she said

identity crisis

by Cecilia Dougherty

"In a Different Light" was a complicated show, a display of 205 items including artwork, art history, and underground pop and activist culture, organized by categories of stylistic affinity and existential paradigm. The premise, as stated in the catalogue, was to represent the contributions of gay men and lesbians to the continuum of visual and text works in American art and culture in terms of their "resonance."[1] Larry Rinder, a curator with the University of California at Berkeley's University Art Museum and artist/educator Nayland Blake, the show's curators, developed the exhibition "through poetics rather than polemics,"[2] first investigating what queer artists are saying, then constructing a curatorial proposition based on their findings. Decisions were informed and guided by the artists, which "shed new light on our collective history."[3] The exhibition, it would appear, practically organized itself in a responsive, deductive, and somewhat historical manner.

A survey of the artists included, however, suggests that what actually happened is more an invention, rather than an unfolding, of collective history. "Queer" has many meanings in the context of the show, and includes straight queers like Vito Acconci and Mike Kelley, straight feminists whose work is unquestionably about heterosexual situations, and of course lesbians who sleep with men. According to Rinder, "The category of queer is rapidly replacing gay and lesbian. Queer is becoming a term which subverts or confuses group definition rather than fostering it . . . queer identity is spontaneous, mutable, and inherently political."[4] Identity, then, is a matter of what one feels like at a given moment. Privilege may induce a desire to cross boundaries and appropriate identities, making claims to fluidity and freedom; however, for those whose identity is a barrier to equal rights, let alone privilege, this blurring and mixing of terms is a step toward continued invisibility. The claim that queerness is a sign of mutability as well as a political position suggests that politics are formed from the individual outward to the society. This keeps the outsiders out, with a claim to political imperative. A dose of our own medicine, perhaps.

Work by young gay male artists is decidedly more prevalent in "In A Different Light" than work by emerging lesbian artists, suggesting that while Rinder and Blake may be familiar with what's happening on the gay male scene, they do not know many lesbian artists, or if they know them, they do not have an adequate background for understanding the language of their work. It also suggests that men and women have a different relationship to art-making, different uses for art in our communities, and different issues in both form and content. We have a different relationship to art exhibition, criticism, and history as well. "In A Different Light" does its best to understand work by lesbians in gay male terms, and in doing so, fails to give lesbian work honest representation.

Work by women, especially by lesbians, was the most misrepresented, underrepresented, and misinterpreted in the exhibit. Work by lesbians cannot "resonate" when the curators seem not to know the history of feminism, the so-called women's art movement,[5] or what younger or under-exhibited lesbian artists are doing. Unless an exhibition's organizers are willing to become more familiar with the art scene supposedly on display, they should use more conventional curating strategies. If the curators could see that they lacked vital

information about the history of lesbian art-making, as well as about contemporary younger lesbian artists, they must have understood that curating by intuition[6] was not going to adequately represent female artists.

Transformed by the exhibition context into nostalgia or camp, overtly lesbian and political work (by both men and women) was defused and rendered sadly ridiculous. Continuity in women's activist and art history was reduced to funk and curiosity. One of the most telling examples was the display of liner notes for the 1977 Olivia Records album *Lesbian Concentrate: a lesbianthology of songs and poems*. The notes illustrate, in microcosm, how women have used culture, and the advantages gained to network and operate on a community level at every turn. No background is provided, however, and this tiny bit of history is categorically rendered precious, even eccentric. The inclusion of straight women as engaged in queer cultural practice reinterprets lesbian work in straight feminist terms, seeming to illustrate the much-loved misapprehension that lesbian artwork owes a heavy debt to straight women.

Subversion of lesbian content was a theme of this show. The specific choices of work by two lesbians, Amy Adler's *After Sherrie Levine,* a drawing of a nude male torso, and Monica Majoli's *Untitled*, a painting of a gay male sex scene, make a clear point. Lesbian "polemics" were effectively vaporized, but our "poetics" were intact, hidden behind the curators' delusion that even in the lesbian erotic canon, the male is the sexual object. Deborah Kass's drag-queen photograph, *Altered Image*, contains a loving hint of irony, an appropriation of the Warhol legacy, and was read as gay-male work as well. Her *Double Blue Barbra* fortunately provides more information about her relationship to drag and Warhol.

Diane Arbus
Two Friends at Home, New York City, 1965. Gelatin silver print, 20" x 16". Photo courtesy of Jeffrey Fraenkel Gallery.

I question why lesbian artists use male and gay-male sexual subjects. On the optimistic side, it may be that women's experience teaches us to be less threatened by a broadened scope of representation. We do not see the male as another aspect of self. Rather he is another aspect of gay culture, someone familiar, someone with whom we share a political stake. I have only to consider how many gay men choose to eroticize lesbian sexuality or depict non-denigrated female bodies, however, to understand that Adler's and Majoli's work is to be interpreted as neither lesbian erotic expression nor broadened cultural perspective. Overtly gay-male subjectivity as addressed by lesbian artists is chosen for a "queer" show instead of work with clear lesbian content because of a willingness on the part of these artists, for the sake of visibility and access to exhibition (i.e. male approval), to negate lesbian subjectivity. This positions them closer to the power gay men have in the queer community and is an obvious trade-off.[7]

"In A Different Light" does its best to understand work by lesbians in gay male terms, and in doing so, fails to give lesbian work honest representation.

In case this point was made too subversively for the viewer to pick up, he or she needed only to spend a few minutes with Acconci's *Conversions Part III (Associations, Assistance, Dependence)* to see a more literal depiction of the idea: a woman on her knees sucking a cock—the queerness of which escapes me. Acconci's supposed trip into the "feminine," in a boring Freudian/Lacanian metaphor, interprets female as male without a dick. His "feminine" side is depicted as the artist minus a cock, because it is in the female subject's mouth.[8] Very Queer.

The current myth about lesbian sexuality is that it was killed by feminists sometime during the '70s, and gay men showed us how to revive it during the '80s. Therefore, it makes sense that lesbian erotic expression should show an obvious indebtedness to the gay male, who gave her back her sexuality. Inclusion of work by two lesbians that specifically refers to or celebrates gay-male desire reinforces two lies: that lesbians are asexual and gay men invented all queer sexiness. My analysis does not suggest that women must limit content, or restrict ourselves to a narrower world view. It is the curators who limited "In A Different Light"'s lesbian content by using lesbian artists to represent gay-male sexuality. This is not about our poetics, it is curatorial politics.

Rinder's and Blake's insistence on keeping male supremacy intact, within a presumably shared queer culture, is clear when encountering the work of Judie Bamber, Judy Chicago, and Zoe Leonard hung over Rex Ray's *Untitled*, a wall of photocopied cum stains. The work by women is literally placed in the context of the male jerking off. The aggressive intrusion of male sexuality into everything female on the wall subverts a feminist, or female-oriented, reading of the work. Ray's cum wallpaper functions as a hostile gesture toward women, regardless of the artist's intent. In other words, the women are metaphorically fucked.

The current myth about lesbian sexuality is that it was killed by feminists sometime during the '70s, and gay men showed us how to revive it during the '80s.

■

This show's theoretical arch-rival is "essentialism," described in Kevin Killian's *Artforum* interview with Blake and Rinder as that which insists on specific identities and meanings. Quoting Rinder, ". . . we are going up against an essentialist attitude that says certain communities own certain issues, on which other communities have no right to speak; the original community, on the other hand, can't speak about anything else."[9] Certain communities, of course, "own" very little except a clear understanding of their own situations. The idea that acknowledging this restricts artists who are making politically engaged work from speaking on anything but themselves is misleading. It is to our collective advantage, as people engaged in visual and other forms of representation, to understand each other's social and political realities, speaking to those realities interactively, freely, and as often as possible. Rinder's logic actually supports the continued ghetto-ization of politically engaged artwork by claiming that some not only favor the restriction and closed spaces of the ghettoes, but insist upon it. The logic claims no less than we are responsible for our own marginalization, and our work cannot be seen outside that framework.

The exhibition is organized to negate clearly directed political interpretations, giving many of the individual pieces new meaning: of being non-threatening to the status quo, while projecting a bourgeois optimism about cultural defiance. Here, cultural defiance by a despised group (real queers, not occasional ones) can be made palatable, even entertaining. If our specific cultural identities are appropriated, we become harmless, de-sexualized perverts on parade. Anyone can join the parade because our situation is one of a sublime "universal experience."[10] We do the dance of life, we represent chances you will never have to take, and we do it with flamboyance, humor, silliness, style, pathos—basically, the tears of a clown. The idea of universal experience, and the belief that art must represent this, is rather essentialist.

"In a Different Light" represented a sexless lesbian and gay community, looking into and out of voids and oblivion. Our strongest objections to decades of brutal intolerance, psychological abuse, abandonment, the near complete lack of equal rights for women, the legislation of our reproductive systems and sexual activities, and the way we are left to die, get boiled down to stylized sentimentality and the search for utopia. So-called Queer Culture is appropriated by the museum, lesbian expres-

sion becomes a sub-category of gay-male expression, and straight feminism becomes the historical precedent for lesbian work. Drag becomes the vanguard of the gender-bending revolution, and straight people like Richard Prince, Mike Kelley, Marcel Duchamp, Carolee Schneeman, Jenny Holzer, and Lutz Bacher are suddenly queer. The agenda to broaden the meaning of queer to include straight artists as well as queer artists may be an "anti-essentialist" gesture. But more than that, inclusion of straight artists in a supposedly queer show is a good way to avoid unpleasant questions about the careerist appropriation of gay or lesbian experience, and art strategies, by straight artists.

Zoe Leonard
Frontal View, Geoffery Beene Fashion Show, 1990. Black-and-white photograph, 43" x 30". Photo courtesy of UAM/PFA Collection.

Regarding the exhibition as a whole, Rinder and Blake have overlooked two of the most vital and popular arenas for gay and lesbian visual dialogue: film and video. The show declined to include video and film, except as an aside, into the official exhibition. A program of films and tapes by and about gay men and lesbians was shown at the Pacific Film Archive "in conjunction with" the museum exhibition, but these contributions were virtually unacknowledged. Except for two terribly annoying videotapes by straight people in the gallery space, film and video were dislocated from the "queer" art dialogue. The catalogue mentions the attendant program, but no one was recruited to write about the work. That gay and lesbian media has a very wide and enthusiastic international network, and is a vital contributor to a complex dialogue regarding every issue from the most basic ways of speaking about representation to sophisticated experimentation, was lost on the organizers.

While I hated the show, I do not hate most of the artwork. Romaine Brooks's *Peter, a Young English Girl* (1923-24) for example, is beautiful, and after having seen it reprinted in numerous lesbian books, newspapers, and magazines for about 20 years, to finally see the actual painting was intensely satisfying. It was also worth wading through the awkward organization of works to find Tony Greene's *The Grain of His Skin*, Harmony Hammond's *Flesh Journals* and *Presences III, IV,* and *VI*, Roni Horn's *When Dickenson Shut Her Eyes—No. 1027* and *Suite #1*, and Siobhan Liddell's *Untitled*, among others.

"In A Different Light" was a horribly flawed exhibition, turning the feminist and gay radicalism of almost 30 years into a perfumed implosion, a Postmodernist camp trip. It used artists and artworks out of context, situating them into a "queer" one based on style and suggestion rather than on histories, intentions, or dialogues. It equated men's and women's legal, psychological, and physical realities. Simultaneously retaining and erasing any markers of identity, the space created by "In a Different Light" very nearly emulated the interior of the closet.

Cecilia Dougherty is a visual artist, videomaker, and writer based in Los Angeles. She currently teaches video production and studio art at the University of California, Irvine.

notes

1 Lawrence Rinder, "An Introduction to In A Different Light," Nayland Blake, Lawrence Rinder, and Amy Scholder, eds., *In A Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice,* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995), p. 1.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 7.

5 Nayland Blake's catalogue essay, "Curating In A Different Light," wrongly states that the invention of a women's art movement is based on museum politics and dialogues within the official art world. He also suggests, therefore, that activist concerns are not, historically, in conflict with existing art power structures, and ignores the grass-roots foundation of feminist art-making. "In the art world, [the Women's Liberation Movement] has come to be known as the women's art movement. The movement is often dated from 1972, when a protest of the Corcoran Biennial's exclusion of women led to a national conference of women artists, organizers, and critics. At that conference, many artists had their first large-scale exposure to the work of their peers around the country. The groundwork was laid for an explosion of activity by women throughout the United States." Blake is most likely referring to the organized feminist protest of the 1970 Whitney Annual, by Lucy Lippard, Faith Ringgold, and others.

There is also misinformation later in the essay (p. 26), as Blake states that "Many of the [exhibited] women are using '70s gay-male culture as a template for expressions of sexual exploration and community." This denies that women are connected to our own history, and suggests they find a more satisfying continuity with gay male work than with the presumably essentialist lesbian and feminist work of the '70s. The work of many gay men, and others like Mike Kelley and Matthew Barney, in fact, are influenced by the women artists. Typically, the work by women has gone under-catalogued and much has fallen through the cracks of art "history."

> It is to our collective advantage, as people engaged in visual and other forms of representation, to understand each other's social and political realities, speaking to those realities interactively, freely, and as often as possible.

6 "Our methods were intuitive rather than linear." Blake, p. 11.

7 I happened upon another example of lesbian deference to gay men in an interview by David Blanton with writer Jane DeLynn. From *The Insider*, March 24—April 6, 1995: "'It's all part of the PC police thing,' says DeLynn. Typically outspoken, DeLynn is critical of the notion that lesbians form much of a community in New York, anyway. 'From the first time I walked into a woman's bar, it was like high school cliques all over again.' If this aspect of lesbian social life strikes her as juvenile, does she find gay male culture any better? 'The degree of sophistication in gay male writing is much higher. Whereas gay women have gotten much better in terms of appearance, I find gay men are much more fashionable across the board,' she says."

8 Misunderstanding female physicality as existing primarily in terms of male desire and anatomy, even gay male desire, underlies much of what has been included in the show. "The associative chain of center—vagina—flower has been echoed in the work of many gay male artists who have replaced vagina with anus. . . . the anus is the vagina for gay men." (Blake, exhibition catalogue, p. 28.) That women's "center" is actually displayed as our "hole," our "void," not only denies that female sexuality exists for women, outside these negative metaphors, it also illustrates Blake's thoughtless misogyny.

9 Kevin Killian, "The Secret Histories," *Artforum*, February, 1995, p. 23.

10 Rinder, catalogue essay, p. 7.