

## Book Reviews

Elaine Kowalsky

*Video Loupe: a collection of essays by and about the videomaker and critic Catherine Elwes* KT press, 2000  
ISBN 0 9536541 0 9

When there is currently a renewed attempt in the UK to bring to a new audience/generation the ideas and work from the 1970s, as evident in the Whitechapel exhibition *Live in Your Head*, the publication of *Video Loupe* is apt and timely. It is significant in two respects: firstly, because we still have a society, that for all its liberal ideology, finds issues raised from the feminist perspective both marginal and irksome – in fact, not just the issues but the very idea of feminism itself – and secondly, because it is a small one-woman publisher who offers us the republished works of this feminist artist/writer.

Years ago, realising that nobody was going to review her work with any clarity and understanding the issues raised in her work and others like her, Catherine Elwes began to write about video and performance work, in particular, that of women. Elwes sets the agenda herself with the statement:

**'Performance, independent film and video all contributed to the**

**critical, counter-culture environment of the 1970s and the early 1980s, but it was the existence of feminist politics as an active force within society that convinced me I could exploit video as a vehicle for my creativity from a gendered position.'**

Her first published letter to *Art Monthly* in 1981, for example, outlines the failings in a review of two shows by women, *Women's Images of Men*, and the show of women artists at the ACME gallery in Shelton Street, and is a brilliant and systematic criticism of the lack of any understanding about what was actual being shown. From then on, one notes that Elwes's own writing was published more often in the magazine. How could they refuse? She said it all so clearly and the questions, raised in her reviews and essays, still need to be asked today.

The strength in Elwes' writing comes from her ability to locate the work she reviews in a broader context, outlining its historical background and contrasting it with other works to bring out many pertinent issues and ideas, especially in relation to a feminist schedule. In her reviews of primarily video works, she notes quite clearly the pitfalls of narcissism inherent in the medium and the lack of any political agenda in many of today's artists' work. She is able to negotiate with some clarity the work of the new generation of yBa's (young British artists) performance work and installations in relation to the previous generation. It is the lack of a political agenda, she notes, that sets the work of older women artists apart and gives their work bite. The message is simple **"Know your history! Or we are doomed to keep reinventing the wheel!"**

I often look at young women artists today, as a teacher and as an older woman, and I am proud of their confidence and the ideas in the work that they do, but I am aware how few reviews of their work link it to women's art history or a feminist perspective. Too often women artists start discussions around relevant issues with the opening statement **'I am not a feminist but...'** in order to distance themselves from the negative associations that have been placed on feminism. However despite my enjoyment of her writing, I am critical of how the book is constructed, as it would have flowed better without the reviews of Elwes' own video work which the book also documents. These selected reviews do not enhance her reputation as an artist or add to what she has to say as a critic. With the exception of the commissioned introduction essays that frame the context of the book, the writing on her work is redundant and does her no favours. If anything it muddies the waters and weakens the overall structure and flow. In contrast the essays by Lisa Steele, Jeremy Welsh and Julia Knight have an intellectual weight and clarity that compliment and extend an understanding of her work.

I read sections of the book to my evening students. A good thought provoker for them was 'Women and Technoculture', first published in *Variant*. The excitement of the ensuing discussions and debate amongst them was revealing. They also enjoyed her analysis with Jacqueline Morreau of the show *Women's Images of Men*. I dug out the catalogue of the show from my collection and brought it to the next class. It was well received. But the longest debate and ensuing discussion

came out of her letter to *Art Monthly* called 'Feminism & Political Elitism' (p. 43). Too often when feminist ideals are mentioned, minds are turned off. The popular press in the UK has done a very good job of trivialising the whole feminist agenda. Yet the same issues are still very alive, as was illustrated by my evening students, who from their diverse social and economic backgrounds, debated and understood quite clearly what she had to say. They found the ideas exciting, pertinent and applicable to their own life experiences. I say this in all seriousness, for after reading this new book on her writings and her work, one is left with the desire that more people should know about it.

### Short Book Reviews

Kirsten Justesen

#### *Re Kollektion / Re Collection*

Nordjyllands Kunstmuseum 17  
April - 13 June 1999. Museum of  
Modern and Contemporary Art Aalborg  
Denmark. Text: Danish and English  
ISBN 87-88307-41-7

The most comprehensive exhibition catalogue to date on the pioneering Danish feminist artist Kirsten Justesen work in photography, performance-actions and mixed media/sculpture/installations since 1968. (See the extensive interview with her in *n.paradoxa* Vol 3, 1999). Each work is introduced by a critical commentary on the piece or parallel to it by a wide range of authors from Eric Andersen, Lene Burkard, Lars Bang Larsen, Kirstine Roepstorff and Tania Orum to name but a few. The exhibition uniquely re-displayed all Justesen works in a new digital form producing a visual archive rendered as large photographic prints

of this wide-ranging body of work. A second book, a collaboration, of photo-text with Alison Knowles was also published to accompany the exhibition.

Harmony Hammond

#### *Lesbian Art in America: A Contemporary History*

New York: Rizzoli International  
Publications Inc, 2000

ISBN 0-8478-2248-6

Advertised as a 'history of which girls made and showed what, when and where', this volume promises to be the most comprehensive documentation of lesbian artists in America. The introduction makes it clear that the territory mapped contains many problematic definitions post-Stonewall of the terms, lesbian, lesbian artist, feminist lesbian artist. Taking Martha Gever's definition as a guide each definition is situated in relation to the 'complex, often treacherous, system of cultural identities, representations and institutions, and a history of sexual and social regulation.' Three hundred artists and thirty years of this story are included in this original and in-depth research developed alongside Harmony Hammond's own activism in this period with many feminist and lesbian artists in America as an organiser and artist.

Catherine Fehily, Jane Fletcher  
and Kate Newton

#### *I Spy: Representations of Childhood*

London: I.B. Tauris, 2000

ISBN 1-86064-384-1

IRIS, the women's photography project at Staffordshire University co-ordinated and developed this lavishly produced and well-illustrated publication with essays by Val Williams, Melissa Benn, Jane Fletcher and Patricia Holland. The work of

professional women photographers from the US, UK and Ireland, Caroline Molloy, Cath Pearson, Catherine Fehily and Wendy Ewald, is reproduced alongside photographs by children from the Holly Street Public Art Trust where children document their own experience of childhood alongside the adult view of either a remembered childhood or their own children. The essays in the book touch on the controversy surrounding Sally Mann's photographs; the work of women and feminist photographers in their real and reconstructed photographs of childhood and the problematic questions surrounding distinguishing a paedophilic gaze or exploitation of children from a more positive representation of children's lives in photography, given the widespread concern today about child abuse.

Gayatri Sinha

#### *Woman/Goddess:*

#### *An Exhibition of Photographs*

New Delhi: Multiple Action  
Research Group, 1999

This catalogue explores the representation of, largely Hindu, goddesses in politics, religion, folk and popular culture, in relation to the status of women in India since the 1950s. The catalogue explores the use of goddess imagery as a free-floating symbol, presented, altered and consistently reinvented, while tracking its use in religious and political causes as well as its more popular reappropriations to promote products and films. The question is clearly raised 'Does the proliferation of the goddess image enhance the status of women?' The book critically examines the iconisation of public and political figures like Indira and Sonia Gandhi and Mother