

ARTISTS TALK ON ART JAN 30:

Their Balls were Black and Blue

What began as another bland Friday night panel ended on the verge of a mass "Primal," leaving the audience seething--but refreshed.

"Would A Yellow Artist Ever Paint Blue Balls?" was the mysterious (and never explained) title of an evening devoted to feminism--not eroticism--in art. Bernadette Hackett, Benny Andrews and Joan Semmel were panelists. Anita Steckel, moderator.

Steckel, among those generously phallus-sprinkled canvases the panel took place, began by asserting that "raised pinkies" and tasteful decorations don't constitute art, and capped a series of denunciations with "let them eat cock." Benny Andrews claimed, "There's little work around that really moves you." His images are based on the Klan and the American Flag--though we had to take his word for it since he had no slides to show. Hackett showed slides of her "vaginal imagery" paintings, including a shower of red arrows around a vagina, and a cactus to stand for painful intercourse, with a running commentary about women's gynecological miseries and humiliations. Semmel showed faceless nudes, paintings of herself with intimate friends. All four said their work is not only inspired by real images, it's meant to project an individual gut response to reality.

Prodded by Steckel's bitter wit, Hackett's sad but true stories, and

the general tone of the talk, many men in the audience were visibly disturbed by the time the panel asked for questions. In fact their display of anger, hurt, threatened feelings, even jealousy, was more interesting than the panel. One frustrated artist said his work was similar to Semmel's but less successful. Riled, he accused her of "hiding behind a banner of Women's Lib." He slipped and referred to the artist as "he," which brought a quick snap from Semmel--"She!"

Other comments: "This shows hatred of men." "Women are helping to fragment society." "You're neglecting the oriental unifying principal [Yin & Yang]." A man told Semmel, "You're excluding men...portraying women, not a couple...the work is propaganda, not personal."

Semmel, whom we've never seen in better form, had roused the audience with eloquence, and been applauded for a well-displayed flash of temper. She replied (in seeming contradiction to earlier statements about individual gut response): "There is no such thing as an individual. We are all in a political-social situation...the female has always been portrayed by men. You had all of history...calling it Greek Classicism, Orientalism...the whole genre of the female nude. Now it's women's turn, and we're hanging ours on Women's Lib."

On the way out my neighbor commented, "Those balls aren't blue--they're black and blue!"

-- Bibi Lenček

continued THREE PANELS IN SEARCH OF A SUBJECT

very values, i.e. capitalist, sexist, racist, that art is or should be against.

At least I think this self-contradictory summary indicates the range of panelist opinion. The talk was confused and the audience said so. They also soon got around to ironic confessions: being corrupt creatures, they want to show in major museums. And along with the panel, they noticed that minorities need museums. Black and chicano artists use street walls to reach "the people" but their work is destroyed by the bulldozer in a civic act known as urban renewal.

Current art politics and the new left have much in common. Both have a vision of the good life that is somewhat dictatorial--in art's case about what to paint and for whom. Perhaps the panelists do not mean to legislate. But even this simple protest raises complicated issues. The positions are familiar--from Sarah Charlesworth's preference for "a healthy society over beautiful objects" to Carl Andre's bid for Kunst halls, like the Soho Center itself, to show living art, a "constant flow of art."

Some want museums to function as cathedrals. But museums are not cathedrals. They cannot reflect an integration that died with the middle ages. Art today is a commodity, another object. Protesting Rockefeller's inordinate cache makes political sense, but will not alter that fact. For our time, Rocky is God.

Nor can one claim that it is the act of putting art in museums and other safe-deposits that separates it from life. The attempt to transform the world by altering who shows what, where, and when, does not question whether such change can be achieved by canvas.

I said the panelists' ground was familiar. So is mine. My source is Duchamp's work and I don't see how the more radical panelists (in this case, Sarah Charles-

worth and Carol Condé) can fail to see that their logic takes them to his doorstep. From this location, much panel talk sounds self-indulgent and old-fashioned at that.

Back at A.I.R. again on February 23 was an exception to panel chaos, perhaps because only two panelists, Whitney curators Barbara Haskell and Marcia Tucker, showed up, and with Mary Beth Edelson moderating, their talk was focused. "Changing and Stabilizing Women's Art From the Curator's View" was the title, though the discussion was of the woes of the curator.

Having asked that the curators be welcomed (this was not the night to attack the Whitney Bicentennial or museums in general), Edelson enumerated the "areas of exploration" in gender art. But both curators swiftly scotched the notion, insisting that "really good art transcends all categories." "I try," said Marcia Tucker, "to look, not categorize. Analysis comes from staying with the work for a long time. There is no need to be self-conscious about women's art, as we were in '71. There's enough out there--good, bad and in-different--to choose from."

Both agreed that the women's movement influenced the current open climate in art. Barbara Haskell thought, however, that this was simply one facet of a larger cultural shift, a turning inward reflected in everything from EST to Jesus Freaks. "The personal integration of the individual is the new myth," she said.

On the poor representation of women in museum shows, Marcia Tucker said current shows still reflect the past. "When they do the decade of the seventies, women will come into their own."

As for the museum's role and their own, neither curator was optimistic. "One thing this job provides you with is a certainty that you don't get to see art," said Marcia Tucker. She explained that curators are overwhelmed with extraneous work and

continued -- Anne Healy

him in the Western world is the exorcist, the caster-out of demons and devils. The shaman, however, is also an artist--what he offers the tribe is a performance, an act of intense make-believe."

While a shaman works in a group context, I work in a personal context. It's the psychic memory of woman and myself that I'm trying to remember. I'm trying to key into a psychic memory of amorphous shapes. There is sometimes something very frightening in a large piece of cloth blowing over one. It is a primitive instinct to be frightened of something large and hovering and billowing. Perhaps it goes back to the time when we were very small mammals and there were very large birds. And yet flags, banners, pennants, jubilation, joy and pageantry are another experience of cloth. I'm trying to get both of these feelings in my work.

My strongest influences have been from everyday objects and ordinary experiences. Flags on a sunny day, dusty drapes, curtains at night with the streetlights behind them and the shadows passing over them, dresses rustling as I move, the sensuous feeling of wearing anything silk, the hypnotic movement of sails. At one period of my life I did a lot of sailing and spent much time lying under the sails, watching light shine through the fabric. The cloth would fill with the wind and change color and outline. I have used the wind and the capriciousness of the fabric, wrinkling up and filling out. I set up a situation in which I can approximately determine some of the movement, but I can never have total control of a piece, and I never want to. That would be like telling the leaves where to fall.

Shadows are important in my work also. There is always the second piece in each piece--the one on the wall behind the one in front of you.

When I was small, my mother would wash all my Doctor Dentons (the one-piece pajamas with the seat and the feet) on one day. In winter they would freeze on the line, and make grotesque or playful shapes--headless bodies--each one unique. Late in the afternoon, with the kitchen in twilight, and the outside in that clear, thin, grey light of winter, she would pull them in and arrange them all over the room. Leaning against the walls, the table, chairs, stove, they were fascinating objects; once soft, now frozen hard, but slowly, slowly, getting soft again. The fantasy figures doing their frozen dance melted into my familiar clothing again.

l. Geza Roheim, Hungarian psychoanalyst.

This is an edited version of a paper read at an A.I.R. panel, Feb. 9. Mary Beth Edelson, Joyce Kozloff, and Joan Semmel also talked about their work, and showed slides.

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are caught between the institution's Big Business approach--the razzle-dazzle show--and the Art Experience--getting good work shown. She stressed that the museum must preserve its autonomy. When the eggs and tamps hit the windows some years back, "it messed us up. I feel a deep despair because we are working for the same things that the artist wants but we may not be able to work together."

The audience was unusually docile, perhaps because the speakers were both forthright, outspoken feminists. (Tucker dates her conversion to 1969: "...like St. Pauline on the road to Damascus.")