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TEXTUAL STRATEGIES: THE POLITICS OF ART-MAKING

To say that there is a crisis in contemporary criticism might seem like overstating the case for a situation in which critical definitions and methods merely lack precision and rigor. Yet it cannot be disputed that in terms of the feminist issue of the representation of women and the figuration of female sexuality in art, a crisis does exist. In order to develop a truly effective feminist artistic practice, one that works toward productive social change, it is necessary to understand the question of representation as a political question, to have an analysis of women's subordination within patriarchal forms of representation. This article emerges from the need for a feminist re-examination of the notions of art, politics, and the relations between them, an evaluation which must take into account how 'femininity' itself is a social construct with a particular form of representation under patriarchy. We have come together, a feminist film theorist and a feminist artist, to discuss these issues, and more specifically to determine to what extent current definitions of art as a political activity are limited. It is indeed a crisis of definitions and methods where women are concerned.

Traditional notions of art have emphasized personal expression, from the subjective lyricism of the Romantics to the individual virtuosity of the avant-gardists. Initially in the women's movement feminists emphasized the importance of giving voice to personal experiences; the expression and documentation of both women's oppression as well as aspirations, provided women's art with a liberating force. However, a radical reconceptualization of the personal to include more broadly social and even unconscious forces has necessitated a more analytic approach to these personal experiences. The experiential must be taken beyond the consciously felt and articulated needs of women if a real transformation of the *structures* of women's oppression is to occur.

While we recognise the value of certain forms of radical political art, whose aim it is to highlight feminist issues that are generally submerged by dominant cultural discourse, it seems that this kind of work, if untheorized,

can only have limited results. These more militant forms of feminist art such as agit-prop, body-art, and ritualized violence, can produce immediate results by allowing the expression of rage, for example, or by focusing on a particular event or aspect of women's oppression. But these results may be short-lived, as in the case of heightened activism resulting from an issue-oriented art work. A more theoretically informed art can prove capable of producing enduring changes by addressing itself to the structural and deep-seated causes of women's oppression rather than to its effects. A radical feminist art would include an understanding of how women are constituted through social practices in culture; once it is understood how women are consumed in this society it would be possible to create an aesthetics designed to subvert the consumption of women, thus avoiding the pitfalls of a politically progressive art work which depicts women in the same forms as the dominant culture. Consequently, we see a need for theory that goes beyond the personal into the questions of ideology, culture, and the production of meaning.

To better understand the point at which theory and art intersect it might be useful to consider women's cultural production in four categories¹. Our attempt here is to describe a typology rather than criticise these positions for their shortcomings. In evaluating these types of women's art, our constant reference point will be the recognition of the need for a theory of cultural production as an armature for any politically progressive art form. When we talk about culturally constructed meaning, we are referring to a system of heterogeneous codes that interact. The meaning we derive from any interaction is dependent on our knowledge of a set of conventions ensnaring every aspect of our lives, from the food we eat to the art we like. Every act (eating an orange, building a table, reading a book) is a social act; the fundamentally human is social. Theory enables us to recognise this and permits us to go beyond individual, personally liberating solutions to a 'socially' liberated situation. Any society will impose a certain selection or priority of meaning upon the multiplicity of meanings inherent in a given situation. Culture as a mechanism that imposes an assumed unity on this diversity of codes, has a naturalising function in that it makes this constructed unity appear as given and enduring. Theory, as a systematic organisation of the range of cultural phenomena, can produce the tools for examining the political effectiveness of feminist art work.

Each of the four categories in our typology of women's art-making implies a specific relation between strategy and action. By examining each of the categories and applying the definition of theory that we have suggested, we can ascertain the assumptions that characterise these relations. From doing this it should be clear that sets of assumptions do not constitute a theory, although they may be sufficient to establish a particular type of artistic practice. When we speak of the political in discussing art work we

must ask the question, 'Action, by whom, and for what purpose?'. Each of the four categories will propose different answers to these questions, because they each have different goals and strategies.

One type of women's art can be seen as the glorification of an essential female art power. This power is viewed as an inherent feminine artistic essence which could find expression if allowed to be explored freely. This is an essentialist position because it is based on the belief in a female essence residing somewhere in the body of women. It is an orientation that can be found in the emphasis on 'vaginal' forms in painting and sculpture; it can also be associated with mysticism, ritual and the postulation of a female mythology. It is possible to see this type of art which valorizes the body as reversing the traditional dichotomy of mind over matter. If we accept the premise that Western metaphysical thought hierarchises binary opposition so that one term always predominates, this form of art can be seen as an aesthetics of simple inversion. Within the context of a logic that reduces the multiplicity of difference to the opposition of two positivities, feminist essentialism in art simply reverses the terms of dominance and subordination. Instead of the male supremacy of patriarchal culture, the female (the essential feminine) is elevated to primary status.

Much of the art work in this category has as its aim the encouragement of self-esteem through valorization of female experiences and bodily processes. This art seeks to reinforce satisfaction in being a woman in a culture that does the opposite. The strategy is that by glorifying the bodies of women in art work an identificatory process is set up such that the receivers of the art work (the women for whom the work is intended) will validate their own femaleness. This type of art work can also be seen to redefine motherhood as the seat of female creativity from which spring female deities, witchcraft and matriarchal cultural heritage. Operating on the assumption that our society isolates women and inspires competition, this kind of art seeks to encourage the mutual glorification and bonding of women. One of the main ways some of the art works achieve this is through emotional appeal, ritual form, and synaesthetic effects in performance, with the aim of enveloping spectators in feminine solidarity.

One example of women's art that would fall into this category is the work of Gina Pane, the French body artist whose performances for the last ten years have involved self-mutilation and the ritualised drawing of her own blood. She defines the incision of her face with a razor blade in one performance as a 'transgression of the taboo of the sore through which the body is opened, and of the canons of feminine beauty,' and at least one critic has appropriated current terminology in his praise of her work because it 'privileges the signifier on the side of pain.' Complications arise, however, when the assumptions underlying this type of art are examined. When an aesthetics of pain is counterposed against the assumed pleasurable discourse

of dominant artistic practice, a rigid pleasure/pain dichotomy is already accepted as given. By confronting one half of the dichotomy with its opposite, Pane's work is seen to offer an act of artistic contestation. However, this confrontation seems rather to continue the dualistic tradition of Western metaphysics.

The very definition of opposition thus comes into question. By evaluating pain to the status of an oppositional artistic force, it would seem that Pane is simply reinforcing a traditional cliché about women. If women are assumed to be outside the patriarchal discourse, would the first rumble of self-expression take the form of very traditional pain or self-mutilation? Pane's comments about her work seem to indicate that she feels in wounding herself she is wounding society. However, because her wounds exist in an art context, they are already ritualised and easily absorbed into an artworld notion of beautiful pain, distanced suffering, and a whole legacy of exquisite female martyrdom. The solidarity in suffering that this work seems to want to promote is actually a form of solidarity that has been imposed on women for centuries. It is bondage rather than bonding.

Hannah Wilke adopts a related strategy of body art by creating an art work that has as its aim 'that women allow their feelings and fantasies to emerge... (so that) this could lead to a new type of art.' In her *S.O.S. Starification Object Series* (1975) she says, 'I am my art. My art becomes me.' She sets up an equivalency between her body's poses and its alteration after vaginally shaped pieces of chewing gum are attached to the exposed areas, and language where the meaning of a word or series of words is transformed by a slight change or modification in the letter(s) – scarification becomes starification. Wilke explains that 'my art is seduction'. Often her poses take on the characteristics of a centrefold, her eyes directed to the assumed male spectator of nude paintings and *Playboy* magazine. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger points out 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. The surveyor of the woman in herself is male; the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object.'² In objectifying herself as she does, in assuming the conventions associated with a stripper (as someone who will reveal all), Wilke seems to be teasing us as to her motives. Is she the stripper and the stripped bare. She does not make her own position clear; is her art work enticing critique or titillating enticement? It seems her work ends up by reinforcing what it intends to subvert. In using her own body as the content of her art, in calling her art 'seduction', she complicates the issues and fails to challenge conventional notions of female sexuality. The consequences are such that they permit statements like the following to issue forth from male critics: 'By manipulating the image of a sex kitten (female sex object), Wilke manages to avoid being trapped by it without having to deny her own beauty to achieve liberation.'

Wilke and Pane are only two, very divergent, types of women's art that

fall into our first category. Yet they both enable us to draw certain conclusions about this type of art-making. Because this kind of art has no theory of the representation of women underlying it, it presents images of women as unproblematic. It does not take into account the social contradictions involved in 'femininity'. In much of this art, women are re-installed in society as the bearers of culture, albeit an alternative culture. In this way what is assumed to be a progressive position is actually retrograde. Although the content of this art is different (19th century women instructed their children in art appreciation and manners, here they embody and illustrate the virtues of womanhood), the function remains unchanged; in both cases they are the custodians of what is deemed true, good and beautiful. Being-a-woman is the essential presupposition underlying this art work: what this notion entails is assumed to be generally accepted, uncontradictory, and immutable. Whether the art focuses on pain (immolation) or pleasure (eroticism), it does not challenge a fixed and rigid category of 'femininity'.

The second strategy or type of feminist artistic practice views women's art as a form of sub-cultural resistance. It postulates a kind of artisanal work, often overlooked in dominant systems of representation, as the 'unsung province' of women's art activity.

An example of this type of work is the valorization of crafts, such as patch-work quilts, and the activities of women in the home. It posits the development of a feminist counter-tradition in the arts, by the valorization or reconstruction of a hidden history of female productivity. The strategy here is one of encouragement and nurturance and has the positive effect of stimulating women's creativity in the discovery of new areas of female expression. By redefining art to include crafts and skills heretofore neglected, it obviates the ideological distinction between 'high' and 'low' cultural forms. In so doing, it emphasises that this distinction is a tool of patriarchy that has served to downplay or negate creative avenues for women.

However, this can also be seen as an essentialist position since it views women as having an inherent creativity that simply goes unrecognised by mainstream culture. It therefore cannot be seen as a broadly effective political practice because it emphasises the personal at the expense of the social, and thus is ineffectual in transforming the structural *conditions* that oppress women. This is not to say that this kind of art-making is unimportant, but simply to point out the limitations of an untheorised strategy.

Although Jackie Winsor is not usually considered a feminist artist, she does fit into our second category of women's art, and in fact at least one critic considered her a feminist artist when she first came to attention in 1970-71 (Fig. 18). Her constructions of wood, hemp and other 'natural' materials



18 Jackie Winsor, *30 to 1 Bound Trees*, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1971.

convey a post-minimal fascination with geometric forms and the imposition of order and regularity. While she lists her concerns as repetition, weightiness, and density, there is in her work-process itself careful attention to craft-like details, particularly in the spinning-like monotony of some of the hemp and wood pieces and even of the actual carpentry itself. In *From the Center*, Lucy Lippard characterises her work in the following way: 'Repetition in Winsor's work refers not to form, but to process, that is, to the repetition of single-unit materials which finally make up a unified, single form after being subjected to the process of repeatedly unraveling, then to the process of repeatedly binding or to the process of repeatedly nailing into wood or to the process of repeatedly sticking bricks in cement or to the process of repeatedly gouging out tracks in plywood.'³

Jackie Winsor's work is considered much 'tougher' than the work of other women who might be placed in this category, for example the 'pattern painters' such as Harmony Hammond. Her work has been seen as speaking a rugged female masochism encompassing the outdoors, and including skills usually reserved for men. Yet, in discussing her work Winsor often ties the origin of a particular sculpture to an early emotional childhood experience, as in *Nail Piece*. When she was a child, her father planned a house which her mother built while he was away at work. At one point, says Winsor, 'My father gave me an enormous bag of nails and left, saying to nail them down to keep the wood in place. I did ... and used the whole bag of nails to do it. The part he told me to nail down needed about a pound of nails. I think I put in about twelve pounds. My father had a fit because I'd used up all his nails. They made such a fuss about it that it left quite an impression on me.' And like much traditional women's work, Winsor's pieces conceal the actual labor involved in their construction.

A parallel might be drawn at this point between this aspect of Winsor's work and a related phenomenon with regard to women's craftwork as in quilts or baskets. The mechanisms of repression have functioned traditionally in patriarchal culture to negate the complexity or degree of work involved in women's traditional handiwork. By foregrounding this 'other' of conventional high art, the art work that falls into our second category emphasises that there *is* another art, which has a history, and which has been repressed due to specific historical needs of the dominant culture. The 'alternative tradition' approach emphasises the social and functional aspects of things such as weaving or pottery-making in communities. We agree that this type of contribution to feminist art-making is an important one; however it is equally important to point out the limitations of a form of self-contained subcultural resistance, one which does not work in a dialectical relation with the dominant male culture. A possible consequence is the 'ghettoization' of women's art in an alternative tradition, thereby limiting its effectiveness for broad social change.

Our third category of women's art derives as well from this aspect of isolationism. This category of women's art views the dominant cultural order as a monolithic construction in which women's cultural activity is either submerged or entirely outside its limits. This position is an antidote to feminist essentialism in that it recognises that what has traditionally been known as the 'form' and the 'content' of culture both carry meaning.

However, ironically, it is also the basis of *both* 'separatist' (artists who do not identify with the art-world) and non-feminist (women artists who maintain that they are people who happen to be women) argumentation. Thus this category includes two groups of women at opposite ideological poles. One group wants to establish a separate social order unaffiliated with the patriarchal culture. The other group, women who disavow their sex, attempts to ignore the issue of 'women in crisis', seeking total identification with the patriarchy.

The strategy of the first group is that by establishing their own society, women will be able to combat the patriarchy. However, by failing to theorise how many women are produced as a category within the social complex, or how femininity is a social construction amidst a whole range of intersecting determinations, these artists lose sight of a solution that is workable in practice. As with many utopian visions, lack of integration within the wider social sphere presents obstacles. It is particularly difficult in the case of feminist separatism in that the postulation of an alternative separate culture can often be founded on simplistic notions.

The example of Terry Wolverton presents both the benefits and the limitations of the separatist strategy. As co-director of the Lesbian Art Project (which provides a programme of Sapphic Education) and producer-codirector of a feminist science fiction theatre exploration, Wolverton informs her art work with the desire to shape an alternative female culture. This takes the form of validating craft projects such as bread-dough sculptures and costumed happenings because they are produced by lesbians in the community. One positive consequence is that this type of art allows women to explore their feelings and attitudes, enabling them to develop self-esteem and pride in the discovery of their love and trust for one another. The productive result is an attack on the destructive dissatisfaction with being a woman that patriarchal culture fosters. However, the separatist position seems to be an example of this self-validation gone awry: the very notion of positive (lesbian) images of women relies on the already constituted meaning of 'woman'. Again, this unproblematic notion of 'femaleness' does not take into account that meaning is a dialectical process which involves an interaction between images and viewers. By failing to theorise how this meaning is produced within the social complex, this art considers the notion of femininity as unproblematic and positions women's culture as separate and different from mainstream culture. This can produce

very disturbing results, as in the case of some of the art work validated by Wolverton, in which the prominence given to the exposed breasts of the subjects of the art work is strikingly similar to that in the photography of Les Krims, an artist noted for his particularly virulent expressions of misogyny.

The second group of women within our third category of artistic practice cannot be said to have a strategy because they do not view themselves as artists engaged in the feminist struggle. It is at this stage that women who have been favored through more strident forms of careerism make the assertion that women's art has outgrown its need for feminism. For these women, feminism is no longer useful, primarily because it was seen as a means to an end. But this form of separatism - women who deny their sex - does not necessarily have to exploit feminism. Artists falling into this category, such as Rosalyn Drexler ('I don't object to being called a woman artist as long as the word "woman" isn't used to define the kind of art I create') and Elaine de Kooning ('We're artists who happen to be women or men among other things we happen to be - tall, short, blonde, dark, mesomorph, ectomorph, black, Spanish, German, Irish, hot-tempered, easy-going - that are in no way relevant to our being artists') simply deny that their work is embedded in a social context, or that art-making, like being a woman, is a form of social practice. Yet in the dialogue in which these two artists made the above statements, when each describes how she began her career in art, both mention being 'taken' to an exhibit by a man (husband or teacher) and being thereby 'introduced' to certain aspects of the art world.⁴

The final type of artistic practice situates women at a crucial place within patriarchy which enables them to play on the contradictions that inform patriarchy itself. This position sees artistic activity as a textual practice which exploits the existing social contradiction toward productive ends. Accordingly, this position takes culture as a discourse in which art as a discursive structure and other social practices intersect. This dialectic foregrounds many of the issues involved in the representation of women. In these works the image of women is not accepted as an already produced given, but is constructed in and through the work itself. This has the result of emphasising that meanings are socially constructed and demonstrates the importance and functioning of discourse in the shaping of social reality.

In discussing our fourth category of feminist art-making, we can clarify the issue of theory by underlining the difference between women making art in a male-dominated society and feminist art working against patriarchy. Activism alone in women's art has limited effects because it does not examine the representation of women in culture or the production of women as a social category. We are suggesting that a feminist art evolves from a theoretical reflection on representation: how the representation of women is produced, the way it is understood, and the social conditions in which it is situated. In addition to specific artistic practices that fall into this

category we should point out that important critical work is being done in theoretical journals such as *m/f*, *Camera Obscura*, and *Discourse*, all of which contain articles analysing cultural production from a feminist perspective.

In *Post-Partum Document* Mary Kelly deconstructs the assumed unity of the mother/child dyad in order to articulate the mother's fantasies of possession and loss. By mapping the exploration of psychic processes, she indicates the ways in which motherhood is constructed rather than biologically given. One section, displayed as a series of transparent boxes, is a record of 'conversations' between mother and son just as the child is leaving the family to enter school. Each box contains a drawing done by the child, remarks by the child, the mother's reaction, and the mother's diary. This information is supplemented by a Lacanian psychoanalytic text describing the constitution of the mother's subjectivity under 'motherhood' (patriarchy). This method allows the spectator to construct several positions simultaneously.

In a September 1976 press release Mary Kelly described her work in the following way: '... I am using the "art object" explicitly as a fetish object in order to suggest the operations of the unconscious that underly it. The stains, markings and word imprints have a minimum sign value in themselves, but a maximum affective value in relation to my lived experience. In psychoanalytic terms, they are visual representations of cathected memory traces. These traces, in combination with the diaries, time-tables and feeding charts, constitute what I would call a discourse which "represents" my lived experience as a mother, but they are consciously set up in an antagonistic relationship with the diagrams, algorithms and footnotes, thereby constituting another discourse which "represents" my analysis, as a feminist, of this lived experience.'

Martha Rosler's video tapes address the ideology of bourgeois culture. In *Semiotics of the Kitchen* an antipodean Julia Child demonstrates the use of gourmet cooking utensils within a lexicon of rage and frustration alluding to a less civilized time when preparing the meal had more to do with survival than commodity fetishism. In *Losing - A Conversation with the Parents* an at-home TV interview style is adopted as two middle class parents describe the death of their daughter by anorexia nervosa, the self-starvation disease that afflicts (mostly) teenage women from middle class families. In the attempt of the parents to present a 'coherent narrative' of their misfortune, many of the social contradictions contained in their position(s) are indexed, most specifically, 'starvation in the midst of plenty'.

Rosler's bound volume of three post-card novels is entitled *Service: A Trilogy of Colonization*. Each novel, *A Budding Gourmet* (about a middle class housewife who takes a gourmet cooking class because she feels 'it will enhance "her" as a human being'), *McTowers Maid* (about a woman

employee who organises the workers in a fastfood chain), and *Tijuana Maid* (about a Mexican woman who comes to San Diego to work as a maid in a middle class household – the novel is in Spanish with the translation appended in the trilogy), deals with women and food in relation to issues of class, sex, and race. Originally Rosler sent these food novels through the mail as postcard series, one card about every five to seven days. As she makes clear in an introductory note to the trilogy, the spectator or reader of an art work is an integral part of the piece itself. 'Mail both is and isn't a personal communication. But whether welcome or unwelcome it thrusts itself upon you, so to speak, and must be dealt with in the context of your own life. Its immediacy may allow its message to penetrate the usual bounds of your attention. A serial communication can hook you, engaging your long-term interest (intermittently, at least). There was a lot of time – and mental space – around each instalment of these novels, time in which the communication could unfold and reverberate. So they are long novels, and slow ones.'

When various representations are placed in a crisis in a work of art, the work has a fissuring effect, exposing the elements that embody its construction. This is important to Judith Barry (our third example of art work in this category) 'in considering how women are represented by art, particularly in performance art where diverse conventions/disciplines intersect making possible a natural dialogue within these cultural conventions.' In *Past Future Tense* woman's position as icon is juxtaposed to a disparate psychological and social narrative detailing the question of woman as subject. The format of this piece calls into question the taken for granted assumption of a unified 'ego' of the woman, making apparent her real heterogeneity in its place. See *How To Be An American Woman* situates feminist social theory clichés informing seven horror stories of women's existence via a pre-recorded multi-track tape (rape, childbirth, abortion, marriage, divorce, old age, etc.) against the naked, immobilised body of a woman in an Italian arcade and museum. Several dualities are telescoped: American feminism's unproblematic relationship to the body of the woman/European body art (including another duality: nudity/pornography), woman as individual subject/popular history, performer/spectator, and the art world/larger social world. These dualities are readily identifiable, yet because they are not resolvable they remain in a contradictory stasis.

Kaleidoscope, a series of eight five-minute scenes employing conventions from TV, cinema, and theatre, explores the relationship of middle class feminism as it shapes the private and public lives of a heterosexual couple. The contradictory positions exhibited by the two protagonists (both played by women) as they attempt to live their beliefs, underscores the unresolvable contradictions contained in even the most progressive views of social organisations. Barry says of this piece, 'It is in trying to come to terms

with the world as perceived (a perception which is ideological) that psychoanalysis intervenes. As dreams, jokes and neuroses indicate, the unconscious does not describe a one-to-one relationship with the world. Jacques Lacan has shown that this unconscious is produced in language, hence the identity of the individual as speaking subject is fictional. Consequently, ideology's arbitrary nature within the domain of this fictional subject becomes apparent and yet simultaneously must remain unknown on some levels.'

From our descriptions of the work of these three artists it should be clear that an important aim of the art in this category is the critical awareness (both on the part of the spectator, and informing the work) of the social construction of femininity. For it is only through a critical understanding of 'representation' that a representation of 'women' can occur. We do not want to simply posit a definition of 'good women's art', for at this historical moment such a definition would foreclose the dialectical play of meaning that we are calling for. Our intention is to be suggestive rather than prescriptive. One strategy of this fourth type of art transforms the spectator from a passive consumer into an active producer of meaning by engaging the spectator in a process of discovery rather than offering a rigidly-formulated truth. Moreover, the art work strives to produce a critical perspective that questions absolute or reified categories and definitions of women. Both the social constructions of femininity and the psychanalytic construction of sexual difference can be foregrounded if the art work attempts to rupture traditionally held and naturalised ideas about women. Finally, a theoretical approach implies a break with the dominant notion of art as personal expression, resituating it along the continuum connecting the social with the political and placing the artist as producer in a new situation of responsibility for her images.

NOTES

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- 1 An initial formulation of these categories has been made by Laura Mulvey in an interview in *Wedge* No. 2, Spring 1978.
- 2 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Books 1972, p. 47.
- 3 Lucy Lippard, *From the Center*, New York 1976, p. 203.
- 4 *Art and Sexual Politics: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* edited by Thomas Hess & Elizabeth C. Baker, New York 1973, both quotes p. 57.