

Operations in the Sphere of the Vulgar

The Work of Wilma Needham

BY CAROL WILLIAMS

There has been in the art world and outside it, for too long, the concept that good art transcends the everyday. Artists have often bought into this image of themselves as seer, genius, demi-god, with a fervour. In all of these categories there were no opportunities for women in the executives of the godly. This tradition has also suggested that if you want to grub around in the unseemly muck of political and social issues, you must leave your studio, your gallery, your art. You may be called an "activist" — you're rarely called an artist. What then is an artist who cares about such "vulgar" subject matter to do if she still loves to weave, print, sculpt, paint, etc?

— Wilma Needham¹

Canadian artist and activist Wilma Needham points out the bifurcated existence experienced by artists who are engaged in the political sphere or using political content or form in their work. By such a commitment they run the risk of losing the title of artist, and in the eyes of many historians, critics and audiences their production may remain external to the defining parameters of art. Similarly, in a discussion of feminist performance art published in 1977, American artist Martha Rosler observed:

Women artists face more than the cultural conservatism that militates against the articulation of critical awareness. They also have to contend with newly intensified attacks in the art world on any coherent leftist social critique. Feminism is seen as "politics" and by the art world's polarized operational definition, one either has politics or one has not.... Under the circumstances, to call oneself a feminist while also doing work that announces itself as feminist is to risk being seen as a tool or hack doing "political art."²

Is it solely a commitment to political action that marginalizes feminist producers of art? Perhaps it is a combination of intent as well as exile that has positioned us in a place not-at-centre. Feminist producers often prefer to straddle two worlds: our work may be directed at audiences outside the conventional sphere of the gallery; our work may be created for audiences exclusively female; our use of a particular media may be incompatible with the gallery as site. Yet in order to secure some visibility and recognition for our production as artists we require support from the

institutional complex of art discourse — even though we may not necessarily be at peace with its politics.

Rosler's 1977 essay was a landmark — a self-critical reassessment aimed specifically at feminist readers rather than a validation of "women's art" intended to enlighten the readers of *Artforum*. Until then, neither feminists nor critics of feminism had begun to demarcate any notion of difference within women's production as a whole. There had been obvious benefits of solidarity from gathering all production under the general heading of women's art.

Rosler's circumscription initiated critical boundaries between feminist art and women's art. The article reflected upon the ideological differences between American producers Judy Chicago, Miriam Shapiro and those who supported separatist or radical departure from the traditional male-dominated art world from producers such as Laurel Klick, Suzanne Lacy, Eileen Griffin, Lynn Hershman, Adrian Piper and Eleanor Antin. These latter artists argued Rosler, preferred not to struggle within conventional media and methods. By the use of alternative options to traditional media such as live performance, street theatre and actions, body art and video, these feminists employed new art forms to cope with feminist content. In part, it was the use of such media that disqualified their actions from the realm of "art" and made their work highly susceptible to criticism. (The controversial activity expressed by body and performance art was of course not restricted exclusively to women producers.) The divisions between the groups delineated by Rosler are not as clear-cut as she implies. With respect to content, those using alternative media shared concerns similar to those artists who argued for separatism. Both groups made use of formerly prohibited subject matter investigating women's social oppression as well as addressed an audience outside the confines of the gallery.

By 1983, Sandra Flitterman and Judith Barry in their essay "Textual Strategies" would further this micro-analysis of women's production. Production by women was seen to be heterogeneous, having often contradictory aims. Like Rosler however, the writers were critical of feminist work that sought to reveal, consciously or unconsciously, an inherent female imagery, or of those who believed in a symbolic manifestation of women's collective identity. Rather they supported strategies that acknowledge femininity as a social construction with meanings produced through an interaction between the text (image) and spectator (audience). Hence art production as textual practice.

Canadian producer Needham encourages a fusion or co-existence of multiple strategies rather than a choice between increasingly polarized locales. She evokes the term "practice," referring to not only the production of art but to feminist activities within and outside the discourse of art that may frequently include writing, teaching and organizational work:

Many women artists had learned their analysis and much of their practice from experiences with public activism in the early 1970s. There was a great feeling of freedom when we asserted the right to employ our skills in our own studios, to speak of the same things we spoke of on the streets. These interactions between studio and street have in the 1980s returned full force in work with peace and solidarity groups. We have come to realize that in responding to our daily concerns we have made ourselves, our art, our galleries, important resources in the communities. Thus an audience previously minimally served now responds to visual art and artists.³

Similarly, Lucy Lippard, curator for the 1980 exhibit *Issue*, held at the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) in London, which included individual practitioners such as Jenny Holzer, Adrian Piper, Nancy Spero, Mary Kelly, May Stevens and Maria Karras as well as feminist collectives such as Ariadne and Fenix, asserts:

[These works] scrutinize that branch which is moving out into the world, placing so-called women's issues in a broader perspective and/or utilizing mass production techniques to convey its messages about global traumas such as racism, imperialism, nuclear war, starvation, and inflation to a broader audience.⁴

Undoubtedly, the exigencies of daily life have exerted a pressure forcing us to look beyond or outside the privileged sphere of modernist art practice, which has reserved the museum and gallery

as refuge. The velocity and complexity of political and economic conditions is accelerated by the panopticon of global media. This enlarged world view has stimulated a crisis of expression for all Western producers, both male and female, particularly those who are white. At this terminus certain forms and codes of art practice are perceived as ineffectual or benign. Yet an overview of Western art practice reveals a retreat to the classical set of traditional media. Strident demarcations are being drawn between outside and inside, inclusion and exclusion, political and aesthetic, private and public, self and other. These polarities and crevices appear disturbingly unresolvable. More importantly, these oppositional relations serve to emphasize that representation is a site of contest concerned not only with the articulation of gender difference according to the heterosexual paradigm but with the securing of class, religious and racial dominations. As a result, there is increased mobilization towards realism, a movement into arenas formerly defined as sociological, of political rather than aesthetic content. This continues the trajectory of feminist practitioners that began in the late 1970s.

The necessity of procuring community outside the gallery as audience is implicit in comments by Lippard and Needham. Needham, as a producer of art within collective and individual actions, appeals to community readership (audience) over and

above the recognition, by the spectator, of her individual expression as an artist. Since 1983 Needham has worked with the Never Again Affinity Group, who are committed to a visualization/vocalization of anti-militarism. The proudly tagged NAAGs act in tandem with the Halifax contingency of the national peace group, the Voice of Women, who do public education and protest through a variety of strategies.

The NAAGs perform carefully scripted enactments of social mimicry. Their 1987 protest in St. John's, New Brunswick criticized the establishment of a nuclear-based power station at Point Lepreau by taking the form of the Praise the Lovely Atom Club and invoking an evangelical prayer group trying to convert the masses to nuclear power.

The NAAGs anti-



"Portia White, an international opera star, was born in Truro in 1910. In 1944 the Portia White Trust Fund was set up to help her train. She performed in New York, Latin America and Europe and later became a gifted teacher. It was her donation that set up the music library in the Halifax Regional Library."

NATO street actions in the otherwise undisturbed, “friendly” haven of Halifax are most unwelcome, even dangerous, in a city where over one-third of the population is dependent on the economics of militarism. However, criticism through humour and parody is effective for disarming hostility. By exaggerating the beliefs and myths manifest in polarized debates the NAAGs incite community and personal empowerment by humour and reflection rather than by antagonism and alienation.⁵

In addition to ongoing participation with the NAAGs and the Voice of Women, Needham has produced a substantial body of diverse visual work. (Due to the restraints of this article I am neglecting some recent work such as *There is No Other Way to Say This*.)

Statues was installed during the 1982 season at Artpark, 12 miles north of Niagara Falls, New York. (The Canadian side is Needham’s birthplace.) Needham installed sculptural figures in five sites on the grounds. One of the clusters is a family of Native ancestry: Beulah Lillvick, Chief Clinton Rickard, William Rickard, and Tracy Rickard, representing three generations of Tuscaroras. The figures are linked by kinship, yet the text Needham applied to the surface of the cut-outs reveals four independent wills, seriously disturbing any Native stereotypes nurtured by the viewers, and disrupting conventional myths of the family.

The text emblazoned on the silhouette of Tracy Rickard reads:

Tracy Rickard is a young native American. Born and brought up on the Tuscarora Reservation she is just starting her career as a music instructor. She graduated in 1981 with a Bachelor of Music Degree in Education from Fredonia State University. She teaches in Syracuse, NY, in an Indian School which is at the Capital of the Iroquois confederacy. She has been involved in the struggle for Indian rights. Her most recent big contribution has been through the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission to investigate hiring procedures in the Niagara Wheatfield School District.

In *Statues*, coherent formal construction fuses effectively with the text, which pointedly communicates the active participation of the men and women represented in demanding human rights on behalf of their community. It addresses a Niagara audience, informing them of undocumented struggles by the local citizenry. Working in contradistinction to the oppressive heroism of monumental figurative or military memorials, these human-scaled figures celebrate the agency of living and dead, white, Black and Native, masculine and feminine persons.

It is this emphatic gesture prioritizing local and individual histories that identifies Needham’s audience. The work is site-specific through its articulation of historical regional specificity — as such, its content is integral to community education and concerns. Needham’s acumen as an archivist visualizing specific histories, as opposed to encapsulating total or mythic history, provides the consistent and transformative integrity of her work.

Her task is problematic. Local or regional details do not easily translate into global-based networks of communication formatted for entertainment impact. And it is for this reason that her work fills a gap in general knowledge. Globally aimed material overlooks local and individual struggles, thereby devaluing them. Needham’s work reverses this devaluation. By gathering the undocumented or seemingly insignificant, her textual/visual

juxtapositions permit the conditions of daily struggle to rise to the surface with dignity

In *Niagara Falls — River of Fame*, Needham juxtaposes a popular postcard “general” view with a variety of other materials that serve to contradict the myth. *Niagara Falls—River of Fame* is a suite of 14 offset lithos, overprinted with seven statistical statements on pollution. For example, a map illustrates “the location of 77 Industrial Dischargers and 10 Wastewater Treatment Plants interspersed with 7 Drinking Water Intakes on the Niagara Frontier (US side.)”⁶ The remaining seven prints utilize diary notations of women living in communities affected by the sewage dumping. The union of the popular image of the falls with documentary detail creates a striking reassessment of the myth of Canada as bountiful nature, sublime and eternal, a myth that sustains the import of tourist dollars. As well as exhibiting the series in artist-run galleries, Needham donated sets to public interest activist groups, some of whom exhibited the work at environmental hearings for educational support.

We Have Always Been Here! is another unflinchingly direct site-specific work. It is a rearticulation of women’s struggle to achieve visibility in institutional history. A copper frieze, framed by architectural molding, was installed at ceiling height in the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. On it are etched 108 names of full-time women faculty members of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) over its one hundred years of operation. Similar to the museum plaques series executed by Jenny Holzer, Needham’s statement is cloaked in the benign formula of museum display. Thus she calmly entices the unsuspecting gallery visitor, whom Needham has recognized as someone unprepared to accept forthright political commentary.

The copper band includes those who were excluded from the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia’s inaugural exhibit, *Eighty/Twenty*, which celebrated the one-hundredth anniversary of NSCAD. The curatorial mandate chose to highlight the “high art” encompassed by the studio division rather than that produced within the “lesser” divisions of the decorative or applied arts: Ceramics, Design, Textiles, Art Education and Environmental Planning.

It is important to integrate Needham’s role and struggle as an educator into this latter work. An MFA graduate of NSCAD, Needham returned to Halifax in 1982 following a two-year appointment as the assistant head of the art department at the Banff Centre. As the only two female instructors hired full-time to the Studio Division (the largest division in the college) Needham and video artist Jan Peacock raised the percentage of women studio faculty at that time by 200 per cent. Needham was hired to teach a studio class in feminist criticism (the first semester of a similar class was inaugurated by sessional instructor Marion Barling in the spring of 1982). The course was brought to fruition by the tireless effort, collective anger, and insistence of the women’s affairs committee, which began as an association of women students and faculty.⁷

Needham continues to teach feminist criticism within the studio division, providing crucial alternatives to traditionally modernist modes of expression. Although praised as an example of the “leading edge,” the feminist courses and influences are continually under scrutiny. This is surely a surprise as the presence of the feminist faculty, full-time and sessional, remains an attraction for potential undergraduates and MFA candidates to the college. Yet, the conditions described in 1982 still apply:

[A feminist representation] looks reasonably encouraging on paper, [yet] the implication that a feminist analysis of art and culture is encouraged and accepted at NSCAD misrepresents the situation.... While courses show a repeated effort to accommodate feminism, the pattern has been one of short-term appointments and constant instructor changes.⁸

These tenuous conditions act as a reminder that while feminists are attempting to break new ground, we are constantly required to tend the old ground, raising to consciousness yet another generation of administrators, curators, editors, colleagues and granting institutions.

Taking seriously the feminist lesson that women as producers must start with the personal as subject Needham has rarely neglected the self as a topic. This evocation of self is explored not so much in the autobiographical sense of the "I" as in a regional or collective identity. *Made By Mother*, however, aligns a more personal self with the community self (the relations between women) by depicting the intimate dialogue between mother and daughter. About this work Needham states: "*Made By Mother* was conceived initially as a personal history piece. It is a memory work about the relationship between my mother and myself from my point of view."⁹

Originating as a solo performance piece, the work was successfully re-adapted into a two-dimensional format. The unexpected results of the subsequent photo-essay was a collaboration, with her mother as co-producer. The attention and respect given to her mother's wisdom and experience, which is apparent to the viewer, challenges the vanguard on a number of fundamentals. Simply by her mother's contribution and presence, the notion that art is produced solely by those with specialized training is undermined. The inclusion encourages a wide reception and comprehension of the work. Older women for instance may be interested in viewing this work. Needham purposefully bypasses the interpretative role of the critic and addresses those who are most excluded from our professional lives, our mothers.

Both critical awareness and desire are stimulated by this collaboration. By inviting her mother to participate Needham refuses to accept that a position of privilege, gained by the acquisition of specialized art language and education, will alienate her from family or the community of women outside that discourse. These educational privileges often threaten to widen, rather than bridge, the division between class and frequently operate to neutralize or mask our gender. Needham refuses to situate her mother as differentiated, nor does she reject the wisdom her mother offers despite its devalued reception in the realm of the patriarch. Rather she fully reclaims pleasure and humour in the reconstituted unity of mother and daughter in *Made By Mother*.

Producers such as Needham, who bravely venture into what Lucy Lippard has termed "social space," put the alternative media to work in the early 1980s to examine the construction of "woman" and to reveal social relations within the world. Art practice moved outside the confines of the gallery, meeting communities and hence issues in the social sphere, head on. This expansion was and is compatible with utopian feminist goals. Yet by departing from the structuring framework of traditional art discourse, feminist production either outside or inside the parameters is susceptible to the label "political." Feminists' depart-

ture from the conventions and codes of art set by patriarchal predecessors, a departure taken both out of choice and of necessity, can have both negative and positive effects.

Unfortunately the institutional complex either lags miserably behind the re-negotiation process or serves to challenge our efforts and initiatives by repeatedly threatening to rein us into the site of passive femininity. The purposeful negation of our production as something that is not art has been met by resistance. Feminist producers have directed their attentions outside the traditional audiences in a search for other sympathetic communities. We are only now, well over a decade later, realizing the monumental and atomizing effects of this agency.

If our goal as feminist practitioners is to forcefully and effectively fuse art with the political we must first ask what the transformative value of our work is if we perpetuate the modernist model of privatized production directed at a reduced audience. How does this approach neglect other audiences with whom we may have political affinities? How do our actions potentially feed the appetite of the conservative politic that wishes to marginalize or commercialize leftist or socially committed representations? What exactly, we must ask, is the function of our feminist agenda within the field of art discourse? It is such questions that we must keep to the fore in order to keep vital our collective struggle.

¹ Wilma Needham, "Introduction" to *Women and Peace Resource Book*, Wilma Needham, ed., Voice of Women, 1987, p. 7.

² Martha Rosler, "The Private and the Public, Feminist Art in California," *Artforum*, September 1977, Vol. XVI, No. 1, p. 69.

³ Wilma Needham, "Visual Art and Resistance" from *Women and Peace Resource Book*, op. cit., p. 7.

⁴ Lucy Lippard, "Issue and Tabu," from the catalogue for *ISSUE-Social Strategies by Women Artists*, Institute of Contemporary Arts Publication, 1980, p. 1.

⁵ Taking shape as a contracting and expanding ad hoc coalition, the Never Again Affinity Group has included at various times: Bonnie Bobryk, Ingrid Koenig, Donna Smythe, Gillian Thomas, Wilma Needham, Susan McEachern, Liz Archibald Calder, Eleanor O'Donnell, Pat Kipping, Nancy Colpitts, Andrea Currie, Karin Leslie-Fairless, Kate McKenna and Yvonne Manzer.

⁶ Bruce Barber, Jan Peacock, eds., *Appropriation/Exploration*, a Mount Saint Vincent University Gallery catalogue, Halifax 1983, p. 28.

⁷ From a chronological summary of feminist activity at NSCAD see "A History of Feminism at NSCAD" written collectively by members of the college community, *Parallelogramme*, October/November 1982, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 10-11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁹ Needham's statement is from the catalogue of *The Diary Exhibition*, curator Marlene Creates, Art Gallery of Memorial University, Newfoundland 1985, p. 38.