



IMAGE: TEEHAN & TEEHAN

review

Women on Art Symposium

Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow

The passage of the last century has been a long journey in the history of the writing of the consciousness of women. This consciousness is both historical and particular, recurrent and mutable, heterogeneous, in relation to the particularity of the political, cultural and economic contours of the inscribed mores of women's lives.

Every struggle, language of resistance, so to speak, is of its time and place, an echo, a continuity with past struggle, but reactive, responsive to other external forces which do not solely originate with questions of gender; but with other categories of identity which shape the expression and reception and production of power in myriad forms in public and private life.

The articulation and evolution of feminist thinking this century is often a fragmented story, always being found again and restored to a significant place which may ensure its recovery and endurance but perhaps not. Structural inequalities which effect women's lives remain persistent despite obvious changes in their form and maintenance, Virginia Woolf's assertion that women require 'a room of one's own and £500 a year' still holds true but perhaps translates into the contemporary equivalent of 'a right to a house, no glass ceilings, support for carers, job security and decent wages for work'.

The desire to discuss the contradiction between historical progress by women and the success of the women's movement set against the persistent presence of the institutionalised sexism was the premise of the *Women On Art Symposium* held at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow. The Symposium, it was claimed, would be the place to discuss such continuing inequalities and gendering of power relations within 'cultural industries' which undervalue the major contribution of women's labour, to their social, economic and cultural function and value. It would aim "to address a number of key challenges for women working in the cultural industries at the present time. The main areas of debate would cover areas such as:

- *Gender and segregation; why certain jobs within the cultural industries are automatically sanctioned as 'female' and others, frequently those with greater promotional prospects, creative input and financial rewards as 'male'.*
- *Working within the cultural industries in Britain today in relation to other European countries; are women forced to adopt a male pattern of working life which does not accommodate their roles as primary carers? Research has shown that the majority of women are*

demanding a personal/professional balance to the quality of their lives; what are the steps towards changing this culture?

- *The importance of creativity and lateral thinking for women within their own professional cultural environment; are women influencing methods of training and education within this field to the extent of changing the working culture? Can we look at role models for women within cultural industries from outside Britain, in particular the USA and Southern Africa.*

The creation of a public space to debate such questions concerning women is necessary, particularly given the promise of the socio-economic analysis which underpinned the rationale of the symposium. However, before discussing some of the features of the symposium, the socio-economic audit of gender equality must be applied to the symposium itself. Simply put, why was it so expensive to attend? How many women working in Glasgow and other locations in Scotland could afford to attend the conference when the fee was so prohibitive? If one purpose of the symposium was to form some continuing forum then it ought to have striven to include the participation of as many women as possible in as many roles and relationships to the arts and particularly from within the city to which it has civic responsibilities. Attendance fees of this sort smack of the spectacle of a middle class philanthropy which eschews the economic and financial austerity, funding cuts and under-resourcing which characterises the working lives of people in organisations the symposium was meant to target. The symposium therefore excludes those with the least economic resources. An ironic fact.

Anyway, if you somehow could afford to be there, the essence of the symposium's themes were perhaps most effectively and interestingly explored in the contributions of Sue Innes, Carol Becker, Angela Kingston and the Goat Island Performance Group.

Sue Innes' talk, *Widening the Cracks and Avoiding the Chasms*, was a scholarly presentation of a sociological analysis of the types and forms of social change which have happened in the working and domestic lives of women since the advent of suffrage. This was set against both the cracking face of the dominant hegemony, male defined, with which it is in conflict and its recurring features of exclusion despite advances by women to break down its appearance. She quoted from her book *Making It Work*,

"what has changed least...is the habit of measuring things against a male defined standard; we still use definitions of work and progress, what counts as success, the place of caring, and appropriate behaviour along a false axis of reason to emotion, which are a consequence of male pre-eminence (dominance) in the public sphere".

The split between public and private life is still con-

sidered the role of women to resolve. State legitimisation of equality issues has the face of ineffective equal opportunities legislation exacerbated by the continuing lack of flexible, adequate childcare and employment practices which take account of the care responsibilities of its employees. Despite this discrimination, women's relationship to themselves, she argued, "had changed but an awful lot hadn't, re women's family work and responsibilities and access to resources (low pay etc.) and also questions of backlash and the 'crisis of masculinity'".

Paradoxically, the grater presence of women in the labour market is synchronous with the redefinition and redistribution of capital and the creation of the flexible, multi-skilled, multi-part-time, contract culture of the present pay-as-little-as-you-can labour economy. Economic differentials between women have been exacerbated and there is a widening gap between women defined by class, ethnicity, age, and motherhood and use value of their particular occupation.

Despite the contradictions of the economic evidence, Sue Innes argued there has been an 'epistemic shift' which had seen perceptions and values change and spaces, psychological and material, where women could assert new values which are neither drawn from traditional prescriptions of 'femininity' nor from uncritically adopting male personae in working life which alienates other women.

This latter point—of the nature of female behaviour in positions of power—is the meeting place of the public and private self for women. The qualities, tensions and relationships between the inner self and internal authority and the external self and female expressions of leadership were one of the areas of analysis undertaken by Carol Becker, Dean of the Institute of Chicago, in her inspiring talk which, for myself, was the key contribution of the symposium.

The power of her thesis lay in the importance of a psychological analysis of institutional behaviour by men and women and the exploration of the symbolic meaning of those institutions to the identity of its community. It is one of the tasks of a feminist project to encourage imagination of leadership roles, yet in a manner that does not collude with patriarchy nor use power in an unconscious, unhealthy dynamic to repair unacknowledged wounds which result in bullying, harassment, emotional abuse at work, hierarchical non-nurturant ego-laden environments in which people in power project onto others their unresolved conflicts. If women and men were to be good leaders, they must be conscious of their own symbolic role. What is a psychologically healthy working environment for a woman to create? It was essential for women she argued, to develop a public self. A woman in a leadership position must demonstrate her lack of fear of men to other women. She must show other women her comfort with her own authority, owning her decisions and responsibilities. She must not be the 'psychoanalytic monstrous mother' for women will look to her for guidance of how to be comfortable with their own creativity and through this her own sense of entitlement, a giving of psychological permission to be, to develop power and creativity.

Carol Becker articulated her thoughts on leadership with reference to her working class background and her relationship with her father. It was for her more significant in an adult sense: the assumption of equality which characterised her father's treatment of her. In her conjoining of the psychodynamic and the public, her work is reminiscent of Valerie Walkerdine and Carolyn Steedman, work through which women from working class backgrounds can find themselves included.

Other highlights of the symposium were contributions by Angela Kingston and the Goat Island Performance Group from Chicago. In her paper *Brushing Cindy's Hair*, Angela Kingston informed her ideas on the interiority of 'girlhood' from a psychoanalytic perspective, tracing the lineaments of female identity in its totality as expressed, rehearsed and displayed in the act of play. This centredness of identity was not of an essential femininity, but a deeply sensual and active engagement with the meanings of imaginary places in which the self kept order, was in charge and effective, had power. The sustaining of this sense of self-assurance and efficacy can be difficult for women to do, the obstacles to healthy self-esteem are numerous. It is important for childhood parts to be integrated into the adult woman to create the good mother internal object which it is vital to feel if you

wish to mother your own creativity and sense of value despite the fact this does not translate into economic well being for most women.

Lin Hixson and Mathew Goulish of the Goat Island Performance Group from Chicago articulated the phenomenological, philosophical method to the theory and practice of their group. They explore the aggregates of consciousness; sensation, perception, association are the objects of subjective analysis, the constructed unconsciousness the source for the taking apart, digestion and rebuilding of ideas which generate performance work. This 'first principles' approach to creativity eschews an essentialism which interprets experience as solely prescribed by gender and was a contribution to the symposium which had its intellectual and linguistic roots in phenomenology and spirituality.

The symposium featured contributions from many other women across diverse fields of interest; Janet Paisley talked of her life in balancing writing and motherhood, Paddy Higson displayed a shocking lack of preparation and any interest in even thinking about womens' issues in relation to the economy of film and television, Sam Ainsley talked of the lack of women teachers at Glasgow School of Art.

Women On Art is to be welcomed because the paucity of public and political spaces with power which are effective in the elimination of inequalities requires some form of initiative, action, forum for analysis at least. The economic rationalism and the turning of all processes of culture into products in a market place has dominated the economy of the arts, education and health; has created new forms of pover-

ty, inequality, criteria of value. The inequalities in distribution of wealth in the arts merely mirrors the broader societal context in Scotland within which it is located. Curiously, the symposium felt placeless as the particularities of the social, political and economic base of power in the arts in Scotland and the consequences of not having a parliament did not feature much in discussion. If there is to be any radical change in eliminating discrepancies in power, the wider political picture is of great significance to women living and working in Scotland. The potential for a new social and political formation in a Scotland with a parliament should have excited greater enthusiasm in the minds of the organisers.

Lorna J. Waite
