

Following the dots

Lucy R. Lippard

The notion of collaboration is significant in particular ways to women artists. To begin with, it neatly subverts the emphasis on isolated individual “genius” fostered by patriarchal capitalism and modernist alienation. Secondly, it provides mutual support systems in often hostile circumstances. Thirdly, it offers instant feedback, an intimate audience with whom it is possible to exchange rather than impose. Lastly, but perhaps most important, collaboration enriches individual insights in areas unexplored by men.

The need for such insights is clear when we hear that at the last São Paulo Biennial the theme was “life”, but only one woman was included in the Brazilian representation. (That’s “half life,” and it omits the “better half”). The development of arts and theory around women’s lived experience began some seventeen years ago with the new wave of feminist art, but seventeen years is not much time to combat the conditioning of millenia. Today, the crucial issues are how to hang onto the gains made in the first decade of the new feminism and how to continue, at the same time, to develop and deepen our knowledge of our own lives. Despite the strides taken, women artists are still embattled in a man’s world, as the Guerrilla Girls’ posters and “report cards” have so successfully pointed out.

These issues comprise the not-so-hidden agenda of the Conexus Project, readable between the lines of ink, paint, yarn, thread, wire of the works in the show and the multi-booklet series. The organizers – Josely Carvalho and Sabra Moore – have participated in various kinds of collaborations within their own work and milieux for several years now. The program for Conexus was therefore vast and fearless. Some of the artists who received the first questionnaire were overwhelmed by its scope. Yet the breadth of this project reflects the breadth of the overall, global, feminist art enterprise.

At a recent meeting of women artists from eight “American” countries, which took place at the time of the Third World Biennial in Habana, Cuba, the concerns that were raised as we went around the circle were precisely those that have preoccupied North American feminist, though cultural differences arose in the way they were expressed or experienced. They included: the double life and double social responsibility of the international art world; the disparity in prices between women’s and men’s work; the ways class differences affect feminist art; and the always immensely complex question of how the female experience surfaces in the images and forms of the art itself.

Artists are not accustomed to being asked to respond to global issues. Neither are women. Yet there is clearly a mandate for woman's voices to be heard on all the life-and-death themes Conexus incorporates. And culture is one of the prime vehicles of transmission. Public discourse is male-dominated in most societies. The visual arts offer women voices that can whisper through the cracks in the walls and yell over the walls and touch across distant spaces. Moore and Carvalho plunge right in: "What is your reality and/or fantasy about birth, contraception, abortion", they ask, "about shelter, sex, housing, agribusiness, movies, beauty as a cultural value, prolongation of life, cultural imperialism, the role of multinational corporations, destruction of natural resources, unions, institutional racism, the role of the church as a tool of survival or repression, prison conditions, legal rights, political systems, the threat of World War III?"

These eight deceptively lovely little books (and the exhibition of larger works, not completed at this writing) might be seen as prolongations of female stereotypes in their delicacy and small format. But in fact they signify strength without bombast. They become a palimpsest of imagery – surprisingly similar, unsurprisingly diverse. Certain "female" images recur, but that is no longer a controversial issue. We know, after seventeen years of looking at women's art, that women do indeed work from their own social, biological, and political experience.

The artworks run a gamut of styles and mediums, flattened and simultaneously heightened by black-and-white Xerox – that technological monster which, when tamed, becomes a friend. There is also a subtly subversive element in this means of reproduction. Xeroxing original art in order to distribute it more widely counters the exaggerated commercial respect for the precious object – which is in fact precious, but not because of its physical uniqueness or its market value. Art that communicates through the mails meet other art through the mails and fuses into a new, visually bilingual creation. Carvalho and Moore printed each booklet themselves, a combination of whimsy and ideology that is a metaphor for the stereotypically labor-intensive (or slave labor) tasks that women both love and hate. The books' covers mirror the method by which the ideas winged their way north and south – stamps of flags and shells and forefathers' faces and fish and flowers and liberty masquerading as the US. In the double-spreads of pages, collaboration has sometimes led to twinning and at other times has spawned work so tenuously connected that it resembles a rebellious daughter or a distant cousin.

When anthropologist Shirley Ardener set out to study women's world views in different groups, she found that although no one was exactly like any other, each pattern of behavior seemed to display a part of a model possessed in common. "To understand this," she wrote, "one may imagine a set of screens in which gaps appear in different places. Through one screen an eye and an ear can be discerned, through another a different ear and a nose, and through another, an eye, a nose

and mouth, and so forth. Each glimpse is different in detail, but given enough evidence we can construct the structure of a face to risk an imaginative leap, to make a guess at the underlying structure”.

The “face” of Conexus similarly offers a patchwork – the unknown global form of women’s lives. No conclusions can be drawn from this evidence, but the patterns are there, subtle and pervasive and tantalizing – and sparkling in their diversity and complexity. If individual voices are still muted, this chorus of imagery, ringing through the hemisphere, may be more audible.