

Womanart

Summer 1976

\$1.00

GERTRUDE STEIN
and the Making of Modern Art

X¹² : Feminist artists
first show together

Erasing Sexism
from MOMA

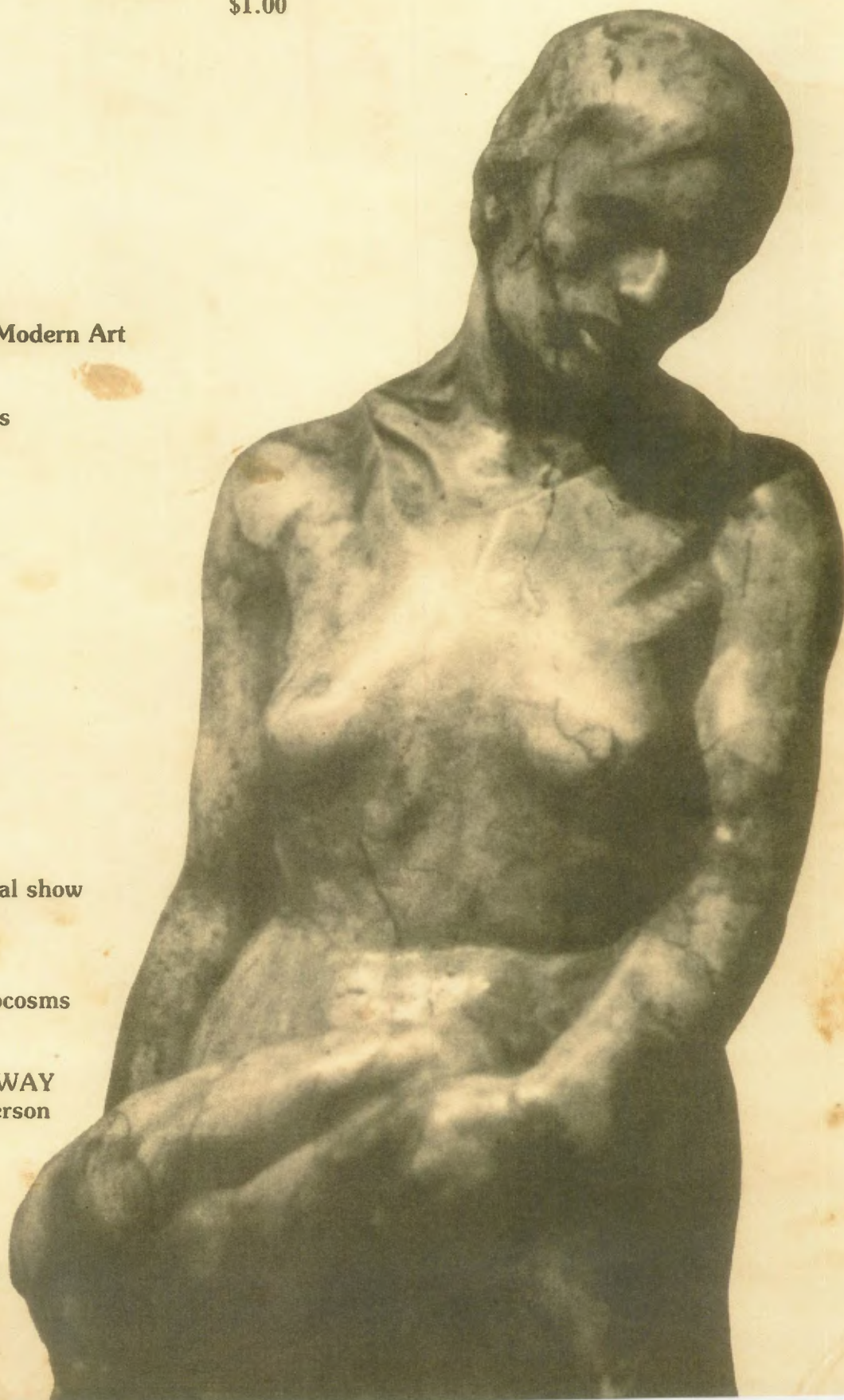
SOHO 20
women's co-op

Early American
Memorial Painting

Artists protest
Whitney Bicentennial show

PAT ADAMS'
contemplative microcosms

LAWRENCE ALLOWAY
Notes in the first person



One of the first off-shoots of the contemporary women's art movement was an exhibit by 12 women artists at Museum, A Project for Living Artists, in February, 1970:

X¹²



by Vernita Nemeč

It's so hard to remember that time, so painful. Cindy Nemser called X¹² the first openly feminist exhibition. Well, she came to a few of the meetings to hear us rap, cry, confess, argue, share, bitch, question, so maybe from her point of view it's true. When artist Carolyn Mazzello and I first conceived the idea for having an all women's show, we were not consciously making a political, feminist gesture. We wanted to show our work, and the idea of having a show of only women artists was to make the point that making art is not a sex-linked characteristic, but a matter of individual ability.

The climate of the late sixties was one of much political fervor and protest. We were horrified at the atrocities of the Viet Nam war. It was a time of consciousness raising, and the beginning of the feminist movement. We were angry enough to speak up and to stand up against authorities to whom we had previously acquiesced. Artists were meeting, pro-

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testing, and structuring their own alternatives to the existing museum/gallery structure. Protest groups such as Art Workers Coalition, Women Artists in Revolution, and the Ad Hoc Women's Committee formed to take action against political injustices in both the art world and society at large. Alternative structures such as Museum, A Project for Living Artists, were created to provide meeting and exhibition space, as well as to publish writings in periodicals like *Magazine*.

We used to go to AWC meetings and share our own frustrations and fears with other artists, until we came to the realization that it was doing us no good to commiserate with other women artists about how we had been ignored, overlooked, put down, reassured and patronized if we were not willing to take some action. Our decision to organize an all women's group show, a phenomenon that we had not witnessed in our professional art lives, came very much out of the same spirit that created AWC, WAR, Ad Hoc, and Museum.

Today in researching information about the history of the women's art

movement, I discover that in the U.S., the last all women's exhibition up to that time was in 1965, entitled *Women Artists of America 1707-1964*, at the Newark Museum, and before that, in 1962, *Mount Holyoke Celebrating the Coming of Age of Women as Creative Artists*, and the *Women's International*. I wish I had seen those shows, but I was in Ohio then, trying to get my painting teacher to really look into my work, not knowing how to defend myself when he accused me of being too serious about my art. Little did I or my art history professors know that women had been having exhibitions excluding men since 1893: women's only means of compensating for their exclusions. Maybe if our art history (or history, in general) had included more about women artists, we would have been more conscious of our political and feminist motivations, but that had not been part of our education. No, Carolyn and I were really concerned at the time with showing our work and thought that the idea of women banding together, rather than hiding behind an initial and trying to be one of the boys, made a strong theme for

a group show. We wanted to tip the scales in our favor and hence excluded men for that reason. In fact, when we were deciding how to select artists, we made sex the only criterion for inclusion. It seemed to us that those women artists who were willing to take the chance of showing with other female artists, as well as letting the public know that they were women, were very serious and determined, or just plain naive.

The night that I announced the show and said that we would take the first 10 women who committed themselves is foggy in my memory. I didn't expect such a strong response; we turned away those who hesitated, and the days following, our phones buzzed with calls from more women artists, such as Agnes Denes, who had thought it over and wanted to risk coming out with us.

The meetings were terrible and wonderful. They became consciousness raising sessions where we not only talked about our problems related to making and showing art, but our men problems, our children problems. For some of us, our lives began to revolve around those meetings.

Now, rereading the press release Silvianna, maybe the most political of us, wrote, I feel that it says very well what we felt, what I felt then about being both a woman and an artist.

We are 12 women artists who come together to show: our logo is X¹²

X is the unknown quantity in an equation yet to be resolved.

X is exploration.

X is crossed out, disposed of, as we have been for so many centuries.

X marks the spot. This is where it is at.

We are on the threshold of the unknown quantity in us, of the equation yet to be discovered like Einstein's $E=mc^2$ that split the atom and changed everything.

We do not deny our true femininity whatever it may be. We accept it, we will rejoice in it. We affirm all the vital values, Health, Beauty, Creativity, Courage, Sensitivity, Strength, Feeling, Energy. Between the fully liberated man and woman there will be no difference but biology.

The old game is dead. We begin again.

We are here. This is what we do. We paint. We sculpt. We present a new form, an art event in mixed media: bodies, materials, time, space. We come together as artists to exhibit. We have paid our dues in today's art world first as artists, doubly as women.

X is the unknown quantity in an equation yet to be resolved.

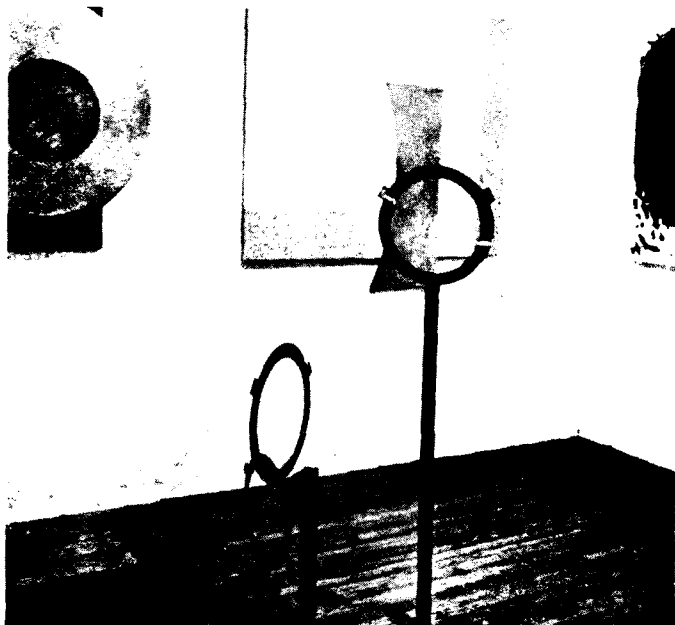
I think I still feel that way.

Lil Picard, in the *East Village Other*, called the opening of the show "the first coming out party of WAR." Cindy Nemser, writing in *Arts Magazine*, called the show a "potpourri of excitement. The diversity of technique, style, and subject matter decided for this reviewer that the case for masculine as opposed to feminine art is closed." Lawrence Alloway, in a review in *Nation*, said, "intensity of assertion is art's function for most of these artists...compared to the technology of the establishment, convulsively hand-crafted objects acquire an expressive function. A naive sense of the sacred, of the conviction of mission insists that this work is more passionate and more

effective than well-made sophisticated art." In the *New York Post*, Emily Genauer asked, "who'd criticize artists for facing a hostile milieu together? Who wouldn't be pleased when an exhibition presents, as in the present instance, some very promising talents?"

We received a great deal of press and media coverage, and the press release (in many ways more than the art) created a great deal of controversy for its boldness and assertiveness. Bob Levin in *Changes* wrote, "The artists' gender unannounced, audiences would have come anticipating a collection of work by men. The work... has few peculiarly 'feminine' characteristics and has, I think, considerable weight by any criteria...To discover after viewing the show that it was authored by women would, I thought, create the desired turn of consciousness far more effectively." He went on to say, with greater understanding than anyone who wrote about the show in terms of us as artists and in terms of our purpose, that "but if the style of the press release was ostensibly intended to alert the public to an emergent feminine force in the art world...the...declaration had a more immediate purpose...writing it was an act of self-assertion, of achieving leverage, in preparation for their entrance into a reality of being artists and fully acknowledging themselves as artists. A self-conscious feminism, moreover, was the psychic dynamism which could give them the trust to transcend the limitations of possibility which social conditions had pre-imposed upon their aesthetic ambitions."

Nanette Ranone of WBAI's "Woman-kind" program did an interview with four of the 12 entitled "Redefining the Roles". It was an appropriate title for the times. Previously, we had listened to our fathers, our husbands, potential dealers, male art



Installation view. Sculpture and paintings by Mary Ann Gillies. Photo courtesy of the artist.



Mirrored relief sculpture installed in bathroom, by Alida Walsh. Photo courtesy Mary Ann Gillies.

teachers, critics, and other male artists. Now we were unconsciously setting the precedent of doing something for ourselves.

We were positive and supportive of each other until the hanging of the show. The pressure of exposure was incredible. The very needs, pressures, and emotions that had brought us together almost blew us apart when we were faced with the need for compromise in order to hang a cohesive show. There were five sculptors, five painters, and two performance artists. For some of us, who had not shown professionally in New York before, the decision to go public affected our work a great deal.

Today, I find it very difficult to talk about the art itself, to even remember it clearly. I think that the art was not as important as our need to show, the fact of showing with other women and publicly identifying ourselves as artists who are women.

The 12 women in the show were Lois di Cosola, Iris Crump, Mary Ann Gillies, Helene Gross, Doloris Holmes, Inverna Lockpez, Arline Lederman, Carolyn Mazzello, myself, Doris O'Kane, Silvianna, and Alida Walsh. Rather than give my description of the work, I'd like to quote further from the critics who saw the show. Emily Genauer called Alida Walsh, Silvianna, Inverna Lockpez, and Iris Crump "promising talents". Cindy Nem-

ser, more specifically, described and categorized the art. She said of Lois di Cosola's paintings, "fields of color studded with stunning insets of brilliantly pigmented plexiglass." She also spoke of "Carolyn Mazzello's poetic, ever-shifting conglomerations of homosote and chipboard", and "Helene Gross' delicately textured fiberglass rods". She goes on: "Iris Crump presents a broad gentle view of human beings engaged in communal activities. She incorporates lights and mirrors into her contemporary settings. D. Holmes has conceived of a medieval environment, complete with dance and song, that is designed to remind the viewer of the human qualities that have been sifted out of today's surroundings." "Inverna Lockpez delineates primitive gods and feverish lovers by means of Munchlike rhythmic lines, while Alida Walsh, with the aid of mirrors, music cabinets, polyester, and resin produces demonic delights." Lil Picard described my work as "doll puppets hanging from the ceiling in grotesque pillow shapes covered with fine line drawings and backed by metallic shimmering icons attached to the wall."

At the time of the show, many of the critics' reactions sounded angry to us and in turn, they regarded us as angry. Today, the reviews and all the writing and quotes about the show, the art, the artists, the act, sound much calmer to me, and more

neutral. Being a female artist is easier and more acceptable today. What was a stigma in 1969 is a distinction today. We have come a long way with two women's cooperatives that are highly selective in their memberships, at least two women artists' groups with open membership, and a slide registry for women artists. There are so many women's group shows that it is becoming difficult to find *enough* good women artists.

We had chosen the first 10 women who were willing to extend themselves, to take the chance of doing it themselves, of showing their work without the aid of outside judgments. We had not looked at slides, there was no curator to tell us if the art was good. We had only the trust and belief that an artist, whether male or female, must judge him/herself and know when his/her art is ready to be public. That was our challenge. We had to trust each other: letting the group down was letting ourselves down. The togetherness and closeness we felt during our meetings, the anger and hostility during the hanging of the show, seen in the crying, screaming and threats of quitting, and finally the surprise of the fine appearance of the show, I think was a measure of the fear we felt and the unconscious realization of the precedent we were setting.

What has happened to the X¹² artists? Silvianna has moved from her early destruction happenings to filmmaking.



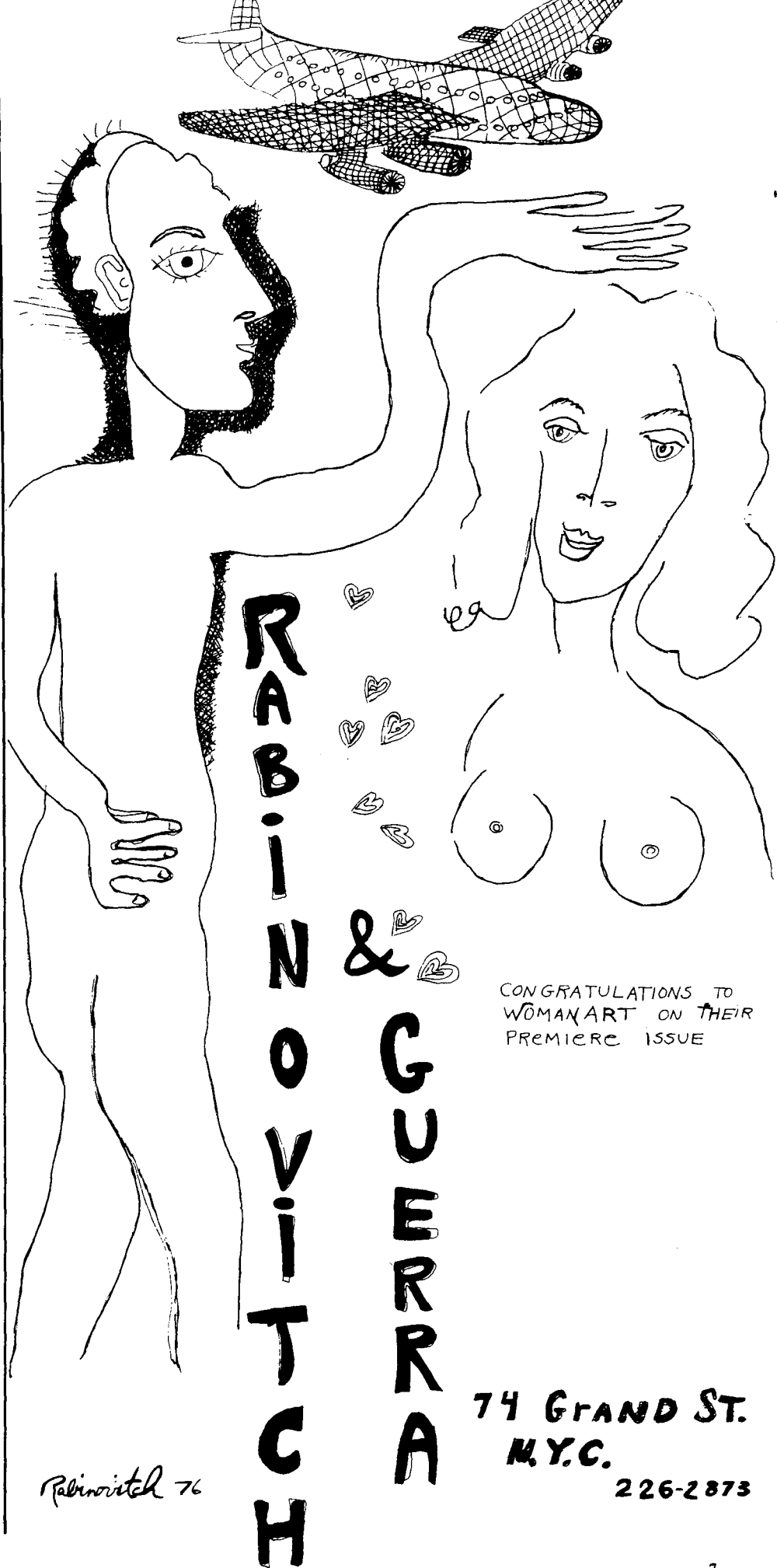
X¹² artists. Left to right: Carolyn Mazzello, Arline Lederman, Lois di Cosola, Silvianna Goldsmith, Vernita Nemece, Inverna Lockpez, Iris Crump, Alida Walsh, Helene Gross, Doloris Holmes, Mary Ann Gillies. Missing: Doris O'Kane. Photo courtesy of the author.

Her films have been shown internationally at the Graz Museum in Austria, the Museum of Modern Art in Paris, and the Cultural Center in New York. Alida Walsh has moved from sculpture into filmmaking and has shown her films internationally. She received a CAPS grant in 1974. Doloris Holmes has moved from creating environments into an interest in art as process. She has performed and presented her plays and films at the SoHo 20 and Second Story Spring Street Society galleries. In addition, she is the director of the White Mask Theater, a rehearsal and performance space for artists, dancers, playwrights. Inverna Lockpez recently had a show at Artists Space gallery. Her work has evolved into delicate pencil drawings made directly on the wall.

I found myself hesitating to contact the other 11 members of the 12. Since the show ended we've all gone in many directions and though we occasionally cross paths, the intensity of that experience I think still weighs heavily among us. I find it painful sometimes to meet someone again from my past. A certain awkwardness has emerged with the distance that has grown between us with the time passed, with the divergences of our lives since then, with our successes and failures. We were brought together by accident and shared an experience that took its toll or left its mark on us in different ways. Some remember it as a turning point, a beginning, and others as an ending. Some of us, I think, want to forget the experience, in part because it reminds us of a profound struggle, and others want to hold onto the dream that was engendered.

Personally, I feel that for the time being the need for open group shows limited to only female artists has diminished considerably in New York. Opportunities exist on all levels for women's art to be seen and there are enough of us who have had exposure, who have demanded that their work be taken seriously, that we can now risk being very selective and competitive. The important thing is to maintain the ground we have gained. We must be persistently conscious of the proportion of existing professional female artists to those who have opportunities for recognition and be sure that it matches the opportunities that male artists enjoy.

The so-called alternative structures we have created, such as co-op galleries, are no longer alternative structures. We have, by standing up for ourselves, created our place in the art world and must hold onto it until it feels so natural and is so secure that we can let go of that struggle and concentrate on doing our art. We have participated in a necessary stage which has allowed women to come into prominence in a basically male world. Let us now move on to merging art history and art herstory into an art past.



CONGRATULATIONS TO
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