

Once the series is done I may have my heyday of spontaneity, a tantrum on canvas!

Agnes: You are a full-time professor, you are developing a Fine Arts program. You are Vice-Chair of the Board of Directors of the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba. You have a 12-year-old daughter. How do you find time to paint?

Colleen: I have to fight for my time as an artist. When people have all these demands on my other skills which totally consume my life, I get very defensive about wanting to maintain that time between me and that canvas. I know it is something I have to fight for. I need to get out of the 8 to 5 routine, doing all the proper things for everybody else and just make time for me, the artist.

The freedom that I feel when I am painting! The freedom to do nothing but paint! To paint what I want. Nobody has control in that studio other than me – and maybe the paint and brush.

Agnes: How do you make the transition from the hectic everyday things to where you can immerse yourself totally in your paintings?

Colleen: I do my best to make my schedule, my appointment book as clean as possible with no commitments. I get everything out of the way that I possibly can. When I come home I have to make sure there are clean clothes for a few days, the dishes are done, that there's something easy to fix for dinners for a few days in a row because I don't want to have to break from painting. I don't want to feel guilty that all this other stuff is not taken care of because I've taken the time to paint. There's always that other Colleen Cutschall who comes into my painting – "Maybe your daughter's hungry" – or you know something should be done for someone else. And I just hate that Colleen Cutschall when I'm up in my studio. She makes me really mad. So the only way I can control her is to satisfy her. Give her everything she wants so the other Colleen Cutschall can go up into the studio. So maybe we are a little schizoid. But I know who that other person is, who does everything right, satisfies all the bureaucracies and all the demands of a normal life. But there's a Colleen Cutschall who has to paint, too. And she gets mad, too!

Feminism, Family and Photography

BY SUSAN McEACHERN

Practically every woman has latent artistic abilities that have never been recognized or developed. We may not all be able to paint a picture (though many who have never thought it possible have discovered they could) but we can express this love and recognition of beauty in the decoration of our homes.

— Polly Cramer

I used this statement of Polly Cramer's in an artwork titled *The Home* that I produced in 1981. It seems an appropriate starting point for a discussion of my work because it makes reference to many topics that are still at the centre of my concern: the sexual division of labour, the value of women's traditional labour, artistic production and popular culture. While I have always attempted to situate my work within the familiar — within everyday life — I have also considered the production of this work as art: I have placed the work within an art discourse.

When I speak of the production of my own work I am speaking of the work I do with the medium of photography. For me photography has a number of characteristics I feel ambivalent about. For instance, to say you are a photographer avoids the question of whether you are an artist or not — photographer is its own tidy category. Also, photography has associations with technical wizardry and fancy gadgets — a technique rather than a method by which one gains a voice. As a feminist, to feel the "odd woman out" in such circumstances is not unique to me nor to the field of photography.

In an effort to write about how feminism has affected my work, it is impossible to begin without considering the time and place in which I decided to "launch my career." I don't think it is useful to attempt to define what feminism is in all the familiar and endearing terms. I never "became a feminist," feminism was a definition that came along sometime during my high school years that seemed to describe my experience up to that point. I was just grateful that somebody had given it a name.

I, like many women of my age, was educated by male teachers and, particularly in terms of my photographic education, the majority of my peers were male. One of the main things that feminism has contributed to my work is a sense of having colleagues and the realization that my colleagues span a great number of formal disciplines as well as enter into the mundane routines of daily life. I discovered that when we give ourselves permission to speak, and convince ourselves that our experience and our insights are worthy of note, then categorizations often drop away, titles fade, and we may be asked to join in.

After studying photography in Banff for two years, I moved to

Halifax in 1976 and shortly thereafter began teaching at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. This institution was/is very Fine Art centred, which for the most part excluded/excludes both the medium of photography and the ideology of feminism. Art done by women has, for the most part, been presented and discussed in courses that are segregated from mainstream courses.

"Photographs of the Preparation of Food" consists of 28 images taken in my kitchen of what I consider to be the four stages of food production: bringing the food into the home, preparing the food, presenting/eating the food, and cleaning up the mess. This work was a break from previous work, which was rather abstract and non-specific. I feel that this change was largely due to my contact with two women artists that I met in the late 1970s. The first was Martha Rosler. She taught that while abstract work could be pretty, a photographer could also take responsibility for her voice, and could say something worthwhile without—and this is the hard part—without "ripping off" the people who became less powerful than you were with a camera in your hand. This view poses major trauma to the traditional history of photography. The other person who was influential was Harmony Hammond, an artist who, with a number of women colleagues, formed A.I.R. Gallery in New York City. This gallery was collectively run and was formed because women artists found it difficult to get exhibitions in New York. Harmony came with about six carousels of slides and told us that we were going to see the work of women artists whom we would never see in *Art Forum*.

So inspired, I decided that personal experience was my starting point, my own circumstances my subject, and I began. I later found further reinforcement for this approach in more formalized academic study. At OISE (the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education), Dorothy Smith demonstrated the usefulness of analyzing a microcosm and projecting its relationship to a much larger model.

In view of the cross-disciplinary character of my work, and in my opinion much work that is feminist, I feel it is important to spend some time considering how success is measured when colleagues in the field you consider to be your own do not respond enthusiastically to your work. This can be tough. In producing work that is outside of the mainstream, it is likely that your support may come from outside the mainstream as well. In the field of art-making, a field with no set rules or standards of excellence, this can feel like the height of insecurity and self-delusion. This feeling of isolation common to so many women has served us well in motivating us to seek out those with similar experiences: consciousness-raising is perhaps an outdated term, but it has proven to be a starting point for a unique method of self-education.

The need for a more structured form of self-education led me to enter the feminist studies and gender relations program at OISE. I had just completed a major work on the family titled, "The Family in the Context of Childrearing," and found my work relying increasingly on specific topics that required research into daily life. Many of my artworks have addressed the contrast between individual experience and the representation of this experience in popular culture. In "The Family in the Context of Childrearing," I attempted to represent three different family forms: a nuclear family, a single parent family and a communal family. Each of these family forms was represented by a wall of photographs that presented the daily tasks associated with the

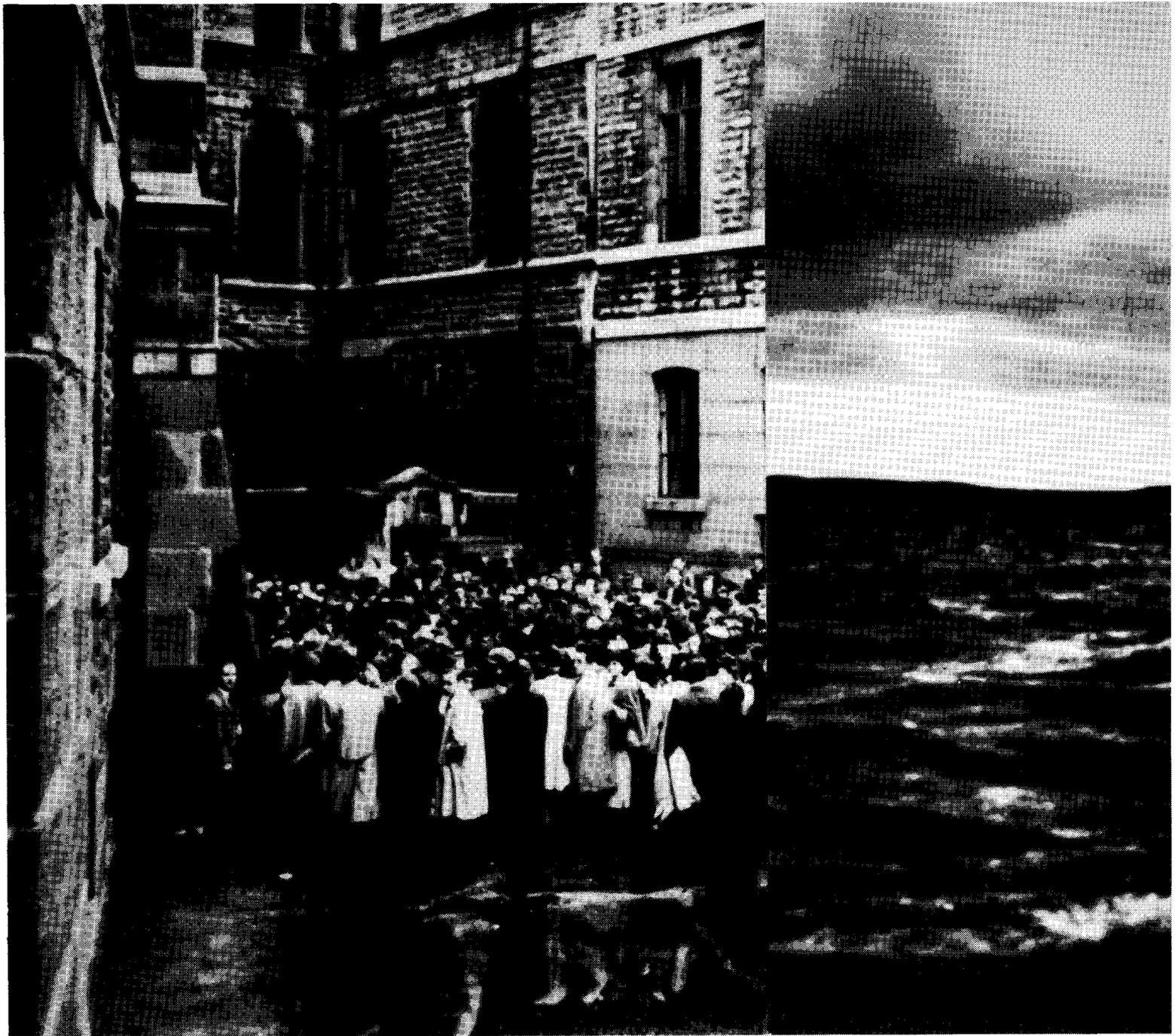
rearing of children. Along with the three walls of photographs, a wall of textual images that included a historical, theoretical, practical and personal text about the family made up the fourth wall. In the sociology department at OISE, I discovered that the concerns I was dealing with in my artworks found a very supportive environment—I was bringing sociological and feminist concerns into another forum.

Along with the discourse of feminism, and complementing this discourse, are the ongoing concerns of photography. Primary among them is the issue of documentary. For a woman working with the dictum, "the personal is political," the problem can present workable solutions. Historically, photography has been one of the most easily exploited and exploiting mediums. By this I mean that it has played a large role in the subjugation and definition of "the other." Women, of course, have figured highly in this definition, but women are by no means the most exploited group. We are all familiar with aesthetically presented sepia-toned images of the dispossessed and disadvantaged leaning against the weathered wood texture of their run-down home. As Martha Rosler stated in her essay "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)," the men of the Bowery "are not particularly interested in immortality and stardom, and they've had plenty of experience with the Nikon set."

For me feminism has meant that a cultural critique is also a personal critique. If we live in a sexist society, how do we practise our sexism? How did we learn it? If we live in a racist society, then how are we racist? How do we as a part of the institutions of our life practise racism? In a recently completed work, "On Living at Home," I attempted to look at the cultural phenomenon of the home, and address issues of gender, history, popular culture and militarism from within the microcosm of the individual living at home.

This four-part work begins with an extreme form of home identification, agoraphobia, and ends with addressing the relationship between the public and private, between the personal and international. With this work I avoided the superior-positioned analysis of "the other" by addressing my own situation—photographing my own home. This strategy is based in the belief that the division between public and private is largely fraudulent and that the individual life reflects the values and misfortunes of the culture. While negative and debilitating in its implications, this belief also carries with it the by-product of self empowerment—we as individuals have the power to enact change. While my works have attempted to deconstruct, to explain social relations historically, they have also contained a critique and a call for change.

Gender and domestic labour have been the most consistent and easily identifiable issues in the work I have produced. The understanding of what it means to be a gendered person in this culture has required a lot of energy and analysis for me to empower myself to act. The relation of gender to domestic labour and the domestic environment has been the form of much of this investigation. Some current debates within feminism suggest that feminists have honoured gender as the singular exploitative ploy of the centuries. While feminism has, not surprisingly, focused on gender, in my view it has also opened doors to the exploitation of sexuality, class and race, and actively addresses and debates these issues. This is not to deny that much remains to be done, but feminism has provided a forum for many voices.





While I had tried to, and even played a little bit, a little poison... certain such... would not... ing en... no... to in... me. I waves... Yes... it... into the sw... the... his... out... he... have... own what... had... some of us would likely sta... his... ly, waitin... for the sto... to... they said it... who le... in... did they know... and to... my... the dea... one that look... eternally... the black... feet... walls... stained... blue red... blood from the eye of the storm. I was... again as I had been before, few... ch... and they would come... as it suited them, my punishment.