

# THE WOMAN'S BUILDING WHERE WOMAN'S CULTURE KEEPS GROWING FROM ANGER TO ACTIVISM

Ingeborg Oderwald's thick Dutch accent does not mar the simplicity of her gruesome tale, entitled "Pain, A Story About Rape and Murder." The audience, about 200 people, mostly feminists who've supported Ingeborg's work all summer, is hushed, visualizing the man with a knife attacking a woman. The plain, graying woman on the makeshift stage wears jeans and a man-tailored shirt; she does not look like the woman she is describing, who wears a dress and slip until the man tears them off. The rapist's appearance is not a part of the story. He's an anonymous, violent being who makes the woman feel humiliated, nauseous and afraid, but not overcome. She cooperates until she can grab the knife from him, and she stabs him over and over, until at last he is the dying

victim. She is neither horrified nor triumphant; she is just a cornered animal killing in self-defense. The audience can still see him dying on the floor as Ingeborg concludes her scenario.

There is total silence until a young white male, one of a miniscule minority at this gathering, apparently feels he must offer a comment. "I like it. I like the revenge," he says.

Ingeborg has been solemn while reading and her expression does not change now. "It was not revenge; it was necessity."

"I like the symbolism of the blade," he persists.

"It was not a symbol. It was a blade," she answers calmly, and he says nothing more.

Finally someone asks her the

obvious question. No, it was based on discussions about rape, not on personal experience, answers the writer. It is a relief to learn that this woman's stoical demeanor is not a brave front to mask an agonizing self-exploration process. She is, rather, a detached artist presenting an alternative concept to *Playgirl* fantasies of a woman ravished, to the Freudian myth that a woman envies her aggressor's weapon, and to the Puritan-inspired tenet that the victim invited "a crime of passion."

"Shall we all express our feelings?" asks a plump, lively young woman in

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*Anne Gaudin of The Waitresses, a performance group born in the Feminist Studio Workshop. Photos by Jan Alexander-Leitz.*

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the first row. Vocal cords all around stretch into a collective primal yell, an "aaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh" that is angry and aggressive.

What has happened here at the Woman's Building, during the exhibition of work created in the 1979 Summer Art Program, is that the students have bared their personal expressions to public scrutiny and found an outsider who doesn't understand women's ideas, which at this school emerge as a manifesto of women's culture. The Woman's Building, the only feminist institution in North America (and possibly the world) that is both an art school and a public building for women, adopted a founding women's art movement in the early seventies, nurtured it and gave it an adult sense of purpose. All of this happened behind walls that, for the most part, barred men. For this reason, people outside the building have labeled it a "separatist" environment, have suspected innumerable sexual possibilities, and have questioned the merit of a culture that encourages women, but not men, to re-examine traditional patriarchal

I wanted to know if such a place "works" when I first visited the building. Mother Art, the controversial group that attempted to elevate housewifely chores to artistry, had roots in the Woman's Building. So did The Waitresses, whose performances advocate fighting the oppression of service workers, and Ariadne, a social art network that has conducted a number of successful media demonstrations against violence against women. I had seen and appreciated these innovative artists, but wondered what happens after you create strong feminist statements. How do you communicate the message to the male establishment, which ultimately holds the power to make changes, if that establishment sees you as a fanatical group of separatists? How can a man become a feminist unless he knows and understands women who are feminists?

The Woman's Building is an oasis of art and life on 1727 North Spring Street, in an old warehouse district, beyond the railroad tracks. In the parking lot, corroding metal bodies, now the property of an auto wrecker, testify to the mortality of only slightly newer compacts bearing ERA and No

Nukes stickers.

Inside the glass doors of the big, red brick building, a receptionist smiles, the switchboard is all lights, and a colorful graphic mural on whitewashed walls says "The Woman's Building, a public center for women's culture, welcomes you." Women walk by, looking busy. They all look like members of the same society — white, over 20 and under 40, no makeup, unshaven legs and underarms, wearing the "starving artists" uniform of fraying jeans and casual shirts. I am startled when I see one with hair that is a luminous char- treuse on top and jet black at the sides, but no one else seems to pay any mind. Further down a narrow, white brick hall is the Graphics Center, full of letterpresses and other old fashioned printing paraphernalia. Posters decorate every corner, but the one that catches my eye is a small, block-lettered sign that says "HerShe Kisses Her." Women do kiss and hug one another in this large public space. It looks like honest platonic affection, but I feel vaguely uncomfortable. I knew before I came that there'd be homosexual and heterosexual women here. Personally, I feel securely heterosexual, and don't expect lesbianism to threaten me unless I receive an unsolicited proposition, which I'm sure won't happen because sexually aggressive behavior is a male characteristic in our society. But here, on this little sign, is a public statement about a private act, and I think perhaps it's more than I wanted to know.

Nancy Angelo, faculty member of the school, the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW) tells me she "facilitates the core process." I'm also told that classes are very "intensive." Sounds like buzz-words; I must find out what they really mean.

Angelo explains that the "core process" is "a two day a week meeting of faculty and students. It is a program that builds community, through discussions and consciousness raising. We look at feminist issues and how they relate to art and life, and at feminist issues that have no relation to art. We also look at personal experiences. We bring in women from the community to talk about issues, but we don't have men speaking because the man's point of view isn't hard to find elsewhere. We're trying to define women's culture and experience, and it's important that

the group be women only because in a mixed group men tend to talk more than women. The objective is to isolate your experience as a woman, then without inspection from a man, take it out into the world."

Mary McNally, public relations representative and photography instructor, says that women in the FSW try to find what they have in common.

"Black versus white, old versus young, conservative versus radical, homosexual versus heterosexual, find that they have a common femininity," she says. "There's been criticism that the building is anti-male, but all of our public functions and some of the classes are open to men. The important thing is for women to have an environment where they are safe. My feeling is that I'm well versed in the patriarchal form of education. This is a place for alternative education, where other things can happen.

McNally readily points out that FSW is an alternative to traditional education that does not cost less. A year's tuition is \$1500. The building needs the tuition to help pay rent and overhead, but even so it struggles every month. They will have to move in 1980 and are currently looking for a new site, preferably a big commercial building on a commercial street in the Hollywood/Los Feliz area, and are having problems finding something they can afford. The building lacks many facilities that might attract a more diverse group of women, such as a child care center. What looks like a token ratio of minority women attend FSW and most other building functions. Everyone seems to want more minority women to be involved with the Woman's Building, as well as more older women, more women with children, more teenage women, more women in need of a supportive environment. No one seems to know exactly how to attract such groups, but this year a few new developments might help.

The National Endowment for the Arts has provided grants of \$10,000 each school year to go to scholarships or special projects for minorities, ex-offenders, disabled, drug addicts and women over 50. This year the Graphics Center has received a special grant of \$60,000 from the Fund for



*Clockwise from left, Sheila de Bretteville, Nancy Angelo and Eloise Klein Healy.*

Improvement of Secondary Education (FIPSE), which will be used especially to attract women from diverse ethnic groups to produce artwork.

Maurine Renville, who is putting together an advisory board, says, "We need to broaden the basis of support for the building. We've sent letters to women in many different professions, asking them to serve on the advisory board. So far, Lily Tomlin and Gloria Allred have both accepted, and Kika Warfield, who is head of Women on Welfare, has indicated interest. We hope to have women on the board who can give us ideas on how to recruit minority and mid-life career change women for our Graphics Center project; we want to use the FIPSE grant to train such women in the area of graphics and tie their work into the Bicentennial celebration in some way. We're hoping to get some business and fund raising expertise, too. I'm also



sending letters to Mary Daly and some others outside Los Angeles, because we see our work as being national in scope."

And since a number of men have shown enthusiasm for the building, a men's committee is forming. Most of them, says McNally, will probably be friends and husbands of women who are involved with the building, and the men will serve mainly as fund

raisers and advisors.

Since the classes are so "intensive" the students will probably want to take votes to decide whether or not you can come and observe them, McNally tells me. This is a surprise to me, because the building seems like such an open, friendly environment. While I'm waiting for the outcome, I attend a couple of one-day workshops that are offered as part of the extension program.

Alice Bloch, a writer who studied journal theory and practice with Ira Progoff, tells the 14 women assembled for her journal workshop to use the day as a retreat. She is not demanding and doesn't inhibit her class by making us feel obligated to share our writing. She instructs the group on each entry, we write for about 30 minutes and then have a discussion period in which anyone who chooses can read her entry aloud.

Most of the women in this group fit the standard mold, but one wears designer jeans and three are black, one of the black women over 50. A late arrival is probably close to 50. This woman noisily munches an orange while everyone else is writing, then interrupts the discussion to ask questions that were answered before she came in. It's hard to feel a common femininity.

My writing just rehashes what I've done before. I've kept a journal most of my life and have figured out exactly why I made my past mistakes, and which events could be turned into sellable fiction. Now I'm in a period where writing about myself, journal style, seems boring and self-indulgent. When I'm tempted to read a half-hearted attempt aloud, I remember how my mother used to force me to confide in her, and how through bitter experience I've learned to be selective about who knows my secrets. But other women in the class are much more open.

We hear a number of morose stories about divorces, abandonment, abortions and, from one woman, a series of nervous breakdowns and a son's possibly suicidal death. There are positive stories too, about children and careers, and one woman says she's thrilled to write and read about her accomplishments, which include losing 90 pounds and traveling by herself. Very little about relationships with men comes up. A number of the women find the experience very illuminating. One finally remembers a period of her life that she had blocked out. I'm glad, and a little envious to see this happen, then I wonder where the process of creative self-discovery ends and self-indulgence begins, and if the difference is important to those who study art in the Feminist Studio Workshop.

But not all of the art that comes from the Woman's Building deals with the strictly personal. The most visible feminist artwork in Southern California today deals with women fighting all women's victimization. It comes from a constructive use of anger and a holistic approach to life and art. It can begin in an art class, a consciousness raising session or even in a self-defense class, such as the one I attended at the building.

"We are here to confront the issue

of rape, which is the brute force of sexism," announces instructor Betty Brooks that morning. "Confronting it is scary, exhilarating and fun!" Fun?

Brooks, a huge, husky gray-haired woman in a jogging suit, looks like she'd have no trouble defending herself. In her warm, booming voice she talks about how alien the attitude of self-defense is to women, and teaches us the "ovarian yell", as she has named that "aaaaahllhh" sound. We should learn to talk about our femaleness in a strong sense, she says, the way men feel free to talk about their balls.

"We're not brought up with the attitude of 'I don't care if I hurt you; I'm going to protect myself,'" she continues before demonstrating the physical techniques. "We have the right to get furious, to think 'How dare you attack me!' and this angry yell changes the dynamics. We are no longer feeling guilty about being attacked."

Meanwhile, Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy have organized the "social art network" Ariadne, one of the programs housed at the Women's Building, to produce and make public art about the issues of violence against women. The mythological Ariadne was King Minos' daughter who gave Theseus the thread by which he found his way out of the labyrinth, and one might say that this modern namesake produces symbolic threads with which victims can fight their way out of an oppressive environment.

"Art as we define it is very different from the way it's traditionally perceived. Art as we define it involves media strategy, community organizing, image making process, and we combine those three things to create the large scale event," says Labowitz. She has an ingrained sense of public relations, which is tested with almost every project, for most of them are events whose justification for existing depends on television and newspaper coverage. The coverage has been there every time, so far, and the news has reached as far as Europe, via wire service. Labowitz is not a separatist in her life or her art, but says the Woman's Building gives her support to carry out her projects, "while anyone else might think they're crazy." She wears a ring with three fiery diamonds. "My mother's wedding rings," she

says, but yes, she is married, and so is Suzanne Lacy and a number of other women who've been leaders at the building.

Labowitz and Lacy's most effective projects have been the ones that were agents for social change, rather than just commentary or protest. When Leslie and Women Against Violence Against Women held a spectacle on Sunset Boulevard, protesting the exploitation of women in the music industry's advertising images, women across the country boycotted Warner Bros, Elektra and Atlantic Records because of their executive's apathy to the demand for an end to advertising images of violence against women. In December 1977, Labowitz and Lacy produced a memorial performance for the Hillside Strangler victims, held on the steps of City Hall. City Council members Joy Picus, Pat Russell and Dave Cunningham, along with Deputy Mayor Grace Davis, attended the event and made supportive statements, and the telephone company responded by listing the Rape Crisis Line number at the front of city directories.

This fall, the thrust at the Woman's Building is going to be on incest. Labowitz, Angelo and a number of others are currently working on various projects, including a videotape, of this heretofore untouched subject. A gallery exhibition entitled "Bedtime Stories" will run from October 8 to November 15 at the building. There will be work by children and adults, along with an information section.

"It's a very scary thing to do," says Paula Lombard, who, with Leslie Belt, is curating the show. "The children will be anonymous and the adult artists can be if they choose to, but it's still scary, to let the public know your family secrets. I've worked for three years within the safety of the Women's Building, and now in a sense I'm going public too, because I was a victim of incest.

"We're trying to take great care to not have people walking away sickened. We want people to be energized and interested in the problem. It happens in all communities, crosses all cultures and classes."

Graphic artist Sheila de Bretteville, art historian Arlene Raven and visual artist Judy Chicago founded the

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