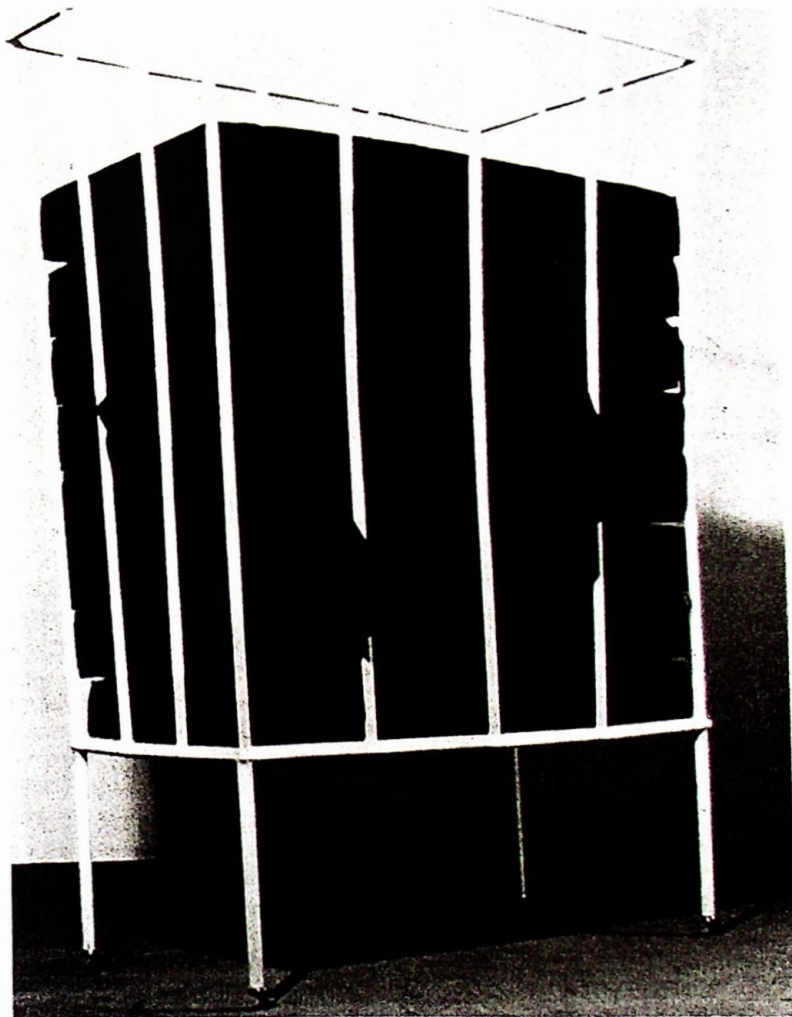


Is Women's Art Homeless?

Nancy Proctor asks



Permindar Kaur *Untitled* 1994 cloth and steel photo courtesy of the Ikon gallery

For this article, I was asked to address the impact of a feminist history on practitioners and theorists—how has it helped, how has it hindered feminists' work?

Let me lay the cards on the table: for me, trying even to conceive of contemporary women's art practices without some sort of feminist history is like theorizing the unconscious without mentioning Freud. For better, or I'll concede, sometimes for worse, the multifarious feminist histories are the very preconditions and ground on which the conjunction of femininity and creativity is figured today. So there you have both of my prejudices in a nutshell.

But while my allegiances to these theoretical bodies are blatant and powerful, I don't have to rack my brains to think of how historical 'feminist' discourses can hinder, even while motivating, women's art practice. I put 'feminist' discourses in inverted commas because what we're really talking about here is a deployment of feminisms (and even psychoanalytic feminisms) to produce yet another master discourse.

There is certainly no shortage of examples of this sort of phallic feminism around. Just this month we were treated to Toril Moi at the Kristeva Conference in Leeds dismissing with a facile quip the entire

theoretical work of both Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous as simply and exclusively essentialist. It made the audience laugh, but was it really a useful gesture considering the thousands of feminists who are using these theorists' work in a non-essentialist, non-reductive manner? Forced into an unnecessarily defensive posture by the prevalence of this feminist policing, Hilary Robinson, writing on Dorothy Cross in 1994, felt compelled to spend the first half of her article clearing the artist (and hence herself) of charges of essentialism, before she could even begin to talk about the art. Dorothy Cross's work is so much more complex than essentialism that it's a real shame there wasn't more time to address what is new and interesting in her work. Funny, that: why is it that male artists are never called upon to defend their phallic works from charges of essentialism?

Ironically Robinson's article appeared in no other 'women-only' space than the journal of the Museum of Women's Art. Even within their own pages, feminist women's magazines still feel the need to justify being exclusively women's domains. I fear that in shedding the 'essentialist' title of *Women's Art Magazine*, make is similarly bowing to contemporary hostility toward anything overtly feminist. In keeping up with the

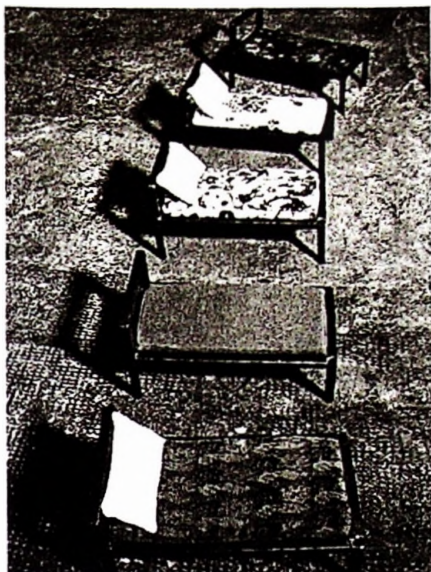
times, perhaps dear old *WAM* is only wasting valuable resources; *make-overs* are by no means cheap.

I suggest that at this historical moment, we need to interrogate not essentialism but phallicism in feminist discourses. If at times women have had to deploy a masterful discourse in order to demand visibility and rights within the phallic order, these strategies must always be recognised as contextually specific compromises with phallicism. If the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house, they certainly can Miss-order the Women's Room.

Rather than *make* do with sound-bite simplification, feminists need to slow down, not be so quick to dismiss one line or another as 'essentialist'. I recognise that such a method is at odds with *make-ing* a buck on the mag market, and may not always be tenable for financial survival; but still, some of those brave enough to try occasionally succeed—like Perminder Kaur, who was invited to exhibit in the British Art Show despite the lack of art market hype surrounding her otherwise very deserving work.

Perminder Kaur is a young British artist of Sikh origins who has now returned to Britain after working in Spain for several years. In a recent interview, she told Ros Dodd, "It's very difficult to make statements about particular things. Issues about race and colour are very complex now". In the gallery publicity for her current exhibition, *Cold Comfort*, which is shown in a 'nomadic' installation at both Birmingham's Ikon Gallery (18 May-22 June 1996) and the Mead Gallery in Coventry (25 May-29 June 1996). Perminder Kaur adds, "In my current work there is no longer direct polarisation between two distinct cultures. The work still contains questions concerning identity but on a more subtle level". With the unsticking of national, cultural and linguistic identities in this increasingly nomadic world, we need a different way of thinking about differences—one which refuses to simplify and erase difference through, as Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger describes it, the phallic ploys of fusion and rejection.

This is not to say, however, that phallically-structured questions such as, "Where is home?", asked by Perminder Kaur in relation to her recent work, are irrelevant. Maybe we just no longer believe that they are answerable in the same old definitive, phallic ways. The known and the



Perminder Kaur: *Untitled* 1994 cloth and steel
photo courtesy of the Ikon gallery

knowable take on a disturbing and unfamiliar aspect in Perminder Kaur's work. In *Tall Beds* of 1996, children's beds are raised high overhead, beyond the safe reach of any child, on cold and spindly steel legs. In *Cot*, 1993, a cot whose sides reach high over even an adult's head is piled with red cushions, red children's clothes oozing ominously out from between the layers. They are objects and environments familiar and yet rendered foreign by their improbable scale and their location in the art gallery. We are forced to ask not only, "Where is home?", in this work, but also, "Can that question be answered in the way we expect?"

The recent rise in feminist theorisation of lost homes and the exiled subject signals a search for ethical positions in feminist practice, beyond the dictates of moral laws. There is an understanding in these theorists' work, and of artists such as Perminder Kaur, that 'home' is not utopia, that is, not 'no place', but rather an-other place, somewhere just over the next hill, in the next land, in that other language. Any belief that we have found it—THE home, THE feminism, THE woman—is an illusion. Desire and its ethical pursuit, is always somewhere Other, someplace foreign—or, as Kristeva would put it, "the stranger within".

Is this then, the ethic behind *Women's Art Magazine's* new name, *make*? Had we become too complacent, the old home too familiar, still to have any (self-)critical teeth? In opening up the magazine's view to include male artists and writers, are we pursuing the desire of a feminism rather than merely female art practice? Or are we acting out of a fear of transgressing the anti-essentialist law by continuing to insist on the exclusivity of *Women* in the *Art*. Are we simply on the *make*, after a sexy new image that attracts more of the cultural goods?

Like Perminder Kaur, I want to resist nostalgic yearnings after the 'lost' home that was *Women's Art Magazine*, and yet I

remain deeply suspicious of claims that we no longer need to assert female as well as feminine specificity. What distinguished *Women's Art Magazine* from other contemporary arts journals was its unabashed insistence on providing a space uncontestedly for women artists and their work. I now wonder what is the difference between *make* and *Frieze*, for example. Says one friend, a woman artist, pointedly, "I don't subscribe to *Frieze*".

But apparently galleries and art-book vendors were loath to stock a magazine with the unfashionable name of *Women's Art*. It is cool to use concepts conceived and developed by feminist theorists, but not to credit feminism for them. Plundering of feminist work is endemic; witness the *femininmasculine* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou earlier this year, at which speakers were invited to discuss "le sexe de l'art", but specifically forbidden to use the 'f'-(e)minism word.

So when the editor says the magazine needs to attract more debate to its pages than was allegedly possible for an exclusively female publication, I agree in principle; but I also hope that widening the forum to include male artists and critics will not prove to be yet another example of women not getting any special notice for their work—"that's what the bloody feminists do anyway"—while men get trophies for doing the washing-up. When the Chapman brothers, for example, write for *make* on their 'genderless' art (their term), I hope there will be space in the new domestic arrangements to acknowledge that we would not even be discussing gender in art had it not been for decades of feminist work on gender, creativity, and representation in magazines like *Women's Art*. *make* demands an object—"make art", for example—or a preposition—*make-up*—to give it an objective. I hope both the objects and the objectives of *make* will be feminist ones. Now, let's *make* the best of it.

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- Independent thoughts
- Glenn Ligon
- The garden of hate
- Y. David Chung (Turtle boat head)
- Suzanne McClelland: painting
- The art of Archibald J. Motley, Jr. 1992
- Standing in the water (Lorna Simpson)
- "Like something not very concrete" (Folake Shogun) 1994.
- Installations 1994
- Ready or Not, Here I come (Janine Antoni)
- Other visions (Composite) 1994