# new feminist now

*Trois femmes étroitement associées aux nouvelles féministes de Toronto au début des années 70 font des commentaires sur la forte impression du mouvement sur leurs vies.*

## Sherrill Cheda

The steps to the house on Huntly Street in Toronto sagged and the unpainted exterior was uninviting. I stopped and checked my address book again—there was nothing to indicate that this was the house I was looking for. What had brought me here?

How far back should I go to explain? Birth in the Depression? Family believing that education wasn't necessary—for a girl? Marriage? Motherhood? For years I had been reading Lessing and Woolf and marking the passages that spoke to me: in *The Golden Notebook,* where Anna is making love at 6 a.m. and cannot concentrate on its pleasures because she is distracted by thinking about the amount of milk there is for her six-year-old daughter's breakfast; in *A Room of One's Own* where Virgina Woolf talks about men being twice their natural size when they see themselves reflected in the mirror held up by women.

On my first day in Toronto in July 1969, at a Voice of Women benefit for the Chicago Seven, I had asked a new acquaintance if there was a Women's Liberation group in Toronto. She mentioned Toronto Women's Liberation and I sought them out but they seemed so young (I was an old thirty-three at the time). My husband then told me of a woman at his workplace who had begun a group called The Toronto New Feminists, but their membership was closed. I impatiently waited six months until I could attend one of their orientation meetings.

I walked up the sagging steps and into a room to join a motley mixture of women: young and old, grubby and well dressed, attractive and plain and we, at first, listened to the tenets of this new feminism: the world and its institutions (church, state and education) were patriarchal and discriminated against women (this later became known as sexism). Individual men were not the enemy unless they proved themselves to be so, but the socialization process, based on society's values, had given us these rigid sex roles and they were the problem. Because of assigned sex roles women served men as secretaries, waitresses and wives. Women did not receive equality in educational opportunity, education, work or pay. No argument there—all these things were certainly commensurate with my experience. But then, they went too far (I thought at that time): they said that the institution of marriage, as it now stood, was oppressive to women. I envisioned that to be a part of the philosophy of this new group. I might have to get a divorce and that sounded drastic. In fact, one member was discussing divorcing her husband but continuing to live with him. Having been married, divorced and remarried, it had never occurred to me that there was something intrinsic to marriage itself that made it so difficult!

There was a great deal of discussion that evening and the braver and more naive among us, asked, 'but, what about love?' We were not mocked or told how love enslaved us. Instead, we discussed how love between unequals was an impossibility and how feminist principles could build better relationships. Then we were given a basic reading list and sent home until next week's meeting.

I was intrigued and had so many questions. Being an over-achiever, I did go to the library the next day to obtain as many of the books on that list as possible. A revelation: the library had only two of the ten books listed. I moved on to a bookstore: they didn't have them all either. Now these were not obscure books—I had already read half of them and had read reviews of all of them. I was a librarian but it had never occurred to me that books such as these should be in my library and in every other library.

The following week, I was drawn to the house on Huntly Street and began the process known as 'consciousness raising.' For the record, it is important to make one thing perfectly clear: CR is not therapy, nor is it religion. CR is applying feminist political analysis to the personal life in a shared group setting and it is *the* crucial step: from CR flows whatever feminists do politically or personally. From this experience came the slogan 'The personal is political' and the even more important term, 'sexual politics.'

In those heady days, our energies were

*Moira Armour*

Sherrill Cheda at a 1972 NAC Strategy for Change Conference.

Johanna Stuckey

# Johanna

One day last year, during a heated discussion in the York University Women's Centre, I suddenly found myself experiencing a feeling of *déjà vue*; the young women around me were talking as if feminism had suddenly been born with their discovery of it. Had a suffragette been listening to a New Feminist meeting in Toronto in the late Sixties or early Seventies, she would have had the same feeling. What changed my attitude and those of my New Feminist sisters then was consciousness-raising—that long, painful, exhilerating process through which we politicized the personal and began to develop a feminist theory.

Not only did consciousness-raising correct that unreal sense I had had that what I was experiencing and had experienced was unique (by making me acutely aware that my life to that point—my angers, frustrations, successes and so on—was similar to that of most women), but it also forced me to reevaluate my life in the light of this realization. Most important, it forced me to reevaluate my work.

Immediately, along with feminist colleagues, I tried to 'put my own house in order.' We spent over three years preparing a report on the status of women at our university, a quite thorough document published in 1975. While we were engaged in this project, I was also reassessing my scholarly endeavours and, hence, the nature and content of my teaching. With the support, invaluable critical advice and loving encouragement of my feminist friends, I began to learn to teach women's studies. The course I devised dealt with the ancient and directed toward sisterhood, building a movement and of course, changing the world. (Later we discovered that it is the hard work of one small change after another that makes the difference.) We did these things with a great deal of commitment and energy, which generated even more commitment and energy. We did it through CR, demonstrations (equal pay, pro-choice, day care, against 'men only' institutions), education (speaking to schools, formulating non-sexist guidelines), political work (putting the word 'sex' in Ontario's Human Rights Code) and getting our lives and relationships in order (karate, honesty, identifying with women, attempting to raise our children in non-sexist ways). Feminism was not a 'lifestyle' (to use a non-word of the Seventies) but it certainly was a way of life that permeated every aspect of our life and the lives of those around us. None of us would ever be the same again.

After the first two years I decided that I could be most effective if I honed in on trying to change the areas with which I was most intimately connected: the library profession and education. For the next six years, I concentrated on teaching women's studies in colleges and universities, developing non-sexist guidelines, compiling bibliographies, building women's collections of materials, co-editing and publishing an alternative feminist library magazine, *Emergency Librarian,* writing about feminism for mainstream publications in order to reach a larger public, researching the status of women within the library profession, co-founding a women's communications centre, publically speaking throughout the country and using the media to get feminist ideas across to a larger audience.

We thought we could change the world and with it the lives of women. And the world has changed: almost every document uses non-sexist language, every media outlet is aware of chauvinism and sexism, every government is careful about how it caters to the women's rights interest, the word 'sex' is in the Human Rights

## Stuckey

mythic origins of today's sex-role stereotypes; I have taught it six times to date, and it has changed as I have changed through encounters with new books and the minds of about one thousand students. The source of the course, though, still lies in those frustrating and fertile, stimulating years of New Feminists and consciousness-raising, in the agonizing search for why things were the way they were and for ways of changing them.

Indeed, for me, those early years of involvement with radical feminism were so influential that I now find it inconceivable that I might think or act without reference to feminist ideas and theory. My teaching and research has consolidated this commitment, so that it is now part of everything I do and everything I am.

Those of us who were involved in the New Feminists in the early years were, I think, irrevocably altered. For me (as for others) radical feminism explained the previously unexplainable in my life and illuminated my path. Above all, it made sense of much of my work that had been obscure. It gave me a solid basis from which to start new projects. Even more, it provided emotionally and rationally valid criteria against which to test feelings, judgments and actions. Some have likened (radical) feminism to a belief, a religion. This simile is valid if the believer in the religion tries, like most feminists do, to live her beliefs from day to day, however difficult that may be. Those of us who have adopted radical feminism as a way of life can—and must—do nothing else.

Code, it is illegal to discriminate against women in some areas (if the woman can afford to prove it!)

The big battles are still to be won: day care, equal pay, women and poverty, politics, management, abortion. There are still many areas in which women do not have choice. There is a great deal more work to do. Feminists played an important role in the changes that have been made and they will continue to struggle through each step to make the necessary changes in the future. We know that the feminist analysis reaches the root of the problem and we continue to work on the small changes to effect the larger change—a world dedicated to feminist principles.

Maryon Kantaroff at work.

## Maryon Kantaroff

On an afternoon in the autumn of 1969, my life changed dramatically. It was a process that began when I returned to Canada after eleven years of studying and working in England. I had come back for my first solo show in my home town, and I was taking this opportunity to reacquaint myself with my roots. I had been in Toronto barely three weeks and had been absorbing all of the ideas and writings about the new feminism, a philosophy that I was immediately drawn to. These ideas made sense to me when I met Bonnie Kreps—and shared information and experiences with her and Johanna Stuckey. I suddenly knew that the dichotomies and contradictions in my life had fallen away. I was left totally demystified about problems that had beset me for years—problems centred around being a woman in twentieth-century western society. My mind was filled with insight and as I worked through this experience the pieces of the jig-saw of my past

fell into place. I had become a feminist.

The term 'liberation is often used today in a casual, almost throwaway manner. But to those of us who grew up in the Forties and Fifties, it had, and has, a meaning that is far from casual. We had come to our womanhood under the intense oppression of the calculated and directed sex-role propaganda campaign that followed the Second World War. We were the generation that had been chosen to reinstate the traditional security of the house and family. We were to allay all the fears and insecurities of the past generation, which had found itself embroiled in war and carnage. We were told in a myriad of subtle and not-so-subtle ways, that our God-given duty was clear—we were made to be the 'There, there darling, Mommie's home now and everything will be okay' generation. Somewhere deep down, most of us knew that Mommie was home before the carnage and that was precisely what gave the children the courage to go out and play war in the first place. But under the massive propaganda campaign, we were able to repress this knowledge and strive to do our 'God-given duty.' We paid dearly for that repression, just as we have all had to pay for the sincere, but misguided, repression of our fore-mothers.

I was one of the lucky ones. I stopped paying my dues that afternoon in 1969. I had no husband now and I had no children. I had no intimate friendships in Canada. Even my relationship to my parents was just starting again, after eleven years of living apart. I had no one in my life to whom I had to readjust; I could start fresh. The only consistent thing in my life was my work. I had been a self-supporting sculptor before marriage, during the marriage and after the divorce. I had been a sculptor before my 'enlightenment' and continued to sculpt afterwards. Since that day in 1969, everything came under the scrutiny of my new critical feminist eye. Nothing was taken for granted. Everything was reexamined and reevaluated. My previous value systems were turned upside down and I literally became another person—my own person.

Strangely enough, sculpture escaped my close scrutiny for over a year. I remember a number of occasions when I was questioned about my art in the light of my new political perspective. To my amazement now, I always answered with something like 'Well of course I'm a radical feminist, but that has nothing to do with my sculpture.' The truth of course was that it had everything to do with my sculpture. But becoming my own person was not an overnight activity. It was slow and arduous, with a constantly shifting focus.

I began by acknowledging the extensive degree of my masculine-oriented value systems. At some level I had swallowed the myths of our male culture and accepted the prevailing views that everything masculine was strong and worthy and that all things feminine were weak, superficial and unimportant. Yet, I was soul-identified with the feminine and consequently, lived in a perpetual state of inner contradiction. My first 'tune-in' started with the personal, then progressively moved out into the political-social and eventually back to the personal. This pattern persists to this day. The overview, however, has changed. When I first labelled myself feminist, I had been living with a view of myself as 99 per cent individual—and perhaps 1 per cent socially formed. At the height of my consciousness-raising sessions, this percentage reversed itself to perhaps 1 per cent individual and 99 per cent socially formed.

My ego did not balk at having to give up so much of my individuality. On the contrary, this politicizing helped to allay some of my guilt at having allowed myself to be duped for so long. As I progressively realized how my inner push-pull, masculine-feminine confusion contributed to an unconscious collusion with masculine ideology, I slowly began reclaiming myself and was able to increasingly accept responsibility for my life. The individually and socially formed person began to merge. While this dynamic was in progress, the results of it were beginning to emerge in my sculpture. Previously, my male-identified value systems had resulted in a conscious glorification of the strong. My work was essentially characterized by control and power. Anything that could remotely be called feminine in my work was viciously rooted out. I aped male art-modes and was particularly pleased to overhear people referring to my sculpture with comments like 'My, isn't his work powerful!' Unbeknown to myself, I was denying the very foundations of my creativity—the female part of me.

The early organizing meetings of the New Feminists were taking place simultaneously with my first exposure to the Canadian art scene. While we were settling into our new headquarters, I was settling into my first Canadian studio—literally in the same building. As we were expanding our library, consciousness-raising sessions, lectures, public speaking and confrontations, I was simultaneously becoming creatively active in my own field—chasing out-door commissions, building a new body of sculpture, expanding my contacts in the art scene. The two prime activities in my life were totally merged. It is no accident, therefore, that each acted as a drain on the other, while at the same time one activity inspired the other.

During this first year of my return to Canada, my gallery director repeatedly admonished me about my high-profile feminist activities. He insisted that my public image as a radical would destroy my career as a sculptor. 'The Canadian art-buying public will not accept this split involvement. If you can care so much about politics, they will reason, then you can't be a real artist. They will view you as a dilletante.' I had no reason to doubt him, but I also had no choice but to continue with my political activities. I argued that the history of art is full of great artists who have been politically active and that if you were sensitive to your art you could not help but be sensitive to social issues. My gallery director responded by saying that the Canadian public was not sophisticated enough to understand this and that I would be the loser.

I continued to build and show sculpture, installed outdoor commissions, wrote and gave lectures on my art and generally carried on my life as a sculptor. But all the while the changes in my work and art attitudes were becoming increasingly evident. The strong lines in my sculpture were beginning to soften into increasingly sensuous and undulating forms. Female-identified forms—such as the egg—began to emerge. The highly controlled masses gave way to softer, more tentative organic forms. Just as my life was full of reevaluating movement, so my sculpture reflected the same feeling—at times becoming almost dizzying. Within two years, my work had undergone a complete transformation, mirroring what was happening to me on the personal/political level. With these changes came courage, resolve and direction. My life had never been more demanding nor fulfilling.

In the years that followed, the pattern has persisted. Few days go by without new insights, new liberations. Contrary to public myth, the same has been true for all my feminist friends. Each in her own way incorporated her feminist insights into her own discipline, gaining courage and direction. The political became personal, the personal became political and each day the integrating process continues. Liberation has become for us not rhetoric, but a way of life—*the* way.

*DAUGHTER OF THE MOON*

Maryon Kantaroff's sculpture and her book *Images of Origins* are available from: Prince Arthur Galleries, 33 Prince Arthur Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5R 1B2.