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LIBERAL ARTS

Reconstructing the History of Lesbian Art of the 1970s

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The 1970s movement of lesbian art and artists has been relentlessly lost within the histories of the feminist and gay art movements of the same time. A cause for its lack of acknowledgment is the limited amount of scholarship available to recognize its unique existence, and to answer questions that very few people have bothered to ask. In light of this, my research seeks to unravel the history of lesbian art as an independent movement, and to ask questions such as why it was only granted visibility in exhibitions from 1978 to 1982. To understand the significance of the decade-long struggle of lesbian artists to have their work shown, and the question of their brief success, my research draws largely on primary sources to reconstruct an independent picture of the movement. I collected press reviews and reactions to the exhibitions by magazine sources, as well as lesbian artists' statements and lesbian manifestos. Further, to supplement the small amount of scholarship written on lesbian art from the 1970s, I included insight from queer theory and historical documentation of the cultural and political climate of the decade to make my analyses. My research has led me to contend that complex factors from both within and outside of the movement caused its short-lived exhibition success—including issues of self-censorship, categorization, and the myth of avant-garde individualism in the art world. Yet despite its brief visibility, the movement serves as an important piece of both art history and the history of the ongoing struggle for civil rights.

Research advisor Catherine Dossin says, "Despite the scarcity of material available, Jayne was able to recover the history of the short-lived lesbian art movement and reconstruct the controversies that divided the movement over the definition of a lesbian aesthetic or sensibility. Her precise and insightful analyses are a real contribution to the field of art history."

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