

Lesbian Art and Community

Marguerite Tupper Elliot

With much love and appreciation for my women's art group: Marcie Baer, Marianne Daransky, Vanalyne Green, Meg Harlam, Annette Hunt, Diana Johnson, Connie Jost, Ellen Ledley, Melissa Mathis, Anne Phillips, Terry Platt, E.K. Waller, Denise Yarfitz

I do not want to say that lesbian art looks like such and such. It is still too early and we would be excluding a lot of work made by lesbians if we were to put definitions on it. What I would like to do is to take the stigma off the label of lesbian art. I identify myself as a lesbian artist as an acknowledgment, an affirmation. In the act of naming, there is power. Since there has been so much oppression around being a lesbian, I would like to see lesbian artists, myself included, make the most outrageous lesbian art we can think of. I would like to see us free enough to be incredibly lesbian in our art-making process.

Last year, as part of a cultural event produced by the Los Angeles League for the Advancement of Lesbianism in the Arts (LALALA) held at the Woman's Building, Anne Phillips and myself curated a show by lesbian artists titled "Reflections of Lesbian Culture." My impetus in curating this show came from a desire to meet lesbian artists outside of the Woman's Building, to show their work, and to create a context for the lesbian work my friends and I were making. Initially, I felt frustration at the lack of availability of lesbian feminist art. For example, some women did not want to be identified with a lesbian show. Because lesbian art has been so invisible, there were a lot of expectations and tensions about what a lesbian show should look like. There was pressure from some women to include all the work that was submitted; others wanted "high quality, professional" work. Anne and I selected work that in some way reflected a lesbian and/or feminist consciousness. As we did not have a set definition as to what we thought lesbian art should look like, the work we selected varied over a wide range of attitudes and media. This was my first experience of a specifically lesbian audience and the appreciative responses were incredible.

We found the installation of the show to be somewhat controversial. It was strongly suggested that we take out two photographs from a group, as they did not present a "positive" lesbian image. Granted we would like to represent the lesbian community in the best way possible, and yet, what kind of censorship are we placing on it? Can we expect to have validating lesbian images overnight? It is my belief that we need to see where we have come from in order to have a solid base on which to grow.

Our experience with the art establishment forces us to look at the lack of places in which to show lesbian art. Locally, there is the Woman's Building. After that, it's back to the closet again. Presently, if women want their work available to the public, they are forced to use male-identified galleries. That will usually lead to some kind of conscious or unconscious censorship in order to make the work more acceptable. Also, by showing with the traditional galleries, women are supporting the elitist art establishment.

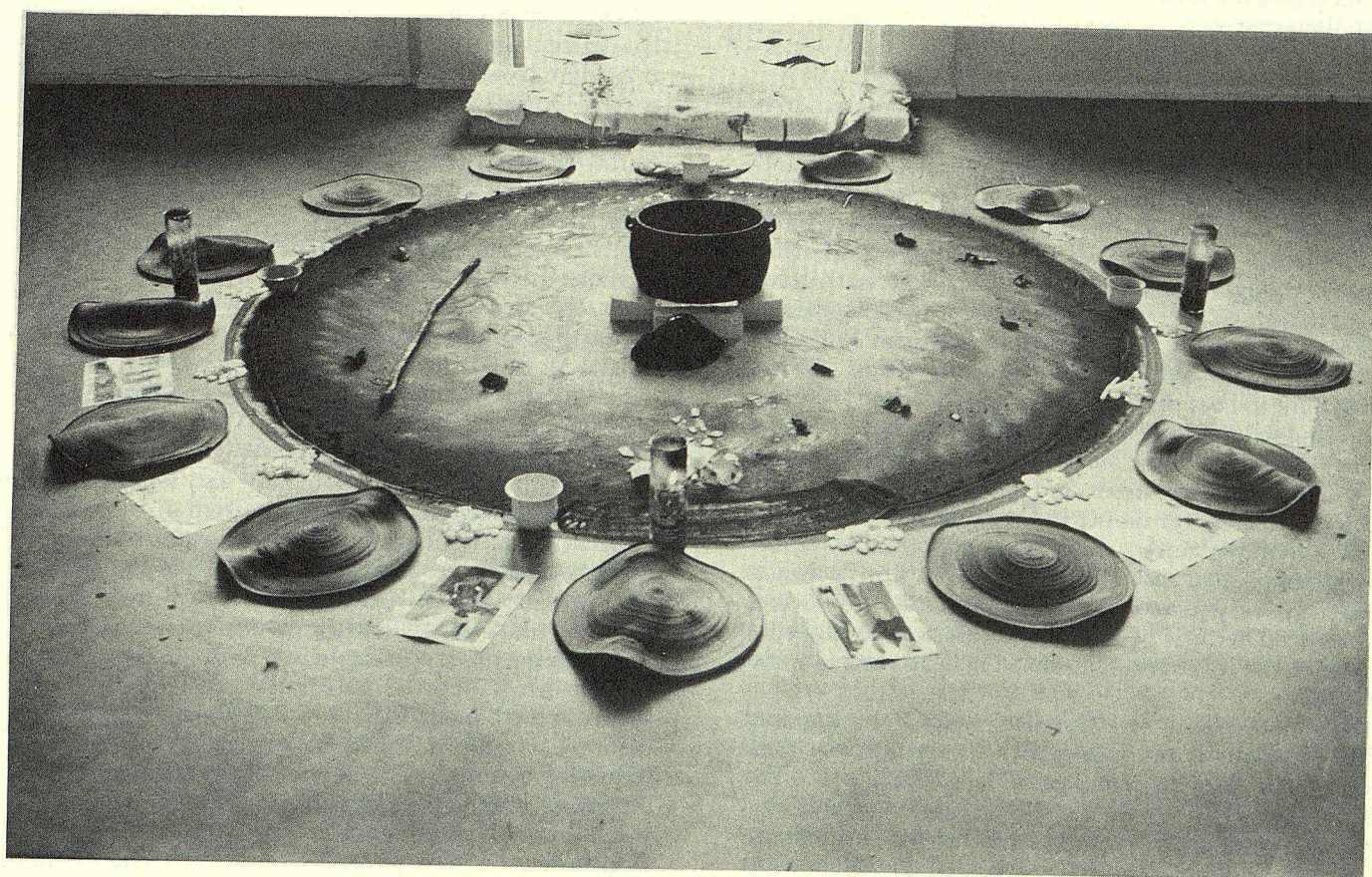
Within the lesbian community in Los Angeles, I feel there still exists a mystification of the visual arts and its relevance in our lives, resulting in a separation between art and politics. This is important to recognize when looking for a lesbian audience. Lesbian writers are getting their work out through feminist presses and women's bookstores. Lesbian musicians are getting their work out through feminist recording and production companies. Where is there a similar network for lesbian artists? During the past four years there have been hundreds of shows at the Woman's Building, only one of which was exclusively lesbian, and few of which have been reviewed in the local feminist presses. It is evident that we have not considered visual art to be newsworthy or political. Part of this has to do with the fact that we as artists have not yet found a way to be directly accessible and responsible to the larger feminist community. Until recently women had to rely on male publications if they wanted their work to be written about, which in turn meant they had to exhibit in male galleries. In order for lesbian artists to be visible, they had to go through the male establishment; then they could be discovered and honored by the feminist communities. We are only beginning to trust our own values enough to stand behind women's art that hasn't received male approval.

In my feminist artist group our growth has been an organic one. In coming together to share our work we give support and criticism to each other, and validation as artists in a world that barely recognizes or values the art-making process. It is of primary importance to me that our relationships with each other have developed through our work as opposed to developing in the bars or on the dance floor. For me, it has been a source of survival and growth. Most of us have participated in the Feminist Studio Workshop and have learned similar tools for critique. Our experiences and education prior to that in the straight art world, make it very easy to slip back into old patterns and value structures. Knowing that our viewpoint will be ignored by the art world, we turn to each other to answer questions that are meaning-

ful to ourselves. I have experienced isolation and otherness when I am with artists who are dealing with formal issues in their work or who are not conscious of feminist issues. In our group, by acknowledging ourselves and other women to be our audience, we are creating the context in which to show our work. I feel that direct lesbian imagery would have taken much longer to develop or wouldn't have developed at all, if the work had not been understood or encouraged. We stop the process of accepting male art as universal, which makes our art merely a part of their system. We are not creating alternatives. Webster defines alternative as that which may be chosen in place of something else. We are already the something else. Would we want the kind of audience that perpetuates the oppressive values of the art galleries? One woman in our group, Terry Platt, is show-

ing her work in various feminist households, treating it as a traveling show. Terry is almost directly accessible to the people who will be seeing her work, and in the process has redefined the relationship between the audience and the artist. The economics of our art is also being examined in relationship to our values. In order to make our art accessible perhaps we need to sell our work on a sliding scale or graphically mass produce it so as to be affordable. We are just beginning to see the issues involved with audience and economics.

We are now faced with the same circumstances which, in the past, have kept lesbian artists invisible. We need to see that the same thing does not happen to us. Our art which is reflective of our experiences will chronicle our struggles, growth, and strength in formulating our lesbian feminist world.



Marguerite Elliot, Anne Phillips and Cheryl Swannack. *Ritual*. 1975. Photo credit unknown.

Marguerite Tupper Elliot, lesbian feminist artist and curator, currently lives in Los Angeles. Former co-director of the Woman's Building Galleries, she is now employed at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery. Media-wise, she works with ceramics, photography and words. A large part of her work has been collaborative.