

Feminist Publishing: An Antiquated Form?

Notes for a talk at the Old Wives Tales Bookstore, San Francisco, Ca.
Feb. 27, 1977

by Charlotte Bunch

especially

I. The Q nobody wants to talk about: (even at Omaha Women in Print Conference)
Why publish and write when nobody reads anymore?
Or do people read anymore and if so, what?

Why is reading important? --- besides the fact that we're in the business --
(and not to deny the value of other media forms):

1. To convey ideas/information -- especially those which aren't readily available in the male media -- feminist newspapers do this BUT other forms of media (our own radio-TV, etc.) could do that job without needing the written word.
2. To develop ind. creativity and imagination (I've been reading those studies of effects of TV as passifier, pre-programming our images, and they are frightening in their effect especially on children.) I remember the RADIO -- you had to imagine how "The Shadow" or the women on "Queen for a Day" looked -- you had to create as well as receive.
3. Individual passivity vs creativity is related to the process of rebellion of peoples. ALL Revolutionary movts make literacy a high priority-- it is seen as essential to giving people ability to think for selves, to choose alternate ways, to rebel.
We assume our people are literate but our society is going post-literate-- what are the implications of this for making radical change?
4. Reading-written word is still the cheapest, most available form for all to use. Anyone can get materials to do it and probably even pen and paper - mimeograph to disseminate their ideas, while vast amounts of money are needed to do film, video, etc.

These underlying questions and trends in US society are our problem:

- literacy should be a feminist issue;
- teaching women to read, write, and think our priority;
- These are essential to long-term struggles for change.

II. What is the specific importance of feminist publishing/writing?
-If ~~words~~ - the written word is important, then its important where, why, and how to do it.

I'm not talking about IND. morality or duty of why a particular person publishes where -- that debate has polarized too easily and often denies ind. complexities--

I mean the underlying basic issue of why feminist publishing is vital to feminist writing +
to women's power

And why it should be supported as crucial to our future.

First, I believe that the existence + visibility of feminist (and esp. lesbian-feminist) writing that we have today is largely a result of the existence of feminist presses, periodicals, journals, and books over the past 10 years.

(Even that printed by male presses would not have happened if we had not created and demonstrated the market.)

This is so not only because feminists print much of our own writing and created the market -- But also -- even more -- because the existence of feminist media has inspired and created new writing:
-new ways of thinking and working
-new topics for exploration in both fiction and non-fiction

When I say that feminist presses have created atmosphere + possibilities that inspire more and more new work--

I don't just mean most recent, most "developed" presses...
(nor do I mean that all feminist press work is genius)

I mean that this is a process with a History: feminist publications did not spring up out of nowhere to receive writings already there. Feminist media has always been closely tied to the beginnings of women's movt. since the days of the mimeograph machine, when our struggle to define ourselves and control our lives was cranking out 500 copies of "Why Women's Liberation?"

(We believed with a religious fervor that if only we could get more copies out to more women so they knew what we knew -- then things would change.)

Those were times not only of religious fervor but also erotic energy-- even when I was "straight" in the women's liberation days of 1968-69, some of our most erotic times were spent around the mimeo machine... Before we could admit to sexuality between women, it was there in our work together. -feminist presses have always been integral to spreading our movt.

We quickly saw that we needed more than occasional mimeoed tracts (although these still play a real role),

We saw the boys - right and left - chopping up our articles and interviews in their presses -- if they ran them at all.

So about 1970--they began: Off Our Backs; It Ain't Me Babe; Women: A Journal of Liberation; Airtt I A Woman, etc.

Now there are over 200 feminist newspapers, magazines, presses and publishers and another 30-40 women's bookstores.

All of that material from mimeo to finely published books is the feminist press.

III. The Feminist Media exists for many reasons:

- not "just because the boys won't print us" -- (today they will print us, we are popular and there are some ways to use that to our benefit)...

BUT OUR PRIORITY must always be to keep our media alive, growing, and expanding:

- 1) as a base of power made up of political and economic institutions of our own.
- 2) as a means of controlling our words and how they are disseminated, even when we aren't popular.
- 3) as a method of creating new words/new work, which has been often overlooked in debate about feminist presses, but interestingly most, so ~~and so on~~ I will end ~~this~~ discussion ~~with~~ of this.

(with a ↗)

The feminist media are not passive receptacles for what's already been done--
-we are active creators of new models, directions, questions for thought and action, both thru our existence and thru the work we seek out.

(Bertha^{Howt's} was to discuss this in fiction -- the difference between her experience of doing a novel for Daughters Inc. compared to her previous 2 novels with a male house was extraordinary.)

Let me take my experience in non-fiction: OOB, The Furies, Quest.

Quest: our main goal (some call it obsession) is to create new feminist theory that combines the best of political tracts and academic work. We want to build/reflect theory and analysis based on experiences of the movt. -- of writers and activists
Yet informed by research and facts -- and countering the anti-intellectual trends of the movt.

Now, obviously that's suicidal or quixotic or both --- Yet, after 3 years, we feel that something is happening in theory that is partially because of us:

- 1) We don't wait for articles to fall from the sky --
our job is to solicit, cajole and seduce women to try to write theory...
(we will go to any length necessary to get an article)
- 2) It isn't just publishing ... it isn't even just editing...
it is also teaching and learning what its all about:
-teaching activists how to write
-teaching academics how to write in a way that more people can read
-learning ourselves how to do it, how to recognize new forms, how to ask the right questions to see what feminist theory is and can be.

The relationship of author, editor, and publisher in feminist publishing is one of mutual creation involving debate, turmoil, growth---
But we all have a mutual desire to move forward -- we have a common stake in the content and the results;
This is hardly shared by the boys in publishing who want us for money, but not to advance feminism.

IV. In conclusion, The feminist media isn't then an "alternative" ---
it is our future (As June Arnold discusses the term in her article for Quest on "Feminist Presses and Feminist Politics.")

It isn't a training ground to get you into the BIG TIME publishers,
as the "small press" is often seen.

(Oh yes, I too had my "Big Time" experience -- I published a women's liberation anthology with Bobbs-Merrill in 1970 and it disappeared; it had sold out its original 60,000 copies as a special issue of Motive Magazine, promoted through the informal grapevine of the movt. in 1969..
But it disappeared in 1970 as a male press book because they lost interest and never promoted it despite its proven audience.)

No, the feminist media isn't just a stopgap --

--it isn't just ind. choices about where to publish, which can involve various issues

--it is our future, as an institution and as the well-spring of our words and thought and action.

It is our looking back and going forward in the written word.

Charlotte Bunch has written and edited numerous feminist works over the past ten years and is presently an editor of Quest: A Feminist Quarterly, a founder of the Public Resource Center in Washington, D.C., and is preparing an anthology, Not By Degrees: Essays in Feminist Education, to be published soon by Daughters, Inc.