

WHAT IS FEMALE IMAGERY ?

Should we judge women's artistic production by man-made criteria or by those inspired from its intrinsic qualities? Should a woman artist try to imitate men's work and vie with it, or is she called to express herself and create her own style? The following paragraphs are excerpts from a panel on the topic, conducted by 5 women artists and art critics.

It is supposed that Dorothy Richardson, the English novelist, invented the stream of consciousness style at the beginning of this century and consciously set out to create a female style and imagery, the quality of female existence in a certain time and place. She captured a middle class English woman's experience and sensibility. That is female imagery, not something Jungian, predetermined and absolute.

Female imagery is not specific image, iconography or subject that has to do exclusively with women. It has more to do with process or modalities of approaching experience. It has to be invented like iconography.

There is a scale of negative and positive physical charges in men and women. Somebody said that man is sixty percent positive physically, — projected out toward the world — and forty percent negative, mentally. Woman is just the reverse. So together they form a bond. Then there are many combinations of masculine and feminine. In order to be an artist at all, you have to have, physically, a certain kind of momentum. It would be very difficult on this level for the superfeminine inward woman to do art work because she would need that physically charged energy.

Women's art is characterized by female sensibility which is hard to define. Why did women make their art? The quality of people's lives has a lot to do with the art they make; hence the lives of artists should be explored for this purpose. If women artists act out male artists' life styles, that is an enormous danger to their sensibility.

Female imagery first used to mean sexual imagery, another term for female sensibility. The second term is preferable because it is vaguer. There is a lot of sexual imagery in women's art: circles, domes, eggs, spheres, boxes, biomorphic shapes, a certain striation or layering, a certain antilogical, anti-linear approach.

Creativity does not necessarily mean art-making. It may come through political action. Feminism should not be an interpretation of this world but a transformation of it. Female consciousness is more important than female sensibility, but it is still in the process of being structured, in the process of becoming. Therefore it is possible to talk only tentatively on a particular stage of

it, female imagery for instance. According to Susana Torre, an architect, women are less removed from spatial experience than men and more able to find closer correlation between spaces and biological and cultural rituals.

Linda Nochlin, art historian, says that her studies often make her see women's styles as being partly conditioned by opposition, as having meaning in the context of being opposed to existing styles. Painter Florine Stettheimer, for instance, declined both the academic and the avant-garde modes produced at the turn of the century, and went on to invent something of her own, something "feminine". The same is true of Gertrude Stein who, though very different from Florine Stettheimer, shares with her the effort to invent in opposition to what is prevailing.

Joan Snyder, abstract painter, thinks that women tend to be more autobiographical in their work than men. "My work is an open diary" she says. "That is what I often miss in men's work — an autobiographical or narrative aspect. Men talk about art a lot, women talk more about life."

Snyder goes on to say that women's art shows a kind of softness, layering, a certain color sensibility, a more expressive work than any man can do, and a repetitiveness — use of grids, obsessive in a way. "When I look at women's art, I look for ideas and images that not only move me visually but tell me something about who the artist is, what she is, what she is trying to say."

"I feel that women are more interested in people, and care more about variety than men," remarks Lucy Lippard, an art critic. "We play so many roles in our lives, while most men play only one or two... Before the women's movement, women were denying their identity, trying to be neutral. When somebody said, "You paint like a man" or "You write like a man", you were supposed to be happy. Now we're bending over backward in the other direction, insisting that there are clichés that define women's art. Women now make "Women's art" instead of "men's art" or "neutral art." It may be easier to find out what women's art is, or what female imagery is, quick, this second, because the work of women who've been isolated and closeted, which has come out in the last three years, is personal; it still has the blush of innocence on it. I want to catch those ephemeral moments before we all move into a different and, I hope, more powerful and clearer level.

(Condensed from a panel conducted by 5 women artists and authors, published in "Women's Studies", Ewha Women's University, Seoul, Korea, Dec. 1977)