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**A Personal Portrayal of Breast Cancer:  
How Art Can Educate**

Deena Dlusy-Apel

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
Of  
Art Education

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master in Arts at  
Concordia University  
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December 2001

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## **Abstract**

### **A Personal Portrayal of Breast Cancer: How Art Can Educate**

Deena Dlusy-Apel

On October 22 2001, the art exhibition “One in Nine- A Personal Portrayal of Breast Cancer: How Art Can Educate” opened at Gallery Gora in downtown Montreal.

I, as the artist who presented this body of work, wanted to bring the breast cancer issue to the attention of the public. I wanted the visitors to the show to become aware of the problems that women who live with breast cancer face.

By focussing on my brush with breast cancer, this thesis explores how personal experience can become a conduit for creative art making. Furthermore the thesis examines my art show, and demonstrates how activist art, by being placed in the public arena, can educate its viewers.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to express my thanks to the members of BCAM (Breast Cancer Action Montreal), my friends, who have taught me to think like an activist and a survivor.

My professors at the University of Waterloo responded positively to my work on breast cancer and encouraged me to produce the multi-media body of work on which this thesis is based. To them, I give thanks.

At Concordia University the entire experience of obtaining my Master of Arts degree has been one of learning and encouragement. I give special thanks to my advisor, Paul Langdon, who has nurtured the “me in me and in my work” and who has made the entire process a joy. Along with Paul Langdon, my readers, Elizabeth Saccá and Loren Lerner, have managed to shape me up academically so that this thesis has become a reality. Special thanks to David Pariser, who encouraged me to look at the work of activist artists.

Thanks to my friends Anne Kaye, Heidi Chernoff, Denise Nash and Jean-Michael Pollack, who helped hang the show and make my work exciting to see. Thanks to all others who helped my show be a success. Particular thanks to my sister and brother-in law, Jocelyn and Jerry Cooper who wrote and sang a song for the vernisage, and to all the members of Playback Theatre who performed at the gallery with the show as a backdrop.

Thanks to my children and their partners who tirelessly listen to my political, environmental and artistic concerns. And finally, I wish to thank my

supportive partner Max, who held my hand through my breast cancer ordeal and whose love of learning for the sake of learning has been an inspiration to me in our years together.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1 Background

My thesis show came together because of who I am. It represents what is important to me and how I process my reality. It reflects the experience I gleaned throughout the thirty years I spent in the classroom, my struggles as an artist and breast cancer survivor, and the discipline and guidance afforded me as a graduate student in the Department of Art Education at Concordia University.

Intuitively, I wanted the body of work, based on my personal breast cancer experience, exhibited publicly. My desire to make my art public for the purpose of educating reflects the sentiments of other activist artists, who believe that awareness is achieved by exposure to their artwork. Education often begins with awareness.

For the purpose of this study, I define “personal” as I use the term. Growing up in the 1940s personal had a connotation of private, something that would remain with the individual or in some cases within the confines of a small, select group, perhaps a family. This included many issues such as socio-economic standing, health, the interaction between family members or partners and a myriad of other issues. The comment, “It’s personal,” was more than an adequate response to end a conversation.

Over the years the concept of the personal has evolved dramatically. Bolstered by the advent of television shows, which inspire mothers and daughters, lovers of every gender, and people suffering from health issues

ranging from halitosis to terminal cancer to discuss their personal cases on public airwaves, the term personal/ private has taken on new meaning. Webster's Dictionary defines personal in terms of what is private to an individual. Private is defined as what is intended for or restricted to the use of a particular person, group or class, not known or intended to be known publicly. The private, in this age of modernity, has been removed from the personal. Personal has come to mean what happens to an individual, whether it remains private or not.

Scholars have offered intricate explanations as to why this change has occurred. Some Marxist-oriented social scientists say this change in outlook has come about as a result of capitalism, feminism and psychoanalysis.<sup>1</sup> Some social theorists have examined the breakdown of the private/public spheres, and suggested that increased state intervention has restricted the private domain. The incursion of government, with its tendency to integrate public and private institutions, has led to erosion of the private world.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the reasons, the change in outlook is indisputable. In many instances the personal, because it has been separated from the private, can now be used in the classroom to enhance the educational process.

When I was teaching English, I began each day by addressing political and social issues. I listened to the concerns of my students. My intention was to foster in my students the desire to be young adults who would possess the background and wherewithal to be informed readers of literature—ones who

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<sup>1</sup> Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Turkel, *Dividing Public and Private: Laws, Politics and Social Theory* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1993), 1-15.

would be able to discern good writing from mediocre writing, relate to it at a personal level and come away from the experience with pleasure. However, equally strong, was my conviction that I, through teaching, would be able to instill in some students a sense of social consciousness and a commitment to be moral individuals. Students were made aware that if they themselves were au courant they would not only gain credibility but also gain valuable material with which to express themselves in their work. A young student, who does not have information or an opinion about his or her surroundings, will have nothing to talk, write or paint about and will furthermore likely develop into an indifferent non-caring individual.

In 1988 I was diagnosed with breast cancer. In terms of national statistics, so far, I have been extremely fortunate. I fall into the category of the 18000 women who contract breast cancer every year and not in the category of the 5400 women who yearly succumb to the disease.

Two years after diagnosis and treatment, I became an active member of a newly-formed organization called Breast Cancer Action Montreal (BCAM). Because of my pedagogical background, BCAM seemed perfect. This group wished to change government policy and educate not only women with breast cancer but the public, as well.

A high school English teacher at the time, my private experience with breast cancer had been uncharacteristically hidden from my students for several years. Sharon Batt in her book, *Patient No More: The Politics of Breast Cancer* wrote on my experience with the disease:

Women who come out of the closet may be pleasantly surprised at the willingness of others to share their emotional involvement with the disease. Deena Apel, a Montreal high school teacher, did not tell her students when she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1988. “I thought it might freak them out,” she says. “I thought they might spend too much time considering my anatomy.” After joining an activist group four years later, she spoke at a public rally that was televised. “My students saw me. They questioned me. It was pretty wonderful,” she says. “They have mothers, aunts and grandmothers who have the disease. It helps to share and I certainly have not lost any credibility.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1997, my retirement from teaching took me to the University of Waterloo, where I embarked on an in-depth study of contemporary art. Immersed in this new environment, my work took an unexpected turn. In a printmaking class, an image of a collograph bra soon had a scalpel protruding from it. This was a breakthrough experience. Soon after, in a life drawing class I found that I had rendered the model tenaciously holding her breasts and that I had also drawn severed breasts at the feet of the model. What followed was a body of work based on my brush with breast cancer.

As an educator in the classroom for close to thirty years, I believed in demystification. I told the students who I was and encouraged them to talk about themselves. Likewise, I accepted to teach more than just my discipline and incorporated into my daily schedule, social, political and moral issues and their connection to the work being done in the classroom. I saw the value of encouraging students to address both issues of private concern and also issues

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<sup>3</sup> Sharon Batt, *Patient No More: The Politics of Breast Cancer* (Charlottetown: Gynergy Books, 1994), 305.

of social and public concern. Keeping lines of communication open enables students to unburden themselves. To hear that others have issues of similar concern is comforting and educational. By addressing issues of personal concern, we find commonalities.

Students were particularly encouraged to look to public issues that were of personal interest to them. While social consciousness may be the result of involvement with other people's concerns, there is no doubt that personal concerns will help politicize an individual.

Feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir helped politicize the personal. She argues that women, as an oppressed caste, must engage in political action to throw off the shackles of this oppression. Noted political scientist Hannah Arendt argues against a mindless, blind existence. She encourages constant questioning, constant concern. Arendt suggests that what we need in society are more relationships and involvement in public issues. Through relationships and involvement, we can educate and teach people to think individually and morally.

As a teaching assistant for Dr. Pariser at Concordia University, I was able to augment my store of practical knowledge about teaching by visiting art classes in the Montreal area. I have seen the incorporation of contemporary cultural, political and social issues into the art curriculum. I have been very impressed with what I have observed. Art teachers are teaching art history as well as skills and techniques, without neglecting current trends in education, which include an awareness of the multicultural population and social and political theories. In this way personal issues are incorporated into the program, as well. Students are

being taught in such a way so that personal concerns and competencies learned in the art room are transferable to other areas of life.

My present artistic endeavors are a direct result of the fact that upon retiring I lost my captive or “hostaged” political arena, the student body. I lost my forum—there was no one to hear my concerns, no one to make aware of the pitfalls in our society, and no one to understand the workings of my mind. To fill this void, I would have to express, through my art, my personal and political beliefs.

## **1.2 Objective**

The title of my thesis, *A Personal Portrayal Of Breast Cancer: How Art Can Educate*, refers to the body of work I exhibited in October 2000, and reflects my conviction that art, which deals with political issues, such as breast cancer or AIDS, can educate the public by being “out there” and “in your face.” This thesis represents 60 years of living, 13 years as a survivor of breast cancer and 11 years as a breast cancer activist. It represents years of painting and art making as well as 3 months of organizing and curating the exhibit. I use my breast cancer art show as a case study and as a model to show how personal activist art can educate by being in the public sphere.

## **1.3 Methodology /Procedure**

The methodology for this thesis is based on qualitative research. I, as qualitative researcher, act as the “human instrument” of data collection, and

through induction arrive at conclusions surrounding personal activist art.<sup>4</sup> I reflect on the development of this exhibition and the educational influence it has had on those who participated in it.

While my experience as a political activist was influential both in the creation of the pieces of art as well as in the planning of the show, it was my background as an educator that helped me arrange the exhibition in a manner that made viewing the show a learning experience. By examining and reflecting on the art work and literature of other activist artists, I was able to envisage the potential impact of my own work. By exploring the use of text in artwork, I was able to incorporate text as an important adjunct to my art. Through my words, I convey to the viewer a sense of myself and my artistic process.

During the exhibition I talked to many individuals and also kept a record of comments. The reactions of the audience to the exhibition and public inquiries during and after the exhibition support my conclusions regarding the educational effect of the exhibition.

The thesis also examines the curatorial aspects involved in putting the show together. It explores the insights that were discovered in the process of devising and designing the exhibition. I examine the huge effort of the media blitz I organized before the show and evaluate activities that I organized to go along with the exhibition. I consider the overall success of the show.

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<sup>4</sup> "The self is the instrument that engages the situation and makes sense of it." Elliot W. Eisner, *The Enlightened Eye: Qualitative Inquiry and the Enhancement of Educational Practice* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991), 34.



## 1.4 Relevant Literature

The literature I use to support this thesis reflects both a theoretical and practical point of view. I have examined the writings of scholars who explore the areas of art education and politics, and I have reviewed the literature of artists who express political ideas through their art.

I was uncertain as to how my work would impact the viewers. However, it was by looking at other activist art that I began to understand that this type of art could educate the public. The book, *Race, Sex, and Gender: In Contemporary Art* by Edward Lucie-Smith illustrates how art can effectively convey a political message.

As some scientists look to the environment and address that which they feel destroy our earth and pollute our bodies, so do artists. Barbara Matilsky in her book, *Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists' Interpretations and Solutions* states: "Artists are in a unique position to affect such environmental changes because they can synthesize new ideas and communicate connections between many disciplines."<sup>5</sup>

There is a plethora of literature dealing with art, politics and education. The book, *But Is It Art?*, provides some important theoretical frameworks for connecting these topics. Patricia Phillips in her essay 'Maintenance Activity; Creating a Climate for Change' connects art and politics:

While the artist serves as an agent, the potential for activism is realized and resides most conclusively in the

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara C. Matilsky, *Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists' Interpretations and Solutions* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1992), 3.

work's subjects and participants. The work is simply not actualized without this essential partnership...<sup>6</sup>

The essays in *Art Journals on the Political Front, 1910-1940*, examine the relationship between art and politics. The articles bolster the argument that "The arts have always interacted in some measure with the larger contemporary social and political context of a culture."<sup>7</sup>

David Trend, in his book *Cultural Pedagogy: Art/Education/ Politics*, deals with the importance of values in the education system. Education becomes an active experience.

Ultimately our task lies in demonstrating that culture and pedagogy are but two sides of the same coin. This is education as the production of values and identities rather than as the passive receipt of knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

*Crossing Over/ Feminism and Art of Social Concern* by Arlene Raven examines feminist art and describes it: "... not simply as art made by women, but art used to make an ideological point about women. It exists to educate and ultimately transform society by bringing to society a consciousness of women's underlying condition...."<sup>9</sup>

In his article, "Why Do We Teach Art Today? Conceptions of Art Education and Their Justification," Siegesmund supports the argument that art

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<sup>6</sup> Patrica C. Phillips, " Maintenance Activity: Creating a Climate for Change" in *But is it Art?* ed. Nina Felshin, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 178.

<sup>7</sup> V.H. Marquardt, *Art and Journals on the Political Front* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997), 2.

<sup>8</sup> David Trend, *Cultural Pedagogy: Art/Education/Politics* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1992), 77.

<sup>9</sup> Arlene Raven, *Crossing Over/ Feminism and Art of Social Concern*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1968), 66.

education has broad societal effects: "Art education is a tool for historical and moral instruction capable of transforming individuals and society. Art education is explicitly placed in the service of social transformation."<sup>10</sup>

I have used breast cancer as my model for examining the relationship between art and politics. Much of the art referenced in this study is either the work of survivors of the disease or of others who have in some way been personally involved with breast cancer.

*The Politics of Breast Cancer*, by Sharon Batt, a breast cancer survivor, an activist and a journalist, provides background information on the role of breast cancer activism. Her book also shows the importance of personal commitment to a cause, as does the artwork of artists who have politicized their work.

*Art. Rage. Us: Art and Writing by Women with Breast Cancer*, edited by Jacqueline Tasch, and *Survivors in Search of a Voice*, edited by Barbara Amesbury, are two excellent references of the work of artists and artists/survivors who, through their art and personal involvement, have helped educate the public. This was also the primary goal of my exhibition entitled "One in Nine-A Personal Portrayal of Breast Cancer: How Art Can Educate."

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Siegesmund, "Why Do We Teach Art Today?" *Studies in Art Education* 39, no.3 (1998): 201.

## Chapter 2

### Activist Art

#### 2.1 Introduction

Art is work of a creative nature done by an individual or group of individuals, employing skill and imagination, especially in the production of aesthetic objects, such as painting, sculpture, installations, video, photography as well as other related endeavors. To produce a piece of art that conveys a message is not easy. Furthermore, it is difficult to measure the impact that the work might have. It is my contention that artwork, when exhibited in a public space, by virtue of exposure, will create awareness, an integral component of the educational process.

Throughout the ages religious, social and political issues have been addressed by many artists. Most of the issues were of a public nature but of personal concern to the artist. Postmodernism, encouraged by Freudian psychoanalysis and philosophical thinkers, such as Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault, has given vent to a more personal form of public art. Feminism, the AIDS movement and environmentalism, coupled with issues of gender, race and politics encourage involvement from the standpoint of experience. Today many artists focus on issues, which have touched them directly. Personal can be expanded to include not only artists directly affected by a particular "problem" but also artists who in one way or another have close relationships to people who are affected by the problem. This makes the work both personal and public. Some

artists do what is known as public art. "...public art is being heralded as an example of artists 'fighting back.'"<sup>11</sup> Some artists do work that is of a personal nature because they speak experientially.

I, as an artist, have come to recognize the importance of art as a tool for activism. As I began to appreciate the importance of art with a message, I looked at the work of artists who have attempted to educate through their work. My work has been influenced by environmental art, minority art, AIDS art and other breast cancer art.

I was uncertain as to how my work would impact the viewers. However, it was by looking at other activist art that I began to understand that this type of art could educate the public.

## **2.2 Environmentalism and Gender Issues**

As some scientists look to the environment and address that which they feel destroy our earth and pollute our bodies, so do artists. Even early landscape artists who depicted idyllic scenes from nature are now regarded as artists concerned with their surroundings and ecology. Today environmental artists address issues head on. Ester Hernandez's poster (Figure 2.1, p.13), *Sun Mad*, 1982, uses a Mexican skeleton figure appropriated from the work of Guadalupe Posado. This is an example of educational art. The red box of raisins that it references is such a widely- recognizable icon of the modern world. Seeing the

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<sup>11</sup> Jan Zita Grover, "Public Art on AIDS: On the Road with Art Against AIDS" in *A Leap in Dark: AIDS, Art & Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Allen Klusacek and Ken Morrison (Montreal: Vehicule Presse, 1992), 58.

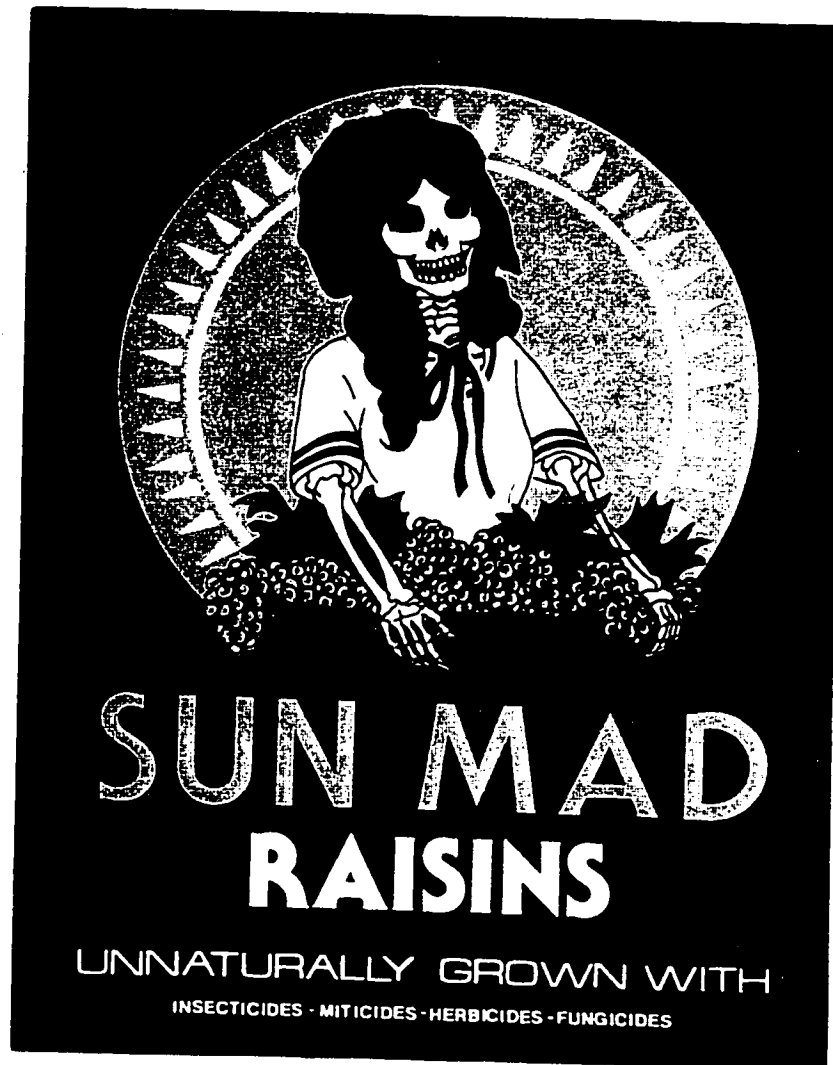


Figure 2.1  
Ester Hernandez  
**Sun Mad**, 1982  
Screenprint, 22x17in

skeleton on the box rather than a fresh young maid is reason enough for the viewer to stop and consider. Undoubtedly, the viewer, who investigates, would soon discover that grapes are one of the most highly sprayed crops. The pesticides found on raisins are extremely toxic; the attractive little Sun Maid box, which parents include as a healthy snack in their children's lunch boxes could be one of the reasons that cancer cases are on the rise.

Edwina Sandys' *Christa*, 1975 (figure 2.2, p.15), is an example of gender art intended to educate. This piece is a bronze wall sculpture which hangs against the subtle background of a crucifix. This four foot three inch piece is self-explanatory in terms of what it addresses. The crucified image of Christ, now with gender reversal, references the feminist issues prevalent in our society.

*Two Men Running Away* by John Kirby, 1987 (figure 2.3, p.16), is a gender piece. The personal is not only represented by the subject matter but also by the fact that Kirby often paints himself into his work. Two men clothed in dresses and high heels are running in terror. "His paintings do not represent overtly sexual acts, nor can they be read as celebrations of male beauty. They are often meditations on the way in which gay men disguise themselves, and on their ambiguous reactions to their own sexuality."<sup>12</sup>

Benny Andrew's *Outsider, Inside (World series)*, 1992 (figure 2.4, p.17), an oil and collage on canvas, is an African-American work. The painting depicts an empathetic black man behind bars, looking into empty space.

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<sup>12</sup> Edward Lucie-Smith, *Race, Sex, and Gender: In Contemporary Art* (Singapore: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 134.



Figure 2.2  
Edwina Sandys  
*Christa*, 1975,  
Bronze, height 4ft 3in



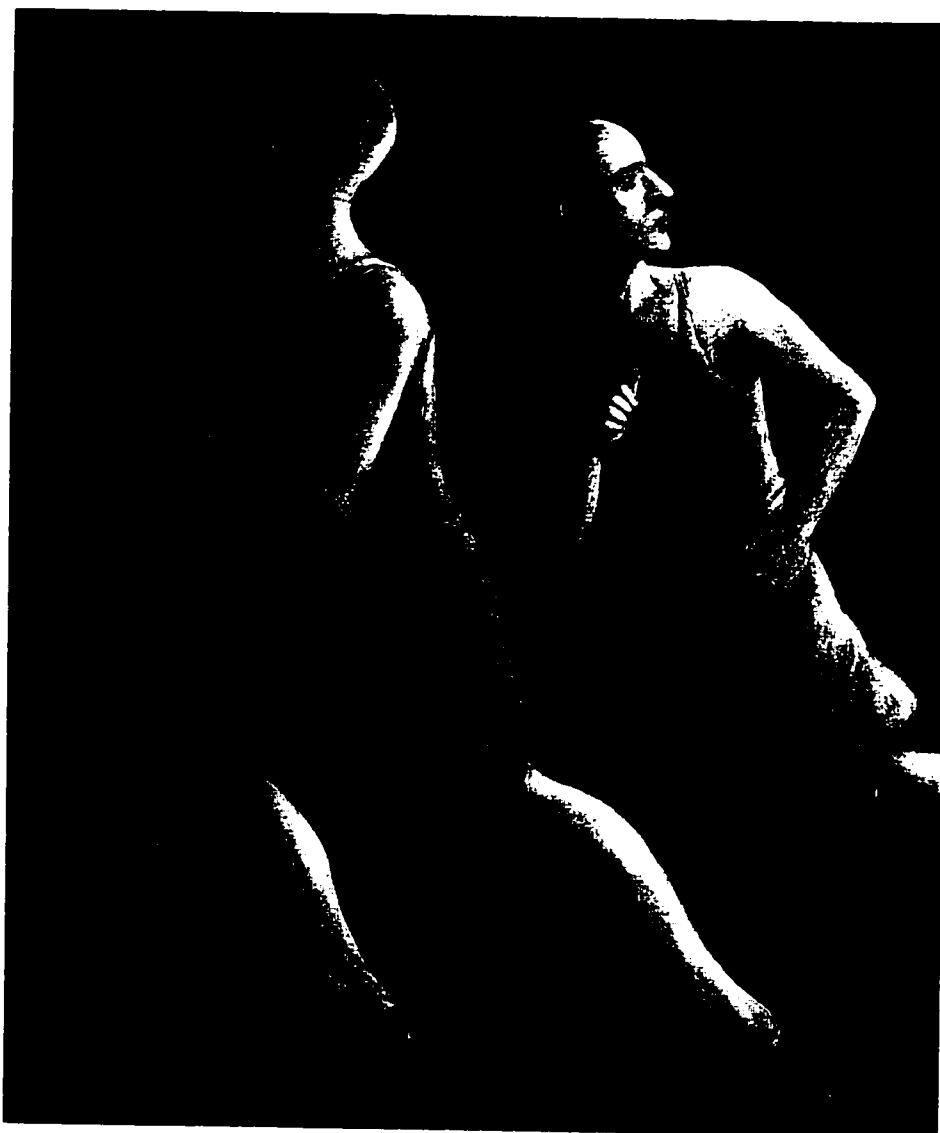


Figure 2.3  
John Kirby  
***Two Men Running Away***, 1987  
Oil on Canvas, 36x24in



Figure 2.4  
Benny Andrews  
*Outsider, Inside (World series)*, 1992  
Oil and Collage on canvas, 37x24in

“It is a truism to say that visual images, like words, are a means of passing ideas and experiences from one person to another.”<sup>13</sup> The work is not simply propagandistic but also stands on its own as a work of art.

### 2.3 AIDS and Breast Cancer

Art that deals with the AIDS or breast cancer epidemic has influenced my work most directly. The AIDS movement provided an impetus to the breast cancer movement, and the breast cancer movement learned much in terms of tactical lessons from the AIDS movement. From the AIDS movement I learned that in terms of education, it is important to make the public aware of the disease and its implications. Artists have been instrumental in creating this awareness; they have helped politicize this issue through their work.

AIDS art has proven to be extensive, politically charged, “in your face” art. Despite the fact that AIDS is not only a gay disease, the examples of art I choose to refer to are mainly representations from the gay community. Within the movement itself, there was controversy as to how to present the AIDS victim.

Should the art under discussion represent people with AIDS directly, or should it turn its focus outward, portraying the world surrounding—and often oppressing—PWAs\*? If PWAs are to be represented, how graphic should the representations be? If outerdirected, what should the work then address? Government inaction/ The world of medical research? The virus itself? How can more abstract notions like homophobia, fear anger, or dementia be shown? How can survival, resistance, or being HIV positive depicted. <sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>14</sup> Rob Baker, *The Art of AIDS* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1994), 137.

\* People With AIDS

Keith Haring, who died of AIDS in 1990, is well known for his work, *Silence=Death*, 1989 (figure 2.5, p.20), which is recognizable both because of Haring's unique graffiti-like style as well as the familiar pink triangle and AIDS slogan. It is poignant to note the significance of the pink triangle.

This in itself tells us about the styles and strategies of the AIDS activist graphics. For SILENCE=DEATH does its work with a metaphoric subtlety that is unique, among political symbols and slogans, to AIDS activism. Our emblem's significance depends on foreknowledge of the use of the pink triangle as the marker of gay men in Nazi concentration camps. Its appropriation by the gay movement to remember a suppressed history of our oppression, and now, an inversion of its positioning (men in death camps wore triangles that pointed down; SILENCE=DEATH's points up).<sup>15</sup>

In 1987, Donald Moffett created a silkscreen poster entitled *He Kills Me (In Memory of Diego Lopez)*, 1997 (figure 2.6, p.21), which consists of six rectangles, three with bulls-eyes and three with the recognizable face of then US President, Ronald Reagan, who was not allocating enough funds to combat the AIDS epidemic. David Edwards (aka Sister Mary Dazie Chain) did a silver gelatin photograph, *Untitled, (AIDS Pietà)*, 1992 (figure 2.7, p.22). The traditional Madonna and Christ portrait is replaced by a man in drag, dressed as a nun, cradling a dying Christ-like figure, an AIDS victim. Because of the recognizability of the Pietà image and the seriousness of the AIDS epidemic, the meaning of this photograph is impacted on the viewer with extreme clarity.

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<sup>15</sup> Crimp, Douglas, "AIDS Demo Graphics" in *A Leap in the Dark, Art & Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Allen Klusacek and Ken Morrison (Montreal: Vehicule Presse, 1992), 47.



Figure 2.5  
Keith Haring  
***Silence=Death***, 1989  
Silkscreen, 39x39in



Figure 2.6  
Donald Moffat  
*He Kills Me (In Memory of Diego Lopez)*, 1997  
Offset Lithography and Colour Screenprint, Street Poster

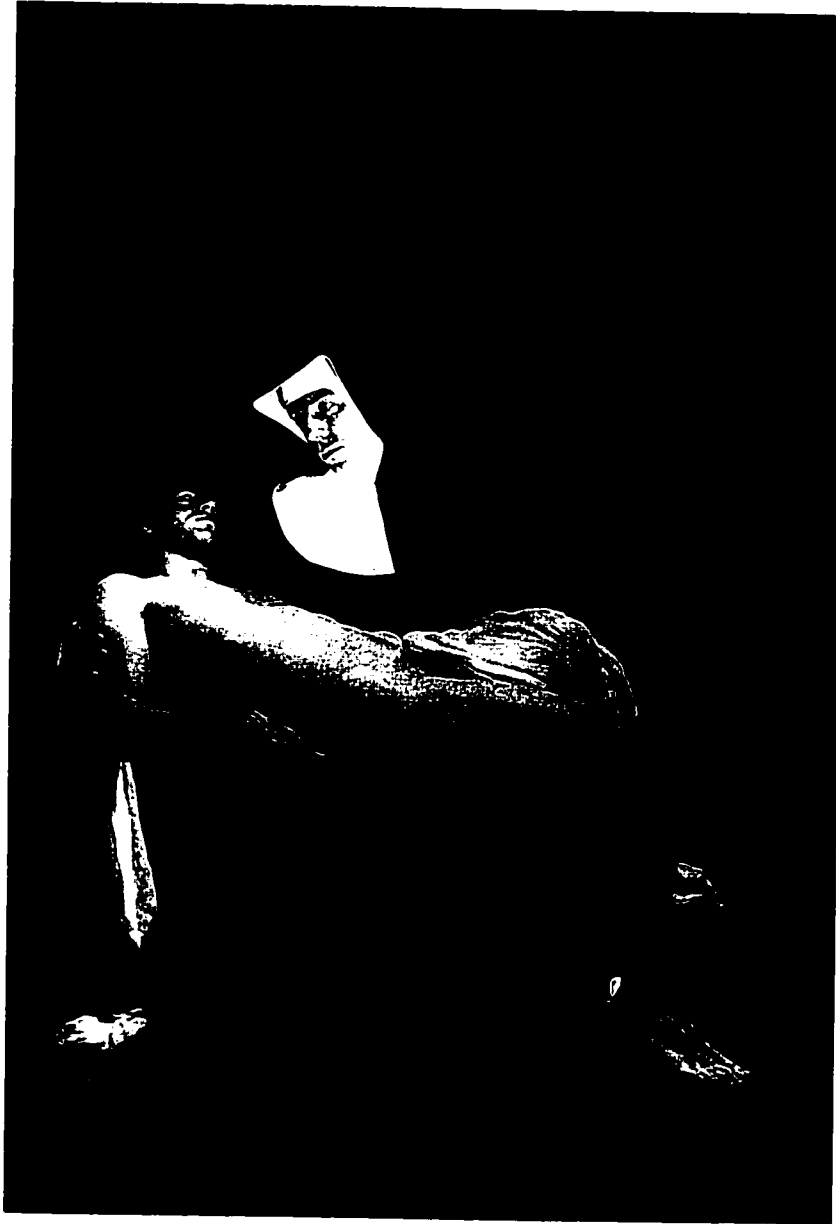


Figure 2.7  
David Edwards (aka Sister Dazie Chain)  
*Untitled (AIDS Pietà)*, 1992  
Gelatin Silver Photograph, 46.6x30.4cm

Matuschka is an artist and breast cancer survivor whose work shows the influence of AIDS activist art. It took two years of lobbying and “harassing” the New York Times for this model and artist to bring her work to the public’s attention (Figure 2.8, p.24).

An activist with clout. In 1993 the New York Times Magazine put Matuschka's startling self-portrait—she wore a white toga-like gown that exposed her scar—on its cover. “I wanted to show the world what a mastectomy looked like, so women with mastectomies would be accepted and loved,” she says.<sup>16</sup>

Reaction to her work was quick and varied. Many women were delighted with her courage and commended her efforts, which they felt would benefit the entire breast cancer community; other women were horrified that now the whole world would see their scars, which they considered unpresentable. She had accomplished what she had set out to do, by creating public awareness of the disease.

Art not only has to portray a message but the art has to be good. As David Pariser states in reference to political artists, “... it was the superior aesthetic quality of the work that distinguished their contributions, **not** the purity of their political beliefs.”<sup>17</sup>

When a group show of survivors of breast cancer was conceived, hundreds of pieces were submitted. “*Art.Rage.Us* began with a vision. One of the

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<sup>16</sup> Christina Cheakalos and Lisa Kay Greissing, “Unkindest Cut,” *People Weekly*, 19 July 1999, 119.

<sup>17</sup> David Pariser, “Letter to the Editor,” *Art Education* 53, no.4 (2000): 5.





Figure 2.8  
Matuschka  
*Beauty Out of Damage*, 1993  
Colour Photograph, Self-portrait, 12x10in

leading breast cancer activists in America, Andrea Martin, knew that an exhibit of creative works by women with breast cancer would be a powerful way to increase public awareness about breast cancer in the San Francisco Bay area....The Call for Entries went out all across the country."<sup>18</sup>

Two juries did the selection. The intent was to have excellent work to exhibit. The show was held at the San Francisco Main Library Gallery.

The show *Survivors In Search of a Voice*, organized by Barbara Amesbury, came together when a group of Canada's "best women visual artists were commissioned to create works of art that would, somehow, give a 'voice' to the thousands of women struggling with the disease."<sup>19</sup> They interviewed survivors of breast cancer and based their artwork on what they learned from these women. The exhibit traveled to many Canadian cities and a catalogue by the same name was compiled. The text was written by the artists.

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<sup>18</sup> Jacqueline Tasch, *Art. Rage. Us: Art and Writing by Women with Breast Cancer* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 7.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara Amesbury, *Survivors In Search of a Voice* (Toronto: Woodlawn Arts Foundation, 1995), 6.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Text**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

As soon as I made the commitment to present my body of work based on my personal experience with breast cancer, it became obvious to me that I wished to educate through art. Immediately, scraps of paper began their random appearances throughout the house. I had a compulsion to tell how this work was generated. I wanted to talk about the place within me from whence it came, and what I hoped it would do for others. I also felt like sharing with the viewers my artistic dilemmas, the artists who influenced my work, and the joy I experienced when things went well in the studio. I even wanted people to have a look into the way my mind worked. In retrospect, this replicates how I approached teaching those thirty odd years I spent in the classroom. Education through dialoguing has always been important to me.

#### **3.2 My Experience and Education in Relation to Text**

I visited museums often as a child and young adult. I managed in 1979 to obtain a degree in fine arts, while teaching English full-time. I continued to take classes at The Saidye Bronfman Centre for the Arts. Yet, I did nonetheless remain a novice when it came to contemporary art, and laughed when I began to encounter artists' statements. Not having had the background necessary to understand where they were coming from, I questioned their importance.

However, I soon found myself seeking them out as I ran like a gazelle with friends through the art galleries in Toronto. It was also in Ontario, where I, as an independent student at the University of Waterloo, was asked to write artist statements to accompany my work.

Since then, my education at Concordia University has brought me up to date. In Cathy Mullen's studio class, in a process that took seven days, we produced our own artist statements and read and critiqued the artist statements of the other members in the group. In the critical analyses classes of Richard Lachapelle and Robert Parker, I became a sophisticated reader of the diverse literature available on art education. In art history with Loren Lerner, I was introduced to postmodern philosophers and their relevance in the contemporary art scene. In Andrea Fairchild's course I became aware of the importance of the museum in education, and in studio with Paul Langdon, the exposure to the work of my colleagues and their reactions to my work has been invaluable. Elizabeth Saccá and David Pariser encouraged me to look at my own work with new insight and to evaluate more theory on art education. With this knowledge I am able to look at art with new perspective. It is with this understanding that I now examine text.

### **3.3 What I Learned About the Use of Text**

Text today is used extensively. It is used in artist statements, it is used by curators, who write about artists' works, it is used in elaborate labeling and it is also used on didactic panels. Obviously, text is interpreted independently by

each reader. There are viewers who choose to ignore it completely and those who actually feel it interferes with examining the work in an unencumbered way.

A curator said the following:

Historical work is relatively easy. Didactic panels, lectures, and good tour guides can make those exhibitions quite fruitful. The viewer has to be willing to objectively perceive works though, to try to step outside of their own experience and perceive from the point of view of the creator. That's where I think good educational materials come into play.<sup>20</sup>

Personally, I have had varying responses to both labels and didactic panels. At the Monet exhibit at The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the panels were annoying to me, and yet, I felt a compulsion to read them. I devoured with gusto the information available to me at The National Gallery when I saw the exhibition, *Canvas of War: Masterpieces from the Canadian War Museum*. Perhaps in this case, I wanted more information.

The ideal label builds on visitors' previous knowledge and answers their most pressing questions about the object. In broader terms, labels sharpen visitors' observational skills and help them make connections between a work of art and its context....labels should be short and contain one main idea.<sup>21</sup>

Although many artists are still in a quandary about the use of text, most use it.

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<sup>20</sup> Gregory Klages, "An Interview with a Curator" <<http://collection.nlc-bnc.ca/100/202/300/artbus/1996/artbus.b01/featuretwo.html>> (March 22, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> The Interdivisional Committee On Interpretation, "Writing Effective Labels" in *Interpretation at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts: Policy and Practice* (Minneapolis: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1993), 43.

### **3.4 Artwork and Text**

I include some striking examples of artwork and text. These works were chosen since they too have used breast cancer as their focus. The images and text of the following three artists are included:

*ONE IN EIGHT*, by Diana C. Young, *VENUS REVISITED* by Carole Bonicelli and *SURGERY MEMORY* by Marcia Smith (figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, pp. 30-32).

### **3.5 The Use of Text in my Show**

My first consideration was to use small laminated didactic panels in English and French, which would hang directly beside each work. Then I considered the size of the gallery and its limited space, coupled with the fact that the text, being so close to the viewer, might serve as a distraction. I decided that nothing other than the artwork and the perfunctory titles would go on the walls.

My advisor thought that I should create a video, with me describing my work; he felt that my presence would enhance the viewer's experience. I was tempted. Nevertheless, I rejected this suggestion because of the size of the gallery; I felt that two machines in a small room of art was one too many. In the show, a vending machine dispensing packaged breasts was an "appliance," crucial to the exhibit.

To me, a longtime activist with a strong pedagogical background, text became an obvious and comfortable way for me to enhance the experience of seeing my work. Yet soon after the text began to be a reality, my artistic self stepped in and said, "Whoa, hold on! Are there not those viewers who prefer to



Figure 3.1  
Diana C. Young  
*One in Eight*, 1996  
Toned Photograph, 15x19in

### Text

One Saturday morning, I gathered together six of my closest friends and one of their daughters for lunch and a photo session. It was an interesting experience in many ways. We found that every woman's breasts are as totally individual as her face. Everyone agreed that my scars didn't look nearly as bad as what was expected. After the photos, we were all reluctant to put our blouses and shirts back on since we had all experienced such closeness, honesty, and ease during the shoot. The title of the work is "One in Eight" because the lifetime risk of being diagnosed with breast cancer is one in eight.

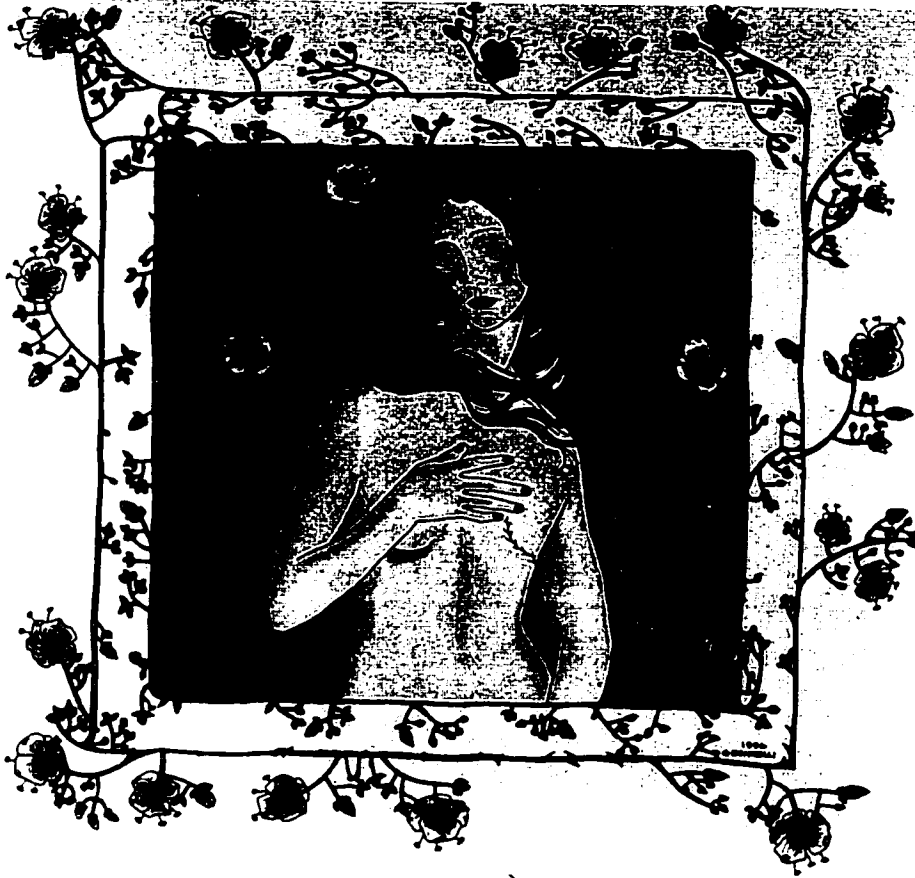


Figure 3.2  
Carole Bonicelli  
***Venus Revisited***, 1995  
Painting on Silk, 45x45in

### Text

Artists use the transformative power of paint and clay to magnify and explain mere singular experience. As an artist who teaches, I wondered how I could make my experience with breast cancer relevant to my teenage students. Using the familiar image of Botticelli's Venus as a metaphor, I painted an altered vision of feminine beauty. When asked to describe the differences between the original painting and my version, the girl students talked about changes in the flowers and the absence of the ocean. The boys said, "She's only got one breast." So the girls avoided the subject, while the boys focused obsessively on it. To me, her eyes, serene but touched by sadness, reflect awareness of her wound, but her beauty is unmarred. We are, after all, more than the sum of our parts.





Figure 3.3  
Marcia Smith  
***Surgery Memory***, 1993  
Pastel, 25 x31in

Text

This image, "Surgery Memory," was done shortly after a session of guided visualization. In the session, a wolf spontaneously appeared and began tearing at my breast. I felt that what I was experiencing was the release of my body's subconscious memory of the surgery. I consciously felt the pulling and tearing of muscle tissues. Accompanying this pain was the realization that the surgery was a profoundly compassionate act, for it was helping me to stay alive.

see art and work it out for themselves?” I began to consider exactly how I could present my text so that it would be available to those who wanted it and not be inflicted on those who preferred to “just” see the work.

I then conceived the idea of producing several booklets of text and hanging them strategically in the gallery. I most probably would have left it at that, but I responded most favorably to the suggestion made by one of my friends who thought handouts available in both languages was a superior idea. This was what I ultimately did. I produced two pages of accompanying text, had them run off in two shades of pink—one for French and one for English—and made them available to the gallery guests at the entrance to the gallery. On the morning of the vernissage, I also pedantically taped copies of the text on the side of the vending machine as a second opportunity for those who might have missed the first.

### **3.6 Text and Art Education**

In postmodernism, we, as educators, push the boundaries. Text can be seen as just another way to embark in this direction. Text can bridge the gap for some students of art from other cultures; words can expedite the comprehension of a new cultural paradigm.

It is my contention, as well, that individuals learn in many different ways and possess different patterns of learning—a contention corroborated by many in the field. Text, unlike works of art, is a familiar way of gaining entry into most disciplines. Students are acquainted with this modality. This is a strong point in

its favour as a teaching tool. I see text as a very useful adjunct to art education. Text can be the right stimulus for some learners. It can provide the demystification to work that up to then has left the viewers feeling remote, alienated or disinterested. It is through the reading of existing text that some students of art become comfortable, interpreting both their own work and the work of others. It gives them insight into their own art making process, insight into themselves and insight into the work of others.

The following pages show text as presented in the handouts (pages 35-36) and the images in my exhibit, "One in Nine—A Personal Portrayal of Breast Cancer: How Art Can Educate". Included in the show were five sculptures which did not have accompanying text.

DEENA DLUSY-APEL

ONE IN NINE

OCTOBER 2000

This text is my way of walking with you through the gallery. You will experience a multi-media body of work that ranges from realism to abstraction. The text will describe who I am in relation to these pieces that I have created and chosen to be part of this exhibit. The words will be informative as to content, style and motivation.

1) Topsy-Turvy This piece I painted in a class just five days after surgery for breast cancer. I laughed when I noticed breast-shaped objects all over the canvas. In retrospect, it was pretty spunky to attend a class so soon after major surgery—a true indicator of how I was to process what was going on.

2) Gas Mask Ten years later, the only residuum to my breast cancer experience was the gas mask I wore when I was in the printmaking studio. What causes breast cancer? I was suspicious of solvents and chemicals.

3, 4 and 5) I decided to make collographs of bras. A product of the sixties, I remembered prints of jeans, jean jackets, Jim Dine's housecoats and Betty Goodwin's vests. Much to my surprise, the frilly bras soon had scalpels protruding from them.

6) Holding On In a life-drawing class the following week, I drew these images of the model holding her breasts. There were severed breasts scattered on the ground. I knew that breast cancer and I had some unfinished business.

I now was to make a conscious decision to produce a body of work based on my brush with breast cancer. I had years earlier joined BCAM, Breast Cancer Action Montreal, an activist group; I had lots to say. My art would be my vehicle to express my politics. Two things, however, were very important to me: first, that my work did not take on the appearance of propaganda posters, and second, that it still, in fact, despite the topic, remained "fine art." Eventually, I hoped to move from realism to abstraction.

7) This pastel frieze on pressed board was the first piece I did after I had made the commitment to do work about the politics of breast cancer. I wanted to stick with an image I found powerful. I had been looking at Degas pastels and wanted to work with this medium. However, because I was transposing from black and white I had trouble with the light source. I began to decompose by scratching away at the surface.

8) I was having difficulty saying what I felt had to be said; I decided to look to BCAM and begin at the beginning. From newsletters I randomly chose the photos of nine members to paint for this portrait 1 in 9. One in nine women in the course of a lifetime will contract the disease and everyone in their paths will be affected. Only three percent of the money spent by the government on breast cancer goes towards the prevention of the disease. Prevention, according to breast cancer activists, includes the elimination of carcinogenic agents in the environment and lifestyle changes.

All nine women in my painting have experienced breast cancer first hand. Because the people were real, I worked hard at these images. These were special women, ones who worked to educate.

I had worked with a grid before and was comfortable with this format.

9) One Saturday afternoon alone in my studio, I was working on my portrait of BCAM members, and at the same time I was also trying to work on smaller canvasses in a more abstract way. Images of breasts hidden in flowers, and small canvasses of women clutching breasts appeared. I laboured away, feeling that my paintings were not addressing what I was wanting to say, when these volcanic breasts literally erupted onto the white canvas

10, 11) Vending Art I was feeling pleased! Soon after, artist and friend Melissa Gordon sashayed into my studio space and asked me if I wanted to take part in her vending machine project. Each week the contributing artist delivered his or her signed work to Melissa. She packaged and labeled it and the purchaser left with an original piece of art for a nominal fee. My response was quick and assertive, "I have no time right now." That night I fabricated my first tittie, each was to be bagged and labeled with a reminder to do breast self-examination. I thought they were perfect, both attractive and educational. When I delivered the breasts to Melissa to be packaged, I presented them to her in an elongated see-through plastic bag—A BAG OF BREASTS. This accidental sculpture was visually engaging and represented the many breasts that had been both necessarily and unnecessarily removed because of breast cancer. My desire to paint became overwhelming.

12) This painting was inspired by the poem Fiat Lux by Irving Layton. In the poem a young religious Jewish boy equates the turning on of a light switch on the Sabbath to the illicitness of tweaking the nipple on a woman's breast—the breast so idealized in North American culture. Now the light switch takes on new meaning. As quick as it takes to switch a light on or off, a diagnosis of breast cancer changes the course of one's life. The breast is no longer a sex object but now becomes a life-threatening mass.

13, 14 and 15) The rest of this body of work just fell into place—the paintings, "A Bag Of Breasts," "A Portrait Abstracted" and, finally, the unstretched canvas called "Verticals" ended the series."

16) Mmmm This "postscript" painting came about as a reaction to the serious work I had just finished. I wanted to do something light, fun and of no political import and so Mmmm appeared, women—all whose name began with the letter M. And what luck I had—I chose M not because I knew I would find a poet, a femme fatale, a work of art, politicians and other icons but just because M had popped into my head. I wanted to include this painting in my show. I didn't know how.

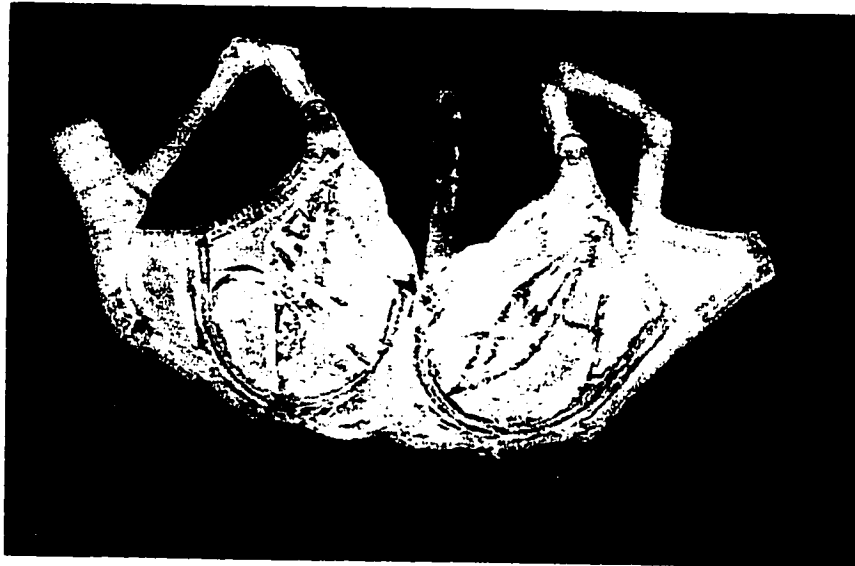
Recently at a party at my son Steffan's house, I bumped into his long-time friend, producer Ezra Soiferman. I told him about my dilemma, how this painting had nothing to do with breast cancer, and that I wanted to include it in my upcoming show. He said, "Oh no" and rattled off the following: 1) mammary 2)metastasize 3)mother 4) milk 5)monumental 6)malignant 7)misery and then we all joined in with 8)mammogram 9)mortality 10)mutilation 11)mourn 12)metamorphosis and finally 13) MIRACLE.



1) *Topsy-Turvy*, 1989  
Oil on Canvas  
36x34in



2) **Gas Mask**  
Height 26in



3 and 4) *Collographs*, 1997  
20x30in





5) *Collograph Template*, 1997  
15x10in



6) ***Holding On***, 1997  
Charcoal and Conté on Paper  
36x50in



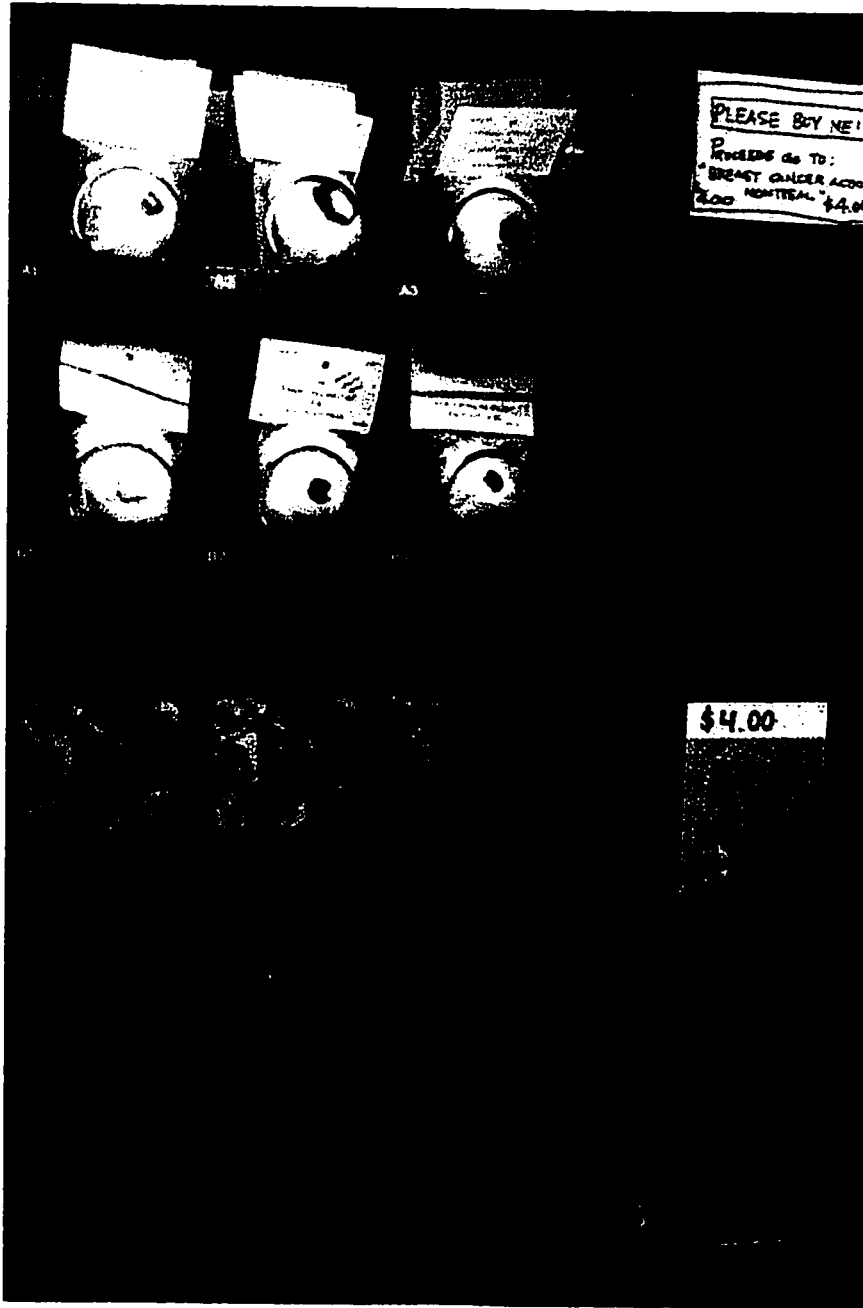
7) *Frieze*, 1998  
Pastel on Pressed Board  
40x48in



8) *1 in 9*, 1998  
Oil on Canvas  
40x48in



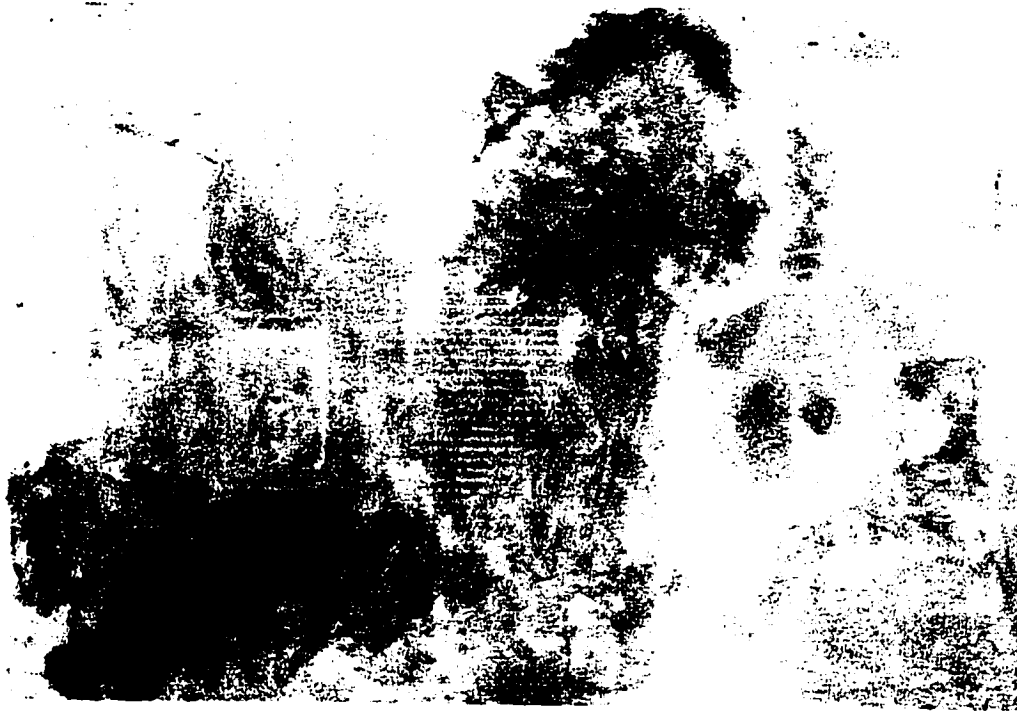
9) ***Volcanic Breasts***, 1999  
Oil on Canvas  
16x20in



10) *Vending Machine Art*, 2000  
48x30x36in



11) ***A Bag of Breasts***, 2000  
Soft Sculpture  
Height 26in



12) *Fiat Lux*, 1998  
Oil on Canvas  
24x36in





13) ***A Bag of Breasts***, 2000  
Oil on Canvas  
24x36in



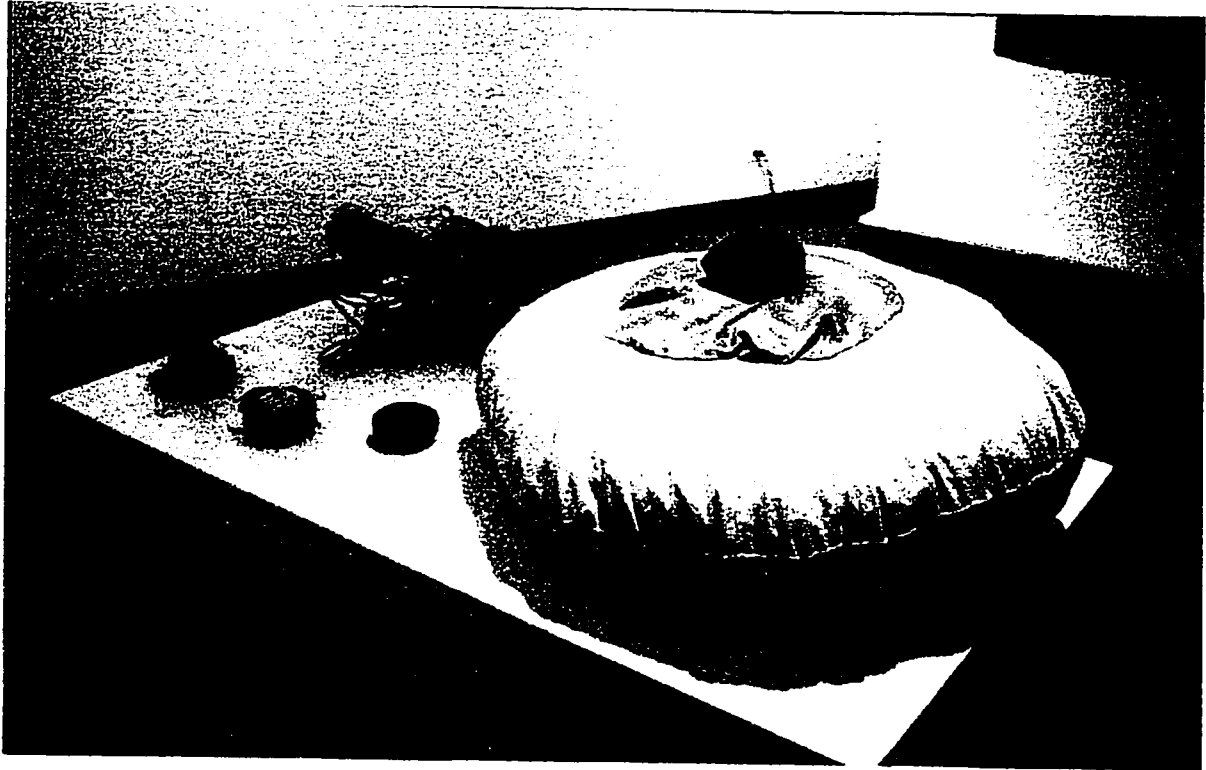
14) *A Portrait Abstracted*, 2000  
Oil on Canvas  
40x48in



15) *Verticals*, 2000  
Oil on Canvas  
36x60in



16) *Mmmm*, 2000  
Oil on Canvas  
30x40in



17) *Something to Lean On*, 2000  
Soft Sculpture  
Diameter 46in



18) *Untitled*, 2000  
Wood and Soft Sculpture  
Height 20in

## Chapter 4

### The Show

#### 4.1 Introduction.

When one contracts breast cancer, one is immediately thrust into the position of “the other.” In a Foucauldian way, the alienation one feels after diagnosis sets one apart from the rest of society. Aided particularly by the “coming out” of celebrities such as Betty Ford and actress Jill Eikenberry, and by people banding together, this disease has entered the mainstream of society, to some degree. Through relationships, constant questioning and concern, and by the politicization of this disease, the system responsible for health care can be changed. I hoped my artwork would be a part of this process.

I chose to exhibit during the month of October, which is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, in order to capitalize on the public’s sensitization to this issue at that time. In order to reach a wide audience, I did a massive media blitz. I consulted with a public relations specialist, and with her cooperation, we formulated a scheme to attract attention to the show. Since awareness was key, I wanted the show to have as much exposure as possible.

Once I secured the gallery space for the exhibition, I had invitations printed and posters made to publicize the show. The painting, *A Portrait Abstracted* (page 49), on the invitation and on the poster became the prize of a raffle I organized. The proceeds of the raffle, which exceeded \$2000, went to Breast Cancer Action Montreal. I solicited the help of friends to help hang the show. My sister and brother-in-law wrote a song on the environment and

performed it at the opening, where there was lots of wine, food and people. The vernissage was a huge success.

## 4.2 An Examination of the Artwork

There were twenty pieces in the exhibit. All speak to awareness. I include some observations on the following pieces:

*Holding On* (page 41), a large charcoal drawing which is one of the first pieces in this suite appeared accidentally in a life drawing class. Four nude women tenaciously hold on to their breasts; severed breasts lie at their feet on the ground. This painting references the unnecessary and necessary loss of breasts due to mastectomies and the horror and fear associated with this loss.

The abject nature of the disfiguration, which accompanies this disease, at times, leaves it in the category of horror. To some, the immediate threat of hair loss appears nearly as devastating as losing one's life.

When I created the image called *Frieze* (page 42), using pastels on pressed board, I referenced beautiful Degas colour to depict women agonizing in their breast cancer experience. As these soft colours appeared, I began to sand them, trying to deconstruct their vividness. I hoped to peel away some of the brilliance to reach the actual colour of loss.

The painting entitled *Bag of Breasts* (page 48), abject enough in essence, references a soft sculpture I fabricated. The sculpture (page 46) is a cellophane bag with foam rubber breasts, ranging in skin colour from cream to dark brown. This sculpture, too, decries the needless performance of mastectomy that



continued well into the 1980s. In our male-dominated medical profession the need to discover an alternate form of treatment was impeded.

*One in Nine* (page 43) is an oil painting, done in a grid. It is a portrait of nine women, all who have experienced breast cancer first hand. They are the women from BCAM. The one in the center has died of breast cancer. Accompanying this painting was a list of names of these women, making them not mere statistics but rather mothers, wives, sisters, friends and lovers, as well as educators, artists and community leaders. These women have become part of a new institution within society-an activist group. The title, *One In Nine* refers to the actual statistics, i.e. one in nine women in Canada in the course of a lifetime will contract the disease. This painting, therefore, not only singles out individuals who represent the statistics of the disease but also refers to the institution of activism within the breast cancer community.

A vending machine (page 45) was another piece in my show. It contained fabricated foam breasts with a reminder to do breast self-examination. Eighty percent of all breast cancer is discovered by women themselves. Vending machine art is intended to alter the way we look at art. It certainly makes it widely available and thus removes the "preciousness" from it. Everyone can purchase a signed original piece for a nominal fee. The small packages advocate breast self-examination, a significant health message, which is, by way of this machine, accessible to all.

My final piece (page 53) is untitled. It is the root of a tree with a breast at the apex. The moment I saw this branch, I immediately thought of Deleuze's

Rhizome and epistemology of knowledge. The roots of the branch reach out and spread, as could breast cancer. As this body of work is aimed at the education of the population, I see these roots representing the spread of knowledge about the disease

## Chapter 5

### Conclusions

This study has addressed important issues relevant to my exhibition, which brought my personal work into the public domain. It illustrated how art has a value beyond the purely aesthetic. It demonstrated that through art it is possible to show the human condition by referencing a personal experience.

Furthermore, I examined the implications this study has in the field of art education. Personal activist art is not only done to make a statement, which it does. It also is done to inform the public of the problems that society faces. It is meant to make people think and examine the issues that are put on the canvas. The study illustrates the importance of “the personal” in the creation of art.

My first consideration had been to present art which would stand on its own in terms of its artistic merit, but soon I had a tremendous compulsion to teach as much as I could through this show. I wanted to let people know what I was thinking both artistically and politically while these works were coming to life. I found that it was not difficult for me to talk about my work because of the years that have distanced me from the disease.

As a political activist, I had become aware of some of the problems that plagued me when I was first diagnosed with breast cancer. I was the product of a generation that looked upon personal issues, such as disease, as private, perhaps even secret. I had to break out of this mindset. I also realized that some doctors went so far as to make people feel responsible for having contracted a

disease such as breast cancer. Thusly, a sense of shame and contamination often accompanied a life-threatening situation.

The idealization of breasts in Western society made this disease a double tragedy, attacking both life and sexuality. As a woman with breast cancer I became an outsider. I would walk down the street and feel different.

I learned too, that the male-dominated medical profession had no trouble recommending mastectomies to women, and that the feminist/breast cancer activist slogan—slash, burn and poison, referred to surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, the prevalent treatments at the time. No one considered prevention. This show publicized the breast cancer issue. I did not want other women to feel like hiding after a diagnosis of breast cancer. I wanted them to be empowered. I observed that my personal experience expressed through my artwork helped make this issue public and thereby part of an educational process.

Because education would occur through exposure, I wanted my work to be seen by as wide an audience as possible. I issued a press release (page 60) to make sure that media coverage would be extensive. Because I had exhibited during Breast Cancer Awareness Month and had used the expertise of a public relations specialist, I was interviewed by CBC television, which aired the interview both locally and nationally. Images from my exhibit were televised. Interviews were also broadcast by the Montreal CTV and Global television networks. In all of these interviews I not only talked about my show but also dealt with the necessity for women to “come out” and to bring the breast cancer issue



# 1 in 9

## **An Artist's Portrayal of her Breast Cancer Experience** *Solo Art Show by Deena Dlusy-Apel, October 22-31, 2000*

**Montreal, October 10, 2000** – For Breast Cancer Awareness Month, from October 22-31, Deena Dlusy-Apel will exhibit her solo show entitled "1 in 9. An Artist's Portrayal of Her Breast Cancer Experience" at Gallery Gora, 460 St. Catherine St. West, Suite 502, Montreal.

Dlusy-Apel's show will exhibit her multi-media body of work, including paintings, drawings, sculpture, and even a vending machine which will dispense a signed, original work of art, in the form of a breast, for \$4 each.

Deena Dlusy-Apel is an artist/educator who has taught in Montreal for 30 years. After retiring from teaching, her art became a new forum for expression of her social and political concerns. A member of *Breast Cancer Action Montreal (BCAM)* since 1992, she is an 11-year survivor of breast cancer.

Dlusy-Apel explains the motivation for her work:

*"One in nine women in Canada in the course of her lifetime will contract breast cancer and every person in their paths, male or female, young or old, will suffer the consequences of this alarming statistic. My work, which began in the fall of '98, developed quite unexpectedly, despite the fact that I was at the time a nine-year survivor of the disease. Working with a live model, I suddenly found that I had her tenaciously holding her breasts and that I had drawn severed breasts, scattered on the ground. I realized then that it was time to express my feelings and ideas through my art."*

**The vernissage will take place on Sunday, October 22 from 2-5 PM.** On Friday, October 27, from 7-9 PM, the *Montreal Playback Theatre Company* will perform a form of improvisational theatre based on stories from the audience's breast cancer experiences.

Dlusy-Apel will raffle one of her paintings at the screening of *Genetic Takeover, or Mutant Food* directed by Louise Vandelac, Ph.D., on November 1, 2000 at 7 PM. The proceeds of the raffle, as well as the proceeds from the art vending machine, will go to *Breast Cancer Action Montreal*, an activist group founded and directed by women dedicated to raising awareness about the issues surrounding breast cancer.

**Gallery hours are Monday to Saturday 1-6 PM.** Gallery Gora is located at 460 St. Catherine St. West, Suite 502, Montreal.

to the public's attention. A 20 minute interview on CKUT, the McGill University radio station, brought to light the importance of prevention and political activism as seen through my art. The focus of all the interviews was on the role of activism in personal art. As a member of BCAM, I made the audience aware of environmental issues surrounding the breast cancer debate. I also emphasized the lack of government funding for preventative measures.

At the gallery, while the exhibit was in progress, with my paintings to set the atmosphere, *The Montreal Playback Theatre Company* performed a form of improvisational theatre based on stories from the audience's breast cancer experiences. The public thus participated in this interactive theatre performance. This event was widely publicized, and we attracted an audience of thirty people. Many who attended were actively involved in the evening activity and found it therapeutic and educational. A reporter for the Monitor was present, interviewing both the actors and the audience. The article in the newspaper highlighted the educational aspects of this evening as many people at the event mentioned the insights that this opportunity afforded them (page 62).

Knowing human nature, I was not surprised that many visitors to the gallery came away from my show unaware of the existence of the text. These viewers prefer to see artwork without the influence of text. The feedback from those who read the text was positive. Some expressed pleasure that their own assumptions about the work was validated by the text. Others were grateful to have had entry points into the work.

# SURVIVING CANCER WITH COURAGE AND GRACE

Breast cancer survivors share their stories, enjoy improvisational play at Galerie Gora



BCAM VICE-PRESIDENT LANIE MELAMED (left) and President Rose Alpert together at the Galerie Gora.

International Breast Cancer Awareness Month, members of the breast cancer community were invited to Galerie Gora to share their stories and have them mirrored back within an improvisational theatre context.

The Montreal Playback Theatre Company, performing at this key event organized by Breast Cancer Action Montreal, illuminated a different way of communi-

cation is at once collective and personal, coming from and reaching a very deep and essential part of ourselves, breaking through the isolation and giving solace in this experience.

Other emotions were suggested by the audience, such as sadness. "A poignant cry 'I'm still here'" was a reminder that increasingly cancer is something with which people must live.

It quickly became evident that the breast cancer experience gives rise to conflicting feelings. They were acted out as doubles, partners becoming opposing emotions. One young boy in the audience spoke of his ambivalence in wanting to know and understand scary events around him, and yet needing to still be a kid in a kid's world, blissfully unaware.

Just my sister, it's a nice person, after she struggled for 20 years with breast cancer... She took it very long, made a lot of emergency calls. In the last year, and a phone call with her sister, she said, 'I think I'm going and I should thank you for it. I don't go this time, she'll kill me'."

Mills has been a part in an ongoing study testing the effectiveness of Raloxifene and Tamoxifen in preventing breast cancer in high-risk women. "There was nothing I could do for her, but perhaps this will help someone else. I am doing it for her."

This story was played back with sensitivity and compassion. At the end, Dawn Mills quietly thanked the actors. "Thank you so much, that was so beautiful."

Lanie Melamed, vice president of BCAM and a retired computer professor, spoke of being in hospital rooms that don't quite close. "After the initial experiences of fear and struggle, there is anger, giving rise to the big question 'Why?'"

Why is so much money devoted to testing, equipment and treatment, and so little to prevention? "When anger has a focus, there is power in talking together to educate, to ask questions, to provide support, to ask questions, trying and of person, you can go deeper than the surface."

That means getting involved. Although she had had two bouts with breast cancer and must have a way to live, some disturbing memories that night, at the end of the actors' interpretation, Lanie Melamed said, "I like that better than the sadness stuff, there are other things to do."

The energy and inspiration in the room were palpable. "Somebody said, 'I feel like I'm pregnant,'" and the audience, at the actors' invitation, joined in an unpremeditated emotion.

In the last sketch, the human voice was introduced not as an expressive tool as before, but in the form of a haunting, wordless melody floating above an ancient accompaniment, the "drone." The other was a reminder that the experience of breast cancer touches us at the most profound depths of our humanity—where our "voice" originates—and that despair can be transformed into action, which leads us to inspiration.

Transformation of our inner and outer worlds comes from the same source: one cannot happen without the other. An ordinary woman who finds herself in extraordinary circumstances, is on her way to becoming extraordinary.

As BCAM board member Janine O'Leary Cobb had said hours earlier on CKUT, commenting on the challenges of changing the mindset of the medical establishment, "If we bear in mind that it makes a difference to our daughters and grand-daughters, it gives us the courage and the energy to go on."

Kristine Bercy

The language surrounding the theme of breast cancer is one of extremes. On the one hand it can be coldly technical and devastatingly indifferent—as in the medical books one inevitably comes across when the word 'cancer' intrudes, like an uninvited guest, into one's vocabulary. On the other hand, it can be painfully personal and highly charged with emotion when this experience is shared between people who love each other.

On October 27, as part of

ating about breast cancer. This home-hitting reality affects one in nine Canadian women in their lifetime.

The evening began with a member of the troupe of actors, therapists and artists, describing her initial trepidation in approaching the subject of breast cancer. "I didn't want to be one of the nine," she said, echoing every one's unspoken first emotional response.

The word and emotion 'fear' was transformed into a whirlwind of instrumental, vocal and body sounds, gestures and facial expressions that brought a pang of instant recognition to everyone in the room. This language of intuition, imagination and

## Breast Cancer Prevention Tips

It has been said that human breast tissue is like the canary in the coal mine. If there is something wrong in the environment, it is the first place affected.

- Avoid animal fat because that is where ingested toxins are stored. Dr. Samuel Epstein has said, "It's not the fat, it's what's in the fat."

- Inform yourself about safer cleaning methods. Keep harsh detergents and other cleaners to a minimum.

- Become a questioning person. Read labels, ask questions, get involved. There are several groups in NDG devoted to creating a safer and cleaner environment. BCAM can inform you by calling 483-1846.

One woman spoke of the courage needed in activism, and the dread of recurrence that cannot be forgotten when you are working with others affected by breast cancer.

As the mood became increasingly intense, bringing back unwanted memories, one man commented on the beautiful and strong multimedia artwork by Deena Dlusy Apel, now being exhibited at the gallery suggesting that joy can come out of creativity.

In the ensuing interpretation of 'joy', the actors made people laugh, somehow freeing them to speak at a deeper level.

NDG resident Dlusy Apel told of how on the last day of her radiation treatment, she had had to drive her son to the airport in a terrible snow storm. While it was the last day of something that she had perceived as being protective, it was a first affirmation of her strength and independence. This story was played back with some hilarious moments.

Dawn Mills, also of NDG, spoke of the worst thing that can happen. "I

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The comments in my guest book were positive and encouraging. They support my belief that personal art with a message can educate the public. Many wrote of the need for this type of artwork. One viewer mentioned the fact that I had “shed yet another light on this very scary illness, which affects so many of us in many different ways.” Another visitor to the gallery wrote, “...you have created a show with a wallop of a message...actually, many messages. Vibrant colourful, illuminating, inspiring and bold. Your vernissage has touched me and moved me to think and to do.”

When I created this body of work, I wished to document my experience as a breast cancer survivor and activist. Somewhere en route, I realized that I wished to educate through this work. My research on activist art supported my belief that art could become a vehicle for educating the public. Based on my experience in the classroom and in the breast cancer movement I was able to transform the exhibit into a learning experience. My body of work, as one viewer commented, “content driven (read ‘political’) without losing the aesthetic,” created a show that was both thought provoking and pleasing to view. The media coverage made the public at large, not just the audience that went to the exhibit, aware of the issues presented.

My research has validated my contention that personal art with a message can educate. I now wish to bring this experience into the classroom. Activist art can be used as an effective tool. As an educator, I am now pursuing this topic and its relevance with high school students. In October 2001, under the direction of Paul Langdon, I embarked on an independent study based on my research.



At Centennial Regional High School, in cooperation with the art teacher, I presented the students with examples of activist art, showing them the works of various artists including my own work on breast cancer. The students were encouraged to create art that had personal meaning to them, expressed their concerns, and delivered a message to its viewers. The students were enthusiastic and subsequent creations of their own activist art have demonstrated the potential efficacy of this process.

I hope to continue my research in this area in the future.

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