

# Still Struggling

## *Making the Visual Arts Process Different*

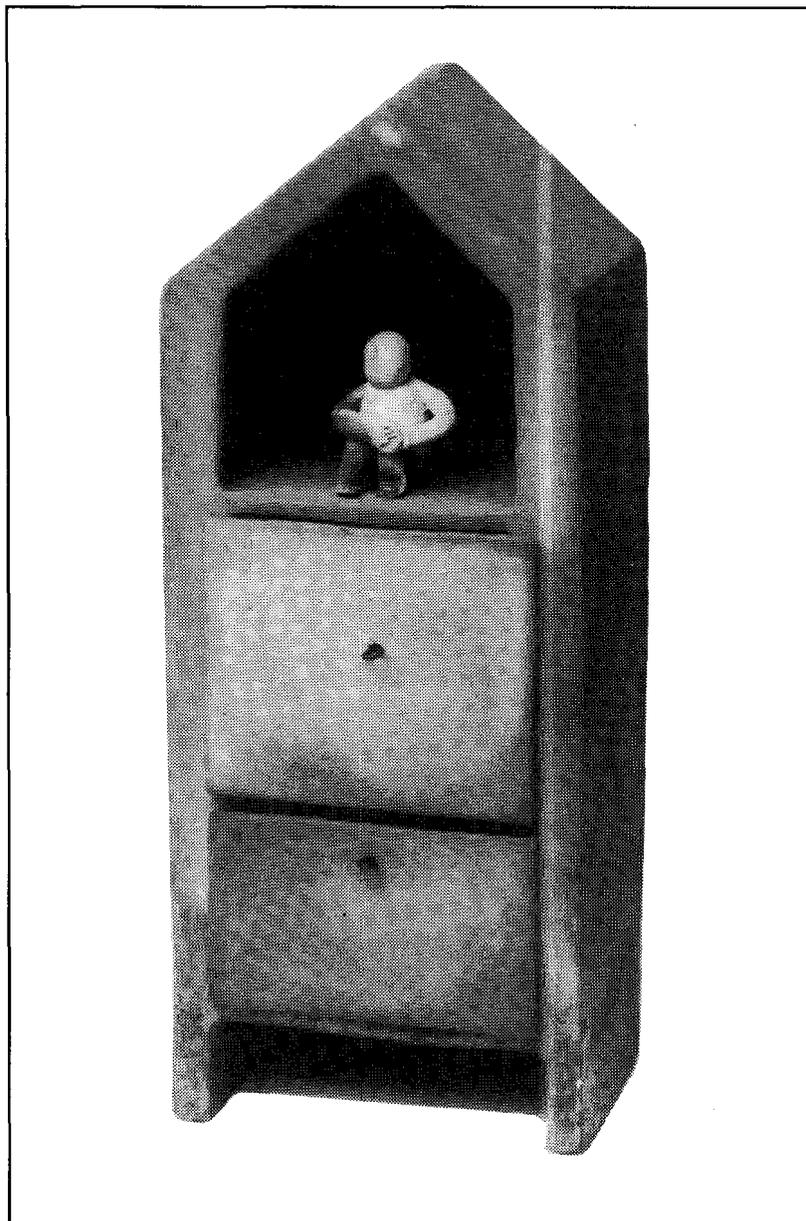
By Janice Andreae

*Outre les femmes artistes et les éducatrices qui se sont lancées dans la déconstruction et le remodelage des structures et pratiques institutionnelles, (en se heurtant à beaucoup de résistance), les artistes et éducatrices lesbiennes s'emploient activement à faire tomber ces barrières en développant des programmes d'études gaies, en prônant et en soutenant de manière visible les causes homosexuelles—spécialement celles touchant à la crise du CIDA et en innovant dans le domaine des médias et des technologies des arts visuels. Ce nouveau profil donne lieu à de nouvelles possibilités artistiques fondées sur les théories de la différence et de la déconstruction, à un art qui met l'accent sur une réalité subjective et entraîne des changements politiques.*

Nearly two decades ago when I was a graduating fine arts student, one of my professors reminded me that becoming sexually involved with his colleague would have guaranteed me an "A" standing in his course. Those twenty years have

shown me exactly why that part of the art school agenda for gaining admission to graduate school was not only wrong but abusive. However that agenda offended and seduced anxious women students struggling to identify themselves as artists and to succeed in the newly developed academic environments in Canada then (they might not only gain a MFA but also a teaching career); it also supported a dominant stereotype. The "macho" male artist who possesses his object—the one he produces and the woman he teaches—still holds power and resists change despite the fact that gender equity is slowly invading the visual arts areas of academic life.

Witness the recent furor at the Ontario College of Art around gender equity. Long overdue at this institution, the first phase of equity which proposed to bring more qualified women into teaching positions, met with tremendous resistance (nationally documented on *The Fifth Estate*). In fact, this equity was gained at the expense of a comfortable early retirement package (saving OCA money in the long run) which many longstanding male faculty members accepted before OCA implemented recent cutbacks on programmes and curriculum offerings which serve to reduce the college of its least senior members—those new women faculty members who arrived at a moment of "gender



"CONFINE" 39 cm H, 1989. Slab-built structure with 2 drawers and figure. Raku-fired. Jennifer Eilon

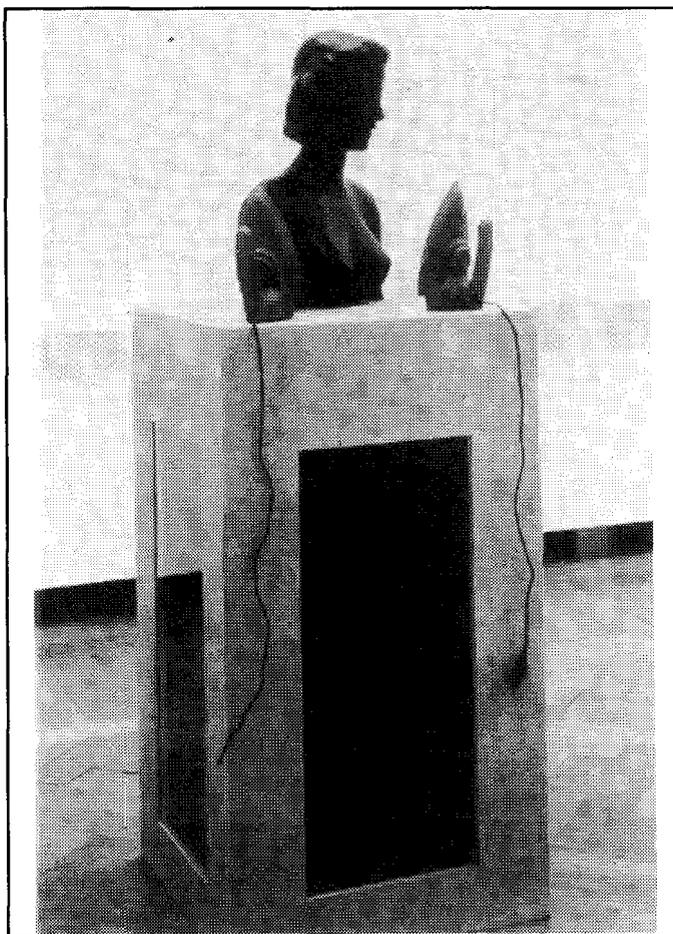
equity." I am not certain what these bright and enterprising women have gained except a sense of disillusionment, a feeling of being used and of being betrayed. Good intentions before a recession?

At many institutions like OCA, the focus of equity was a "visible" one, appropriate for an art college. OCA is located in the midst of the most densely populated lesbian/gay urban population in Canada but the "moment" for representing this "invisible" minority in the college and the visual arts community in Toronto passed too easily. At least that "visible" minority (women) were easy to objectify and to reckon with; this "other" was invisible and, therefore, not so frightening. Perhaps confronting *the unknown* without the possibility of fully exposing and objectifying it remains a feared and forbidden territory for "macho" male artists because "control" is denied.

Beside women artists and educators who are effectively beginning to deconstruct and to remould institutional structures and practices (with much resistance), gay artists and educators are actively breaking down these barriers by developing and by implementing gay studies, by leading and by lending support visibly to gay causes—specially those surrounding the AIDS crisis, by employing innovative media and technology in the visual arts. This new "act up" profile presents new possibilities for making art grounded in theories of difference and deconstruction, art which emphasizes a subjective reality and makes political change. This art-making image exists within the male continuum and changes it.

For the most part, these "act up" activities have been undertaken by gay professors/artists/writers who have tenure. Often they have "come out" after job security is no longer an issue. Unlike their

female counterparts who still hope to gain a secure teaching position, these men risk relatively little by taking on a high profile for gay causes. Certainly, the new profile gay artists/activists posit provides an image of productivity which is very different from the "macho" stereotype I confronted twenty years ago. This "new" male makes art based in a social/political reality founded in *difference*—one that profoundly contradicts his previous genera-



Untitled, 1987 wood, wool 160 cm H. Rosemarie Trockel

tion's. That earlier "pure" modern vision of the art object was unsullied by the contradictions and complexities of societal and political context. Then, making the object was a simplifying process, a distilled one that denied difference, but proposed a focus and favoured universality. Being logo-centric and phallo-centric, it possessed masculine power and maintained it in academic life.

In many ways, the image of the visual artist as a "making subject" who integrates theory with practice is something women in the visual arts can aspire to and

reinforce within academic institutional structures. And they do. Witness the growing number of programmes such as the one at the University of Western Ontario headed by Alice Mansell where (after much reformation and much resistance) that principle forms the mandate across studio, theory and criticism courses into art history studies. Such new curricular approaches and programme developments connect content (traditionally the focus of fine arts teaching) with context. Students are encouraged to think analytically and critically about what they are doing and where they are. They do not passively accept and regurgitate what is presented. This participatory pedagogy entails a critique of the western tradition which has both informed and shaped programmes especially art history in the visual arts in Canada. Women students encounter these traditions with a challenge now, for this discipline excluded both the study of women artists and *different* perspectives from the dominant patriarchal culture of the western world. That "macho" image of the male artist filled pro"lif(e)ic" and "phallic" longings for male artists but it denied individual integrity and thought, dialogue grounded in difference and diversity and women artists as powerful "making subjects."

Trockel's sculpture is often composed of disparate found objects displayed on pedestals or in vitrines. Like complex riddles, these enigmatic and wry arrangements reveal a variety of perspectives about gender associations, sexuality, art, history and culture. The artist includes such objects as stove burners, irons, kitchen ladles, scrub brushes, and brooms, which make direct reference to housework and activities usually assigned to women. Defying the subordinate or invisible role of women and the lofty status usually associated with art, the objects assume a status beyond the purely functional as provocative forms and images.