

WHAT MAKES A FEMINIST SPIN?

By

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"It's about taking back a women's life...she gets things done...she has a life...and that is all there is to it"

writer **Aritha van Herk**

at the **International Women's Day** opening
at the **Alberta College of Art**. March 1991

International Women's Day 1994 will not be forgotten soon by the feminist art community. The IWD March was the political kick-off for **Feminist Spin**. **Feminist Spin** was a multi-disciplinary month-long cultural event showing the "depth and diversity of Feminist Practice within the Calgary community" according to the coordinators **Joan Caplan and Mary Lou Riordon-Sello**. The symbolism of the March started politically at **Calgary's City Hall**, and ended in the **Glenbow Museum** with a spiritual celebration by composer **Marcia Epstein** called **Laudes Matris: A liturgy for God the Mother**. Involvement crossed cultural art boundaries. It included grass-roots people in the **March** who made it happen, to support from large institutions such as the **Glenbow Museum** host of many programmes associated with **Feminist Spin**. The event echoed "the intermingling of media" in the feminist art community according to the two coordinators. These means varied from art exhibitions to choral music to lectures, performances, literary pieces, hands-on art lessons and workshops, to videos. **Feminist Spin** reached out to a broad spectrum of people throughout the city.

Feminist Spin was about Feminist Practice, the woman as artist. "Our work was making spaces for women's voices and manifested itself in different ways" said the collaborative coordinators Caplan and Riordon-Sello. These two artists have "chosen to work collaboratively ...from a need to work with and be part of a community...individual authorship becomes diffused...this accentuates the intension/meaning".

This being said, an objective of **Feminist Spin** was "to see the community, to affirm that there is a really viable, active, loud community". The process of locating these voices was the art of the artists Caplan and Riordon-Sello in "trying to expand to the community...we wanted to get a lot of people involved...to have other people's perspective". They searched for feminist expressions throughout Calgary; "it's easy to do the whole city because you ask everybody" exclaims Caplan. The results provided a curious mixture. It showed the effectiveness of individuals working with the support of large cultural institutions in our city. These included the **Alberta College of Art**, the **Glenbow Museum**,

and to a lesser degree, the **University of Calgary** and **Mount Royal College**. Even more supportive were the smaller organizations like artist-run gallery **Truck** and **Artichoke** magazine.

A powerful example of the hard-won support that Feminist Spin managed to win was characterized by the city's large **Glenbow Museum**. The **Contemporary Art Curator Annette Hurtig** reacted positively when approached by our dynamic duo. Together they decided to programme the **New Alberta Art** with feminist work by **Mirielle Perron**. At her opening **How Many Times?**, the artists rearranged the traditional guest lecture format and coordinated a moving participatory performance art piece. Her "confessional" involved friends, colleagues and students speaking for her various perspectives. This emphasized the "different voices" that the organizers were searching for.

When examining visual art venues, the coordinators **Caplan** and **Riordon-Sello** found that the **Glenbow** was "promoted and perceived as Calgary's repository and presenter of this city's most substantial art collection". As such it was targeted by the coordinators as an influential institution. When curating an exhibition of contemporary **Feminist Works from Glenbow's Art Collection** almost 17,000 artworks, only 14 dealt appropriately with feminist concerns. As **Caplan** commented, this made "a fairly strong political statement that added a lot of depth". On the other hand, these works did include such well-known national artists as **Faye HeavyShield**, **Rita McKeough** and **Mary Scott**. The mainstream **Glenbow** also provided space for a multitude of Calgary's active fringe groups, including **EM/Media**, **Maenad Theatre** and **International Women's Day Committee**.

The **Glenbow's** participation in **Feminist Spin** provided an authoritative symbol; even a massive, tradition-bound, slow-changing institution was willing to critically examine the past and to remain open to new ideas and changes. **Feminist Spin** was a tool that examined some of these policies. Large organizations showed they were amenable to review when people were no longer willing to go along with the status quo. That this challenge to the system had already started was exemplified by the **Glenbow's** showing Toronto's **Janice Gurney** in a major contemporary retrospective.

Calgary's commercial art galleries also proved that a woman artist was a viable commodity. For an historical approach, the more traditional **Master's Gallery** did two years of research to put together **A View of One's Own: Canadian Women Artists 1890-1960**. This show of well-established art reaffirmed well-known artists such as **Sybil Andrews**, **Emily Carr**, **Janet Mitchell** and **Marion Nicoll** as part of the long-standing art establishment. This was one agreeable unofficial off-shoot not directly connected with **Feminist Spin**, but receiving a higher profile because it was happening simultaneously. In a more up-to-date vein, the **Virginia Christopher Gallery** showed current Calgary women artists including **Helen Sebelus** and **Bev Tosh**. One of Calgary's most prestigious contemporary art

galleries run by **Paul Kuhn** focussed on a single well-known female artist **Isla Burns**. The artist-run centres were, as usual pointing the way of the future, The controversial **Fantasmagoria** at the **New Gallery** was a lesbian-based video installation that said “I just want to be me!” Another voice of women was allowed to be heard.

An invigorating participatory basic involvement occurred at the ACA volunteer student-run Marion Nicholl Gallery and 372. Exhibitions, performances, discussions and readings, reflected diversity within Feminist Practice according to organizer Dianne McAfee. Caplan and Riordon-Sello commented on the two individuals, students Donna White and Dianne McAfee, “ They didn’t just help us they did it! They did the whole thing. They had a budget... it was a lot of work. They took responsibility for all...(although) they had never done anything like that”. This statement illustrates the benefits provided by mentoring between established artists and students who remarked that they viewed this experience as “an excellent learning opportunity”.

An example of the spontaneous kind of commitment so typical to **Feminist Spin** was the student feminist writing available in the **Luke Lindoe Library** at the ACA. Organized by instructor **Amy Gogarty** with the help of students **Alex Kein** and **Zoe Williams**, it initiated a reflexive commentary by the readers. **Gogarty** launched it because she saw the need to recognize “feminist research in the written discipline”. Revealed **Caplan**, “ the whole thing was lovely... you could sit with other people reading. There were comment sheets... it was just delicious”. **Gogarty** observed “**Feminist Spin** showed that even while the rest of the city is falling apart on the art issue, the students could take responsibility and do it.” How did this voluntary participation surface? According to the coordinators “you have to be in the place, feel the pressure...it allowed people when they saw a need, to just do it.” **Feminist Spin** encouraged another level of feminist voices to express themselves.

The widespread venues of **Feminist Spin** were too many to mention; the brochure listed over 50 events, “ trying to expand to the community.” Some events not mentioned yet included TV’s **ArtAge**, **Canada Council Visiting Artist** lectures, **CJSW** radio, **Plaza Theatre**, **Quickdraw Animations Society**, **Recubix** and **YMCA** art lessons by the **Muttart Art Gallery**. There were even more; the spectrum was broad.

During the initial planning stages of the month-long **Feminist Spin**, **Caplan** and **Riordon-Sello** found that when choosing the term feminist, it was “very loaded and caused some people to recoil. This “helped to make us aware of different value systems, of being open” to new approaches and ideas. Innovative strategy was essential in the planning of the event. The genesis of **Feminist Spin** really started a few years ago when Caplan and Riordon-Sello were students at the **Alberta College of Art**. They were looking for their own individual voices as artists, but they found a void in the researching. “Art historically, there are no

women's voices and no references". As **David Garneau** has commented, "A lot of histories are lost and histories are our life." Musing on this process, **Caplan** points out, "Art comes from behind us and moves us forward. If there are no women artists behind us, how can we carry on?"

The question concerning women artists of the past was effectively addressed by one **Feminist Spin** event. This was the **Artemisia Project Exhibition** organized by **Dr. Ann E Calvert**. Founded on "the story of **Artemisia Gentileschi**, a seventeenth century Italian painter...[whose] lifelong commitment produced bold, innovative works...[that were] extraordinary for women." **Gentileschi**, a silent mentor for many women artists served as a "springboard" for the goals of the project. The framework for the project combined the valuable role model and "experience of practicing professional artist in this community" such as textile artist **Jane Kidd**, with art students like **Nicole Howe** from **Lester B. Pearson High School**. The result according to co-curators **Calvert** and **Katherine Ylitalo** of the host **Nickle Arts Museum** "made a remarkable contribution to art education at the high school level in **Calgary**." Voices from the past were researched to provide a voice for women artists of the future.

The past and future of women artists as presented in **Artemisia** were complimented by voices of today heard at the **Feminist Spin Forum**. Expressing a women's present identity through autobiography, artist **Faye HeavyShield** and writers **Roberta Rees** and **Yasmin Ladha** provided current expressions of woman's identity suffused with issues of ethnicity and racism. Intense discussion erupted at the break continuing at an informal level at the **Forum**, and for many of us, throughout our lives.

In summary, for many, **Feminist Spin** strongly marked a political moment in time. The reading was mixed. Most of these people, places and events were associated with the **Alberta College of Art**, an active agent on **Calgary's** contemporary art scene. Its' sister art institution, the **University of Calgary**, generally lagged behind in participation but expressed itself most experimentally through the **Art Education Department**.

A real strength of the **Feminist Spin** was undoubtedly spread through our lesser known organizations. This involved struggling galleries such as **Myxmedia Gallery** and **New Zones**. Incorporated here are also the presentations of less traditional venues such as **Jubilee Auditorium Walkway** and **Eau Claire Market**. Another dimension was added with the periphery media such as **CJSW** and **Chanel 10 TV** and **Cameo Magazine**. Obviously the back bone of this event was really the community of people who allowed themselves to be heard.

After the resounding success of this year's **Feminist Spin** people are asking "Will there be another?" Coordinators **Caplan** and **Riordon-Sello** believe it is time for the voice of someone else to be heard. Their offer is if "anyone else wants information it can be done in many different ways. It's open to the next

person.” Perhaps other voices could find expression in pressing political issues like, “racism, native ethnicity etc..” commented **Amy Gogarty**. Society’s professional and volunteers provided an outstanding example of working mentorship in action. It was student **McAffee** who voiced that the effect of “mentoring was very important and led to greater understanding.” A shorter time span, maybe ten days, has been recommended, still allowing for diversity, but with less chance of duplication and burnout. The wide exposure from many venues added the variety that made many events appealing to someone somewhere. Few people in the arts community were totally unaware of at least one spinoff from the month long **Feminist Spin**.