

letters

Feminism

To the editor:

The conversation which Shelley Rice describes in the opening paragraphs of her article, "Feminism and Photography: trouble in paradise," (*Afterimage*, March 1979) reveals more about magazine editors than about the politics of feminist art. Unfortunately, she presents this experience as an example of a widespread feminist malaise, and proceeds to list a series of complaints about feminist artists and the state of feminist art. This attempt to define and discuss problems related to feminists and photography might have been more fruitful if the author had offered some evidence (more convincing than the introductory story) to support her arguments. But, I found the essay disappointing for several more fundamental reasons than this.

First, and most important, Rice does not differentiate between feminist art/artists and female art/artists. These terms are not necessarily interchangeable. I agree with Rice's statement, "Women's art encompasses anything that women choose to create..." but **feminist art** is something quite different. While no orthodox definition of feminism exists (nor does a "feminist party line"), any definition would probably include a critique of patriarchy as the dominant form of social/cultural organization—a form which is oppressive to **all** women. Feminist art, it follows, is concerned with the elimination of patriarchy and/or an exploration of values, traditions, imagery, etc. which is not male-centered.

When a discussion of feminist art/artists occurs without a political context, the focus can easily shift to the role of women as oppressors, tyrannizing each other and ourselves. And this is precisely where Rice concentrates her attention. She scolds feminist/women artists for numerous shortcomings: narrowness, over-indulgence towards women artists, developing a female ghetto mentality, timidity, irresponsibility, passivity, etc., but glosses over the male domination of art and art-related fields. When she writes, "The real world is out there—and it must be conquered..." I understand her meaning as **male** world, since the "real" world has for centuries and still is controlled by men. Is that what women **must** do? Must we accept male values and male culture and imitate masculinist art? Certainly not. But under present conditions women can never "conquer" unless

we become masculinized—a goal which is contrary to any feminist vision. Denying any oppression of women by women would be foolish, but emphasizing women as our own worst enemies denies an understanding of the circumstances which determine the course of many women's lives and creative careers (token women excluded). Is the question: why are there no great women artists? answered: because we haven't tried hard enough?

While directing women artists to "occupy pivotal positions of power," "achieve personal power," and to become "aggressive," she ignores the intimate relationship between patriarchy and power. Again, she seems to assume that feminists merely want what men have and that our task is to seize control (our share, anyway). This prescription disregards the sexual politics of power (male/female dichotomy providing an ideological archetype for other power relationships, e.g., superior/inferior, intellectual/emotional, active/passive, etc.) and the power of sexual politics. A feminist challenge to the art world demands qualitative change rather than more female curators or gallery owners.

Rice concludes: "...there's no such thing as token victory—either we make it together, or we don't make it at all." I found this plea for solidarity mystifying since her essay is primarily a catalogue of women's weaknesses and failures. And, since she proposes no strategies for collective feminist action, solidarity among women seems doubly meaningless. Instead, she consistently advocates the individual pursuit of "power" and prestige in the same old patriarchal, capitalist system. Fortunately, what Rice sees, hears, and interprets as feminist is not necessarily so.

—Martha Gever
Rochester, N.Y.

To the editor:

Two cheers for Shelley Rice's pep talk (*Afterimage*, March)! However, perhaps the same troubles debilitating the women's movement (a rather strange euphemism) seems to be sitting in the backyard of photographer artists.

I think it is time to cease with the referential feminist (or photographic) classifications and get on with art making, in all media, by all artists.

Personally, I resent being classified a "woman artist"; worse yet "a photographer"; even worse: "a woman photographer." The same problems afflicting

women (as a group classification) affect photographers; everyone involved is trying to declare her/himself more equal than others. Now, I realize it was not Rice's intent to elevate herself above her male (or non-feminist) colleagues, but I can't fail to suspect that articles of this sort help perpetuate those very limiting categorizations which she so vehemently rejects, and rightfully so.

The classifications: women's art; women photographers; photo galleries; photo art exhibitions, all insure certain restraints and limitations on the artist as well as the public; offering the latter much confusion and embroilment in semantics and codification. I think it is time to dispel these classifications and get on with seeking out and exploiting great art, whoever makes it.

I empathize with Rice's energetic and emotional pleas, as well as her feelings of rejection and prejudice. Undoubtedly I will all too soon face these problems as I embark on trying to enter the too-male-dominated teaching profession. But I must admit prejudice has yet to repress my artmaking. In response to her suggestion that we "overthrow the barriers inhibiting women's creativity and self-expression," as an artist who happens to be a woman, I don't find myself laden with these dark and dreary inhibitions. Regarding ossification and old age: perhaps Rice has confused disfunction with metamorphosis. In my opinion, the majority of noisemakers who are rattling the bars of these often self-imposed cages of isolationism are more often than not bemoaning the fact that feminism for art has arrived, and departed. Departed, not because it is no longer trendy, not because of failure, but because it has served its function—because it has been successful.

What has happened is that the much-needed and lauded accomplishments of the brave feminists of the '60s and '70s have served all of us well. In art, the "mission has been completed" and those bound and determined to get blood out of a turnip are frustrated at the thought of "letting go."

As for new problems facing women, as I stated early on, women in the working world have an even steeper uphill battle. But as far as I can tell, the new problems facing women in the '70s and '80s are the same ones facing men: unemployment, inflation, hustle, the art mart. No, the discrimination to which Rice alludes is not in making art. The discrimination

should be levied between good and bad art...not male/female art. And as for women who fear showing their work out of fear repression or because they lack aggression, perhaps the confidence lacks in the artwork itself.

Finally, as for deficit motivation and "crossing thresholds together"—no thanks. I want to cross those thresholds by myself.

As I began, two cheers for Rice. The third one is reserved for me. In the end, not "we," but I, either "make it or don't."

—Felice Fike
Tempe, Ariz.

Photo books—again

To the editor:

I was flattered by Ansel Adams responding to my article ("How it is that the familiar is repeated in photography books," January) and appreciated his amplifying some of its concerns and also his correcting the factual error in Paragraph 41. That he responded is a testament to his continual support of photography and to the importance of *Afterimage*. The forum you provide for critical thought and dialogue between serious photographers of all schools is commendable and wonderful. Thanks.

—Robert Leverant
Berkeley, Calif.

CORRECTIONS

In the article "ASU Conference focuses on criticism," by Felice Fike (*Afterimage*, February 1979), Karen Truax was inadvertently referred to as Karen Truaz. In addition, the hand-colored nineteenth-century skin disease pictures attributed to Truax were **actually made by Dr. S.I. Rainforth** (c. 1910) and were loaned to Tom Barrow by Truax. In the article "Amarillo symposium reunited FSA photographers," by Dana Asbury (*Afterimage*, March 1979) two typos changed the sense of the statements being made: in the sentence, "Perhaps we are still too close, both temporarily and emotionally, to the FSA era to codify our assessment of this body of work..." temporarily should have read temporally; in quoting Carl Mydan as saying, "These were terrible times and a large part of America wanted to close its eyes...these pictures presented that more than anything," presented should have read prevented.



Roger Fenton, *Harewood House from the Park*, 1860. See inside: "Roger Fenton—Victorian superstar," by David Reed, pp. 12-13.

2 LETTERS

3 Leacock on Super 8, video discs, and distribution by Marita Sturken

4 "He./She.": Robert Heinecken's SX-70 conversations by Carl Toth

6 Summer: places to go, things to do

8 Tarnished meditations: some thoughts on Jerry Uelsmann's photographs by James Hugunin

12 Roger Fenton—Victorian superstar by David Reed

14 CORRESPONDENTS: Pittsburgh: symposium on overlooked photography by Frank Joseph

16 REVIEWS:

Reading
(reviewed by Hal Fischer)

Ernest
(reviewed by Martha Chahroudi)

Received and noted

20 NEWS NOTES

21 SOURCES

22 NOTICES

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Managing Editor: Charles Hagen

Assistant Managing Editors: Martha Chahroudi, David Trend

Reviews coordinator: Alec Dann

News: Marita Sturken

Editorial: Margaret Belisle, Ed Claycomb, Bob Gilson, Joan Lanier, Lee Silverman

Design/Production: Lee Carmical, Fiona Hall, Dorothy Handelman, Ed Minick

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