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## INTRODUCTION

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### SURVIVING SCHIZOPHRENIA<sup>†</sup>

By Cassandra L. Langer

In *Home Girls*, Black lesbian feminist Barbara Smith addresses “seeing and touching/Both sides of things that makes my commitment real.”<sup>1</sup> Real commitment to working actively against discrimination and with people who have been labeled Outsiders and/or Other is part of my heritage as a Jewish American woman. I learned about prejudice and anti-Semitism from my family and from the humiliations I suffered at school in the south, and in a community that wanted no part of me unless I was invisible, because I had made the mistake of being born Jewish. But as a Jewish woman I experienced sexism within the tribe itself. Fighting this sickness has been an ongoing part of my life since the late 1950s. Trying to heal it in society has involved me in the Civil Rights, Feminist, Lesbian and AIDS movements. My involvement has increased over the years and now extends to ecofeminism, first amendment rights and other modes of sane conduct when it comes to the powers-that-are, and the planet we live on.

It was the desire to break the imposed silence, and find some answers to the questions I had that inspired me to design “Beyond Survival: Old Frontiers/New Visions.” The exhibition, symposium and journal were structured to foster community exchange and interaction among women of colors.

The first issue of *Positions* is the result of our communications with each other and far from the “dream of a common language,” that Rich spoke of (see *Position’s* Statement of Purpose). Rather, Arlene Raven’s “Artists Speak Out,” and Joanna Frueh’s “Leaping to Conclusions,” witness a beginning. Like video artist Dara Birnbaum\* we wanted to “explore the possibility of talking back

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<sup>1</sup>Barbara Smith in *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*. New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, p. XXII, she quotes this phrase from Kate Donna Rushin’s “The Bridge Poem,” in *This Bridge Called by Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, eds. Moraga and Anzaldúa. Watertown: Persephone Press, Inc., 1981, p. XXI.

\* See Exhibition Plates.

<sup>†</sup>The term “schizophrenia” has many meanings and connotations but in its most literal usage it describes a split. Although I am aware that some people object to its non-medical usage, I am using it to describe such a split or cleavage.

to the media." In gathering material for her "Damnation of Faust," initiated in 1983, Birnbaum wanted to "open the composition and reveal its hidden agendas." By addressing the experience of a girl growing up in the streets of New York City, the artist tried to show the forms of restraint and near suffocation imposed through our contemporary technological society, pressures which force a person to find the means of openly declaring, through basic communication gestures, their own identity."<sup>2</sup> In a similar way we have tried to show how the art world restrains and suffocates certain forms of expression in favor of others.

Despite this fact we believe as Catalina Parra\* observes that:

What matters is to be alive in this world today,  
wherever you are, in Latin America, in New York,  
wherever, and to work, to work, to work. For me  
there is no difference between art and life, no  
separation between keeping house and making pictures.  
It's all one package. All parts—parts of my life.  
Also, there's no division between my works and their  
meanings.

In discussing "Imbunches" (those who consult witches and sorcerers in their caves where they are raised from childhood to practice spells and enchantments), Parra refers to forms of restraint saying:

I learned that the imbunche is the person who has  
all the body orifices sewn shut, all the holes blocked  
so that the evil spirits can't get out of his body. So  
it's a kind of censoring of release, any kind of release.  
And this made of my work a kind of allegory or really  
a metaphor, for what we are living through in Chile—  
I'm talking about censorship.<sup>3</sup>

In a comparative reading between the essays and illustrations that appear in this issue of *Positions* and the major trade magazines it will be evident that Chile isn't the only place where censorship is flourishing. Native Ameri-

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<sup>2</sup> All quotes and paraphrases from a general description by Dara Birnbaum.

<sup>3</sup> These quotes are taken from an interview by Ronald Christ in *Artscanada* (March/April), 1981, 3; *Catalina Parra*. New York: Terne Gallery, October 22 - November 28, 1987.

\* See Exhibition Plates.

can artist Pene Bonita put it this way, "I'm the kind of person who the creative-ness of the work is much more important to, than actually selling it. I refuse to follow the male concept that I was taught at Hunter, that you can't have a message in your art," she said. "My art very often doesn't stop with line, color, space. It has a definite political message. It has a definite History."<sup>2</sup> It is a message that sculptor Nancy Fried has honed to a fine art. "What feminist art is," says Fried, "is making the personal public. Making the private public." One woman out of every 10 women will develop breast cancer sometime in her life—yet few in art want to symbolize these feelings and go beyond them as Fried has done. Artist Sue Coe stated, "To think and act as a human being in a system set up for profit is to be classified as a criminal. To protest innocence is to become subversive."<sup>4</sup>

So feminists are subversive human beings. Today the "verbicide" or logocide—stopped state of words that feminist theorist Mary Daly refers to in her book *Pure Lust* (162)—is what feminist art critics suffer at the hands of most art trade magazines and other opposing cultural outlets:

The negation of any deep ontological elemental sense of creative participation in the knower and the know-ing Be-ing, whether this negation be called nominalism, or modern realism, or imply science—is indeed the emptying out of the BIG—that is meaningful words.

This raises a serious question which has yet to be answered by postmodern critics—is it because feminist art critics choose to work from a women-centered perspective that they find they are so rarely given an opportunity to speak for themselves, even when these publications refer to the feminist art movement?

Nor are feminists the only ones who have suffered in what Barbara Christian calls "The Race For Theory."<sup>5</sup> Women, Blacks, Native Americans, Asian, Hispanics and Lesbians too have been excluded and their work has not been studied, reviewed and written about. These groups are dramatically under-represented in the arts and the magazines that supposedly cover them. Such groups still do not own their own cultural interpretation, they have been co-opted—taken over by white male theory. In the final analysis an assessment of our era will stand or fall by the quality of the commitment we made. □

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<sup>4</sup> Sue Coe "Police State." Richmond, Va.: Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, January 20 - February 28, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No.1, (1988), p. 67-79.