

Graphic FEMINISM

Graphic Art of the
Ontario Women's
Movement, 1970-86

A Space, 204 Spadina Ave.
Wed. May 14 -Sat. May 31
Opening Wed. May 14, 8pm

16 years of women's issues:
choice, racism, equal pay,
day care, lesbians, women's
culture, violence against
women, women in the labour
force, sexuality, peace,

IN posters, leaflets,
buttons, illustrations,
t-shirts, magazines, books.

Introduction

"As feminists, we need art that reveals as well as shapes our experience. We need an art that expresses our anger at the stubbornness of our society to give space to our demands and we need an art that celebrates our delight in our increasing strengths. Through art we can begin to imagine and define the contours of a new feminist reality."

Daphne Read with Rosemary Donegan
and Liz Martin, "But is It Feminist Art?"
Still Ain't Satisfied

The show, Graphic Feminism, is a project of the Canadian Women's Movement Archives. The main purpose of this project is to compile, access, and exhibit work produced by and for the women's movement from 1970 - 1986. This exhibition presents a selection of the graphic work produced by women in Ontario concerned with feminist issues, choice in abortion, racism, equal pay, day care, lesbianism, women's culture, violence against women, women in the labour force, sexuality, and peace. Posters and flyers previously mounted on telephone poles and bill boards are represented here, along with buttons, magazine covers, and books. This material can be appreciated not only for its political content, but also for its aesthetic qualities.

The traditional boundaries of historical document, propaganda, and art overlap in this selection of works. This is due to the curatorial aims of the show and to the make-up of the curating committee. The graphic work chosen was selected by several curators - graphic artists, artists who work in various other media and activists involved with the feminist community. The aim of this committee was to put together a show that was representative of the women's movement in Ontario from a political, historical, regional, and aesthetic perspective. Each of the categories - document, propaganda, and art can simultaneously be applied to all the pieces included in the show. The environment in which the artworks are seen define their function. Like the feminist movement that the graphic work represents, the work in this exhibition draws from and operates within a wide variety of contexts.



Graphic Feminism as Historical Document

"A people or class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act than one that has been able to situate itself in history."

John Berger, Ways of Seeing

The graphics presented in this show are the visual records of contemporary feminist history -- a testament of sixteen years of struggle. They are the historical documents of the women's movement in Ontario. The suppression of women's history and its detrimental effect on the development of women's self-identity has been acknowledged by many feminist writers. The work of unearthing women's history, a major archaeological task, is at present being undertaken by women in various academic disciplines and in alternative autonomous women's groups. One of these alternative structures, the Canadian Women's Movement Archives, is concerned with the "research into, and preservation of the history of the current women's movement in Canada, from the late 1960's to the present." It was the materials in the archives that made obvious the wealth of graphic arts produced by the women's movement and the need to collect more of them for a public exhibition.

The feminist movement has taught us that the omission of women's contributions to history and the lack of women's perspectives of the past has often been used to justify our oppression (ie. because there were no recorded "great" women artists it was assumed that women did not make art, could not make art, and definitely could not become significant artists). What was not acknowledged in traditional historical accounts was that this history was largely constructed by men and for men; women were excluded or misrepresented.

The women's movement has exposed the misrepresentation of women not only in history, but in other areas as well, including popular and "high" art culture. We have learned that as long as we do not develop and produce our own cultural images we will be subjected to someone else's messages and someone else's perspective of how we should think, feel, and be. The past and present monopoly of culture depends upon our silence. Feminists working in all aspects of culture are refuting the traditional myths that constrain women. The work in this show combats an historical amnesia about women's culture and feminist struggles by placing these images in the public imagination. Despite government cutbacks, the present conservative

Talking about

POP NOG RAPHY



Film-not a love story
 Feb. 8 at 6 and 9pm. in O.I.S.E. auditorium
 discussion follows each showing***
 Feb. 9 at 12-2 pm. in Rm 4-411
 (women's caucus, O.I.S.E.-wide)

study group sessions
 Feb. 10 at 6:30pm. in Rm 7-206. merb discussion group
 Feb. 11 at 9:30am-12:30 in Rm. 7-206
 educational and research.

talking with Bonnie Klein the film's director
 Feb. 15 at 7:30-10:00pm. Rm 2-212 General discussion
 Feb. 16 at 9:30a.m.-12:30 in Rm. 2-214 educational and research implications

co-sponsored by: GSA and the adult education student organization

***admission limited to members of the O.I.S.E. community with identification

governmental policies, and the popular media myth that we live in a post-feminist era, these graphic images attest to the ongoing struggle.

A collective memory is needed for the production of strong images of political and social change. The international recognition of the graphic women's symbol attests to the size and strength of the feminist movement. As Martha Rosler points out in her article, "For an Art Against the Mythology of Everyday Life", "cultural products alone cannot bring about substantive changes in the current social and political situation but they are important to any movement that is working to bring about change." Rosler emphasizes, "The clarification of vision is a step towards reasonably and humanly changing the world." Graphic Feminism, by re-presenting the traces of the contemporary women's movement, also emphasizes the demand for social change.

Graphic Feminism and Culture

This exhibition operates within several different cultural categories - community culture, commercial culture and "high" culture. Graphic Feminism can be considered the "community culture" of the feminist movement in Ontario in that it is determined by that community and expresses their vision. It operates within the commercial cultural realm in that it exists alongside of other popular visual forms - advertising, bill boards, print media, etc. By exhibiting this work at A Space Gallery the work is automatically legitimized as "art" by the validating mechanism of the artworld (ie. the gallery). Because the graphic art in the show crosses various cultural boundaries, it also has the potential of reaching several audiences: the women's movement, the unidentified member(s) of the public, and the art audience (artists, critics, etc.)

Graphic Feminism and Community Culture

In her article, "Some Propaganda for Propaganda", Lucy Lippard argues for a specifically feminist propaganda. In this argument Lippard reclaims the original meaning of the term and uses its dictionary definition -- "propagating, multiplying, and disseminating by organized effort" -- to make



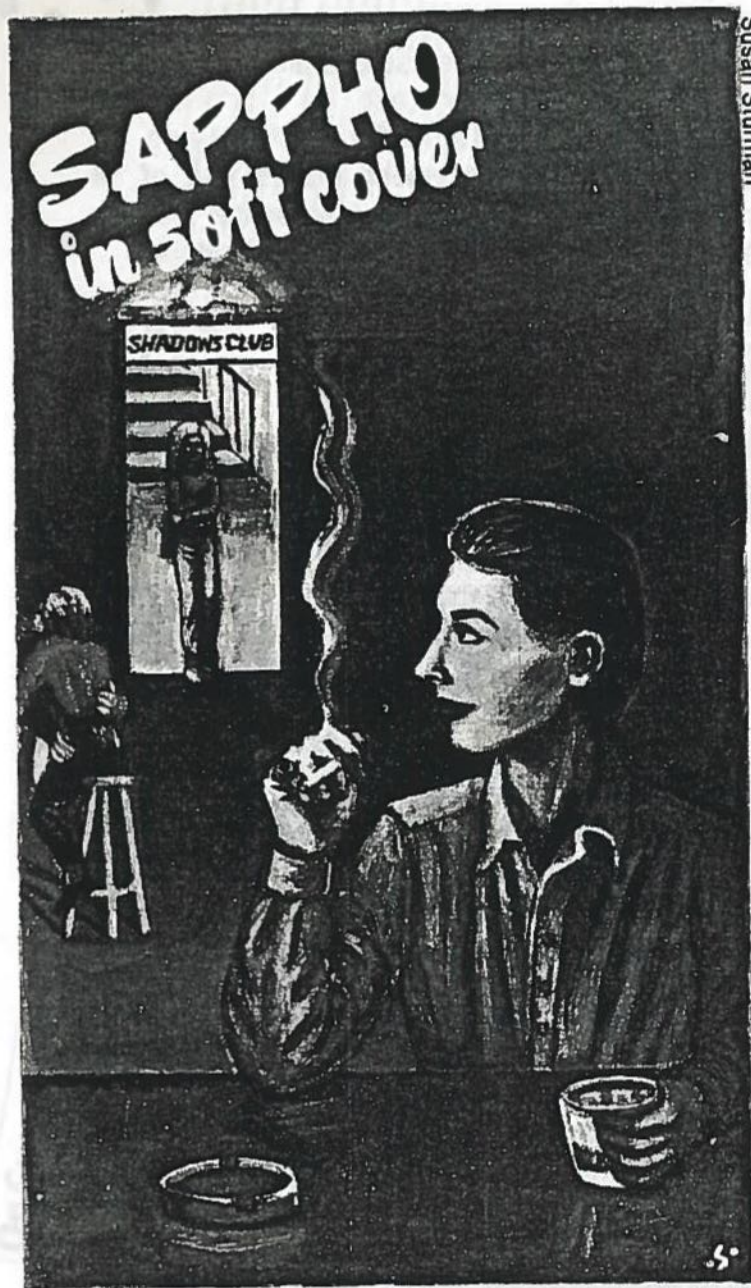
her point that the current usage of the word to connote deception and distraction was acquired in a "colonizing male culture (ie. the Roman Catholic Church)". In this article she differentiates between "good propaganda" which she defines as "socially and esthetically aware provocation", and "bad propaganda" which she claims is an "exploitive and oppressive economic control mechanism". All of the pieces in *Graphic Feminism* -- magazine graphics, posters, post-cards, flyers or brochures -- do provoke, and "spread the word" about feminism; they are consciousness-raising on a large scale.

"The goal of feminist propaganda is to spread the word and provide the organizational structures through which all women can resist the patriarchal propaganda that denigrates and controls us even when we know what we are doing. Since the role of the image has been instrumental in our oppression (through advertising, pornography, etc.), feminists artists have a particular responsibility to create an image vocabulary that conforms to our own interests. If ... "unpropagandized" people are forced to live outside the community, then as feminists we must use our tools of consciousness-raising, self-criticism, and non-hierarchical leadership to create a "good propaganda" that enables women of all races and classes to form a new way of seeing and thinking about what goes on around us,"

Lucy Lippard, "Some Propaganda for Propaganda", *Get the Message*

The work exhibited here has been produced both spontaneously and in a more calculated manner. Events demanding an immediate response have meant the quick and relatively inexpensive production of leaflets, flyers and posters -- to raise consciousness, provide information and rally support. Other graphic work, especially those found in magazines and books, have been the result of more careful planning.

The graphic mediums -- posters, flyers, buttons etc. -- are a relatively cheap media form and therefore are accessible to small political groups. One of the major methods the women's movement has used to advertise itself has been through the use of the photocopier; unfortunately much of this information has been lost. Because xerox is cheap, photocopied graphic work is generally not kept (as a poster or magazine may be) and as a result there is not a great deal of historical material of this type available for display here. However, the accessibility of the photocopier cannot be underestimated in its importance to the feminist movement's ability to "spread the word".



Susan Sturman

traditional norms, exposes hidden issues and provides a new history, theory and understanding of our society."

While many women may feel frustrated that the message(s) contained in this show reaches a largely converted audience (those presently sympathetic to the women's movement) this in itself is not problematic in that we need this work to reaffirm our group identity and history, give us a sense of unity and let us know that we are not alone in our struggle. To deal with oppressive circumstances and to voice opposition to the prevalent status quo one needs a supportive community to feel that one is not alone. In her book, "Toward a New Psychology of Women", Jean Baker-Miller states the importance of women's structures for fostering a sense of community:

"A community of purposeful and sympathetic women directed to their self-determined goals is a new phenomenon. It has created an atmosphere and milieu that brings a whole new quality of life. It advances and fosters both attempts at knowledge and a personal conviction about the content and methods of getting at knowledge. It creates a new sense of connection between knowledge, work and personal life. All of this has begun to happen for women."

An area that the show addresses is the often unacknowledged but important contribution the feminist artist makes within the larger political feminist community. It has been suggested by Daphne Read, Rosemary Donegan and Liz Martin in "But Is It Feminist Art?" that this is because it is difficult to understand how art contributes to social change. Perhaps this misunderstanding is also due to the co-optation of the arts by commercial interests and the historical alignment of the "high" arts with wealthy patrons. Our landscape, both private and public, is dominated by the visual image of the commercial advertiser; in our homes this ideology is received through the television, magazine or newspaper while in the public realm it is presented to us on billboards, subways and in the cinema. Because work and ideas get carried out in symbolic form, art is a powerful medium or conveyer of values and information. The feminist artist is part of the feminist movement and not separate from it. Those of us in the women's movement must rethink our ideas about what art is and reclaim the visual - (as feminists are reclaiming the verbal and written word). The graphic art in this show is intimately tied to the movement that produced it, narrowing the gap between women arts working on feminist issues and the rest of the movement. Like all propaganda of groups working for political causes, these graphic forms are an integral part of our movement.



EATON'S BOYCOTT

M·A·Y

EXTRAVAGANZA

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Massey Hall

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(1 Block East of Eaton's)

8:00 pm

Monday, May 6th

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contact: Retail Wholesale and
Department Store Union, 444-5205.
Labour Council of Metro Toronto,
445-5900. Ontario Federation of
Labour, 441-2731.



Graphic Feminism and Commercial Culture

Culture is coded and filtered by those who have power. When monopolized, it can become an instrument of domination. Graphic Feminism is a collection of propagandized art, the goal of which is to make space for the perspective of the women's movement, and to undermine and expose the oppressive aspects of the mainstream ideology.

By developing alternative structures and networks, the women's movement has taken control of part of the means of production and distribution of their own graphic arts and publications. However, how the messages in these graphic mediums are received is another question. Within the context of the dominant media, the feminist graphic artist can mostly undermine and question the prevalent ideology.

While commercial interests serve to maintain a society defined primarily as spectators and consumers, the graphics of the women's movement encourages the viewer to question the mainstream messages and to act on specific issues. Women's groups have challenged the dominant media by placing stickers such as "This ad insults women" on oppressive images, placing our posters and flyers in public view (on billboards, telephone poles, buildings and restaurants) and handing out leaflets, pamphlets and flyers to receptive pedestrians. In addition, many of the feminist graphics in alternative women's publications can be found on the shelves of "alternative" bookstores, libraries and colleges and in more mainstream venues. Those who choose to wear buttons or T-shirts publicizing certain issues are personally endorsing specific causes and events.

A relatively recent development is the entrance of feminist ideology into the mainstream graphic and printing world. This phenomenon has a double edge: on the one hand this access to the mainstream audience provides the movement with greater opportunity to sensitize a larger public about feminist concerns; while on the other hand, our messages can become diluted or neutralized by the surrounding images. More dangerously, our images and graphics can become totally co-opted. Despite these problems there are a growing number of women illustrators, designers and others involved in the publishing industry who are voicing feminist concerns about how women are portrayed and addressing other relevant issues concerning representation.

HELD OVER
at Adelaide Court

A Nightwood Theatre Production

THE TRUE STORY OF IDA JOHNSON

a play adapted from the novel by Sharon Riis

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Graphic Feminism and High Culture

By exhibiting this show at A Space gallery, the work selected for Graphic Feminism has entered into the validating mechanisms of the "high art" world. The propaganda of the women's movement has become "art" in the historical sense of the word. A Space gallery has become known in recent years for its outreach to various activist communities and audiences and its exhibition of various forms of "community art." As Canada's oldest and largest alternative parallel gallery it lends authority to the work displayed in its exhibition space.

The historical process both within the art world and society as a whole has allowed feminist graphic art to appear in a gallery such as A Space. The resurgence of feminism in the sixties was concurrent with the waning of modernism. Content, once more, became both acceptable and fashionable in art making. As well, some artists began to develop a social consciousness. In her article, "Notes on Quotes", Martha Rosier points out the role of feminist art production in this process. She states that feminists helped to "undermine the modernist tenet of the separateness of art from the rest of human life and [provided] an analysis of the oppressiveness of the seemingly unmotivated forms of high culture that was companion to this work." What did concern feminist artists was subject-matter and the importance of communicating with their audience. Feminist art embraced many categories, transformed old concepts and blurred the boundaries between the low arts (crafts), hobbies, "high" art and life.

While the main unifying factor of each piece is its feminist impulse, the work in this show covers a wide variety of styles and approaches to graphic design. Many contemporary movements (such as pop art, appropriation of commercial advertising techniques, collage and montage strategies) have influenced this selection of artworks. Like the propaganda of other small political groups, much of the work here depends upon using portraits of famous women in the movement, allegory, metaphor, parody and caricature. Some of the work also uses feminist art strategies such as employing domestic subject-matter and motifs. Often a contemporary visual approach is used to appear "in step with the times". In addition to the art references, much of the work adheres to professional design principles: simplicity, clarity, balance, emphasis, unity, attention-getting devices and the use of a modern art style. Unlike the art produced for a gallery setting, most of the pieces in this show (with perhaps the exception of images in magazines and books) has been designed to be quickly apprehended by the public; it must compete with the mass media imagery of the urban landscape.

A showcasing of Graphic Feminism at A Space gallery and the subsequent attention that such a gallery demands, gives the women's movement yet another opportunity to voice the concerns of feminism in general, and to show and celebrate the graphic arts of the women's movement in particular.



Determining the dimensions of
a mythological woman.

Cartoon by Dawna Gallagher

Acknowledgements

It was the women at the Canadian Women's Movement Archives who were responsible for the original idea for this show. This idea has been in the works for some time, however, the show itself was not possible until the archives received the funding necessary to carry it out. As mentioned above, the work in the exhibit is the result of a Call For Submission, research by the coordinating committee and staff and a selection of graphic materials held in the archives. The work involved in carrying out the project was done by three staff coordinators (Tori Smith, Jeanette Dowson and Carla Murray) and a volunteer coordinating committee. The members of the Coordinating committee worked hard to research materials for the exhibition, discuss various issues concerning the show and to decide curatorial criteria. Those to be thanked for this task include: Sandy Fox, Gail Geltner, Wendy Wartsman, Sandra Gregson, Debbie Green and Joss MacLennan. Joss MacLennan is also to be acknowledged for designing the publicity - the poster, invitations, flyers and advertisements - for Graphic Feminism. Finally, the mounting of the exhibition was designed by Pat Jeffries, and executed by Pat Jeffries, Rita McKeough and Barb Taylor with input from the coordinating committee. We especially thank all the artists, women's groups and individuals who are represented in the show, for their enthusiasm and interest in Graphic Feminism.

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