

Letter On Movement Pioneers

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P.S. About the pioneer question. I haven't worked it all out either but here're my thoughts. I had to deal with it in that book review because all the pioneers of the women's art movement were excluded from that book. It's usually put as "what does it matter as long as the ideas get across." But the ideas come out different when they are being said by the originators and by the "second wave." The energy is gone, of course, and they are less forceful. But they always seem to be different, somehow not radical anymore, like the direction that was originally forward movement now becomes stasis. They become hemmed in by thousands of qualifications, too. But I think the real difference, like in the Chavez case is that Chavez has something more in mind than \$2.30 an hour. The Teamsters will offer \$2.30 an hour to stop that. In the art review I found that the second wave, like the Teamsters was *forced to acknowledge* the force of the ideas of the pioneers. But that's all they will do; they will not move any farther forward until the radicals make another big push. If the radicals are put out of the way there will be no second big push. Then gradually the first gains erode. I have seen this over and over in art negotiations. After we got the boot at the suggestion of museum officials, and the opportunists thought by acquiescing they would get something, they found that the powers *no longer had to give them something* because we weren't around anymore. Or they gave them a little crumb and that was it.

Also I've been told by lots of women that it makes them uneasy or terrifies them to see the pioneers being cut out, like a sophisticated backlash. In the art movement it looks to me like union busting—whoever sticks their neck out gets the axe. A lesson to everybody else. If Chavez gets destroyed, it will be a lesson that the rewards of taking risks and initiative will be the hatred and hostility of the powerful, the ripping off of whatever you accomplish, and the destruction of your reputation and name.

Co-optation is the same as the pioneer question, I think. One might say the Teamsters co-opted the Farm Workers, but I don't like that word because its not clear. The second wave is like the occupying army, not the avant garde. It can and will move only into completely cleared and risk-free territory—like in the artbook, the only thing that was acknowledged was that women are discriminated against by museums and galleries and schools—hardly radical in 1973. For Chavez, it was \$2.30 an hour, also hardly radical anymore. Now if the pioneers are forced out of the territory they have cleared, they have to keep attacking from outside and cannot gain momentum. Our force is constantly dissipated.

For example, there are "feminist" cultural programs at WBAI as a result of the women's movement's push. But since they will not give us access to air time, we *still* have to struggle to get the word out. That's cleared territory—a feminist radio station could be very powerful, could really keep the movement going forward, but if it's not controlled by the pioneers the movement is stopped. Eventually WBAI will decide they no longer need feminist programming, and then who will be around to force them to? Not us, that's for sure. OR, the programming will get weaker and weaker and become irrelevant. That's happened already.

The second wave is totally trustworthy, "professional" one might say. They can be depended on to do nothing to rock the boat, push the movement forward.

Part of this question is that the movement cannot stay in the same place. It has to move forward or backward. That's why all those "collectives" just rotted away. A strange experience I had was at the January College Art Conference when an economist group got up and read a paper saying women have been discriminated against blah blah and I had the weirdest feeling. If they had read the exact same paper in 1970 it would have been radical. In 1973 it was almost funny. *The same paper*. That's part of the pioneer question, because the pioneers were getting a very hard time at the same time as the second wave was getting polite applause and official recognition.

I keep coming back to my "cleared ground" metaphor—that being pushed off our own cleared ground means that still we have to fight to get any writing of ours published, to be able to speak in public; forget

access to media, that's been made impossible. And if the movement doesn't go forward, it will corrode, people drop away, the momentum slows down and stops, and then the gears start grinding *backwards* towards repression. (Like abortion being made hard to get in Communist countries after the revolution when women began to go home, shoved home is more like it, or like the more negative aspects of equal rights—draft and loss of alimony—being implemented before the more beneficial ones like equal access to the good jobs).

Well, those are my thoughts, unorganized but maybe they will be of some help. You're welcome to them.

P.S. Another thought. Eliminating the pioneers is like unionizing in reverse. People will take risks to unionize because they feel their condition will be improved as a result. Supposing that everyone who went on the picket line got fired and everyone who didn't got a raise, and suppose this was kept up long enough to eliminate all the organizers. It would crush initiative and courage, too. Also the pioneer issue is not static. Everyone who takes a step forward is a pioneer. And the elimination of them is not something that happened once to us—I have observed that women who came into the movement last week and pioneered in some small way will be eliminated tomorrow.

I guess the way I see it is that eliminating the pioneers is an attempt to eliminate forward movement, an attempt to stop the movement, a backlash and a union busting technique. As such it is related to the leadership question since pioneers are leaders. We've talked about the other method of eliminating pioneers—by praising their past work which has now become "safe" and ignoring our present work—treating us like we're dead. I know I'm always running into people who think the only thing I've done in the movement is write "Politics of Housework" and have long since dropped out. It gives the whole movement an air of impermanence when one can't trace any of the pioneers. I thought that *Esquire** article did that—tracing the ones who haven't done much and not the ones who've continued to plug away.

* (*Esquire*, July 1973)

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