

# ART IN THE MARCH

## *Celebrating Our Different Voices*

by Amy Gogarty

**W**e wanted to add some colour and energy to the Women's Day March.... A woman from one of the groups said that it was great for them because it got them working together. It's very rewarding organizing something and then hearing about the after-effects that we never really expected. It gives me the shivers to talk about it. It's been a very emotional day... seeing everyone's enthusiasm and celebration, how much effort everyone put into it, how excited everybody was... hundreds and hundreds—maybe 800—people!

JOAN CAPLAN, ART IN THE MARCH



JUDY CHEUNG

International Women's Day March, Art In The March, March 6, 1993.

March 6, 1993 marked the end of a lengthy planning process for five Calgary artists and the beginning of what promises to be a new tradition in Calgary. This year, International Women's Day was celebrated by some 800 marchers, many of whom bore, wore, pushed or performed personal banners celebrating their response to the event. Art in the March, the committee that conceived of and organized the visual component of IWD, grew out of the belief that art—in particular, feminist art—can integrate with and enhance political action. By focussing media attention and coordinating involvement by local women's and visual arts groups, Art In The March contributed significantly to the air of excitement, celebration, and solidarity that was present in this year's event.

Art in the March is the project of five recent graduates of the Alberta College of Art: Mary Lou Riordon-Sello, Joan Caplan, Lorrie Wager, Susan Harrison, and Diana Zasadny. These women had worked together previously on an exhibition, "A Woman's Life," the first IWD event ever held at ACA. In the past, the IWD march never received the media attention or attendance these women felt it

deserved. This was partly because the event was organized by already overworked and underfunded members of women's groups, a situation the artists believed their own art and organizational skills could remedy. The March gave them the opportunity to practice their beliefs in feminist art. Banners were chosen to symbolize the many issues and forms of personal expression that characterize the women's movement.

IWD is an annual day of celebration in which women celebrate themselves, their work, women of the past, women of the future. Having a call for banners was a great way to get the community all working together....It has brought out a lot of voices and issues. There is a real diversity within the Calgary feminist community, and there is acceptance for all these voices. That's what happened today: we had all our voices out there. There was a lot of solidarity, and a lot of fun.

MARY LOU RIORDON-SELLO, Art in the March



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Of particular concern to the artists was the lack of participation in the March by women of colour and disabled women, a lack that plagued other arts organizations in the city as well. Issues of exclusivity versus participation and "widening the circle" were concurrently being considered by The New Gallery's Programming Committee, a factor that encouraged Art in the March to approach the gallery with a request for support. The New Gallery agreed to endorse the project and to display the banners in the gallery for the month of March. Subsequently, three other venues—the Calgary Municipal Building, the Plus 15 windows of the Calgary Centre for the Performing Arts, and the Glenbow Museum—also agreed to display the banners. The Municipal Building served as the site for kick-off speeches,

while the Glenbow hosted a reception, a two-day feminist film festival curated by Susan Lord, and an exchange of banners and performance with Rita McKeough. The broad support from visual arts and civic sectors gave legitimacy and encouragement to the project from the start.

While the events themselves were great fun, the specific social issues addressed by marchers indicated the seriousness of the occasion. International Women's Day, March 8, commemorates a successful strike in 1907 by women workers at a garment factory, in which a contract to improve working conditions was won. The strike was precipitated by a fire that killed a number of women trapped by locked doors in the factory. Similar sorts of barbaric conditions continue to dominate the lives of many



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women both at home and abroad, as was demonstrated by the number of women's groups that took part in the March. The plight of women in Iran under the fundamentalist regime received attention in one speech:

There is a country where a great number of able human beings are only half credible...where the right to study or travel is denied...where millions are legally condemned to follow the Islamic dress code...where the marriage to nine year old girls has been legalized; where these millions are denied the right to custody of their children; where it is legally and morally sanctioned to flog, stone, and torture these human beings. This country is Iran, and the

Islamic fundamentalist regime suppresses these human beings because they are women.

SHILLA SHARAFI, Subcommittee of the Federation of Iranian Refugees and Immigrants Council

Some 40 staff members at the Calgary Sexual Assault Centre each chose a woman from "herstory" who had personally inspired them: Marie Curie, Mary Wolstonecraft, Audrey Lorde (author, poet, black activist), and Manon Rheaume (first woman to play NHL Hockey) were among the women chosen. Each woman's achievement was researched and recognized by a banner, which was carried by a staff member who often dressed the part



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as well. Restoring the record of other women's courage and accomplishment inspired these women, who confront difficult circumstances in their workplace on a daily basis. Women Looking Forward, a group opposing violence against women, distributed cards printed with the phrase "I will work for change by...." The signed statements, completed with answers such as "ending the silence," "trying to rid myself of hatreds," and "building connections," were exhibited in the Municipal Building as eloquent testimony to the positive changes women are making in their lives and in the social fabric.

For the first time, disabled women were able to participate fully in the event. Although disabled women have always been welcomed, able-bodied women often overlook the difficulties, which range from the lack of rest-

room facilities for wheel chairs to the lack of security in crowded or confusing circumstances, associated with their participation. Riordan-Sello met with the Disabled Women's Committee over an extended period of time to ensure these details would be addressed. As she points out, trust takes a long time to build, but the fact that disabled women were able to participate for the first time in this important political process made the investment of time more than worthwhile.

I'm new to the feminist movement. I'm a new feminist. As a woman who happens to have a disability, I have more often felt apart from—alienated and excluded [from the women's movement]. I think I've come a long way in my journey because I no longer

feel quite so excluded, quite so alienated. Why? Because I have come to believe that the fostering of solidarity within our women's movement must be based upon three fundamental principles: Responsibility. Risk. Respect.

PAT DEMIANTSCHUK, Alberta Advisory Council on Women's Issues and Independent Living Resource Centre of Calgary

Participation by women of colour at this year's march was significant and visually stunning. A beautiful banner quilted by the Native Women's Shelter depicted a woman whose outstretched arms embraced the world. The Soromundi Club, the Women of Colour Collective, The Tibetan Women's Association, and the Iranian women all carried banners. The Soromundi Club produced masks with feathers and raffia hair, pinecone noses, and leafy eye-brows, as well as positive images of men and women working together. The connection between global development and issues facing women here at home was emphasized by one of the kick-off speakers:

*Solidarity. Together, sharing our knowledge, our understanding...listening to women from the grass roots...whose lives have been influenced in a very fundamental way, we learn and share with policy makers. ....When we think of women in the South, we tend to think of them as victims, not as holders of knowledge, not as people with whom we should be in solidarity, working towards a new world order. We need to remember solidarity, not pity; sharing and cooperation, not aid; women as holders of authentic power, not victims.*

ROSINA WILTSHIRE, Feminist Activist visiting from the Caribbean, working with the U.N. on issues of Gender and Sustainable Development.

Well-known artists also contributed to the event. Barbara Todd and her son Louis Century, from Banff, carried a lively quilt based on Louis' drawings of moons, stars,

birds and airplanes, which read "The sky is for birds, not missiles." Mireille Perron and Lorne Falk distributed brightly coloured cotton gloves with the message "You are in safe hands, yours." During the performance evening at The New Gallery, participants were requested to write their names on the card inside and to pin the glove on a giant map of Alberta. During the march, Leslie Sweder and thirteen friends performed *Hologynics*, in which she travelled along a designated route carrying galvanized pails on a bamboo yoke. Along the route, each of her friends stepped forward to contribute a resin-covered apple to her bucket. The performance was videotaped by Colleen Kerr, and the tape, buckets, dirt, and apples were installed in the alcove of The New Gallery. The performance blended medieval elements of folklore, witchcraft, and women's wisdom with a sobering image of the scapegoat—as well as positive images of friendship and the reclamation of personal history. A more boisterous performance was enacted by the gargantuan figures of the Green Fools, Christine Cook and Dean Bareham. The garishly tarted-up Pierrette and her cadaverous partner on stilts contributed a special merrymaking and burlesque.

For those who missed the March or who wished to get a better look at the various banners, the installations at the four venues served very well. The Municipal Building atrium displayed the banners of the more well-known organizations—the Women's Inter-church Council, The Women's Committee of the Calgary and District Labour Council, and the Calgary Birth Control Association. For the most part, these banners were well-crafted and direct in their message. Displaying them in City Hall, where they would be noticed by downtown workers and the general public, was a strategic decision, as it conveyed a sense of mainstream support for the goals of IWD. A few pleasant surprises—The Lesbian Mothers' Support Society banner and the colourful, often sharply political, squares quilted by volunteers at the Women's Resource Centre—served to remind people that the Women's movement is broadly based and inclusive. Janine Hall's frieze of jubilant women was installed in one of the Plus 15 windows of the



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Performing Arts Centre. Visitors to the Glenbow were treated to the Green Fools' robust effigies and more elegant creations, such as Linda Wallace's delicate wire and embroidery floss boot. The New Gallery displayed a range of personal statements, from those by the Calgary Sexual Assault Centre, instructively hung with an explanation of the significance of each historical figure and a photo of the woman who had made it, to Barbara Todd and Louis Century's quilt, to Mireille Perron and Lorne Falk's map of Alberta covered with the colourful gloves from their performance, to Pat Ashley's "nightsweats nightie," a diaristic testimony in flannel to the physical distress and challenge of menopause. Banners honouring mothers, daughters, goddesses, First Nations' women, teenagers, religious

groups, and issue-oriented placards completed the display. This complexity of issues was suited to the art gallery, as staff on hand were willing and able to discuss the event and issues with interested visitors.

The New Gallery hosted a night of performance on May 8, IWD proper. Sixteen performances by a total of 32 women ranged from the hilarious or personal to the chillingly serious. Among the most accessible presentations were those that addressed personal identity and family history. Local poet Roberta Rees read from a work in which she is mistaken for a childhood friend by an unkempt middle-aged woman. In the confusion of countering the woman's insistent question, "Are you sure you are not Olive?" Rees's own repressed childhood memories rise up

and fuse with the mistaken identity, which disorients Rees's own sense of herself. Cheryl L'Hirondelle opened her performance with a question she is often asked, "So if you're Metis, is somebody in your family an Indian?" She recounted how her people have been Metis for five hundred years. "I have two grandmothers," she began, "and four great-grandmothers, and eight great-great-grandmothers," and so on, until she arrived at "... 1,024 great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandmothers—and they were all Metis!" The song she then proceeded to perform was dedicated to all her grandmothers. In contrast to L'Hirondelle's embrace of family history, members of the Maenad Theatre performed an excerpt from "Bluto." The segment opened with a litany of voices chanting strictures women internalize as children. It then explored the awkwardness women encounter when they try to return to the family home. "Whenever a woman goes home" is alternately poignant (the woman notices her parents aging, her father becoming even more remote), thoughtful, and salacious (she hides "that old sex thing" and tries to remember the acceptable family ways of expressing herself). A welcome note of hilarity was struck by the Spring Board Dance Collective's *We Weren't All Meant To Be Pink Flamingos*. Wearing hot pink leotards with feathery bum wraps, and, at times—black rubber flip-flops—the dancers enacted madcap parodies of feminine deportment, Latino dirty dancing, tangos, and other assorted actions. The parodies succeeded due to the obvious skill and control of the dancers. A more serious note was struck by Homa Niroobakhsh, with *I Was Born A Girl*. Her poignant appeal to Canadian women asked for support for about-to-be deported Iranian women, whose crime was to crave a tiny bit of the freedom taken for granted by the audience.

This appeal was but one further reminder of the terrifying, repressive conditions that govern the lives of many women, despite the encouraging advances made in developed countries. If there is a message to come out of events such as International Women's Day, it must be to begin to seriously address these conditions. All too often, we accept our own well-being and success, or see them as

reason enough to abandon the original goals of the women's movement. Reminders such as Homa's are calls to action to keep up the fight for equality and respect for human rights, regardless of gender, world-wide. Hopefully, IWD, through such inclusive organizing strategies as Art On The March, will grow in strength and effectiveness, and women will find support in sisters around the world to combat sexism, child abuse, racism, and terror. The March in Calgary is part of a global effort to regenerate and change the world—let's all work to see it grow!

Thanks to Mary Lou Riordan-Sello and the other members of Art In The March for informational material. The women's voices have all been quoted with permission from videotaped documentation of the events. For more information on how you can become involved, phone the Calgary Status of Women Action Committee (403) 262-1873 or Women Looking Forward (403) 269-1144, who were primarily responsible for organizing the March.

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