

THE PLAYBOY SHOW – Victoria Middleton:

"And then one of them shouted a codeword and all hell broke loose." 1

We expected press distortions and giggled over this one, an art gallery owner's vision of hell: feminists dispersing rabbit droppings on the floor of the gallery, dispensing tapioca 'sperm' on the walls of the men's toilet, spraying stencils of the strangled Playboy bunny on the walls next to exhibits, unfurling a banner proclaiming "Art pimps for Playboy", and parading with placards, all talking in code (the much-sought female language?). The various press reports were so ridiculous and naive we just laughed; we had issued a press release but our main target was the gallery crowd at the opening of this exhibition.

Playboy issued an invitation to Playboy readers to attend the opening of an exhibition of Australian art works commissioned by the Playboy corporation, and as occasional readers we accepted. We were also occasional viewers, even at openings (and, we have to admit it, occasional exhibitors). Early in the proceedings the editor of 'Australian' Playboy attempted to manhandle one of the guests, dressed in a rabbit suit and dark glasses, out of the gallery, and this breach of courtesy caused one of our number to loudly question the propriety of throwing out invited guests. Clive shrugged his shoulders and put his arm around the rabbit.

Other audience reaction differed: someone in the Playboy uniform for cultural events (neatly fitting turquoise jeans and white opennecked shirt) accused two of us of half measures - he said we should have rushed in, slashed a couple of pictures and rushed out "like the attacker of Lord Snowdon's portrait of Liz Taylor". (We weren't provoked into action). This view was later reiterated by both friend and foe (feminist film maker and male fashion model), which shows the extent of misunderstanding about the purpose of the demonstration, and perhaps our error in drawing on nostalgia for sixties-style protest in 1980.

"Playboy sex is boring" it still said on the carpet at Hogarth a week later, but Playboy art is worse.

In the quest for admirable cultural standing via the patronage of fine art Playboy bypassed its own standardised and touched-up centrefold photos in favour of derivative images produced by the "unrestricted" imagination of "Australia's top artists". Despite the acknowledged (mercenary) power of centrefold photography, Playboy's commission relied on that same double standard which dismisses the 'simplifications' of commercial art and encourages fine art to maintain the bribe for cultural prestige. We attended the opening to demonstrate our contempt for the whole exercise, and although we didn't chant in unison "better to have enlarged some centrefold photos" when we saw the exhibition I think we showed our contempt for Playboy's taste also.

The problem with the art Playboy so trustingly commissioned is that by ignoring the sexual tensions uncovered by the Women's Liberation Movement and the Gay Liberation Movement in the last decade the artists failed to produce anything that

strikes a contemporary chord, and consequently anything that has any vitality. The traditional nudes, which commercial photographers in the porn and fashion industries have taken over, these artists reproduced with a curious resort to a sense of daring at making pictures of naked women. Not only this, but it appears that the possibility of there being an issue to contend with never even occurred to them. If addressing Playboy with feminist criticism seemed like an outdated concern to some, the evidence of the exhibition is that some artists have never heard the stream of criticism directed at mass-media depictions of women.

The art works themselves were not a central concern of the demo, nor even of the opening. Our reasons for bothering to take notice of the activities of Playboy or Hogarth Gallery were stated clearly in our press release, though ignored by the press:

"The committee organised the demonstration to object to the cynical use of artworks for the purpose of legitimising Playboy's sham sexuality. The Exhibition serves no other purpose than to promote the magazine."

Several (male) friends and acquaintances at the gallery opening, not demonstrating (nor provoked into doing so) read this and told us they agreed with what we were saying; the editor of 'Australian' Playboy came running after us as we were leaving pleading (with fellow journalist who attended the demo) that he agreed with what we were saying. These remarks were made in confidence, not openly, and whilst such covertness is annoying, what it indicates is how duplicit (or hypocritical) are Australian men feminists. Something the press failed to notice was that the demonstration was attended by both women and men. This was perhaps the one unsurprising oversight perhaps given that the inaudible, still-reluctant men feminists left the women to parade while they looked on (with one exception) – female pleasure in regard of female bodies, for example – are also denied, creating other forms of sexual repression. This is not to justify Playboy's promotion of stereotypes, but to consider the manipulation of our sexuality by the commercialisation of sex. There's a persistent worry that expressing disapproval of Playboy will be interpreted as prudery. The first from the opening of the Playboy exhibition: we eventually heard the old cliché, "Funny how it's always the ugly women who protest", uttered despite all evidence to the contrary. Certainly very few of the demonstrators conformed to the Playboy stereotype, but many of the feminists present conformed to the current concepts of fashionably attractive women. This conflict between the old-fashioned ideal woman and the new-fashioned ideal woman may indicate that Playboy's enemy far from being the Women's Movement, is the fashion industry. Something of the threat of 'fashion' to Playboy is discernible in the Australian editions of Playboy in those photographs taken by Australian photographers whose previous work consisted of clothing fashion spreads and ads containing fashion models. In these pictures the tall, narrow-hipped, small-breasted disdainful models posed to exude a sterile sexuality intrude on the docile voluptuous playmates. Nevertheless at the opening (and in the press afterwards) people insisted that the women protesting were the mythical 'women's libbers' the mass-media has conjured up. With such obscured vision one wonders that any could see the art in the gallery, let alone buy it.

There is no point correcting error by error the various press reports of the demonstration, but this one mistake should be corrected: no art work was destroyed by

demonstrators. A decision was made at organisational stage not to damage any work and this decision prevailed. Some exhibits were damaged but not by demonstrators gathered to show their contempt etc.

All demonstrations provide the opportunity for individuals to air personal gripes or engage in individual action under crowd cover. This may have some undesirable side-effects for the purpose of the demo, and perhaps lends support to argument for alternative strategies to be adopted for expression of opposition to political oppression. (Maybe performance art does have a valuable role beyond the self-centred desolation of private attributions and personal interpretations).

Nevertheless the demo (wasn't it performance art anyway?) took place with ample reason.

The outrage which Playboy and gallery staff displayed at the opening, and the subsequent pursuit of a scapegoat indicate the extent to which Playboy felt thwarted in their attempt to gain cultural status and were upset at the ruin of their imagined prestigious social event. Perhaps what wasn't realised was why Clive acted so pleased: how empty and unentertaining the gallery would have been without our presence, and how galleries have the appearance of white-washed prisons when they're empty. We heard that Clive later mustered some anger. We heard that he decided to ban all women artists (from his gallery). And then realised that half his exhibitors over the last year were women. He said, we heard. And then he told the press that the purpose of the demo had been to protest the imbalance of women and men participants commissioned by Playboy. How easily the victories of one Sydney Biennale are turned to platitudes of tokenism and the issues trivialised; how easily equality becomes a matter of numbers.

Just as we knew the press would misrepresent us (even those journos who spoke to us for 'our side' of the story), so we knew Clive Evatt would capitalise on our presence. The anticipation of these reactions was no deterrent to protest; the opportunities for delivering a feminist viewpoint and Australian opposition to the activities of American multinationals are rare enough to justify utilising every occasion. If we need a reminder we need only turn to the editorial in the first edition of 'Australian' Playboy:-

In that issue in 1978 it was considered appropriate to include a quote from the first American issue of the 1953 Playboy: "if we are able to give the American male a few extra laughs and a little diversion from the anxieties of the Atomic Age we'll feel we've justified our existence". (Hugh Hefner) This neat diffusion of responsibilities and open reference to the (witting or unwitting) collusion between the mass-media and world military power cleverly diverts attention away from the increasing (Australian) public concern over American interest in Australian uranium deposits.

However, we might never be presented with a plainer admission of the power of government and corporate enterprise and the helplessness of the individual (male) in the twentieth century.

Victoria Middleton
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Footnotes

1 Clive Evatt director Hogarth Gallery as quoted Sunday Telegraph 14/12/80

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