

Monica Ross

history or not

*we are considering art history today and yet... we are and we are not...
I have enjoyed the exhibition Live or Live in your head immensely and
yet... there are these gaps, these distances... these not enoughts, these
invisible gaps between what is there and what is not there, the what that
cannot be there of several works in the show and works which were there
in the past but are not there in this present. So... it's history and it isn't...*

we used to talk about centres and margins

race, sex and class

we used to talk about sex and Marx and Fashion

the Goddess or not

the cervix

sleeping with the enemy or not

the right to take a photograph without consultation

painting or not

housework or not

equal pay, usually not

jobs for the boys and not for the girls

to be married or not

to be heterosexual or not

monogamous or not

childcare, probably not

the right to choose to be pregnant or not

what a pain it was walking past a building site

why there were more male lecturers in art schools than women

but more women art students

Pam Skelton slogged through a statistical survey backed by Nalgo

on that one

we used to read Pollock and Parker and Nin and De Beauvoir

and Lippard and Marcuse and Gramsci and Nochlin

and Olsen and Hall and Williams

and Rowbotham and Spare Rib

and any radical thing we could lay our hands on

pamphlet, leaflet, duplicated, handmade, stick and paste

and we looked and looked in libraries
for books on women artists
even though history had said there weren't any
and we asked why?
why not?
and we wore badges which we'd made ourselves
and we went out in the dark with buckets
and fly posted the posters we'd silkscreened
during the night
on Phil Goodall's kitchen table
and pegged up to dry
next to the socks and the nappies
and we fought and we argued with each other too
about art
about formalism and abstraction
about mens work
and womens work
the gallery system
and community art
and the myth of genius
who wants to live in a garret with small children?
about being white
about being middle -class
about education or not
about imperialism
about industrialisation
about the politics of the family unit in capitalism
about prostitution
about The Media
about representation
about being working class
and not betraying the revolution

and we turned out to strikes

and went on demonstrations
and took photographs
and shouted
Not the Church and Not the State
Women will decide their Fate
and by the time we got to Greenham
How to Protest
had become a performative public art form

and we said what does it mean?
and how do we bring up our children?
and make art
and earn a living
and make art
about this experience
this not
that there is not so much of
in this exhibition either?
this here we go again
where are we then?
we who are not
even though we were
we're in women artists groups
in birmingham, nottingham, leeds and Sheffield
and elsewhere
at a distance from the centre of the art world
but not from cultural, economic and political debate and action
we just about know
through the Womens Movement grapevine
about the Womens Arts Alliance
and the Womens Workshop of the Artists Union
in London
and that they are setting up
a Women Artists Slide Library

and quite a few of us are in critical reading groups
finding out what the historical, social, cultural, political
and gender gaps in our education
particularly our art education,
and quite a few of us are in Trade Unions
the Labour party or the Communist Party
the Workers Educational Association
and we're living in squats, council flats, shared and collectively
organised houses
and lots of us are in consciousness raising groups
getting to grips with The Personal is Political
and we're having to re-think
and re-structure ourselves
before we try and change the world
not to mention art
and we're having to work out
what it might mean to make art in a context
with skills we haven't got yet
but we'll learn in a minute
we're leaving our husbands and shocking the neighbours
not to mention the art critics but I'll come to that later
we're in groups organising around every issue you can think of
going vegetarian and to each others houses
to look at the artworks
hidden under the bed
wrapped up in a drawer
the not really art
/ made it myself from a few bits and pieces
as Kate Walker said
while the children were watching Blue Peter
of an image that was published
in The Women Artists Slide Library Diary
Heart not Art, Home made I'm afraid is the title
but we just used to call it the knitted baby

This is The Womens Postal Art Event
The Womens Postal Art Event
was initiated by Kate Walker
in a workshop
at a Feminist Art History Conference
in Chalk Farm
was it 1975 or 1974?
it doesn't matter if I can't remember
because Kate or Hannah, or Jean or someone else will know
it was after that
that we really got down to reading books

The Womens Postal Art Event was a regional project
started in a spirit of every woman her own darning needle
to quote the catalogue of
Hang up Put down Stand Up
an exhibition organised by the Women Artists Collective of
the Artists Union
which Tina Keane can tell us more about
the Birmingham Womens Artists group
did most of the organisation
for The Womens Postal Art Event
and we discussed
authorship and originality
the ownership or not
of art
collective structures and
or individual art practice
we tried to work out of and into this gap
we said we'll do it together
we'll make art out of our lives,
from its content and form
literally from its material
the broken and discarded bits

the rubbish and the leftovers
the forgotten recycled

and we'll make art out of the time of our lives
that is always between one job, one role and another
and there'll be no hierarchy between one form or another
none of this - that's craft
or - how can that be art?
or - but that's writing; these sheets pasted large on a gallery wall
an account of a back street abortion
which Cathy Nicholson wrote large
in galleries up and down the country
and we said who is this art for?
we said it's for us, it's for women first
so that we know that we are there
and then...
to make our experience visible
in our own terms
we said
the traditional languages of art are not enough
for us
the intent, the content of the work will produce its own form
and some of it will quite soon fall to bits
because the intent
not the object
was the issue
the process of making art work
as communication
rather than the production of commodities
was the issue.

And one woman was often
in a rush
to reply to another

so we made art work quickly
and posted things
back and forth to each other
until whole dialogues on sex, relationships, food, identity, history, politics
angry, sad and funny
began to build up
into collective collections
in each womans home.

In 1975, or was it 76?
these collections
art dialogues
were shown together for the first time in a Manchester Gallery
we slept on floors, worked and ate together
discovered how to make art- and -politics
and have a good time
Waldemar Januszczak reviewed it quite favourably
I wonder if he remembers
in 1977 more than 300 artworks
made by a network
of maybe 20 or 30 women
aged between 20 and 50
I think....
were shown at the ICA
Suzy Varty
Kate Walker
Lyn Foulkes
Tricia Davies
Sue Richardson
Phil Goodall and myself
constructed the exhibition
as a collective installation
a series of rooms
a fridge full of artworks

a walk-in photo album
while the queen was being driven up the Mall
to celebrate the anniversary of her Coronation

for a short while we were infamous
the London critics were mostly appalled
and if anyone wrote about the show
it ended up on the womens, not the art, pages
the Daily Mirror ridiculed us
and one commentator thought our children should be taken into care
we did get invited to a few art schools to give talks
usually by women art historians or women artists
employed in the cultural studies area
on at least one occasion, we had to virtually make a run for it afterwards

hardly anyone wanted to consider The Postal Event as art
maybe it wasn't
then
but it was an art event
what mattered most to us
was that it was a collective, process and time-based social practice
an art strategy
which generated as radical a momentum
as consciousness raising groups of that era were often able to do
inclusive, eventful and empowering
some of us called ourselves artists
or cultural workers
or just didn't bother
I have no idea how much or how little of it still exists
of course it is not in the history books
the museum or mainstream catalogues
and we knew it wouldn't be
don't look for it there
it was not that we had forgotten about art

or the way that its histories are made
not at all
we made a publication called MaMa
as a pun on Dada,
and we wrote it all down
there and elsewhere

the legend anonymous was a woman
was stitched on to one work for good reason

look for the evidence in The Women Artists Slide Library
in old copies of Spare Rib and other Feminist publications
and look for it where the processes that started then
have continued

look for the work all these women
and many others active then
and later

continue to do as artists
in art education, in community projects, in art and public organisations,
in curation,
in campaigns, exhibitions and publications
those who are gone but whose work remains
and those who are still doing their work today
in the here and now

this was

as were many art projects of that time

a social art practice

driven by urgency

and the necessities

of ordinary, but complex, lives

many of these necessities are no more ready to become history than

I am

some are even more urgently pressing now

than they were then
others have returned in their own new clothes

so look for it in the social and collective practices
of other artists and curators now
When I see their work I see a history of work
which is still alive in the head
and which knows itself as the present

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