Issue

SOCIAL STRATEGIES BY WOMEN ARTISTS

ARIADNE: A SOCIAL NETWORK (SUZANNE LACY & LESLIE LABOWITZ)
NICOLE CROISET & NIL YALTER
FENIX: A COOPERATIVE TRAVELLING INSTALLATION (SUE RICHARDSON, MONICA ROSS, KATE WALKER)
MARGARET HARRISON
CANDACE HILL-MONTGOMERY
JENNY HOLZER
ALEXIS HUNTER
MARIA KARRAS
MARY KELLY
MARGIA KRAMER
LORAINE LEESON
BEVERLY NAIDUS
ADRIAN PIPER
MARTHA ROSLER
MIRIAM SHARON
BONNIE SHERK (THE FARM)
NANCY SPERO
MAY STEVENS
MIERLE LADERMAN UKELES
MARIE YATES

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SOCIAL STRATEGIES BY WOMEN ARTISTS

An Exhibition Selected by Lucy R. Lippard

Institute of Contemporary Arts

ISSUE

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Exhibitions Assistant: Iwona Blaszczyk
Gallery Technician: Steve White

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Preface

Issue is the third of the exhibitions which focus on different aspects of art being made by women today which we are presenting at the ICA. *Issue* is an international exhibition and it is of particular importance to us to bring together work from separate parts of the world which looks at related issues. Such an exhibition *is* long overdue, but now that it is happening it can be seen to be especially relevant to this time, when the questions it poses most urgently need to be considered. Marianne Wex was also selected to be in the exhibition, but had temporarily moved to New Zealand before we were able to secure her agreement to participate.

I would like to thank Lucy Lippard for selecting the exhibition and writing the catalogue introduction, and for keeping in touch with artists world-wide. I want to thank May Stevens for initiating the idea of an exhibition based on 'Caring: Five Political Artists' in the women's issue of *Studio International* in 1977, and Margaret Harrison for her help in developing and organising this exhibition. Thanks should also go to the artists for their help in preparing this catalogue and their continued support for the exhibition.

Sandy Nairne October 1980

Issue and Tabu

. . . Political commitment, however revolutionary it may seem, functions in a counter-revolutionary way so long as the [artist] experiences [her] solidarity with the proletariat only in the mind *and not as a producer. — Walter Benjamin, paraphrased.*

Issue is of course a pun on generation and topicality. It is about propagation, spreading the word that it is possible to think about art as a functioning element in society. While all art should to some extent act as provocation, as a jolt or interruption in the way social life and sensuous experience are conventionally perceived, the work shown here attempts to replace the illusion of neutral esthetic freedom with social responsibility by focusing — to a greater or lesser degree — on specific issues. It is all made by women because the contributions of feminist art to the full panorama of social-change art and the ways in which a politicized or topical art approaches, overlaps and diverges from the various notions of a feminist art are crucial to its further development. *Issue*'s concerns parallel on an art front those of Sheila Rowbotham's, Lynne Segal's and Hilary Wainright's important book *Beyond the Fragments.* While the fragments vary from field to field and from country to country, the fact that feminism has something to offer the left that the left badly needs is as unarguable in art as it is in political organization. The transformation of society, at the heart of both feminism and socialism, will not take place until feminist strategies are acknowledged and fully integrated into the struggle.

After the *1978 Hayward Annual* (inaccurately called 'the woman's show' and sometimes still more inaccurately seen as a feminist show), Griselda Pollock called for 'an exhibition of feminist work which will present and encourage debate around the issues of feminist and art practice which have emerged within the women's movement . . . conceived and structured as a sustained political intervention.'[1] I would like to think that *Issue* starts to provide such a framework for a transatlantic and cross-cultural dialogue. I want to make clear at the outset, however, that despite its stylistic diversity, *Issue* was conceived within a relatively narrow focus. It is concerned with what is being done in this specific activist area. It is in no way a general show of 'feminist art' dealing with the politics of being female. Nor is it even a general 'women's political art' show, since it does not include highly effective multi-issue artists like Toni Robertson or Annie Newmarch in Australia, nor community muralists like Judy Baca in Los Angeles, nor the many women who concentrate on video, film, performance, photography[2], organizational slide shows, or realist painting and sculpture with political subject matter. Certainly *Issue* does not constitute a value judgement about what is the only effective feminist art, effective political art, or esthetically successful feminist art. In fact, such outreach art is no more a style or movement than feminist art is. If I am protesting too much about these distinctions, it is because I am sick and tired of the divisive categorizing that supports reactionary tabus against social-change art by stimulating the competition inherent in the present high art system.

I hope it will also be clear that *Issue* sidesteps debates on stylistic assumptions about women's art. I still hold the opinion that women's art differs from that of men, but I have moved away from my earlier attempt to analyze these differences in formal terms alone. In ten years, the needs, contexts and developments have changed. In the early days of the feminist art movement we were looking for shared *images* — or rather they popped out at us and demanded to be dealt with. For some of us this preoccupation then led to a search for shared esthetic and political *approaches*, for a theoretical framework in which to set these ubiquitous images. Now we are in a stage where we tend to take that earlier data on image and approach for granted; the real challenges seem to lie in analyzing structures and effects. Thus the time seemed right to begin to break down the various kinds of feminist political art (all truly feminist art being political one way or another). *Issue* scrutinizes that branch which is 'moving out' into the world, placing so-called women's issues in a broader perspective and/or utilizing mass production techniques to convey its messages about global traumas such as racism, imperialism, nuclear war, starvation and inflation to a broader audience.

There is, I know, a certain danger that when women's issues are expanded too far they will get swallowed up by an amorphous liberalism. Yet I have opted here for an ecumenical view rather than a strictly socialist feminist view because I am convinced that the cross references made between all these works — even within the limiting context of an art show — add up to a denser, deeper statement. I hope the web of interconnections and disagreements will cross boundaries of medium, esthetic and ideology to facilitate a dialogue with the audience. The conference taking place in conjunction with *Issue* and her sister shows — *Women's Image of Men* and *About Time* — will be a still more effective factor in this process.

One reason for placing a woman's show outside strictly women's issues is to provide a fresh look at feminist art from a different angle. Most of the work

in *Issue* is urgent and explicit about its subject matter. It is *experimental* art, throwing itself into that notorious abyss between art and life of which so much has been readymade since Duchamp and Dada. The artists have chosen different ways to slalom between the poles of isolation, separatism, struggle and autonomy within the male left and assimilation that have been the choices open to feminists for the past decade or so. Yet all of them have worked collaboratively or collectively on some aspect of their art-related lives — whether in a co-op gallery, a political collective, a woman's center, on a periodical, a school, artist-organized exhibitions and events, team-teaching, or in artmaking itself — with other women or with politically sympathetic men. (Three of the twenty participants *are* collaboratives — *Ariadne*, Croiset/Yalter and *Fenix* — while Leeson and Holzer work regularly with male partners, several others do so irregularly, and Sherk works with a mixed group.)

This is particularly significant because artists involved with outreach have to learn to work with others before they can hope to be effective in larger contexts. The women in *Issue* share an awareness of their capacity (and *responsibility*) as artists to raise consciousness, to forge intimate bonds between their perceptions and those of their audience. Some of them may feel that feminist art's most effective tactic is intervention *into* the mainstream so as to attack from within; others see the mainstream as irrelevant and seek alternative models for artists disillusioned with the role of art as handed down from above. They have all to some degree been exhibited and discussed within the current system, but each has also kept a wary eye outside of it. Their art gains from the resulting tensions. For instance, a large number of them have chosen potentially populist, mass-produced mediums such as posters, books, magazine pieces and video as a means by which to extend control of their own art and its distribution, in the process choosing their own audience, or at least not letting their audience be chosen for them. The dominant culture tends to see such small, inexpensive, disposable objects as by-products, a watering down of the unique artifact for mass consumption. But in fact, the reproductive works often represent a *culmination* in compact form that intends to compete (on however small a scale) with the mass-media for cultural power. Such directness stems from the artists' desire to bring art out of its class and economic confinement, and it is integral to their strategies to such an extent that 'direct' — as a verb and an adjective — seems to be a key word.

Jenny Holzer, for instance, uses direct mail and street leafletting to convey her provocative messages about thinking for oneself in the morass of conflicting propaganda that surrounds us. She does this by making her own carefully researched collections of aphorisms and essays whose messages sound ultra-positive and direct, but are often on scrutiny, highly amgiguous. Holzer operates in a curious realm between belief and disbelief, cliché and fact, cynicism and hope. She sees her work as non-ideological; it does not so much impose a fresh view as it criticizes all existing views. One of her recent works — a leaflet with a return response coupon that is headlined 'Jesus Will Come to New York November 4' (U.S. election day) — exposes rightwing and religious connections and warns its readers that three million fundamentalists are newly registered to vote. The language is clear and non-rhetorical and the piece is potentially effective in that it could scare more liberals and leftists into voting.

Nancy Spero's delicate collaged scrolls are directed against brutality and violence. In a bold irregular oversized print, interspersed with twisted and attenuated figures, sharp tongues out or arms flailing, she catalogues humanity's current nightmares — the Vietnam war, the torture of women, the bomb, fascist coups. She often uses poetry (by Artaud or H.D. or from mythological sources) ironically to undermine the whole notion of poetry, or art, as something beautiful and soothing. In 'Torture in Chile', Spero uses fragmentation as a metaphor for the dismemberment of women and of a revolutionary motherland. The vast horizontal scroll is drawn out, strung up against the wall like a prolonged scream of rage. The images are less active than usual, as though the horror of the factual text, underscored by sharp geometric lines, has immobilized the figures.

In a very different way, Nicole Croiset and Nil Yalter also explore fragmentation in their extended video/text and drawing oblique object installations about the fourteen million working class immigrants to urban centers and to the wealthier European nations. Yalter is herself Turkish and the piece in *Issue* focuses on Rahime, a Kurdish woman of nomadic background making the wrenching transition between her village and an industrial shanty-town outside of Istanbul. Married at thirteen, a mother at fourteen, she is undergoing a forced triple consciousness-raising (as a woman, a worker, and a rural alien) tragically heightened when her progressive daughter was murdered by a man she refused to marry. Rahime is very articulate about the injustices of her situation. She notes how the rich can't do anything — work in a factory or even do their military service. Croiset and Yalter combine art, sympathetic anthropology and documentary

approaches. As in their previous works on the city of Paris, a woman's prison, and immigrant workers in France and Germany, they bring to rhythm and life the people who make up the statistics of Europe's new, reluctant melting pot status.

Miriam Sharon is also involved in cross-cultural awareness. An Israeli, she has worked with the Bedouins in the Negev and Sinai deserts. Her earth-covered tents and costumes pay homage to their close relationship to nature. By performing rituals both in the desert and on the Tel Aviv waterfront (at Ashdod Harbor, appropriately named after an ancient goddess), Sharon uses her art as a vehicle of cultural exchange; she reminds the workers of the plight of the nomads who are being herded into cement villages and forced to abandon their traditional ways of life. She also shows her work in factories and has become a one-woman liaison organization between the 'Desert People' and their rulers.

Maria Karras also deals with dislocation in her photo-text posters on the subject of 'multicultural awareness'. 'Both Here and There' consists of fourteen posters in English and one of twelve different languages; each shows a relaxed portrait of a woman from a different ethnic origin and a statement excerpted from an interview with her about her experience as a woman and an immigrant in America. Conceived and marketed as teaching aides as well, the posters were seen by over a million people when they went up in Los Angeles public buses in 1979. They stem from Karras' earlier work on her own Greek heritage. What initially appears to be a bland, chamber-of-commerce format is ruffled by the casual poses and the controversial things some of her subjects had to say about women's roles in their communities. Each poster is a small and pointed political geography lesson. Karras offers positive images of women, new role models and new sources of confidence for women, as well as providing an exchange between Los Angeles' many and isolated ethnic communities, and making connections between feminism and the anxiety, alienation and assimilation of the bicultural experience.

Posters, of course, are probably the most direct public art medium there is. Loraine Leeson and Peter Dunn have been collaborating for several years with the trades unions and local groups to produce a series protesting at hospital shutdowns and health cutbacks for the East London Health Project. Because of their formal strength and visual interrelation, their campaigns lend themselves to art contexts as well as to the intended social function, although the artists make it clear they dislike using their audiences as 'passive consumers' and don't think 'gallery socialism' is enough. The series in *Issue* was made by Leeson with the Women's Health Information Centre Collective and deals both with specific issues such as abortion, contraception, home care and women's work hazards, and more general questions such as women being driven back into the home as the result of health cuts, the social role of women and its indirect effects on health and why certain aspects of health care should be seen as women's issues. Like the earlier campaign it is seen as social art for a 'transitional period' between art based on the values of a consumer society and 'something else' that will occur when that society is changed. Since she is acutely aware of the dangers of art colonization, Leeson's poster work is informed by a rigorous self criticism which brings it to the edge of disappearance into social *work*, from which it is saved, paradoxically, by its visual and esthetic force.

For most of these artists, the international Women's Liberation Movement is a source of great theoretical vitality. However, they use it in very different styles, to very different degrees and operating from very different political assumptions. This could not be otherwise since they are also of different nationalities, different races, different class-and-esthetic backgrounds and foregrounds. The difficulty of generalizing about twenty-one such diverse artists is compounded by the fact that the discourses around feminist and socio-political art in the US and the UK (where the majority of these artists live) are literally in such different places. The state of British art is not the state of American art. For example, this ICA series is the first establishment-approved women's show in London, while New York has had women's shows but has never had a 'political art show' on the order of London's *Art for Whom, Art for Society* and others.[3] In mainstream America, social art is basically ignored; in England it enjoys the attention of a small but vocal (and often divided) group with a certain amount of visibility and media access. In America, artist-organized tentatives toward a socialist art movement are marginal and temporary, waxing and waning every five years or so with only a few tenacious recidivists providing the continuity. In England there are actually left political *parties* artists can join and even work with — and the more advanced level of theoretical discussion reflects this availability of practice.

In England, feminist art is thought by some to be 'utterly unconcerned with notions of what art is and only concerned with making strong direct statements about the position of women in our

culture'[4] — which certainly helps to explain the reluctance of some professional artists to being labeled as feminists. In America, on the other hand, it is the feminist left that is reluctant to be associated with 'bourgeois' or 'radical' or 'separatist' feminism, and the popular notion of feminist art is more oriented toward images than toward ideologies. There is also a firm resistance to the notion of defining feminist art at all, or accepting any 'predetermined concepts of feminist art'[5], because we have seen the enthusiasm of those who would like to escape feminist energy by consigning all women's art to a temporary style or movement. In Israel, feminist art is still an oddity and Miriam Sharon is rare in welcoming the identification. In France, feminist art is more often defined according to American cultural feminist notions (autobiography, images of self, performance, traditional arts) than according to the more universalized psycho-political theory for which French feminism is known. In any case, the sociological work of Croiset/Yalter does not seem typical of either country's clichés about feminist art.

All of these confusions can be partly attributed to the fact that, as Rowbotham has remarked in another context, the feminist tenets of organic growth — 'many faceted and contradictory' — do not fit any current model of the vanguard.[6] In challenging the notions of genius, of greatness, of artist as necessary nuisance that are dear to the hearts of the institutional mainstream and of the general public, the artists in *Issue* have also challenged some fundamental assumptions about art. They are in a good positon to do so because feminist art has had to exist for the most part outside of the boundaries imposed by the male-dominated art world. While these artists exhibit in that world, they also maintain support systems outside of it and many have established intimate connections with different audiences. Having watched so many politicized artists reach out, only to fall by the wayside or back onto acceptable modernism fringed with leftist rhetoric, I have the heartiest respect for those with the courage to persist in this nobody's land between esthetics, political activism and populism. The tabus against doing so, however, bear some looking into, along with the ways such artists have broken them.

Some are challenging the tabus against subject matter considered 'unsuitable' for art — such as unemployment, work and domesticity, budget cutbacks or militarism. Some are aiming at the sense of imagined superiority that has so disastrously separated 'high art' from 'crafts' and 'low art' and artists from 'ordinary people'. Margaret Harrison, for instance, is acting on both of these principles. Her collage paintings and documentation pieces have long focused on the theme of women and work, but rather than picture or objectively comment on her subject, she works from inside of it with the people it concerns. A work is finished only when it reflects and has had some effect on the selected field. Harrison has worked with isolated homeworkers and with rape groups. In *Issue,* she takes on craft and class. The visual core of the piece consists of three versions of each craftwork — the actual object, a painting of it, and a photograph of it. The items belonged to her mother in law. They trace the 'deskilling process' of workingclass women since industrialization by moving from a handmade patchwork to a cheap doily, 'made in the factory by working women and sold back to them'. Like the 'hookey mat' — once a shameful symbol of poverty and now enjoying the status of a desirable antique — they indicate the disappearance of crafts from the lives of workingclass women to become the domain of the middle class. Harrison's theme has ramifications not only for the feminist insistence that the struggle is taking place in the home as well as in the workplace, but also as a comment on the 'precious object' in current art practice.

Beverly Naidus also deals with planned obsolecence. Her title is 'The Sky is Falling, The Sky is Falling, or Pre-Millenium Piece'. The audiotape talks about 'selling life as it is', about unemployment and economic insecurity and the panaceas offered to cure them — consumerism and evangelical religion. She deals with issues blurred by media overkill by using cliché and collage — lists, assinine questionnaires, posters slapped up guerilla style over photos of people standing in lines and suffering bureaucratic banalities. This visual layering technique suggests that underneath the doomsaying is a groundswell of people's power.

There is a pervasive belief, in the US at least, that art with political subject matter is *automatically* 'bad art'. To some extent, of course, such tabus can be attributed to the artists' intentional divergences from conventional audiences and goals, as well as to a formalist dislike of 'literary art' that is much stronger in the US than in the UK. But social art is also *perceived* differently. An organic shape readable, say, as a mushroom cloud, is judged on a completely different scale, no matter how forcefully it may be formed, from the same shape, similarly executed, that is illegible, or abstract. Timely subjects like those listed above are not publicly acknowledged to be threatening to the status quo but are simply dismissed as 'boring' or 'unesthetic'. This is particularly weird coming after a decade in which the avant garde and the bourgeoisie cheerfully validated pieces involving pissing, masturbating, match throwing, body

mutilation, self imprisonment, etc. What, then, makes the appearance of an angry Black face, a war victim, or nuclear generators so firmly unacceptable?

Adrian Piper has addressed this issue in her 'Aspects of the Liberal Dilemma'. A photograph on the wall of a crowd of angrylooking Black people coming down a staircase is accompanied by an audiotape that discusses the image solely in formal terms and asks 'What exactly is the esthetic *content* of this work?' In another, similar pamphlet work, four identical photos of starving Boat People are captioned as follows: 'Gosh, what a tragedy . . . / . . . / . . . (sigh) / Is that all? Where's the art?' In a 1977 letter she suggested that 'the purpose of art may transcend the development of one's esthetic sensibilities in favor of the development of one's political sensibilities'. Acknowledging the horror with which that statement would be generally received, she speculated: 'Maybe nonpolitical "messages" are more acceptable because they tend to be more personal, hence less publicly accessible, hence more symbolic or mysterious, therefore more reducible to purely formalist interpretations; i.e. the more likely it is that people will understand what you're trying to convey, the less fashionable it is to try and convey it.' As a Black woman who can 'pass' and a professor of philosophy who leads a double life as an avant-garde artist, Piper has understandably focused on self analysis and social boundaries. Over the years her work in performance, texts, newspaper, unannounced street events, tapes and photographs has developed an increasingly politicized and universalized image of what the self can mean. In the set of three 'Political Self Portraits', for example, she turns her autobiographical information inside out to provide devastating commentaries on American racism, sexism and classism.

Tabu subjects inevitably include a panoply of feminist preoccupations, such as rape, violence against women, incest, prostitution, ageism and media distortion. All of these have been confronted by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, working together and with other women as *Ariadne: A Social Network.* Like Piper, they have used 'the expanding self' as 'a metaphor for the process of moving the borders of one's identity outward to encompass other women and eventually all people'. Their collaborative performances are unique in their grand scale and detailed planning, and in the fact that they take place exclusively in the public domain, sometimes with casts/audiences of thousands (as in the *Women Take Back the Night* march in San Francisco in 1978). Lacy and Labowitz have evolved a 'media strategy' for their campaigns and events, which often incorporate several different approaches to reach different sectors of the population.[7] They work with a broad variety of organizations and groups, focusing on specific feminist issues. Their pieces are carefully designed so as to subvert the usual media distortion of women's issues; to attract coverage, they depend on striking visual images (such as seven-foot tall mourning women in black and one in red for rage bearing a banner reading WOMEN FIGHT BACK, in the piece 'In Mourning and In Rage' which commemorated the women murdered in Los Angeles by the 'Hillside Strangler'). *Ariadne* was determined to control not only its production, but the way its images were perceived and understood. Lacy's and Labowitz's networking techniques gave them broader access to popular culture than is usual for art.

Most of the tabu subjects are in fact those covered (and mystified) extensively by the newsmedia. I suspect one of the reasons they are palatable in that form of 'entertainment', but not as fine art, is precisely because they are so ubiquitous in their more popular form. We are tired of them. Their focus on novelty deprives them of meaning even when they are the most meaningful issues of our time, and those it is most crucial for us to see clearly. The artists in *Issue* are acutely aware of this situation and confront it in various ways. Candace Hill-Montgomery, for example, in her angry photo-drawings, uses images that have survived the media blitz to remain shocking reminders of the history of racism in America. Just to be sure, she heightens their immediacy by hanging the drawings, weighted down by plexiglass, with unexpected and often ungainly objects that bring them still more into our own world. Thick chains support a terrifying picture of a Black man chained to a tree, his back broken; a full sized noose holds up a lynching picture; and army pants hold a piece on American military atrocities; a brass eagle holds the big colorfully bitter 'Teepee Town is in Reserve'. By bringing relatively abstract and expressionist images into concrete space, Hill-Montgomery makes it clear that she is not talking about fictionalized history. With these almost monstrous objects mitigating the craft of her drawn surfaces, she juxtaposes the possibility of Black power against the historical fact of Black powerlessness, daring the viewer to enjoy her works as 'just art'.

Margia Kramer's 'Secret' also deals with terrifying material and her use of black and white is based on a similar symbolism. Her raw material is the censored photocopies she obtained through the Freedom of Information Act on the FBI surveillance and harassment of Jean Seberg,

which led eventually to the film star's suicide. In the 300-page file, the FBI referred to Seberg as 'the alleged promiscuous and sex-perverted white actress' and stated its desire to 'cause her embarrassment and cheapen her image with the public'. Seberg's persecution arose from the fact that she was a supporter of the Black Panther party. The FBI leaked to the newsmedia the false story that Seberg was pregnant by one of the Panthers; when the baby died at birth she took it in an open coffin to her hometown in Iowa to refute these stories, but the emotional toll had been taken. Kramer's art consists not of commentary but of strong visual presentation of the documents in video, book and huge blown-up negative and positive photostats; with their impersonal telegraphic style and brutally censored passages, they are the ideal vehicles for this chilling tale of governmental paranoia and manipulation. Her subject is not only constitutional rights, America's race wars, the media's willingness to exploit a woman at her most vulnerable point — her sex life — but, also, paradoxically, the democratic fact of the Freedom of Information Act that permitted this ghastly story to be exposed. In addition there is a curious reversal of the feminist search for public meaning in private life in Seberg's martyrdom through public invasion of privacy.

Alexis Hunter has concentrated on gesture in what might be taken as parodies of media photos of disembodied hands capably and prettily doing women's dirty work. She is not a documentary photographer, but sets up and acts out her own ideas like a photo-novelist. For several years Hunter concentrated on themes of fear and violence, rape, domestic and sexual warfare. Despite often sensational subject matter, the work transmitted not moral outrage so much as a bemused personal anger that found its outlet in highly physical or sensuous activities. There is an element of exorcism in these pieces and at the same time there is something decidedly threatening about the elegantly female hands going about their business with such aggressive determination. Surfaces — smeared, caressed, decorated or smashed — are dominant in Hunter's work, perhaps as a pictorial pun, since humor is rarely absent no matter how horrific the content. In 'A Marxist's Wife (Still Does the Housework)', a ringed hand wipes off a portrait labeled 'Karl Marx Revolutionary Man Thinker'. The second piece in *Issue* is rare for Hunter in that the protagonist is neither generalized nor disembodied. 'A Young Polynesian Considers Cultural Imperialism Before She Goes to the Disco' shows a black woman trying on and then discarding a white woman's jewels (or chains). As a white New Zealander or 'pakeka', the artist is implicated in this story not only as the executor of the work but as its surface. The young Polynesian becomes a mirror in which Hunter must see herself and her own race.

Marie Yates, in her photo-texts 'On the Way to Work', also explores social preconceptions about images of women, the ways in which they are made and their meanings. By the materialist ploy of working 'in the gaps of reality', she appears to pull the viewer into the interstices between cultural understanding and misunderstanding that are left when the representational cliché is emptied of its accepted content. She does this on the levels of 'real life', fiction, and politically sophisticated analysis. In her earlier work (particularly the book *A Critical Re-Evaluation of a Proposed Publication* of 1978), Yates confronted the 'display and/or consumption of landscape' by juxtaposing beautiful views of rural England with simple binary oppositions like 'nature/culture, them/us'. Now she applies a similar confusion of predictable romanticization and objectification devices in order to expose the codes of gender identification in this society.

Where most of the artists in *Issue* believe that art is about seeing clearly and teaching people how to see the world that surrounds them, they and others like them are sometimes attacked from the Right for not sticking to formal 'beauty' and from the Left for having any formal preoccupations at all, as well as for being politically naive. They are caught in a classic conflict between the 'standards' of art taught in schools and the disillusionment that hits socially concerned artists when they begin to realize how little what they were taught can help them to get their most important ideas across. Once they have found their own ways, they may still be walking a tightrope, making art critical or neglectful of values they must accommodate to earn a living. Some such artists are eventually disarmed and assimilated into the mainstream while others are banished for uppity irrelevance to the dominant culture. Some have made a politically informed decision for this uncomfortable position, while others have moved into it organically. Either way, it is crucial for feminists to understand the ways these tabus operate and the reasons behind them, because even the least daring women's art is judged by criteria based on such antipathetic values. This in turn can lead to fear-inspired competition and factionalism and the diminution of a publicly powerful feminist art front.

Such factionalism also can result in (or is the result of) a reverse philistinism. The kind of feminist artist who does 'care about art' can find herself isolated from those who have chosen direct action rather

than working with them on tasks more suited to her own needs and effectiveness. She can also find herself reacting against reactions against feminist art, and thus being controlled by the opposition. New tabus arise from rebellions against the old ones: progressive and feminist art reacts against the notion that 'high standards' are to be found only where form and content are seamlessly merged, where content 'disappears' into form. In the process of this reaction, a new rhetoric emerges, and artists who refuse to throw the baby out with the bathwater (to replace form entirely with subject matter) may find themselves opposing their own politics and their natural allies. This double negation process may be inevitable if it is not analyzed and understood as highly destructive and divisive.

At the heart of the matter is what Walter Benjamin called 'the precise nature of the relationship between quality and commitment'.[8] The notion of 'quality' (though I prefer the less classbound term 'esthetic integrity') is embedded in Western culture, along with various degrees of anarchism, individualism, and pluralism. We have, ironically, seen the results of their suppression in those Socialist countries where the power of art as a political force has been clearly recognized. Yet one reason why we can still not thoroughly discuss much of the work in *Issue* within a Socialist framework is that the Left itself has not expanded enough to include the options art must have — just as it has had trouble incorporating feminist values. May Stevens has defined philistinism as 'fear of art'.[9]

It is difficult not to be confused by all these tabus against any art that might be useful or even powerful. Several complex factors are operating. The most obvious is the tenor (or tenure) of Western art education and its insistence that high art is an instrument for the pleasure and entertainment of those in power. We are told in school that if art wants to be powerful it must separate itself from power and from all events artists are powerless to control. This is the counterpart of telling women and children to step aside, 'leave it to us; this is men's work'. (And it has long been clear that artists are considered 'women' by the men who don't dabble in culture but do 'real work' and get their hands dirty in blood and oil.) If such attitudes stem from the ruling class's conscious or unconscious fear that art may be a powerful tool of communication and organization, what are the artists themselves afraid of?

For women artists in particular, the 'real world' as an arena in which to make art can appear as a fearful, incomprehensible place. We know about our fears of taking hold of unfamiliar power. And for all its dog-eat-dog competitions, the art world is relatively secure in comparison. Finally, one's art is, after all, *oneself,* and its rejection — politicized or personalized or both — has to be dealt with emotionally. One of the most popular excuses given by mainstream artists for rejecting social art is that 'the masses' *and* the middle class *and* the corporate rich are all uneducated, insensitive, crass, vulgar, blind — leaving artists with a safe, specialized audience consisting primarily of themselves. Sometimes the frustration inherent in such limited communication leads to the international encouragement and provocation of a 'fear of art'. During the 1970s, much self-described political or Marxist art was watered down not only by stylistic pluralism and academic aimlessness, but by the artists' own illusions of complexity and espousal of incomprehensible jargon. So-called advanced art tries to *épater le bourgeois* just as bourgeois art tries to tempt *its* chosen audience to consume it. These games are incompatible with social-change art where reaching and moving and educating an audience is all-important.

Yet this is all too often only reluctantly recognized because of the pervasive tabus. And all the tabus are rooted in social expectations of art, and these in turn are rooted in class. As Piper remarked, artists concerned to communicate are often considered 'bad artists' because their content is 'untransformed' — that is, still comprehensible. The high art milieu assumes that no one expects meaning from art; yet the societal cliché about 'advanced art' is expressed in the question, 'But what does it mean?' Laypeople are inevitably disappointed when the answer is 'nothing' — that is, only form and space and color and feelings, and so forth. The sophisticated assumption is that these experiences are of course open to anyone, so the audience too 'dumb' to get it is not worth communicating with. One tends to forget that while the *experiences* may be open to anyone, the *meanings* are not, because we are educated to code them so they are available only to certain classes of viewer.

Even the expectations themselves can be broken down according to class. The ruling class expects 'high' or fine art to be framed in gold — to be valuable, decorative and acceptable — and preferably old, except for the bland new outdoor furniture of 'public art' considered suitable for banks, offices and lobbies. The middle class can't afford old art, so it tends to be more adventurous, preferring the new, the decorative and the potentially valuable. Working people are resigned to expecting 'beauty' — an old-fashioned, hand-me-down notion that usually has little to do with

their own taste. Supposedly the working person doesn't expect meaning from art but is happy with what s/he gets from gift shops and mail order catalogues. Yet when artist Don Celender interviewed working people in Minneapolis and Saint Paul about art, he got answers such as: 'art is good training because it teaches us to look deeper into things' (a female bus driver); art is important 'for appreciation of the environment' (truck driver); 'art makes the world seem brighter' (house maid); 'life wouldn't be interesting if we didn't have art' (house maid); 'One of the better things in life [is] that people should be able to relate to his own type of art' (taxi driver); and 'art is a way to convey and preserve a culture' (roofer).

Mary Kelly has set herself precisely this task — to preserve a culture hitherto virtually unexcavated in the first person: 'The ways in which ideology functions in/by the material practices of childbirth and childcare.' These are among the tabu subjects, and Kelly has been exploring them for some eight years now in a multipartite work called 'The Post Partum Document'. Each section consists of two forms — a series of framed collages that make refined and beautiful art objects ('fetishes' she calls them) out of stained nappies, infant clothes, her son's first marks, drawings, discoveries; and a dense accompanying text that includes Lacanian diagrams, charts and a detailed analysis of 'the ongoing debate of the relevance of psychoanalysis to the theory and practice of Marxism and Feminism'. The section shown in *Issue* is, appropriately, the last one, in which mother and child enter the real world of writing and infant school. The 'art objects' consist of chalk-like inscriptions on slate, combining the mystery of the Rosetta Stone with the solemnity of the educational undertaking; the language of alphabet books and learning stories is juxtaposed against diary entries and then in turn against the accompanying text, which dissects subjective and unconscious structures in linguistic frameworks. In one of the most complex explorations I know of the often distorted feminist credo — 'the personal is political' — Kelly argues 'against the supposed self sufficiency of lived experience and *for* a theoretical elaboration of the social relations in which "femininity" is formed'. The result is a poignant attempt to understand the mother's personal sense of loss (loss of the phallus is her interpretation) when a child leaves the home, and an equally moving exposition of the predicament of the workingclass mother when faced with schools, bureaucracies and all the other powers over her child that will leave her powerless again.

Fenix (Sue Richardson, Monica Ross and Kate Walker), though dealing with similar subject matter, prides itself on a raw, comfortable ('home-made, I'm afraid') approach that offers the process of *coping* as a direct challenge to the estheticization of high art. The three artists, who were also collaborators in the *Feministo Postal Event* ('Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife') see themselves as part of the first generation in which workingclass women have had access to art education. Their theme is rising from the ashes to the occasion. They want to destroy boundaries between low, hobby and high art, motherhood and career. 'It has been said many times by experts that women are not creative. They have a sentimental approach! Babies are not home made! Flowers cannot be knitted! Reality is not a pussy cat!' They have set out to identify with and then deny the workingclass suffragette Hannah Mitchell's statement: 'We will never be able to make a revolution between dinner time and tea'. *Fenix*'s installations reflect the creative chaos of the home. Richardson, Ross and Walker work on their art in public and while the esthetic outcome of their collaborations is risky, it is less significant than the process itself and its effect on the audience.

Martha Rosler's conceptual and book works, mail pieces, photographs, performances and videos approach the issues of motherhood, domesticity, sex and career in a manner that is as theoretically stringent as Kelly's and as accessible as *Fenix*'s. She avoids the vocabularies of the Marxism and feminism that inform all her work in favour of a 'decoy' — a deadpan, easy-to-understand narrative style in which she demonstrates the most complex social contradictions and conflicts. For several years she concentrated on the uses and abuses of food — as fashion, as international political pawn, as a metaphor for a consumer society to which both culture and women seem to be just another mouthful in an endless meal. In the verbal/visual framework of her various mediums, she has examined anorexia nervosa, food adulteration, TV cooking lessons, the bourgeois co-optation of 'foreign' cooking and starvation in those same 'foreign' countries, the fate of the Mexican alien houseworkers, waitressing, and restaurant unionizing (as well as The Bowery, Chile, the P.L.O. and the Vietnam War). Rosler uses humor and a deadly familiarity to maintain her Brechtian distance from these subjects at the same time that she exhibits a thorough, and sometimes autobiographical, knowledge of them. Her acid intrusions into naturalism push reality up against idealism until neither have a chance. At that point, the skeleton of a demystified, but still estheticized truth appears.

Yet another approach to the analysis of the female role in the total society is that of Mierle Laderman

Ukeles. For some ten years now she has been making 'Maintenance Art', which emerged from 'the real sourball . . . after the revolution, who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?' It began in the home, when Ukeles realized that as a mother of small children she was not going to have time to make art, so she would have to make art out of what she spent her time doing. The work has since moved gradually out into the world — to the maintenance of art institutions, then collaborative pieces with the maintenance workers in offices and office buildings in which the structures of their tasks were examined both as work and as art, and finally two years ago to the grand scale of the New York Sanitation Department — to the eight thousand garbage men who are the pariahs of city government. The outward and visual/ performance aspect of 'Touch Sanitation' was a dialogue and handshaking ritual with every man on the force. Its radical aspect reflects again on tabus. Ukeles's work has been called outrageous, trivial and condescending by those who have not stopped to think where these accusations come from. She has also evaded Marxist assumptions about production through a prototypical feminist strategy which uses men's productive but despised support work as a means to call attention to all service work — the most significant area of which is, of course, women's reproductive work in home and workplace. The most recent result of 'Touch Sanitation' is that the sanitation men's wives are organizing.

Many or all of these works are collages. And for good reason. The surrealists defined collage as the juxtaposition of two distant realities to form a new reality. Collage is born of interruption and the healing instinct to use political consciousness as a glue with which to get the pieces into some sort of new order (though not necessarily a new *whole*, since there is no single way out, nobody who's really 'got it all together'; feminist art is still an art of separations.) The socialist feminist identity is itself as yet a collage of disparate, not yet fully compatible parts. It is a collage experience to be a woman artist or a socio-political artist in a capitalist culture. *Issue* as an exhibition is itself a collage, a kind of newspaper.

The collage esthetic is at the heart of May Stevens' moving series 'Ordinary Extraordinary'. It has recently culminated in an 'artist's book' that juxtaposes the lives of Rosa Luxemburg ('German revolutionary leader and theoretician, murder victim') and Alice Dick Stevens ('Housewife, mother, washer and ironer, inmate of hospitals and nursing homes'). Like Rosler and Kelly, Stevens analyzes language, but unlike them she does it in an unashamedly affective manner. The book and the richly layered collages that led up to it are black and white — dark and light. They weave visual portraits and verbal self-portraits to bring out the underlying political insights. Sometimes a level of irony surfaces, which makes the roles of the intensely articulate and active Rosa and the pathologically silent and passive Alice almost seem to reverse, or overlap, offering generalized comments on class and gender. Stevens's mother became mute in middle age, 'when what she wanted to say became, as she put it, much later, too big to put your tongue around'. When she regained her ability to speak, 'she had lost a life to speak of'. Rosa, on the other hand, writes to her lover, 'When I open your letters and see six sheets covered with debates about the Polish Socialist Party and not a word about . . . ordinary life, I feel faint.'

The most ambitious collage in *Issue* is Bonnie Sherk's collaborative artwork/corporation/ performance piece/site sculpture or 'life frame' called *The Farm* (Crossroads Community). It consists of 5.5 acres of buildings, land and gardens under a looming freeway, at the vortex of four different ethnic communities (and three subterranean creeks) in San Francisco. *The Farm* is a collage of functions including community center, after school and multinutritional health and nutrition programs, experimental agriculture, appropriate technology, zoo, theatre and park; and it is a collage of living styles or social options: an old-fashioned farm kitchen, suburban white iron lawn furniture, an International Living Room to show that elegance is part of the natural life, and the latest project — 'Crossroads Café', part of a scheme for international outreach that includes the projected import of an old Japanese farmhouse. Because of *The Farm*'s scope, it is virtually impossible to summarize in this context, but its most interesting aspect is its fusion of art with other functions. *The Raw Egg Animal Theatre* (TREAT), for example, could be called a stage set or an environmental installation piece as well as several other things. Sherk is concerned to integrate 'the human creative process — art — with those of other life forms'. She is fundamentally a visionary, albeit an earthy and practical one who managed six years ago to found and then maintain this huge-budget near fantasy. *The Farm* emerged organically, so to speak, from Sherk's earlier art, which involved identification with animals, study of animal behavior and work with growing things, such as the creation of portable parks in the inner city and on the freeways.

Sherk's subject, like that of Ukeles and many other artists in the show, might be said to be nurturance and its meaning in an art context that

sees it as a gender-related tabu. Yet like the notion of a female collage esthetic, this is also reducible to the dreaded 'nature-nurture syndrome' which is a tabu within as well as outside the feminist movement. In some views, nature and culture are incompatible and any hint of female identification with the forms or processes of nature is greeted with jeers and even, perhaps, fears that parallel those of the bureaucratic patriarchy when they tried to censor Monica Sjoo's graphic depiction of 'God Giving Birth' at the Swiss Cottage Library in 1973. Some of the artists in *Issue,* however, refuse to separate their social activism and their involvement in the myths and energies of women's distant histories and earth connections.

It seems to me that to reject all of these aspects of women's experience as dangerous stereotypes often means simultaneous rejection of some of the more valuable aspects of our female identities.

Though used against us now, their final disappearance would serve the dominant culture all too well. This is not the place to delve into the disagreements between socialist feminism and radical or cultural feminism (I, for one, am on 'Both Sides Now'). But in regard to the issues raised in *Issue*, I would insist that one of the reasons so many women artists have engaged so effectively in social-change and/or outreach art is woman's political identification with oppressed and disenfranchised peoples. This is not to say we have to approve the historic reasons for that identification. However, we should be questioning why we are discouraged from thinking about them. Because such identification is also a significant factor in the replacement of colonization and condescension with exchange and empathy[10] that is so deeply important to the propagation of a feminist political consciousness in art.

Lucy R. Lippard

[1] Griselda Pollock, 'Feminism, Femininity and the Hayward Annual Exhibition 1978', *Feminist Review,* No. 2, 1979, p.54.
[2] Another omission that will be obvious to British viewers is that of the Hackney Flashers; I would have loved to have them in the show but they had just stopped making new work when I asked, and I had decided not to exhibit anything previously shown in England.
[3] A 'Social Work' show was held at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art in 1979, but that was still in an 'alternate space'. I organised 'Some British Art from the Left' at Artists' Space in NYC in 1979, as well as 'Both Sides Now' at Artemisia in Chicago; in 1980 'Vigilance' — a show of artists' books about social change — was at Franklin Furnace and there have also been small 'political' shows at institutions outside of New York as well as a number of artist-organized events over the years.
[4] Roszika Parker, talking to Susan Hiller, though the view expressed was a prevailing one rather than that of either participant; *Spare Rib*, No. 72, 1978, p.30.
[5] Harmony Hammond covered this in her 'Horseblinders', *Heresies* No. 9, 1980.
[6] Rowbotham, Segal and Wainright, *Beyond the Fragments: Femininism and the Making of Socialism,* Merlin Press, London, 1979, p.109.
[7] See *Heresies* No. 9, 1980, for Leslie Labowitz' 'Developing a Feminist Media Strategy'.
[8] Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', *Understanding Brecht,* New Left Books, London, 1977, p.86.
[9] May Stevens, 'Taking Art to the Revolution', *Heresies, No. 9, 1980.* All her quotations here.
[10] Mary Kelly, in the notes for and around *Post Partum Document* — the sources for all quotations here.
[11] Adrian Piper raised the crucial distinction between condescension and empathy at a symposium on social-change art at the Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center in June 1980.

Statement

On a recent visit to New York I saw the show of British Art at the Guggenheim. My thoughts on seeing this bland view of British Art was to wonder why this show (with one or two exceptions) not only didn't reflect current ideas but gave no indication of the excitement of a decade, where artists in the British Isles forgot to apologise for not being American and located their work from a position in their own society. Instead the exhibition seemed predominantly to act as a mirror for the great American schools, and because the work extracted style rather than motivation, appeared second rate by comparison. At the beginning of the 70's as one set of artists and writers bewailed the loss of the sixties, with its brief, transient, cheap thrills, others set about building new structures in which to operate and to create new forms to deal with those new structures. As virtually no market existed it made these artists the most fortunate and the most unfortunate simultaneously. The relinquishing of many of the constraints necessary for aiming at the market trends and fads, enabled them to produce interesting and varied work and, meanwhile, on the whole, grants, purchases and prestigious shows remained locked into a memory of the individual hypes of the previous decade. A myth has been perpetuated that the 60's was a period of flowering for British Art and the 70's never matched up to it, producing little of consequence. This is difficult to comprehend when one considers that there have been three flourishing fields of activity, feminist art practice, performance art, and work with a socio-political content and all three fed each other and interpenetrated. Despite the fact that these areas were to a large extent ignored officially, much work managed to permeate outwards and a range of possibilities began to emerge, more artists than ever before were motivated towards art with a social meaning and political effectiveness. Art practice which had become a hermetically sealed internal reaction to each preceding movement looked outside art for its subject and motivation, and began to develop an intense variety of different and exciting aesthetic criteria. Alternative spaces, alternative methods, alternative subject matter, alternative audiences, alternative contexts and so on became a possibility. The trouble with these kinds of steps into the unknown means (especially in England) that emerging work is judged by the rules learnt in previous work, so when artists engaged in a developing process took subject as the starting point, the art world had to learn to see again, having become virtually visually disabled. This exhibition comes at a point in time at the beginning of the 80's when having laid the ground on which to build a strong art practice, fears of cultural colonialism are no longer appropriate and it seems necessary to break out of our almost self-imposed isolation to compare and debate ideas with artists of common interest outside our own country.

We need to examine what is specific as well as what is shared by women in differing situations. If circumstances and consciousness are concertina-ed we fold an abstract category woman into a particular historical movement which has emerged out of changes in the life of some woman. —
Sheila Rowbotham, Beyond the Fragments

This quotation by Sheila Rowbotham probably sums up the motivation behind this exhibition — that is, it takes the need to examine the specific in order to explain the whole. It seems to me that in order to achieve an art practice which transcends time and geographical boundaries and thus be universally understood, it only has a chance of doing so through an examination and an

understanding of particular circumstances. The intrusion the women's movement has made on politics by a continuous insistence that sexual politics and the lived experience of women be a conscious consideration in party/group politics — in organisation, activism and theory — is probably not assessable at this point in time. But one factor feminists do recognise, is that to insist that 'women' have a unified and common viewpoint as well as a biological one is clearly untrue.

To bring together women artists at this stage, who don't represent a common homogeneous politics, but who do feel the need to work in a variety of specific contexts, whose ideas focus on particular circumstances — I think is not only an important milestone in recent art practice but also in the calendar of women's shows, which have taken place in the last eight years. Some of the most memorable international shows fall into the following categories — art historical: as in *Women Artists 1550-1950* brought together by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin at the Los Angeles County Museum; practice: general, current and past work by women, as in the Kunstlerinnen in Berlin in 1977; definitions of feminist art: as in the Dutch show which opened in the Municipal Museum of the Hague in November 1979 and now on tour — and now this exhibition which completes the circuit and exposes the social and political nature of feminist art practice through a variety of working methodologies. To have an exhibition of this nature at a time when we could be forgiven for thinking we were living in a time warp (to judge from recent exhibitions, as well as this year's decision by the Arts Council awards panel to ignore women's work) is to say the least timely.

Margaret Harrison, September 1980