

AILSA
O'CONNOR

UNFINISHED
WORK



Articles and Notes on Women
and the Politics of Art

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FOREWORD
Julie Copeland 1981

It was the end of winter in Greece. 1971 had been a dark winter. The fascist junta of the colonels had been in power for four years. Their posters, their slogans and their symbol of male rejuvenation, the phoenix rising from the ashes, were plastered over the walls of buildings and in the cafes of our village on the island of Lesbos.

Yet there were already signs of spring. The almond blossoms were silently exploding in the valley and the women stood on the steps of their houses and watched the fishing boats set out to sea.

Ailsa O'Connor came into the *cafeneon* one night, a quietly spoken, reserved woman, travelling alone and looking for accommodation in the village for a few weeks while she rested and did some sketching. It was perhaps typical of her unassuming manner that, unlike the many sophisticated poseurs who arrived in the summer to take up attitudes on the village terraces, she never referred to herself as an artist. She simply 'did a bit of sketching'.

Ailsa was the best of company, bringing us news of events in Australia, interest in discussing ideas and anger at the political humiliations being forced on the Greeks. Together we went out and painted the almond blossoms in the valley and views of the village. But her best work was concerned with the figures and faces, the lines of endurance and suffering of the villagers themselves.

No one has ever really understood where a sense of injustice and social concern comes from. Factors such as family background, childhood influences, experience of the Depression and war just aren't adequate to explain why some people have this sense

and others don't. In her unassuming way, Ailsa O'Connor was one of the most 'involved' people I have ever known.

Her response to individuals and society was the product of a sensitivity which, unlike that of many of our friends and colleagues, never became cynical, never said: 'it's hopeless', never gave up believing the world could be a better place.

She lived the feminist principle that politics is the personal, but her background and political instinct told her that issues must be fought in the public arena and this dilemma occupied much of her thinking. It also applied to the problem of connecting her art to society; while she often complained that her political involvement didn't allow her enough time and energy for her art and that she needed to withdraw for a while, when asked to help in some campaign or another, she couldn't resist! There was hardly a political rally she didn't make the effort to attend, handing out leaflets, generally carrying banners she herself had made - whether it was Anti-War, Anti-Uranium, Change the Constitution or International Women's Day in Rome.

This may conjure up an image of an extrovert ranter and roarer. In fact Ailsa had a refined gentility, a sense of physical restraint which made her uncomfortable with expressions of passion. Given her radical nature, I often speculated on how much repressed anger lay behind that softly spoken, quietly elegant persona.

For her politics and art were inseparable, a constant dialectic. Although she described herself as a 'late starter', part of her great interest for me was that she bridged two generations of both art and politics. I learnt a lot from listening to her talk about her experiences of the Depression, Anti-Fascism, the Modern Art Movement, the Anti-Vietnam War Movement.

As she said, she believed her involvement of over thirty years in the struggles of the socialist left, the art world and the women's movement all came together towards the end of her life, but she was also aware that the struggle is a continuous one. Her writings show her political philosophy which



connected all three - that is, theory combined with practice, ideology with action.

This philosophy began when, after studying at art school in the thirties, she joined a group of young left-wing artists who had experienced the Depression and who, horrified at the prospect of another war, were drawn to socialism as a means of fighting the corrupt system which had produced fascism. As artists, the expression of their commitment through their work would be a major part of their political action. For example, she was a contributor to the famous Anti-Fascist Exhibition of 1942 - the only woman represented.

Her position and that of the very few women artists in the art groups of that period is an interesting subject in itself. In the last few years feminist art historians like Janine Burke and Mary Eagle have begun to explore women artists from that very important period of Australian art between the Wars.

Looking at Ailsa's early paintings and drawings, she was certainly expressing 'female imagery' well before the current women's movement, although she admitted that she had to suppress what she described as her 'instinctive feminism' in the name of 'political solidarity' - a familiar problem which is still being argued about by women today.

In every aspect, Ailsa's life was a prime example - almost an archtype - of what happens to women in the world of art and politics.

Reading Richard Haese's recent book on the Social Realist artists, *Rebels and Precursors, 1942-1946*, my sense of anger increased to outrage as I read descriptions of the major figures of the Social Realist movement - Noel Counihan, Josl Bergner and Vic O'Connor - Ailsa's husband. Behind all the male achievements and concerns documented by Haese, is the invisible figure of Ailsa, connecting them all. There laid out before me was the sum of the problem for women artists.

The importance, especially for women, of studying Ailsa's life is that while she is not mentioned in art histories such as Haese's, we can speculate on what sort of an artist she may have become if she had been taken seriously and encouraged by her male

peer group in those early years. Her isolation amongst those 'important' male artists illustrates the need - still - for women's art groups to support and communicate with other women artists.

Ailsa was married to - and overshadowed by - Vic O'Connor, who is recognised as a central figure in the Social Realist group. Both Ailsa and Vic O'Connor joined the Communist Party during the war and whilst she was at times critical of the Party's policies and strategies, she remained a hard working member all her life, with a strong sense of loyalty and a belief that only through some form of political organisation (and the Communist Party seemed more acceptable to her than the others) could an individual effect change.

Historian Bernard Smith observed that the Social Realists 'often begin as good artists and end as poor politicians; by putting more energy into politics than into painting, they burn themselves out'.

While Vic O'Connor avoided this dilemma by drifting away from political involvement to concentrate on his art, Ailsa was more politically involved than her husband - in the Communist Party, as Victorian Secretary of the Union of Australian Women in the fifties and in local campaigns of all kinds.

But Ailsa didn't burn herself out. Her problem, as with so many women, was that throughout her life she was caught up in a *support* role, and that is how most people continued to see her.

Her friends have told me that her generosity meant that she always did things, willingly, that she knew *needed* to be done, because somebody had to do them. Caught up in events, she didn't procrastinate as so many did, because she believed one didn't need to know a lot about something to *do* whatever needed to be done urgently. And this meant an enormous amount of draining, time-consuming work.

So her supportive nature, combined with the economic realities of having to work as a teacher in secondary schools, plus looking after her two small children, meant there was very little time

for serious art work during those crucial, formative years of her twenties and thirties.

For all these reasons, recognition of her art, through exhibitions and sales, came late to Ailsa.

In one of her essays, Ailsa refers to the split between the Modern Art Movement and the Melbourne-based Social Realist Group to which she belonged.

Influenced by the group's ideas about art and culture, she maintained a consistent and strong argument for realism in art, despite the many innovations and experiments in the modernist movement. It is indeed something of a paradox that her radical, anti-establishment spirit produced work that, in the conventional sense, was the opposite to radical. She was aware that the avant-garde of the art world saw her work as conventional, if not positively conservative.

In some ways she was. Conscious that the humanist tradition with which she identified was now discredited and considered obsolete, she on the other hand constantly questioned the direction of modern art, seeing much of it as taking up the wrong options. It neglected a social commitment, was becoming more obscure, heartless, was not committed to communicating real human concerns and was increasingly catering for, and controlled by, the elite who could afford it.

Her conviction in her own values prevented her from suffering the familiar anxieties of many contemporary artists who constantly worry that they are out of fashion, that their work is not 'keeping up' with the latest trends in the art world.

Also she felt somewhat vindicated in recent years by the return to figurative images by many artists and especially by the revived interest in the human figure. She was most optimistic about the possibilities of expressing human values in new ways through the perspective of women's art.

While she kept her own artistic independence, she was also enthusiastically involved, both through the Women's Art Movement and through her own efforts, in examining women's art history and encouraging other women artists. Here again there was an amalgamation of theory and action: during the last few years she both wrote and spoke extensively of

the Women's Art Movement while at the same time she organised drawing classes at her home - which I attended - where a group of women of various degrees of competence got together and drew from a live model on winter evenings.

Ailsa's awareness of the power politics of the art world, the manipulation of the market by hierarchies and money, meant that it wasn't enough for her to make art, but that it was also imperative to question the purpose of art under capitalism, to find alternative ways of being effective.

One of the possible alternatives was the co-operative method of work exemplified in women's art projects such as 'The Dinner Party', the massive concept of the American artist, Judy Chicago, which was carried out by 250 co-workers over five years. Ailsa saw this key work of art in the United States during her last trip overseas and in an article for *Lip* magazine she wrote about its impact and the questions - again of power/politics - raised by a collective work of this scale.

Despite its problems, part of the importance of 'The Dinner Party' is that it pays tribute to the unknown history of many women. One of Ailsa's prime concerns was with the reason why talented women 'drop out'. From her own experience, she understood the familiar conflict between career and motherhood and she knew that the problem operates on two levels - both the personal and the pressures of society. (*Vashti* article).

It is tragic the Ailsa was not able to work seriously at sculpture, which is what she had always wanted to do, until the last years of her life. Again, her sculpture centred on the figure, which she saw as a universal, essential image through which she expressed her concern for women, children, other cultures, minorities, education and world peace.

Although she was involved with political art and produced many works which had a directly polemical purpose, her art was also more personal than a lot of propaganda art.

She would have said that the positive values which her strong, serene, female figures represented were her political statement, but they were also

more than that. Some of her last works, both drawings and sculpture, were connected by their idealised humanity to a tradition which went back to the classical Greeks and the Italian Renaissance. The other strong influences on her work came from later humanistic and political artists such as Daumier, Goya and Kollwitz - the latter was her favourite artist. Ailsa never lost this connection with the art of the past and although she had seriously studied the great traditions of art in reproduction, she gained enormous inspiration from actually seeing the works, especially sculpture, overseas. I remember for example that while she was sketching the ancient Greek marbles in the Athens Museum she was very excited by the discovery that the faces of those seemingly perfect heads were all - deliberately - asymmetrical.

She continued to expand the knowledge she had gained from teaching art and during the 1970s she was still reading and re-reading many art theorists. Earlier she had made positive use of her experience of devising art appreciation courses for the Victorian Education Department's Correspondence School which helped clarify many of her own ideas about art history and the role of art in society.

One of her great disappointments was that despite her efforts, there were no artistic 'circles' in Melbourne where these questions could be thoroughly discussed. Although her modesty and gentility prevented her from speaking badly of anyone publicly, she must have been caused much bitterness by the irony that not only the male artists with whom she was involved earlier had offered her no encouragement, but that also some of the younger contemporary feminist artists she supported had little time for her either. While there were more conservative women artists who were suspicious of Ailsa's left-wing politics, I think she saw that this lack of sympathy from younger 'radical' women came from their seeing their reality as the only struggle, hence their rejection of the past.

Ailsa constantly examined her own ideas, but her need to emphasise the continuity and shared experiences of the women's struggle, combined with her sense of running out of time, produced an

interesting talk at the St Kilda Library about her early married life and political activities with neighbourhood women in Kensington, an inner-Melbourne suburb. By then she was ill and in pain and it was very moving to see how carefully she had organised a display around the walls of the library of posters, pamphlets and drawings which illustrated her talk, a record of her personal history.

She had just returned from what I think she knew, because of her ill-health, would be her last trip overseas. We had planned to join her in Italy, where she was working at her sculpture, but it hadn't been possible.

I was tremendously saddened by the obvious loneliness of that last trip, which came through in her letters. But despite her great warmth Ailsa was in some ways very private, quite reticent about her own personal problems.

However she was anything but self-pitying. After her return to Australia she felt more a sense of frustration than anything else, that she wasn't strong enough to do all the things she wanted to do, especially as an artist.

The last time I saw her she was sitting up in her hospital bed in good spirits, eager to talk about the book she wanted to write, which would clarify some of the ideas about women and art expressed in her writings here.

Ailsa O'Connor is important, not only to those who knew and loved her, not only to women's art history, but because her goodness, courage and talent represent a positive example which challenges the negativity and confusion many concerned Australians are experiencing at present. Her struggles, the values of her work and life, should give us all hope.

Julie Copeland

DISCOVERY

*The only reality
Is the aloneness of self
Being one within the world.
As well to discover this
So that all else
May fall into place.
How right then
To measure out
Fast diminishing strength
In the long drawn battle
Towards oblivion,
To have this reliability
Despite the frailty of self!*

(no date)

INTRODUCTION

In the few weeks before her death in February 1980 Ailsa O'Connor spoke to friends about a project of hers. She had written many articles and given numerous talks about art, women and politics over the past decade and wanted to draw together her writings and notes to clarify and develop the themes she had taken up. This was a long term aim, something which would take her some years. Ailsa wanted time, but she did not get it.

What Ailsa planned to do in terms of developing her ideas was something that no one else could do for her. What could be done by others was to republish her writings as a collection. This has been undertaken here by a small group of her friends and family.

Ailsa's ideas about art - about realism, about women artists, about images of women in art, about the role of art in social change - had excited many people just as had her 'practical' work, her sculpture, her drawings and paintings and her political activism.

Ailsa saw the humanist tradition in the art of most cultures as a fundamental force in the re-shaping of social structures and relationships to a more human scale. She believed that the sympathetic portrayal of people and their environment and especially idealized images of the human form helped us see ourselves, our contemporaries, our predecessors and successors as one and part of the world we live in. She felt the growth of such an awareness should help to reduce the damage caused by our competitive impulses and encourage co-operation. She felt that 'today the continuity of art is

broken because we no longer aim to master tradition' and so it is only by chance that most artists produce images that have a positive effect on the evolution of their own culture. She was disappointed in and bitterly opposed to today's minimalist anti-art just as she was to the popular mass media image of human relationships and needs.

Her interest in and ideas about women in art, the feminist movement and the need to find a new ideal relevant to the changes that we must make to our society if it is to survive, led her to feel that an answer might emerge from a synthesis of these strands.

Today some of the specific issues of which Ailsa wrote have changed. For example, her plea for recognition of Australia's women painters would seem to have been answered at least in part in the last year or so. However many of the questions she asked demand answers just as compellingly now as when she first asked them.

In collecting together Ailsa's papers we have grouped them into sections to emphasise the themes around which she wrote. However Ailsa's work does not lend itself readily to being categorised. Her interests and activities were widespread but overlapping and increasingly integrated. She described herself as having been involved in 'three areas of struggle, the left socialist movement, the art world, and the militant women's struggle, since the age of twenty'. In later years she fought to break down the compartments of her life 'and to bring it all together: my work, my politics, my friends, my subjects'.

The papers published here represent the major part of Ailsa's finished writings. They by no means give a comprehensive picture of her interests and activities. She wrote very little about her own work, her sculpture. Also not recorded in these articles are her years of work in the anti-Vietnam War campaign, her involvement in various local issues, nor the numberless hours she spent talking to friends and allies, to all those who called on her, drawn by her irrepressible optimism.

While this is primarily a collection of articles about art, it seemed appropriate, indeed necessary,



Ailsa O'Connor in 1977

to include a few examples of Ailsa's work, her sculpture and drawing and also some of her poetry. This allows her ideas to be communicated in some of the variety of ways in which she expressed them.

Many of Ailsa's articles were written at short notice, many seek rather than provide answers. We cannot produce the synthesis of Ailsa's ideas that she thought must be possible and in republishing these articles as a collection we have to accept the limitations imposed by their original purpose. She addressed different audiences, a meeting of women artists, a class of art students, readers of the *Tribune* newspaper, of feminist magazines. In general she tried to communicate with artists, activists and the general public rather than with theorists or academics. This book has not been prepared with a specialist audience in mind, but it is our hope, as it would have been Ailsa's, that the ideas within will reach a wide range of people concerned with the issues of art, of women and of politics.

*Lyn Hovey, Megan O'Connor, Sean O'Connor, Rose Stone,
Janet Taylor
Melbourne, August 1982*

Ailsa O'Connor about 1943