



*feminist
art:*

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Issues & Agendas

part TWO

by Caterina Pizanias

In the Spring 1994 issue of *Artichoke*, Caterina Pizanias questions some of the canons of feminist art practice and suggests: "We need to break from our obsession with aspects of theory, style and simulation in our continued efforts to unveil the evils of modernity..." In this follow-up, Pizanias moves from the theoretical to the applied by examining some of the exhibits, installations and performances connected with **Feminist Spin**, held last March in Calgary. Written in a more personal voice, Pizanias chronicles her reactions to this month-long extravaganza of art by women.

FOR YASMIN'S MOM ON MOTHER'S DAY

There is an appropriate honesty, however, in working on, writing out of, the here and the now. In all its ordinariness and modesty... If we cannot make something out of what we are, out of what we know, how shall we ever cease to colonize others? What else today but whatever wisdom we discover in our own lives do we have to give them?

Nicole Ward Jouve¹

I knew of the plans to dedicate the month of March, 1994, to feminist practice since last fall, when I received an invitation to participate from Joan Caplan and Mary Lou Riordon-Sello, organizers of **Feminist Spin**. In their invitation, they wrote: "**Feminist Spin** is a design to invite all workers, selectors, programmers and owners of galleries in Calgary—including commercial galleries, museums, artist run centers, alternative spaces, magazines, theatre and women's groups—to programme their spaces with Feminist Practice for the month of March." By then, I had come to know the two collaborative artists through my research at the Calgary Institute for the Humanities; their names were frequently mentioned when I was searching for local artists who defined themselves as feminist and/or post-modernist. By then I had also been introduced to some of their previous work, like the **Current Connection/Living Histories Project**, shown photos and told stories from last year's most successful **Art in the March** on Women's Day in March, 1993.² A "dream" pair, really, these two women artists are for anyone, like myself, who is interested in art as an everyday life project. Their art both delights the senses and speaks in some way to the social issues of the day. In the press kit for the



ANNE SEVERSON

Feminist Spin Organizers: Mary Lou Riordon-Sello & Joan Caplan

Current Connection the artists describe their project: "This installation critiques the prescribed position of women in our society. In particular, the older women whose work, wisdom and histories are often marginalized. Through the voices and images of women recalling their memories and experiences a gap is bridged between past and present, and between conventional expectations and women's realities."³ I've only seen a video of the installation, but I cannot forget the bright multi-colored crocheted strips. Made by deft hands, spinning away yards of colour and life-time memories in many accents, and about far-away homelands, taking over the physical and emotional space of the Fort Calgary and the Deane House. This space—until Mary Lou's and Joan's project—was steeped in the stories of the "pioneer man" only. [Many times I have thought about what might have been Penelope's story, the other spinner of cloth, Odysseus' wife, if she could have told us what went through her mind during all those years of waiting and spinning.]

I had no doubts that **Feminist Spin** would be colorful, lively, diversified and challenging, but I was in awe when I received the programme of events: over fifty of them, in a dozen venues, across town and across disciplines, taking place from noon until late at night. Never before would I have imagined that the time would come where I had to make a choice between concurrent feminist events! Quite a few times I had to make such choices, but those I attended never disappointed me, as efforts to spin a story, to listen and respond, to make connections, some more lasting and colorful than others. The explanation for this success can be found in an artist's statement by Caplan and Riordon-Sello: "Our collaborative efforts extend from a need to work with and to be part of a community. As part of this community, individual authorship becomes diffused. We believe this diffusion accentuates the intention/weaving of our projects which is stressed in the materials used, the scale, the site, the event, and the community involvement. Through the emphasis of these elements in our work a strong voice is heard which gives value to individual experiences often lost in institutional

processes."⁴ Can they ever be thanked enough and appropriately for having created physical, textural and imaginative spaces/opportunities where women could gather and....

*[S]pin. Opening our mouths,
daily, and what comes in. Spin.
Space. Giving. Your asking, my
asking. Nodding our heads
and laughing and asking and listening.
Spinning. Waffling, with or without
cunning.⁵*

WAFLING, WITH OR WITHOUT CUNNING

I did not see, attend, or follow all the events of **Feminist Spin**, and I will not be writing about all the ones I was fortunate enough to attend. After many drafts and re-writes, here I am on this glorious Mother's Day, stooped over my desk trying to keep my promise to *Artichoke* to give it to them by Wednesday, already ten days late. [Deadlines are never meant to be taken seriously. Didn't I tell you I am Greek? For us deadlines signify only the beginning.] So, what follows is what ever I have summoned today, the day I decided to keep my promise. No *a priori* drafts and notes, only writing as waffling and surprise. In what follows, I want to initiate public dialogue with all its attendant risks; but before I proceed, I will pay heed to another one of Nicole Ward Jouve's admonitions, "No one who writes today can or should forget their race and their gender."⁶ The "I" who has written this review is white: privileged, yes, middle class, occasionally; and everything it has to say is limited and colored by unconscious euro-marginal assumptions, intuitions, and temperament.

I had the best of times on Saturday March 12, another glorious bright day like today. I was looking forward to seeing Isla Burn's work at the Paul Kuhn Gallery, and listening to Faye Heavyshield talk at the **Feminist Spin**

Forum at the Chinese Cultural Centre. I did not like their back-to-back scheduling, because I wanted lots of time to see Isla's work, visit with her and see if the latest turn of her work—her altarpieces for Hindu gods—would keep me at arm's length.

*"Elle/lui ne plant pas, elle/lui fraie.
S/he does not plant, s/he opens a path."
Isla, Faye, Ganesh.
S/he opens a path
for Yasmin, Roberta, Madhubala,
the Aegean and back.⁷*

I met Isla Burns ten years ago in Edmonton. I went to interview her as part of my research and kept coming back to her studio out of curiosity—about steel-making art, about modernism, about her fear/aversion to feminism, about my seeing her as something other than most people saw her, about using her as a "reality" check vis-à-vis the many theories about contemporary art worlds I was learning as a beginning graduate student. In the end, after all this talking and listening and asking, always asking of the other, we became friends. A most unlikely pairing by outward standards, traitors only to those who use naming as an exclusion—she a modernist, I a feminist. But I say, we are both women, daughters and sisters; she has seen and loved the Aegean that defines my soul. I am still struggling to figure out her turn toward a Hindu east that is so far from my reach.

However, s/he—Ganesh/Isla— removed many obstacles for me on that March the 12th [I am now reading more about Ganesh—but am not ready for offerings yet.] I've always felt at home with Isla's art; I could take joy in the superior execution, the clarity of volume/lines, the way the light would reflect and define the planes of her work that reminded me so much of Cycladic art. Over the years I've learned to feel the same vibrancy when touching her "finished" steel as that when I touched marble—Isla "carves" her steel (her words), cutting and welding and soldering until the surface gets a "felt" surface. I've always

touched the pieces until over a year ago when I went back to Edmonton to see her art and write about it for the Edmonton Art Gallery's exhibit **Three Alberta Sculptors: Ken Macklin, Isla Burns, Clay Ellis**. Isla had taken a turn with her work that I could not follow, not with my heart, my belly. She was quoted in that show's catalogue saying "there are no stories attached to my work."⁸ I said to myself, no, there is a story that you do not want to tell us yet. I looked and looked at the work for clues to no avail. I found the works overpowering, was afraid to touch them; intuitively I knew she had taken the right turn, but I wasn't ready to take it with her. I finished the review by saying, "These works demand a different relationship and I need more time for that."⁹ Arriving at Paul Kuhn's Gallery before the scheduled opening, I told myself that I needed the time so that I can be on time to the Forum, but really I was afraid that the art might keep me at a distance, was afraid that I might never catch up with Isla again.

As I walked in, I saw *Altar for Ganesh* (1993) and moved quickly past him: there we go again, I thought to myself, with this part human/part elephant god sitting fat and jolly on a rat, receiving offerings from Selene. From Selene? [For the record, Selene was a Greek goddess, the sister of Eos (morning) and Helios (sun); later when Romans conquered Greece and stole, borrowed and adapted, they identified Selene with their own goddess Luna]. Moving away from Ganesh, I saw another piece, *Altar for Kali* (1993-94), another altar piece, a solid rectangular table, with an empty circular depression carved in, and on top a harp-like shape of steel, decorated with detail and attention that only Isla can obtain. I took immediately to this piece; the top reminded me of a favourite cycladic sculpture, *The Harpist* and it reminded me of the saints' days in Greece when I was a kid, where my mom and I took the best flowers from the garden and stuck them all around the icon of the saint. The icon was usually set on a table and for those saints that had acquired fame for being miraculous, people used to go under the table believing this act to be good for body and soul. I remember taking flowers, going under the altar, paying respects so-



COURTESY OF PAUL KUHN FINE ARTS

Altar to Kali, steel, Isla Burns, 1994.

to-speak to the saint. For the first time, my fear around Isla's altars was conquered; I spent a lot of time touching and going around and around the piece. Isla has said "When Hindus go to pray...they go to look at their God...it's not in the way that we go and worship in front of the Virgin Mary. They go to look, to have a chat, to see their God...and praying and dealing with God is considered an aesthetic experience, and as an aesthetic experience is also to me, anyway, a spiritual experience, because it's touching that part inside of you that we call a soul."¹⁰ [That's what my mom and I did Isla; our flowers were "offerings" not to appease the saints, but rather in the sense of giving as part of life; much like you gave me "New Quay" and I gave you the fern plant.]

When Isla came to the gallery, I was on my way out. Quickly I explained the surprise, the discovery that I was at home once again with her work. She smiled and said "It's Ganesh, Cat, he removed the obstacles." On the way to the Forum, still fighting Ganesh's magnanimity, I started thinking: it would be interesting to find out when and where the animal gods of the east on their travels west became just anthropomorphic—was it the Aegean's influence or did they reach its waters already humanized? So much more work to be done!

When I arrived at the Chinese Cultural Centre, I learned that the forum would not take place; instead the artists would present their work, talk about it and generally have a rather structure-less afternoon. Well, I thought to myself—Ganesh has done it again! After some introductory remarks by Amy Gogarty, Faye Heavyshield would tell some of the stories told by a woman named She.

I briefly met Faye Heavyshield a couple of years ago, when she spoke about her art at a conference I was involved with. She showed slides of her work, but what I carried with me after that encounter was her sense of self-identity: she is a Blackfoot, but she is not making "native" art. She makes art from her personal history, her memories of home, residential schools, women's shelters. When asked in an interview if she sees her work "carrying on certain traditions of the Blackfoot or native cultures," her

reply was: "No, not at all. I think maybe that's what people are trying to figure out about native artists, regarding us as such strange animals. But we're not. We're artists and you could say that artists are strange animals. Sure, you depend on your history, going back to it when you're making art, *but doesn't everybody? You refer to something that you feel is important. There are a lot of unnecessary tensions.*"¹¹ (my emphasis).

The first time I saw Faye's art was at her solo exhibit at the Glenbow **Heart, Hoof, Horn** over a year ago. I felt at home at that exhibit, just like I did, years ago, with Isla's work. The first thing that came to mind was an inscription by Faye Heavyshield in an exhibit catalogue [*Our Worlds Are One*, 1991] where she wrote: "A displaced person stands alone. Standing alone can signify desolation or strength. And I imagine, both." The strength of that installation was/is indescribable—one can only sense it. The lucid forms, the vibrant surface of the gesso brought me back home, made me feel at home in Canada. [Could it be that our worlds are one sometimes?] Speaking about *Sisters*, the six pairs of identical high heeled women's shoes arranged in a circle, Faye Heavyshield said: "[T]he piece talks about women, about sisters, and I really learned a lot while I was working on it. There is a very strong current in the piece. It really knocked me out when I had them all sitting on a table. I know it sounds kind of dramatic, but it just seemed that they didn't want to be sitting in a row. I think it was then that I almost physically heard these women's voices. That was really good for me. It took me down a peg from having made too many decisions beforehand. I had been treating them as individuals. In the end, I decided to let the material have its own voice, to let the concept of *Sisters* breathe."¹²

Well, I believe that four of these "sisters" took a long breath and told us their stories during Heavyshield's performative piece *She* at the "forum that never was." This time, four pairs of shoes were lined up in front of the audience, a pair of running shoes, brown loafers, Birkenstock sandals and a pair of black shoes with thick winter soles. In her trademark "spare and evocative manner," Faye

wore each pair of shoes, went to the microphone and told each story beginning with "My name is She." All stories were of women, about identities, their bodies, sexualities, spirituality, hope, the going back and forth, the swaying between native and non-native, between man and woman, because "He is a part of S/he." After she finished, we took a long break before the next performance/presentation by Yasmin Ladha and Roberta Rees.

All along I had planned to leave after I had heard Heavyshield, but found myself unable to move, mesmerized by a "state of grace" which kept me firmly planted to my seat. When Ladha and Rees were getting ready for their performance, my eye caught a series of embroidered elephants all around Yasmin's jacket. I laughed alone, overcome by giddiness, Ganesh opening the path for me once again? I decided to stay, for Ganesh's sake. *Gully Belly* the title of their piece:

*Yasmin: Swell a story, share
story like
roti-bread
love story out of woman
to woman, mother and
daughter
elder daughter to elder daughter
chocolate cake and pickles
before period I come from Gayatri
who creates and protects.*

*Roberta: Woman heat heart east
Sing chanter Shanti
Woman Om Om Om
Wooooomb*

*Yasmin: My speech sings
woman heat
woman Om
woman chant
Catch Roberta and me
on Indian roof-top*

*my she-geography space
She-spin
where woman loves herself thick
talk heavy as thigs.¹³*

I looked around at the audience, to see their faces, to make sure Ganesh was not playing tricks on me. Their chant was so like the plainsong of the island orthodox church service! They read their lines drawing on the natural stress of language for their rhythm, the strength of their beings, the length of their breath for their chant. I got caught in their rhythm, the intensity of their chant and rode back to places and memories I have been trying for years to avoid. As a child, I used to love to take flowers to saints, talk to strangers, spin stories about saints, neighbours and the heroic sea-voyages of my maternal grandfather. But all that changed when I became a "woman"—me a woman at eleven? Couldn't approach either saints or strangers the days I wasn't "clean"—What's the fun of spinning stories for your sisters only—four of them and much older to boot. "Am I okay, Mother?" I would ask and she would say "Yes and shhhh" at the same time, and I stopped believing in her; stopped believing in the Saints, God, the priests and fathers. [How I envy you Yasmin for standing in front of Allah. Did I tell you when I left home I'd go to Russian Churches and mosques to listen to priests and mullahs to chant those soothing sounds of plainsong without having to hear/understand their chants? I am so sure that something happened in the seventh century A.D. and the priests and the mullahs got together and decided to keep the chanting—one chant, for two gods, but both, oh so vindictive!]

*Roberta: ...Am I okay?" Oldest
daughters, mothers who watched
husbands rot from cancer and
grieved, grieved, but freed, too,
and that almost hurts too much to
write. "He was afraid of life," my
mother says, "afraid of life." And I*

*am more like him, Yasmin, ask my
mother as I sit on the floor
between her knees, her fingers massaging my
head, "How are you so brave?"
Writing to honour his fear, her
strength.
Writing myself closer to her, to him, to you,
Yasmin.¹⁴*

How I wanted to join you, to chant with you. I could chant as good as you could; I too cared for the rhythms of language, but could not talk about my father's death. I had left home, because he too was afraid of life and I did not want to grow up like him. It is because of him and all the others like him that I became a displaced person—at least alone I could imagine desolation and/or strength. But I felt so alone, listening to your chant, sensing your trust but being left out. How I wanted to chant with you. [When my mother called late at night to let me know that the doctors had given him only two-to-three days, "plenty of time to make it back," all I could muster was "I'll come only if you want me to come for you." All I could think was that even if I went to see him before his death, he would call me by my sister's name—the one named after his mother. He would have had the last word and it wouldn't have been the one I had always longed for. So, I dumped my fear and guilt on mom and stayed put.]

Roberta: (What do you remember, Yasmin, about your mother? What mother memories are in your cell?)¹⁵

Yasmin: Did my mother feel sensuality of her nipple underneath silk? She could copy a filmstar's twists in a saris/slice her sari drape half-cupped across her blouse. She could copy Madhubala's kisscurls, but was she allowed? did she know? did she desire to explore

her own sensuality? Thirteen rooms, but she (nor I) looked at ourselves shameless... this dialation, this swelling.¹⁶

[Early on my mother and I were very close. Never knew she was afraid of her own body until she had to make me afraid of mine. Was her mom so strict with her? Her mom had died early, so it was left up to her older sister to do the scaring. Thia Kali?¹⁷ Well into her hundreds, my auntie-Kali was lamenting the loss of her bosom, where did it go, she used to ask me]. That Saturday afternoon, when I longed to be in your chorus, guess who came to my rescue—your mother, Yasmin. You said, "When your mother became a widow, I became one too."¹⁸ Well, when I felt a desolate orphan, that fateful Saturday afternoon, your mother became my mother. [What I forgot to tell you Mrs. Ladha, is that I could easily picture you as Madhubala! When I was a kid, the most popular song, sung so beautifully by the most popular male singer in Greece was about Madhubala! Your Madhubala! I must bring a tape of the song next time I go back home. "Madhubala, my sweet love, I long for you to be by my side" sung Stelios Kazatzithis. I am sure I can find many more converging points, unexpected commonalties, welcomed ones.]

Yasmin: We are at Gingerbeef, first time, first place, Roberta and I, break bread, break noddles, when I pop question. Ask Robbie kinda artless, I drunk on food, on giddy Chinook, drunk on first-connections, ask her straight out. "so what did you eat in Crowsnest?" like she is the immigrant.¹⁹

*Roberta: gully essence
belly essence
essence gaia don't forget
intelligence*

*gully belly
gush
yes
Oldest daughters, Yasmin, different
countries, different languages,
different food (always food), all
this difference, but this trunk
connection. Heart connection. Not
romantic heart, I don't trust the
romanticized, Yasmin...²⁰*

*Yasmin: What I want to share is not I come
from Tanzania and barrage of staple
questions, consumptive expectations:
Even in Delhi, a white woman stops
me,
round table of them at Dumpok
Sheraton:
"Where are you from?"
"Fuck-off!"
Roberta and I, Siamese
trunk connection
food and gully-ghar*

*Roberta: Milky confessions, the
word I used, Yas, reclaiming confess
from "oh women write such
confessional stuff." As in admit a
sin or crime. One way revelation.
How about confide, confidere, with
trust. Share. Share food, share stories,
hurts, fears, desires, this spin-
spin-spinning, and I know the
shadow side, women whose fear of/
desire of male power makes them want
to control women, but Yas, yes, I like
yes more than no, I always like yes
more, two mouths opening, yes?²¹
(my emphasis).*

That afternoon, I never made it back to Isla's opening. I walked around and around the Prince's Island, envying Yasmin's and Robbie's trust, reveling in Mrs. Ladha's words and hugs. When I sat down to write my notes for this telling, all I wrote was: "must meet with them," "get copy of the piece," "want to share their trust."²² What I had seen before that Saturday and what I saw after it during *Feminist Spin*, has been marked by my response to the events of March 12. Jin-me Yoon was in town during the third week in March as a Canada Council Visiting artist. She gave two public talks and visited artists' studios. She is a Korean-born artist who resides in Vancouver. She spoke of her work and showed slides of work already seen in Alberta²³ such as *Souvenirs of the Self* and from her contribution to the *Yellow Peril: Reconsidered* (a touring group exhibit by Asian-Canadian artists) entitled *(Inter)reference, Part I: (In)permanent Re(collection)* as well as from *Screens* an installation examining the suggestive meanings of what "screening" means and from the *Passport* series of photos from the moment of immigration, where one secures an identity while displacing another. It would have been best if an exhibit of her work was organized along with her visit, but the clarity of her arguments regarding the "locationality" of identity made up for the lack of exhibited work. She spoke of the ongoing negotiations that we all go through, and how identities are constructed. I attended both of her public lectures and the gist of her message was that one's identity—racial, gender, ethnic, sexual, national—is multiple, contingent, and frequently contradictory, affected by our "location" at any given time, be it class, politics, or culture. What I learned from Faye, Yasmin, Roberta and Jin-me is that neither "resistance" nor "the dominant" are monolithic or autonomous. And now on to the other events.

While making the first selection of what I would like to attend at *Feminist Spin*, I left out the New Gallery's *Fantasmagoria: Sexing the Lesbian Imaginary*. I found its title confusing, albeit sounding very up to the minute: but, if the imaginary is "lesbian" is it not already "sexed"?

(I must confess after March I have developed a weariness in the excessive use of terms such as "imaginary," "carnavalesque" and "queer"). So, having left *Fantasmagoria* behind, I started my *Feminist Spin* travels by attending Bettina Grunwald's shelter installation at the Jubilee Auditorium walkway.

Bettina Grunwald, a third year art student at ACA, opened the events about feminist practice with the most promising beginning. She started her project in January 1994, when she took her idea to the Women's Shelter to work with the women and children there on an art project centered around "Family Day" celebrations. The idea was to have the children draw "notions" of home and family life, and have them exhibited as part of an installation that included Bettina's work. She used the identical-size drawings to build a wall of a house, a rather sturdy looking wall, made up of rather fragile and at times disturbing drawings of individual home lives. Grunwald built a performance piece around the drawings, the one I attended on March 6, 1994.

During a very effective performance, Bettina removed the "bricks" from her house one at a time. She would then call out the name of an elected official—she covered all levels—roll up the drawing, label it with the politician's name/address, and put it in a mail bag, until all the "bricks" were used and all politicians were named. She then carried her bag away, where she actually sent the drawings—free of charge she told us, as is the custom with political mail. I was impressed by Bettina Grunwald's political acumen, artistic and personal grace. Over the events of the month, I had the opportunity to chat with her on a number of occasions—I am looking forward to following her progress. The attendance was unfortunately very low—could it be it lacked in carnivalesque atmosphere?

In the remainder of this text, I would like to raise some problems and confusions I found and felt with three of the most popular—at least in attendance—of the events: *How Many Times*, *Fantasmagoria* and *Bound to be Tongued-Tied: Gagging on Gender*.

BODIES AND PLEASURES: WILL THEIR "TRUTH" SHALL SET US FREE?

Mireille Perron's *How many times...?* opening performance for her installation work in process under the same title was scheduled at the Glenbow Museum for March 6, 1994 between 2-4 p.m.—right after Bettina Grunwald's. Nothing much happened until well past three o'clock, a delay which allowed me to browse around at **The Feminist Works From Glenbow's Art Collection**; I thoroughly enjoyed seeing one of Mary Scott's wonderfully obsessive syringe paintings as well as Faye Heavysield's minimalist and seamless works made of wire, wood, grass and cloth. Also, I chatted with some other early comers who wanted to know what I thought of the opening of *Fantasmagoria* the hottest show in town. When I told them I hadn't seen it, I was told to watch an interview with some of the members of the collective on *ARTAGE*. Animatedly they talked of "body parts flying around" and discussed whether some of the scenes were "simulated or not." Moving on to Perron's installation, I went from one part to another. Some left me uninterested (*Théatres de Machineas*), some were okay to listen to (for a moment), some amused me like the pietà-like portraits with Mireille as a sexualized Madonna, and other components like the *Mucous Moments* wall intrigued me. One wall was covered with dozens of what looked like assorted fishing tackle (I know nothing about fishing). Each piece hung on nails on the wall so that it seemed as though one was looking through a window at a steady sort of rain—nothing menacing, just steady and plentiful enough. As I came closer to the wall, I recognized the words written below each one of them (in French), the infinitive of mucous producing verbs: *baiser*, *embrasser*, *desirer*, etc. I caught myself looking at that wall over and over—at least after every pause I took when I tried to decipher some of the statements on the accompanied print material on the exhibit.

How many times...? surrenders to the Christian ritual of confession as it simultaneously refuses patrimony, matrimony, and the traditional prohibition of female sexual

desire. The artist conveys her awareness of the effect of confessional testimony, with its redemptive disclosure and obsessive retelling of infinitesimal detail...By providing intimate disclosures of her several selves, the narrator of this discourse of the confessional identifies herself as a desiring woman, and as a woman who refuses the constraints of compulsory reproductive heterosexuality. In her apostasy, can she find redemption?²⁴

Why would an apostate be seeking redemption? (apostasy = abandonment of religious faith, vows, principles, or party). Why and from whom would one seek redemption when by the artist's admission, we are dealing with a desiring ex-nihilo woman? (no patrimony, no matrimony, no prohibition, etc.). Why "surrender" to the ritual of confession while abandoning the regime that signifies it?

Right after the above quoted passage the following quote/aphorism appears: "Wherever Christianity has a powerful presence, the ritual of confession seems to influence the social discourse of the self."²⁵ Who is the author of this quote? Mireille Perron, someone else? There are a number of similar quotes, un-named and un-noted. Why then would a free-floating apostate be going through the motions of "confessing?" Who is putting on whom here? I must wait and see.

Once everybody arrived—and it was a full house—Glenbow curator Annette Hurtig introduced Mireille and immediately it became apparent that the performance would be a take-off on TV talk shows—both women spoke to each other and the audience through a microphone. "Is there, for example, a link between the compulsion to have sins absolved and the Oprah Winfrey show?"²⁶ [Maybe yes, maybe no, but an apostate cannot worry about sinning, right?] Mireille played (?) herself as the visiting artist, and when asked to talk about herself and her work she decided to respond to the request by reading excerpts from one of her published short stories "The Fakir" (An apostate redeeming old sins?). Then we listened to a number of audiotapes, all of which had women's voices, and throughout the listening we were guided by the artist to focus on various aspects of desire/pleasure/bodies. She

raised the questions, she alluded to answers. One got the impression that "her confession" was bypassing the disciplinary censors—those discourses and practices that keep the self under veils. "Do we stop being sexual beings when we enter the classroom?" was one of the questions. I would have liked to have replied, since I, too, am an educator, but on the exhibit note I had read earlier that "...in art or literature, it may be misleading to look for answers. It is much better, I think, to keep asking questions."²⁷ But what about in confessions? Doesn't the questioner expect an answer from the questioned? If this is a confession, then why not give it a try? And all of a sudden it hit me: when Annette Hurtig—mike in hand—ventured into the "audience" to elicit response, the respondents were pre-chosen, most had even prepared statements from which they read. Mireille Perron was the author, the subject, the director, the questioner, the questioned, the decipherer of the message and the consoler, all at once! ["no patrimony, no matrimony, no traditional prohibitions, just the narrator of this confessional discourse"—since when is a discourse non-contingent upon history and power?].

The impossibility of non-positionality within and outside confession became very evident when two males (a recent ex-student, and a current one) responded to the request of Hurtig. Their discomfort was evident; maybe Mireille Perron (an artist, a faculty member, a teacher) in her practice thought she could disregard "traditional" prohibitions, but could those who were asked to respond refuse her request? Especially students? Another question on the exhibit note: "What happens to the feminist concept of the personal as political in such a mediated climate?"²⁸ Well, since we've been implored to not seek answers, just keep asking questions, I would reply then with another question: What happens to feminism when it acquires panoptical tendencies? At the end of the opening performance, I thought to myself—no reciprocity here, no permeability. And definitely, no waffling whatsoever.

While I am writing this piece and looking back on *How many times...?*, I want to believe—if for no other reason except that Mireille is very smart—that what took



COURTESY OF THE GLENBOW MUSEUM

Mucous Moments: How Many Times...?, Mireille Perron, 1994.

place that Sunday afternoon, was a staged parody of a confession because she wanted to make clear the impossibility of being members of the society we are while being able to have an un-mediated experience of the self. I read the ahistoricity of the aphorisms on the exhibit sheet, the inattention to asymmetrical relations acted out in the "talk-show/confession," and choose to decipher these actions either as pedagogical (albeit creative) attempts to bring home that our bodies are thoroughly marked by the institutional positions we've occupied and still occupy, or, by her performance alluding to some metaphysics of the body—an authentic non-phallic sexuality. I want to believe that the first is the case. If not, then the following quote from Carole-Anne Tyler might help us clarify the issues involved with the second possibility:

Camp (like mimicry) functions complexly by dragging in many differences at once that are all too easily articulated with phallic narcissism in a symbolic which is really a white, bourgeois, and masculine fetishistic imaginary. I have suggested this narcissism needs to be analyzed, its phallic impostures unveiled as such. For that to happen, gay theorists (like feminist theorists) must recognize their positioning in a number of discourses besides those of gender and sexuality and accept difference, including self-difference and lack.²⁹

Before I got around to go see *Fantasmagoria* I had seen the interview in *ARTAGE* and read the reviews/interviews in *The Calgary Herald*³⁰ and *The Gauntlet*. The latter review could have been written by one of those I overheard at the Glenbow:

Let's talk about sex, baby. Lesbian sex. Dyke sex. Sex fantasies. That's what a group of six artists who call themselves Lock Up Your Daughters wants you to

do...Important: these videos are graphic—sometimes very subtle, but often very graphic. There are breasts, pubic hair, scenes of oral sex, and even a dildo. Yet if this show was just a bunch of erogenous zones on parade, you wouldn't care or even flinch. (Or would you?)³¹

The most telling interview was the one in *ARTAGE*. A couple of statements there piqued my curiosity sufficiently to induce me to go down to the New Gallery and see for myself; one was the fact that some members of the collective had to stop and think of a fantasy that would be lesbian and another was a self-conscious—and I take it not too happy attempt—to objectify her fantasy, but believed the political project to be important enough to do so. Prior to going to see the video installation, I had never seen any video erotica/porn, neither straight nor gay and anything else in between. I am not a videophile—probably our household is the only one in Calgary without a VCR and of all the films I have seen, I can't recall an explicit homosexual encounter. Not quite "visually-learned" my response then!

When I made it down to the Gallery, the next Saturday, it was a quiet morning. I decided to simply begin on the left with *Swelter* and keep going one after the other. Then trouble hit with *Girlie Movies*! The idea of setting up a curtained booth, where the video monitor and viewer could be "hidden" for some "naughty" moments was okay as ideas go—but the senses were considerably pained attempting to see *Girlie Movies*. Can anyone watch a TV screen from three feet maximum from their face? I got cross-eyed and "headached"—was this the effect wanted (as a joke?)—to punish someone for going into the booth? I took a break after that and sat outside to read some of the artists' statements and watch the reaction of others who ventured into the booth—some tried to adjust the screen, all left almost immediately in amazement or laughter. Was that the intended purpose? Then I moved on to *Gens de Foque* all the way to the end at Anne Golden's *Fat Chance*,

the only one I found artistically creative and vulnerable enough to be erotic: the unpublicized parts of her and other bodies and their stories kept me thinking (imagining) of what their conversation might be. I found the rest mainstream and Hollywood-like which can have two explanations: with my video-illiteracy who am I to say? Or, could it be that the mainstream fantasies have been bred into all our bones, that when lesbians fantasize it is rather mainstream? At least, I did not feel I was watching something queer.³² It would be interesting to hear reactions on *Fantasmagoria* from both the homosexual and heterosexual communities. Also, from those who know video as an art form: were these videos artistic? Is it creative enough for something to be given public space just because it is made by lesbians? I have no problem regarding the political intent of this project: homo-erotica should be out and not censored, and it should not be refused funding just because it is not heterosexual/masculine; but at the same time, should something be funded just because it is (may be) sexually subversive? I have not heard anyone raise some of these questions.

In the *Herald* interview one of the Collective members was quoted as saying, "The original intent of the show, which still stands true, was to promote dialogue within the gay community as well as to give permission (my emphasis) to people in general to explore their sexuality and their fantasies."³³ Having taken advantage of the "permission" given to me, I found this gesture rather chauvinistic, as I find the name *Lock Up Your Daughters*. I went to see the installation, which was apparently produced specifically for *Feminist Spin*. I did not see any openings for coalition with those of us who are not lesbians and who recognize other differences as being important along with that of sexual identity, such as class and race. Carla Wolf's article in *Cameo* describes the group and project:

Lock Up Your Daughters' presentation of *Fantasmagoria: Sexing the Lesbian Imaginary* at the New Gallery, March 5-26, 1994 in Calgary, is a multi-media collabora-

tion of six lesbians living in different parts of Canada. Three gay women in Calgary, a queer from Vancouver, a lesbienne from Montreal, and one bi-coastal dyke are using video, film, photography, text and installation to explore and present some of our sexual fantasies.³⁴

Because of my *Fantasmagoria* encounter I have now started reading in the area of queer theory—a lot of good work is being done in that area. Where is the feminist community going with *Fantasmagoria*? Back into its separate closets?

Before some final thoughts, I would like to say that the artistic community needs to go back for some soul-searching regarding the *Bound to be Tongue-Tied: Gaggling on Gender*, another forum that never was (even though I was told not to miss this one, it would have been the forum to end all fora). When I got there at 8:30 p.m. it looked like a high school play night and the only gagging I got was from the copious cigarette smoke. I missed the short performances by arriving late. The short time I was there, I looked for the side shows (promised on the advertising poster) but all I saw was the regulation attire of black, mostly leather black, some brightly colored hair, and some wigged persons. But this is the event that got most publicity. The advertising poster had nothing to do with the "carnavalesque" night (read party)—and shared little with so many events of *Feminist Spin*. To have such a misbegotten event mark the month for the wider community is a pity.³⁵ To speak of the unspeakable is not enough—and I am not thinking of the Ken Kowalskis of the world here—I am thinking of those of us who claim to have a political project: "articulateness and representation are (not) in themselves a virtue."³⁶ [Editor's note: The reader is advised to consult a person who *did* see the whole show. In addition to the performances, there were three side shows and much dialogue/debate.]

Public dialogue is the first step in sharing public life; continuing dialogue is needed in order for members of

any group to develop coalitions, to understand their positions/positionings without force or violence. Joan Caplan and Mary Lou Riordon-Sello created for us a "safe" place during the month of March 1994, making dialogue possible. That the "safety" of the space they created was felt could be seen in the exposed vulnerability of those who participated—emotional, cultural, political vulnerability. But since there is no closure to any debate, to any dialogue, in this text I have tried to look at the strengths, the difficulties and contradictions facing us at this moment in feminist history/practice. Feminism has helped us understand the contradictions of patriarchy enacted out in capitalist, polycolonial countries. Feminism has also helped us see how as women we participate in contingent, historically specific regimes of social practices, how we act daily within a web of overlapping identities and group affiliations. In view of the above, I want to raise this final question: How prudent is it for us to believe at this historical juncture that our bodies can lead us to the immediate "truth," uncontaminated by phallic discourses of ourselves? Nancy Fraser, in her essay "Foucault's Body Language: A Posthumanist Political Rhetoric" raises a similar question: "Why does it (body language) in particular seem promising as an anti-disciplinary stratagem?" As food for future thought, I would like to end this review essay with her reply:

One way to answer this question is to appeal to the tactical value of body language as a counter to the "ideophilia" of humanist culture. The rhetoric of bodies and pleasures, in other words, can be said to be useful for exposing and opposing, in highly dramatic fashion, the undue privilege modern western culture has accorded subjectivity, sublimation, ideality, and the like. But this is to treat Foucault's suggestion as a flashy strategic ploy aiming to "épater les bourgeois." Unless more can be said about the uses of

body talk for thematizing at least some of the major social and political issues of the day—issues such as the prospects for democratic, nonbureaucratic, nonauthoritarian socialism; the ecological crisis; scientism, technologism, and the deformation of public life; sexism, racism, homophobia, national and religious chauvinisms; the relations between modern and traditional cultures; disarmament; mass culture; the family; poverty—unless body talk can speak in some way to these, Foucault's proposal might understandably be thought jejune.³⁷ ✱

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FOOTNOTES

1. Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks With Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. viii.
2. Amy Gogarty, "Art in the March: Celebrating Our Different Voices," *Artichoke*, 5:2 (1993): 32-39.
3. Joan Caplan and Mary Lou Riordon-Sello, *Press Kit for Current Connection*, n.p.
4. *Ibid.*
5. From a copy of the performance piece by Yasmin Ladha and Roberta Rees, "Gully Belly" (working title).
6. Nicole Ward Jouve, *op. cit.* VII.
7. The first line is by Hélène Cixous, quoted somewhere in Ward Jouve; the rest are my adaptations of same as result of how I responded to the events of March 12, 1994.
8. Isla Burns, quoted in exhibit catalogue—text by Kitty Scott—*Three Alberta Sculptors: Ken Macklin, Isla Burns, Clay Ellis*, (The Edmonton Art Gallery, Spring 1993), p. 3.
9. Caterina Pizanias, "Making Their Mark in the Age of Theory," in the exhibit catalogue *Three Alberta Sculptors*, *ibid.* p. 4.
10. Isla Burns, quoted in an unpublished paper by Edie Brewster, "The steel sculpture of Isla Burns," p. 24.
11. Mike Murphy, "Intuition Before Order: A Conversation with Faye Heavyshield," *Artichoke* 5:3 (1993): 48-55.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
13. Ladha and Rees, *op. cit.* p. 1.
14. *Ibid.* p. 6.
15. *Ibid.* p. 9.
16. *Ibid.* p. 10.
17. No relation this Kali to the Hindu goddess—just the diminutive of Kalliope, the muse presiding over the heroic epic.
18. *Ibid.* p. 15.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
20. *Ibid.* p. 5.
21. *Ibid.* p. 13-14.
22. All three of my wishes came true at the Heartland Café on May 3, 1994.
23. For further discussion of Jin-me Yoon's work see *Touring Home: Jin-me Yoon*, exhibit catalogue, The Edmonton Art Gallery, 1991; Caterina Pizanias, "Making the grade: multiculturalism and the arts in Canada," in *Blurring Genres: studies in cultural practice*, Number 5, 1994: 11-19.
24. Mireille Perron, exhibition statement, (The Glenbow Alberta Institute, 1993) n.p.
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*
29. Carole-Anne Tyler, "Boys Will Be Girls: the Politics of Gay Drag" in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. by Diana Fuss (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), p. 62. For a different take regarding the separation of ideas from desire read Margaret Talbot's "A Most Dangerous Method: The disturbing case against Jane Gallop, feminist provocateur" in *Lingua Franca* 14(2) 1994: 24-40.
30. Nancy Tousley, "Film and video artists take risks to depict lesbian sex" *The Calgary Herald*. [Note: The Herald covered only two events, *Fantasmagoria* and *Jacine Gurney: Sun Over Histories*. I wonder why the other events were bypassed].
31. William Ho, "New installation only as controversial as you make it," *The Gauntlet*, March 10, 1994, p. 27.
32. I am just now becoming connected to the rather large and interesting discourse of queer theory and politics. Thanks to suggestions by Susan Bennett and Mary Joy, I have now read and recommend the following: Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" in *Performing Feminism: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. by Sue-Ellen Case (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 270-279; and "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in Diana Fuss, *op. cit.* pp. 13-30. Lisa Duggan, "Making it Perfectly Queer," *Socialist Review*, 22(1) 1992: 11-31; Arlene Stein, "Sisters and Queers: the decentering of lesbian feminism," *Socialist Review* 22(1) 1992: 33-55; and Allyson Lunny, "Bound to the Body: The Queer Sites Conference" *Parrallélogramme* 19(2) 1993: 35-42.
33. Nancy Tousley, *op. cit.*
34. Carla Wolf, "Lesbian Sex in the Public Eye," *Cameo*, ... p. 40-41.
35. "Art with a 'Feminist Spin': Some publicly funded Calgary galleries make March their official fembo month," *Alberta Report*, March 28, 1994: 30-31; "Deputy premier pans gender-based show," *The Edmonton Journal*, March 31, 1994, A7; "Gender bender show irks Tories," *The Calgary Herald*, March 31, 1994, A3; "Kowalski says he'll put a stop to kinky shows," *The Calgary Sun*, March 31, 1994.
36. Elizabeth Grosz, quoted in Allyson Lunny, *op. cit.* p. 36.
37. Nancy Fraser, "Foucault's Body Language: A Posthumanist Political Rhetoric" in her *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, p. 62.