

## Introduction to *Women Artists Series Year Five*

by Lucy Lippard

Five years of women artists at Douglass Library, 44 one-woman shows by the end of this season, plus group shows of New Jersey women and the Rip-Off File: Landmarks for an alternative exhibition space within a (usually sexist) institution. Until recently no fiscal support except from women's groups. Until this year a bastion amidst an all-male faculty at this women's college. In previous catalogues the artists' statements referred often to their alienation from the art world, to the warmth and solidarity of feminist groups, to the new community of women artists. They talked about their struggles, about hustling, about mirrors and self portraits, breaking boundaries, the nature of art, the sky, the edge, and the surface. They offered "circuits, events, signals, waves," "a feeling of movement," and "ironic, perverse, creative order, transcribed from the domestic arena," "bands of light"... bands of "song" or "talk," "a symbolic interpretation of life forms," a "picked-up image, its space activated by incidents and events," the "possession of a surface." They were "being tactile, geometric, organic, sensuous, subtle, sere, mystical," "thinking about how we can feminize our society, how we can make images which reflect a new set of values," and thinking about "the fleeting gestures, moments... caught in motion, the rhythm of the whole, seemingly discordant and incomplete" and how it "relates to fractured time." They tried "to turn woman from an object into an active subject."

Women's shows are still very important. In the past five years, thanks in great measure to such "separatism," there has been an increase in the number of women artists shown in commercial galleries and in large museum shows. But even now the figures are nowhere near equal representation, and the teaching situation remains virtually unimproved in many schools where the student body is mostly female and the faculty is mostly male. At this point, when the women artists' movement is just entering maturity, nothing could be more dangerous than to wallow in a false sense of victory. Loss of energy, loss of identification, means inevitably loss of ground. But aside from the strictly professional aspects, and farther reaching, is the psychological factor. It would be still sadder to lose the strength transmitted from artist to artist, generation to generation, when women support other women in alternative situations such as women's co-ops, workshops, art centers, local shows, and open shows, "salon de refuses" like this one, and hopefully, in the future, more connections between feminist artists and broader, extra-art world audiences. An increasing amount of vital work by feminist artists is being shown in more or less isolated places. This face bodes well for an expanded consciousness, a rejection of the social and esthetic pressures which constrict art world conventions, customs, fads. The Douglass series is unique, and also exemplary in that it has included well-known and unknown artists, a broad range of style, age, intent. Its organizers (Lynn Miller, with Naomi Kuchinsky) have had the courage to be honest with themselves and with their audience, which has responded in kind by strong reactions-for and against-each individual show.

While it is perfectly clear, as Linda Nochlin pointed out in last year's preface, that "there is no such thing as a monolithic or stereotypical 'feminine' style," this does not preclude what is equally clear to me... the existence of a many-branched and many-leveled female imagery (or on a still more diffused plane... a female sensibility) that pervades in one way or another all styles and, incidentally, all the work of artists who have shown here. An artist's experience as a woman may be only one of many elements in her art and it may emerge consciously or unconsciously, but one way or another it is a focal point at this time when a particularly pressing question is "What is a feminist artist?" Is a feminist artist a woman artist who joins a C-R or a discussion group or is politically active? Who supports other women? Who identifies with other women? Who does none of these things but attributes her career problems to sexist discrimination? Who is one of the boys and proves that women can be as strong as men? Whose work reflects her rhetoric? Whose work consciously reflects her experience as a woman? Whose work unconsciously reflects female biology? Who uses soft materials and domestic techniques or subjects? Who is obsessive? Who makes striated, veiled, mirrored, fragmented, autobiographical, centered, detailed or disjunctive objects? A lot of questions. So far no answers. A provocative place to go.

And another question: "What, then, is feminist criticism?" So far as I can see, it has not yet emerged, just as a feminist art is still under wraps, though the clues are there. At the moment criticism by feminist is primarily concerned with the politics of getting along, getting a piece of the pie, getting women into the mainstream, and though I've done my share of this, I have grave doubts about the outcome, about women being re-absorbed. I do know that my own work has changed a good deal in response to the specifically female issues raised by the women's art I've written about. I know that I'm less afraid now to be "personal, vulnerable" (don't have to cover all my feelings, qualify all my statements), that I'm more willing to consider biographical influences, to go out on a limb, to be called "retrograde," to reconsider all previous opinions in the light of my male-dominated past. I look forward to the time when both feminist art and criticism will be aware of and responsible to the core issues of real life feminism and only peripherally so to those of the incestuous establishment.

This Year: Diana Kaiser's clusters and piles and ranks and rows and patches of terra cotta relating to each other tentatively, each one a fragment moving toward completion in one kind of whole or another.

Ann Marie Rousseau's hairy contortions drawn in series but revolting against compartmentation by their variety.

Bibi Lencek's fragments of indoor action, where figures entwine with fabrics and flesh rolls over pattern

Agnes Dene's cerebral fragments of an all-encompassing whole stretched between breadth and detail with total clarity.

Christine Osinski's almost harsh, almost random photographs insisting on the listless, lonely identity of specific people and objects.

Bettye Saar's obsessively assembled minutiae, which once boxed, escape by association to their endlessly different sources.

Joan Snyder's wounded skins, her own, unbeautiful, lurid, painful, sensitive to touch and talk, splitting and grownign and needing. A Douglass alumna, Snyder provided the impetus and inspiration for this exhibition series five years ago, and the development of her work, through rough spots and smooth, offers a poignant parallel to the development of the women artist's movement.

Lucy Lippard  
August, 1975

Originally printed in *Women Artists Series Year Five* (New Brunswick, NJ: Women Artists Series, 1975), pp. 1-5.  
All rights reserved.