

"Female Experience in Art": The Impact of Women's Art in a Work Environment

Ruth E. Iskin

In early summer of 1975 I was asked by the Women's Committee and the Office of Equal Opportunity of Aerospace Corporation to curate an exhibition of women's art on the subject of female experience. This seemed to me to offer the potential of reaching a broad audience and avoiding the defensive reactions often attached to "feminist art" or "female sensibility" in the art world.¹ This art has been at the heart of an ongoing, often heated controversy which has clouded the issues and obstructed direct perception of the work.

Female experience has been the starting point for the new art created by feminists since 1969. Consciousness raising and other forms of women's communication, sharing and group action, initiated as a result of the women's movement, made female experience a rich source of subject matter and sparked the fresh energy with which women are making art. For the show I selected the work of 15 L.A. artists² to represent both a broad scope of women's experiences and a diversity of media, ranging from large environmental pieces to paintings, drawings, photography, prints, collage, assemblage, and artists' books. In an attempt to build a bridge between the art and the creators' intentions, I requested written statements from the artists, which, along with biographical information, were available in a folder in the exhibition area.

The exhibition was on view from August 18th through September 5th in the Cafeteria Conference Dining Rooms of the Aerospace Corporation. It was the first exhibition of professional art on the company's grounds, preceded only by shows of art by employees. Although sponsored and funded by the corporation, the show was initiated by feminist employees who conceived it to offer "insight into the emotional aspects of contemporary women."³ They scheduled it to coincide with Women's Week, a program featuring prominent speakers and entertainers.

The management of Aerospace Corporation ("a non-profit research and development corporation which provides technical direction of general systems of engineering, primarily for the Air Force"⁴) had been forced to develop new policies for hiring women in order to meet affirmative-action requirements for receiving government funds. Women are in the minority, constituting only 25% of the roughly 3,200 Aerospace employees. Most of them (80%-85%) are in lower-echelon clerical and secre-

71

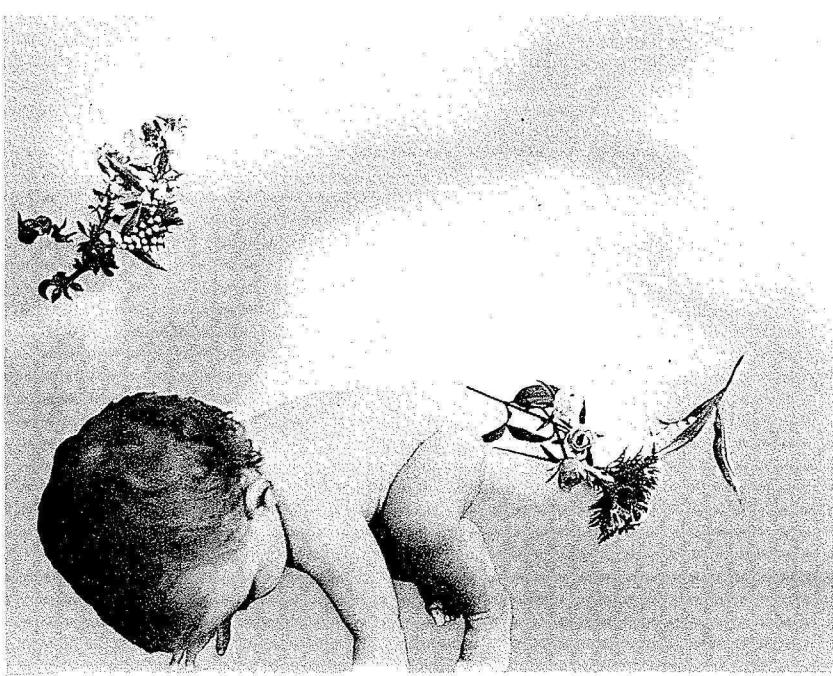
tarial positions; only a few rank among the engineers, scientists, or chief administrators. The company was, no doubt, hoping that the art exhibition and the activities of Women's Week would go on record as testimony to their newfound good will toward women. Much to my surprise, and to the dismay of the sponsors, the exhibition became the focal point of hot debate. Violent emotional reactions, protest and support quickly assumed the dimensions of a local scandal and echoed for months in letters to the editor in *The Orbiter*, the company's newspaper.

The art in the exhibition offered a feminist point of view on subject matter usually treated from a male perspective. Though one might assume that the controversial responses arose out of an alienation from contemporary art forms, it seems that the conflict stemmed primarily from feminist content.⁵ None of the works included were blatantly political protest art, yet they all reflected, to varying degrees, a new feminist consciousness. It was this consciousness—judging from the reactions of many of the female viewers—that was unfamiliar and threatening.

We are accustomed to think of political art as crude, illustrative, or plainly propagandistic, in contrast to "good/serious/modernist" art. It has of course been pointed out that no art is entirely disconnected from its historical, political, cultural, and geographical environment, and that therefore any art reflects these conditions. However, feminist art is often labeled political art because the consciousness it reflects is held by a minority, and it is at odds with the tacit beliefs of those in power. The label "political art" is used to demean the work rather than to evaluate its artistic significance.

In a recent interview with Judy Chicago, the artist articulated her thoughts and feelings about these issues:

The issue of politics for me arises at the point where my work interfaces with culture; it does not arise at the point of origin in my studio. I never think about politics when I make my art; rather I think about being true to my own impulses, and for a woman to be true to her own impulses is, at this point in history, a political act. . . . What I challenge is the idea that masculinity is inherently better than femininity; that hardness is better than softness, that defensiveness is better than vulnerability, and



Sherie Sheer. *Putti*. From the series *Heavenly Visions*. 1975.
Silver print with oil paint and acrylic.

Nancy Youdelman. *An Homage to Lily Bart*, from Edith Wharton's
"House of Mirth." 1974. Tableau with life-cast figure. 6' X 9' X 12'.



that violence is better than sharing. The assertion of womanhood is a challenge to all these values that allow war, dehumanization, rape, and art that lacks relationship with reality to continue.⁶

Faith Wilding elaborated on the relation between personal and political change:

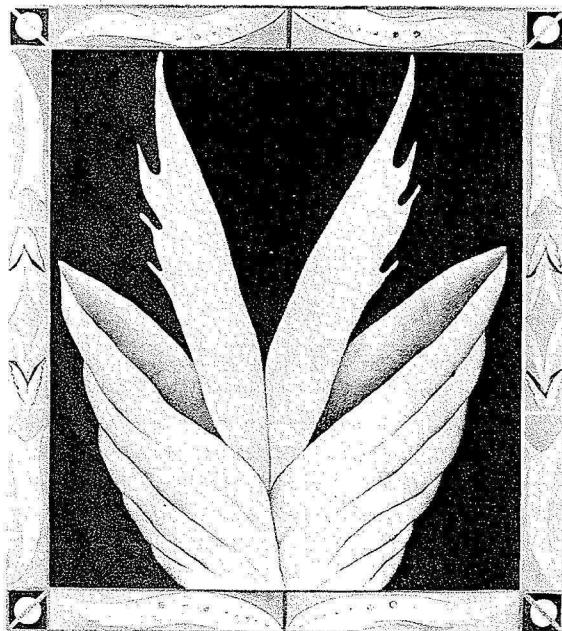
It has always been a tenet of the feminist movement that the personal is political. It is political because when a person becomes transformed, enters into public experience, and infuses her own experience into the public, the world becomes transformed for her, but in addition she then has the possibility of transforming the world. . . . We have witnessed too many people who are in politics who have never experienced any kind of personal change or real vision. . . .

What specifically triggered the controversy? The art in the exhibition included a wide range of feminist work: parodies on public images of women (Helen Alm Roth and Carole Caroompas); private images of women and interior spaces (Margaret Neilson); women's self-images integrated with their historical and mythological references (Judy Chicago and Faith Wilding); references to women's vulnerability, powerlessness, and powerlessness (Astrid Preston); relics of admired female figures as magic talismans (Hazel Slawson); communal efforts (Maria Karras); and the quilt/grid pattern and color pink seen as tributes to women's collaborative forms (Sheila de Bretteville).

In her tableau environment *Remnants in Homage to Lily Bart from Edith Wharton's House of Mirth*, Nancy Youdelman "reconstructed" a scene from the book with theatrical grandeur and presence. The tableau represents the climax of Wharton's novel, when Lily Bart, having lost her wealth and status, kills herself. Hauntingly life-like, her full-size figure, bearing the artist's own features, reclines in bed. Her skin tone is grayish and the sleeping drops that caused her death are by the side of her bed. The floor is cluttered with remnants of her life: letters, photographs, delicate laces, dresses, corsets, and veils. Youdelman creates metaphors (sleep, passivity, death) for what have been essential aspects of female experience: economic dependence on others, lack of ultimate control over one's own life, victimization by circumstances. In the guise of a 19th-century tragedy, Lily Bart's story is emblematic for women who have remained powerless in society.

In Youdelman's photographic series *Leaves: A Self Portrait*, the artist is lying on the ground, gradually being covered with leaves (from photograph to photograph) until she is entirely buried:

Faith Wilding. *Chrysalis II*. 1974. Graphite and watercolor. 42" X 38".



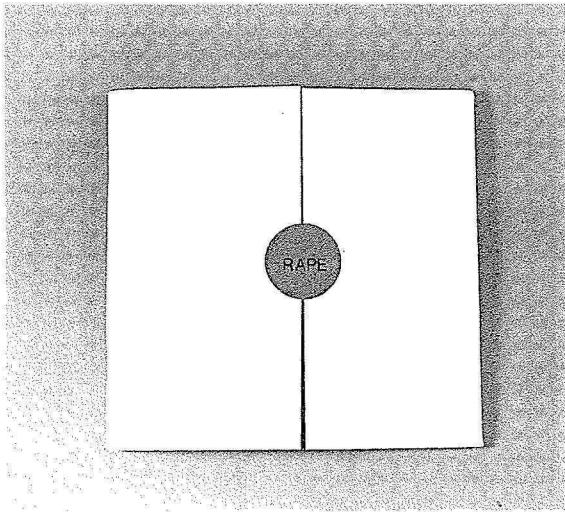
73

It represented ways I felt; I felt numb all over, or like a sleepwalker, something that could just disappear, and I think that is that powerlessness in female experience, sleep. There is also something esthetic about it; I love the color of the leaves; it is about death and one could suppose that it might also mean renewal. . . .

Youdelman treads on precarious ground in presenting the passive female figure, lying unconscious, as horizontal female figures have so often been used in the history of (male) art to entice the spectator by reminding him of his vertical superiority. However, Youdelman's tableau successfully evokes the solemn empathy of the viewer, who is confronted with the victim's feelings about her powerlessness.

In Jan Lester's tableau environment—*Cats Enamoured Kits: Helpless Tom and Merciless Sex Kitten* (1974)—two cats are anthropomorphized to enact a sexual-encounter scene. The human environment, dress, and behavior patterns throw into relief the stereotyped patterns of men and women, only the roles are reversed. The female cat plays the determined "attacker," the seducer, while the male cat withdraws with some apprehension. At the same time, Lester sees her work as a manifestation of how women are perceived when they take an active role in a situation:

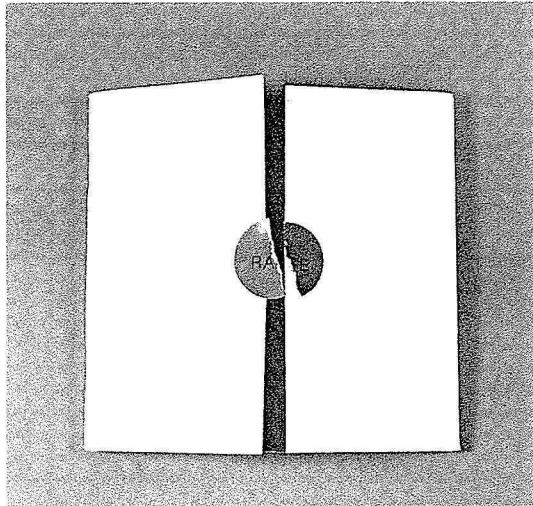
The tableau had to do with sexual politics and with the female taking power. It goes farther than just one sexual encounter, it goes out into the world in general. It is one situation like a snapshot that makes it clear that this goes on in all situations in society.



Sherie Scheer's series—*Heavenly Visions*—depicts Fragonard-inspired images of her own baby as a cherub floating in an infinite blue California sky. "Wherever they go, they have no choice in it. . . . The heavenly vision in which they appear is both ideal and it is limbo." This reflects Scheer's own experience as a first-time mother:

I found the child very sensual. It was unexpected to me what a strong female biological experience it was to have a child, and then to be absolutely in love with the child. In the course of using her as model, however, I made her cry, sometimes neglected her, and in a way I used her, both as a model and as inspiration. . . . I was aware that the art that makes it in L.A., or made it at the time (two years ago) was non-image-oriented and I am very image-oriented. I was also entirely aware that showing babies in one's art was really outrageous, and it gave me a devilish pleasure, because I think that a lot of art that makes it is empty formula and doesn't have any blood in it; it is not daring and it is not a turn-on either. So it was like breaking a taboo, and especially for a woman artist.

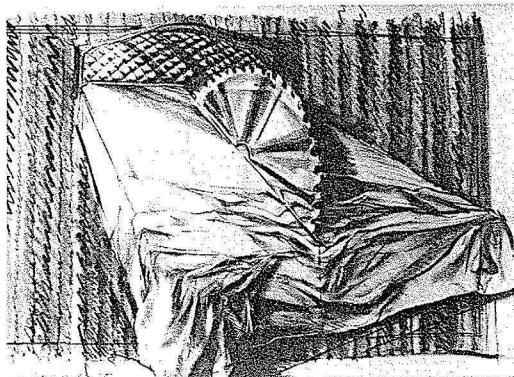
Like Scheer, Gilah Hirsch deals with female power within its traditional domain. She uses the imagery of food as "a secret biography, a metaphorical code."



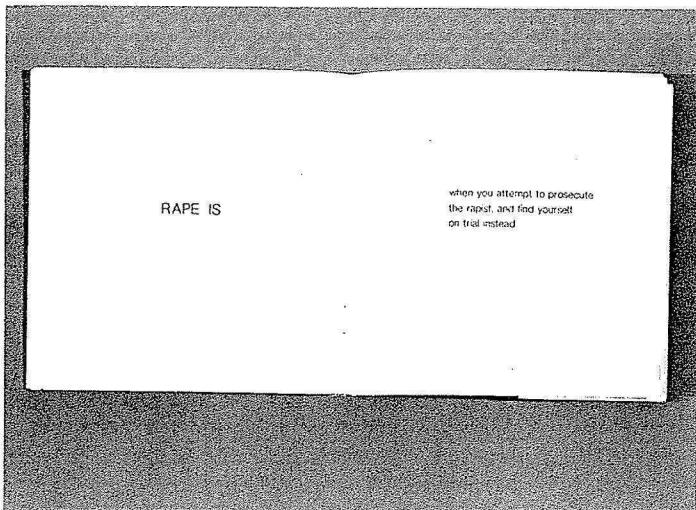
The shape and color of food itself was so completely right and ripe for my own feelings that it became a symbol for me; especially the tomato, strawberry, and egg became symbols for myself. These are expressed in scale and potency; it is a strange word to use in relationship to an egg, a potent egg. . . . The strawberry is one of the few fruits that carries its seed on the outside, it is a vulnerable fruit; it is juicy and has strength and vulnerability at the same time. . . . Rather than feminist, these paintings are, I think, more expressive of femaleness. It was a personal statement for me. . . . I can't separate my experience from a female experience; I feel powers in me, very specifically in certain centers in me.

Suzanne Lacy's book *Rape Is* (1972) has a white cover which becomes bloody red on the inside. To open the book one must tear apart a red sticker labeled "rape."⁷ Lacy's book names 21 instances of rape—not only as a sexual violation but also as a series of psychological assaults:

Rape is when you are skipping home from school, and are surrounded suddenly by a gang of large boys. Rape is when the man next door exposes himself and you feel guilty for having looked. Rape is when you're walking alone, thinking your own thoughts and a man driving by shouts "HI SWEETIE!"



Left to right: Karen Carson. *Edge of Night*. 1975. Pastel and Charcoal, 36" X 22"; *Cracking Up*. 1975. Paster and charcoal, 36" X 24"; *Shattered Dreams*. 1975. Pencil. 36" X 24".



Suzanne Lacy. *Rape Is*. 1972. Printed book. 6" square.

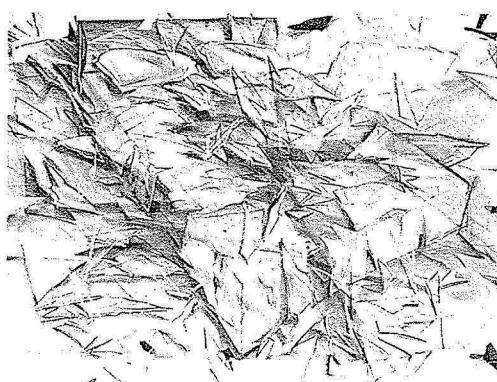
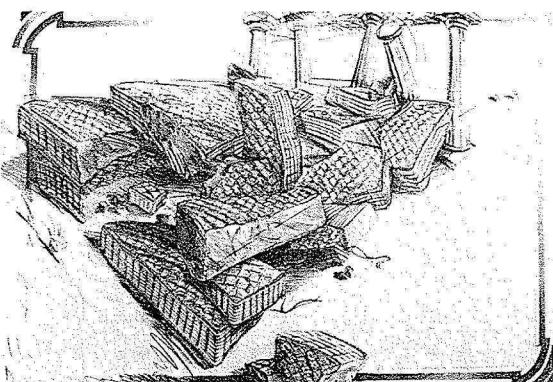
The traditional representation of rape in art (with the exception of Kollwitz⁸) represents the experience of the rapist by focusing on his strength, activity and beauty, and further removes rape from a realistic experience through mythological disguise. Lacy first forces the viewer to enact a metaphorical rape ("deflowering" the book by tearing the sticker) and then confronts the viewer with what rape means to its victim.

In Karen Carson's drawings of beds (1971-75) woman is the bed. The drawings are expressionistic in style and imagery, powerful as well as satirical statements about the myth of happiness in sexual relationships. In this case, too, the "disturbing" feminist content of Carson's drawings arises from the art-historical tradition of reclining female figures on beds and sofas. Many of these women become an integral part of the inanimate, passive, yet sexually inviting surface on which they are reclining. Unlike males, Carson identifies with the oppressed—the woman/bed—and at the same time, as artist, she takes active charge of that surface, penetrates it with a giant screw (*Screw*), converts it into a carton of eggs (*Easy Lay*), severs it with a saw blade (*Edge of Night*), or crowns it with a giant camera (*Easy Shot*).

These surreal visualizations are take-offs on popular puns, which function as titles and were

often the starting points for the drawings. The series began as a macabre though humorous comment on popular sexist consumerism. What emerges is a violent denunciation of sexual roles, until finally the bed—former haven of consumer pleasure—disintegrates from within (*Cracking Up* and *Shattered Dreams*), smashing any illusions we might still have about bed and woman. In these most recent drawings the formerly inanimate object erupts uncontrollably, and its fragments fly into space. What is commonly labeled Women's Liberation is in fact, as Carson expresses it, an excruciatingly painful process beginning with the recognition of exterior oppression, leading to the experience of oppression from within, and finally building toward a complex re-integration—represented by the artist's new work—collages in which the torn and mutilated fragments are reunited on a cohesive surface.

I would say that these drawings were intentionally propagandistic. . . . It had to do with consumer and sexual politics. . . . The frame of mind that I was in when I did these drawings was severe frustration over treatment by men. . . . The drawings were also politically charged for me because I talked about them to all kinds of groups from Valley housewives to a continuation high school culture-hour class; I thought people would be bored by these draw-



ings and they weren't. They seemed to have a good time, and related to the drawings immediately. Now, it is not necessary to have a good time when viewing art, but there was blanket recognition of the issues.

When I looked in the newspaper I noticed that you could apply sexual politics, directly or indirectly, to almost every image in the advertisement world; every image implies sexual promises. My original fantasy was that I would have enough money to take out a full page ad in the *L.A. Times*, and just change the images a little bit. Obviously the most political thing about that was my fantasy about how many people I could reach that way. It is the nature of good political art to be recognizable and understandable by a lot of people and maybe at a visceral level too. . . . Political art is often satirical, and probably most effective at that level.

The exhibition provided an opportunity to witness the heightened impact of contemporary feminist art when viewed by a "non-art" audience—a cross-section of middle America that normally would not encounter art, and specifically by a female audience alienated from feminism. (The negative response came primarily from women⁹) It can also be seen as a test case for implementing a long-desired goal—bringing art into a public daily work environment.

Had the show at Aerospace been exhibited in any number of established or alternative gallery spaces, it probably would not have caused unusual debate, and certainly it would not have prompted any doubt about the artistic merit of the work.¹⁰ In the Cafeteria Conference Rooms of Aerospace, however, the exhibit infiltrated a male environment that ordinarily would not display women's work made from a feminist perspective and certainly would not give it public acclaim. The work was predominantly considered scandalous; it engendered passionate objections and firm negative judgments. The show was labeled *pornography* rather than *art* by people who were unlikely ever to have considered what is or isn't art.

This disclaimer was the protesters' attempt to dismiss such threatening and upsetting material. Casting it as pornography implied that the art lacked any real esthetic value and therefore need not be taken seriously. The level of naïveté of the critical responses—when opposed to the more sophisticated criticism to which we are accustomed from much of the art world—was refreshing in its directness. One letter of protest stated:

I object to the Art Exhibition. . . . I find it degrading. As a woman, and hopefully a lady, I find it extremely offensive. . . . I am unable to lower my sights to the gutter level of this exhibit. In my opinion, it is lewd, vulgar, obscene and immoral. Since when did good taste and modesty go out-of-style?¹¹

In another letter, signed by 36 people—almost a petition—the art was called:

. . . in poor taste, bad character, and a definite infringement on the rights of all women and men who give sex the dignity, respect and honor that was intended for the human race.

The Aerospace Corporation has drastically changed its practices since the 1960s to allow this type of "smut" to be exhibited, and the employees were encouraged through desk-to-desk distribution and advertising to view the exhibition.

We are sure that with much less expense to the Company, the representatives . . . could have arranged for a display of pornography, pictures and books from one of the adult bookstores in the Los Angeles Area, and at a lower insurance premium. . . . The Aerospace Women's Committee does not speak for all of the female employees, as there are those of us who still adhere to the old principle that we were liberated immediately when we were born in America, we enjoy being treated as a woman, and we are definitely Miss or Mrs. and not Ms.¹²

Clearly these female viewers at Aerospace "saw" in the art their own worst fears of feminism. Their objections, though focused on the exhibition, were rooted in their alienation from the organized women's movement. Confronted by art that dealt with an oppression familiar in most of their lives, real images that did not correspond to the illusion of the American dream presented a powerful threat.

The art was perceived as offensive precisely because it was not placed in a neutralizing environment like a gallery, where viewers can easily hide behind anonymity. The art invaded their own daily working sphere where it threatened how they were viewed in their professional positions. Brought into the work context, the art reflected more directly upon them. The heightened emotional reactions caused a strong need to disassociate themselves verbally from the picture of womanhood presented in the show.

While identification with female experiences and values is threatening in any situation in a patriarchal society, such identification may be virtually impossible when introduced into a work environment dominated by male values and power. Such an environment, by implication, and as a condition for the possibility of working there, demands a woman's identification with patriarchy over a recognition of her own oppression. To admit that what was expressed in the art is real—women's powerlessness and powerfulness, their sexual feelings and experiences, and the fact that women are rape victims—is to shatter the very myth that has sustained traditional womanhood all along. It is admitting publicly to an embarrassing, private part of woman's experience, which she has attempted to conceal even from herself in an effort to preserve the "human dignity" of which