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But is it feminist art?

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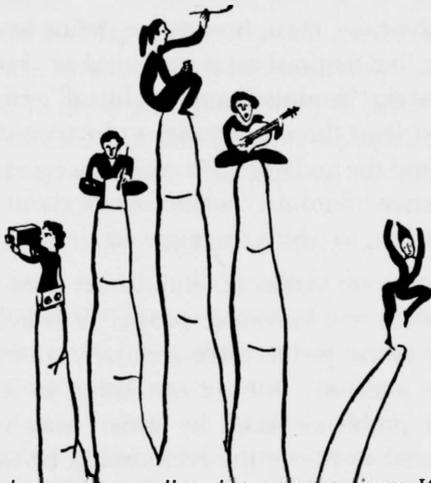
But is it Feminist Art?

B Y D A P H N E R E A D

W I T H

R O S E M A R Y D O N E G A N

A N D L I Z M A R T I N



As feminists, we need art that reveals as well as shapes our experience. We need an art that expresses our anger at the stubbornness of our society to give space to our demands and we need an art that celebrates our delight in our increasing strengths. Through art we can begin to imagine and define the contours of a new feminist reality. In this article, Daphne Read, with Rosemary Donegan and Liz Martin, examines some of the problems faced by artists as they search for expressive voices and forms, and by feminist audiences as they seek to interpret the challenges of the recent flowering of feminist culture. The authors explore the social dilemmas confronted by women as artists, as subjects of art and as a growing self-conscious community. In this context, they touch on recent controversies, such as the politics of feminist "realism" versus the avant-garde and the problems of presenting and interpreting images of women.

*Dare to imagine, and nothing will ever be
the same again.*

VIRGIN MARY IN *LES FÉES ONT SOIF*¹

ONE INDEX OF the growing strength and confidence of women as a group is our ability to lay claim to our own experiences and to name and interpret them in our own terms. Feminist art is on the cutting edge of this process of redefinition and re-vision. It has many functions: consciousness-raising and politicization, affirmation and celebration. Like all art, it moves us to feel, teaches, and gives us pleasure. But because art is born from the artist's psyche and taps into the audience's psyche, it is less susceptible to rigorous political analysis than, for example, struggles in the workplace. The imagination, one might say, defies sectarian analysis.

More analytically, then, how do we define feminist art? We could begin by saying that feminist art is a political art, but the meaning is still obscure: to what do "feminist" and "political" refer? In the practice of art, there are at least three categories to be considered: the artist, the work created, and the audience. To which category or categories do we attach the adjective "feminist" when we talk about feminist art? This is a complex question, to which there are no simple answers.²

A single coherent vision of feminist art does not exist. We can't reduce feminist art to a knowable project: it is living, in process, and there are many forms, just as there are many communities of feminists with particular interests. But we can begin to identify some of the challenges and problems faced by artists who consider themselves feminist. We need to clarify the relationship between artist, artwork, and audience. For example, what is the difference between the art created by women politically committed to feminism and other art? What can a feminist audience demand of feminist artists? How can we, in feminist communities, nurture our artists? In untangling these knots, we begin to move towards a political analysis of feminist art and towards fulfilling Robin Morgan's hope and challenge: "No revolution has yet dared understand its artists. Perhaps the Feminist Revolution will."³

THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

Any analysis of feminist art must take into consideration the economic and social situation in which women artists in general (regardless of their politics) find themselves. A woman artist is doubly cursed: as an *artist* she is in a vulnerable and precarious economic situation, as a *woman* she finds herself on the edge of the mainstream artistic community.

Economic survival is a critical issue for every artist. Unfortunately, in the public mind, being an artist and being poor have come to be identified as natural and just. In this process two distinct images of the artist have been conflated: the sentimental picture of the starving-artist-in-garret and the romantic view of the artist as hero-in-agony. The latter view promotes the equation of art and suffering. The artist is seen as a tormented (male) genius, a visionary, whose isolation and sacrifice combine to guarantee good art. This image in turn gives rise to two variations in attitude: on the one hand, the romantic "suffering is good for the soul and for art," and on the other, the puritanical "if you choose to be an artist and refuse to get a good job, then you deserve to suffer." Although the image of suffering artistry may be attractive to some, appropriately punitive to others, it has little to do with productive creativity.

Artists as a group are marginalized workers, and very few make much money from their art. Unlike workers in comparable low-income brackets, artists themselves are responsible for paying for their tools and materials, and are not eligible for any employee benefits (unemployment insurance, sick leave, paid holidays, accident compensation, employer contributions to medical insurance). Yet artists *subsidize* Canadian culture: the works they create on low incomes become a part of our social wealth.

One of the problems lies in the fact that our society does not have an economic measure for the social value of artists. One proposal has been put forward by a group of artists, the Toronto local of the Cultural Workers' Alliance. They have argued that artists are cultural workers who provide a social service equivalent to educational workers, and therefore they should be integrated into a formalized wage-and-benefits structure.⁴ Though not necessarily sharing the same analysis, the National Action Committee for the Status of

Women (NAC) and other Status of Women groups maintain that a guaranteed basic income for artists should be one component of the recognition of their social contribution.

The vulnerable economic situation of the artist is compounded further for women: within the mainstream art community, women encounter the kind of discrimination and ghettoization women workers face in the economy in general. NAC bluntly terms it "censorship." Its 1981 brief to the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee states: "The under representation of women in Canada's cultural life, and the uneven distribution of women within the arts constitute a hidden, but nonetheless insidious, form of censorship."⁵ This censorship ensures that in the arts, as Dorothy Smith has argued for education, "at every level of competence and leadership there will be a place for [women] which is inferior and subordinate to the positions of men."⁶ What this actually means for women in the arts is made depressingly clear in the NAC brief: "Discrimination results in fewer women than men regarding the arts as a serious career option, [in women] diverting themselves into audiences, patrons, fund-raisers and perpetual students of evening classes; that is, passive, supportive or behind-the-scenes activity."

If we look at statistics for the visual arts, we can see the effects of a system of discrimination that operates from early sex-role socialization through education to funding. For example, in the visual arts faculties of Canadian universities, more than two-thirds of the students are women, but women comprise fewer than twenty percent of the faculty members.⁷ A study of the major government cultural funding agency, the Canada Council, found that there is a direct correlation between the number of women jurors and the number of women artists who succeed in getting grants. Of 229 jury positions between 1972 and 1979, only 28 were held by women; the number of women who were successful candidates for grants was correspondingly low.⁸ The NAC brief bitinglly draws out the connections between these statistics:

Women. . . are encouraged to attend art schools, to pay tuitions which support the employment of male teachers who are often the same persons who sit on all-male juries awarding fellowships to other male artists who, in turn, view these same women as housewives and whores. The paintings which often appeal explicitly to the prurient interests of male

art dealers and male art collectors turn up in the textbooks studied by women as examples of aesthetic achievement of a high order.

To deal with the problem of discrimination against women in the arts, NAC and other women's lobby groups are proposing both economic action (in the form of increased benefits to all artists, including a guaranteed basic income), and affirmative action to rectify the under-representation of women in the arts. These strategies appear to be mere refinements of the liberal principles of equal rights and a fair deal for everyone, but their implementation would require radical changes in the existing economic and political structures. Needless to say, most feminists do not really anticipate that the revolution will be negotiated at the federal level.

Instead feminists have begun to work together collectively and have created alternative institutions and networks for the production and distribution of feminist work. There are now feminist art galleries, such as Powerhouse in Montreal, Women in Focus in Vancouver, and Womanspirit in London. There are feminist publishers - Press Gang in Vancouver, Éditions du Remue-ménage and Éditions de la Pleine Lune in Montreal, The Women's Press in Toronto. There are even feminist record companies. These buttress the struggle of feminist artists for recognition as artists, and encourage their efforts to articulate their vision of the world as women.

FEMINIST ARTIST/FEMINIST AUDIENCE

A receptive, critical audience is crucial for the development of a political artistic community. But too often, political audiences get stuck in a negative critical groove, attacking an artwork or its creator, rather than fostering the political and creative development of the artist. One of the problems with artistic practice, from the point of view of political activists, is that it is difficult to see how art contributes to social change: there isn't a clearly perceived relationship between activism and art. Consequently, political audiences can be very hard on artists, without recognizing their own responsibility. This dialectical relationship of artist-audience accountability is a problem that feminist artists and audiences are just beginning to sort out.

Feminist artists are caught between the conflicting demands of their development as artists and their political commitment to the women's movement. However, recognition within the mainstream or dominant culture carries the risk of political cooptation, at least as far as the artwork is concerned – and this often extends to the artist. Once an artwork is appropriated by the dominant culture, the artist loses control over how it is interpreted and used. Fassbinder's film *Lili Marleen* illustrates both how the artist, a nightclub singer, is appropriated, or controlled, through the star system, and how her song, no longer "hers" once recorded and available for mass distribution, becomes a powerful cultural symbol in fascist Germany. Taken out of the singer's control, it is used for disparate political purposes: by the German government to inspire patriotism, by the German military to torture her Jewish lover, by the Allies to lure patriotic German soldiers to their death.

Obviously the "management" of artists and the perversion of art on this scale are not what we would expect in Canada; however, even here, though more subtly, political art and artists are neutralized. This neutralization tends to be achieved through the marketing and distribution of artworks as items for consumption, a treatment of art which we have come to expect from the mass media and cultural industries. In other words, our art comes processed for us. This has the effect of cancelling the potential political effectiveness of an artist's work. For example, Margaret Atwood, a literary star, has turned her attention to the difficult question of the politics of writing in her two most recent books, *True Stories* and *Bodily Harm*, but the media have ignored this development. Consequently, there has been no debate in the public arena over the political direction in which her work is moving and Atwood has been deprived of critical feedback important for her growth as a political writer. Both the audience and the artist suffer from this silence.

One of the sources of misunderstanding and tension that can occur between artists and their audiences lies in what might provocatively be called the audience's "artistic illiteracy." That is, we are more comfortable evaluating an artist's work in terms of its relationship to our own struggles than in perceiving how it works within an artistic tradition. For example, many radicals prefer art with a

message that corresponds to their own view of the world. Realism is an acceptable form because it appears to be a transparent reflection of life, accessible to all; thus an audience can evaluate the work without considering its artistic form. But experimental art forms demand some knowledge of the traditions within which an artist is working or against which she is reacting. Although the experience of experimental works may be alienating and disquieting, especially to an untrained audience, the act of finding new forms to express a vision is itself political.

An ideal audience would assume responsibility for educating itself, but even this would not prevent misunderstandings from arising again and again. An artist's meaning can be altered – even subverted – by the context in which the audience receives it. This problem emerged in the controversy over the poster *Fireweed*, a feminist quarterly, used to advertise its National Women's Playwriting Competition in 1980. The image on the poster comes from a photo-cartoon series "SuperSecretary" by Tanya Rosenberg, a conceptual artist. The *Fireweed* collective and the artist understood her intention as a

... but can she write?

WOMEN'S PLAY WRITING COMPETITION



- Canadian citizens & landed immigrants.
- Unproduced script.
- Deadline February 1, 1980.
- \$5.00 entry fee per script.
- Awards include publication and professional workshp.
- Author's name, address & telephone number along with the title of the play should be enclosed in a sealed envelope, attached to the manuscript. The title of the play should appear on the outside of the envelope and the cover page of the manuscript.
- Feminist Women's Playwriting Competition, P.O. Box 278, Station B, Toronto, Ontario, M5T 2W2

visual satire of two stereotypes of women – sex object and efficient secretary – and did not anticipate the outraged response the poster generated. In response to their critics, *Fireweed* explained:

Both Rosenberg and the Collective feel that it is only by strongly confronting the traditional images that are foisted upon women, and the context in which they are presented, that the manipulative nature of these conventional roles can be examined. In using the clown-like image of a woman, parodying the sex-kitten, Rosenberg is asking us to consider how the cosmetized, air-brushed version, seen so often in commercial advertising, is used to exploit. Unfortunately, some people perceive the image not as satire, but as the very thing it meant to debunk and ridicule.⁹

The intentions of *Fireweed* and the artist were to satirize and educate, but *Fireweed* was also using this image to advertise its competition. Because the issues of sexism and violence against women in advertising and the media are so critical, the poster touched a raw nerve in the feminist community at large. In the context of an art exhibit, people would probably have responded to the intended satire, but in the context of public advertising which reaches a wide audience, the image appeared to reinforce the offensive stereotype.

The hostility directed at *Fireweed* and the denunciations of its use of the poster point to another significant problem: how to develop a nurturing community for feminist artists. By “nurturing” we don’t mean uncritical adulation for every feminist effort. We mean struggling to find ways to express support without losing critical perspective, encouraging excellence without undermining the efforts to achieve it – in short, developing a feminist critical practice. The kind of feminist criticism we envisage will be rooted in the principles of feminist practice: non-hierarchical, non-competitive, non-aggressive, collective and consensual.¹⁰

One aspect of developing this critical practice is becoming aware of the various ways in which mainstream – or *male-stream*¹¹ – criticism isolates, denigrates and trivializes feminist art. Feminist art is often reviewed by unsympathetic critics (frequently male), who have little knowledge of the feminist arts community or of the goals of feminism, but draw on popular, glib distortions of the women’s movement. A typical way of dismissing a work by a self-defined feminist artist is to describe it as “feminist.” This signals to the critic’s audience that the

critic thinks the work is polemical or propagandistic and not worthy of serious consideration. This tactic is the anti-feminist equivalent of a more general phenomenon: the denigration of all self-professed political art. In the vocabulary of mainstream critics, "political" is a pejorative adjective. Good art, it is argued, is "above politics," which means that "good" art does not openly proclaim any politics. When a critic describes a work as political, it generally means that she or he does not agree with the artist's intention or point of view - and if a work is overtly political, then how can it possibly be good art?

"Feminine" is another loaded term within male-stream critical vocabulary. Though a more subtle epithet than "feminist," nevertheless it is often used patronizingly to imply inferiority, and is one instance of a larger cultural phenomenon: the linguistic derogation of women and things associated with women. In the arts, "feminine" means small, delicate, intuitive, emotional. "Feminine" materials are those found in the home, used by women. The "feminine" arts include dance and the fine arts. "Feminine" is appropriate for women, problematic when applied to men, whereas the universal, to which we have been taught all good art aspires, is generally a form of the masculine. To describe a work as "feminine," therefore, is to imply that it does not measure up to universal/masculine standards of excellence. This anti-feminist bias automatically defines and condemns *women's* fiction, *women's* art - even *women* artists - as the limited case, second-rate, and suitable only for *women* audiences.¹²

Feminists are, however, reclaiming the feminine and proclaiming the feminist. Artists across Canada, working in every medium - visual art, film, theatre, dance, video, performance art, fiction, poetry, music, poster art, photography - are building a feminist culture.

Some are involved in working feminist themes into traditional genres. In novels, films and theatre, for example, women's experiences are being named and scrutinized. An important aspect of much feminist art is this process of naming the world from women's perspective - affirming the world as women experience it. When feminists name, they identify experiences and feelings in new and provocative ways - an

essential process in consciousness-raising groups. It can be as straightforwardly significant as giving an experience a name – such as wife-beating – and making it visible, or as complex as treating artistically the experiences of groups not traditionally recognized in art: lesbians, Third World women, working women. Recognizing ourselves in art affirms our lives and struggles and helps us make connections with each other.

Some feminists are experimenting with new forms to express a feminist content. In poetry and fiction, writers are attempting to turn language inside out – exposing its sexist bias – and to create a feminist language. New fields, like video and performance art, are attractive because there is greater freedom for women to experiment with form and content and to learn technical skills. In fact, working in avant-garde areas attracts many feminists precisely because these areas are more in flux sexually and socially, less rigid in formal terms, and more investigative in relation to content.

Other feminists are moving into traditionally male-dominated areas, such as rock. Feminist rock singers and performers are discovering a feminist version of machismo – “machisma.” Expressing a strong feminist sensuality in performance is a far cry from the sexualized-bunny stereotype popularly associated with women in rock.

Many women are reclaiming traditional crafts and validating them as art forms. At the level of high art, Joyce Wieland, in *True Patriot Love*, and Judy Chicago, in *The Dinner Party*, have subverted male-stream conventions by incorporating feminine crafts into their works of art.

There are other tasks, other projects, too: recovering women artists and women's art from the past; critiquing stereotypes of women and imagining new “heroes”; fashioning stories and images of a feminist world. These all contribute to challenging the ways we are taught to see and interpret the world. Feminist artists are creating new images of what women are and can be; they are giving us new forms – a new language. They speak to us, about us, for us, with us. Together we move towards a feminist vision.

N O T E S

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1. *Les fées ont soif*, by Denise Boucher (Montreal: Les Éditions Intermède, 1979), is a feminist play about three women – the Virgin Mary, Marie the housewife, and Madeleine the prostitute. This line is quoted in translation in Patricia Smart, “Culture, Revolution and Politics in Quebec,” *Canadian Forum*, Vol. LXII (May 1982), p. 10.
2. In our original outline for this article, we attempted to delineate major areas of concern for the feminist art community. We then used this outline as the basis for our discussions with feminist artists. Clearly, these questions and issues need more discussion and analysis.
 - a) The relationship between form and content:
 - artistic vs. political intention
 - high/fine art vs. folk/hobby/domestic art
 - materials, style, form
 - b) Practice:
 - the economics of being an artist
 - method: e.g., collective, individual, individual with support group
 - c) Politics and aesthetics:
 - is there a feminine sensibility?
 - how does “the personal is political” translate into art?
 - particular perspectives: e.g., the specificity of being a non-white or working-class or lesbian woman in the Canadian cultural community
 - d) Audience:
 - the relationship between the artist and her work and the community (how is the community defined?)
 - who is the audience – the artist’s own political community or those outside it?
 - e) The relationship between the women’s movement (in all its forms) and feminist art:
 - how has the women’s movement affected women’s art practice?
 - how has feminist art affected the women’s movement?
 - f) Is art a political tool?

3. Robin Morgan, *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), p. xii.
4. The Cultural Workers' Alliance makes this argument in their brief to the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee. An extract from the brief, "Service or Commodities?" appears in *Fuse* (May/June 1981), pp. 175-76. The Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee, as its name indicates, is conducting a public inquiry into culture and the arts in Canada. It held public hearings in 1981 and is expected to present its final report in 1982.
5. National Action Committee for the Status of Women, "Canadian Cultural Development with Equity for Women," Toronto, 1981. We also consulted briefs presented to the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee by other Status of Women groups.
6. Dorothy E. Smith, "A Peculiar Eclipsing: Women's Exclusion from Man's Culture," *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, Vol. I (1978), p. 293.
7. Sasha McInnes-Hayman, "Contemporary Canadian Women Artists: A Survey," prepared for Womanspirit Art Research and Resource Center, London, Ontario, and Status of Women Canada, Ottawa, 1981, and submitted to the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee.
8. Jane Martin, "Women Visual Artists on Canada Council Juries, Selection Committees, and Arts Advisory Panels; and Amongst Grant Recipients from 1972-73 to 1979-80," prepared for Canadian Artists' Representation/Le Front des Artistes Canadiens (CARFAC), and submitted to the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee, 1981. See also: Avis Lang Rosenberg, "Women Artists and the Canadian Art World: A Survey," *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Fall 1979), pp. 107-26. For an analysis of the situation of women poets in anglo Canada, see: Sharon H. Nelson, "The Sexual Politics of Poetry," *League of Canadian Poets - Newsletter*, No. 32 (July-August 1981), pp. 15-18.
9. *Fireweed: A Feminist Literary & Cultural Journal*, Nos. 5 and 6 (1979-80), p. 15.
10. An exciting step in this direction has been taken by the Women's Cultural Building, a collective of women in Toronto (as yet without a home), who are working to provide a forum for women artists in all fields and to develop a new audience for women's cultural work. In June 1982, they held a public panel discussion of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, which was then showing at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The panel addressed in depth the aesthetic, economic and political issues raised by *The Dinner Party*. Criticism of this kind - committed and constructive - is essential for understanding the problems of the making and the reception of feminist art.

11. This is Mary O'Brien's phrase. See her book, *The Politics of Reproduction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981).
12. This is an oversimplified and condensed explanation of the linguistic derogation of women. For an introduction to this concept see: Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

F U R T H E R R E A D I N G S

Canadian Woman Studies / Les cahiers de la femme, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Spring 1982).

Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly.

Fuse: The Cultural News Magazine.

Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics.

Room of One's Own.