

HEARTBURN - Response to Marilyn Fairskye's article on the Heartland Forum.

Merilyn Fairskye's discussion of the Heartland Forum at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery last August (*On The Beach*, No 9) is to be welcomed as it provides an opportunity to think about the ways in which debate is demanded and at the same time, precluded. Merilyn's article underlines some of the problems involved in the attempt to speak critically about work, but it also draws our attention to the other side of the equation of speech - the problem of hearing - and, related to this, the question of memory, which provides a context for both speech and hearing. Merilyn cites Gisela Ecker in making a point about historical specificity:

"Certainly a feminist aesthetic demands reflection on the feminine, but it also demands a commitment to the historical moment with its specific necessities."

A misreading of this point, and of the work in the show, is however, made in Merilyn's article, which indicates a certain problem with seeing, hearing and remembering a specific history - precisely that history of attempts in the last fifteen years or so to explore "representations of femininity". To fail to acknowledge that shifts have taken place in the debate around these questions and that these shifts are to be seen in the ways in which certain artists have worked is to look at the work in **Heartland** with one's eyes closed.

As Merilyn saw it, forum debate assumed that femininity was "a fixed thing" - yet this is in no way implied in any of the contributions made by the artists who all refused precisely this kind of designation, not only in their speeches but also in the work. This point could not have been missed by anyone who was actually listening to what was said.

Because of a certain amnesia effect which accompanies an all too common failure to hear what is said in public, assumptions are then made which bear little relation to an event itself, but say a great deal about the manner in which issues are discussed.

And so in Merilyn's article, assumptions are made about the work or the context of its production, or the critical climate in which it is situated but nothing is ever specified; it's as if the debate is all happening somewhere else - who knows where? One hears mutterings: "such & such a work has 'problems'" etc. but the problems are never *stated* in other than the tones of moral outrage, so that no debate is possible.

If we look at one or two of the sentences which Merilyn has written, we encounter a voice but we do not know in whose name it utters. This gesture of refusal might have a subversive intent under some circumstances, but here it seems to avoid the issue and does not offer us any way out.

Merilyn writes: *"From the evidence, it can be argued that the exhibition has to be seen as a flagship"*

What evidence? Who is arguing that the show is a flagship? She goes further:

"This show attempts to occupy the space of an exemplary (sic) Feminist Visual Arts Practice, and as such, was not intended to merely present a fragment of a much larger debate"

Who is speaking here? Such a statement attributes motives and intentions as if the writer is speaking from the position of being curator, . Her piece, in this way,

constructs a fictional purpose and intent for the show, solely for the purposes of arguing that it does not then live up to these expectations - which it never claimed it was even attempting! And then, it seems, in Marilyn's view at least, the forum is to blame for being unable to provide all that is sought in the show or in the catalogue essay.

Marilyn is being rather earnest and literal when she suggests that the forum's title, ***Heartburn*** "*indicates a more anxious self-consciousness about the critical resonances surrounding the exhibition*" - although she does not specify what these resonances are.

The statements made by the artists at the forum were not especially fraught with anxiety or self-consciousness; on the contrary, critical discussion was actively sought - which is why the forum was held.

In her article, Marilyn provides herself with a platform for a radical stance which I am not sure she really occupies. At the end of her article, she refers to Liz Gross's speech at Artspace (*Politics, Representation and Feminism*) in which it is suggested that male artists and critics need to develop a consciousness of their own gender and to relinquish some of the space they occupy in museums and galleries. However, the real targets in Marilyn's article are not men, but women, whose inadequate art, writing and chairpersonship are seen to be the real problem. This is indeed cause for some heartburn for all of us.

Helen Grace.

Source: On the Beach, No 10, 1985