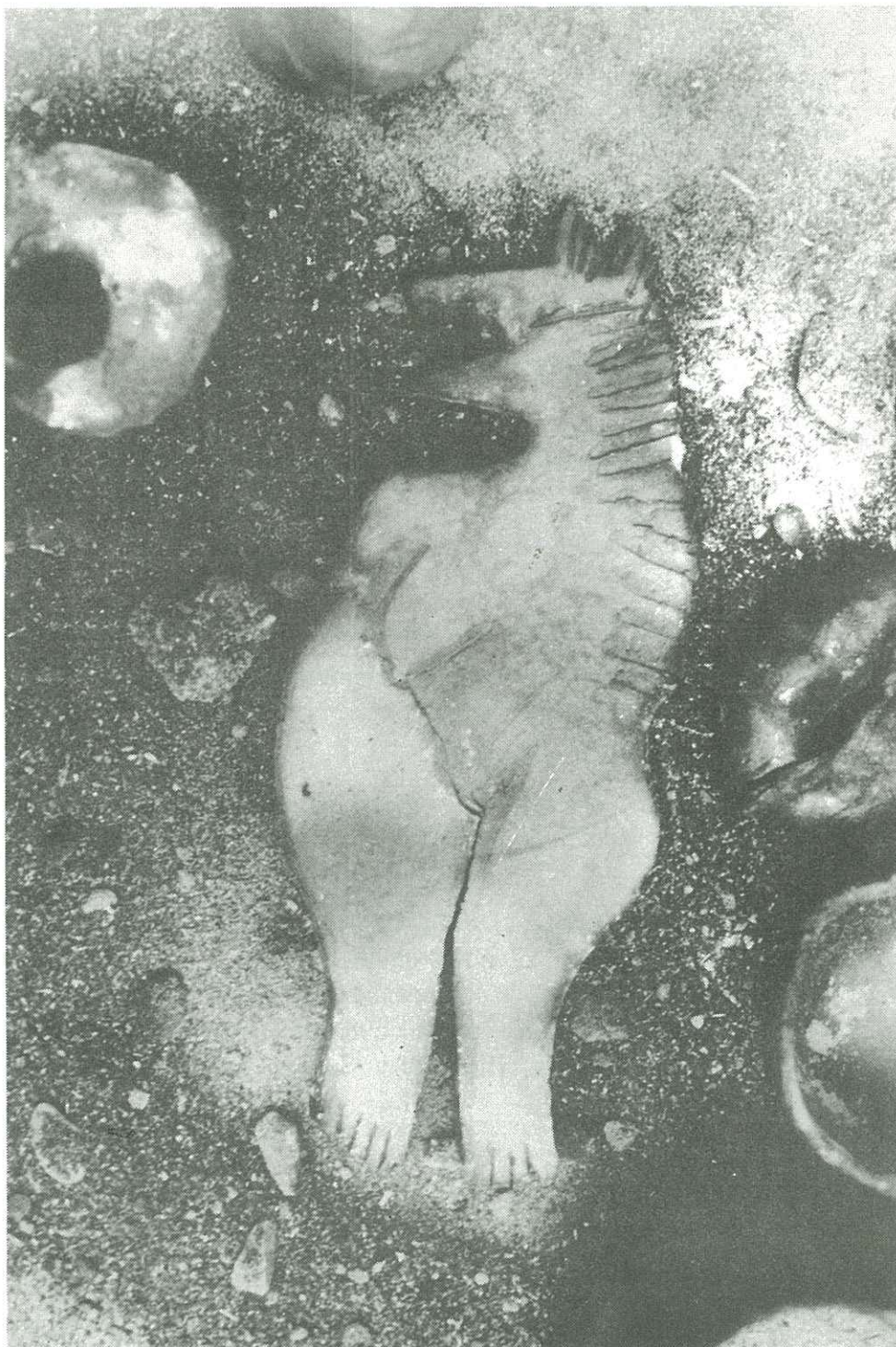




Bonita Ely Dogwoman Makes History

Opening 6pm, June 4, 1986. Closing 6pm, June 22, 1986

First Draft
2nd Floor
27 Abercrombie Street
Chippendale
Telephone: 698 4439
Hours: Thursday to Sunday 11-6



Detail, "Excavation", pit fired ceramics and ash, 1985. Photo: B Ely.

Dogwoman Makes History

Elizabeth Ruinard

Take a dog and take a woman ... You perform an alchemic transformation in clay upon them and then viola! Dogwoman (Hundefrau) cometh in a blaze of cometesque glory!

Dog and Woman have been (regarded as) humble citizens of the world during the past x000 years of history. Darwin believed the dog to be descended from the wolf and the jackal. Woman, as the story goes, comes from the rib of man.

But the new amalgam, Dogwoman, augurs well for the narrative future of her double constituency, we feel. She is of the order of the triumphal, the mythological. Is she a deity? Endowed with revelatory powers?

Dogwoman, being the logicians' complex term, is definitely more than the sum of her parts ...

We take up her story somewhere in the Bundesrepublik, maybe at Kreuzberg, West Berlin. In 1982 she opted to reveal some of her dogma to the then unborn female child of the matriarch, Bonita Ely, in a public performance, "Hundefrau kommuniziert mit der jüngeren Generation", ("Dogwoman communicates with the younger generation").

Ely then dug her up, as programmed, in Copenhagen in 1985 in "Dogwoman Makes History": this generated a series of ceramic sculptures called "Excavations", where her Janus-like head attests to her dual passport situation.

In keeping with the cyclical pattern of her existence(s), she has manifested herself in the cosmos over Terra Australia (Wagga Beach) in a jubilant triptych entitled "Wildlife — Wildes Leben!". It is here that her relationship to "the" comet, the so-called "tail of the century", is most in evidence, but was Ely also thinking of the Dog stars?

This large drawing is reminiscent of the Limburg manuscripts executed for the Duc de Berry in the fourteenth century in its use of lapis lazuli-like blue and its splashes of gold, but its vibrant gestural qualities and its format — 27 sections — anchor it in a contemporary context.

The juxtaposition of various moments in history accords with the postmodernist spirit that "history" *per se* can have "meaning" no more, and that the "unique moment" defining the unity of the artwork in a traditional sense is as fragmented as the Lacanian "I" who is its fictitious executor. The same goes, of course, for the fictitious "you" created by the artwork; and this means us.

Co-emergent with "Wildlife" are six ancillary drawings in Murrumbidgee mud plus red oxide pigment (a bridge between the paint and the clay of the previous artworks). These emphasise the powerful sexuality of Dogwoman and her penchant for mapmaking and representation.

A further aspect of Dogwoman's recent manifestation is a wood carving — an angel placed on a medieval desk in the manner of the Evangelists. This serves to reiterate the early-art associations and confirms our belief in Dogwoman's mission for the resurrection of female narrativity.



Detail, "Excavation", pit fired ceramics and ash, 1985.

It is in Ely's book, "Memoirs of a Dogwoman" (the indefinite article suggesting a collectivity of Dogwomen) that the separate and necessarily alternative and non official histories of Dog and Woman, and the less joyous coincidence of these, are charted.

In a mode of proceeding that might be termed "bricolage" and must also be read as postmodern (selective usage of images from art history, manipulation of graffiti recorded in photograph, picture postcards, records of Ely's own art production) we construct Dogwoman's story, and so make room for the saga of this *Etrangere* to take its place in the mainstream (male, among other things) discourse.

Ely establishes early in her syntagm the interchangeability of the signs, Dog and Woman — for Dog, read Woman, for Woman, Dog: they lend each other semes. The implications of this for Woman — not to mention Dog — are highly dysphoric.

If one accepts that Woman has frequently been cast as the Underdog (sic) in world events, the far denser representation of Dog, as opposed to Woman in Ely's text, can not be read as unmotivated. Woman alone is almost less than Dog here.

Dog is sometimes an agent of man, albeit against her express volition and for fascist purposes, and sometimes she is his substitute. (Ely was thinking of that generation of women whose male counterparts were killed in the Second World War).

But Woman is not even relegated to these negative functions here. She waits for the hunters to come home, and in no place is she designated as a surrogate man for Dog. Indeed, Beckmann's Dog (57) is even larger than Woman.

We reflect upon this and recall that even "la tres sage Heloise", called by many the most brilliant woman (man?) of the twelfth century, was supposedly given a dog (female, which she named Aristotle!) by Abelard after he rejected her for religion.

This in mind, we travel through the time space of diverse cultures and arrive at such magnificent representatives of Dogdom and Womanhood as Pluto, Snoopy and Lassie.

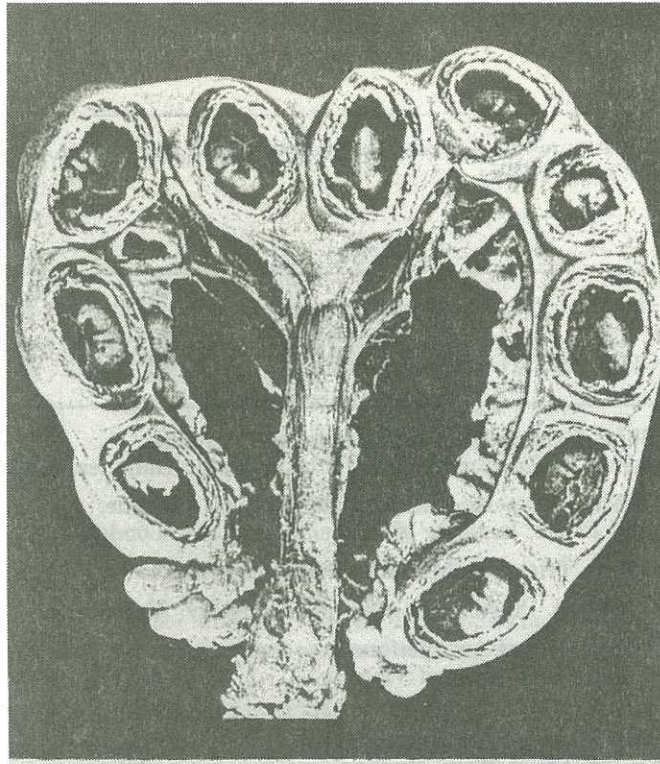


FIG. 5.1. Ventral view—30-day gestation.

So the lexicon of Dogwoman is always organised around: /sexuality/, whose emblem the uterus is very much in evidence, and the attendant concepts of /servitude/, as past versions of psychoanalysis and biology have decreed, and /abuse/, eg the variously damaged pots of the Copenhagen installation.

Dogwoman mates, gives birth, nurtures, decorates, plays, goes to the beauty parlour (the lovely German word "schminken" is appropriate here).

There is a very coherent set of circumstances where Dogwoman is bound to turn up. In reference to her dissertation, "Dogwoman Makes History"¹, Ely states that "all religions originated from the Dogwoman cult".

The represented attendance of Dogwoman at eg the birth of Christ, the Crucifixion, assorted great moments in alchemy and other mystical/spiritual western and non western practice gives credence to this assertion. It would seem that the faithful and comfort-providing characteristics of Dog have been felt as those helpful to the negotiation of the treacherous path to the afterworld.

Dogwoman has been the object of male desire through male representation, but Ely's own proposition for dogwoman is finally an optimistic thesis, a destruction of (and end to?) the negative manifestations to which art and religion have treated her, an unwriting and dismantling of her own previous identity.

Spivak speaks of the (discursive and mythological) space where woman will weave her stories² and we feel that Ely is embarking (no pun intended) on this project here. Woman is taking charge of her own narrativity.

¹ Performance, "Dogwoman Makes History", Copenhagen, 1985.

² Gross, E, "Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak", *Art Network* 16, Sydney, August 1985, p21.

Bonita Ely

Born Australia 1946. At present lecturing in sculpture and drawing at the Riverina Institute of Higher Education, Wagga Wagga, NSW.

Education

1965-69: Caulfield Institute of Technology and Prahran College of Fine Arts, Melbourne.

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1976: Post Object Show, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide.
Three Statements on Environment, G Paton & Ewing Galleries, Melbourne University.
- 1977: The Women's Show, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide.
Women's Postal Event, Institute of Contemporary Art, London.
- 1978: Seventh Sculpture Triennial, Mildura Arts Centre, Mildura.
- 1979: Performance Festival, Preston Institute of Technology, Melbourne.
- 1980: Act 2, Canberra School of Art (performance festival).
15 Sculptors, National Gallery of Victoria.
- 1981: 1st Australian Sculpture Triennial, Latrobe University, Melbourne.
ANZART, Christchurch, New Zealand.
Perspecta, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney.
3 +3 +9, Harbourfront Gallery, Toronto.
- 1982: Performance 2, Kunstlerhaus Bethanien, West Berlin.
Act III, Canberra School of Art.
- 1983: "Continuum", Tokyo, Japan.
Zona Gallery, Florence, Italy.
ANZART, Hobart, Tasmania.
- 1984: Austanch/Exchange, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, City Art Institute, Sydney.
- 1985: Making Appearances, Charlottenberg Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark.
Perspecta, 1985, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney.

Selected Solo Exhibitions

- 1979: West Street Gallery, Sydney.
- 1979: Art Projects, Melbourne.
- 1981: Art Projects, Melbourne.
Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane.
- 1982: Adelaide Festival Centre Gallery.
- 1983: Artspace, Sydney.
- 1985: Performance Space, Sydney.

Represented

Art Gallery of New South Wales
Warrnambool Art Gallery, Warrnambool, Victoria
Australian National Gallery
University of New South Wales

Grants

- 1976: Special Project Grant, Visual Arts Board, Australia Council
- 1977: Special Project Grant, Visual Arts Board, Australia Council
- 1981: Literature Grant, Victorian Ministry for the Arts.
- 1985: Kiffy Rubbo Memorial Art Award, Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council.

Dogwoman Makes History

THE WORKS

"Memoirs of A Dogwoman"

Leather binding; coloured photocopies on Arches Rives paper; title page and text, ink and acrylic paint. 1st book of an edition of 10.
\$2,500

Lectern

Oregon
\$950

"Wild Life — Wildes Leben!"

Work on paper; 540 x 270 cm
\$2000

"Excavation"

Pit fired cermaics; ash. Installation approx 120 x 480 cm.
\$3000

"Lingam"

Clay, red oxide pigment, PVA, cardboard. 112 cm x 86 cm
\$350

Berlin Berlin

As above

"Swastika"

As above

Totem

As above

Tree

As above

Dowaydo

As above

Totem

As above

Performance

"Dogwoman Makes History"

ACCREDITATIONS

Book binding by Heather McPherson

Sound by Jill Scott

The artist was assisted by the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council
as the recipient of the Kiffy Rubbo Memorial Art Award, 1985.

