

## A POWERFUL LECTURE

We're very privileged to have with us today to deliver this first, and perhaps last, powerful lecture, Ms Charmian Artisan.

Miss Artisan was born in Orange and attended the National Art School in Sydney from 1965-1970. She won the art students prize for painting in 1970. From 1970-72 Ms Artisan did a postgraduate course in interdisciplinary multi media at the gallery school in Melbourne. She worked with Barry Stern for several years in an advisory capacity before going to Paris and London on a Flotta Lauro Scholarship.

While overseas she had two one-man exhibitions at Denis Rene Gallery in Paris. When she returned to Australia she was invited to do a Project Show at the National Gallery of N.S.W. It was titled Romanticism Lace & Order ... Ten Portraits.

Further enhancing her career is the fact that one year she won the Blake Prize for Religious Painting.

Ms Artisan is now developing processes in neon, clay, acrylic, fibre and content as artist in residence at the University of New England. She is also lecturing on the philosophy of aesthetics.

Her talk today is concerned with some of her experiences and the conclusions she has drawn as an artist working in a variety of media and circumstances in the current art environment.

Thank you Mr Chair.

That introduction is just a fantasy about a woman and making it in a man's world.

What we have to say today is actually quite another matter, and is of considerable importance not only to us but to everyone here.

So I will discard this label as I'm not prepared to take on the role of "oken woman" and will explain why.

It's not my place to accept what is the responsibility of educational institutions to overcome the sexist bias which thoroughly permeates them.

TOKENISM is the means by which these institutions appear to be concerned, but in reality avoid any change in their inadequate education programs. Gross inadequacy exists as a result of conscious and unconscious sexual discrimination.

The issue at hand concerns women and femaleness and must be included in all lectures and aspects of education. It cannot logically be sectioned off as if it were another topic in the range of topics covered by courses. We are not talking about an art movement. One does not for instance find courses on men's art, yet an examination of the situation shows that the courses given are in fact about men and the art they make.

Women's studies courses were initially introduced as a means of breaking through the entrenched maleness of academia. These courses were meant to be an interim measure resulting in the inclusion throughout all established courses of the awareness developed by them.

This has not happened. Instead women's courses have proliferated whilst the content of priority courses has remained as before.

The exclusion of women's work from courses concerned with art history and aesthetics involves not only the ignoring of women as producers but also the examination of femaleness in art content.

The exclusion not only discriminates against women artists and women's culture: it also ignores the support given by wives, lovers, sisters and mothers, to those who are accepted as the legitimate art producers. By implication, the discrimination extends to the majority of students involved who, after all, are women.

We are denied a knowledge of ourselves and our history by those who claim to educate us. We are educated to see that we barely exist in and do not effectively influence what is presented to us as the reality of art and art history. These lessons are learnt quietly by means which are not acknowledged but which operate powerfully and have been called the hidden curriculum.

The situation discovered at a large college for the arts in Sydney, that over 60% of the students were female whilst out of 45 full time lecturers, only 4 were women, is not unusual. Women educated by men in a male orientated world, do not relate well to that world, are driven underground, and surface only through the male culture. Their success depends on the one hand on their ability to accept a traditional role and on the other to their skill at mastering male models of developing a career.

Unfortunately, the Tertiary institutions continue blindly with their sins of omission. Consciousness is so low that those running courses seem to have the greatest difficulty in understanding what this means. They appear threatened when approached and engage in lip service and tokenism or harden into antagonism, returning with angry vigour to their lopsided and, as current research makes more and more obvious, their misleading programs.

The issues presented are complex and extensive. I am only one member of a group of women who are equally concerned about this matter. I suggest, Mr Chair, that we now address ourselves to some of the questions which continue to arise in the arguments dealing with issues affecting women in the arts.

Question No 1

*Listen comrade ... of course I sympathise enormously with your plight – but I think you should understand that the petty bourgeois sensibilities that you've just expressed ignore the real issue which is the primary contradiction of capitalist society. That is, the oppression of the working class by the appropriation of their surplus value by the ruling class.*

*What you women must realise is that by putting your energies into transitory problems such as fighting your own oppression can only postpone the glorious day when the power of the ruling class is overthrown and replaced by the dictatorship of the proletariat. There can be no women's liberation without a socialist revolution first. Be grateful you've at least got tokenism – you'll get your child care centres when there's a worker's state.*

*Can you get the point I'm making mate?*

Yes, but I think I'll leave this for others to deal with. I feel like a cup of tea!

It's a well known fact that no oppressed group has even won its liberation as an offshoot of another group's struggle.

The socialist revolutions that have occurred in history don't have a very good track record for the importance they give to women's liberation. You should know that – you obviously live in books. Go and read about Russia, China, Cuba, Vietnam.

Sure, we agree that the destruction of Capitalism is essential; but in no instance has that automatically resulted in the destruction of patriarchy. Its about time revolutionary men realise that they're not just a part of the solution – they're also a part of the problem.

Until the demands of all groups of people oppressed by this society are seen as essential in the attack on it, any revolution is doomed to merely replace one form of exploitation with another.

Question 2:

*So, what's all this got to do with art?*

Answer:

Despite claims to the contrary, the problems confronting art are identical to those confronting the rest of society. Patriarchal values and control by the ruling class are as evident in the art world as they are everywhere else and so art must be included in any critique of or attack on this society.

We believe that any revolutionary attitudes to the historical and contemporary production of art are both inadequate and inaccurate when they fail to account for either the presence or absence of woman-produced art.

(Slide Still Life)

(Slide- Bill Poster)

Question 3:

*Why don't we know of more great women artists?*

“Judith Shakespeare”

Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say. Shakespeare himself went, very probably – his mother was an heiress – to the grammar school, where he may have learnt Latin – Ovid, Virgil, and Horace –and the elements of grammar and logic. He was, it is well known, a wild boy who poached rabbits, perhaps shot a deer, and had, rather sooner than he should have done, to marry a woman in the neighbourhood, who bore him a child rather quicker than was right. That escapade sent him to seek his fortune in London. He had, it seemed, a taste for the theatre; he began by holding horses at the stage door. Very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody, practising his art on the boards, exercising his wits in the streets, and even getting access to the palace of the queen. Meanwhile his extraordinarily gifted sister, let us suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone of reading Horace and Virgil. She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother's perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers. They would have spoken sharply but kindly, for they were substantial people who knew the conditions of life for a woman and loved their daughter – indeed, more likely that not she was the

apple of her father's eye. Perhaps she scribbled some pages up in an apple loft on the sly, but was careful to hide them or set fire to them. Soon, however, before she was out of her teens, she was to be betrothed to the son of a neighbouring wool-stapler. She cried out that marriage was hateful to her, and for that she was severely beaten by her father. Then he ceased to scold her. He begged her instead not to hurt him, not to shame him in this matter of her marriage. He would give her a chain of beads or a fine petticoat, he said; and there were tears in his eyes. How could she disobey him? How could she break his heart? The force of her own gift alone drove her to it. She made up a small parcel of her belongings, let herself down by a rope one summer's night and took the road to London. She was not seventeen. The birds that sang in the hedge were not more musical than she was. She had the quickest fancy, a gift like her brother's, for the tune of words. Like him, she had a taste for the theatre. She stood at the stage door; she wanted to act, she said. Men laughed in her face. The manager – a fat, loose-lipped man – guffawed. He bellowed something about poodles dancing and women acting – no woman, he said could possibly be an actress. He hinted – you can imagine what. She could get no training in her craft. Could she seek her dinner in a tavern or roam the streets at midnight? Yet her genius was for fiction and lusted to feed abundantly upon the lives of men and women and the study of their ways. At last – for she was very young, oddly like Shakespeare the poet in her face, with the same grey eyes and rounded brows – at last Nick Green the actor-manager took pity on her; she found herself with child by that gentleman and so - who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body? killed herself one winter's night and lies buried at some cross-roads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and Castle.

All the Judith Shakespeares of history have found that high art, the realm of the Great Artists, is a lonely and hostile place for a woman to be.

Feminist artists have further asked: Does the high art of patriarchal society serve the same interests for men and women?

The question 'why have there been no great women artists?' assumes that it does.

For us, this assumption is as deceptive as the one operating when Fraser tells workers to tighten their belts and soon we will all be better off. He is putting up the deception that his austerity program equally benefits the ruling class and the working class, just as patriarchal high art practice and theory puts up the deception that men, the oppressors, and women, the oppressed, have the same stakes in high art.

Of course we recognise that working class men and other oppressed groups, are also excluded from high art, but for women this exclusion is heightened by the sexism that operates across class barriers.

The cultural models celebrated in high art, such as the artist as hero,

(SLIDE)

the subject as hero,

(SLIDE)

the pedagogue,

(SLIDE)

the leader,

(SLIDE)

are the pinnacles of the sex roles into which all men under patriarchy are socialized. We know the very different character of the female roles celebrated in high art:

SLIDES

All high art leaves us with is passive identification and emulation of these roles.

SLIDES THROUGHOUT

A Marxist critique of high art without a feminist consciousness is not going to change this. The hero can be transformed into a working class hero, the intellectual can espouse revolutionary theory, and may even become a leader of a political struggle, and women are left quietly waiting, making the tea, certainly not making 'great art'.

It is still important to understand that women's creativity has been thwarted but not totally suppressed. For most women it has been restricted to the domestic sphere. Art was and is suppressed in this environment, but this art seldom surfaces in history.

(SLIDE – Hungarian women)

Just as women's domestic labour has remained hidden and unpaid in our society, even though child rearing is essential to the economy in the production of new workers, so too women's art has remained hidden and undervalued by society.

(SLIDE – Capitalism also depends on domestic labour)

(SLIDE – Women's work equals slave labour)

Women's creativity in this situation is closely tied to her domestic role as wife, mother and housekeeper.

(SLIDE - Womens budget)

(SLIDE – Milk jug cover)

Imagery often arises from this context and the work has the added value of being utilitarian.

(ENTER – Woman with pram)

Women's art traditionally has not made a distinction between high and low art.

(SLIDE - Mrs Field)

High art depends on one very visible egocentric individual who often uses another individual for support and maintenance.

(SLIDE – Parity begins at home)

*There is no point in talking about human rights unless you have had breakfast.*

Women's art is often communal and anonymous.

(SLIDE – Quilting bee)

When women artists do surface in the mainstream art world, their work is often devalued because of the subject matter or distinctly female aesthetic.

(SLIDE – Mary Cassat)

*Marie, what does the colour pink mean to you?*

Fuck patriarchy.

(SLIDE – Fuck Patriarchy)

Question 4.

*Aren't you throwing doubt on the authority of history?*

Answer:

Absolutely. As we have already said, history is inadequate and inaccurate where it fails to account for either the presence or absence of women-produced art.

Question 5:

*What can we do about all of this?*

It is important that we recognise that only by questioning and demanding changes can history be set right.

We've prepared a bibliography of relevant material – if the books aren't available at the library demand that they be ordered or, try the following bookshops:

University Co-op Bookshop  
Feminist Bookshop, Balmain  
Jura Bookshop, Newtown  
Compendium, Taylor Square  
Intervention Bookshop, Dixon Street  
Centre for Non-Sexist Resources, Homebush

Women's Film Collection, Sydney Filmmakers Co-op  
Library, Womens House

You should demand that your lecturers begin to present the material in the lectures as well.

Now we propose to show a series of slides which encompass a range of women's art which reveal only the surface of the total output of women's art. We intend to let the work speak for itself. After the slides we will answer any questions you might have concerning the works illustrated and/or points raised in the Powerful Lecture.

Question

*Who Are You Women Anyway?*



## WOMEN ARTISTS SING THE PINKS

We are practising woman artists with a range of backgrounds  
Who formed some study groups on women and the arts

In the tin sheds we are trying to work some problems through  
Concerning aspects of women's practice in the arts of today.

Through discussions and shared experience and a pool of source material  
We're acquiring a working knowledge of revolutionary theory  
And actions. We start from a critique of capitalism  
And because we all know better we must include patriarchy.

In our practice as woman artists we have had to struggle through  
Sexist theory, sexist practice, sexist education too  
We're looking for our origins, function as a support group  
What's the meaning within the art scene of the presence of our troop<

None of us has found completely what the answers are as yet  
Have no fear, we're sure to get there and on that we'll place a bet.

\*\*\*\*\*Sing to the tune of CLEMENTINE (Please)

**Source: Women's Art Group, University of Sydney, 1978. 'Powerful Lecture'  
delivered, Carslaw Lecture Theatre, July 14th)**