

The Heartland Forum

Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney, 7 August 1985

'What has been imposed on women through oppressive social conditions or prejudice should not be made part of our definition of women's art and thus be further perpetuated.'

Gisela Ecker, *Feminist Aesthetics* (The Women's Press, 1985)

Heartburn - A forum - Heartland so beckoned the leaflet advertising the forum jointly organised by the Affirmative Action for Women in the Visual Arts committee of the Artworkers Union, the Power Foundation and the Ivan Dougherty Gallery, which was held on the night of August 7th.

Heartland is a touring exhibition of work by six women artists – Kate Lohse, Mandy Martin, Margaret Morgan, Susan Norrie, Wendy Stavrianos and Ania Walwicz. It has been toured extensively and is accompanied by a comprehensive catalogue essay by Julie Ewington which makes a number of significant claims for the show. From the evidence, it can be argued that the exhibition has to be seen as some kind of flagship. This show attempts to occupy the space of an exemplary Feminist Visual Arts Practice, and as such, was not intended to merely present a fragment of a much larger debate.

It should be noted that there have been several all-women group shows in Sydney over the past two years at Artspace and Performance space, for instance, yet none of which have attracted the extravagant claims surround *Heartland*. Despite disclaimers, this is not just an exhibition of artists who happen to be women, and as such, it invites a different response than to a 'neutral' grouping of female work.

The introductory remarks by the chairperson, Helen Grace, suggested that the forum was being held to 'discuss the work in the show'. The forum's title, *Heartburn*, however, indicates a more anxious self-consciousness about the critical resonances surrounding the exhibition.

Two hundred people turned up at the lecture room behind the Ivan Dougherty Gallery. Initially there was a festive mood at the pre-forum drinks, which was however, soon to be dispelled. Not all the artists were there, although the advertising suggested they would be. The catalogue essayist, Julie Ewington, could have been pivotal, but was also unable to attend, due to illness. The show's curator, Frank McBride, was inexplicably absent.

Those artists present delivered short papers or spoke of their work. Susan Norrie expressed a feminist intent and gave a theoretical account of her concerns, plus a number of verbal cues to her work (although this member of the audience is still unable to work out how Lazlo Toth's hammer became Sue Norrie's knife). The artist in response to a question from the audience about the structure of the work, stated that it was designed to address the commodification of art – the images referring to the materiality of the work – fetishised objects and the paintings themselves being given an equivalent treatment.

Kate Lohse gave a personalised account of producing the work and her own sensual pleasure in printmaking. Ania Walwicz provided a spirited history of her imagery and mode of production and distanced herself from the other artists and the catalogue essay. Margaret Morgan contextualised the various debates around the exhibition and

elaborated on the historical references to her work, in what was perhaps the most interesting paper. She spoke about how her work had been specifically developed for the show and also expressed a feminist intent.

Much of the debate at the forum was centred on the subversive effect of representations of femininity, as if femininity might be a fixed thing and not defined in relation to what is male and therefore liable to change. Such an unproblematic view begs the question of how such a fixed notion of femininity is necessarily subversive, given that, all through the long history of patriarchal society those qualities which have been ascribed to women rather than men – receptivity, sensitivity, non-violence, passivity, tenderness etc. are predicated on a binary opposition and which, it may be argued, suits men to have women continue to express.

With both Morgan and Norrie, arguably the two strongest artists in the show, what starts out in their work as descriptions of historical phenomena inevitably become essentialist statements. The School of Fontainebleau device – woman looks through ‘vulval’ (the artist’s description) curtains/ into mirror/ into domestic interior – or – through window/ over suburban rooftops – The Eye of the Vagina – (Morgan), the valorised, albeit not unambiguously, and socialised signs of femininity, the economically marginalised fetish, (Norrie), do not allow for any examination of how these places and signs of femininity are produced.

“Certainly a feminist aesthetic demands reflection on the feminine, but it also demands a commitment to the historical moment with its specific necessities.”
(Ewcker)

Helen Grace, the chairperson, implied extraneous issues were raised which prevented ‘talking about the work’. At such a forum, and with such an exhibition, it is very difficult for artists or audience to ‘talk about the work’. Some artists may wish to speak about the work, others may prefer to let the work speak for itself. And with a show which has particular claims made for it the theoretical underpinnings are of as much interest as the ‘work’ itself. If the artists wanted discussion solely about the work in the show, a widely advertised, heavily promoted forum with a chairperson who calls for ‘any questions?’ probably wasn’t the best way of going about it.

The general mood in the 200-strong audience seemed to be one of adulation for the artists, and there was an assumption of celebration and self-congratulation. There was little readiness to accept a critical perspective, as evidenced by the extensive murmurs of disapproval and defensive responses when questions around the issues in the work were raised. One of the two male audience members who spoke provided some unintentional light relief with his earnest potted history of tampon as signifier in recent visual art.

But nonetheless the forum and the show have managed to generate long-needed discussion which might not have taken place otherwise. Shows like *Heartland* are important, as are the attendant catalogue essays and subsequent discussion. The claims made for this particular show need to be further explored as they could not be within the limitations of the parameters placed around the discussion at *Heartburn*.

It is obvious that more gender-specific curatorial work needs to be undertaken, although the block-buster all-woman show per se is problematic with its potential to marginalise ‘women’s art’ even further, and to let institutional curators off the hook.

Despite the fervent wish of many women artists to be seen as 'artist' first and 'woman' second, there is no such thing as gender neutrality in art. So-called neutral-gender art is MALE art, and 'women's art' is somewhat on the edge. As Liz Gross pointed out at the recent forum at Artspace, *Politics, Representation and Feminism*, the myth of neutrality (the phallogentric voice which speaks for male and female) will not be deconstructed unless and until male artists and critics develop a consciousness of their own gender, and relinquish, or are forced to relinquish, some of the space they occupy within the institutions and museums.

Merilyn Fairsky.

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