

# LESBIAN ARTISTS

We are a collective of lesbian artists working on a lesbian issue of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics*. We are soliciting material of all kinds, but in particular we are asking for responses to this question:

What does being a lesbian artist mean to you? (Your work, your medium, your relationships to other artists, to the Art World, to the Lesbian community, etc.)

You can approach the question verbally and/or visually, in any way that seems most applicable to you. In the issue we will print the question along with the replies. If you have any specific feelings, pro or con, about signing your name, please include them in your response.

Our copy deadline is April 15. Please send all material to: HERESIES, Box 766, Canal Street Station, New York, N.Y. 10013. C/O 3rd Issue.

We will be selecting the material for the issue and contacting you in the spring. If YOU consider yourself to be a lesbian artist, please respond. And thank you.

# LESBIAN ARTISTS

Lesbian energy is the subject of my art. I weave useful objects, bags, ponchos, saddle blankets, and more. These objects are strong and durable, for I weave them with active lesbians in mind as customers. I want to make the best for lesbians. It is this attitude which makes my work "lesbian art."

In the physical realm, there is little to set my work apart from another's weaving; it could be copied exactly. But my feelings and thoughts, as I work, also become part of my product, just as surely as the design and color and threads themselves. This non-physical aspect is like the lint between the fibers, inseparable from the final product and, hopefully, seen and felt by the viewer, user, and/or wearer. It is the part which cannot be copied.

Obviously, this is a hard proposition to prove, but I know from experience that it is true. Because I, as a lesbian-separatist, am thinking strong, positive feelings about lesbians and lesbianism as I work, lesbians are drawn to my work. One told me she physically felt warm glows pass through her body when she put on a poncho; some have told me they feel strong with it. One woman referred to stripes in the shoulders of a poncho as "power stripes."

Also, as a lesbian-separatist, I sometimes am thinking

negative thoughts and feelings about men and some straight women as I work, and, consequently, they often do not even notice my display. There is no magnetic energy to attract them. Not only are they not attracted, but sometimes they feel repelled by my work. This pleases me, because I feel very strongly that I only want to sell to lesbians, and this way I don't have to make any special effort to accomplish it.

My partner is a jeweler, and she has noticed the same phenomenon. Many lesbians have told her that they draw strength and self-esteem from her work, not only from the lesbian symbol rings and pendants, but also from stone rings that are not specifically "lesbian." It is the love for herself as a lesbian, and her concern for all lesbians, which they are absorbing.

Any subject, then, may be lesbian art, and lesbian subjects may not be lesbian art. What makes the difference, in my mind, is the thought and feeling about lesbians which the maker feels *as she works*, the tangible energy which becomes part of the product and is communicated to the consumer.

Jane Stedman  
Aitkin, Minnesota

Lesbianartist.

I wish I had a lesbianartist button.

A small black and white button with six-point Optima letters.

Intimate. Women would have to read it up close.  
A button for a high-energy day.  
Clearly the word makes me happy.  
It didn't always.

I spent a lot of time not believing there was a connection between my sexuality and the art I made, not believing my two carefully separated adult identities had been closely bound together even in childhood and, certainly not believing the content of my painting was emotional.

Joining together two powerful words made me recognize the focus of my life and put me in touch with my own work.

If I hadn't been a lesbian I wouldn't be an artist.

From girlhood I had admired strong women, loving their intelligence and strength.

I focused on what was woman-identified, experiencing a passion, not yet genital, not yet verbalized, that made me want to find an identity in work, in expression, in making paintings.

In making art, I hadn't before realized how closely

related the content was to the impulse that made me want to be an artist in the first place.

When I was eight years old I had a game.

I would go out into a grove of trees away from the other children and would take pieces of bark and sticks.

I would draw on them with nail polish and lipstick and crayons, writing secret things about admiration for women, about a crush on a woman.

While making these I was very intent; but then I would get very frightened.

The slightest sound of anyone approaching would make me hide them under leaves, bury them in the ground.

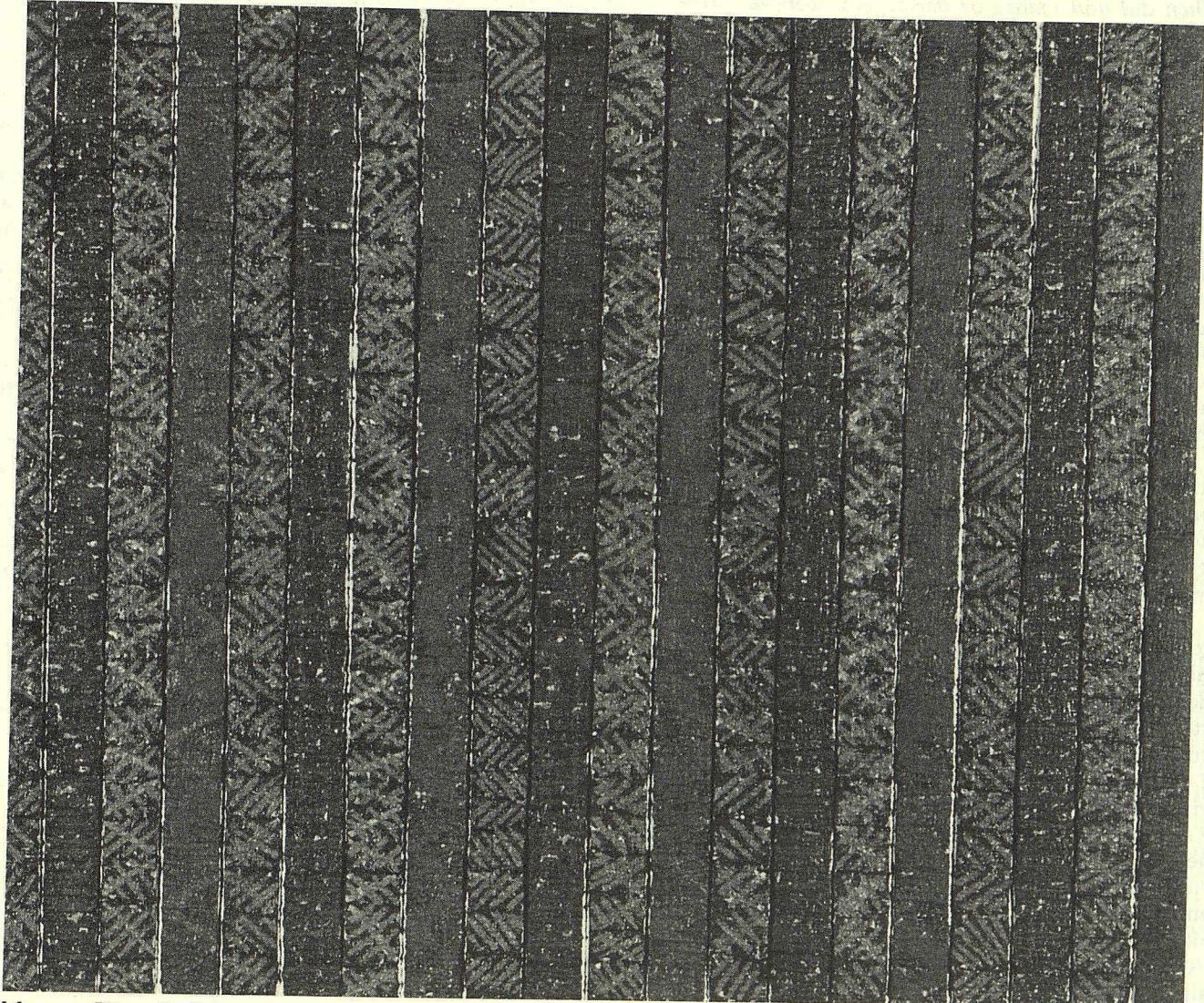
In my work now I use wood and paint.

I make marks that spell out secrets, burying them under layers and layers of glossy color.

The secrets, repeated dozens of times, asserted and recognized, then protected and hidden so well—sometimes I don't see them myself.

It's been a long time since I was eight years old, but the secrets, the pain and happiness of loving women were then and still are the motivation and content of my work.

Maryann King  
New York City



Maryann King. *Gaslight*. 1977. Acrylic on wood. 38" x 45".

These are the questions I am asking:

What has your relationship been to asking questions?  
Did you ask questions in school, at home? Why were  
you asking?

How do you feel about asking questions now?

How do you feel when young people ask you ques-  
tions?

Are there particular people you have difficulty hear-  
ing information from or situations in which it is hard to  
hear information?

How does it feel when people give you information  
you already have or about something you already know  
about? Is it important to you that people know that you  
know things?

Do you remember the first time you had a new  
thought or idea, one that was totally your own? Was  
there ever a conscious awareness of such a thing?

Have you ever had the feeling that you were the first  
one to find or discover something, the first one to make  
particular connections? Does that have anything to do  
with art-making for you?

When did you realize you could and do affect the  
world? Was there a time of realizing your power?

Do you remember the first time you did a public "pol-  
itical" act?

What is your relationship to beauty and beautiful  
things?

When did you realize or decide you were an artist?  
Which did you do?

How do you feel about the idea of art being a luxury?

Do you ever do unimportant things?

What did your parents do when you were growing  
up?

What was your family's attitudes towards art?

What was your relationship to conformity or being  
different when you were growing up?

What were you like in high school? How are you dif-  
ferent? How are you different than you thought you'd  
be when you were in high school?

Some thoughts and answers:

Did you know that I am not really an actual artist?  
When I was in first grade I found out that I could not  
draw and I knew it then. I don't remember the exact  
moment of realization.

I remember that for a long time, as a little girl, my  
fantasy was that I would marry a struggling artist and  
definitely never be one. I have been feeling a connection  
between deciding to be a lesbian and taking control of  
that fantasy and throwing it out the window for good. If  
I am never going to marry someone, or have a man be  
the "core of my existence," that fantasy can never  
become true. The struggling part of the fantasy is cer-  
tainly out of my upper middle class background, where  
I idealized and romanticized struggling, and it is also  
part of the artist myth. Chronologically I decided to  
become an artist before I decided to become a lesbian,  
but they are and were part of the same process; of  
saying that my life is important, of valuing my life and  
my self as a woman, of beginning to let go of living for  
others and seeing myself in the eyes of others and also  
giving up that deeply ingrained and conditioned  
woman's sense that only when I am giving, am I worth-  
while, do I deserve to live etc.

At the time that I decided that I wasn't an artist, I  
really decided it. I knew then that creativity and all that  
went with it was not part of me or my life. There was a  
stopping of the expression of my self, of the creating

from inside of me, saying who I was and what the world  
was to me.

I remember when I was pretty young, in Sunday  
school, doing a drawing of the Tower of Babel, which  
was hung up with other drawings and my teacher said  
that I was a good artist. She said it on my Sunday  
school report card. That is the only memory I have of  
being appreciated for "art work." The next thing I  
remember is being in first grade and having our teacher  
put on music and we were supposed to draw to the  
music with our eyes closed. Everyone else in the class  
drew abstract drawings, apparently to the feeling and  
rhythm of the music. I drew a house, a tree and a walk. I  
did not get a star for my drawing and I think I was—I  
must have been—very embarrassed. I remember in third  
grade all of us making towels where we stitched threads  
into the towels and I was the only one who did not make  
a geometric design. I did some seagulls and an ocean  
with a boat on it.

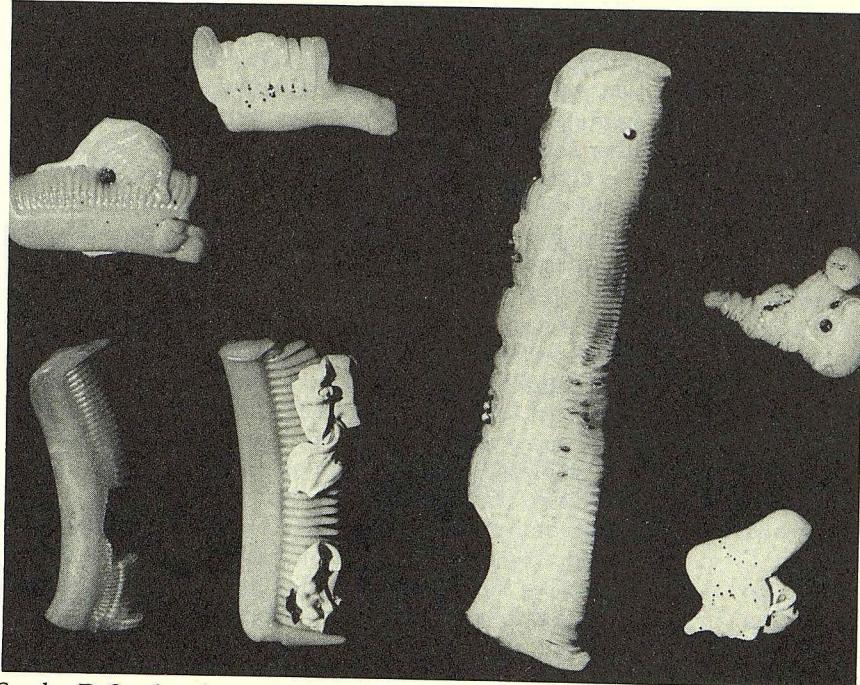
I knew that an artist was the one thing I would never  
be! There was something about my absolute non-identifi-  
cation with the creativity or activity of "artist" which  
had significance beyond the fact that I wasn't calling  
myself an artist.

I am seeing that being a lesbian means valuing my  
perceptions, as well as other women's perceptions and  
seeing that the world is a place I (we) have a right to be  
in charge of. I realize my outsideness and with that  
knowledge I begin to learn and then create beyond the  
given reality, and live beyond it.

There is a kind of question that is thought-provoking  
and "interesting" that I feel very involved in thinking  
about and asking. It has to do with some awarenesse  
that I have come to through being alive, particularly in  
the past few years. These questions stay with me and I  
love them and they feel like my "art." They are the  
results of awakening parts of me that have been shut  
down, not allowed to grow. I catch a glimmer of the me  
that really exists, fully alive, spontaneous, responsible,  
creative, awake and aware and active and unaframed. The  
feeling of a "first time" or a "new discovery" has to do  
with breaking through from that old space of hurt and  
shut down to the way I can be, the way every person  
can be, all the time.

There is something very important to me about  
saying that I am a lesbian, that I am a feminist, that I am  
an artist, that I am a Jew, that I am a woman, that I am  
from an upper middle class family, that I am white, etc.  
It has to do with owning parts of me, with feeling them,  
with being public, with all of me out, not ashamed of  
anything that I am. In that way it feels very active to say  
I am.

Ellen Ledley  
Pasadena, California



Sandra DeSando. *American Beauties*. n.d. Broken and melted plastic combs, rhinestones, plastic forks and slidemounts. 2" or 3" pieces.

Being and growing up lesbian always put me out of sync with my peers. I never did understand certain phenomena of our times. Do you remember screaming at your first Elvis Presley movie? Mine was *Love Me Tender*. I saw a whole generation of women screaming at the images and evocations of male sexual provocation. I sat in the audience wondering what it was that these women were feeling. I didn't feel like screaming. I thought it was strange the way my friends were behaving, but always I felt the undercurrent that I was the one that was wrong.

We have been brought up to respond to certain culturally defined stimulations. I didn't respond. I went through school unaffected by the captain of the football, basketball, soccer, wrestling, and chess teams. Without these things there was little else. My friendships with women were steady but painful, when one by one they had their first crush with the new boy in town. They moved, talked and pleased one huge romantic ideal—falling in love and marriage. Sex was already there; their tease and their rape. Living in rural Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey, didn't provide any alternative lifestyle, not in the fifties.

When I came out as a lesbian it was wonderful. A whole life began to take shape. Coming out was a joyous time. Suddenly ice blood dissolved, walls became windows and doors. But making a new lifestyle is a slow and steady process. It took years to wear away at the circles of isolation, fear and repression. I wanted the knowledge I felt had been hidden from me. The gay and women's movements provided support and information. With a growing perspective, doing my art work became really important and possible. Now there is so much I feel I want to do. Part of that is I want to leave records. Growing into womanhood I am finding my ancestors and making herstory. Our contact creates fibers and pathways for others.

Sandra DeSando  
New York City

AMERICAN BEAUTIES

PRESENTING

AMERICAN BEAUTIES

COMBS

MASS MADE

PLASTIC INDUSTRIAL

SHARP EDGED

WIDE TOOTH MONSTERS THAT RAKE MY HEAD

TAKE THEM ALL AWAY

MELT THEM

COVER THEM WITH DIAMONDS

MAKE THEM THE LITTLE SHINING BEAUTIES

In the deepest sense of the word, I see lesbian humor as the essence of the playful spirit, but play in the most challenging-to-the-cosmos sense. We play with our imagination, with our sexual freedoms, with our clothes—costuming not to represent power parades like leather, but to laugh at the confines of color and texture, lines—and in our playing we create new worlds because of the deepest sense of the deadliness of this one. *Les Guerillères* is playing at its most powerful, creation of language, names, structures, with joyous energy and warrior strength. I know this sounds philosophical, and yet even when I was an old femme I knew there was an amazon world—not by reading or talking but by the strength and adventure I felt in entering the bars, walking the street late at night, stepping out of bounds even if it was to find a closeness that was defined by who did what. The important thing was we did, and we laughed in the faces of the Mafia men. Our play with language seems to come from the same impulse—to turn around the givens, to reinforce each other's daring and strength in playing above this world. I think our humor, like many other parts of our culture, is celebration—the cheering on of each other to make a new universe in the presence of each other, to drop the sticks of this world at each other's feet and pick up the pieces all mixed up and in so doing assert our ability to create new worlds. I think our writers have mostly known this: they played with sentence structure and threw their words up into the air, their air, to make them fall into a different way of symbolizing a different life. I think we play because this world is not ours, and we are self-cherishing enough to know we must live somewhere. We are connected to each other enough to believe we have the power to create new worlds at this very moment with the words we play with.

Joan Nestle  
New York City

Lesbian is who I am; feminist is how I think. Feminism gave me vision, self-love, and love for other women, not the other way around. I know women who love women and are not lesbians. I know lesbians who are haters of self and other women (no surprise: men hate us and fuck us). Nevertheless, for me coming out as a lesbian was continuous with my development as a feminist. I can't talk about myself as "lesbian artist" apart from "feminist artist"; nor do I want to.

The year I came out was the year in which I began writing again, after a nine year silence. I now understand that breakthrough partly as an explosion through fear—fear that inside me was a self, a vision, that would either horrify men or bore them. My friend Paula King says, "Being a lesbian meant I could create what I wanted." Yes. It meant I stopped caring about male boredom, shock, or disgust. It meant—and means—that women are at the center of my eye, that I think of women's ears when I write, that my work grows through the tug and shove of female response to it.

But it was not just coming out which allowed me to write. It was also the conscious creation/discovery of a tradition of female art, a sense of connection with other creators, past and present, a connection which provides support, validation of one's technique and subject matter, and a source for imagery, ideas, and forms. This is a circulatory system which makes me know we are one body; the network is literally vital.

A friend tells me she read Lessing's *Golden Notebook* in the early sixties and found it "boring," i.e., threatening; the air of that time clogged her ears with self-hate. When I read the same book in 1970, I was electrified. From my journal, 1970, after reading the *GN*: "With Anna pouring jug after jug of warm water over her stale-smelling menstruating cunt, you'd think she'd tell us what kind of birth control she uses. Does she never worry about being pregnant?" Never mind the body-hating words I chose in 1970. Lessing's matter-of-fact treatment of menstruation instantly upped my expectations so that I was annoyed by her omission of another facet of my bodily experience. Prior to the *GN*, prior to the feminist movement, it had never occurred to me to miss myself in all those books I plowed through. We are seeing in this last decade a gathering of demands on artists to tell the truth about female experience. We write in a context of an audience which requires responsible work from its artists, an audience responsive in turn to our subject matter and technique.

I want to tell the truth as best I can, to recycle the energy I have gotten from women's creative work, to get that energy back in the form of more and more women articulating their experience. We all have stories and they should be told—mine among them. Thus we come to understand our experience through naming it. Thus we nourish each other, feed our visionary selves—the selves who know change is possible. My medium is words. It is what I know. I feel its limits. I would rather make movies. I would rather take over TV. I would most rather overthrow the government. But words are what I can use.

Much of my writing falls into the category "lesbian art" because I am a lesbian; the content is my experience, much of it common to all women. Fear of rape, job discrimination, survival anxiety, female solidarity, the whole societal weight of sexism, some struggles with men, participation in raising two boy children, watch-

ing them start to swagger, wondering how to love them as they turn into little piggies. My past is heterosexual, different from that of lesbians who have always been aware of their love for women, who were never touched or wounded deeply by men. I want to explore, and want other lesbians to explore, these differences among us. Gay chauvinism: I have practiced it, been victimized by it. Now I see it as only destructive, as one more hierarchy (how long have you been out? I came out in the crib....).

Since I began writing as a lesbian, much of my past remains unwritten: what has happened to women, how my life was formed, how it served men, how it did not serve me, how it was made to seem inevitable. What transpired in my marriage bed, for example, was predictable, anything but natural. It had as little to do with love or pleasure or sexuality as the grocery list. It had more to do with the grocery list.

Also important in my past: familial relationships among women, my grandmothers, mother, aunts. I need to see these more clearly, with less anger, less fear of being trapped as they were trapped, with more love. I have not yet written about the deep bond between myself and my sister, a positive model for the relationships I build with women.

I assume the telling of my specifically lesbian experiences is useful since I find myself so hungry for details of other lesbians' relationships. We all need practice in seeing what is happening and in telling the truth. In how to love each other better than we were taught. How it is hard to face a formless, unfolding future. We used to chant these words like a litany, double axes gleaming in our eyes. Now I am more aware of difficulties alongside the palpable joy. I want to be honest about these difficulties.

Yet I find myself hopeful. If sexuality is one of the earliest deepest emotional constructs to be institutionalized in our tiny child-bodies, and if at age twenty-six I could discover a range of sexual feelings—a whole capacity previously invisible—I can only conclude that all change is possible, and that we don't yet know a fraction of our capabilities. So I feel great optimism about personal transformation within severe limits. I feel less optimistic just at present about breaking through the limits, i.e., transforming the world. I feel despair/comfort when I think how my opportunity for growth is stifled by patriarchy/capitalism—despair because I will never get to be my fullest possible self; comfort because I can at least understand the reasons for my blocks, fears, tightness. I see danger in demanding that we live the revolution before the revolution. The relationship between consciousness, action, and material reality is crucial. I have been working on some notes—still formless—about competitive feelings among women; not competition for men, but feelings of envy and threat among lovers and friends. I see these feelings partly as a realistic response to a world whose goods need not be scarce, but are (jobs, publishers, even love and respect); partly as an archaic response to an old and perilous lesson about competition. I have felt much guilt about my feelings of competitiveness, a guilt which keeps me from *feeling* them, thus from working through them. I want to write about the masking feelings—feelings we feel instead of feeling something else: guilt; embarrassment; boredom; laziness; even desire. I want to rename my feelings more accurately, to disrupt the

categories within which I learned to know myself. To recognize the weight of the past so I can more readily put down what is burdensome, hug what is useful. To acknowledge my luck in living through a time when the feminist movement is making my life joyful and my work possible; to acknowledge my dependence on our movement's continued movement.

Finally, I want to learn not to say what comes easiest, since for me "easy" often means "old." This last comes from my experience of being challenged by my lover, another poet, about the ending of a poem: "Do you really feel as helpless as that?" she asked, and I had to confess that I didn't, and I rewrote the poem. Here is the rewritten poem. It is the most logical conclusion.

Melanie Kaye  
Portland, Oregon

## LIVING WITH CHAOS

1.

This morning the *NY Times* said  
the airforce is building new bombers.  
On points like this  
the *Times* is to be trusted.

2.

Tomatoes rot in the garden,  
your children play tag on the roof.  
I picture small bodies tripping, plummeting,  
squashing tomatoes to a fine red ooze,  
bones poking through flesh.  
I tell them to stop, they laugh.  
Helplessness swells in me like a bomb:  
they will stop when they're ready.

This is not my house but I want to clean it.  
I want to sponge down the table, pick up dustcrumbs,  
put the tomatoes up in jars.  
I want to wrap the children in blankets,  
feed them soup.  
I want to scrub the air transparent,  
take away the bombs, wash the children,  
put us to bed.  
Helplessness rises in me like bread,  
bread to feed no one.

3.

This morning I went looking for patterns,  
could find no order, no repetition.  
Then realized, this was the pattern:  
everything from scratch.

If things would hold still long enough to be named,  
we could have more lucid conversations,  
before a fire, over good wine.  
Instead we make do with the pale whistle of hunger, fear,  
the quick rush of desire.

4.

You say you don't hate yourself,  
don't feel guilty for the bombers, the hunger,  
the smog thickening the air.

"But," you say, "I feel helpless, can't  
breathe. I feel competent  
only to describe my sensations."

5.

then describe your sensations  
where else can we begin?

in the thick broth of chaos  
all possibilities swim

if the wind blows through us  
if we lack words for its sweet howling  
our teeth still know its name

your hand tracing my bones  
discovers patterns which already  
split into new forms

these bones will make soup

6.

Let me remember  
we were born new in blood

Let me observe  
how we grow larger than any predictions

When you describe the world as you see it  
let me accept your gift, match it

Let me believe  
nothing will be lost except separate skins

Let me absorb:  
there will be no salvation

only the small firm pulse of a friend  
drumming

Let me celebrate  
how we split and shed layer after layer of dried cracked skin  
and hang the pieces as history  
too small for us

I am writing as a lesbian feminist artist in the Minnesota Arts Community. This is difficult because there are few substantial conversations about the personal and political implications of lesbian art here, and those few conversations that do exist result from an atmosphere of paranoia.

There are two specific instances of the art world in the Twin Cities politically using the label "lesbian" to exert community control over women's groups. The first was the termination after one year of the Women's Arts Core Program at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul. The program instilled great fear and was discussed and described by those not participating as a lesbian program that used harmful brainwashing techniques. As a result the students in the program were questioned about lesbianism and in certain instances verbally pressured to give information concerning the number of lesbians in the program, who they were, and who they were sleeping with.

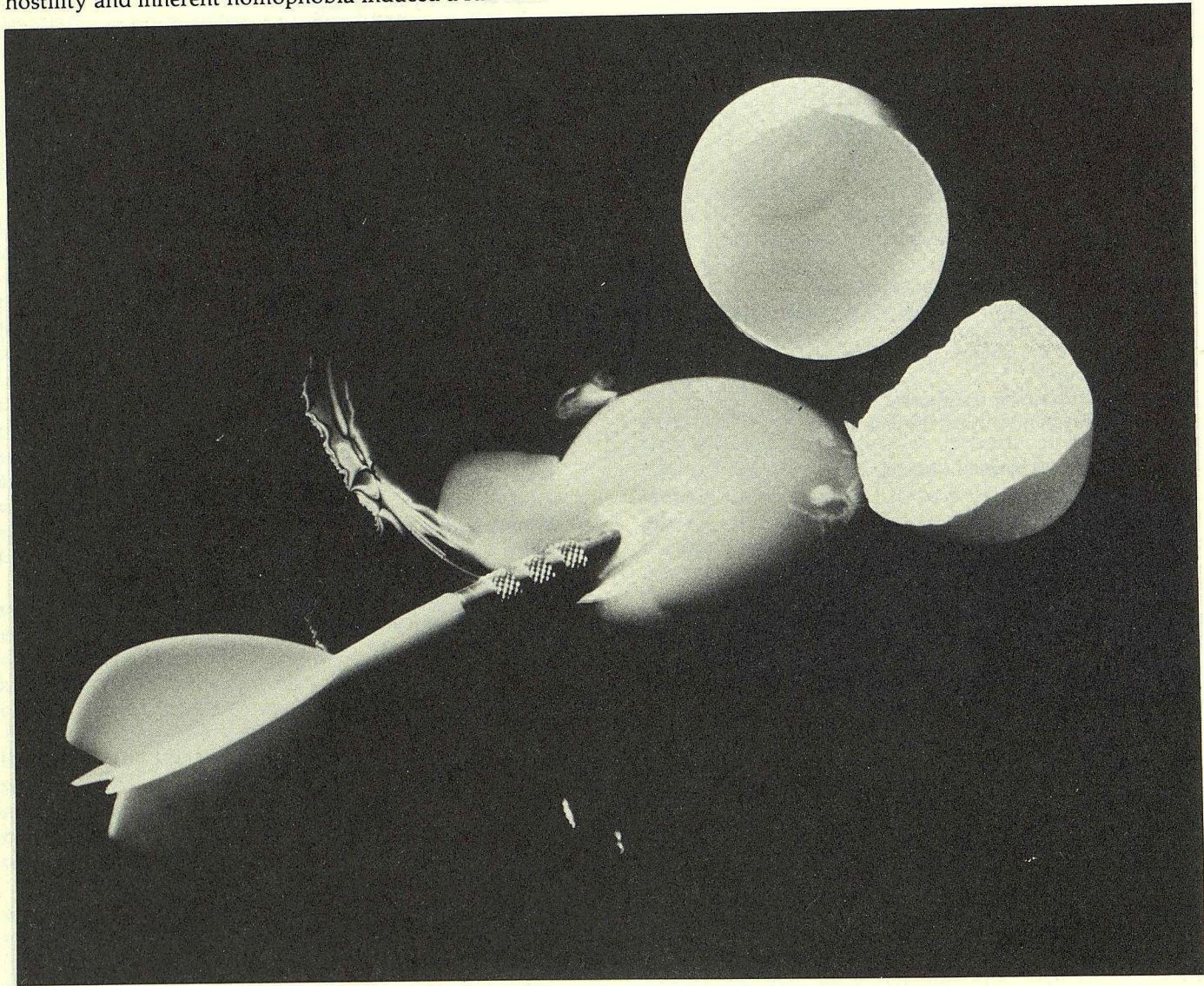
The women in the program were asked to submit reports on their area of academic study, fill out program evaluations, and participate in hour long tape-recorded individual interviews. All of these demands were met and the participating women themselves felt the program was highly successful. However, the paranoia, hostility and inherent homophobia induced a full facul-

ty meeting to vote for a moratorium until further studies could be completed. That was five months ago.

The political use of the lesbian label to attack feminists and their art worked once and it may work again. Similar tactics of divide and conquer are being aimed at the W.A.R.M. Gallery, a women's co-operative art gallery in Minneapolis. Because it is a women's gallery with an all-woman membership and exhibition policy, the community has labeled it as a lesbian organization, although in reality the gallery includes and shows both straight and gay women. Sexual preference has not been a criterion. However, outside homophobia is manipulating internal homophobia, by using "lesbian" as a negative and dangerous image. Gallery members have been told that people are afraid to come into the gallery because they would be confronted by radical lesbians and that W.A.R.M. has a dyke image.

In reaction to this some of the women in the gallery feel compelled to exhibit male artists and have submitted exhibition proposals which read like this:

"Invitational for Men—Each gallery member would choose one male artist who they feel has been supportive of women to be included in the show. I feel this would be good P.R. for the gallery in the arts community and a good way to get publicity as well as being an encouragement for men to be supportive of



Janice Helleloid. *Egg and Dart*. n.d. photograph.

the women's movement, etc. People like [name withheld] deserve a thank you from us all."

"Let's invite a man to have a show."

Women feel comfortable in dealing with the lesbian issue without the protective environment of an all-woman organization but remain concerned about the external public image. In their attempt to dispel the lesbian image, they want to integrate men in some way. The assumption is that male reads "heterosexual" and female reads "lesbian." This situation allows the established community structure to have a foothold on the internal workings of the feminist structure with women spending the majority of their time and energy taking care of the general community (men) rather than themselves and their work. Of course this is one purpose of patriarchal politics.

If the above mentioned questions were changed from dispelling the lesbian image to dispelling the discriminatory practices that are associated with the label "lesbian," then the community would need to be directly confronted and held accountable for its own discriminatory practices whether based on sexual preference or bias toward all-woman structures.

The politics surrounding homophobia is reminiscent of McCarthyism or the power which is generated from the manipulation of fear. Consciously/unconsciously choosing to be manipulated by internalized fear makes every individual a vulnerable target. Taking a passive or non-confronting posture allows the existing homophobic structure to remain intact. Political maneuvers of this kind have separated gay and straight women, working class and middle class women, and white and Third World women. It has driven wedges into the power base of woman-developed structures, separated us from our goals, and dispersed our creative energy.

Janice Helleloid  
Minneapolis

I found that the only real support that I got in Stockholm came not from the official women's movement, "Group 8," but from the lesbian women of the "Victoria-group." The reason for this is that the straight women's movement is too worried about gaining approval from the male left and is too afraid to be associated with lesbian feminism and so is not capable of developing a true women's culture—which is what I am into.

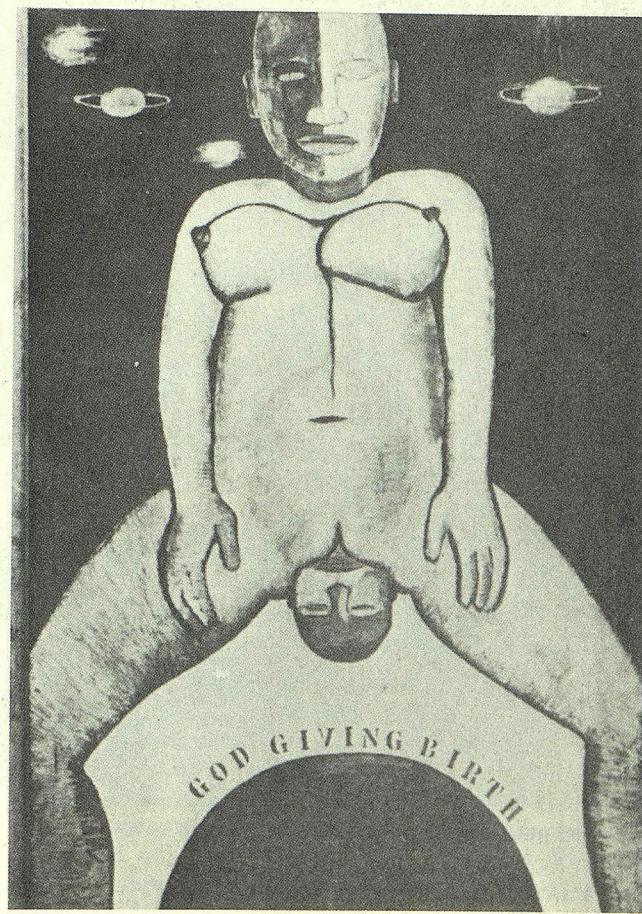
A real women's culture can only be developed by women together, women who have withdrawn their sexual, creative, and emotional power from men. Women who ultimately seek male approval, because they are sexually dependent on men, will never ultimately be able to draw any real consequences of their own actions, feelings, and thoughts. They will always be somehow looking sideways. So the real outrageous and unafraid statements have come from lesbian women. [I am very aware when I say this that at this point in time a great deal of women's "sexual dependence" on men is simply based on economics (women's poverty and fear of losing their children), and that the majority of women have no choice in the matter of whether or not to live with a man.]

When I slowly managed to produce true (to myself)

paintings of women, they seemed perfectly obvious and at the same time had a look about them of something not being quite right to many who saw them for the first time. So unused are we (women & men) to seeing women portrayed with strength by a woman. My paintings were accused of being "ugly," meaning the women are not pleasing to men.

It is when you as an artist portray women with love and pride—and not just complain about women's situation and repressed lives—that the abuse is thrown at you. Male critics, who actually call themselves left-wing and radical, have said about my work that "they feel alienated from my view on women and my views on sisterhood and motherhood." I am accused of being a mystic. Some of my paintings are based on what I have understood of matriarchal societies—where the religion was centered around the Great Mother and women were the main producers, the first farmers, and owned the land. One of my paintings shows symbolically the universal creative power as a woman giving birth in space ("God Giving Birth"). But that is only one of my paintings; others are of women working, struggling, relating to each other. According to the Swedish critics I should keep only to the kitchen sink or talk about my pain at being born a woman in a man's world. Apparently you shouldn't presume as a woman that you should or could make any flights into thoughts about creative energy, religious beliefs, the cosmos, or women's identity in relation to herself and other women.

Monica Sjoo  
Bristol, England



Monica Sjoo. *God Giving Birth*. 1968. 4' x 6'.

For some time I have recognized that my sculpture reflects aspects of my personal experience. Nevertheless I had not been able to effectively distinguish the personal lesbian content of the work from the broader female imagery. Recently, however, I realized I had been interpreting the work in terms of female anatomy and genitalia, but not in terms of how I experience those forms. The unity, strength and openness, the materials and the arrangement of forms that I see in my work closely connect with the expansion of self into nature which I feel during orgasmic contact with a woman. The biological parts of my work are common to all women; the sexual experience, as a whole, is lesbian. I would like to share two of my sculpted images which express the spiritual/sexual nature of that experience.

"Omphale" is a large, open bowl that is a visual expression of the orgasmic experience. The vessel has always been a symbol of change, from simple cooking conversion to alchemical transformation. The activity of "Omphale" creates feelings of change from moving into, through, and out into the landscape. To indicate the transformation the image is carved from "fungal" elm wood striated with earth-like patterns of decay. The dilated protuberances curving around the bowl are felt sequentially in the act of swelling. The swollen forms actually radiate out into the landscape while the wide spout of the bowl tips toward the earth.

The biological forms in "Autoerotic Bowl" are simply five fingers poised at the vaginal opening. The bowl knot which still retains the natural rough bark is made of oak. From the exterior body of the bowl's surface the fingers curve inwardly around the lip. The movement from the erotic act itself to the natural landscape is obvious: the bottomless bowl opens into the earth.

Embodied in the work is a sense of the personal, historic and mythic. My readings on mythologies and ancient cultures clearly have expanded my understanding of my imagery. I am intrigued by the resemblance of "Autoerotic Bowl" to the basic structure of the rhyton, which was a ceremonial vessel with holes in both ends, used in Minoan culture. It is significant that the libation liquid to effect change had to pass through the vessel/female symbol and then onto object or earth. With some sculpted pieces I make direct connections to the past by naming them after women in history. "Omphale" was the name of a Lydian Amazon queen. Moreover, in Greek the word "omphalos" means the center, middle or more beautifully that part of the rose where the seed forms are created. As in early civilizations and current primitive cultures, I feel that sculpted images should be used in ceremony.

Debbie Jones  
Ithaca, New York



Debbie Jones. *Autoerotic Bowl*. 1976. Oak. 8" x 12" x 12".

The above paragraphs were excerpted from a longer article dedicated to all women in celebration of change and especially to Carolyn Straughan, Sandy Rubaii and Barbara Adams.

"Lesbian writers can't be taken seriously. They're limited. Narrow, kinky, twisted. Incapable of universality. Lesbian writing is not, certainly, for the mass market, for decent people's homes. Let them have their little presses, their little distributorship and galleries. They make up a special interest group, like your bird watchers, your genealogists." So the male-identified critics say.

My great-grandfather refused to allow my great-grandmother to buy paper, for fear she would "waste" her time writing. Confined to do stitchery, she embroidered lines of her poetry on the inner hems of her daughter's dresses. She was a lesbian writer, though she would not have called herself either lesbian or writer.

We lesbian writers are formidable, threatening, to the breastless controllers of power and money. They, too, are formidable. This struggle informs and enriches our art, and will not lie silent, will not be locked away. Lesbian writers have married men and kept house and borne children and cooked and cleaned their lives away, scribbling in journals, writing letters to each other, shaping poems they kept hidden under mattresses or in sewing baskets. Lesbian writers have painted plates, arranged flowers, decorated birthday cakes and committed suicide. I know my kind, how it has been for us, and how long.

As a lesbian writer, I report how it has been, what our options were, and what we chose. I tell our stories, the grimness and the love. I tell breast, hair, blood, the undulant curve and the clitoral vibration. I tell the touch and the womantalk which flows between us. I am speaking quietly, as calmly as I once spoke in recipes, of the power of the mother-will and of revolution.

I have learned, in my confinement, skills which serve me well. I write as steadily as I once ironed men's shirts, write as vigilantly as I watched over my toddlers and listened for their coughs in the night. I write as only women can, as only women have: with interruptions, and with love and without cease. My images are female, my symbols are female, my energy is female. Lesbian.

Kathryn Kendall  
New Orleans

All the dangers of being a woman under patriarchy intensify as my visibility in the dominant culture increases, especially since it increases by more than one count: as writer, feminist, lesbian, foreigner. Some of the dangers: trivialization, stereotyping (since much of my work is sensual and lyric I dread the possibility of being dubbed "erotic" and being limited to that label), isolation through the star-systems and image-making, verbal and physical harassment, assault, threats. And co-optation. Of all these the fear of co-optation, of losing touch with myself, my sisters, what is necessary and real for us, this fear has never left me since I received the Yale [Younger Poets] Award.

Then again, visibility makes possible much greater contact with women. What enabled me to begin writing with authenticity was my decision, in 1973, to speak only to a female and feminist audience. It gave me a sense of community, a sense of connection and responsibility, a necessity beyond the personal pleasure of writing. It gave me stamina and sustained me. I no longer had to explain so I began to sing. This is a gift women have given me, a gift I want to share with as

many as possible. And so I am grateful for the award, the visibility, which widens the circles of women I can get to know.

Visibility also gives me permission to speak in public, or gives me certain kinds of authority, such as judging competitions. I'm still trying to come to terms with this, since I fear that it is through this door that co-optation most easily enters, but right now feel that if I can maintain my connection and responsibility to my women's community I can use these occasions to say or demonstrate things that the patriarchy would rather keep unmentioned.

On the most immediate level, in my work, I am trying to write poems that are free of the institutionalized conflicts and brutality that have characterized our literary tradition for so long, to use simple grammar and syntax, and to praise, praise.

Olga Broumas  
Eugene, Oregon

Before talking about what it means to me to be a lesbian artist, I want to emphasize two other distinguishing things about myself: (1) I am a West Coast person, having lived in San Francisco for the last fifteen years (though I grew up in the Midwest). We live differently out here from people on the East Coast or in the middle of the country. We are in a different relation to our lives, our bodies, our work and "careers." (2) I am not attached to any academic institution, nor have I ever been since I was a student.

The term artist is hard for me to use, given its connotations of privilege, elitism and irresponsibility. The mystique surrounding that term is damaging to us as women, I think, and as makers of things. Maybe I'll just call myself a writer, for the purposes of this discussion.

Now: being a lesbian writer. I think of myself as an outlaw. I operate outside the heterosexist establishment, and my effort is to subvert it so that some more humane system can be established. Women are primary to me.

Having worked for a year in New York as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle* and having for years followed with passionate interest the goings-on in the so-called literary world, I think I know what it's about. (I speak of the world of the *New York Review of Books* and its little brothers.) And the conclusion I have come to is that this world subsists on and purveys a very high level of bullshit which is, at worst, destructive to women, and at best, a waste of time for us.

I feel myself to be part of a world of print created by the independent women's newspapers, journals and publishers such as the Women's Press Collective, Daughters, Inc., Diana Press, etc. All of us together are creating something new, in that we are bringing into literature a consciousness that has never been expressed before.

The task for me is to get to what I know and then express it in the clearest way possible (I do not mean to say that one function precedes the other; they are at best simultaneous.). When I say that I want my writing to be accessible to everyone, I do not mean that I wish to write conventional novels in the style of the nineteenth century, which is still the formula for pulp fiction. But I am concerned with content, as I think all genuine feminist writers are. We want to examine the experience of women and articulate the hard questions posed by the struggle of the last few years. And for me,

prose is not performance, but ideally a clear glass through which the reader enters the story. The medium should disappear.

Part of the revolutionary content of our work, I believe, is the re-experiencing of our bodies. Having been brought up in a repressed and ignorant condition for the purposes of capitalism and heterosexism, our resistance to knowledge of our bodies is extreme. We are traumatized, we freeze, we become blind and deaf in the presence of flesh. A book that confronts us with flesh is Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*. And because we resist so strongly, Wittig has to proceed in a violent manner. She has to take us by the back of the head and shove our face into it to make us look at the body, touch, smell, taste it from the inside, make us stare at it rotten and putrid and every possible way it can be—so that we will come to know and accept and love our own flesh.

Part of what I love about dykes is our toughness. And that toughness can be connected up with a deep awareness of women too; lesbians are mothers and lesbians are daughters, so we have the whole range of women's experience and the other dimension too, which is the unique viewpoint of the dyke. This extra dimension puts us a step outside of so-called normal life and lets us see how gruesomely abnormal it is, lets us see the kinds of illusions that people live by, that steal people's lives from them. It puts us up against the moment, against the reality of creating our own lives and relationships because there are few models. But this examining and inventing reaches out beyond our individual lives and relationships into a way of viewing what goes on around us, and can issue in a world-view that is distinct in history and uniquely liberating. It is our continued working together over time, taking risks, remaining true to ourselves and stretching ourselves out beyond our limits, that will lead us to the development of this world-view.

What I want to do in my own work is to affirm women's strength, and I don't mean by that to pretend to a kind of strength that isn't real. (For instance, I find heroines like Wonder Woman or Super Dyke offensive.) In the novel I've been writing, the character who started out at the most disadvantage, supposedly, was one of the women who was very aware of her own anguish, who experienced herself in pain and out of joint with other people and the world. Over time, she is the character who developed the most strength. The other women in the book, who initially were more appealing, did not grow as much. It surprised me during the writing of the book, to see this woman, the most ineffectual and hurting one, develop into the most complete and effectual human being there. I didn't intend for this to happen; she just grew naturally within the events and feelings and interactions of the novel. And looking back, I think her depth came from her being so connected to, so aware of, her pain. So when I present images of women's strength, I want that to come out of a true understanding of the difficulties of our lives and the agonies one has to endure in the midst of our struggles and victories. To tell the truth is not easy. I hope I have the wisdom and courage and skill to do it.

Sandy Boucher  
San Francisco

In my personal life the power of the combination lesbian/feminist/artist is tremendous. By personal life I mean the life I lead in my studio, where I take measurements of myself and begin to invent hypotheses and possibilities based on these measurements. One way in which the power of lesbian/feminist/artist has manifested itself is in the terror that I uncover through painting. Sometimes I need a couple of hours to "recover" after a painting. I can feel very tangibly as though with a painting my head has split open and something has been birthed from that chasm. The terror is (again, tangibly) the feeling that my head needs to close up before I can interact with the world directly, lest something unwanted and terrible from the world get in through that split. I always have this feeling after painting something that comes from my gut, something that, no matter how indecipherable to anyone, has come from an automatic gesture from within me. I can recognize it as such.

Two things I have learned from lesbian-feminism are that: a) irrational terrors are possibly not irrational at all but part of a terrorizing way of life that goes on for all women, and b) the terror often increases for women who take steps away from compliance with the system.

Terror of rape, terror of being molested, of being tortured, of being taken over, of intrusion. I link all these together for myself and for other feminist lesbians. They are real. We're not irrational. Even the protective gestures that I make in my studio to avoid the very possibility of intrusion are linked to my fear of coming apart, being *taken apart*.

Amy Sillman  
New York City

Because of my saturation in sociology, I believe that all theories should be put to the test of research. In my opinion, the question of a common denominator existing between women artists, other than gender, is still on the drafting table, is still a theory unproven. Without defining it, it is dangerously refutable. Without defining women's art, it is impossible to secondly reach conclusions about lesbian art. As long as there remains essentially no data, as long as art remains what the individual concedes it to be, general terms such as lesbian art will always be uncomfortable terms lesbians believe to be true without knowing how to define what they mean. In other words, "I know I'm a lesbian artist but I don't know what that means." Sure, I could come up with something, but I believe a political statement merits more research than what I, or several other lesbians, could individually come up with.

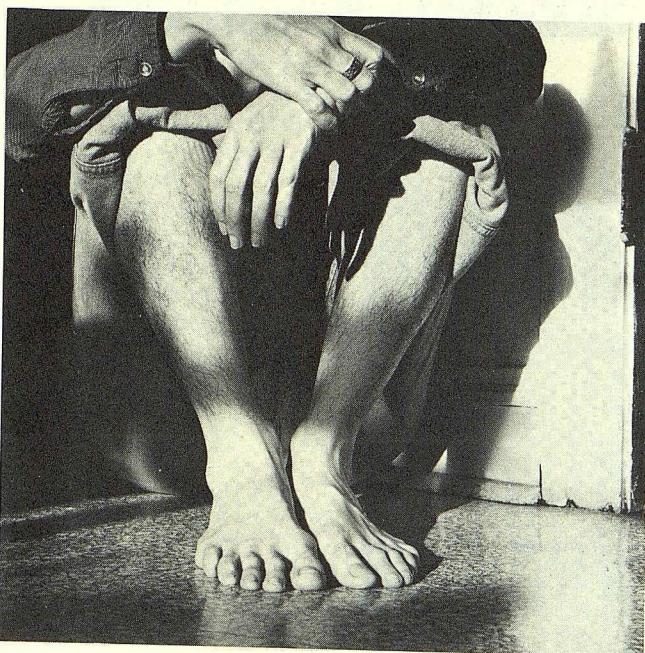
As far as the Sweaty Palms show [in Chicago], where four of us advertised our work as being produced by four lesbian artists, I can only speak retrospectively and for myself. The show proved that one can not stereotype lesbians and the art they produce; one could not find any similarities even between the four of us. It also made myself, and probably others, start thinking about what lesbian art could be. I feel that in some respects Sweaty Palms posed a question. That question is still unanswered.

Phylane Norman  
Chicago



Photo by eeva-inkeri

Amy Sillman. *Marty's Cool Blue House*. 1977. Pencil, pen, chalk. 21" x 15".



Phylane Norman.

Jane Stedman, a self-taught weaver who makes elegantly simple and functional weavings, works with her partner, M'Lou Brubaker, a silversmith (formerly "Sistersilver") in their craft business, Mother Oaks Crafts.

Maryann King lives in New York City, paints, swims and puts together jigsaw puzzles.

Ellen Ledley lives in Pasadena in the Red Moon Collective and she is a member of a women's carpentry/handicrafts collective. She is also part of a group of women artists who have been meeting and talking about work.

Joan Nestle is a lecturer in English, SEEK Program, Queens College, CUNY and a co-founder of the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York.

Sandra DeSando lives in New York City. She has exhibited at various galleries, including Albright-Knox and Hundred Acres. Her work is currently at the Seventeenth St. Gallery.

Melanie Kaye is a poet and activist. She teaches women's studies at Portland State University in Oregon and is a co-author of *Naming: Poems by Eight Women*.

Janice Helleloid is a member of the Women's Art Registry of Minnesota Gallery, a Woman's Collective Art Space, and an instructor at the College of Art and Design in Minneapolis. Currently she is working on an exhibition for Galleria D'Arte Del Cavallino in Venice, Italy for fall of 1977.

Monica Sjoo is a Swedish feminist artist and writer (self taught) who has lived in England for the last 15 years. Her book, *The Ancient Religion of the Great Cosmic Mother of All* will be published by Womanspirit, in the United States in the coming year.

Debbie Jones is a sculptor, woodworker and lecturer living in Ithaca, New York.

Kathryn Kendall survives and writes in New Orleans, mothering Seth and prevailing, despite the odds.

Olga Broumas' poetry appears on page 57.

Sandy Boucher is the author of a book of short stories, *Assaults & Rituals*, and a novel, *Charlotte Street*, to be published by Daughter's, Inc. this year.

Amy Sillman would like to make a living running an offset press.

Phylane Norman considers herself a lesbian artist more often than not when she is around other artists who aren't. Photography and academia keep her occupied.