



## **THE SISTERHOOD I CHOOSE**

IN THIS STUDY, THE PUBLICATION OF "LIP" -- A COLLECTION OF WORKS BY SOUTH AFRICAN WOMEN -- IS USED TO TRIGGER A DISCUSSION CONCERNING WOMEN, ART AND SOCIAL REALITY. THE AUTHOR CHOOSES A SISTERHOOD THAT IS WHOLLY POLITICALLY COMMITTED.

After long discussions with male colleagues on whether there should be a separate "women's art", by and for woman, and just what art should do, I awaited with some eagerness the arrival of LIP. LIP is an anthology of art by South African women: the introduction states: "...What emerges is a search for an artistic language that does not derive its vocabulary from Western Europe or the United States, a language that fits with women's lives". The editors stress LIP "should not claim to be representative or definitive". But LIP does raise again all those long debates about what woman's art could do — and one has to ask, does LIP begin to do it?

At the time of those long discussions, I argued that there are unique experiences that women go through as women. The obvious biological ones: childbirth, abortion, menstruation, the female side of sex. More all-encompassing, the position women take in society: concern with family and children, support for the man, lower wages and heavy housework. The specific assaults of rape and illegal abortion. The caring and help from other women who have been through it too. At the same time women are forced a "false consciousness" about what it means to be a woman — all the images of advertising, of pulp magazines and novels, which tell us: our role is to be decorative and subservient; and incidentally to do the women's work (only "light tasks" like cooking, washing and childcare — and conveniently forgetting how many women hold down wage jobs as well); and meanwhile to give emotional support to everyone else around us. Women cultural workers, by virtue of their personal experience, should be the first to raise the questions of who women really are and what do with their lives, to break down this "false consciousness", to create images of what it means to be a woman in this society that will help us take control of our lives.

So, does LIP make a beginning towards this? To what extent does the picture presented there begin to give us an idea of what it means to be a woman in South Africa?

The overwhelming majority (although not all) of the work presented in LIP deals with what society tells us should be "woman's awareness" — how to behave ourselves as women, our dreams, our families, sex and sexual conflict. For the most part these are dealt with in the context of the privileged white women's world. There are few pieces about employed women, practically none about childcare and housework. We are forced to ask ourselves, does this reflect the gross actuality of women's experience in South Africa?

#### WALLS OF PRIVILEGE

Most women are poor, and uneducated, and black. The questions most women must ask themselves are: how do I, or we my family, eat? Where do I live — can it be made habitable? How do I feed the children, pay the doctor, clothe the kids in winter? How can I keep my family together? Just from simple statistics this is "being a woman" for most of us. Rape and subservience and looking pretty and sex become part of that "being" too: they are the processes which sustain that "being" within the framework of physical realities.

If there is a purpose to "woman's art", it is to explore the links between us as women, the images of what "being a woman" means in reality and not in the Sunday newspapers. It would seem logical to start here, with what women do with their lives. And yes, it is the privileged woman who has the time and materials and skills to write short stories or paint pictures; and yes, that privileged woman probably does not herself carry the burdens of near-starvation and no Section-10 rights and emigrant husband. But if we honestly want to explore what being a woman means, it is our responsibility to go beyond the walls of privilege to where most women live. What do we share as women? How should we relate our experiences as individual women to other women's experiences? What unites us? If we cannot find that common ground between women, there is no reason for a specifically "woman's art", as opposed to art by individuals who happen to be women.

Yet look at the number of pieces in LIP about a woman isolated in her room, or a woman's dream or memories of herself in isolation:

*I sit in my room  
There is a smell of oil ...  
The voices I hear  
are disembodied,  
peripheral...*

(Jenny Roberts)

"Occasionally Meg broke her sitting on the long green couch." (Floss M. Jay) "The earliest memory I have is of being in my cot. The nappies hanging around me are still wet. They shut out the light." (Sharyn West) "Crosslegged on my marriage bed, blowing clouds of smoke into this airless room obliquely lit by a winter sun..." (Elana Milner)

*Sometimes I would be still  
as coral beneath the waves.  
Blue white stone my face,  
moveless perfection instilled  
with human grace.*

(T.M. Raubenheimer)

#### FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

But as we said, women do NOT exist in the abstract, composed of socialisation from the movies, and our mothers' desires for us, and our men's fantasies, and our daydreams. These are precisely the myths we are trying to reject, that "false consciousness" that hides what women are and do with their lives. To limit ourselves, as the majority of LIP does, to this isolated realm, is to perpetuate this "false consciousness". We reject as invalid the image of woman sitting dreaming about love and marriage and dressing up; do we replace it with an image of woman sitting dreaming about how alienated we are and our unhappy childhood and slicing men's testicles? This is no image of reality to counter the myths we have been drugged with.

Even in the privileged white woman's existence, a woman is not cut off with her dreams. Rather, social issues only seem remote from her because she has accepted the false consciousness that they are remote. Does she have a maid, who she depends on for her family's day welfare? That maid is not remote, she is a major ingredient of that white woman's life, her solution

to housework and childcare. Does she drink wine who makes it, how? Does she feel cut off in her large house with high walls to keep out who? An artist should dig into the roots of our lives - and privilege in South Africa is very much rooted in exploitation, on a very concrete, daily basis. We are all living in this one system. To show any woman as isolated from the forms and structures of that system is to reinforce those very sexist myths of a pretty woman on her pedestal: silenced, alienated, powerless.

A depressingly small amount of work in LIP avoids that particular trap. Sherm Ahmed's *Nice Girls Don't Work* does in fact talk about an Indian woman as an integral part of her society, and the specific difficulties she faces: an exploitative job (she needs money) interwoven with a sexual relationship which makes the job more bearable, but which also turns out to be exploitative; and her escape into the traditional surrender of marriage. Gina Mhlope's *Nokulunga's Wedding* describes a "traditional marriage" composed of a rape with lobola; the woman is no more than a possession; the men sing "the bride is ours, the bride is ours" after the rape. Her boyfriend rejects her when he realises that she would literally cost too much to buy back.

A few other pieces, Jane Barratt's *Part of My Life*, Brenda Goldblatt's *I was born at Babanango*, the photo-story *Nightshift* by Lesley Lawson, give fairly factual, straightforward descriptions in a black working woman's life. These pieces point to a particular and important role for feminist art: to present us, without artistic obscurantism, with an account of what happens to a woman. Can Themba in *The Will to Die* presented a nearly sociological description (albeit beautifully written) of black township life; such simple facts about the lives of women still need to be explored. (Although here we have an artistic question: does it help for Brenda Goldblatt's story to appear in the first person singular? To this reader it gives the story a feeling of falseness from the start, which seems unnecessary. It would not have hurt,



perhaps, to write "she was born in Babanango", or to give it an interview context that would justify the "I".)

In this context, one could comment on the graphic work in LIP. The most successful are the documentary photos: they give us straight, images of women to counter those we have been inundated with. Migrant women, domestic maid, white woman dissolute. Documentary photography records, it does not soften the edges of our actualities.

The non-documentary photos, and nearly all the rest of the graphics (excepting Bongive Diomo's *Removals*, Elsa Miles' *Freedom Charter*) tend also to retreat into dreams, to abstractions, to isolated aspects primarily through surface and colour when it is reproduced! small in cheap black and white. But ask: how many of these images have tried to get us out of our socialised cubicles of "woman"? How many confront a woman's life? Do these graphics help us know what it means to be a woman, here?

We know that women do not spend their time in designer dresses with three-hour's worth of hairdo making love to expensive stereo sets. Contrast that image, from posters in a music shop (in one poster the

girl was white, in a second black, wearing a gold lame pants-suit), with the woman in the Lou Haysom piece, *Thola Cardboard Waste Thenza*:

*"Nomathemba uncurls her legs, folds the plastic and newspapers which serve as mattress and blankets, careful to conserve what she can still use tonight. The child is awake, it kicks against her, hungry. She feeds it."*

Nomathemba, here, in her very particular context of oppression, has to face the same problems many of us as women face; she is real. We know her. If we want to find out what it means to be a woman, these are the pictures we need to find and relate to.

LIP was compiled by asking women to contribute artwork about being a woman. This article makes no attempt to evaluate the technical quality of the work: some of it no doubt very successfully captures the present level of woman's consciousness. My point indeed lies there: that too many of us still, as women and as cultural workers, are trapped in the official definitions of "being a woman". And that is reinforced by the approach to art as an exploration of one's own

head. Woman's art needs to be more than poetic flower-arrangements of feminine or feminist fantasies. It is time we as cultural workers, moved towards finding real image of women, towards exploring the texture of a woman's life.

And beyond that: from understanding the texture of being a woman in South Africa we must build a foundation from which to talk about change and taking control of our lives.

I remember reading a factual record of Dora Tamana's early life, an account not attempting to be artistic at all:

*"Dora Tamana was born in 1901 at Gqamabhe in the Transkei. When she was 20, her father and two of her uncles were killed at the Bulhoek Massacre, in which 163 people were shot dead by the police.*

*In 1923 Dora married John Tamana, also from the Transkei. Over the next seven years she bore four children, three of whom died of starvation, tuberculosis and meningitis. The family moved to Cape Town in order to have a better chance to survive. Dora's life continued to be a bleak struggle for basic essentials. Her husband eventually deserted her. She nevertheless became increasingly involved in the wider problems she saw around her, joining the African National Congress and the ANC Women's League, and becoming an energetic organiser in the African and Coloured townships."*

And then her words, speaking in Cape Town in 1981, aged 80:

*You who have no work,  
speak  
You who have no homes,  
speak.  
You who have no schools,  
speak.  
You who have to run like  
chickens from the vulture,  
speak.  
Let us share our problems  
so that we can solve  
them together.  
We must free ourselves.  
Men and women must share  
housework.*



*Men and women must work  
together in the home  
and out in the world...  
Women must unite to fight*

That account said to me: this is my sister, who lives also in this land, she is talking about what we as women must do. She too had children; how would I cope, how would I feel; if my own two small ones died because of society's carefully maintained deprivations? She too had a husband, and separated. Yet she survived as a woman, and from that survival became strong. This is the sisterhood I choose, an image I will take for my own, of what it means to be a woman.

Woman's art should make these links.

And then go past these links, towards developing not only a knowledge of who we are, but also who we should be. Take these two poems from MALIBONGWE, ANC women: Poetry is also their Weapon. In "Superwoman, (Grown by Apartheid)", Lindi Mabuza begins by describing the life of a rural African woman:

*She  
wakes up each morning  
to the vacant sound of  
beetle...*

*She  
moves, stranger in her  
country  
empty...  
Beleaguered by laws and  
bound to infant and hut  
she must face a land criss-*

*crossed  
and dissected by droughts...*

From this description she develops into resistance, and then to a new world and a new woman.

*with all  
i am  
with man  
i am human  
with husband  
i am wife  
with father  
the children must grow  
with other hands  
the earth brings forth  
without without  
we will no longer be  
without*

And Lerato Kumalo, in "No More Words Now", gives this answer to those people who tell us to "be nice"; this answer, to all those people who feed us that false consciousness of "pretty-pretty"; this answer, this image, of what a woman can be:

*But my point argument and  
logic  
come  
from piles of dead bodies  
and the necks struggling  
under the yoke  
ask them what they think  
of me  
"a nice girl like you" as you  
put it  
when I shoulder with pride  
this AK47  
ask what they think of you  
and your cocktail party  
wisdom  
"a nice person like you".*

LIZZIE ADAMS