CLASS NOTES

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Class hierarchies and heterosexuality are patriarchal institutions which divide women, give some women power over others, and destroy our strength. As a lesbian feminist artist, I am interested in examining the assumptions of class and heterosexuality in art, and the role of lesbian art as a potential catalyst for social change. This article will focus on the myth of art as classless, and how this myth functions to separate us from the reality of our lives and affects the way in which we see ourselves. Specifically, I want to discuss how we as lesbian artists need to defy this myth by developing class consciousness, and incorporating it in the development of lesbian art and culture.

THE MYTH

Fine art is a reflection of upper class interests, values, tastes, and patterns of thinking. The images found in art reflect and serve the needs of a small group of "corporate-government elite" (upper class white men) who define culture in America and elsewhere if they can profit from it. They found, fund, and run art museums, set standards of taste, and have a vested interest in creating, validating, and supporting art whose form and content justifies and furthers a patriarchal social order.[1] Jackie St. Joan has defined this social order as:

> "...that system—intellectual, political, social, sexual, psychological—which requires in the name of human progress that one group (in the history of the world, rich, white men) controls and exploits the energies of another, and in which women are particularly despised. It includes patriarchal institutions (heterosexuality, the nuclear family, private property, etc.) which are the tools of oppression as well as the patriarchal mind-constructs which, like the capitalist mind-constructs, limit even our ability to think beyond what is.[2]

Rarely does fine art include images of workers, the workplace, or daily survival. Rarely does it depict the experiences of Blacks, Native Americans, women, or lesbians. When these images do appear, they seem outside the experience of those portrayed because they are romanticized or stereotyped, rather than real. For instance, lesbian sexuality is rarely portrayed in visual art and when it is, say in film, lesbians are presented in butch/femme roles, as sick, masochistic, and sadistic, and as though sexuality was the only important thing in their lives. This limited male view hardly relates to my experience as a lesbian. Nor do I feel that my identity as an artist is realistically portrayed. The artist's life is romanticized as a chosen struggle of economic hardship necessary to produce art rather than as a product of the alienation of artists from society.

If art provides a way for us to perceive ourselves and the world around us, it seems necessary that we examine what is validated as art. An excellent example of an attempt to write social history through art was the exhibition "American Art," a collection belonging to John D. Rockefeller III, which was shown last fall at the Whitney Museum as our Bicentennial survey exhibition of American art. This collection contains one work by a woman artist, one work by a Black artist, and no work by Hispanic or Native American artists. The absence of work by women and Third World artists in this and most other collections and exhibitions, denies the experiences of most Americans. Not to see their experiences reflected in culture is to say that they don't exist. Because art both creates and reflects social realities, their absence becomes a political issue. As the artists writing in "an anti-catalogue" state: "Omission is one of the mechanisms by which fine art reinforces the values and beliefs of the powerful and suppresses the experiences of others."[3]

Another mechanism reinforcing upper class values is the myth of art as classless and universal. By creating the myth of universal art, those in power teach us to identify with images and the experiences these images represent, which have nothing to do with our own class position. We are told that art, and therefore the artist, is classless, and that our experiences are immaterial and should be ignored.

All classes accept this myth, for to question it would be to reveal the oppressive political structures and social institutions underlying patriarchal capitalist society. Rita Mae Brown writes that "America is a country reluctant to recognize class differences. The American myth crystallized is: This is the land of equal opportunity; work hard, stay in line, you'll get ahead. (Getting ahead always means money.)"[4] Identification with this myth of classlessness redirects us from dealing with our own particular oppression as working class, as women, as lesbians, etc. The artists in "an anti-catalogue" state:

> "The mystification of art depends upon two things—upon our surrendering our capacity to judge and upon unquestioning acceptance of authority in place of the printed word and the authority of scholarly titles and distinctions. The mystification of art takes our passivity for granted. It encourages us to look upon art as if art had no bearing on experience.[5]

Accepting the myth is accepting our invisibility and powerlessness. To question cultural attitudes is to question social conditions. Passivity smooths the pain of powerlessness and helps us to survive these conditions. We need to see that behavioral patterns affect who becomes an artist, what artists create, what art is validated as "quality," and how art in turn reinforces those patterns.

HOW I BOUGHT THE MYTH

Thinking back to junior high school in the fifties, I see that one reason I chose to be an artist was to escape the daily pain of lower middle class life in Hometown—of living in a duplex, taking a bus to school, and wearing hand-me-downs until I got a job at Lerner's and could buy my own clothes. The guy I went with turned me on to Mulligan, Coleman, Getz, and all that jazz and the beat writers Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Prevert. They were "artists" and intellectuals, without money (like me), and romanticized. I thumbed my nose and fantasized riding naked down the highway. We fucked. I got a scholarship to the Saturday School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I wanted to be a dress designer or fashion illustrator because it sounded "classy" and "sophisticated." If all else failed, I could be an art teacher.

In the museum I saw "real" painting and sculpture. I remember sitting in front of the Pollock, the Rothko, and the Still, thinking that I could do those paintings, but not realizing that I was a woman and that it didn't matter what I did. In the studios I saw art being made by grubby students and I took note that the artist could wear anything, say anything, and didn't have to socialize. The artist seemed special and not bound by class behavior. I would be an artist. Accepting fine art meant renouncing my class background and stepping out of the lower middle class life of Hometown into the universal world of the muses. Safe and protected at last. Who ever heard of a middle class muse?

THE MYTH SHATTERED:
CLASS IS HOW YOU SEE THE WORLD.
ART IS HOW YOU SEE THE WORLD.

It has taken me a long time to begin to understand and accept my lower middle class background, and to realize that the art world I entered wasn't an alternative to middle class society but that women, Blacks, and the poor are also oppressed within the alternate "world of culture." As long as society allowed me to be a "starving artist" I did not question my own experiences, or how they affected my work and work attitudes. Acting out a romanticized art life was my option to upward mobility.

Heterosexual women get their privilege from the same patriarchal systems that give privilege to middle and upper class women. Coming out as a lesbian with a feminist consciousness forced me to realize what class privilege I did and did not have, and what I would now lose. Even the fact that I first came out to myself through my art and not in bed is in itself a reflection of my class position. As a feminist artist I had learned to use my work as a place to confront fears and other feelings privately in my studio. A woman working as a maid, a waitress, or a seamstress, does not have this option.

As a lesbian, however, I was forced to confront and give up illusions I had about being accepted and rewarded by the male art world where they treated art "seriously." To be public about being a lesbian means that your work may not be taken seriously, or may squeezed into a category of "camp" or "erotic art." Because you do not hang out with the right men or the right women (those who hang out with the men) at the right bars, and since the lesbian feminist community doesn't yet support its visual artists, you are less likely to make your work visible, to have professional dialogue, and to support yourself through your work either directly (sales) or indirectly (teaching). For women, the economic class system is largely determined by their relationship to men. The higher up the man she relates to, the more she benefits from the system. The lesbian, by not relating to men does not benefit economically and has no privilege unless she is independently wealthy. Most of us do not have that kind of support and opportunity, and without support, it is very difficult to continue making art. Historically, known lesbian visual artists (Rosa Bonheur, Romaine Brooks, etc.) were wealthy. Only they had the privilege to continue making art despite their public lesbian lifestyle.

If we examine the relationship of lesbians to the class system, and to patriarchy, we can get an idea of the active role art can play in developing a culture that does not make women powerless and invisible. In "Lesbians and The Class Position of Women," Margaret Small writes:

> . . . At this point in history, the primary role that lesbians have to play in the development of revolutionary consciousness is ideological. Because lesbians are objectively outside of heterosexual reality, they have potential for

developing an alternative ideology not limited by heterosexuality. Lesbians stand in a different relationship to (the) three conditions that determine the class position of women (production, reproduction, sexuality). The lesbian does not have a domestic base that is defined by the production of new labor power and maintenance of her husband's labor power. Her relationship is in proletarian terms. The element of slave consciousness integral to heterosexuality is missing.[6]

I am interested in how we can do this through art. Developing a class consciousness does not mean that each work of art by a woman would have to directly relate to women of all classes, but rather that the form and content of the work, be it figurative or abstract, would somehow illuminate experience in such a way that it is shared with and includes rather than excludes women from different backgrounds. Instead of presenting one universal experience that is supposed to represent ALL of us yet represents few, art should reflect and give information—facts, emotional response, visual accounting, ways of seeing into and understanding different experiences and feelings. We must acknowledge our differences in order to learn about, support, and work with each other. Thus I feel that to make art as a lesbian with class consciousness has far-reaching creative and political potential for connecting women through work. This means actively rejecting cultural dictates, taking responsibility for our work, and questioning the concept of apolitical art. Art-making is where consciousness is formed.

ANALYSIS—REINTEGRATION

Ultimately it is a question of the function of art beyond the personal. It is not merely a matter of doing work that doesn't oppress others, but also of doing work that pushes further towards a redefinition and transformation of culture. For me, coming out as a lesbian has a lot to do with developing a class consciousness, and that consciousness brought to my art raises questions of imagery, permanence, scale, ways of working, and concepts of art education. It raises questions of money and power, who sees my work, and what effect I want it to have on others.

This does not mean that we as class conscious lesbian artists must make paintings with recognizable figurative imagery, that we must be downwardly mobile, give up making art for "real political struggle," or involve ourselves in the rhetorical circles of the artistic left. What it does mean is not making or accepting class assumptions about art such as what is allowable as art, who makes it, who sees it, and what its function is to be. By removing esthetic hierarchies and the need to pretend that we all share the same experiences, meaning can become accessible and available.

Talk about "bringing art to the people" only reinforces class distinctions. Class consciousness can be reflected through our art by demystifying and deprivatizing the creative process. Presently it is difficult for a working class woman who likes to write, paint, or dance even to consider being a professional artist. When making art as well as owning art ceases to be a privilege, and the art-making process itself is available to women of different classes, races, and geographic backgrounds, we can begin to understand the political potential of creative expression.

As lesbians, we need our experience validated culturally. To refuse art that denies our existence and to deny that art is apolitical and universal, is to actively challenge the wealthy few and their supporters who have been defining and controlling social order through the manipulation of fine art. Demanding group and self identity in art is one means of resisting oppression. The art-making process is a tool for making these demands and changes.

Art is essentially work. Simone Weil writes that art is a surplus commodity in this culture because it does not have immediate consumption and is not shared and used by the people. That artists are not part of the paid work force further separates the productive from the consumptive classes. The work process (and the purpose of work) have always been external to the worker. Just as she writes that our main task is to discover how it is possible for the work to be free and to integrate it, we must free the art-making process so it is accessible and understandable to everyone. The process should be as available as the product.[7]

Acknowledging the existence of class structures, and how through art they can affect cultural attitudes is just a beginning—a necessary step one. In the long run, we should not focus merely on the relationship of one class to another, or on the relationship of art and class, but on defining a future classless society. The integration of art into the lives of all people and not just the upper class contributes to that vision. "Revolution presupposes not simply an economic and political transformation but also a technical and cultural one."[8]

FOOTNOTES

1. The Catalogue Committee of Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, *an anti-catalogue*, 1977. The catalogue was written as a protest to the Whitney exhibition, "American Art, 1976." I have included a condensed version of a more detailed discussion of "how art is mystified, how art exhibitions influence our views of history, and how collectors such as John D. Rockefeller III benefit from cultural philanthropy."
2. "A Lesbian Feminist: Jackie St. Joan," an interview, in *Big Mama Rag*, Jan-Feb, 1977, Vol. 5, no. 1.
3. *an anti-catalogue*
4. Brown, Rita Mae, "The Last Straw," *Class and Feminism: A Collection of Essays From The Furies*, edited by Charlotte Bunch and Nancy Myron, Diana Press, 1974.
5. *an anti-catalogue.*
6. Small, Margaret, "Lesbians and the Class Position of Women," *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement*, edited by Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch, Diana Press, 1975.
7. Weil, Simone, *First and Last Notebooks*, translated by Richard Rees, Oxford University Press, London, 1970, p. 58-61.
8. *First and Last Notebooks.*

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