

From The Lesbian Issue Collective:

I'm a writer who struggles constantly with the urge to remain silent.

And I understood our collective process as a struggle with silence. Like an individual isolated lesbian, we worked first on self-validation. We talked about the famous respected closet cases—could we get them to come out or figure some way to claim them. (Claiming the "great ones" is a way for a despised group to feel good about itself.) And we spent many many meetings doing consciousness-raising on what it means to be lesbian artists—talking, some of us, about issues we had never discussed before. My excitement in working on this issue of *Heresies* centered around the hope that many lesbian artists would write us, share their work, and contribute to this dialogue.

The standard I used in judging work was based on my wish to be inclusive—to present as much diversity as possible, to present clearly articulated articles even if I disagreed with their content.

Others in the collective felt differently. This we discovered as we worked and worked and no longer had time just to talk to each other. We had been too busy when we started—discussing our similarities, our struggles, our fears, and our opportunities as lesbian artists—to get very far in discussing our differences.

Cynthia Carr

The only talent I bring to the lesbian collective is my sexual preference, a scorn of self-important pretension, a nose for drivel, and a desire to see to it that we say it like it is. In the past we have done ourselves and our work a terrible damage by lying about our experience. Driven by a need for the comfort of a common political position, we have all too often allowed rhetoric to pass for truth. Seeking an accommodation with the straight world, we have lied about our essential difference. And in a spirit of loyalty we have compromised ourselves by supporting thinking and work which is simply bad. There is very little sense of humor in us. We have, by this excusable example, leaned heavily on many closet doors which might otherwise have sprung open. It was my hope that with this issue we might present truly good work by lesbians. Now, as I am about to be pasted up and mechanicaled, I can say that the effort has been exhausting and perilous. And certainly I am too close to the final product to say that we have succeeded.

Betsy Crowell

I usually think of myself as part scientist and part magician with certain skills that sometimes make art. Neither feminism nor lesbianism determine the form and content of my work yet it was only with the security of the former and the coming to terms with the latter (the muse) that my life and art began to be uniquely and overtly me.

Initially I worked on the issue seeking a community to explore in depth the relationship of lesbianism to the artist and to discover what would happen if lesbian art and artists were brought together. Our editorial collective's discussions were some of the most provoking and intimate that I have experienced, yet after each I felt a sense of panic. I know that lesbians have made great art, I know that lesbians have been major contributors to culture, and I believe that lesbianism in the largest and most powerful sense of the word has been central not peripheral to the creative world of woman, yet I was worried that we wouldn't receive sufficient "good" material. I also feared being viewed through society's homophobic lenses

yet I will not obscure the importance of lesbianism to my life and art. The muse and I are inextricably entwined and she is a woman. I struggle continually against any restrictions on my identity while questioning why this culture relentlessly omits and suppresses from discussion and history (even in the feminist community) the essentialness of lesbianism to the creative lives of women.

However, there was a far deeper reason for my panic. After nine months of working on this issue I felt that our greatest unfaced demon was our own homophobia absorbed by all of us in different ways from a culture so homophobic that it ruthlessly suppresses and punishes all exploration of female sexuality. This, coupled with the fact that lesbian artists desperately need visibility and credibility, gave us a common unexamined goal: visibility as matured and serious artists.

This is only a beginning. Omitted from the issue is any dialogue that examines the role of lesbianism as central to women claiming full power over their sexuality and that such power is the root of strong and unique art. Do not for a minute imagine that art has to be explicitly about sex or anything so simplistic. I am speaking rather to the fact that a person must be able to put the full force of herself behind her work. Fear of being seen as sexual, fear of the audience, fear of offending heterosexual friends, fear of retribution for creating or being in the issue are only a few of the fears that are real and need to be faced before we can initiate a discussion that begins from a point that assumes that lesbianism is the key to the powerfulness of all women.

Betsy Damon

I wanted an issue on lesbian art and artists that would provoke me; an issue that would challenge all the assumptions I have about lesbians and art; an issue that would leave me filled with questions and with the energy with which to explore the questions further. I wanted lesbians to be excited and disturbed by what they read here, finding glimpses of themselves, as well as a sense of what is missing. What stories are still untold?

What are lesbians? What are artists? In trying to reach a working definition of these two most basic questions, a sense of my own alienation from the task before us began to grow. This alienation came from being forced to examine sexuality from within a patriarchal context. A context which has created distinctions and categories in order to maintain its own power and privilege. The advantages gained by society's "power-brokers" through perpetuating and emphasizing the differences among racial, economic, sexual, and religious groups are clear. The most apparent difference between myself and a heterosexual woman; or myself (white, middle-class), and a Chicano working-class woman—is one of privilege. And for me, as a lesbian, as white, as middle-class, to maintain and perpetuate differences that ultimately exist only to deny privilege to some, seems wrong. One way I see myself as a lesbian perpetuating differences is in my focusing on what is and what is not a lesbian. "A woman who does not sleep with men." "Any woman who calls herself a lesbian." "A woman that loves and sleeps with other women." "What if she sleeps with a man one time? Is she still a lesbian?" "What if she used to sleep with men, used to be married to one, and doesn't now, but can't predict the future?" "What is the difference between a woman-identified-woman and a lesbian?" It was in trying to answer questions like these that a sense of futility and absurdity developed. I am not a lesbian. I make love only with women. I am in every way what society calls a lesbian. I will call myself and insist upon being called a lesbian as long as something called a heterosexual or bisexual exists. In all probability, I am referring to a sexuality that will never exist inside me. A simple sexuality, without reference to another's

gender. All of this is related to the question of circumstance (the time and space I live in) and therefore related to strategy (the means of change): an area I'm far less clear about than that of alienation.

The dilemma for me is that regardless of how I view the role such distinctions serve in this society, I am brutally oppressed by them, as they *have* been accepted by most everyone. The fact that I am a lesbian has a profound affect on my life. (My job, my family, my friends always hang in the balance.) While believing that "heterosexual" and "lesbian" are concepts that directly serve to oppress us all, I know full well that as a lesbian I am intentionally persecuted and isolated by this society. The nearest weapon to me with which to fight back is the taking of the concept and the word lesbian and claiming it as my own. My continuing to work on this issue is the result of that conclusion.

The term "artist" serves a very similar function as the word "lesbian," though the specific effect upon society is quite different. The term "artist" distinguishes between those who are artists and those who are not. To me, an artist is a person who works without sham. One who works with integrity. The three most basic tools are a sense of self, honesty, and imagination. These are also three of the greatest enemies of this society. With good reason all three of these qualities are suppressed in most people at a very early age and replaced with subservience, confusion, and conformity. The expressing of oneself creatively demands not only a sense of self, honesty, and imagination; but time...the time to listen, the time to concentrate. To have time, is one of the most important instances of privilege (and therefore oppression) in this society. If everyone had access to the same opportunities as everyone else—would there be such a creature as "artist?" Art would not have to speak for everyone if everyone could speak for themselves. Because of the privilege accorded to and/or fought for by artists in this society, the presumptuous assumption that some of us whether by genius, skill, or inspiration are better able to express "our" circumstance—I refuse to call myself or others "artists." Accepting money for work and associating with art institutions only contributes to the class system of art and artists. There are poets, performers, cooks and the like among us. These words refer to what we do. But "artist" refers to who we are in a context that inescapably implies a difference that furthers oppression rather than challenging it.

The most important point to me, as it refers to this issue, is that just as the words "lesbian" and "artist" exist within a context and are affected by a circumstance, so does this issue.

Marty Pottenger

I want people to understand that to be a lesbian feminist is to be undefined, complex, groping, newly born, uncategorizable and uncategorized—i.e. not a "Lesbian" as she has been culturally defined. I work and live for the day when the damnable categories of human behavior are gone. And towards this end, I am a part of *Heresies* and the lesbian issue.

I don't for a moment believe that we are presenting (or that we even looked for) any answers or final solutions in this issue. There were frightening moments when I felt that we had to say it all *right now* or never. As far as I'm concerned that's a reasonable and not too paranoid reaction to a culture which "gives us" NO place NO voice NO credibility NO trust. We just have to keep stretching, shoving, insisting, confronting, and pursuing whatever goals we each find most politically important and personally fulfilling. I find all the challenge I need in keeping my faith in the strength of the combined efforts of feminists and in taking seriously my individual acts of survival and growth in this death culture.

I am committed to photography and the written word, to outrageous and humorous art, to women, to the chaos of reconstruction, and to publishing as a way to become visible, to be heard and felt by no matter how small or select an audience.

Su Friedrich

I've been painting for twelve years—as a feminist I feel I've been making "my own" art for six of those years—and have identified myself as a lesbian for four years. We continue, the work and I, the commitment growing stronger, the relationship deeper. As I am less anxious that the work will leave me, or that others won't approve, I step out of my protective world and find myself increasingly concerned with feminist political issues. I know how my work functions for me, but how does it fit into a larger social political view of feminism?

I have to admit that I came to this issue with a lot of expectations. From the beginning, I conceived of a whole issue devoted to lesbian art as political. I had hoped it would give lesbian artists visibility (especially lesbian visual artists who have virtually been ignored), create dialogue and community between lesbian visual artists and writers, remove the separation between lesbian art and politics, and bring an art consciousness to the lesbian community and a lesbian consciousness to the feminist art community. Since lesbian artists are so often isolated, I had hoped that in this special collective context we would take risks, ask questions, explore ideas, and theorize. Like a painter exhibiting for the first time, I wanted to show it all.

Now that we have worked for almost a year on this issue, I have very mixed feelings. I think the work presented in this issue is excellent. The problem is not the art itself, for much strong work has been and is being made by lesbians. The problem is what's missing, and what is missing is a context for the work. I am disappointed that this issue has avoided controversial material and has continued the artistic fear of conscious political discussion. We have avoided a larger social political context for our work, as though it would somehow interfere with the work or take away from its power and meaning. To think politically doesn't mean we can't see creatively.

If artmaking is an integral part of feminist revolution as I believe it is, we should be asking the following questions:

1. What is the role and function of lesbian feminist art in the lesbian movement?
2. What is its role and function in the feminist movement?
3. How does lesbian feminist art relate to larger social struggles for change in a society where lesbians and others will no longer be discriminated against?
4. How does lesbian feminist art affect and transform culture?

The discussion of these questions is far more important than the answers. I believe that to be a lesbian artist is in itself political, but I also think in these days of homophobic backlash, that we need to push further and analyze all patriarchal institutions which control our lives. I feel that we have not allowed ourselves (because we're artists?) to deal with important issues of lesbian separatism, socialist lesbians, lesbian sensibility, the relationship of lesbianism to feminism, and the issues of race and class. These subjects are not rhetorical, clichéd, or irrelevant to artmaking. To me they are very real and important in determining the quality of lesbian art.

Harmony Hammond

My impetus to work on this issue was rooted in the desperation and frustration I was experiencing working as a lesbian painter within a very circumscribed peer group. I had begun to do what most lesbians have always done in creating a private world of reinforcement. I no longer believe these pockets of isolated support groups can bear the strain of what it means to be a lesbian in a culture predicated on misogyny and homophobia. This issue was an attempt to seek out lesbian artists and publicize the fact of their existence to myself, other lesbians and other women. The dangers and ramifications of exposing myself and others in a solitary lesbian issue of a magazine whose audience and founders are predominately straight are inherent and menacing. But no matter what the extent of this issue's token quality I believe that the contents pursue with integrity essential questions and possibilities facing all women.

K. Webster

I believe we are lesbians largely because we realize on some level that the demands of heterosexual roles are rooted in a tradition of violence to women's bodies and minds. This tradition is consciously and unconsciously ritualized; it is large and powerful, life determining in fact. Feminism can and must help alter the tradition but cannot ultimately transcend it. Some of us have tried to transcend it, could not, don't believe anybody can at this time, and reject it. Equality is a myth that liberal feminism and theories of androgyny nourish. Self-hatred, doubt, and homophobia on some level are operative in all our lives. In spite of this, and in defiance of this, I believe lesbianism is fundamentally about self-preservation and self-love in a culture that would have it otherwise. The choice to make art is directly aided and energized by such positive impulses.

The connections between artist's lives and their artistic creations have historically been acknowledged, probed and even embellished upon. However, the very existence of lesbian lives has inveterately been denied. The connections between our lives and our work must be constructed and recognized, by ourselves, and eventually by others. It is essential that these connections and their powerful political ramifications be given credence, and a loud, loud voice. Despite my terror at signing my name to this magazine, my convictions are strengthened over and over: the presence of lesbians and lesbian artists must be affirmed. The third issue of *Heresies* is an attempt in this direction. My personal dedication is to all lesbian artists who understandably remain silent, in hopes that they won't always have to.

Rose Fichtenholtz

This issue of *Heresies* has had a particularly difficult built-in problem. *Heresies'* usual policy is not to print monographs of contemporary artists, but the invisibility of lesbian artists and the need for dialogue of every kind among lesbians moved us to consider altering the monograph policy in various ways. Essentially, because we decided to publish only lesbian-made material, the issue itself is monographical: *Ourselves, our thought, our work.*

We used a discussion and voting process to determine what to publish. The question of inclusivity/exclusivity has been a source of trouble for us as a collective; it was a problem that we never resolved methodically. One direction that I felt the urge to follow was to print as much as we could, since this issue could be seen as a vehicle by which to strengthen a "women's culture." As it has been defined by some women, a women's culture is based in part on the principle of representation of as many of our voices as possible with the idea that the many voices make a beautiful choir.

However, in the end I was committed to print only that material which I felt was most powerful. This outlook can be and has been seen as an alternative to the "many voices" method of creating a women's culture. I agree that what I deem "powerful" is colored by personal biases, some of which must be examined closely for their validity. But to try to reflect what was "out there" seemed foolish. I felt that it was more honest to print what I believe in; that is, not just what I agree with ideologically but what *agrees with me* esthetically. Unfortunately the usual editorial message is that to deny space to something is to imply its worthlessness, and that, conversely, to print something is to assert its worth.

As an editor I have reflected only my own biases and opinions. I have done so only with the hope that other lesbians will investigate our lives true to their own opinions and values—and that we will analyze our differences with an eye towards our diverse pasts and our collective future.

Amy Sillman

I've been a lesbian and I've been a painter for a long time. I have little respect for rhetoric, politics that squeeze the life's blood out of artists, or theories of lesbian sensibility or lesbian imagery formulated out of daydreams.

I don't like being isolated in this magazine because my lesbian artist sisters out there refuse to come out. Backlash is on its way, but we don't even need backlash—we have the sanctity of the closet.

I'd like to personally dedicate this issue to all the women who we know are lesbians and who have made it big in the last forty years—as artists, as dealers, and as intellectuals—for their steadfastness in the denial of their queerness. The starkness of their lives led me to cherish honest living and to search for an alternate route for making art.

I want to share what I have learned in my twenty years of being a painter and a lesbian with lesbians who want a strong identity as artists. I am interested in work. I am first a painter. I am not interested in formulating politics or in promoting a lesbian universe. I am in this despite my doubts about the productivity of collective enterprise and despite the distance it takes me from my work.

Louise Fishman

When I am making a work of art I am making it first and foremost therapeutically for myself, and I am alone in my studio and feeling usually very lonely. At this time there is only a vague sense that it is also for other women artists and women who like to look at art. And even when I have finished working on it and it is an expression of my own formulated and particular visual bias, it is still not yet complete. Women come to my studio and look at it and see things that I was too close to see and the painting's meaning becomes larger. And still it is not yet finished. It seasons awhile in front of its small audiences and insistently sits before them and I bring people in front of it and say, "Yes, this is my art; this is my experience," until in some way it is recognized, analyzed and absorbed. Then it is finished. It is finished when it goes public, is recognized, given meaning.

Women have managed somehow to survive in a woman-hating culture, but rarely have they found ways to complete expression in the culture. We know better than most that the personal is political because when we have insisted upon our personal viewpoint, when we have insisted upon our art, we have been burned, mutilated, raped and put away—at best, ridiculed. Exposure, even sometimes to each other, is dangerous; fraught with memories of past violence, visions of future violence, the feeling that we will be considered crazy if we let others know who we are and what we think. We have no historical or political context to decide which parts of us remain intact after suffering consistent negation and brutality.

Who we choose as an audience is of vital consideration as long as exposure is dangerous. I sign my name to this issue with a great sense of purpose as well as real trepidation. Every day I am aware that people think I am crazy because I am a lesbian and that violence may be done to me because of it. This will continue long after male institutions grant us our civil rights. It will continue until we make the reality of our experience clear. Women have often had strength in the private domain, are safer there. When we have brought our experience, our work, our ideas to the world we have been repudiated and endangered. It is time to be particular and rigorous in our language and ideas, to articulate our needs and biases, and to insist, "Yes, this is our art; yes, this is our experience," in a voice that can not be refuted.

Christine Wade