

THE TAPES

EDITED BY LOUISE FISHMAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BETSY CROWELL

"Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience. Our future depends on the sanity of each of us, and we have a profound stake, beyond the personal, in the project of describing our reality as candidly and fully as we can to each other."

Adrienne Rich

The *Tapes* are the edited comments of ten lesbian visual artists who met as a group in New York City during the winter of 1977. Even though many of us had had prior experience in feminist and lesbian groups, none of us had ever before sat down to talk about our lesbianism and our art. For each of us, this new group experience was profoundly moving. Discovering after our first meeting that the experiences of the "older" lesbian artists (age 30-45 years) seemed vastly different than those of the younger artists, we found it necessary to separate into two smaller groups. *The Tapes* represent, with the exception of the "Coming Out" section, the thinking of the older group. At some time we hope the younger group, which continued to meet, will produce a similar statement.

With our goal being to share our experiences as lesbian artists, we found ourselves discussing a myriad of issues, the highlights of which are presented here. A number of surprising facts emerged. Only two of us had identified as lesbians for more than four years. As would be expected, the experience of being a lesbian in the fifties and sixties had a strong impact on our politics and attitudes. The majority of the group had not experienced the quality of oppression, repression, rage, and despair that only the fifties could inspire. Four out of six of us in the older group are mothers and the subject of motherhood became one of the most profound and painful issues to emerge. That the institution of motherhood for these women artists was a greater source of oppression than that of being identified as a lesbian and that their motherhood functioned initially as a survival mechanism were both striking revelations. A less surprising discussion included the complexity of relationships with our mothers, sources of great difficulty as well as inspiration. The section which mentions established women artists is short because of the probability of being taken to court for divulging some of our personal knowledge or sharing some well-worn secrets about those mighty ladies. The sections on anger, energy, and work should be further amplified by other lesbian artists. This is the area of *The Tapes* which I find most important to me as a painter—the information which was kept a mystery to most of us—probably to maintain certain myths about

the process of making art. Although only fragments are presented here, at least it is a beginning for the sharing of "secrets."

It was difficult for us to focus on the energizing effects of our lesbianism on our work. Obviously, this is the area which needs the most thought. Some of us sense that we have special powers and great potential to make the best art. Why is that? Coming out gave most of us a great deal of energy for our work. But what is it about being a lesbian that really affects our work directly and makes it different from other work, if it is different? What does lesbian art look like? This subject was only touched upon during our discussions. The fact that there is only a handful of us scattered here and there and even less who are exhibiting our work or who have a degree of visibility as artists and as lesbians seems to indicate the powerful male machinery and the myths which control an artist even in her studio. The anguish of working that is evidenced in this article is some indication of how much guilt we carry around with us for having done it at all. As a community, we seem to be in a comparable place to that of the feminist art community five years ago, yet with the double jeopardy of coming out as lesbians as well as artists. Our need for community is overwhelming and yet, as *The Tapes* reveal, we have ambivalence even about that. Forming a community is almost impossible when ninety percent of its potential members choose to remain in the closet. I see *The Tapes* as a nudge toward a common ground for lesbian artists. At the very least, it will provide information about how some of us live and work and what we are thinking about—examples of the fact of our existence.

Louise Fishman

COMING OUT

"My mother found me in bed with a woman when I was sixteen. I was scared to death. She walked over to me and said, 'You are swine' and slapped me as hard as she could. I raced out of the house and I was out in the night.... My mother never looked for me.... I disgusted myself, and yet, this relationship was my only happiness. With all the politics, that rejection is never diminished."

"I am thirty-eight. I came out as a lesbian twenty-one years ago, in 1956. I came out publicly about five years ago, at a Women's Ad Hoc Committee meeting. There was no comment from anyone there. It was as if I'd sneezed. When I came out I also made an important commitment to being an artist. The two seemed to go

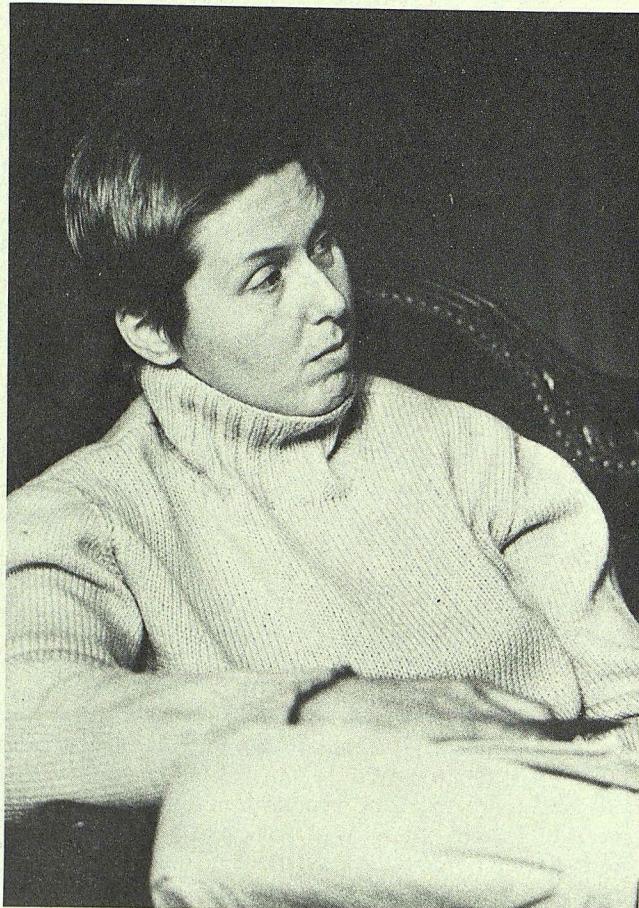
hand in hand in nourishing each other. . . . My father stopped supporting me and for the first time I was forced to start thinking about how I was going to survive."

"I didn't watch a movie, watch a TV program, have a conversation with a man for two years. I didn't read a critical art journal, nothing. Ideally, I would have liked to have lived that experience for ten years, intensely involved with another woman."

"I felt a speedy and incredible rush of energy for awhile. However, I think an equal amount of energy, a different kind of energy, goes into just sustaining the center of myself around being a lesbian."

"In coming out, I felt magical for the first time in my life, and I felt I could use that magic in my painting."

"I am twenty-three. I came out about a year ago. When I was in art school a lesbian painter came to speak. I think the response she got made me realize there was no way a woman could have her experience, her art taken seriously (let alone come out as a lesbian) in that context. I dated one of my male professors, believing it to be a sure method of getting attention for myself as an artist. . . . I've got to be a lesbian in order to be a painter because there is no other way in this world that I can make art that is my own. I feel that I do have a strong support group. Two lesbians/painters/friends live in my building. We've been to the same art school and listened to the same rhetoric. I don't want to talk like the boys do. I want my language to come directly from my work. We are having a very hard time with this (language) which may have to do with still not believing in ourselves."



"I feel that I came out through the Women's Movement, with a certain support group around me which made it very easy; very, very, comfortable. That support group, combined with my work, was a place where I could deal with certain parts of myself, so I really confronted my lesbianism in my work and it was just a matter then of removing the hidden parts of it in my work, taking the layers away, admitting what was in the work. Once that was bared, it was obvious. I think that I found a real support group in being a lesbian. That was not a painful experience for me. But what I had not found was a support group as a lesbian artist. I am pretty fortunate. I am always hired as a visiting lesbian artist. I can be out pretty much wherever I go."

"I came out within the past year. I think it is directly related to focusing on whether I could be a painter or not."

"It seems very clear to me that I am different and it takes me a long time to remember that it's because I am a lesbian. . . . I feel that when I came out I went in. It's like everyone I know seems to come out. And I have been thinking lately about the people who don't. My relationships with them have been very different and not as important."

"I am twenty-two. I came out at school last year. I know I've been a lesbian for a long time but it was a matter of being afraid to admit it to myself. But I think I was smart enough along the way to cultivate friends who were supportive and sympathetic and shared a lot of my feelings and ideas so that by the time I was ready to come out publicly I had already surrounded myself with people who would support me. . . . I am a painter and one of the things that really concerns me now is bringing together my feelings about being a lesbian and my feelings about painting, because I feel as though they have been really separate. Now I'm trying to empty out a lot of the garbage from school. The rhetoric is sort of clattering in my head. . . . One of the big problems I have in painting is that I feel that my paintings aren't mine. I have trouble doing them and I feel they don't come from me. For that reason I have a feeling I am always lying. Lying to myself and not taking myself or the work seriously."

MOTHERHOOD

"I have been denied my motherhood. I am not allowed to have my children, to have a say about where my children go to school or what's to become of them. I am permitted to see them on weekends. I am not permitted to take my children for two months in the summer. . . . I was not allowed to have my children in my loft for two years because I am schizophrenic and because I went to a looney bin. And because I am considered by my society and by my husband not fit to be a mother. The children have made the bridge by coming to me and making other things possible. . . . I would not choose to have my children all year round because I want to paint. But I would choose to have them for a month or six weeks in the summer and I am not permitted that."

"My children are some of my closest friends. I am the only person here who has made the choice to throw my lot in with the kids. I have kept peace and haven't gone

through the terrible struggles and pain which you all have. But on the other hand, I am thirty-eight years old and have no work which really moves me. It's going to take me a long time now to develop that, having made the choice I made. I have paid a big price for that choice."

"I don't have children and my family doesn't think I'm a person because I haven't. I had an abortion. It was a choice that I'm only beginning to forgive myself for now. Before that I thought abortion was murder. But when I got pregnant I didn't care. I would rather kill than to have men in my life. I couldn't have been a painter. Everything would have been destroyed."

"I don't feel my lesbian oppression as greatly as I have felt oppression as a mother. That isolation is just so brutal that I had to get out of it. It was killing me. I don't feel that about being a lesbian."

"For me, having a child was the only way there could be a possible experience of direct physical love, because I could not feel any honest physical love with a male and physical love with a female was taboo. So that was my inspiration to have a child. . . . But then when I had the child I had nothing but hatred for it because it took me from the studio."

"Having a child was the only way I knew to love myself. I loved being pregnant. I had incredible energy. I was creative. . . . I fell in love with my body. I was back in my studio very quickly. It didn't interfere with my work. I had a good marriage. But I really felt that I had to leave it. I felt that way before I came out. . . . When I came out it scared the shit out of me. At first I thought that no one liked me anymore, even my best friends. I stopped asking things of people. Then a year later I left my children. I got to the point where I found myself crying week after week after week and then I lived with them again and I think you cannot do that unless you have a lot of support. I have lost a lot of time and history is against me."

"My major quilt paintings came out of my first pregnancy when I had the twins. I was tapping into their growth and I painted ten enormous quilts during that pregnancy."

"There was no social understanding for a woman who became a mother to separate herself to become an artist. I think it is categorically impossible to do both. . . without help. I left a six-month-old baby. And I cried for three years."

OUR MOTHERS

"I come from a family which includes two women artists, my mother and my aunt, but neither of them presented me with a real alternative to becoming a secretary, a teacher, or a housewife because of their terrible and unfulfilled struggle to make art. My mother never stopped being a housewife, never was able to totally pursue her work, although she paints much of the time and is fairly sophisticated in her knowledge of art. She is serious but never has made a mark for herself. She will never stop being primarily my father's wife. My aunt was an alcoholic, had two nervous breakdowns and

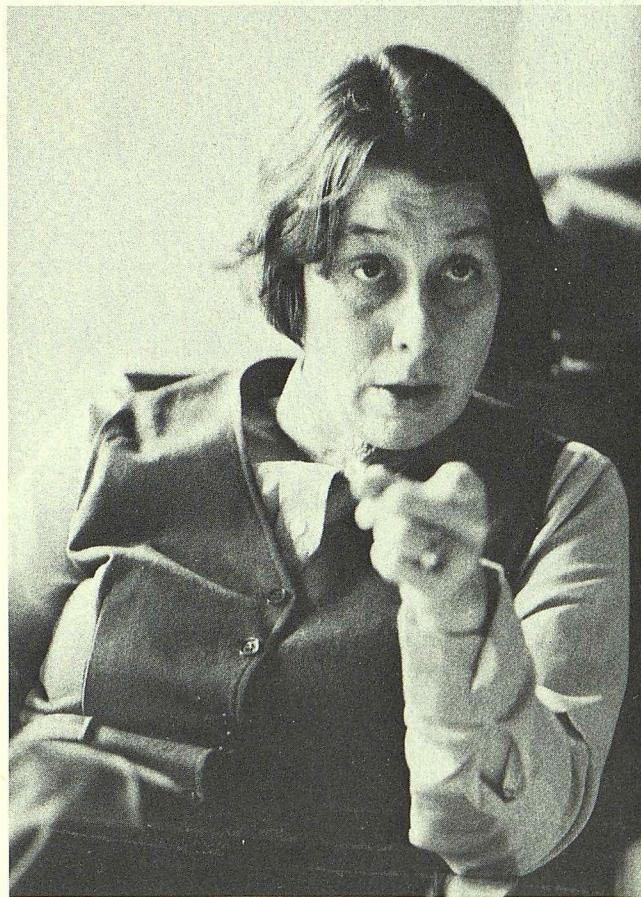
ended up killing herself at the age of fifty-nine, after spending thirty years studying painting, including a summer with Siqueiros and a year at the Barnes Foundation. She had fifteen or so one-woman shows and is in four major museum collections. She married a man who was a writer and an intellectual who hated her energy and her gift and spent all his waking hours beating her down. On her death bed she was worried that he would not be able to get along without her, despite the fact that he had watched her as she slowly killed herself and did nothing to help. Both of their concerns for their men overshadowed any real help they could give me."

"My mother is totally into self-denial. She is a very creative, positive woman. . . . She is "the great woman behind the man."

"The death of my mother-in-law woke me up to a direct vision of the content of my anger and my need for a rite of passage. . . . I perceived her death as all her woman-energy turned against her. I had the incredible feeling that I was going to die too if I didn't do something. My selves had gotten highly separated. I was feeling very unreal. . . and her death coincided with that."

"My mother died this year. She kept worrying that I would be alone because I didn't have children. I never worried about that before. . . but those being her parting words, I was filled with worry."

"Agnes Martin told me that she was not free to be a painter until her mother died and she told me I would be that way too. She said, 'I was on the Staten Island ferry and I heard my mother call "Agnes" and I knew that she had died and I was happy because I was free to paint'



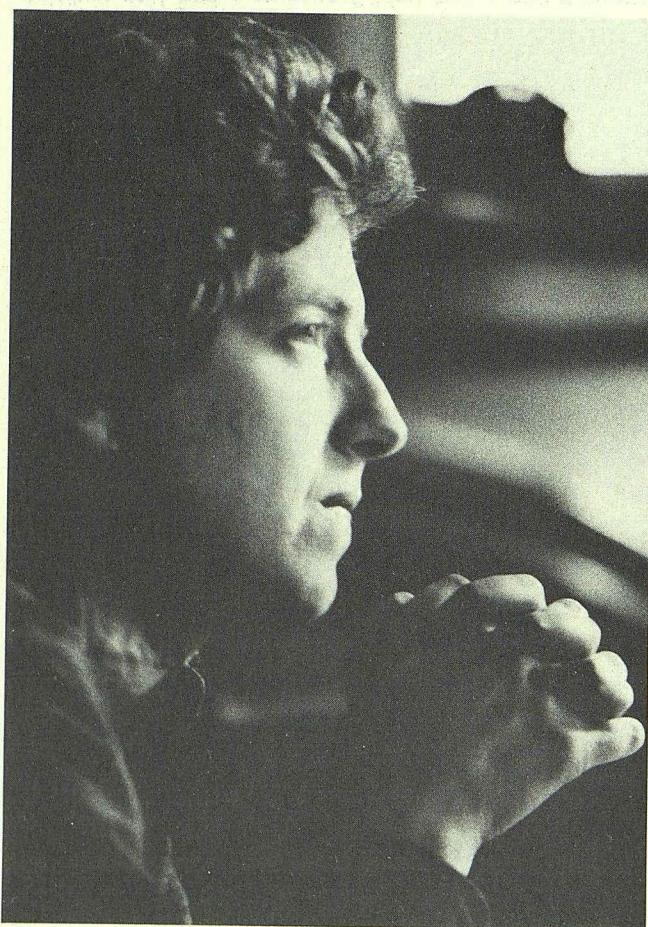
'and I could let go of caring about her.' . . . As you know, Agnes was alone and totally accepted the joy of her own aloneness. People have different needs.'

'I remember being downstairs in my basement studio in my parent's house when I was in college. I was painting a black painting. I went upstairs to have a cup of coffee and my mother came out of her studio and said, 'I'm working on a black painting!' She thought it was wonderful because it meant we were one and the same person. That was a very frightening intrusion to me, yet there was something mystical about it.'

'As a child and as a young woman, I was constantly seeking female support—in terms of love, and especially as it related to my sense of selfness as an artist and a poet. Anytime I made a bid for female support the discussion was always that I was too sloppy, if I would only comb my hair some man would find me attractive. When I would go to a female for support, had that woman ever reached out . . . but she didn't. She gave me a whole list of what I was doing wrong and why I wasn't making it in straight society. What I needed was to straighten out and be like other women. That support was the same I got from my mother and father.'

THE ART WORLD

'When I think of how I can relate to well-known women artists—Louise Nevelson is someone who stuck with the fight. Although she made herself into some kind of witch/sibyl. She isolated herself by the costume. Martha Graham did the same thing. You could not walk up to Louise or Martha and say, 'Hey, let's go have a cup of coffee.'



'The New York political art world is decadent. . . . It's perverted to the point that no one in it can have a noble, honest, or true friendship. . . . I find the work of that community to be abysmally dull, boring, repetitive, incestuous, and I don't think anybody has had an idea since Duchamp.'

'Some women are a lot like Garbo cashing in on homosexual and heterosexual males. She's the muse on the pedestal. These women make themselves goddesses. Men accept them and gradually their work is also permitted. But the men define what kind of women they are going to accept and how they are going to accept them.'

'Inspiration never comes from fame. The male bureaucratic power system from which I receive my support absolutely is a star system, a bad translation of the movie system into the art world.'

'Two of our country's most famous and respected women artists have never expressed their lesbianism publicly. But it became quite clear to me that any woman who made it through to creative art had expressed lesbianism because they had expressed the totally feminine position in the universe.'

ENERGY (A DIALOGUE)

'I have to take naps after I make two moves back and forth to the painting. I work very intensely for those moments and I sleep for an hour to prepare myself for more work.'

'When I have my psychic energies up to do a piece, that is when my full self is its healthiest. I am having a flower. As a woman I have options that very few other people on this planet have: to bring forth flowers.'

'Energy is something I'm constantly struggling with. It's very important for me to know the place it comes from.'

'It is sparked by love, in its divinest form. It comes from being in love and catching passion. The passion can come from another person. It can come from your mind.'

'Maybe my struggle is on a more basic level—which is how to use the love that I have.'

'How to use it constructively. And not to have wrong loves. I've spent my life having wrong loves.'

'Wrong loves are in my past now. Misusing energy is what gets in my way.'

'That's my magilla. I am a libertine. I am a spendthrift with energy. I am profligate and I should be locked up. I sit on six sticks of dynamite just to sit on the dynamite. And then nothing's done. . . . I am always shorting. I collapse because before I've ever gotten to anything, I have used all the energy. I have never learned how to use the space between the fuse and the time the dynamite goes off. . . . I spend a lot of time in bed recovering from energy attacks.'

'All my life I have been punished for my energy. Did they ever call you a strong, domineering female?'

"No. But have you ever been told by somebody that you need more rest than anyone else? That you're burning the candle at both ends? My father once told me that while I'm going I should stick a broom up my ass and sweep on my way."

WORK

"The experience of working is a microcosm of my whole life... the way I coerce a shape into forming, the severity of my discipline... and the enormous doubting. Now I am making paintings on paper that are about a way of birthing a shape. Originally the shapes were about exterior spaces. They are starting to be more about internal spaces. I start with nothing in my head, on the paper, and with no feeling of a history of previous work. When I am in front of a painting I don't even know how to hold a pencil, I forget everything I know... as if I was starting out at three years of age.... The way I suffer a form through, there are so many things I will not allow to happen... the way I won't allow them to happen in my life.... This is a source of a lot of power and a lot of problems in the work. I can't accept a painting as having any meaning until it has gone through changes and changes, until many things are lost and it looks very simple and it doesn't look at all like it has gone through what it has gone through. The painting becomes separate and doesn't feel as though I had made it. I've discovered lately that the lines in my painting sometimes read as if they were 'light' and sometimes as an 'edge,' like the way light sometimes falls on a bird flying outside my window, one minute it is soaked with light, the next, the bird has moved out of the light and I can see its outline against the sky."

"I use very specific, concrete imagery whenever I am intensely exploring something. And then I abstract until I can claim my image. As I understand it better, that's how I would describe my process. My life has gone through dramatic changes and my work just diaries them. The big breakthrough was when I did a whole environment on pain.... I realized then that I had finally claimed my pain. It freed me to celebrate, to do performance, to do ritual."

"What you have to do to get yourself to paint, doing one stroke and going to bed for four hours... (is) that Jungian thing of exposing the underlevels. You've made a mask and become a spirit. And so you have to do things or you won't come back... that old shaman thing... you go to heal somebody and you catch their disease and may never come back. It's like that. You go beyond. You pay psychically in going to the underlayer of the personality structure and bringing up stuff that you don't know and don't know where it's going. I never even dealt with birth nor would I want to because I tend to be a classical artist and my art is removed from my emotions. I am not an expressionist. Maybe that's what keeps me from going bananas."

"My work is very secretive. There are a lot of cubbyholes and dark spaces that one could get caught where the light doesn't come in. And the light distorts what the thing is and only gives you a hint of what that form looks like."

"The only time I am not angry is when I am painting.

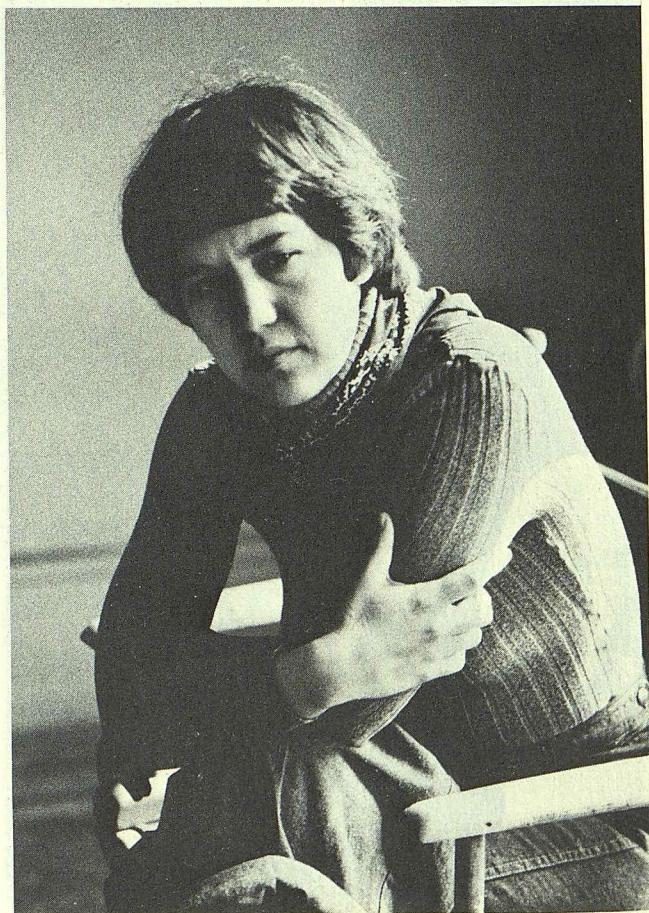
And I don't want to destroy that by putting politics all over it. So that the one place I am totally human, the only place where I am the best possible person—which is in my art—gets fucked up with hating my father, resenting my brother, and being angry at all males and straight women."

"When I'm getting ready for a show I'm thinking about my paintings all the time, and every time I do something connected to the show I have difficulty being sexual. I don't have a sexual feeling in my body. I feel like I'm dying. One thing I've learned in the last ten years is that if you aren't sexual with people they leave."

"After a show, I've left several parties in my honor, generally crying. I walk home and lock the door and if anybody is dumb enough to come and pound on the door and say 'Why aren't you coming to the party?', I scream 'I never want to see you again.' It doesn't generally endear me to them."

"My work process is so painful to me that I always need reassurance from other women that it's OK, that it's legitimate."

"I used to think my work was very related to a lot of things that were going on in contemporary painting and I used to think there were certain young painters who were very important. I've been thinking more and more about the fact that with few exceptions they really don't have the kind of quality I thought they had. If we're really going to do it, let's go back to the great art of the past. We set our sights too low. As lesbians we have the potential for making great art."



ANGER

"We each carry around enormous rage. I think that the threat in my life has been that my rage would destroy me, and until very recently, that has been a real possibility. We need to focus our rage so that it becomes usable energy."

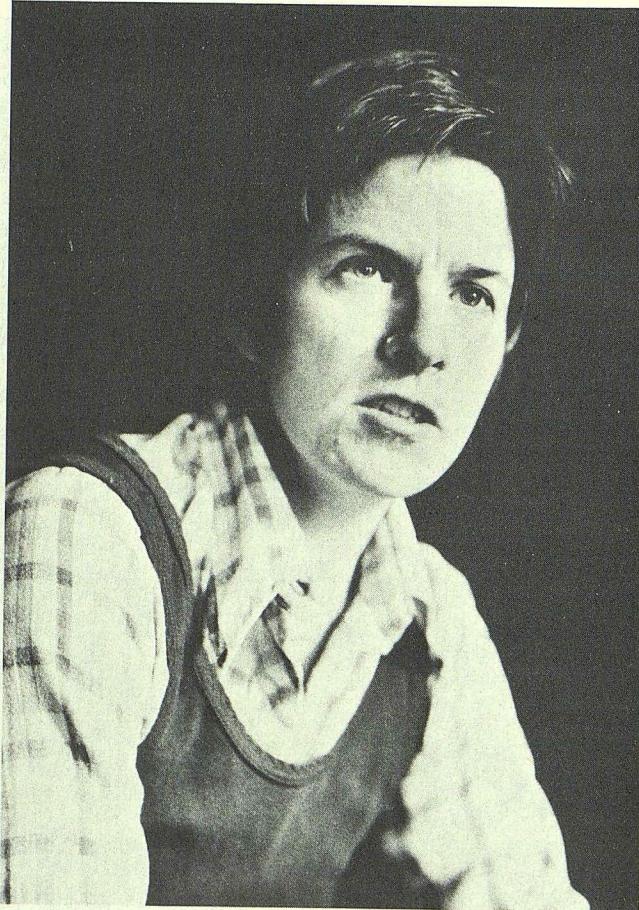
"It has been a lesbian's role to be angry. I object to that as a pressure for my own identity."

"There are different moral degrees of anger. There's the anger where I say I could really murder. And that's absolute, malicious sin. And I believe it's sin to my advantage. Then there is anger because I have been done in until I'm forty-five and stopped from being able to be an artist because I've had to go to bed for nine or ten months because I've been hurt. And that is an anger that I self-indulgently allow myself to be plowed under with . . . and it's a question of character strength to overcome that. And then there's an anger of 'Dammit, I'm going to do it,' which I think fuses the work and is a very healthy anger . . . in itself it can be a very useful and motivating force . . . or it can be very self-defeating and you can get in a very paranoid fixation that can destroy you."

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF OUR LESBIANISM ON OUR WORK

"Before the Gay Liberation Movement I felt like a maniac, not able to accept the reality of my queerness. I couldn't direct my full energy to my work."

"(Being a lesbian) allows my womanness to be all mine. I have all that force behind my work. And that's what makes a difference. . . . The whole process of finding



myself as a woman sexually and finding my course as an artist is a simultaneous process."

"There's that level of physical comfort, being able to relax, that's really important and it naturally affects my work."

"It's that level of risk we encounter so much of the time . . . it allows me the ability to take more risks in my work."

"I think it's good that men denied me a peer relationship. It made me stronger in my resolve that the art was important."

"I've received the encouragement and the validation of my existence for things I have been vaguely, slowly moving toward all my life."

"The more out front I become as a lesbian the more affirmation I receive from other lesbians and some straight women."

"I've been less terrified to make changes . . . so that I am now able to go into music or dance."

"We don't relate to men much which makes it much easier for us to make art. I can be a primitive in my own time because of the fact that I am a lesbian. That gives me a lot of energy for my work, a lot of choice. My work can become more peculiar and its peculiarity is not threatening to me."

COMMUNITY

"I feel very confused as to what my community is. There is no lesbian community of artists, no economic community. . . . I am certain that if it was a lesbian political gathering (instead of my show) there would have been a community. There is a power community for political events. And yet the artist is way ahead of politics in a way. The lesbian art community could never get the support which the lesbian political community can receive."

"I was never very much accepted by the lesbian radical community. I was mystical and religious. I had had this background of being involved with men, but at the same time, I had always known Agnes Martin and written about her. . . . Then I went to work with the Byrd Hoffman School. The Byrd Hoffman School was creating art out of personal madness. It was a predominantly homosexual community. I found it personally very helpful. That community was rather like Harry Stack Sullivan's homosexual ward at Shepherd Pratt Hospital. The idea of a healing community, people healing each other. I came out in that group."

"It's becoming clearer to me, on hearing everybody talk, that if we don't get a community together we're not going to survive. I have seen so many brilliant women—with all kinds of personal power—fail. They have killed themselves, gone mad, dissipated their energies. With all the pride of lesbiana we could all still go down the drain."

"We are a group of people who have traditionally been

covert, secretive, about every move we make. You can't come out on the job, you can't tell your parents, you're not sure you want to tell your kids yet. It's such a traditional pattern to be secretive that it's like a story about a bunch of prospectors who couldn't sit next to each other on the porch because they might shoot each other if somebody got too close. Secretiveness breeds a very territorial sense about protection and armament."

"I certainly think that we have the least options in terms of funding, money, gallery space, critics. If we want to be visible there are no options. At all. God forbid that there should be a lesbian show in the Museum of Modern Art and that somebody would condescendingly write about it in *The New York Times*. The last thing they would see is the painting. I always get told by men how angry I am, how hostile I am, how domineering I am. And I'm sure I am. I think that because lesbians are the outcasts of the sexual world, much more so than male homosexuals, by being pariahs or lepers we have a sort of honesty of despair."

"If there was more of a connection for my work, more of a lesbian art community, it might ease up some of my panic about putting my work out into a totally remote space."

"The idea of community is slightly threatening because of the fact that it involves more commitments to other people. The more I become involved with painting, the fewer people I want around me."

"I think that what we are looking for is intelligent, inspirational material from other human beings. And honest feedback... I am looking for a creative milieu in which to function."

"What I've been hunting for is a type of community in which the life as well as the art give caliber to the spirit."

"Community is hard because of the demons of jealousy and competitiveness."

"Everyone here has stated that what we respect is rigor and discipline in ourselves. I would like a community that has that commitment."

"One thing I've found out over the years of being very idealistic about collaboration is that collaboration is usually about who gets to be president. It's a very political act that I don't think is possible outside of primitive tribes where people are structured to do a dance together, for centuries, for religious purposes."

"There is great difficulty in developing language in an historically male culture, with a male esthetic system, being taught by males that Jackson Pollock was the painter. Of course I like Fra Angelico and of course I like Giotto, and of course I am inspired by Degas. But I think our problem is to develop a valid female esthetic system, a female language with almost no precedents."

"I feel that it is very important for women to assert being lesbians, to assert being totally feminine, because I think a female support system of sexual sympathy is very necessary in the arts."

"We must develop a context for women's art, which is influenced by so much of what you are describing. We must ask questions, is there a feminist sensibility, or even a lesbian sensibility? We make art in the context of other art... and we need the context of other women's art to make our own art unique. The visible art is the male art; that is the art that affects us. The other art which has affected me I have sought out, such as the art of non-Western cultures or non-white art. And now, the beginning visibility of the art of other women. It is a very slow process. The more visibility the better. The more we talk about our work, the better. Out of this, something will emerge which is clearer about who we are as artists, as mothers, and as lesbians."

Information about the participants in The Tapes: all are white and college-educated; four of the women are mothers; two are from working-class backgrounds; three from upper-middle-class backgrounds; and six from middle-class backgrounds. All live in New York City. We range in age from twenty-one to forty-five years. Two women have identified as lesbians for about eighteen years, the rest from one to four years. One woman is in art school, six are painters, one woman is involved in ritual performance and makes sculpture, one is presently making a theater piece, and one is a photographer. Some of us work part-time jobs, a couple of us teach and collect unemployment when we can, and one of us works full-time. All of the women, except for two, are in the collective responsible for the third issue of *Heresies*. Participants for the three sessions were Bestsy Crowell, Betsy Damon, Louise Fishman, Harmony Hammond, Sarah Whitworth, and Ann Wilson. Also participating in the first discussion on "Coming Out" were Rose Fichtenholtz, Amy Sillman, Christine Wade, and Kathy Webster. Betsy Crowell took photographs and assisted in transcribing and editing the final material.

*"Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," Rich, Adrienne. *Heresies*, Vol. 1, January, 1977, p. 25.

Louise Fishman is a painter who lives in New York City.
Betsy Crowell is a freelance photographer.