Summer 1979

Sessions on Oral History

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Bishop each received a citation and a work of art by a younger woman artist who has been influenced by or especially admires the older artist’s work.

The task of reclamation continues. The account of Josephine Withers (Art History, University of Maryland) of the process of exhuming 119 paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, and works of fabric art from public collections in Washington, D.C., for a special exhibition this past January amply demonstrated the masculine biases which do not make such research easy. That so-called national collections do not contain the work of women who lived west of the Mississippi should shock us into action. The kind of painstaking research and compilation of checklists that Withers has done must go on in every part of the country.

As a final note, I should like to tell my long-time women’s studies friend and teacher who asked the original question about why we were having a Convention that the works of over forty midwestern women artists and craftspeople were on display at Lawrence, in addition to an exhibition of Frances Benjamin Johnston’s 1890-1910 portraits of women. Conventions accomplish many objectives. The NWSA may have been the umbrella under which we gathered. Increased support both of the women who gave us so much and of the Association itself is vital to keep that umbrella open.

Nancy Porter teaches English and women’s studies at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

### The Regional Women’s Art Exhibit at Kansas

**By Estella Lauter**

The Regional Invitational Women’s Art Exhibit at the University of Kansas was a solid demonstration of talent and artistic proficiency. Chosen by a committee of women artists at the university, the show emphasized variety in medium, style, and subject in the work of nearly 50 artists. Although there were a few explicit (and very good) explorations of female subjects, e.g., M. K. Baumgartel’s sculpture “She — Apsaras II,” Vicki L. Bourek’s vaginal stoneware wallhangings, and Marilyn Murphy’s “Tornado Pattern” in which a piece of a sewing pattern suggests a seamstress’s perspective on tornadoes, most of the works were not concerned directly with female experience. The selection reflected the still-current preoccupation with technique in the art world.

Even so, the most memorable pieces had “something to say” to Convention participants. Joan Livingstone’s “Group of Four Objects” (fiber, wood, steel, rope) suggested the darkness of both ascent and descent in its strong vertical thrust, its blacks and browns, and its imagery of ladders. Mary Ann Bransby’s “Dancer’s Mask” (metal sculpture) conveyed a power both ferocious and joyful. Lou Vaccaro made an untitled ceramic vase into an implicit tribute to the Great Goddess by adorning it with a snake fashioned out of clay, locks of hair, bits of leather, and bones. Among the most exciting pieces were those by the silversmiths, who revealed the essence of adornment and of ritual in their abstract pieces. Virginia Gredell’s necklaces and cuffs in silver, with large, unpolished stones too heavy to wear, were among the most intriguing in design.

In spite of the deliberate emphasis on variety, there was a strong mythic undercurrent in the exhibit, particularly in the works I have mentioned, but also in the silver pieces with mythological titles, by Glencie Lesley Matthews; the landscape painting from a series called “Landlace” by Colette S. Bangert; “When Witches Dance” and “Moon Route” by Susan Bercu; and “Sharing of the Heart,” a tiny, intricate print in the tradition of the heroic quest, by Patricia Scohey.

The exhibit would have been a more effective act of sharing had we been given more information about the artists. In exhibits at future conventions, I hope the sponsors will request a brief statement from each artist about the source and direction of her art, in addition to labels that give the title, date, and medium of each piece. Nevertheless, I am grateful to the women at the University of Kansas for the opportunity to see this broad range of work by women in their region.

**Estella Lauter heads an oral history project on women and the arts at the University of Wisconsin/Green Bay.**

### Sessions on Oral History

**By Betty Burnett**

Since feminist historians largely concur that traditional documentation ignores, obscures, and distorts women’s lives, non-traditional material logically ought to be a prime resource for women’s studies scholars. Nevertheless, the collection, evaluation, and use of oral history pose a number of problems.

At several sessions, participants described the accumulation of material from almost every part of the country that needs to be organized, analyzed, and indexed. So far, oral history projects have been primarily regional and therefore not granted the prestige that national projects have received. Most of the women interviewed are “ordinary” — not well educated, not politically active, not considered economically significant or artistically avant garde. An exception is the Wisconsin Women in the Arts program, according to Estella Lauter of the University of Wisconsin/Green Bay. She points out that there has been some quarrel with the fact that the women interviewed are “self-defined” rather than society-defined artists, but all are practicing artists, articulate about their work, goals, aspirations, and struggles.

Oral historians want to find out not only how women have lived, but also what role models have been effective in their lives, what environmental factors have influenced them, and how they have perceived their lives. The effective factors in a woman’s life come through more clearly on a tape than through a transcript of an interview. And, as several oral historians emphasize, the process of interviewing is as important as the end product because students learn to
listen to and respect older women and often come away from a session with a sense of the continuity and importance of women's history.

Oral history draws in the community while reaching out to it. The "Hidden Faces" project at Colorado University, initiated by Sarah Jacobus, developed into a readers' theater that traveled throughout the state. Another traveling project reaches women in Idaho. Under the direction of Corky Bush and Isabel Miller, skits are presented to women's groups which act out part of women's history. (The skit presented at the Convention featured a reunion between two women who did war work during World War II, "because it was patriotic.")

Sue Armitage of Washington State University, through detailed interviews (mainly in Colorado), is assessing the importance of housework in the development of the West and raising questions about the economic and political impact of women's daily lives on the larger community. Virginia Stamper of the University of Wisconsin/Milwaukee has found that when women are interviewed by a sympathetic interviewer, they begin to remember and even enjoy parts of their own histories that have been submerged for years. For instance, one of her class members revealed that she had been an "Aunt Jemima," yet had never written down her experiences, thinking they weren't significant.

There is a sense of urgency about oral history. Many women interviewed are over 80, and interviewers are determined not to let their stories be lost. Oral history is self-consciously tentative about theory, because it is becoming a new form, a combination of both history and literature with sociological overtones. The lack of value judgments in the ideal interview allows women to open up the truth about their lives, but the lack of evaluation techniques limits the usefulness of the material. The emotional content of an interview makes it interesting, but does it also make it unreliable as accurate history? None of these problems will be solved easily or quickly. Meanwhile, tape collections grow.

Lesbian Research Projects

By Charlotte Criste

As a new member of NWSA, I was unprepared for but delighted by the number and quality of the lesbian-centered sessions. At Kansas, lesbian culture was not only superficially acknowledged, but validated and treated with respect as a significant aspect of women's studies.

The Friday morning panel, "Voices of the Lesbian Community: A Workshop on Researching, Archiving, and Teaching," presented a wealth of images. From the Cambridge Women's Center, we heard Chris Czernik report on a teacher's responsibility to include all aspects of women's culture in her courses: "If I am doing an introductory section on Afro-American women," Czernik noted, "I should include some information on Afro-American lesbians. If I'm doing a section on lesbian history/culture, it should not be focused on white, middle-class women."

The Buffalo Community Research Project, engaged in collecting an oral history of the lesbian community in Buffalo, New York, is documenting the lives of usually invisible, "common" lesbians, rather than the "special" lives of those rich, gifted, artistic women who have left their own written records.

The slide show presented by the Lesbian Herstory Archives (P.O. Box 1258, New York, NY 10001) was intensely moving. We learned that the Archives, which publishes a newsletter that regularly includes a bibliography, is devoted to the preservation of all aspects of lesbian culture: books, magazines, journals, newsletters, news clippings, bibliographies, photos, historical information, tapes, conference proceedings, films, diaries, original poetry, prose and research papers, records, biographies, autobiographies, notices of events, posters, graphics, crafts, buttons, T-shirts, and other memorabilia.

The Archives is a labor of love collectively run by women in the community — not in an "academic institution." Lesbians, as Joan Nestle has written ("Radical Archiving: A Lesbian Feminist Perspective," in Gay Insurgent, nos. 4-5, Spring 1979), "do not exist in historical understanding or academic institutions. . . . We live in our homes . . . and we create our herstory every day. It is this story the Archives wants to preserve and share. Once lesbians have generations of herstory to experience, they will change history by the force of their presence."

Charlotte Criste is a newly-appointed Lesbian Caucus representative to the Coordinating Council.

International Programming

By Peg Strobel

The NWSA took several important steps in international programming at its First Convention. Those participating in sessions included women from Argentina, Britain, Ghana, Holland, India, Mexico, the Philippines, Senegal, and Zanzibar. Three national leaders of the All China Women's Federation of the People's Republic of China spent a day touring the Convention. But more important than the mere presence of foreign visitors were the information and issues generated by an international perspective.

In the first place, the Convention provided a forum for exchange of information. International sessions covered such topics as the educational needs of immigrant women in capitalist systems; women writers of Africa, Asia, and Latin America; French and West German feminism; multinational corporations and Third World women workers; and teaching about Third World women.

"International Women's Studies: The Academy and the Activist" in many ways set the tone for the controversial issues raised throughout the Convention. Participants from Britain, Holland, and Argentina discussed the connections and tensions between work in educational and research institutions and work in community settings; the distrust of academics by feminist activists; the ethics of research; and the