

Murdered by Misogyny:

By Marian Yeo

On December 6, Marc Lepine walked into a Montreal classroom, ordered the men to leave, denounced the women as a "bunch of feminists," and started shooting. By the time he finished his rampage of hatred fourteen young women at the École Polytechnique lay dead. Like millions of others Winnipeg/Toronto artist Lin Gibson reacted with grief, rage and despair. She knew immediately, "in her bones," as she says, that there would be a backlash. Not against men who kill, but against women in general and feminists in particular.

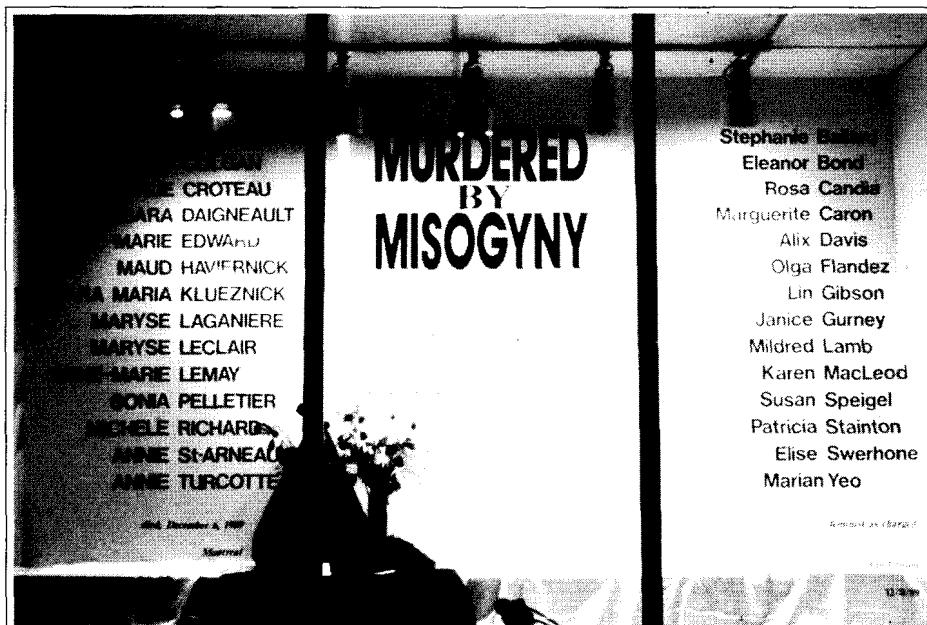
As the first director of Osborne House, a Winnipeg shelter for abused women, Gibson was well aware of the frequency and the extent of violence against women. She was also aware that the names of the victims are quickly forgotten, disappearing into history as empty statistics. Her response was a decision to dedicate her artistic production for the next year, a year of mourning, to works relating to the murders.

That decision led to a series of four works under the general title *Murdered by Misogyny*. Each work is subtitled individually. The first in the series, *Ces Noms*, was installed in March 1990 in a large window at Pages Books and Magazines, on busy Queen Street West in the heart of Toronto's art community. The second, *Here in Black and White*, appeared as a two page layout in the Spring issue of C Magazine. *These Shining Golden Names* was installed as part of a three-person exhibition at the Anna Leonowens Gallery (Nova Scotia College of Art and Design) in Halifax, and the fourth, *Forever*, is a multi-site installation in Winnipeg for a period of one year, from December 6, 1990 to December 6, 1991.

For the Toronto installation, *Ces Noms*, type was applied directly on the inside of a large (9' x 12') plate glass window divided into three equal sections. On the left

section were listed, in capitals, the names of the fourteen murder victims in alphabetical order. On the right, a similar list (but in lower case) of fourteen living feminists appeared. This list was comprised of Gibson herself and thirteen friends. Within twenty-four hours of the murders Gibson wrote a letter to each of the thirteen asking them for permission to use their names in an as yet undetermined project. Each was asked simply to allow her name to stand publicly as a feminist (at a time, the artist points out, when it may have been dangerous to do so), and each was entrusted with the responsibility of keeping alive the name of the woman with whom her own name was paired. The words "guilty as charged" appeared in small type under this list. The two lists were anchored in the window's centre pane by the words "Murdered by Misogyny" in large, bold, type and by a prose poem, a variation of which appears in all four of the series' works. In the window itself small cards inscribed with the victims' names in gold were scattered around the base of a vase containing fourteen fresh flowers. The installation remained in place for one month.

Gibson drew on two historical examples for this work. In 1973 three hundred and forty-three women, protesting France's restrictive abortion laws, signed



Murdered by Misogyny: Ces Noms, 1990, Pages Books and Magazines, Toronto. Installation, vinyl type, fabric, flowers, 12' x 8' x 3'.

Lin Gibson's Response to the Montreal Massacre

a newspaper proclamation 'confessing' that each had had an (illegal) abortion. And during World War II, in Nazi occupied Denmark, thousands of non-Jews, following the example of their king, donned armbands bearing the Star of David after Jews had been ordered to do so. Thus they made it impossible to determine on sight who was, or was not, a Jew.

Within the context of *Ces Noms* the names of the feminists served as a testimonial, much like a silent vigil. By coming forward and identifying themselves as feminists (and thus potential victims), these women demonstrated that their stance was not only empathic but also political. The Montreal women were killed because they were women, and if the female gender constitutes 'guilt' then they were "guilty as charged." The prose poem which accompanies the lists of names underscores the fact that the two lists might well have been interchanged.

These names...ces noms...here in black and white for all the world to see. Our eyelids burn, we cannot look. We did not imagine. Ces noms...leurs noms...names which might have been our own. Wrapped in our womanly arms. Safe in our feminist hearts. Ces noms...once inscribed...imprinted...can never be erased...jamais.

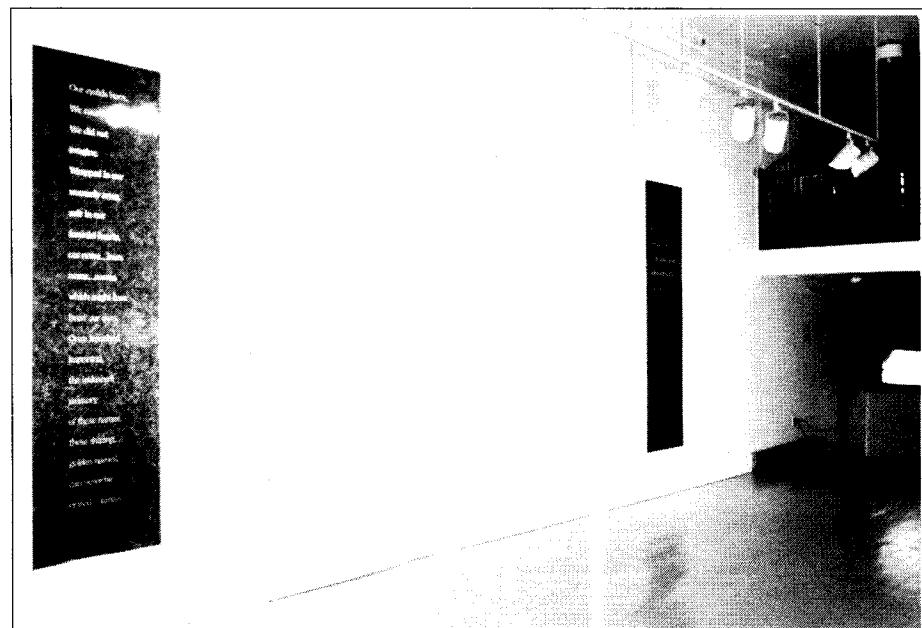
The Halifax installation, part of a three woman show called Backtalk, curated on the theme of violence against women, consisted of two large (2' x 8') panels, or columns, mounted on the gallery wall and spaced eighteen feet apart. The slain women's names were inscribed in gold lettering on the right panel and a variation of the prose poem also in gold, appeared on the left panel. The two panels were visually connected by a line of gold type applied directly to the wall and reading "these names...these shining golden names...will live forever, toujours." Gibson's use of French words and phrases is, she claims, not so much a political statement, as it is a desire to 'speak' directly to the slain women in their own language. This exhibit was timed to coincide with the anniversary of the massacre. *These Shining Golden Names* was the only of Gibson's four works to appear within a gallery context.

The fourteen pieces constituting the Winnipeg installation, *Forever*, consisted of fourteen solid brass plaques (10" x 16") installed in fourteen separate locations. Each plaque was engraved with the name of one of the murder victims, and the inscription, "Murdered by Misogyny, December 6, 1989, Montreal." (In some cases the inscription was in French.)

These plaques were installed in the pub-

lic areas of fourteen Winnipeg organizations or institutions, such as health, educational, or cultural institutions. Each was chosen because its *raison d'être*, at least in part, is the betterment of the community. Selected sites included: The Faculty of Engineering (University of Manitoba), Centre Culturel Franco-Manitobain, Klinik, Women's Health Clinic, Manitoba Union Centre, Artspace, Augustine United Church, City Hall, West End Cultural Centre, Manitoba Legislative Building, Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, University of Winnipeg, Plug-In Inc., and the Winnipeg Art Gallery (since removed at the artist's request.)

This project was sponsored by Plug-In Inc., a Winnipeg artist-run gallery. Appropriate placement of each plaque was agreed upon between the artist and the host organization. The City Hall plaque for example, was placed in a 'plaque gallery' honouring prominent civic personalities. The inclusion of a murdered woman in a formal, patriarchal setting established the importance and dignity of the artist's subject. In Augustine Church the plaque was installed in the sacristy, an area devoted to prayer and meditation, as opposed to the lobby or some other less sacred place. In the Faculty of Engineering, the plaque sits directly outside the entrance to the Dean's office, thus signal-



Murdered by Misogyny: These Shining Golden Names, 1990,
Anna Leonowens Gallery,
Halifax. Installation, faux marble,
vinyl type, dry transfer, 22' x 8'.

ling his agreement with, and endorsement of, the *Murdered by Misogyny* statement.

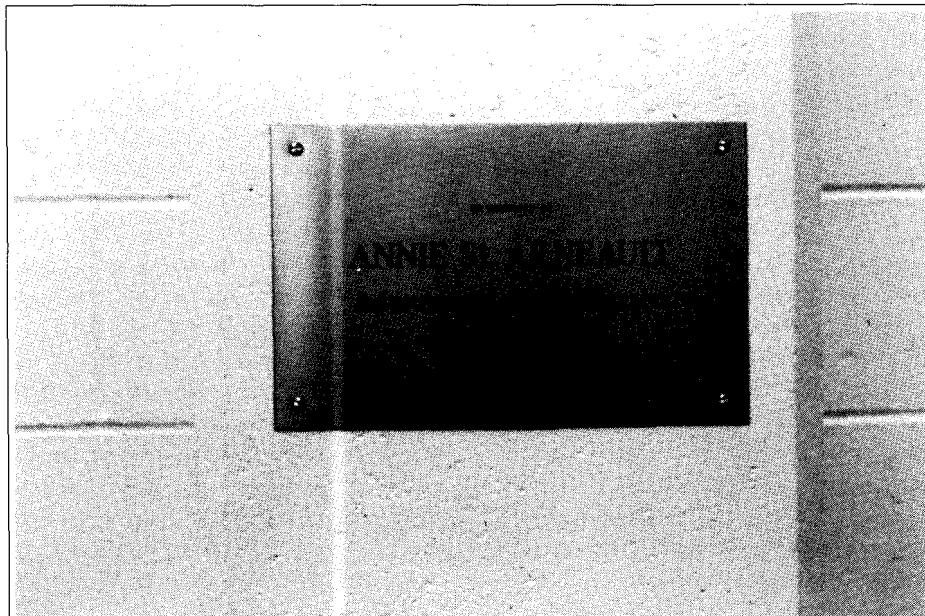
Gibson's emphasis on her concept and its importance to a society which accepts, indeed condones, violence against women (often to the extent of blaming the victim herself), and on the value of the idea over the formal objects conveying it, aligns her work strongly with the conceptualism of the late 60s and early 70s. Preceding movements had demonstrated that the market could absorb "avant-garde" art production, no matter how dissident. The conceptual aesthetic of art as information, rather than as object with market value, sabotaged the treatment of art as a consumer collectible. It also undermined the hegemony of abstract art by its rigorous elimination of visuality and effacement of

imagery, style, individuality and skill, and revived the link between aesthetic production and public social experience usually denied by the modernist aesthetic of individual expression. By exposing artistic production and consumption as a tool of ideological control, artists such as Hans Haacke avoided the reification of culture.

Like conceptual art, the formal dimension of Gibson's work contains an implicit critique of cultural conventions. Its emotive context rises out of the idea, not the optical appeal and visual pleasure. Because manual skill is not an essential aspect of this art, it can be executed by a person other than the artist. Thus the value of the handcrafted original, like the concept of individual genius, is negated. Traditional methods of distribution also are

abjured and Gibson's work is as appropriate in a public architectural space as in an art gallery. These works have reached a wide audience and the Winnipeg installations in many cases included very moving ceremonies honoring the victims. Gibson herself delivered the dedication speech at these events.

Although the work has broad social and political implications it is deeply personal. The deaths, rather than being the random act of a madman (which Gibson points out Lepine may or may not have been), are inextricably linked to daily acts of violence to women in all cultures. Engineering, the chosen profession of the Montreal women, has traditionally been a preserve of men. Violence is systemic in a society with a gender hierarchy and a



Murdered by Misogyny: Forever,
1990, Faculty of Engineering, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg. Installation, engraved brass, 10.5" x 7.5".



Murdered by Misogyny: Forever,
1990, University of Winnipeg. Installation, engraved brass, 10.5" x 7.5".

sexual division of labour. Marc Lepine's actions were not aberrant but were a social expression, symptomatic of a culture that creates and condones misogyny and violence against women. They were the extreme of a spectrum that includes verbal abuse, commercial exploitation of women's body images, pornography, domestic violence, incest and rape. It is often difficult for women to confront the topic even though (and often *because*) they instinctively understand they can be the target of gratuitous violence, whereas men are not terrorized in this way.

In the Winnipeg installation Gibson appropriated the format of patriarchal memorial plaques, customarily used to commemorate men of status. The form is subverted both by the use of the names

that would be forgotten, were thy not the subject of a work of art, and by the inclusion of the pungent phrase "Murdered by Misogyny," pointing to an event never before given official recognition. The words are shocking and disorienting. They not only gather viewers together in memoriam, they also jolt them into an awareness of violence. The memory of the slain students is no longer limited to family and friends: it is incorporated into the public consciousness.

The crisp, elegant beauty of the plaques contradicts the pictures of the bloody massacre evoked by the words. The lettering, a formal Roman type, was chosen to conform to the gravity of the commemorated event and the ceremonial nature of the installation.

For conceptual art utilizing text, the ground and type face is equivalent to the painter's choice of colour and brushstroke. The authoritative, dignified form purges the work of any level of connotation. Form as an agency of meaning confers value to the life and death of the women whose names are inscribed. Ironically, Gibson's use of commemorative plaques reinvests a devalued form by making visible an important aspect of human awareness. It challenges and provokes, stimulating new thinking about the social problem of violence. It is art as idea and social relation.

Marian Yeo is a Winnipeg writer who specializes in feminist art.

Murdered by Misogyny: Forever,
1990, Klinic Community Health
Centre, Winnipeg. Installation,
engraved brass, 10.5" x 7.5".



Murdered by Misogyny: Forever,
1990, Manitoba Provincial Legisla-
ture Pool of the Black Star. Installa-
tion, engraved brass, 10.5" x 7.5".

