

# SERIOUS ART CRITICISM

A feminist collective unconscious simmered and brewed in a significant number of artworks exhibited in Spare (P)arts, a spring 1995 group art show sponsored by SITE. Dubbed a "community collaboration," Spare (P)arts arose out of an ingenious project involving objects belonging to commercial tenants of downtown L.A.'s Roosevelt building, SITE's space.

Each building tenant was asked to donate a personal or work-related object connected to the work process. The business and service workers who responded varied widely, and included

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doctors and other professionals, as well as building maintenance and construction. Objects donated ranged from paper clips to test tubes, to vacuum-cleaner dust. All were ultimately transformed into artworks that were exhibited.

Many of the artworks directly or indirectly made feminist statements about working and work-related objects. It was not a surprising result, given that the objects sprang out of the traditionally male-dominated office world. In some sense, objects "disgorged" from the bowels of such a masculine context almost invite self-critique.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the inventive piece *Taking A Stand or Other Stories* by **Nena Amsler**. The piece used a construction object of unidentified origin, the shape of which vaguely resembled an artist's palette on a stand. Inset in the half-dollar-sized round circles on the stand were images of women writers, including Michelle Clinton and Wanda Coleman. The encircled images cast onto the wall shad-

ows, which appeared as holes, canceling out the women, or transforming the women into "nothing." This comment on how women artists (and even more so, women of color) are marginalized in society brings to mind poet and critic Alicia Ostriker's discussion of Emily Dickinson and the role of women poets in America from 1650-1960:

In her most striking statement of the position she shared with many women poets who had less skill and courage than she, Emily Dickinson wrote that she was Nobody at approximately the same moment as Walt Whitman was claiming to be everybody. Let us then examine... that signature poem:

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you—Nobody—too?  
Then there's a pair of us! Don't tell!  
They'd banish us—you know!*

*How dreary—to be—Somebody!  
How public—like a Frog—  
To tell your name—the livelong June—To an  
admiring Bog!*

Alicia Ostriker, *Stealing the Language—The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp.39-40.

Carrie Ungerman echoed Amsler's sentiments. Her playful piece *dust to dust* seemingly referred to the deadening meniality of the "women's work" of cleaning. At the same time, by disclosing that the duster and vacuum cleaner in fact were donated by "maintenance men," not "cleaning ladies," Ungerman turned feminism on its head, almost spoofing us or at least cautioning us about the dangers of applying knee-jerk conclusions without careful analysis.

An even more playful twist on the feminist perspective occurred in *Ma Bell* by Sylvia Bock. Sticking out of both sides of the receiver of an old rotary telephone

(the donated object) were long braids. *Ma Bell* displayed an obvious and quite literal visual humor. An accompanying text specifically referred to the folklorish, condescending view of women as idle gossips, clearly evoking the societal view of men as hard-working communicators of essential information.

A less direct approach to a similar set of concerns about women and men was explored in *Prioritize*, by Amy Klees. One of the most aesthetically pleasing pieces in the exhibit, *Prioritize* consisted of small square panels of transparent fabric. The panels were connected by dozens of paper clips (the donated objects) and were hung in the form of a floating, three-dimensional square pillar. Like a Martha Graham creation, the tulle pillar blew in the breeze whenever the front door opened, obscuring the images and words painted onto the fabric, challenging the viewer to search beyond the "veil" for further meanings.

The sharp contrast between the hard, dull, steel practicality of the paper clips and the flowing, diaphanous quality of the transparent pillar served as a metaphor for the contrasting traditional ways in which prioritization occurs in the realm of the male and business world, on the one hand, and the female and spiritual world, on the other hand.

*Permutation*, a video installation by Lothar Schmitz, again highlighted the contrast between the vocabulary of the male and female worlds. The objects donated were several square rubber pads with tubes sticking out of them. The pads appeared to be forty or fifty years old, but were similar in shape to modern heating pads. (One viewer at the exhibition's opening believed the pads were used in the '50s to eliminate cellulite). Almost reminiscent of torture instruments or turn-of-the-century straightjackets, the pads were displayed