The Women and Arts Festival — the first of its kind in Australia — spanned the month of October, the state of New South Wales, and all areas of the arts. My initial and lasting impression on realising its scope was of the enormous reserves of energy and commitment which must have been called on to make the Festival a reality. Its rationale, planning, implementation and evaluation will be fully documented by those women whose involvement in all its many stages best qualifies them as appropriate to such an important task.*

In this article I shall discuss specific works and activities in the context of what I perceived to be some of the important issues foregrounded by those aspects of the Festival in which I was able to participate and/or view.

The first point I must make is that the overall emphasis of the Festival was not intended to be feminist — in speaking to some of the women involved in the planning and co-ordination of the multifaceted program, that fact was made clear. It was a forum for, and a celebration of, women’s contributions to the arts and as such its importance in allowing their work to be displayed/discussed/written about cannot be underestimated. It served to focus on a range of works and related issues which otherwise remain ignored or, at best, available to a select few.
In regard to the exhibition *From The Inside Out: Aspects of Women's Art*, the show's coordinator, Margot Osborne, outlined the main selection criteria as being firstly, that the works reflect the chosen theme, secondly that women whose work is underexposed in mainstream galleries be supported, and finally that the show represent a wide selection of women's work. That emphasis on diversity seemed to be reflective of the Festival as a whole and made for a seemingly endless variety. The many forums, workshops and seminars facilitated participation rather than passive attendance; there too, one confronted practitioners in the arts whose views ranged from committed feminist to those who wished to disavow their sex as a qualifying relation to their art practice.

However, if the scope of the Festival presented richness and diversity, it also simultaneously posited as unproblematic the notion of the category “women’s art”.

Although the expository intention of the Festival was clear, with attendant benefits to both audience and those so “exposed”, it also raised a number of important issues in relation to women and art.

**WOMEN WHO WANT TO BE... ARTISTS**

A recurring, though not dominant theme was succinctly expressed by Susan White, one of the women whose work was exhibited in the *From The Inside Out* show. Accompanying the black and white postcard reproduction of her painting “Self Portrait With Children” was the request/statement:

*Don't judge me as a mother*

*Don't judge me as a woman*

*Judge me as an artist.*

That was certainly neither the first time such a plea has been made, nor the only time it was made by artists in the Festival – either in a similar statement form, via the films on the lives of women artists, or in the discussions centred on women’s experience in varying art practices.

Ms White’s statement implies the existence of one fixed, immutable definition of “mother”, “woman” and “artist” by which one could judge her. A disavowal of one’s sex is a denial of the social context in which art is made – and consumed. But her statement can also be read as part of the current questioning of the idea of a separate “women’s art”. Ten years ago, if a painting contained a doyley or even looked as if it may have been worked “from the centre”, the tendency was to uncritically applaud it as the work of a woman in the supposed majority – women.

In questioning the value of such confining, “definitions” of women’s art – as that identifiable (read marketable) group of works manifesting a feminine sensibility, some women have sought to leave behind the label “woman” as one which relates to their art. Allied to that implicit denial of the social construction of “art”, “artist” and “woman”, together with the underlying ideological functions of such constructions, is a refusal to engage in the problematic of meaning in relation to the images employed by women working as art makers. Whilst it is true that the category “women’s art” is constantly being constructed, modified in a fluid continuum, it remains essential for feminists to critically discuss imagery employed by women. Such images have often perpetuated rather than challenged the patriarchal representation of Woman: woman-as-mother, woman-as-icon, woman-as-passive observer, inside, looking out. The recognition of how images of/by women can reinforce the status quo was not a concern felt by those who wished to celebrate, glorify the richness and diversity of such images. That the Festival was neither planned nor presented as a feminist strategy poses some problems in discussing it from a feminist perspective – some of those problems will become clear in a closer look at *From The Inside Out: Aspects of Women’s Art and the New Zealand exhibition Mothers.*

Robyn F Kahukiwa *Hinetaitama* 1980 oil on board 118 x 118 cm; cover image from *Mothers* catalogue, Womens Gallery, Wellington, NZ.

**FROM THE INSIDE: INTERNAL PROBLEMS**

From the *Inside Out* featured the work of forty women (selected from three hundred) and presented a wide array of media, style and subject matter. The chosen theme obviously allowed for flexibility in interpretation. Evidence of questioning or challenging patriarchal notions of “women” or “art” was not an overbearing presence in the show. Much of the work could, in feminist terms, be dismissed as well or poorly crafted but certainly lacking any theoretical framework from which to undermine rather than reinforce current constructions of “woman”. It is my view that a more rigorous theoretically based analysis of art practice is undeniably useful. It directs attention away from exclusively aesthetic concerns to the sociopolitical context in which art is made. It also foregrounds the problematic of meaning as an interaction between images and viewer. However the problem alluded to earlier – that of discussing works which never claimed to be feminist – is basic to using such analysis. That is, using theoretically based analysis to present a notion of “feminist” art from which other works will be measured and dismissed as untheorised.

In exploring the broader notion of women and art, I will restrict my attention to the works of three women in the show. The work of Ann Stephen and Ann Newmarsh contains the immediate, wistful memories that many workers are entering, in terms of choices, subjects, the wider sociopolitical forum.

Stephens’ photomontages deal with the monotonously ignored violence perpetrated by Anglo-ustralians toward Aborigines, with the escalation in the arms race and with the adulation of “male” and “foreign” art values comprise strong foundations for her visual language to communicate major issues of concern to all – certainly not just women. The two panels of Ann Newmarsh’s photo silkscreen _For John Lennon And The Sons_, are united by the central image of: It spoke to the media circulation of violent entertainment, and to the incitation of the idiom of violence through play. Evident works of those women is a commitment use of visual art practice as a means of communicating fundamental social concerns to a wide audience as possible. In fact, spoke to her work in two of the South Auckland Film Corporation films dealing with the inner and work of women (and shown as part of the Festival), Ann Newmarsh stated that “as concerns were not the primary impetus of her choice of media or mode of presentation. Rather it is her subject matter and its clear communication which concerns her most.

In relation to “women’s art” we may have seriously questioned the notion of a direct link between that term and art which may well be a “feminine sensibility”. However there is the idea that women’s art, and certainly any art by committed feminists, will reflect what may be termed “women’s issues”. The work of feminists, is still thought, will, informed by the experience of being female in a male dominated society, manifest another female sensibility by restituting women as a unit group aware of, and sensitive to, such issues as rape, domestic violence and sexist representation. The works of Ann Stephen and Ann Newmarsh were existing in that they deal with both the prevailing notion of subjects dealt to be appropriate to women and our understanding of feminisms as a sociopolitical movement. Art practice allows for a social intervention into such important problems, domestic violence but any analysis of the structural causes of such problems cannot be given the character of “women’s” if they can be dominated as women’s problem.

In contrast, Alisa Maxwell’s narrative romance, both lighthearted and humorous, made a less overtly political statement on construction of woman. She employed a use of text – in the form of excerpts from sources as Mills and Boon and Marilyn French – Byron, Donna J Steinbeck – and photo graphed images. The images, a woman in various “erotic” poses with her vacuum cleaner, were accompanied by a chosen text, there problematising the meaning the viewer might construct for the images alone. In placing a woman with a vacuum cleaner the work can be read as a restatement of the woman’s role being domestic. However, using the powerful communicative tool of humour, that notion undercuts by the atypical relationship set up with that domestic implementation.
The political positions of the artists represented in From the Inside Out: Aspects of Women's Art, were as varied as the works. The show lacked any focus other than that of woman-made. However it put paid to the notion that women make one particular type of art.

MOTHERS: PROBLEMS OF REPRODUCTION

"Women's mothering in the isolated nuclear family of contemporary capitalist society... prepares men for participation in a male-dominated family and society, for their lesser emotional participation in family life and for their participation in the capitalist world of work."  

The New Zealand exhibition Mothers, a selection from which comprised the exhibition in the Women and Arts Festival, was brought to Australia without assistance from the NZ Ministry for the Arts. It is one of several shows emanating from The Women's Gallery run in Wellington as a feminist collective.

The exhibition, very much in the "art from direct experience" and "self-expressive" mode, like the From The Inside Out show, presented a variety of media and styles, and a variation in the quality of the conceptualisation and execution of works around the appointed theme. Images of children, mothers and combinations thereof, predictably, abounded — alongside a couple of works depicting Maori motherhood myths.

The works, taken individually, represented the notion of "mother" as fixed, and in problematic relation to a unified female experience. Since a fundamental thread running through the show was the value of making art from direct, powerful personal experience, one could also state that the personal took pre-eminence over the social base in which motherhood is constructed. The very choice of theme relocated motherhood as central to the female experience and (reflecting the Festival's publicised aims) celebrated, glorified both motherhood and the art made around it.

The accompanying catalogue, with essays and poems on the theme, provided another voice to the works. However, there too one confronts "motherhood as a central area of women's experience, one which needs to be reclaimed as a theme in women's image-making and one where the surrounding myths need to be re-examined. The relation between "mother" and "woman" is never challenged. In her essay, for instance, Madonnas or Heroes? A reappraisal of the Mythic Model of Motherhood, Robin McKinlay argues for a re-examination and "rejection of the passive, self-denying mother goddess". In view of the superhuman nature of the task of mothering, she sees the mythic hero as the more appropriate model. She further states that "it is time the mother's task was re-examined and accorded the respect it deserves."

The replacement of one myth with another, more positive, myth, does little to confront the problem of why women continue to take almost total responsibility for parenting and how, in fact, we reproduce, through female-dominant parenting, that very role.

It is not within the scope of this article to examine the contribution to feminist analysis made by a psychoanalytically-based exploration of motherhood, but the work of Chodorow and others, highlights the dangers in a glorification of primary parenthood and the subsequent perpetuation of the notion that it is biologically or socially the exclusive domain of women.

Without wishing to undercut what I perceived to be the limitations of the show, I am unwilling to simply dismiss it as extremely limited in its conception of the current debate around "motherhood", sensing that the dangers in such dismissal are as great as an earlier dismissal of art by women when such work failed to manifest "feminine sensibility".

Taking three images as examples — Jacqueline Faber's Mother and Daughter Quarrelling; Helen Rockel's Contact and Jill Stewart's Madonna with Child — I want to discuss the collective sense of the works. The issue of why women are primary caretakers of children was not addressed, but collectively, the images intervene one on the other to challenge the notion that there is, or unified experience of mothering or one essentially female response to it. The representation of mother was, generally, in stark contradiction to the traditional male depiction of serene and detached mother/child relationship. Thus whilst the show lacks a firm theoretical base it could be said to present a rupture with a commonly held view of mothering as automatically rewarding and fulfilling.

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE IN FILM & THEATRE

If the imperative to dismiss much women's work as untheorised is one problem confronting feminist art, critical practice, the very predictability of the language used and the issues taken up is another.

In a film forum, held at Paddington Town Hall, and organised to discuss the kinds of interventions a feminist teacher/critic can make, Meaghan Morris eloquently and at times humorously, articulated some of the practical problems confronting her as a feminist writing about film.

Stipulating that film review is genre of newspaper discourse which traditionally stresses the persona of the reviewer, Ms Morris spoke of the need to move away from the persona of The Feminist Critic with the attendant expectations, on the part of readers, that such a person will only look at the cocktail of social issues (rape, domestic violence and sexism) — erroneously taken as "woman-related" and further, that she'll do so in some predictable way. Though none of the issues commonly adopted by The Feminist Critic are, by any means solved, the ways they're talked about often compound the problem. There is a need more than ever to renew feminist rhetoric — in the light of the rightwing backlash and the appropriation and trivialisation of feminism by anti-woman factions. Ms Morris challenged the notion that there could exist a list of "suitable subjects" which could define the parameters within which a feminist film critic or filmmaker might work. Rather the choice of what works to review, what to then emphasise and how to work within the constraints of newspaper journalism are more pressing issues. Her choice to write about the film Two Laws in preference to films by a German feminist filmmaker, was informed both by the knowledge that in reviewing the latter she could not rebuke the film's rhetoric and also by her strong feminist commitment to wider social issues than women-made films or films about women.

At the same forum, Lesley Stern, also spoke of the need to broaden the application of feminist film theoretical approaches. She referred to aspects of this theoretical approach as "Stalinist". In later discussion with the audience/participants, she admitted that such a term was an overstatement of her view that there were constrictions within an uncritical acceptance of such an approach. Such theories often fail to recognise the capacity of the viewer to read against the text rather than be defined by it.

I want to end with one of the notions expressed as part of the weekend Seminar on Women's Theatre. In a panel discussion, chaired by Anna Volska, women involved in all areas of theatre — director, critic, union representative, designer, actor, playwright and manager — spoke on the theme of their experience in that field.

Alison Lyssa, a playwright, spoke in anecdotal style of her earlier Debating Club days when no one could tell her how to address The Chair if that position was occupied by a woman. Using 'The Chair' as a metaphor for Power, Ms Lyssa acknowledged that many more women are occupying such positions. That quantitative social change however was not enough. "We must change the meaning of The Chair and of the relationships which emanate from all seas of power rather than continue its oppressive base."

I have loosely quoted Alison Lyssa who was not the first, nor I hope the last, person to make that important feminist distinction.

The opportunity and encouragement the Women and Arts Festival afforded all women who participated in it is but a first step towards allowing women not just to gain access to The Chair but to radically alter its nature and status.

Footnotes
1. Helen Grae's article "From the Margins: A Feminist Essay on Women's Art", which appeared in LIP 1981/82, p 13f, takes up this and other issues within the context of reviewing an international women's art show.
5. Film critic with The Australian Financial Review.
6. Lecturer in Cinema Studies at Lutrope University.

* There is continuing debate on the value of documentation as more rigorous theoretically based analysis of women's artwork. I consider that the coexistence of both approaches is necessary but in the case of the Festival, that its full documentation is essential.

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