was planning to shave my fucking legs.

Cheryl Sourkes



I remember the rush of blood as I slashed as hard as I could, sort of not looking and then the blood welled up and I sat there and let it run in the bath. After a while someone knocked on the door to use the bath so I got up. I went out to the desk and slapped the razor down in front of the nurse with my bloody hand and said, "I'm finished with the razor." She looked at me real angrylike and said, "You'll be sorry for that." They stitched me up without anaesthetic and I remember that it hurt like hell but I pretended it didn't.

## Unladylike Behaviour by Persimon Blackbridge and Sheila Gilhooley

*Where does our art, born of a political movement, represent political and artistic process?*

*By presenting this interview, it is my hope that discussion will be pursued in future contributions to FUSE, in similar art shows and in future events sponsored by Woman to Woman.*

**Sara:** Where did the idea for the Woman to Woman showings come from, who pulled them together and how did this last show come about?

**Ellen:** In 1980, the National Lesbian Conference was planned by a group of women in Vancouver. I was working on the organizing committee and decided that I really wanted to do an art show in conjunction with it. I approached Persimon Blackbridge who I had been working with and had done a Mother's Day show with previously. I came up with the name **Woman to Woman**. We decided to ap-

proach **Women In Focus** and luckily they had a two week gap in their programming; so we rented this place. It was a straight hung show that started the evening of the National Lesbian Conference. There were no workshops involved with it. After that was over I wanted to see the evolution of the artists involved and the ways that lesbians looked at themselves. I approached a few people about doing it again. We ended up with a core of people: Betsy, Lorraine, Cheryl and a great deal of help from Lorraine Oades. We decided to go into a gallery that was set up and then to really expand in terms of what kinds of things we had happening. It grew from two weeks to a month, as things really mushroomed. "Memory and Imagination" was the title of the recent show: our daily lives and our evolving imaginations, from the or-

dinary to the magical.

We wanted people to think that the show was about lesbianism, but we wanted to broaden it out to our daily lives: raising kids, looking for a job or housing, to complex issues.

## An unjurious movement

**Sara:** Why was it an unjurious show?

**Ellen:** An unjurious show means that anything a person puts in, they decide they want to put in and that is precisely what the lesbian movement is.

**Lorraine:** I feel very strongly about it being an unjurious show and I also feel strongly at times that there's a place for shows in which you have control over all the work that comes in and the context and the result of the show as a whole.

Maybe it's because lesbians have been silenced for so long and there



hasn't been any forum in which lesbians could present their art, or any kind of cultural work, that it was really important that we didn't censor images. There were a lot of different levels of technical expertise. It created an environment where there were lots and lots of images for lesbians to bounce off of, to get ideas from, to be self-critical about.

**Ellen:** There's been a number of art shows; there's been the **Erotic Art Show** and **Festival '82**. It's been remarkable that very few lesbians worked on either of the two shows in B.C., but even more indicative is that there's been very little lesbian content. Not only are we invisible, but when we try to be visible and approach shows our work isn't selected. So we need to begin to present our own images as we choose them for ourselves.

**Sara:** What then is lesbian art? Can any of you embroider on a definition of a lesbian aesthetic?

**Betsy:** There are certain kinds of images and subject matter that have specifically to do with the lesbian experience, that don't translate into any other experience. Because of that they have the potential for new visions and sensibilities and forms. Right now a lot of those have to do with our bodies, it seems like square one as a culture and as an art form. You can have a lesbian who can paint landscapes, but I don't consider that lesbian art right now, I consider that as art that happens to be done by a lesbian.

**Cheryl:** I think we have the phenomena of 'lesbian and artist', and lesbian artist. 'Lesbian and artist' can deal with any subject matter at all. But the moment you want to say "lesbian artist", you are dealing with energy that has to do with sexuality and sexual identity; that's what we've attracted to this show and the readings.

**Ellen:** Through the women's movement we've been able to define ourselves as women; but through the lesbian movement we begin to go beyond the stage where the "I" is the only thing that exists, when we reach the lesbian movement we are at the point where "we" exist. We have the self-affirmation, but we also have the affirmation of the other, which is the real turning point for the position of women in society as a whole. The movement of women together really does fundamentally overthrow the definition of who a woman is.

**Sara:** To continue with the lesbian aesthetic: is there a set of images, an emotional space created by the art, a kind of impact or specific forms that lesbians have chosen? Is there

something that distinguishes this art from that of dominant artists or even of other women artists?

**Betsy:** Without a doubt. Some of the literature in the literary evening was about women making love and the ambience, what happened, the images, are so clearly between two women, it couldn't be mistaken for anything else. There's a reclaiming of words that I've had to disregard, such as 'intercourse'. This was an obsolete word in my life experience and then

up a sense of defiance in some of the work? I did. And anger, also.

**Ellen:** I wouldn't say outside of society, because when you incarcerate people you definitely include them in society, in a particular position in society. You either accept society's definition of who you are or you don't and you have to redefine society and then start to create a new society — usually in direct opposition. We become a revolutionary impulse, creating a new society for our own



**Becoming the Image by Sara Diamond**

going back to the word's etymology, the root of that word is "to run between", so I've reclaimed that word. That actually is a very meaningful word that I've been able to transform into our experience now.

**Lorraine:** I think that there are some pieces — Persimmon's and Sheila's, for example — that place the maker outside of society and not in an eccentric way at all, but lesbians really are outside. Some lesbians accept the position of being ostracized from society and use energy from that to create their own vision. Did you pick

survival's sake. To be a lesbian means that we're — unconsciously but also consciously as we become more active — opposing the system.

**Cheryl:** Lesbians are a society; we are a community. We recognize each other and we congregate together and we create a culture and we also have the bravery to say NO! to what we were brought up to. You get to make your own rules.

**Betsy:** To get back to aesthetics as a way of seeing: I think that once you really enter into the lesbian experience the way you see things is altered

forever. An example: one woman was looking at some photographs in the show and they are the inside of sea caves; they are like sandstone. She was a straight woman and she saw them as being fragmented; "this is what the lesbian experience is like, fragmented." I was shocked because what we all saw in those was how the landscape of those caves were like our own bodies, and these were the folds or dark recesses, our vaginas, and they were such shockingly different ways of seeing the same piece of art.

**Ellen:** I think that anything that defines a group of people primarily — and in our case it's our sexuality, who we're lovers with; that is what lesbian means to most people — that's the first area we'll address ourselves to, because that's where we've had to keep quiet.

**Sara:** What you're suggesting is that lesbian art is that which is self-consciously lesbian through the artist stating her sexual identity. Did women who don't create art that falls within that framework stay away from exhibiting in the show? Did that focus narrow who your audience is and the ability of the art to speak to a broad range of lesbian experience? Does it require a feminist consciousness to identify with the art you are describing?

**Cheryl:** The 'lesbians and artists' were part of the audience, they didn't stay away, they simply didn't put in.

**Betsy:** It seems that the kind of art you're defining can be read, shown or played, if you're talking about music, in the arenas that already exist and the kind of art in this show doesn't have that arena.

**Ellen:** Once you start to speak of something that hasn't been spoken of you immediately broaden the field. We started last year with fairly abstract images in a two-week show and this year we've done a month long show that encompasses censorship, eroticism, herstory, music, a literary evening, a band and artists' workshops.

**Sara:** What issues came up in the erotic workshop?

**Cheryl:** Before we got to the erotic workshop a lot of women talked about various sexual blocks where they needed a forum to express themselves. They would say where they hurt and there was a feeling that a lot of discussion had to happen before that could become unblocked, to get to the erotic energy. People were holding very deep places in themselves and it wasn't the place for it, although

it was enough just to hear them say what they would like to talk about. Then we got to the specific imagery that people had brought.

**Betsy:** When Lorraine and I met each other we were in a film on pornography that Women in Focus had done and a discussion afterwards. I think it was almost all lesbian women there that night. Everyone was very ambivalent about pornography. There was a real reticence to have any images, even if we did them. Lorraine and I were the only two that felt differently from that and wanted to make positive images that we felt good about. One of the resources that we used in the erotica workshop was Audrey Lourdes' essay about erotica as powerful; to me it's a cornerstone of lesbian art because it says that our eroticism is actually where our power comes from and that the patriarchy has in fact really steered us away from that because it knows that. That's where we have all our vision, that's where we replenish ourselves and that's where we get in touch with our deep knowledge that goes way back; it's where we're transformed. In "Galaxy", I wrote about a certain experience that I had of feeling impregnated by a woman lover; it had never occurred to me that that would happen. Part of the image was that my womb was like a galaxy and the impregnation was like the first moon in that galaxy.

**Cheryl:** I think that making love and making art come from the same place; it's like a freeing of energy.

**Lorraine:** The deep realization that you're lesbian comes from understanding that something that is erotic is true. My discovery of my lesbianism was such a revelation that it brought me to question everything else and to trust my own truths: my eroticism was telling me something valid, in opposition to everything that society was telling me. It's a valuable source of power for all women.

**Ellen:** Just having the workshop is a break from the previous discussions of sexuality for the last six months that have centered on S and M violence between women. It's in the interest of the state to perpetuate violence between women and between men and women, and there's been a lot of money made out of S and M. I'm ecstatic that our art show is able to say, "That's the wrong direction to be taking; what we need to be doing is rejoicing in our sexuality and exploring it."

**Lorraine:** One woman in the

workshop pointed out that part of the interest in S and M in the lesbian community comes from the fact that this is the only place that sexuality is talked about.

**Sara:** Did women in the workshop, or in other workshops during the show, talk about how you deal with creating erotic images when the dominant representation of women's sexuality and bodies, including lesbian sexuality, are pornographic images, created through the male eye for the male viewer? Were there references to strategies in terms of form, content, defining the audience?

**Betsy:** One of the things that Lourdes says is that the erotic is really joy, so that immediately divorces you from pornography. Also that it is within the context of loving, which again immediately separates you from pornography: there was a discussion of that.

**Ellen:** We talked about it some but we moved off that quickly into saying what we felt was erotic and looking at the images and saying why we found them erotic. For example, the breast prints, in which this woman just inked her breasts and did prints of herself and her friends. They're remarkable because you look at them, and because the hairs are white and the nipples are pink — they look like a comet going through space and they look like an eye. They keep unfolding and unfolding. You can never see a breast as the same thing again. It seemed easy to move to that once we started to talk about images; if we stay intellectual, we can only go so far.

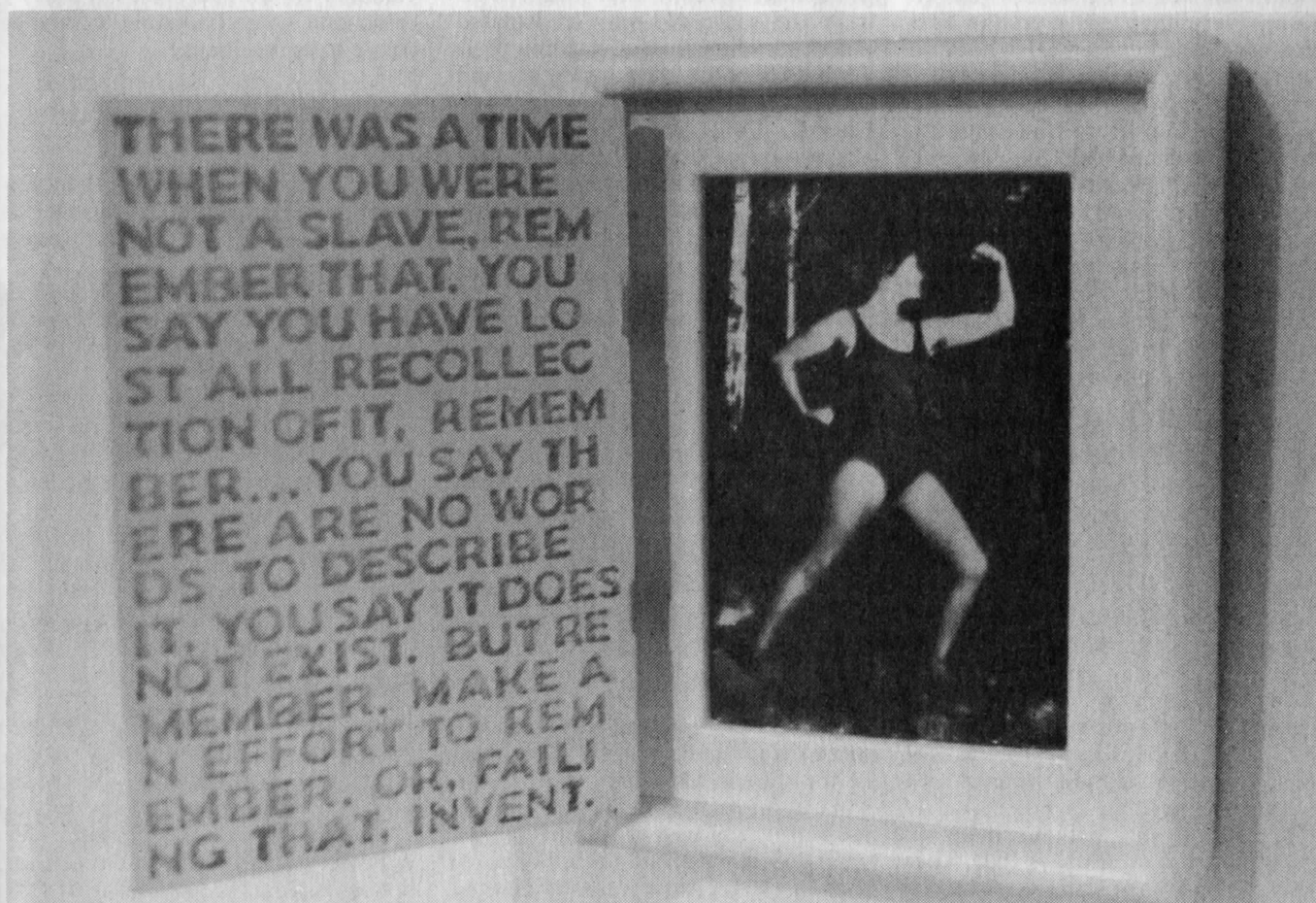
**Sara:** I find it difficult to understand how women artists can create erotic images without dealing with pornography through some reference to how their art contradicts existing images of women's sexuality. I am personally conscious that I have been socialized into seeing myself and my lover, to some extent, within an erotic language created by patriarchal domination. So for me, there's a big issue about how we provide the model, when images are always channelled again through mass culture in the way that they are read by people. I get frustrated with art that simply represents women's bodies in aesthetic forms, either literally or symbolically; one of my feelings about the art show was that there were a lot of very beautiful but static images of women's bodies. They were very pure images and didn't seem to deal with the anger, struggle and active process around reclaiming our sex-



uality. It was another more beautiful, more accurate, but still objectified vision of the female body. That struggle for me represents a lot of my personal process of trying to carve out an identity which comes to terms with my fascination with glamour and dependency on mass culture. I don't think I'm alone in that process. As feminists we might reject those images produced by male-dominated culture but there's always a part of us that moves back into them. There's a level where we have to play with those im-

important to combat and counter-balance it with a new erotic culture. I don't think that it's going to come out of being against pornography but out of a whole other place which is an alternative place. What we need to develop is a strong lesbian erotic that will include a variety of experiences and expressions so that rather than having the codified system that pornography provides, the erotica comes from different, individual experience. Pornography has some kind of formula; you have to include some

by our images. One of the things that Sara explored in her piece is the fact that we do look at each other's bodies, we do look at what each other wears, we do look at the rings on each other's fingers and what we wear around our necks and how we do our hair. That is aesthetically pleasing or not pleasing to us. As lesbians we've seen each other in so many situations where we've been destroyed. My first experience as a lesbian was on the street or in the Vanport (a former Vancouver lesbian bar), or in situations with women who



Anne Quigley

Cheryl Sourkes

ages, identify with and ridicule them. I don't think we can truly transcend the culture that we're informed by, we'll have to smash the very structures that the culture is based on to really make that transformation.

**Cheryl:** In order to make erotic imagery, I have to feel very innocent, I have to be totally immersed in some joyous feeling and forget all these other things that you are saying. So the task is to feel strong and bold and intact and to love myself and then what comes out of that energy is as close as I can get to an erotic image.

**Lorraine:** The anti-pornography movement has articulated fairly well the problems with pornography. It's

violence against women for titillation and a certain kind of degradation. We need erotic images that don't include that at all. The danger with pornography is that you start to reject sexuality as a place where you can make culture from. We shouldn't underestimate the power of images. We've been faced with images that don't in any way affirm a woman's identity, let alone a lesbian's sexuality and we need to create alternative images that women can identify with, sexuality where women can be autonomous with a lot of the qualities that are embodied in the women's movement.

**Ellen:** We are still very much defined

drank a lot, were extremely unhealthy, wore clothes that were unappealing to me, myself included. To begin to see women who look healthy, who look beautiful, their bodies look really lovely . . . it's just that I can explore another way of looking at a woman and saying, "My God, this woman really likes her body, she's not afraid to play with it, to adorn it, or to move with it in a pleasurable way."

**Lorraine:** For me, in the show there were a lot of images that were idealized images of lesbians' lives or bodies. I think it's a first step because it's a reaction to the negative images with which we've been presented in the first

place. What I'm hoping will happen in future shows is that more complex images will start to emerge. One of the important things about the show is that it's allowing a context for women to discuss these things and then to develop more complex images which are more mature and include more criticism of the lesbian community or present more contradictions, but it's a process of development.

**Cheryl:** Because of using *Women in Focus Gallery*, where they're fussy about their walls, we were forced to frame everything and then the first show was called conservative because we framed everything.

**Sara:** Did any of the pieces grapple with the actual process of art production as experienced by lesbian artists? For example, I recall one discussion about whether it was important for lesbian photographers to refer to their role in the image-making process within their completed photographs.

**Lorraine:** What I was struck by was that in photographs there is always the presence of the photographer and the camera, it interferes with the moment of what is being taken. I'm always conscious, when I look at the image, of the process that had to occur for that image to be taken. In Cheryl's two photographs (of two women lying side by side on Wreck Beach), I was really conscious that because she took the photograph herself, from the first photograph to the second there had to be this movement where she was adjusting the camera. The process of documentation is implicit in the image; the process both defines the imagery that is being made and interferes with it.

The images that lesbians make are different from the images that other people can make of lesbians, so one of my real interests in the show was seeing the images that lesbians make of themselves.

**Sara:** There needs to be some reference point for what and who creates the completed product that people are then consuming as an art object. Especially as women and as lesbians because we are turned into objects by the culture, referring to how new images are created and their components would be crucial in fracturing that objectification.

## Voices unfolding

**Betsy:** In the literary evening the readers were put together in dramatic sequence so that the work was unfolding into the next piece. There you

had a process you could see before your eyes, the whole evolution and maturity. There's something remarkable in young women's writing because it's so raw and the older women's work is so refined. Because we structured the literary evening as we did, it made the ten of us feel that we weren't performing. We were all interconnected as a community of interest and we got so wrapped up in each other's reading. Someone would end a poem and then five poems later, it was interwoven. I didn't want to do it in the same old way as isolated voices standing up and reading their work. All of us were trying to find forms to structure the showings.

**Cheryl:** Collective process has been an important part of the lesbian sensibility, the breaking down of the star, the breaking down of the hierarchy, the gathering in a circle and voices coming as they arise.

I felt a change between the first show (first two weeks) and the second show in the second show we took liberties, we left spaces, we turned off lots of lights and made it much darker; we left the ladders in, we tried to let it show more. Images will come because of the experience of being able to show images; work will come from the reading, people will write things that they never thought that they could write before, people who read in the show will expand part of themselves. They will be amazed that they have license from within to go into those areas.

**Ellen:** I was working on a process piece (in the gallery for the duration of the show) that came out of a personal thing that I was going through as an athlete as well as an artist, about what soccer meant to me and being at the Gay Olympics. It was the first time that I could ever be together with a whole bunch of women and totally be all that I was: the highs and lows and the periods and the emotional break-ups and the falling-in-loves. A woman who was a mother and handling three relationships was also able to model. She and her lover worked with me on this piece and as their relationship went through changes and my relationship with her changed, the piece was affected. But that's what being an artists is: you're working with so many emotions that, if it's something that requires other people, you make it or break it with the other people. Also, when you bring it into a public context you put more pressure on it.

**Lorraine:** The fallibility of doing a work in process is that it can fail; if it's

not something beginning with some kind of formula that you know produces results no matter what. That has been a valuable lesson to learn and I don't think that can happen in many contexts. Some will criticize the failure of some of the process projects. Comparing it to a lot of women's art shows that I've seen, they're trying to fit women's art into the mainstream, they're trying to showcase our art "which is as good as your art" and I don't think that's very valuable to women artists. I don't think that's very valuable to anyone trying to make change.

## Trauma and conflict

**Sara:** What themes other than sexuality were represented by the various events and show? What about trauma



Cheryl Sourkes



in relationships, conflict with the straight world for example?

**Ellen:** The most powerful and moving pieces in the show, people have said that made the show, were Sheila and Persimmon's pieces of being incarcerated in a mental hospital by parents and the police, because the woman was and is a lesbian. The piece is lifesize and done in a raw clay material with shards of glass and different things inserted in it and with writing superimposed over the burnt painting. That piece, both in medium and what is talked about, is certainly one of the most telling of what has happened to lesbians for hundreds and hundreds of years.

**Sara:** What was subversive about the show?

**Betsy:** We put these posters up and they kept getting ripped down around town. We couldn't go for funding for

a show like this. I went into a restaurant and there were all these posters: Tony Bennett and the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra and I said, "Can I hang this?" The manager of the restaurant came up behind me and she said, "Uh, uh!" I asked, "Why?", and she said, "That's political!" That really sums it up in a way: dominant culture is entertainment, it's not politics, and what we're doing is political. Everything's political!

**Lorraine:** It got into the Vancouver Sun Entertainment Guide, in our family entertainment section.

**Ellen:** A lot of lesbians who are artists were threatened because suddenly we had exposed this previous underground and made the public aware. It can't be that queer anymore when there's a lesbian art show. It subverted our own underground identity.

**Sara:** What do you see as the relationship between creating art and building a political movement?

**Lorraine:** I feel pretty strongly that the art show comes out of the lesbian movement. There's a drive for people who are artists to see their own forms somehow developed in the lesbian community. I don't want to be working in a political movement, that's not where my strength is. I'm an image-maker and I want to make them for other lesbians so that they know what being a lesbian is about. For me it comes out of being political to begin with, but the real impulse is to want to make those images. I also think that lesbian artists have a lot to offer the women's movement because I think that we have a different kind of vision that's not solely political and the lesbian political movement needs that kind of vision as well. □

**Mask by Robyn Elphick**

