

## THE MAKING OF GROUNDS TO ACT

An enquiry into male violence

by Françoise Sergy

GROUNDS TO ACT is a performance. An enquiry into male violence. It is a collaboration between myself, Françoise Sergy and Gail Bourgeois. I am a dance / martial artist / self-defence teacher. Gail is a visual artist from Canada. We met at the beginning of 1985, through Women's Work at the Brixton Art Gallery. We started exploring the theme through personal discussions, exchange of information and a lot of reading. At times the research was extremely disturbing and we had to encourage and support each other, carrying on because we very much believed in the importance of our work as a political statement.

We were very excited to work together in collaboration and experiment with our very distinct skills, in an attempt to stretch the boundaries of our work. This required a lot of sharing and learning, and a need for extreme clarity and open-mindedness. Gail had to accept my limited knowledge of visual arts. She taught me a great deal about some of the basics in painting and sculpture theory, which helped me to understand her work better and to relate to it within a creative perspective. We realised how differently we worked, with my movement as an organic form, time / space bound and totally based in the present, while Gail's drawings and structures were for ever real but for ever still. We felt that if we could somehow interact both forms, we would achieve something bigger, more subtle and more exciting.

And so the cubes were born. They were to exist of their own, as a dynamic synthesis of the philosophy we related to, with the theme of each drawing transformed and contrasted from one cube onto another. But within the performance itself, the cubes started being manipulated, moved and danced with, acquiring many more meanings as they became symbols of objects, people, costumes and particularly spaces within space. Their weight and traveling through space acted as an organic counterpart to my movements, creating a visual and physical dialogue between the shapes of the drawings and those of the dance and revealing a much more subtle relationship. They had blossomed into wonderful movement sculptures, like some flying banners or some giant kites of woman spirit...

While working together, Gail and I greatly debated the dangers of doing a piece about male violence: Were we to describe this violence? Were we to reproduce it in order to analyse it and challenge it? We agreed against it: We wouldn't portray any explicit situations, imagery or language which could be taken out of context, even for the briefest of moment, and interpreted as titillation, or as reinforcement of the very violence we were fighting against.

We also decided to challenge the structure of performing itself and to subvert its traditional way of passing on its meaning. Because we saw male violence as an inherent part of every aspect of society, we knew we had to challenge the form to really explore the issue. In my view there is no art for art sake!!

To the visuals we added slides, a reflection on reality, which we carefully deconstructed and subverted by opposing our presence as real women from the painted faces of adverts and art works. This led us to explore the role of ballet and fine art in the making of femininity as powerless and unreal, and there again, to establish the responsibility that any art form has in the making of our present ideology.

Discussions took place on what was the essence of performance. We talked about the public space where the performance happens and the private space where we create the work. Was it possible to create a private space within the public one? Could there be a way of dismantling the all pervasive viewer / performer relationship, where the performer reproduces an act of fantasy directed from the viewer's mind, which operates in the same way as the two sides of the coin defining our sexual norms: romantic against pornographic fantasy?

We defined the public space as a "projection of creation" and the private space as a "creation of projection". We then wondered if we could produce a "private projection" and a "public creation". Projecting privately could be, for example, dancing in the dark or behind objects. And creating publicly was improvising, showing the structure, the process.

And so came the idea of dancing in the dark, with torches, then later the use of the torches as lights moved by the performer, as my own redefinition of the public space. The cubes became private spaces within the public space. And I tried to be the maker and the performer all in one, as much as possible presenting to the public an image which I had myself created, an active image of a woman determining her own paths through a maze of experiences, collective and individual, and trying to make sense of it all.

This concept of the performer as the thinker / creator developed into a process of distancing, with myself transforming the environment as I was performing and distancing myself from my role as a dancer, ultimately looking towards the most private of projection, the making of an inward-directed aura, an inner-radiating identity.

Obviously, when the piece 'matured', I realised that this concentration on my role as a performer was one-sided and had to be balanced out, particularly so that people could understand what I was doing. What was distancing had to be distancing from something; people watching had to be able to identify before being asked to question. I had to focus on how to communicate, either through some dramatised role playing or a simple expression of a personal truth. Hence my attempts at fusing a more direct communication with a more distant, subverted approach.

The result is a piece which concentrates on the positive: How self-defence can help us, women, to grow stronger and start fighting back. How we can create a woman-centred imagery that portrays our body and our mind with all the respect they deserve. How we can affirm our rights, our thoughts, our actions. How we can celebrate all the work which has been done by women to help other women and to fight against the institutions which perpetuate male violence against women.

Because the more we will know: the more we will act. And we have many, many  
GROUNDS TO ACT.