

# ABOUT TIME

Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists



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### *Exhibition and performances:*

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## ABOUT TIME

### *About Time – what is it?*

'About Time' is an exhibition of works in video, performance and installation by women artists. These disciplines come from an area of art known variously as Third Area, Mixed Media, Live work or Time-based work. These are all descriptive attempts to define a wide variety of work which extends beyond the traditional boundaries delineated by the disciplines of painting and sculpture. The ideas of the artist are expressed through the use of sound, text, video, film and live action, as well as through the more established fine art media.

### *About Time – the history*

Two years ago a group of feminist artists, Joyce Agee, Catherine Elwes, Jacqueline Morreau, and Pat Whiteread initiated an exhibition of art by women to be held at the ICA. Their hard work and enthusiasm inspired such a large response from artists that it soon became evident that one exhibition would not be enough. In order to ensure that all work selected could be adequately shown, their original concept was extended into two separate exhibitions. The main committee concentrated its efforts on 'Women's Images of Men', an exhibition of painting, drawing, sculpture, photography and printmaking. Catherine Elwes also took particular responsibility for video performance and installation works, and was joined by Rose Garrard and Sandy Nairne in the selection and organisation of 'About Time'. Films have been selected and organised as a separate programme by Deborah Lowensberg, Felicity Sparrow and Chris Rodley of the ICA.

### *About Time – the selection*

All the works in this exhibition are about time. All the artists exhibiting their work here are women. These two facts are the simplest link between the twenty-one art works to be seen during the ten day exhibition.

Selection was made from an open submission of new works or proposals for work by women artists involved in this area of art. Decisions were based firstly on these works being of recognisable merit rather than on the name or previous reputation of the artist. Another and more complex linking factor which governed both the submission and selection procedures was that 'all works should indicate the artist's awareness of a woman's particular experience within the patriarchy.' Although the final selection was intentionally inclusive of a wide range of styles and forms of art, and diverse individual attitudes and ideas, we did not feel that we could adequately represent women's work in theatre, dance, music or documentary video. We considered that these were often closely associated, to the work we chose, but was less appropriate for the gallery situation available to us. The concerns expressed in the form and content of each selected piece will, we hope, raise many questions which can form the basis of discussion in and beyond the gallery.

The rich variety of work submitted and the large number of young artists who contacted us, suggests that there is considerable creative potential in the future for work 'about time'. Unfortunately the limitations of time, space and finance, so familiar to artists in this area, excluded the possibility of an exhibition which could even attempt a comprehensive survey of women's involvement in this section of art. We hope that

this will be the first of many exhibitions of women's work and that the whole range of time-based activity in the visual arts will be given the space and interest that it deserves.

Catherine Elwes  
Rose Garrard  
Sandy Nairne

September 1980



*About Time* is an apt title for a season of work by women experimenting beyond the traditions of painting and sculpture. Time can never be reduced to a simply technical concept. It will always carry with it connotations of survival, discovery, deliberation. We live through time and we live through hard times. Autumn 1980, hard times for artists when the panel of artists appointed by the Arts Council to distribute life-line funds to fellow artists were so deeply affected by the cultural equivalent of Thatcherism that they were prepared to withhold funds from all but four artists working in traditional ways. And even harder times for women artists, for there were many among the 700 or so who applied, and not one chosen. As a species, too shallow to create. That was the judgement of a member of the all-male panel.

High time then, for a show of solidarity like this season. *About Time* is part of the answer to dismissive sexist treatment. It is a tribute to the expansiveness of these women artists that the work to be presented in these 10 days does not respond to provocation with sectarian bickering. But it is true that a certain cohesiveness of meaning is to be found in works which take the very different forms of performance, video and installation.

This cohesiveness is not programmatic, nor is it propagandistic. What these women do share, as pointed out by Rose Garrard and Catherine Elwes as participating selectors, is 'the awareness that the particular position of women within the patriarchy is not irrelevant.' Because they are artists this awareness becomes part of a heightened perception that should be able to explore more than is already known.

To explore more than is already known. That is the aspiration of revolutions in art. Often the tools of exploration have to be other than those already tried and tested which must be why many of the artists exploring their new awareness have turned to the less charted means of performance, video, film and installation. Taken too literally this too can be a red herring. It is not simply the change of means which is significant, but the will to experimentation. For in a very real sense, any woman working with a full awareness of her identity and all the socio-political factors which surround it, will find herself out in an experimental vanguard, exploring areas which many men, to be fair, have acknowledged, but none, for obvious reasons, have felt. Take, for instance, the act of birth. Creative men have always recognised the deep and often disturbing similarities between the act of cultural creation and the process of conception, gestation and birth. For women artists the similarity can become more than a vague metaphor. The act of creation can be directly informed by the experience of giving physical birth. Not surprisingly, some of the work explores this area, yet it is precisely here that women artists have encountered cruel scorn. It's a response conditioned by frightened and sometimes embarrassed prudery, crudely expressed as 'Do your dirty linen-washing in private.' In this, sad to say, the art world has fallen way behind the social sciences, sociology, anthropology et al, and revealed a deep resistance to welcoming new expressions of human experience.

It's many years now since Anais Nin wrote: 'The art of women must be born in the womb-cells of the mind. She must be the link between the synthetic products of man and the elements. She must create that unity which man first destroyed by his proud consciousness'. We still fight for the ideal of unity, of redressed balance, of the need to discover the self as a necessary step towards an understanding of the whole. I admire the courage of these women who refuse to be shamed into dividing private and public behaviour into artificial defence lines. Performance is an excruciatingly public form of exploration which, when used with integrity, can have everything to do with shared experience – actively, not passively, received.

Caroline Tisdall



## ABOUT TIME – historical background

Several of the women whose work appears in this show would not happily place it within any art historical tradition. Others feel that their work has links with past or current notions of form and content, however unlike they may be of the first and questioning of the second. So the catalogue task of providing a 'historical introduction' is not easy. It is hard to place women's work in a historical context when the factors which combine to shape the history of art have so often failed to offer recognition to the work of women artists. And the rediscovery of work 'hidden from history', welcome though that is, does not help solve the problem of women's place in the very inception and consolidation of movements in art.

A show such as 'About Time' would not have been possible without the cumulative influence of many other unofficial shows, many other performances, and much committed political struggle all of which have brought about this belated recognition of women artists. From the present show, inevitably, names are absent. It does not, after all, set out to offer a history of women who have worked in these areas of art. Rather, it presents a selection of new work, especially created for this exhibition.

'About Time' could perhaps be best seen as both a recognition and a potential step forward. A recognition that it is indeed about time that women's work was known, and a chance to offer new work specifically with this in mind. Recognition is one aspect of the show. Just what else it might contain in terms of a consideration of the purpose and role of 'art' will form the attempted subject of this paper.

### PART ONE

#### *From the outside*

This society sets great store on the philosophical contribution reputedly made to social organisation by works of art. Yet comparatively little time is devoted to considering just how the form and content developed in art work relate to the social organisation of which any art work and its creators are of necessity integral parts.

Perhaps this will seem less curious if it is remembered that art history was initially the willing hand-person of the connoisseur. Its task began as the provision of proof that valuable works were indeed by their reputed authors, and their value thus assured. Traditional aesthetics and art appreciation have often been little more than glosses on this work of detection and investment. Beginning to think about women's art, little known and less valued, calls this traditional structure into question.

The work of women, and not just in art, has been heavily suppressed in our culture. Why then should it now be possible to look at even a fraction of contemporary art work produced by women? And what is it that we are likely to see when the unfamiliar is allowed to surface before us? Is there anything different about art conceived and executed by women? The material gathered in the course of researching this piece would appear to indicate that there most certainly is. But the area in which that difference lies may not be solely contained in that which is familiarly considered the concern of art criticism. Rather, it may be found perhaps to fall within the more general notion of a concern for truth.

'About Time' unites two areas generally supposed to be somewhat mystifying or hard to define in art – live or mixed media work, and art by women. Live/mixed media work will be considered in some detail below. The notion that women's art is somehow mysterious, an unknown quantity, is speedily justified. But not because it is art by women and thus somehow inherently strange. No – it is strange simply because it is rarely seen. The present exhibition is the first group show of women's work in this area to be presented by a publicly funded gallery in this country. And this after over ten years of the women's movement. This is not to say that there has been no art by women. On the contrary, the present show is of selected works, a mere drop from the pool of work available. Thus the unfamiliarity of art work by women does not lie in its rarity. It lies in its suppression.

For in these ten years and more, women have been developing and strengthening their work in all sorts of ways. There may not have been official shows as such, but there have certainly been 'unofficial'

ones. In 1974, for example, the Women's Workshop of the Artists Union held its exhibition 'Hang Up, Put Down, Stand Up'.<sup>1</sup> The catalogue explains: 'A group of women artists first met in London in January 1972 to discuss the possibility of joining the Artists Union. We wanted to join as a group rather than as individuals in order to ensure that women's demands became an effective part of the Union's programme of action. . . . The Workshop enables us to work with the maximum possibility of expression by eliminating destructive competition and allowing us to decide upon our own values and priorities instead of accepting and being defined by traditional art structures.'<sup>2</sup> The following year, 'Sweet Sixteen and never been Shown' was organised by the Women's Free Art Alliance. 'A strange show for anyone who has preconceptions about art exhibitions', as Sue Braden put it in her review.<sup>3</sup> Both these shows hoped to provoke dialogue about the role of art.

These were the women already publicly organised. Many, many more were also contributing, whether as individuals, sometimes severely isolated by home and family responsibilities, or as part of the many groups, large and small, taking part in the Seventies surge of performance and live work. Many also engaged in the political struggles of the feminist movement, and brought its principles and practices to bear on their artwork and how that work was organised, where it was shown, and who it was shown to.

It is perhaps unusual to write about struggle in the context of art. Struggle, that is, which breaks with the familiar stereotype of the artist as genius, suffering before his eventual recognition and salvation as society recognises the value of his work. Women artists are not engaged in that kind of struggle. The artist as hero, lonely in his rightness and righteousness, secure in his inspiration against hunger and cold, (with a little help from the female model and muse, of course) . . . there has been no such niche for women artists. Women artists can be more or less certain that their exclusion from society will not be latterly recognised as genius protecting itself against lesser mortals. For women, exclusion from society has no romantic overtones because for them it is the norm. Their historical absence from the realm of primary image makers is covered up, hidden by the essential social place they are made to occupy as tenders, breeders, and occasional part time labour.

The male artist on the borders of social life can use his outsider status to criticise or condemn. For this, his chosen remoteness has been socially recognised and granted the power which such self-exclusion confers. Women have no such option. Their exclusion from decision making, government and power is imposed on them. Thus, because exclusion is the position of the whole of her sex, it is impossible for the woman artist to claim it as privilege. Only very recently have women artists been able to attempt to assert a covert stand as commentators on society. This has been the result of a unique combination of social circumstance and artistic form which has enabled women who have seized the means to make some uniquely powerful statements. To understand how this came to pass, it will be necessary to take a cautious look at history.

### PART TWO

#### *Colleague as subject*

The early years of the twentieth century saw one of the most significant developments for the subsequent history of the plastic arts – the invention of cubism. From 1906 on, Picasso and Braque abandoned one point Renaissance perspective as their basis of pictorial composition. In still life after still life, they painted the subject in increasingly complex patterns of shifting viewpoints. Thus, instead of an exercise in one point illusionism, the canvas became a dense mass of interlocking structures, making a final unity of pictorial structure quite separate from the initial subject. They also abandoned the notion of the sanctity of the picture surface. Illusionism gave way to the transformation of reality by the inclusion of the actual – the invention of the technique of collage. These two formal innovations had immense repercussions, recurring continually in painting and sculpture, and latterly in photography and the cinema. Perhaps the ideas of simultaneity of structure and the power of juxtaposition could be suggested as the twin roots of all contemporary composition in the arts. It is certainly hard to imagine the development of the cinema



without them, and they would seem to be the basis of what structures there are to be found in contemporary performance art.

The influence of cubism spread widely throughout Europe in the years before the First World War, and was also enthusiastically received by the avant garde in Russia. Artists experimented with cubist and collage techniques as they tried to capture the speed and excitement of an increasingly technological society. Both the Russian and Italian 'Futurist' groups – the name was both emblem and aspiration for the new age – shared this concern with capturing the new experience of mechanical speed and dynamism in paintings. They tried to capture the sensations of riding in a motor car, on a bicycle, or hurrying through city streets. So it was really quite a small conceptual step for the idea of collage to lead to another innovation. In Milan in 1912, the Italian poet and leader of the Futurist group, Marinetti staged the first Futurist 'concert'. This was a collage of the media themselves, a simultaneous barrage of poetry, music, hectoring, banter and insults presented before a background of paintings. Such were the beginnings of a method of cultural montage which in 1920 reached one of its grandest expressions in the Russian spectacles enacted in the streets and squares of Moscow by thousands of her citizens, under the direction of artists, to commemorate the Revolution of 1917. Its re-evaluation some fifty years later then rendered montage a vital tool for women artists. But it should not be imagined that a similarity of form or formal inception meant a similar content. For the Italian artists used their noisy evenings and manifestos to favour the cause of patriotism and Italian nationalism. The First World War brought out clearly the political and class contradictions which had set the royalist Italians and the revolutionary Russians on their opposing paths. In central Europe, the war gave birth to the Dada movement, initially in neutral Switzerland. There, various defectors and refugees from a war they had experienced at first hand had gathered. The Cabaret Voltaire, founded by Emmy Hennings and Hugo Ball in Zurich in 1916 became their meeting place. Here, the traditional skills of the music hall – song and dance, juggling and acrobatics, costume and illusion – were juxtaposed in improvised nightly entertainments which attacked the brutalities of the war and the materialism and cynicism of the society which could support it. Although their ideals were certainly anarchic if not avowedly socialist, the royalist Marinetti remained a major influence, recognised as the inventor of 'simultaneity'. His poems often formed part of the recitations which were a feature of the nightly shows. Thus by 1916, what would now be called 'live' or 'performance' art had become established as a way in which a socially aware and politically engaged generation of artists, of many political persuasions, expressed their ideas. The notion of the confrontation of audience and performer as art work had been born.

War and revolution had sown the seeds for the emergence of art as confrontation. Dada groups had sprung up all over Europe, and even reached New York. The consolidation of an uneasy peace however, saw the emergence of a new movement dedicated to a more disciplined exploration of chance. The Surrealists, with their automatic writing and image games introduced the courting of the unconscious as a recognised element in both the creative process and the images of its formal expression. As it developed in Europe and America over the next twenty years, the Surrealist commitment to the releasing of the unconscious became a major force for change in the concepts of artistic composition. From confrontation with the audience, the artist moved on to confrontation with the self. The acceptance of this as a legitimate aim for art, when latterly coupled with the rise of feminist politics, was to have an explosive effect on the work of women artists.

Women were of course involved in the artistic movements so far mentioned. But although much work has now been done to make this generally recognised, the precise nature of their contribution is difficult to define.<sup>4</sup>

Emmy Hennings, for example, is credited as the co-founder of Dada. She was an already established cabaret artiste, and no doubt brought considerable skill and knowledge to the nightly events. Indeed, in the most practical way, it is difficult to see how they could have taken place without her, as the Cabaret was initially let to be just that. However, it is Ball, Tzara and the rest who are credited as the

founders of the new movement and it is their statements of aim and purpose which are reproduced in the official texts. The notion of 'statement' here is perhaps crucial.

The Futurist and Dadaist groups released a flood of statements and manifestos published in the daily press and their own journals. They took care that the publications reached the widest possible audience by posting or even personally delivering them to the European intelligentsia. They were supremely conscious of the role of publicity, the importance of dash and style. But none of the credited statements are signed by women. In 'Theories of Modern Art, a source book by artists and critics'<sup>5</sup> the statement printed from Hannah Hoch refers to the invention of photomontage, which she modestly states to have been inspired after seeing military photographs where the soldiers popped their heads through a prepared backdrop.

There can be little doubt that the women associates of the Dada and Futurist movements contributed surely no less than the men. But how could their contribution have been given proper recognition when a statement in the original Futurist Manifesto read '9. We will glorify war – the only true hygiene of the world – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchist, the beautiful ideas which kill, and the scorn of Woman. 10. We will destroy museums, libraries, and fight against moralism, feminism and all utilitarian cowardice.'<sup>6</sup> They might 'sing the great masses, agitated by work, pleasure and revolt,'<sup>7</sup> but the actual consideration of the feminine brought out only chauvinism and hatred.

The Dadaists too, although their manifesto addresses 'all creative men and women'<sup>8</sup> and makes a plea for sexual freedom, were still quite capable of using female characteristics as triggers for derision while flaunting maleness – urination and masturbation in public – as an instrument of protest. (The bourgeoisie were fit only to piss on. Women might agree, but they couldn't join in . . .)

Surrealist imagery, too, frequently made use of the female as representative both of desire and repression, possibility and lack. Dali and Ernst, Magritte and Duchamp, all used the female to represent the epitome of desire and frustration. Collage became mutilation – the female form was frequently cut up or distorted, or combined with animal images. It is also hard to know what to make of Duchamp's celebrated recreation of himself as female in the impersonation of 'Rose Selavy'. His sculpture such as the 'Wedge of Chastity' often has a quality of sexual violence and delight in repression shared by the 'Large Glass' which can only be disturbing for women.

The sexism and chauvinism of these avant-garde groups would seem to be clear enough. It is reflected ideologically in the impossibility of granting their female members any place in the recognised construction of an artistic movement. The women's skills were accepted, even praised – 'The star of the Cabaret is Emmy Hennings', wrote the *Zuriche Poste* (going on to remark that her body was now, but only slightly, ravaged with grief).<sup>9</sup> Of Sophie Tauber, Hans Richter wrote in 1966 'Her abstract drawings, extraordinary Dada heads of painted wood and tapestries held their own alongside the work of her male colleagues.'<sup>10</sup>

But what must have been their vital role in actually making substance of the vaunted ideas goes unacknowledged. In Russia, women were given high offices in the organisation of various departments of art (Krupskaya handled film and some of the agitprop activities, including sending an agitship down the Volga, Trotsky's wife administered museums, women taught in the new art academies and showed work in the mixed group shows held in 1919 and 20) but the 'great experiment' was too short lived to enable the full effects of an apparent equality to develop.<sup>11</sup>

For even in the most advanced movements and groupings, the consciousness being so eagerly explored was male. Much of the imagery used was, as it had always been, female. Although a colleague, woman could still be used as a subject, the eternal vehicle for the metaphors of male desire.

The doctrines of Surrealism, reinforced in America by an influx of artist refugees who formed a Surrealist colony in New York during the repression of the Thirties and the Second World War, released an energetic attempt to find the sources of the self in art. One result of this was the school of painting known as Abstract Expressionism, which became the first indigenous American contribution to world art.



In this new American context, the principle of juxtaposition eventually brought together the musical experiments of John Cage, the choreography and dancing of Merce Cunningham, and the design skills of Robert Rauschenberg. The large happenings or events that they arranged and explored at Black Mountain college and elsewhere in the Fifties combined the old Dada principle of chance filtered through the discipline of Surrealism with a new influence – Eastern philosophy and the quietism of Zen. The results were spectacles in which the audience was not destined to be shocked, but rather expected to commit themselves to participation through attention. By being attentive of the moment, they participated in its creation as manifested by the event. Art as confrontation had transmuted into performance art, in which the spectators' participation through commitment and attention was consciously acknowledged as part of the piece.

Initially women took part in the burgeoning performance art as collaborators, their familiar and expected role. But the rapidly shifting political climate was soon to change all that. The quietism of the Fifties, as America froze in the grip of MacCarthy<sup>12</sup> was challenged with the Kennedy era and the new generation of protest. The lines between the art world and the street grew less distinct as the artists' deliberately ritualised happenings and events merged with demonstrations for racial equality and against the Vietnam war. Live art seemed more than ever to be the vehicle of the moment in a society of spectacle. But it was not quite as simple as that. The growing recession at home and the success of the liberation movements abroad called the supremacy of Imperialism into question. The Vietnam War brought its brutality home in the bodies of injured sons and a television's eyeview of massacre. The protest movement grew world wide. In this climate of increasing contradiction, women stepped forward.

### PART THREE

#### *From subject to instigator*

The late Sixties saw a shift in the political climate from quiescence to protest. Along with other oppressed minorities such as blacks and gays, women began to organise. The movement emerged almost simultaneously in America and Europe. It brought forth a sudden flood of writing and debate, gatherings and demonstrations. Women began to analyse and challenge their own position, the deep oppression experienced in every part of their lives. They came together in consciousness raising to share experience and gain strength. Certain strands of analysis which emerged at this time became important for the development of a new, feminist art. And this in turn was to prove vital for a whole new assessment of women's work and its possibilities over the decade. Perhaps most crucial was the idea of the personal as political. Every woman's life experience was seen as part of a shared history of oppression. Part of the mechanism of oppression was the male system of hierarchies within which women had no place. Their relegation to the "caring" chores of home and family or equivalent work such as nursing or service jobs kept them out of the hierarchy and confirmed their marginalisation. Their social and historical invisibility was maintained in a society which at the same time used women as spectacle in order to aid every form of consumption. Women artists were among those who took up this challenge. Various tactics evolved by the movement became part of the conceptualising process of women's art work. Thus personal experience and expression were foregrounded. Experiments were made with collective working to demonstrably oppose hierarchy. A determined effort was made to rediscover and reassess past work by women artists, and work done by all women long dismissed as "crafts". As in the Dada years, ideas spread fast. The position was perhaps most quickly consolidated in America. Here, by 1970, a feminist art programme had been set up by Judy Chicago at Fresno State College, California. Here, feminist artists seized the opportunity that live art had always offered for confrontation. They challenged the contemporary uses of performance as a means to achieve a sort of unity of audience and performer and instead used live work to emphasize difference.<sup>12</sup> As Judy Chicago put it, "Performance can be fueled by rage in a way painting and sculpture can't. The women at Fresno did performance with almost no skills, but they were powerful

performances because they came out of authentic feelings."<sup>13</sup> The first programme at Fresno State was followed by one set by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro at the California Institute of the Arts in Los Angeles in 1971. The Cal Arts women transformed an old house in Los Angeles into "WOManhouse". In a series of dramatic environments – a kitchen with fried eggs turning to breasts on the wall, a bathroom overflowing with Tampax, a mannequin trapped in a closet, performances concerning the daily lives and struggles of women were presented. "Cock and Cunt", a play presented there, began with "A dispute over dishwashing and ended with castration". Women re-enacted the birth trauma and the daily chore of putting on make-up. From these works and many more like them<sup>14</sup> a new language of images reappropriated by women began to emerge. Often, their own bodies became the tool of this expression, thus directly challenging the socially ordained role of female as spectacle. Sometimes this work pushed out to painful limits. An artist such as Gina Pane proved fascinating for many women in the lengths to which she was prepared to push her physical endurance. Live performance, sometimes reaching out to extremes of physical experience as its means of expression, was a way in which women could avoid incorporation. By presenting themselves and their physical presence as the substance of an art work, they both questioned and by-passed the gallery system which had so long been stacked against them. The work was of necessity challenging, sometimes even dangerous. But the women had the courage of those with little to lose. They also had each other's support. Working collectively, sharing tasks and skills, was a useful tool. While demonstrating an active opposition to hierarchy and the "star" system on which the art world thrives, collective work is also a useful way of sharing skills and materials. It can provide both a platform for discussion of ideas, and a practical way of getting the ideas into action for women who are often lacking in means and facilities for the production of art work. The recognition and introduction of particular "women's" skills into the realm of art was often part of this process. Baking, sewing, embroidery and other household skills emerged as part of a move away from the monumentality and permanence of much 'official' art. Many women found the creation of environments a fruitful avenue which led away from the traditions of sculpture to the possibilities of incorporation of artists and friends in art works almost as "settings" for further interaction.<sup>15</sup>

The burgeoning and variety of women's art in the Seventies is indicative of the widespread effects of the initial impact of feminist theory and practice on artistic form. Initially perhaps at its most cogent in the live works and extraordinary performances of a fairly small number of women, it has spread out ever wider like ripples on a pool. In a decade of unease and increasing political tension, the emergence and confidence of an ever increasing number of women artists is striking.

The background to the present show represents almost a microcosm of this process. Prior to 1970, women were involved in the happenings movement and around the two original London Arts Labs at Robert Street and Drury Lane. Carlyle Reedy worked there, her initial training as a poet giving her work a particular quality related to Surrealism. Susan Hiller worked on large scale pieces such as "Street Ceremonies" and "Dream Mapping" involving many participants. Tina Keane presented light shows. Letha Poppaconstantinou Hughes conceived spectacular images presented by group events. By the mid Seventies, the initial burst of activity was beginning to consolidate in several ways.

Some women, originally working alone or with mixed groups, began to work together as a conscious political statement. The Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union was formed in 1972. Its members felt that their presence as a group was necessary within the union in order to make sure that women's particular concerns were part of its programme. Past and present workshop members have presented work together – Tina Keane and Rose Finn-Kelcey on several occasions, for example, at the Edinburgh Festival in 1976, and elsewhere, and several have taken part in festivals such as the International Womens Show in Berlin in 1977. (Tina Keane, Rose Finn-Kelcey, Sonia Knox, Hannah O'Shea and Jane Low). The Women's Workshop continues to function as a discussion group and



support system for its members.<sup>16</sup> Kate Walker and Margaret Harrison both early active organisers of womens events, also had work in the Berlin Exhibition. Sally Potter and Jacky Lansley, who had formed "Limited Dance Company" while still at the Place (The London School of Contemporary Dance) performed as a duo but also often used the group as a base from which to invite other women to work with them on collaborative pieces. The group expanded to six during the Performance Art Festival at the Serpentine Gallery in 1975, (including Rose English, Judith Katz, Lynn MacRitchie and Sylvia Stevens). Rose English had herself designed a work for six women presented at the Southampton Festival in 1974.

Women were active in the burst of organisation which surrounded the setting up of the Performance Art Panel by the Arts Council. The Performance Artist Collective, of which Rose Garrard was a founder member, was short lived. The Association of Performance Artists, with Rose English as secretary, managed to carry on for some two years. Women were active in both groups and they provided a useful forum of debate on matters of funding and venues. Some were opposed to working as performance artists within the gallery system, seeing live art as essentially opposed to the static and elitist notion of the gallery space. Others argued for change from within. Some found the centrifugal effect of London oppressive, and Marie Leahy, Shirley Cameron and Di Davies were among several artists who decided to move north at this time.

The setting up of alternative spaces where artists could show work or perform provided an expansion in possible venues. Art Meeting Place was a space organised and cared for by the artists who showed there. Artists for Democracy ran a "Cultural Centre" in Fitzrovia which was always receptive to new work. Several women worked there, and a group of six women who had worked there also took part in the Women's Film and Video Festival in Paris in 1975. The Women's Free Arts Alliance was a venue set up and run by women where women's art work of all kinds was shown.

The foundation of the Acme Gallery in 1976 provided a more traditional venue which showed a number of women artists. Rose Garrard presented "Incidents in a Garden" there in 1977. This ambitious work attempted to present the widest possible range of skills both as artist and as woman (from large scale sculpture to careful sewing) in an environment in which other women were invited to take part. The notion of invitation to participate in others' work was popular with women artists. It ensured that a venue for work, once secured, could be shared, and confirmed women's determination to oppose art world star systems.

Rose Finn-Kelcey, Annabel Nicolson and Hesitate and Demonstrate (the duo of Janet Goddard and Geraldine Pilgrim) were other women who performed at Acme. Jane Rigby presented a film installation piece especially created for the space, in 1979.

Acme also provided the venue for the London Video Arts showings of artists' video tapes and performances. These included work by Alex Meigh, Tamara Krikorian and Marceline Mori.

Recent performances and mixed media venues have included the studios at Butlers Wharf, which provided a fruitful setting for the establishment of a whole new generation of women artists including Alison Winckle and Anne Bean. The Basement, a performance venue in Newcastle, grew out of the Butlers Wharf group, and is run by a woman, Belinda Williams. Roberta Graham is at present organising a series of events at the London Film Makers Coop (an early venue for women's work in performance and expanded cinema, pioneered by Sally Potter and Annabel Nicolson). Artists appearing there have included Tina Keane, Catherine Elwes, Sylvia Ziraneck and Marie Leahy.

A listing such as this, confusing though it may be on first reading and incomplete as it is, represents a considerable breakthrough for women in the areas of live and mixed media work. There can be little doubt that this is because the form somehow seems to suit women, to answer some of their creative needs. Many have confirmed in conversation that they are drawn to the area because of its lack of hierarchy and the opportunity for exploration it provides. For women have been excluded from the realm of "significant form". Even those who have attended art school have described the experience as one where sexual stereotyping was reinforced, and they were not

expected to produce good or serious work. For some, a complete rejection of established art practice was a necessity as they became conscious of their position as women. For others, the process has not had to be so drastic. Many, however, have described the driving force which motivated their work as one which is essentially problem-solving, seeking ever more satisfactory ways of conveying a complex experience of the world. For the male artist, form is something removed, abstracted from the self in another realm from everyday experience. For women artists, form would seem to be the end product of a process of exploration, which, although it can produce manifestations of extreme rigour, remains somehow ever open ended. It is still too soon to offer any thesis of "women's art". "About Time" and its companion show provides an opportunity at least to glimpse the implications for all our understanding that the serious consideration of women's work must eventually make possible.

This piece is informed throughout by conversations held, as part of its preparation, with many of the women appearing in the show. In so general a text, individual contributions are inevitably lost. However, without them, no such text would have been possible. For all those who shared their ideas and their time so generously, many thanks.

Lynn MacRitchie

#### Footnotes

1. The show, held at Art Meeting Place in Covent Garden, had the support of the Greater London Arts Association.
2. The demands were: to pressurise local councils to provide studio space for women with children. To ensure that public galleries and national museums include women in both retrospective and contemporary surveys. To demand that Art Colleges hire female staff in proportion to the number of female students. To examine the entrance requirements for art schools (especially the proposed A levels with relation to discrimination against women). The group, with a slightly different membership, still meets regularly.
3. 'Time Out', February, 7-13, 1975.
4. Kunsterinnen International, 1877-1977, Berlin 1977. The catalogue of this women's exhibition held recently in Berlin has sections on Emmy Hennings, Sophie Tauber Arp and an interview with Hannah Hoch. It is not yet available in English translation. Material from it may cast a new light on the thesis this piece offers.
5. Theories of Modern Art, a source book by artists and critics. Herschel B. Chipp. University of California Press, 1968. p 396.
6. Ibid, p 286.
7. Ibid, p 286.
8. Ibid, p 381.
9. Quoted in 'Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present'. Roselee Goldberg, Thames and Hudson, 1979, p 40.
10. Dada, 1916-1966. Documents of the International Dada movement. Exhibition by the Goethe Institute, 1966. Commentary by Hans Richter, p 23.
11. This material was drawn from 'The New Sobriety, Art and Politics in the Weimar period, 1917-1923', by John Willet. Thames and Hudson, 1978. 'Women Artists of the Russian Avant Garde 1910-1930' catalogue, Cologne, 1978/80, has information on individual artists.
12. It is always tempting, when the opportunity to write about women's work arises, to cram a piece with as many names as possible, trying in one article to make up for so many years of neglect. It was decided in the present piece not to do this. Rather, in this instance, the reader is referred to the excellent work of Moira Roth, who is at present working on a history of women performers in America. See especially for reference in this piece, "Autobiography, Theatre, Mysticism and Politics", Women's performance art in Southern California" (to be published shortly). See also "Arts", Feb/June 1978 and "Art Forum", 1977. Thanks to Catherine Elwes for access to Moira Roth material. Also see Lucy Lippard's interview with Yvonne Rainer in her book "From the Centre". There are also books now available by women artists themselves, such as Carolee Schneeman's "Beyond Meat Joy".
13. See above. Moira Roth material provides many further examples.
14. See above. Moira Roth material provides many further examples.
15. It is interesting to consider work by women artists recognised in the mainstream who may have had some influence on this development. Marisol, Nikki de St Phael and Jan Haworth are three examples of women using particular women's skills or concerns to inform their sculpture and environmental pieces.
16. The present members of the group are Rose Finn-Kelcey, Catherine Elwes, Sonia Knox, Hannah O'Shea, Jessica York and Jane Low (who lives and works in Derbyshire).



## ON SHOWS

My intention is to raise questions that need to be asked by and about women working in performance. What follows of course arises out of my experiences working variously as a dancer, choreographer, musician and filmmaker. At times I have also worked, somewhat reluctantly, under the label 'performance artist'. Why this reluctance on my part? Why the anxiety experienced by so many working in these fields about what they 'really' do, and what terms describe their work best? I have found it helpful to examine the history behind the terms and so that is where I am choosing to begin.

### *Naming yourself*

In the nineteenth century during the consolidation of class difference to serve the new industrial capitalism, the word artist became distinct from both artisan (craftworker) and artiste (performer) – the difference implying not only one of form but also one of class position. Artisan implied a skilled manual worker without intellectual, imaginative or creative purposes (qualities that the bourgeoisie were busy naming as their own) and artiste implied entertainer; for women this usually meant a connection with prostitution, for the display of the female body in performance was considered a form of sale. The word artist was reserved for painters, sculptors and eventually also for writers and composers – part of a culture defined, funded by and mostly serving the middle and ruling classes. So to name yourself artist embodies a history of class meanings. How do people choosing this kind of work tackle this history and what does it mean to them?

For some, the work becomes criticising art itself and the prescribed role of the artist: a continuous form of self-referential protest (followed by criticism of how the protest is transformed into saleable artifact). For others the priority is to destroy the definition as it is understood; to show that the manual worker also thinks, that the housewife creates, that art practice is a life practice and not the property of an élite. But for some people, using the name artist implies seizing the right to something which has been systematically denied them: the right to work with ideas on a large scale within a form of production over which they have complete control.

And what does it mean to call yourself a performance artist? At its most simple level it means to be an artist who performs. How is this different from other kinds of performance and entertainment? Does it imply that it has somehow been 'elevated' to the status of an art form? For the Dadaists, Futurists and Surrealists to perform was in itself to dissolve and revolutionise the function of art – to disinvest it of the deadening aura of 'high culture'. The actions and events often borrowed from other forms of performance (eg cabaret) and from the polemics of political practice (manifestos etc) but the contempt for bourgeois values was often more redolent of the aristocratic prankster exercising a privileged form of protest than of the struggles of the revolutionary; and, most importantly, their work was always designed to be seen in the context of the history of art.

What reasons lie behind contemporary performance artists' choice of self definition and anxiety to distinguish and separate their work from anything to do with theatricality? Any implication that the entertainer deals with less important issues and in compromised ways would seem to arise from the class stereotyping founded in the artist/artiste split described above. But not all performance artists think along these lines. The emphasis placed on difference arises out of a criticism of the functions of pleasure in the theatre (plays, opera, dance, music etc). Performance art becomes a framework for this criticism through a combination of formal and structural strategies.

### *Performing versus Acting*

Some performance artists might describe their work as a kind of anti-skill, to differentiate their way of performing from the acting skills of characterisation. Performance is seen as 'doing' – an activity which is being watched rather than a part being played. Characterisation is seen as a technique founded on a literary tradition heavily reliant on the written and spoken word and intimately connected with the aesthetics of illusionism which transport the spectator by a series of identificatory processes to another place and time. Theatre is

caricatured as a place of catharsis where you vicariously emote and rarely think. You may 'lose yourself' in the displays of virtuosity of another, or via the structuring mode of the story, of realism, of narrative continuity.

Some see this process of engagement as itself the site of reactionary formation. Theatrical timing, developed to its ultimate finesse by comedians with a split-second appropriateness of word and gesture that delicately juggles the desires of an audience and orchestrates their response (often on the borderlines of repression and expectation) is rejected in favour of 'real time'. The time it takes to execute a certain task, read a certain text, and so on. The audience may be free to come and go during a piece; its duration is not necessarily determined by the conventions of the 'show'.

The performance artist is often concerned to alert the audience to the shifting constructions of the performance, to be both inside and outside it, commenting on it. Similar reasons motivate the painter who moves out of the rectangle onto the wall, drawing attention to the act of framing; the filmmaker who works with the surface and plastic qualities of film and draws attention to the structuring device of the splice. The theoretical context is that of post-linguistic structuralism in which emphasis is thrown on how meanings are formed (the 'language' of the medium) rather than on what is being said. The intention is to destroy the 'innocence' of representation, to expose its mechanics. However this strategy can be counterproductive when the enemy is wrongly named as the story, identification and pleasure. Many comedians and others working in theatre tread an extraordinary line that engages an audience on many levels at once; not in a soporific way that prevents thinking but in a way that allows precisely the opposite to happen. The audience can laugh or cry *and* think. The function of the joke (when its not at the expense of an oppressed group) can be to open out and stir up those places in people where thinking has stopped. "I cracked up" describes the experience of a good laugh.

In any case live action, be it in a theatre, gallery or wherever, inevitably also produces its own kind of distancing. It can never achieve the perfection that explains the power of cinema for there is never a perfect blackout (indeed some shows happen in broad daylight) and there is never a truly empty space. The performer is at the mercy of possible mechanical failure if using lights or tapes and is constantly exposed to the hazards of accidental sound. This erosion of the perfect statement and of precise artistic control is often used as the basis for questioning both the myth of the absolute correlation between intention and realisation and as an acknowledgement of present time.

### *The female performer*

For women the implied difference with theatricality has also more complex meanings because of women's relationship to entertainment, stereotype and spectacle. Once outside of the fine art context women have joined the tradition of the female performer: women as actresses, singers, dancers, strippers, music hall artistes. One could argue that even within a gallery or other self defined art venue this history is implied. Woman as entertainer is a history of varying manifestations of female oppression, disguised, romanticised (but savingly, contradictory, of which more later). The glittering phantom ballerina wilting in her lover's arms; the burlesque queen playing with and overtly conceding to her male audience's fantasies; the singer crooning about unhappy love and her victim relationship to her lover. These are the conditions under which the female performer has been visible; positioned always in relation to the male construction of femininity and in relation to male desire. Women performance artists, who use their own bodies as the instrument of their work, constantly hover on the knife edge of the possibility of joining this spectacle of woman. The female body, nude or clothed, is arguably so overdetermined that it cannot be used without being, by implication, abused. But of course it is unthinkable that the only constructive strategy for women performers would be their absence. So steps are taken to build a new presence. How is this done?

It becomes necessary to examine what the presence of the female body means, what it means to be looked at. As a female performer



you embody both the representation of a woman and you are a woman. The distinction is important, even if it seems academic, for it can illuminate why most women experience themselves in everyday life as a kind of living continuous performance, distanced by the constraints of femininity from themselves (let alone choosing to perform in the accepted sense of the word). It is like a split, being both inside your body, unable to transcend gender identity, fixed as the 'other' to man's central position in patriarchy, and yet also outside of your body in the very act of thinking, of using language. (The terms used to explain this phenomenon in psychoanalysis are very dense and need lengthy definition. In the context of this piece of writing that would be inappropriate so a form of extreme precis will have to suffice; that woman as performer represents for men a fetishistic replacement of the phallus as a way of dealing with the women's symbolic 'lack' and the implied threat of male castration.)

How can the female performer begin to dismantle this construction?

### *Strategies*

For some it means using a feminist conception of subjectivity as the basis for the work as part of an overall strategy to reclaim on new terms what has been negatively caricatured as the realm of the feminine. An obsession with personal experience and relationships, an unwillingness to generalise, prioritising emotional over intellectual life: look differently at these characteristics and you find that what has been designated trivia has in fact profound political significance.

The women's movement has demonstrated that ideology is not merely reflected but produced in the context of the family and in personal relationships – that political structures are not just 'out there' but are manifest in the most seemingly insignificant actions, words and conditions. We have also shown how a society with power relations based on sexual, racial and class differences fixes these differences in early childhood in such a way that they are experienced as being almost outside of rational explanation – so that they seem 'natural'. Any form of objectivity based unthinkingly on the position of the white middle class male is therefore bound to be partisan and irrational, acting as a form of disguise of its authors' real and subjectively experienced sex, race and class interests. In an art practice dominated by men this has led to an emphasis on formalism, 'purity', art for art's sake, the de-signified image. The raising of female subjectivity to the status of objective significance is then for some women artists a priority. So how is this subjectivity approached and worked with?

For some it means building an imagery based on the female body – on menstruation, reproduction and female sexuality; on tackling what has been endlessly portrayed as female mystery from the other side – the inside. This might be on the level of documentation of the unmentionable or its traces, or on the level of myth, taboo and a cult of the mother in opposition to the patriarchy. For others it might mean reversing the gaze, breaking the silence of centuries and getting the female nude and muse to speak.

For some women a useful step is to look at female stereotypes and how they function; in some cases to turn them against themselves. For others the key is to find and use modes that contradict the stereotypes – ways out of the representation of women as passive and incompetent. Here the contradictory aspect of the female performance tradition can be used to good effect, for women have found positive and ingenious ways in which to sidestep or criticise their impossibly prescribed roles. The ballerina's physical strength and energy which is communicated despite the scenario; the burlesque queen whose apposite and witty interjections transform the meaning of what she is doing and reveal it for the 'act' it is; the singer who communicates through the very timbre of her voice a life of struggle that transforms the banality of her lyrics into an expression of contradiction. All these can work against the pessimism of female 'absence', and also suggest a new way of looking at skill and its subversive potential.

### *Skill*

'Femininity' demands the appearance of lack of skill and emphasises nurturance and appreciation of the skills of men. Women have

therefore often been denied access to the skills they want and have also had their own skills undervalued or denigrated. In reaction to this some have seen virtuosity as the extreme example of skill that 'oppresses' by virtue of its display of superior difference. The performer becomes a symbol of privilege, of work that is valued while other kinds of labour are denigrated. Both the specialness ascribed to individual performers and the performer/audience divide itself are seen as unhealthy symptoms of a class divided society, the performer taking an honorary or symbolic position of power. The strategy then becomes to break down the divide and emphasise audience participation as a way of saying 'anyone can do it'. However, enforced participation can become a rather self-conscious and counterproductive event if it is not handled, paradoxically, with some skill.

It is this sort of realisation that leads many of us to differentiate skill defined as appropriateness of ability to meet a need, from the solidification of skill into a rigid system of technical excellence with its own insulated and self fulfilling ways of measuring and rewarding success. This 'success' for women often means gaining the precarious position of token achiever in a male dominated profession. This position is circumscribed in such a way that as more women achieve in a given area they are forced to compete with each other for the same space rather than the space itself expanding. In the women's movement there has been an emphasis on skill sharing, on teaching other as a way of breaking down the mystiques of professionalism and working towards the realisation of each persons 'genius'.

### *Working process*

What of the mystiques attached to the 'creative' working process? How, in practical terms, does a performance artist set about working? This can be quite idiosyncratic, but usually reflects the starting points learnt in some form of training or practice. The sculptor turned performance artist might start with making or finding an object and working outwards from there; in some sense activating it in time, or giving it a space, a room or set, which suggests a scenario. The painter turned performance artist might take an existing painting or a painterly principle (such as Renaissance space), and use its formal and ideological components as the basis for a "script". Others might use their own dreams as the starting point for assembling images, or some other kind of writing such as notebooks, diaries etc. A dancer might use a sequence of movements, a tableau or a memory of the hidden aspects of the dancer's training as a basis. Apart from in improvisation, which is a discipline in itself, even very minimal performances usually have some kind of script. Sometimes the physical form of the script – the sheet of instructions, the diagram, the trace that the performance will leave, is considered more important than the performance and the event is designed as a forethought to the act of documentation. For others the performance is itself the antithesis of documentation. It is intended to strip itself of every vestige of artifact, to be purely temporal, to be the activation of an idea that then destroys itself. This is considered part of the struggle against capitalist recuperation.

Working processes of course become more systematised when people work together with the desire that each person's ideas will transform the others. Some performance artists work together side by side but continue to identify what they do individually as their own work. The fact of performing in the same space or in a series together may imply a connection, or suggest an argument. For others, such as myself, collaboration became part of a politics that questioned notions of individual ownership of ideas and of the pursuit of originality. Working with others made it possible to discuss the implications of the work, of its politics and realisation at all stages; it forced one to be conscious of what one was doing. It was also a way of combining areas of relative expertise and the lessons brought from them; and on a practical level was a way of sharing tasks. One could try out ideas physically on each other, having the opportunity to step outside the piece and look at it. Exercises would be borrowed from various sources, theatrical and otherwise, designed to focus on performance itself. To find not a right way or a wrong way of doing something, but a conscious way. It provided a way to strip vestiges of



self consciousness, to experiment with different kinds of voice, movement etc and above all to discard, to work through the first stages of an idea towards its full realisation and, hopefully, towards a new imagery.

### *Imagery*

Images cannot be spoken of as if they float free of formal embodiment. A painted image obviously works quite differently from a photographic one. How do you begin to define what an image is in performance? A starting point would be to consider it as a compositional unit. In this way a movement or sequence of movements can be seen as an image, as can a tableau or a combination of layers such as light, action and object; the unit functions as an entity of visual meaning. However, this meaning cannot be seen as absolute or fixed. The varying approaches to the production of images determine at least in part how they can be understood.

Some would define the image maker's task as one of selection from a store of images received in that person's lifetime via artifacts, the media and in everyday life. The problem is seen as one of appropriateness and accuracy in the illustration of an idea – to make something 'in the image of' – a pursuit of 'truth' through likeness. The image in and of itself is seen as relatively unproblematic, having a kind of transparency and essential neutrality that will be transformed into meaning by the purpose of its user. But for the feminist performer, the impossibility of neutrality arises at every turn. How, for example, do you choose what to wear in a performance? It becomes clear as you sift through the options that there is no neutral costume, that every garment for women is imbued with feminine and class specificity. That the boiler suit, so often chosen as a suitably functional basic garment by performance artists during the last decade could be seen in much the same way as Marie Antoinette and her shepherdess scenarios – the appropriation of images of labour for the purposes of bourgeois leisure.

The experience of actually producing images also raises other questions. The sensation can be that of an ordering or letting through of a subrational area. The images seem to pop into ones head; when the 'right' one is there it appears to have arrived without conscious design. This process is conventionally defined as the use of the imagination, of intuition. Where do these images come from and how do they work? Archtypal images, myth and symbolism sometimes suggest the existence of a residual or collective unconscious, and that the image maker learns how to organise and produce from this place outside of verbal constructs in much the same way as a person can learn to produce dreams to order. The surrealists and dadaists considered the liberation of the imagination from sense to be a political act. The apparent randomness of the unconscious was emphasized, chance operations and arbitrariness became fetishised. The destruction of the order of the rational by giving in to 'chaos' seemed to them to be the clue to unlocking repression. But a more useful approach now seems to be to understand the order behind the apparent disorder. To unlock the power of imagery, to decode its mystery, to make the impossibly evocative also a moment of dissection and comprehension.

As a part of this project it becomes important to look at the principle of juxtaposition to see how the proximity of one image to another transforms its meaning. This is similar to the principle of montage in the cinema, but in performance, certain kinds of juxtaposition are uniquely possible. Juxtaposition through time, in space; visual and aural – the performer can simultaneously mobilise all the senses of the spectator. For a feminist, the fact of being able to work at the level of organisation of the unconscious (images and music) and in juxtaposition to rational speech offers the possibility of entering and re-entering consciousness in order to change it.

In a wider sense this dialectical principle can also focus on how performance as a whole is transformed by the environment it is shown in – by its physical characteristics, the associations it triggers, the politics it embodies and by the audience it generates. Understanding the role of the audience in *producing* the meaning of the performance, rather than just absorbing a given one, demands responsibility to them and respect for their needs (which may, within

any one audience, be quite contradictory). It means finally abandoning all vestiges of alienated posturing (the 'nobody understands me now but will in posterity' syndrome) and instead finding or inventing ways of working that are effective here and now. The question is not so much one of making difficult ideas accessible, which somehow implies diluting or transforming in a patronising way for the benefit of a supposedly less able audience, as one of appropriateness of strategy. It means discovering what specific functions this work can have as part of a wider collective strategy to transform the structures and conditions under which we live.

Sally Potter



“You stand somewhere in the middle, turning and looking. But each direction you find, after a try, seems to point back to the beginning. So you take a little from here and a little from there, tiny gems torn from their settings. You paint strange configurations designed neither to reveal nor to satisfy but just to help you get by. In all the tangles you look for her as if she were lost and somehow could be found. You retrace your steps but your memory fails you, so you piece her back together again, borrowing from friends. But you know she lives in the shadows so much closer to home. You catch sight of her as you turn, but she evades you and slips away. You try to woo her with logic and a powerful principle – things need not be what they seem. You promise her everything you assume she desires, hoping to coincide. But your guesses don’t even raise a smile, her costs are always too high. Sensing her retreat you push her away to save your splintering pride. When all else fails you try to clear a space to give her room to breathe. You breathe her into life with an act of faith, willing her to be there. She never really leaves and likes to tease you with clues that defy you to try. But you speak just too loud for her words to be heard, and run a little too fast for her stride.”

My work currently involves my presence as a live element interacting with pre-recorded dialogues or monologues. I try to set up a network of shifting identities that draw the viewer/listener in at various levels. In this way I allow her/him a freedom within the work to make a series of identifications or deductions that enable her/him to complete the “story”. Time past, present and future is the medium through which memories, fantasies and projections emerge as a sequence of fluctuating images. The work reflects the social and psychological position I share with many women of my generation. I inherited a set of values that were challenged in the 1970s by a growing awareness of the women’s movement. I saw the possibility of freeing myself from an old order that restricted my development as an individual and as an artist. I soon realised that a simple intellectual rejection of everything my middle-class, Catholic upbringing had taught me was inadequate and it became important for me to understand the ways in which cultural forces interacted with the universal and the particular elements of the relationships that formed me. Attitudes and needs are established early in the microcosm of the family, reinforced at school and confirmed by society at large. They are not easily shifted nor satisfactorily replaced by a new set of seemingly all-embracing convictions and alliances. Our social circumstances are still relatively unchanged and they would undermine any sustained defiance of ingrained behaviour. I stand “somewhere in the middle” still tied historically and psychologically to a past which my present beliefs struggle to overthrow. I base my work on a continued analysis of that past in order to build an understanding of present conflicts as a bridge to a possible future.



My art education began in 1969 at the West Surrey College of Art and Design and has been interspersed with periods of training and full-time work in other professions. Lanchester Polytechnic, the Slade School of Art and the Royal College of Art have since contributed to my formal education. I have been a member of the Women Artists Collective since 1976. I now live and work in London.

Exhibitions/Live work

The Women’s Arts Alliance, 1977

Kvindegalleriet, Copenhagen, 1977

The Women’s Festival, Action Space, 1977

London Video Arts, Acme Gallery, 1978

New Contemporaries, ICA, 1979

The Basement, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1980

London Film Makers Co-op Events, 1980

Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, 1980