



Ephemera from the Glasgow Women's Library archives

EVEN IF IT'S GOD-AWFUL



I'm digging into a box of printed matter picked from a shelf at the Glasgow Women's Library. Xeroxed A4 pamphlets on a variety of coloured papers containing drawings, cartoons and statements that are provoking, inflamed and funny. I'm pulled in by the humour and urgency. The ephemera is *SINCERE*, it has *FEELINGS*. It is definitely historical, yet it still speaks in the present. The closeness to the present makes contemporaneity to cross it out in an attempt to cancel the past and start as **NEW!** Like getting rid of your old diaries. While browsing, I feel elated by the documents I'm handling. But I also feel something else which is not sentimentality, not nostalgia – something I can't quite determine. Like a smell – difficult to describe.

Embarrassment was an aesthetic before it was an emotion.¹ A confessional VHS tape, art that looks like a cunt, fertility imagery, a performance with your body on display. Overly expressive, it contains an excess of presence, yet it is witty and sharp at the same time. Hard to argue against.

In a 1979 interview, writer and activist Lucy Lippard recalls how she felt embarrassment for the feminist activists around her in the 1970s.² This changed after an intense period of writing, away from the New York art world in Spain (“a

horrible place to be for a 70s radical”), where Lippard came to the realisation that in fact, she was ashamed of her gender. [And what is the difference between shame and embarrassment?] “I did nothing but write fiction for the first time in my life. It was just three and a half months, and all these things came out. I realized it was a shame to be a woman. That was just very peculiar: to be ashamed of something you were, irrevocably [laughs]. It didn't look like a good place to be. I started thinking about all that, and it turned me into a feminist, and I came back and just fell into the movement. ... Whatever women do interests me, tremendously. Even if it's god-awful.”

When chancing the possibility of unease, embarrassment can turn into persuasion. It prevents stagnation by resonating and carrying the momentum forward. A threshold has been crossed and the rest of us can step over it. It is possible for awkwardness to win you over and convince, in the same way humour does. But while humour keeps you at a distance, embarrassment warms you up and pulls you close. Embarrassment gives permission, its kitsch is a release.

I'm watching a videotape about baseball.³ Though not so much about baseball

as it is about desire, gender and sex. The protagonist is a fan, she knows the ins and outs of the game. The game was there with her through her recent life-events, and it didn't go away after things picked up, "like a friend who's there when you need her, but who has to return to retain to her own needs after you're well."

The vocabulary of the sport, its *argot*, is comforting. "The words made me feel I had some shred of America for my own, without shame or loss. And so I marvelled at a country that joined words to make *twin killings*, *chin music*, *dialing eight* and *meat hand*. And when some poor baseball player on his way down said that he was trying to *squeeze blood out of the bat*, I thought about all the ways in my life I have tried to do that too."

She is not as a spectator here. She thinks about the stadium, its geometric shape, and what the ritual of the game represents to her.

"The most inchoate emotions I had, drift out of my body and hang suspended, reminding me of my female sex, of orifices, entrances, cavities and cycles." Around an image of a baseball base, she draws a circle in red ink.

She takes her camera to the stadium, with the intention to intervene. She has received a press pass, but prefers the idea of trespassing. A still image of her feet on the grass. She knows she is an intruder here. 'No roving permitted' reads the pass. She roves away, ogles the players, aims the lens of her camera wherever she feels like aiming it, breaking the unspoken code reserved for the female-suspected spectator tramping on the ground of an all-male sport.

She poses unlikely questions to the players:

"One of the things I'm interested in are these pre-historic rites that baseball

emerges from, the sacrificial, the fertility rites... Does it ever seem to you that you're murderous when you're pitching? You know, like you could kill somebody, you feel like killing somebody?" The player glances at his side. Cut.

"As an artist I feel like I'm always under pressure, and every time I do something new it has to be the best." The player smiles enthusiastically and nods, "Yeah." Cut.

A player is sitting in the dugout, looking into the distance towards the pitch and reflects, "Well, you try to have a lot of confidence. That's not one of my greatest points." He turns his gaze towards her with the camera and says, "I find trouble having confidence in myself sometimes." Cut.

Medieval choral music. The protagonist is contemplating on a painting of the Virgin Mary with a flower – a metaphor for the way Mary's sex has been fragmented and detached from her body. The protagonist too feels removed from her genitals, while her gender is always on display.

"In the course of my daily life, my sex feels separated from me. From the me with the brain, from the me with a history."

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Sex and embarrassment – the gender and its aesthetic rendered inferior. Sex and gender – blended together historically, one equating the other to justify abuse. The way one's body is extracted from the self and put on display, like a witch at the stake. To categorise one, to frame one in order to induce embarrassment so that one will abandon ideas about themselves.

But historical feminist activism managed to turn embarrassment into a resource.

Feminist campaigning deconstructed the idea of the political poster being sober and earnest. Abandoning the good taste of modernism, it was do-it-yourself and intervene on a shoe-string budget. *We need media.*⁴ Women's presses and publishing houses were set up, and video as a new art form was deployed – a medium without the baggage of male art history. Through various forms of design and art, activists applied the ideal of collective production to develop processes and aesthetics specific to their politics and interests in order to communicate on their own terms.

“For a variety of reasons, many artists did not sign their names. For example, artist Betty Kano has stated that she saw herself merely as a ‘facilitator’ when she contributed posters to the Third World Liberation Front in Berkeley in 1968. Jean LaMarr, whose 1973 *Wounded Knee* poster was widely distributed, recalls that to sign such a poster ‘wasn’t the thing to do those days.’ The choice of anonymity was also dictated by the need for protection against the very real threat of government reprisal.”⁵

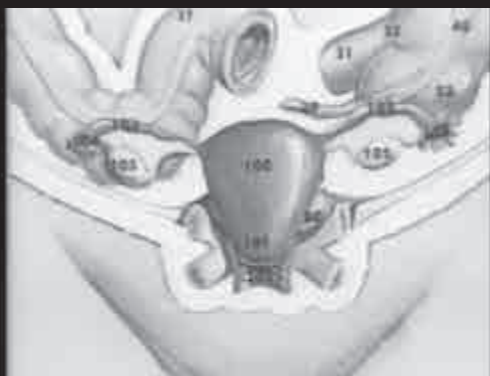
The collective production rejected the idea of the lone artist genius focussing instead on inclusiveness and interaction in an attempt to dissolve the division between the private and public realm. The private, the personal, the embarrassing – was political. Sheila Rowbotham has pointed out some of the questions the 1970s and 80s activism faced: “How to develop resistance on the basis of personal experience when that experience could eclipse the subjectivities of others? How to jolt consciousness while maintaining communication with people who were not necessarily sympathetic towards experimentation with form?”⁶ Since then, the movement has opened up, expanded and morphed into

numerous operations that share ends. It has been cracked open into political clusters with aesthetics that carry that faint, indeterminate and exhilarating whiff from the past that is too close.

NOTES

1. Eva Kenny in *Persona* (Melissa Gordon & Marina Vishmidt, 2012).
2. Video *Data Bank* interview conducted by Kate Horsfield and Lyn Blumenthal, New York City 1979.
3. Vanalyne Green, *A Spy in the House that Ruth Built*, 1989.
4. Zella Wylie's character played by the civil rights advocate Florynce Kennedy in *Born in Flames* (Lizzie Borden, 1983).
5. In *The Power of Feminist Art – The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, New York: H.N. Abrams, 1994.
6. In *See Red Women's Workshop – Feminist Posters 1974–1990*, Four Corners Books 2016.

Screenshots from *A Spy in the House that Ruth Built* (Vanalyne Green, 1989)



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MOVING PERMITTED

No. 2754

ADMITTED TO:

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AUXILIARY PRESS BOX

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