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## MARIAN BARLING: FROM LONG SHOT TO CLOSE-UP . . . WOMANSIZE

*Susannah Joyce-Jones*

*Marion Barling est directeur de Women in Focus, un centre de distribution de films et de vidéos situé, à Vancouver en Colombie Britannique. Par l'intermédiaire de son intérêt dans l'art et la sociologie, elle redéfinit la façon dont la femme est vue par la société.*

Imagery is central to women's lives. The ways in which women are presented shapes our self-

perception and in traditional mainstream media, perpetuate the stereotypes that comprise our experience.

For Marian Barling, Director of the Women in Focus Gallery (and film-making distribution centre) in Vancouver, redefining patriarchal concepts and images of women is a primary concern.

Imagery defined by women is not in the mainstream; it has historically been defined from a male perspective. Women had no access to their own imagery. The

significance of this lies in the interdependence between imagery and ideological evolution.

In lectures delivered recently to groups of women in Manitoba and London, Ontario, Barling outlined the cyclical process by which an idea becomes accepted, filtering down from a common experience through institutions which legitimize ideas and images.

Since institutions like those in education are predominantly male-oriented, female experience is usually over-looked. Once ideas are

legitimized, they become symbolic, (art) and are distributed back to the world milieu. Distribution centres, such as galleries, publishers, and film production companies are also controlled by men and thus women are normally denied their own communications.

Barling's interest in the importance of women's imagery is the result of a background in both art and sociology. She combined the two at university and wrote her M.A. thesis on *The Ideological Process of Film*. Fortunately, the thesis committee was feminist and encouraged her to cross the barriers between the two faculties. Today, Barling works within arts and media from a feminist sociological perspective.

Her involvement in feminism and video were almost simultaneous. She feels all art has sociological and political implications.

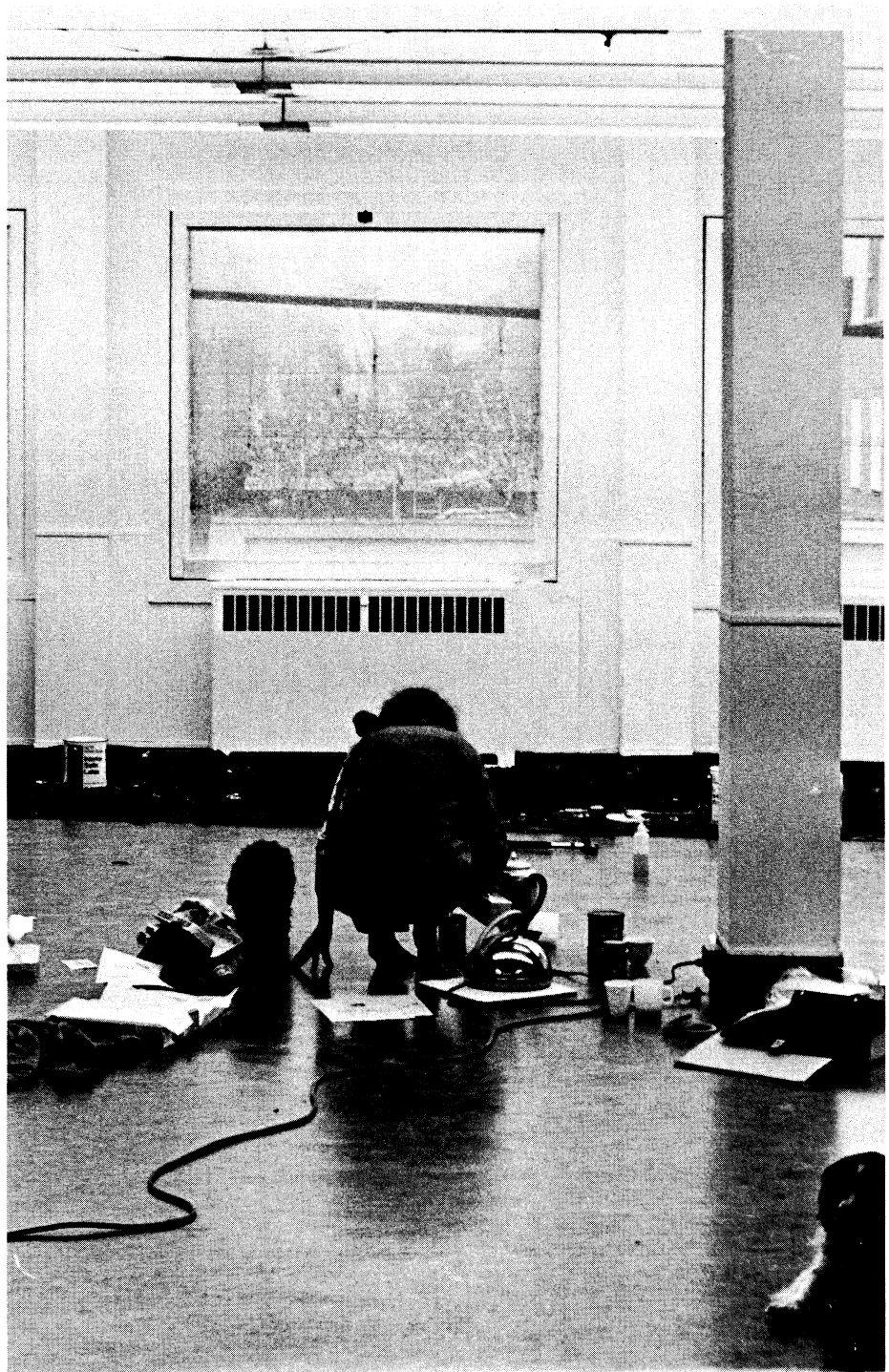
'I don't think that just because the symbolism isn't clear that it isn't political art. We need a body of work produced by women who have some consciousness (and even when they don't have that), to talk and think about and show what feminist is, as a genre.'

Although she is constantly being asked, particularly by men, to define feminist art, Barling shies away from simplistic, one-dimensional descriptions.

'We're still breaking new ground and it's impossible for us to completely know our experience of what it is to be female outside of the patriarchy. We are just starting to find that out.'

'We now have a basis of feminist theory; we have women's media centres and from the work we are doing, we will be able to discover what the experience of being female is. It won't be just one experience; it will be many-levelled, influenced by a number of personal characteristics, as well as the body of knowledge that we learn when we come into society.'

All women artists experience difficulties in making their interpretation of themselves known to the public. A problem specific to feminist film-makers is the lack of access to the technology necessary for their art.



'Also, film is very influential. Almost everyone has a television set, goes to movies. The ideas they present are spread throughout the world and it is very important for a patriarchy interested in maintaining power, to restrict the possibilities of women breaking into that world.'

Women like Lena Wertmuller and Claudia Weil have recently gained some recognition in commercial film-making, but Barling finds their work disappointing from a feminist perspective, although she considers

Wertmuller's work to be technically skillful.

'It isn't enough to show the situation of women; that is what all the rest of the stereotypes do. Unless you implant some questions, then the general public will not stop to think about what they are seeing because everything will appear normal to them.'

'The trick is to either present an alternative image or to include an extra dimension that will make the viewer question an existing cir-

cumstance. The we begin to come near feminist film-making.'

Although working in mainstream media allows women access to their art, Barling has some misgivings about the long range success of effecting significant change from within the system. 'Feminism isn't dividing the existing pie. Feminism is making a new pie.'

Alternatives do exist. In Canada, there are women's film centres such as Women in Focus and the National Film Board's Studio D which make feminist and humanist films on a very small budget.

Last summer Barling was a delegate to the First International Women's Arts Festival and Women's Alternate Forum, held concurrently with the Bi-Decade United Nations conference in Copenhagen. She found great energy and excitement there among women in arts and media. Now she is part of an international network that includes feminist film-makers and distributors such as the French Cinemien and England's Cinema of Women.

Barling is also encouraged by the increase in networking amongst Canadian arts-related women. Organizations such as Montreal's Powerhouse Gallery, Manitoba Women in the Arts, and Woman-spirit Art Research and Resource Centre in London, Ontario are important links for women who must contend with geographic and professional isolation.

Although cutbacks in arts funding are a continual problem for such groups, Barling is confident that somehow women will get the work done, as they always have in the past.

Founded in 1974, Women in Focus makes and distributes films by and about women and shows women's art in its gallery. The library contains more than 50 films on a variety of topics concerning women. Films are available for rent or purchase and distribution.

Producing a new film can be a major undertaking due to a shortage of funding and the necessity of training women on-the-job through short-term 'make-work' projects. These were the conditions under

which Barling recently produced her film on sexual harassment in the workplace, *It's Not Your Imagination*.



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Frequently, she works without an assistant director or even a trained camerawoman. Films and video distributed by Women in Focus receive much positive feedback, but occasionally people expect video to have the same visual appearance as a television show.

There is, of course, a large disparity between mainstream high-budget facilities and the lack of equipment and experienced technicians for feminist film-makers. But many women are not interested in imitating traditional methods; they are exploring new camera techniques which will depict alternate ways of presenting their own stories.

One such method is a re-evaluation of traditional editing practices. Usually these concentrate on a shift from the long shot to a close-up. As Barling notes, this is not a natural way to see people. As an alternative, she cites work done by feminist filmmakers such as Chantal Ackerman, whose film, *Jeanne Deelman*, presents the entire process of a woman washing dishes.

'She gives you a long shot and the camera hardly moves; the editing is minimal. You see the woman washing every cup and every dish for about twenty minutes. Some people say that's boring, but Acker-

man is trying to show meticulously, everything that is done by the woman, to show what a woman's life is.'

Women in Focus is dedicated to making people aware of the truth about women's lives. Four women are currently involved in the co-operative on a full-time basis: Michelle Nickel, who operates the video/film distribution; Sue Moore, who gives community workshops; Jill Pollack, whose focus is the gallery; and Marian Barling, who is presently documenting exhibits.

In celebration of moving to a new home, the first show, held in three separate stages, was called *Womansize: Large Renderings of Women's Imagery*. The purpose of the show was to demonstrate that women can and do work large. Roomy spaces are usually found in traditional, public galleries, that do not normally exhibit work with feminist content.

*Womansize* ran from March until May 1981 and featured carving and three-dimensional work, paper/canvas and fibre. Postcards of the art, posters and a detailed catalogue of the exhibitions were sold. A free list of all films is also available on request.

Shows as visible as *Womansize* and the gradual increase in public acceptance of women's art and media are encouraging signs. Slowly, organizations such as Women in Focus are helping to redefine patriarchal attitudes and imagery of women, validating women's personal experience to become, as Marian Barling suggests, a part of the legitimized body of knowledge that shapes society at large.

*Video and Film: Women in Focus 1982 Catalogue*. \$2.00 from 456 West Broadway, Suite 204, Vancouver, B.C. V5Y 1R3, (604) 872-2250.

- 1 *Marion Barling*, by Marion Barling 1981
- 2 *New Space Women in Focus*, by Marian Barling, 1980
- 3 *Gitskan Woman*, by Doreen Jensen, 1980 in poplar wood, rabbit fur, human hair and acrylics. Postcard photo of same by Marion Barling.