

history or not

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A presentation in response to an invitation to speak for 15 mins on Art, Activism and Feminism in the 1970's at **347minutes... a Conference** at Conway Hall, London, 24.3.2000, held in conjunction with the Whitechapel Exhibition **Live in Your Head** January - March 2000 (1).

*we are considering art history today and yet.....we are and we are not...
I have enjoyed the exhibition Live or Live in your head immensely and yet.....
there are these gaps, these distances.... these not enoughts, these invisible gaps
between what is there and what is not there, the what that cannot be there of
several works in the show and works which were there in the past but are not there
in this present. So .. it's history and it isn't...*

we used to talk about centres and margins
race, sex and class
we used to talk about sex and Marx and Fashion
the Goddess or not
the cervix
sleeping with the enemy or not
the right to take a photograph without consultation
painting or not
housework or not
equal pay, usually not
jobs for the boys and not for the girls
to be married or not
to be heterosexual or not
monogamous or not
childcare, probably not
the right to choose to be pregnant or not
what a pain it was walking past a building site
why there were more male lecturers in art schools than women
but more women art students
Pam Skelton slogged through a statistical survey backed by Nalگو
on that one
we used to read Pollock and Parker and Nin and De Beauvoir
and Lippard and Marcuse and Gramsci and Nochlin
and Olsen and Hall and Williams
and Rowbotham and Spare Rib
and any radical thing we could lay our hands on
pamphlet, leaflet, duplicated, handmade, stick and paste
and we looked and looked in libraries
for books on women artists
even though history had said there weren't any
and we asked why?
why not?

and we wore badges which we'd made ourselves
and we went out in the dark with buckets
and fly posted the posters we'd silkscreened
during the night
on Phil Goodall's kitchen table
and pegged up to dry
next to the socks and the nappies
and we fought and we argued with each other too
about art
about formalism and abstraction
about mens work
and womens work
the gallery system
and community art
and the myth of genius
who wants to live in a garret with small children?
about being white
about being middle -class
about education or not
about imperialism
about industrialisation
about the politics of the family unit in capitalism
about prostitution
about The Media
about representation
about being working class
and not betraying the revolution

and we turned out to strikes
and went on demonstrations
and took photographs
and shouted
Not the Church and Not the State
Women will decide their Fate (2)
and by the time we got to Greenham
How to Protest
had become a performative public art form

and we said what does it mean?
and how do we bring up our children?
and make art
and earn a living
and make art
about this experience
this not
that there is not so much of
in this exhibition either?
this here we go again

where are we then?
we who are not
even though we were
we're in women artists groups
in birmingham, nottingham, leeds and sheffield
and elsewhere
at a distance from the centre of the art world
but not from cultural, economic and political debate and action
we just about know
through the Womens Movement grapevine
about the Womens Arts Alliance
and the Womens Workshop of the Artists Union
in London
and that they are setting up
a Women Artists Slide Library

and quite a few of us are in critical reading groups
finding out what the historical, social, cultural, political
and gender gaps in our education
particularly our art education, are
and quite a few of us are in Trade Unions
the Labour party or the Communist Party
the Workers Educational Association
and we're living in squats, council flats, shared and collectively organised houses
and lots of us are in consciousness raising groups
getting to grips with *The Personal is Political* (3)
and we're having to re-think
and re-structure ourselves
before we try and change the world
not to mention art
and we're having to work out
what it might mean to make art in a context
with skills we haven't got yet
but we'll learn in a minute
we're leaving our husbands and shocking the neighbours
not to mention the art critics but I'll come to that later
we're in groups organising around every issue you can think of
going vegetarian and to each others houses
to look at the artworks
hidden under the bed
wrapped up in a drawer
the not really art
I made it myself from a few bits and pieces
as Kate Walker said
while the children were watching Blue Peter
of an image that was published
in The Women Artists Slide Library Diary
Heart not Art, Home made I'm afraid is the title
but we just used to call it the knitted baby
This is The Womens Postal Art Event

The Womens Postal Art Event
was initiated by Kate Walker
in a workshop
at a Feminist Art History Conference
in Chalk Farm
was it 1975 or 1974?
it doesn't matter if I can't remember
because Kate or Hannah, or Jean or someone else will know
it was after that
that we really got down to reading books

The Womens Postal Art Event was a regional project
started in a spirit of *every woman her own darning needle*
to quote the catalogue of
Hang up Put down Stand Up
an exhibition organised by the Women Artists Collective of the Artists Union
which Tina Keane can tell us more about
the Birmingham Womens Artists group
did most of the organisation
for The Womens Postal Art Event
and we discussed
authorship and originality
the ownership or not
of art
collective structures and
or individual art practice
we tried to work out of and into this gap
we said we'll do it together
we'll make art out of our lives,
from its content and form
literally from it's material
the broken and discarded bits
the rubbish and the leftovers
the forgotten recycled

and we'll make art out of the time of our lives
that is always between one job, one role and another
and there'll be no hierarchy between one form or another
none of this - that's craft
or - how can that be art?
or - but that's writing; these sheets pasted large on a gallery wall
an account of a back street abortion
which Cathy Nicholson wrote large
in galleries up and down the country

and we said who is this art for?
we said it's for us, it's for women first
so that we know that we are there
and then. ...
to make our experience visible
in our own terms
we said
the traditional languages of art are not enough
for us
the intent , the content of the work will produce it's own form
and some of it will quite soon fall to bits
because the intent
not the object
was the issue
the process of making art *work*
as communication
rather than the production of commodities
was the issue.

And one woman was often
in a rush
to reply to another
so we made art *work* quickly
and posted things
back and forth to each other
until whole dialogues on sex, relationships, food, identity, history, politics
angry, sad and funny
began to build up
into collective collections
in each womans home .

In 1975, or was it 76?
these collections
art dialogues
were shown together for the first time in a Manchester Gallery
we slept on floors, worked and ate together
discovered how to make art- and -politics
and have a good time
Waldemar Januszek reviewed it quite favourably
I wonder if he remembers

in 1977 more than 300 artworks
made by a network
of maybe 20 or 30 women
aged between 20 and 50
I think...
were shown at the ICA
Suzy Varty
Kate Walker
Lyn Foulkes
Tricia Davies
Su Richardson
Phil Goodall and myself
constructed the exhibition
as a collective installation
a series of rooms
a fridge full of artworks
a walk - in photo album
while the queen was being driven up the Mall
to celebrate the anniversary of her Coronation

for a short while we were infamous
the London critics were mostly appalled
and if anyone wrote about the show
it ended up on the womens, not the art, pages
the Daily Mirror ridiculed us
and one commentator thought our children should be taken into care
we did get invited to a few art schools to give talks
usually by women art historians or women artists
employed in the cultural studies area
on at least one occasion, we had to virtually make a run for it afterwards

hardly anyone wanted to consider The Postal Event as art
maybe it wasn't
then
but it was an art event
what mattered most to us
was that it was a collective, process and time - based social practice
an art strategy
which generated as radical a momentum
as consciousness raising groups of that era were often able to do
inclusive, eventful and empowering
some of us called ourselves artists
or cultural workers
or just didn't bother
I have no idea how much or how little of it still exists

of course it is not in the history books
the museum or mainstream catalogues
and we knew it wouldn't be
don't look for it there
it was not that we had forgotten about art
or the way that its histories are made
not at all
we made a publication called MaMa
as a pun on Dada,
and we wrote it all down
there and elsewhere

the legend *anonymous was a woman*
was stitched on to one work for good reason

look for the evidence in The Women Artists Slide Library
in old copies of Spare Rib and other Feminist publications
and look for it where the processes that started then
have continued
look for the work all these women
and many others active then
and later
continue to do as artists
in art education, in community projects, in art and public organisations, in curation,
in campaigns, exhibitions and publications
those who are gone but whose work remains
and those who are still doing their work today
in the here and now

this was
as were many art projects of that time
a social art practice
driven by urgency
and the necessities
of ordinary, but complex, lives
many of these necessities are no more ready to become history than I am
some are even more urgently pressing now
than they were then
others have returned in their own new clothes

so look for it in the social and collective practices
of other artists and curators now
When I see their work I see a history of work
which is still alive in the head
and which knows itself as the present

Notes

1. A catalogue of the Live in Your Head Exhibition is published by the Whitechapel Art Gallery. Among women included in the exhibition were: The Women and Work Collective (Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt and Mary Kelly), Rose Finn Kelsey, Susan Hiller, Judy Clark, Tina Keane, Annabel Nicholson. An educational project related to the exhibition included the design of an artwork- pack by Jo Stockham. The conference was organised by the Whitechapel's Education Officer, Alastair Raphael and chaired by Susan Hiller. Presentations and performances by women artists included Lorraine Leeson, Yve Lomax, Anne Tallentire, Silvia Zirianek, Hannah O' Shea and Monica Ross. A videotape record of the conference was made by the Whitechapel. Further material is included on the Whitechapel's web site.
2. slogan from the Women's Liberation Movement campaigns in the 1970's which successfully prevented private members bills from repealing the 1968 Act of Parliament which had liberalised the law on abortion.
3. a standard slogan of the 1970's Womens Liberation Movement.

References for The Womens Postal Art Event

Sources of Images:

The Women Artists Slide Library

Black & White Photographs of the collective Installation at the I.C.A. June 1977:
Michael Anne Mullen. SIGNALS Photography Collective.

Articles

What's the difference Griselda Pollock. Aspects. No.32. 1986.

The Womens Postal Art Event. Phil Goodall. Trouble and Strife January 1985

Feministo- The Womens Postal Art Event Rosie Parker Studio International
April 1977 and *Feministo- The Womens Postal Art Event* Rosie Parker Spare Rib
June 1977

Books

The Womens Postal Art Event Framing Feminism Griselda Pollock/Rosie Parker.
Routledge 1988/ 1991.

Get the Message: A Decade of Social Change? Lucy Lippard. E.P. Dutton 1984

The Subversive Stitch Rosie Parker. Routledge 1984

The Spare Rib Reader Ed. R.Parker. Womens Press 1982

MAMA. the MAMA Collective. Birmingham Arts Lab Press. 1978

This list is incomplete e.g. see the review of *Live in Your Head* in Mute April 2000. There were reviews by Waldemar Januscek, in a Manchester Arts Review Journal in Spring 1975 or 1976, and of the ICA exhibition by Sarah Kent in Time out/ City Limits in June 1977. Phil Goodall wrote an article for Spare Rib in Spring 1976 and The Postal Event is mentioned in an article for Artscribe by Alexis Hunter in 1985/ 86. Lucy Lippard also wrote a comprehensive article for Heresies, a New York Feminist Arts Journal, in 1979/80 and there may be others I am not aware of. In addition several BA Theses were written by women students in the 1980's .e.g. Liz Colebrook. Leeds University (Fine Art) 1984/85.

text for the 347 minutes conference. 23.3.2000 . this document finalised for The Women Artists Slide Library Archives.5.9.2000