EDITORIAL

Our first discussion about the questions raised by a special issue of *Feminist Review* on cultural politics highlighted the different meaning the idea of 'culture' has for different people. For some, culture means the myriad specific forms of art practice that exist, and for others it means the experience of everyday life in a much more general sense. Immediately we were confronted by the problem of what to include in an issue that potentially covered everything, and naturally individual commitments and enthusiasms quickly became clear. We agreed that the many products of past and more recent work by women in the arts—novels, poetry, theatre, music, photography, film, fine art, craft and design—were an important part of feminist definitions of culture in the broader sense of the word. But we recognized, too, that choice of dress, attitudes to living arrangements, childcare, friendship and sexuality, along with broad commitments to egalitarian, anti-racist and pro-peace politics, were also part of a shared feminist identity and way of life. Was it right, we asked ourselves, to discuss feminist intervention in the arts and media without including these day-to-day meanings of feminism? They were, we knew, closely connected to each other and together they provided, in moments of political pessimism, a continuing sense of feminism's creativity and dynamism.

After considerable debate we agreed that while both aspects of 'culture' were of equal importance, we would in *this issue* focus on what contemporary feminism had done to transform the arts and the media. Everyday feminist culture—culture with a small c—has played an enormous part in changing the model of artistic production from an isolated activity of individual genius to something more participant and social. Not only do the objects, texts and events produced by individual feminists and groups within the women's movement over the last fifteen years offer major critiques of the dominant views of women—and men—they also often come into being in new ways and are heard, read, and seen differently by their audience. So in concentrating on these visual, verbal and aural forms of representation we have emphasized the ways in which the daily context of our lives as women, as feminists, has changed the ways in which such work is made and consumed.

Women writers today often develop their skills in writing collectives; their work in turn is read and discussed in feminist reading groups. Feminist artists organize shows together. Feminists in those already collective practices of theatre, music, cinema and television

try more self-consciously to democratize their forms of group work. None of these projects to transform the conditions and modes of artistic production has been accomplished without great difficulty, for the economic structure on which most practices depend still favour individual competitive and heirarchical models.

Changing the structures through which feminist art is produced and consumed has been in some ways the most daunting and politically educative part of the feminist project. It is painful too, because as producers we still have strong if ambivalent feelings about our stake in traditional notions of individual work. For most of us who have been involved in trying to make such changes the process has stripped away any lingering illusion that Culture with a big C is above economics and politics, or that the meanings advanced by its products are universal ones that transcend race, class, sex and time. While it is extremely difficult and possibly unprofitable to define a 'feminist' work of art simply by looking at the content and form of a given cultural artifact—for there are many feminisms and many conflicting notions of what makes a novel, poem, painting or film 'feminist'—it is possible to see a radical process of transformation in the many arenas of representation in which feminists now participate. That process itself, often frustrated and incomplete in any one event or project has been, nevertheless, an important aspect of all of them. It is when feminism 'touches' each stage of the production and consumption of new work, or when it informs both the re-interpretation of past writing or art and the way in which that re-reading is developed and shared that we can begin to think of a feminist cultural politics as actually taking place.

Western feminism today, all the many western feminisms, take almost as a given that ideas and images in general circulation are of crucial importance. While sections of the male left still argue that the politics of culture are marginal or irrelevant to socialism, feminism has been much more prepared to see cultural issues as central, for culture has long been a privileged place for the discussion of sex and gender differences. In the poetry, fiction and fine art of the nineteenth century, in its popular melodrama and penny-dreadful illustrated tales, feminity and masculinity as well as relations between men and women were constructed. The various strata of art and literature imagined and embodied the class and gender divisions elsewhere elaborated in economic, political and legal terms. These pleasurable representations were often both prescriptive and critical of dominant gender relations. When women began to write in significant numbers, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the texts that they wrote, largely for an expanding middle class audience, intervened significantly in more general social debates about the role and nature of women in contemporary society. Re-reading those novels and poems today we can hear them as future readers will no doubt hear our own 'feminist art'—as a complex mixture of support and critique of existing institutions and ideologies. The development, in the early nineteenth century, of a species of literature written and read by middle class women was one of the important preliminary steps towards the creation of a 'modern' feminist discourse. Class-conscious

and class bound as it was, it offered one secular model of a public dialogue between women. We are reminded of its usefulness today when we see how frequently marginalized and relatively powerless groups of women—black women and lesbian women, for example—turn to poetry, fiction, drama and the new media technologies to get their messages across. Writing and reading which in traditional liberal Culture are assumed to be private experiences are, in the hands of these writers, a way of expressing cultural meaning that has been suppressed and ignored both in male-orientated literature and in middle-class white women's writing, and a way of reaching out and organizing new constituencies of women.

If we substitute the term 'cultural production' for traditional notions of Culture with a big C we can put some distance between received ideas about the arts, as they come to us through education or the arts establishment, and the various critiques and transformations that feminism has set in motion. 'Cultural production' would include all kinds of representation from sonnets to soap opera, from the films of Chantal Akerman to the videos of Karen Alexander and the photographs of the Format group. It would include new collective projects and the critical project of re-reading film melodrama, Jane Austen or James Baldwin through a feminist lens. 'Cultural production' implies an activity and a relationship between practice and audience, while Culture tends to lie there inert at the bottom of the pool, weighed down by the aesthetic value attached to it. Feminism's approach to cultural production has usually been more concerned with meaning in a particular practice than in ordering works of art in an aesthetic hierarchy. For example, feminists will argue fiercely with each other about how, precisely, visual representation works to denigrate and objectify women, and how best to produce alternative representations of gender and sexuality. Traditional criticism is more concerned with defining formal excellence and ranking past and present producers. The boundaries between art and criticism are strictly patrolled. Feminism tends to blur the distinction between practice and critique—seeing both, and sometimes the two together, as creative and productive of new meaning. The questions generated by feminist debate around a controversial film like *A Question of Silence* are therefore integral to the cultural production of the film itself.

Yet feminism's approach to self-defined feminist cultural production is surprisingly contradictory. It sometimes seems as if we are happier to search out the feminist implications of old films and women's 'classics' than we are to give new work feminist credentials. Often it seems that we want novels or films made from a feminist perspective to answer questions that are not by any means resolved in our practice or theory. There is a demand, sometimes sublimal, sometimes overt, that self-declared feminist cultural practice should be extra-correct politically *as well* as offering the conventional pleasure that we have traditionally come to expect from cultural forms. Yet pleasure, as so many feminist practitioners and critics have pointed out, is not a gender neutral sensation. The pleasure that we have learnt to take from particular kinds of representation is highly

dependent on existing social and sexual structures. In the area of cinema some feminists have argued that the pleasure of looking at a film is structured around certain male sexual obsessions: they have suggested that feminist film makers be wary of reinvoking these dubious pleasures. While many of us accept all or part of this theoretical analysis, our desire for a pleasurable experience as viewers and audience is not easily quenched. In film in particular the disruption of traditional narration and imagery, in the name of progressive feminist practice, often evokes angry response from feminists. Interestingly, experiment with 'avant garde' form and narration are better tolerated in literature and in fine art than in the cinema. Some 'pleasures' are easier to relinquish than others.

These problems are particularly acute for feminists working in the mass media, where there is a straightforward demand that presentations be accessible and entertaining in a familiar way. The problems of reaching beyond an already constituted audience of feminists with strategies of presentation that seem, on the surface, unpleasurable, strange and 'difficult' have never really been resolved —and the debate around these issues goes on. One response from practitioners is to disclaim the label feminist as too constraining, too oppressive. If traditional liberal aesthetics demands that art be universal (which it never is), feminism's attempt to construct a too rigid alternative aesthetic has also run into problems. Our collective probing of these questions suggests that they are still all wide open.

Another issue that surfaced in our discussions had to do with the supposed elitism of certain kinds of feminist critical practices that borrow heavily from Marxist, structuralist and psychoanalytic theories. If there was some anxiety in the group about artistic practices that were difficult, obscure and inaccessible, there was much greater concern about the inaccessibility of feminist commentary and critique about cultural production. Debating the pros and cons of 'difficult' cultural commentary raised once again the question of whether and how traditional languages can be used by feminists. Of course this problem is wider than the use of theoretical languages—popular discourse is saturated with non- or anti-feminist idiom. But many feminists have been particularly concerned about how already existing theoretical vocabularies, loaded and gender-biased as they are, could be made useful for us.

These questions arise equally in considering feminist cultural practice, feminist critical work and feminist theory, and show that these distinctions, which we often fall back on, cannot really be maintained. In the end it is clear that the major theoretical debates in feminism and cultural politics are addressed in all the different types of writing we have included. The photo-essays and poetry, as well as the discussion of specific practices such as film, television and theatre, address questions of theory just as much as the more obviously 'theoretical' articles, such as the review of Julia Kristeva's work.

The issue contains three photo-essays and three groups of poems. Our view is that feminist art comes in a wide variety of forms and styles. Some poems or photographs are easily interpreted. But part of the satisfaction of much feminist writing, new women's music and visual art comes out of the effort that goes into understanding them. A

case in point is Lindsay Cooper's song on our flexidisc. *Seeing Red* is the song which opens Sally Potter's film *The Gold Diggers*, discussed in this issue by Sarah Montgomery. The song's lyrics raise the question of a woman's pleasure in a patriarchal 'leisure time' which excludes her. Lindsay Cooper's music echoes a twentieth-century radical European tradition which draws on and reworks urbanized forms of popular music developed in cabaret and in some types of music hall. Music, poetry and visual art can contain highly concentrated complex meaning which the consumer must unravel slowly like a knotted piece of string. The poets included here, Gloria Evans Davies, Karen Whiteson and Denise Riley have all written on aspects of femininity. Evans Davies's work uses highly pictorial imagery, evoking domestic scenarios. Karen Whiteson's poems frame their narrative in classical myth and the female gothic. Denise Riley's work moves through a range of forms, offering a tragi-comic view of the dilemmas of contemporary feminism. The three photo-essays are all quite different. Yve Lomax's essay poses a lyrical relationship between image and text, juxtaposing prose-poem and an assembly of fragmented photo-images. The work of Format, a collective of photographers, is in the agitprop traditions developed on the left. Their work reveals the activities and identities of women suppressed in the presentation of popular media, and raises socialist feminist issues by re-presenting dominant images. Format's captions illuminate the processes involved in selecting and producing their material. Mitra Tabrizian's work draws on semiotic and psychoanalytic theory to challenge the conventional notion that images of women are reflections rather than constructions of meaning. Her carefully composed and lit studies echo film imagery and play with psychoanalytic narratives.

In the issue as a whole we have tried to present a wide variety of approaches to the question of cultural politics for feminism. There are, as there must be, significant gaps—no piece on feminist music, nothing on feminist publishing, not enough on the specific contributions of black feminists and lesbian feminists to cultural production. We hope that the issue will inspire further contributions on cultural politics from our readers.

Throughout our emphasis has been on the process of making and receiving these cultural products, as much as on the products themselves. If there is any didactic thread running through the issue, it is an attempt on our part to displace the notion of individual genius and perfect, complete art which transcends its context and historical moment, and to substitute a notion of cultural production as an ongoing unfinished engagement of producers and consumers with issues central to feminism. We cannot—and ought not—be trying to determine the form of feminist art for the future. What we can hope for is to alter its conditions of production and reception. In doing so we may permanently transform the traditional, and oppressive meanings of Culture.