

SPEAK OUT

A report on the art exhibition THOU SHALT NOT BE AWARE
and

A report on the SPEAK OUT STUDY DAY



"Congratulations on getting
together a very
powerful exhibition."

SUPPLEMENT

SCENES FROM THE EXHIBITION....

"Thankyou for
sharing such
potent and
private
feelings!"





THOU SHALT NOT BE AWARE GROUP STATEMENT

The purpose of the exhibition was to present the work of women who had chosen to explore and analyse the often taboo subject of sexual abuse. Some of the women involved had made artwork under different conditions, and so there were two categories of work.

The first was work made in an art therapy context. That is with a therapist working as a facilitator with the survivor. The work was made as a way of getting in touch with previously repressed feelings connected with a past traumatic event in the survivor's life.

The second group of work was made by professional artists working normally in a studio environment with the expectation that the work produced would eventually be exhibited in a public space to a wider audience.

In both cases the subject matter was centered around the experience of being sexually abused as a child and the effects of that abuse on the survivor's life. The exhibition meant that the participating women could take the brave step of communicating their work to a wider audience of both survivors and non-survivors and realise that their work had a wider social place.

READING THE COMMENTS BOOK was an incredible experience that made us realise there really is an incredible amount of empathy and support out there and people really want to hear our stories (about time too, ay!) .

THE MALE RESPONSE was rather enlightening...here's a selection from the comments book.

"An extremely courageous and successful show. I feel slightly ashamed of being a man!" David. "It is good to see something honest and human for a change rather than the stylized and depersonalised thing we see every day. P.S. Don't stop now." Tim. "Brilliant show, brought tears to me, very encouraging to see very powerful, gut-wrenching work, as much about 'process' as finished art." Joty. "Thank you for sharing such potent and private feelings." Max. "Thanks for your courage and perception." Pete. "Threatening almost but incredibly powerful and gut-wrenching. Shame that some spoilt it by stealing a work." Graeme. "Casual previous discussions on the subject just pale into insignificance. Thanks for your courage to show me." Steve.

THOU SHALT NOT BE AWARE

Survivors Network Exhibition at the Red Herring Gallery in Brighton.

June 3 to 15 1991

A review by Monica Ross, Tutor, St Martins School of Art London.

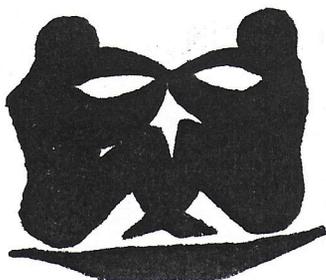
Technically this show was well hung and sensitively put together. The work was clearly contextualised by just the right amount of powerful text which left the reader shaken, sorrowed, but not intimidated by the content. It was clear from checking with various members of the Survivors' Network group afterwards that these texts enabled women to recognise and identify their own experiences in an intimate and personal way.

The atmosphere of the show was very safe and enabling in this context. There was always a friendly, quiet presence and members available to talk to visitors. This ensured that any difficult experiences raised in viewers by the work could be initially followed through if necessary. The comments book was another area for dialogue.

The show brought together artwork by members of the Survivors' Network and included some strong drawing and sculpture, installation and audio-visual work. The venue of the Red Herring Gallery was a fruitful one; very public for such a fraught set of issues but also a very popular and 'social' venue in the Brighton milieu - no sign above the door declaring any special need or problem and this also made it safer for any visitor to attend; who perhaps needed to find a recognition of her own experience without having to declare it publicly.

The context of showing within an artists' community also provided a strong support. Technically in putting the show together, but also by providing a protective layer of respect for the artists, their work, their courage and the issues of the work. The show contributed in this context by bringing serious and issue-based work into that artists/ community/gallery. Following from the AIDS show last summer at Red Herring this sets a different precedent for shows in this context and contributes to a growing base of critical practice in the Brighton Arts Community.

What impressed me most was the feel of the group and the work. Quiet, subtle and courageous; pulling no punches without every assaulting or intimidating the viewer, for whom there was a number of positions to engage with the work and its consequences.



*Continued
Over
Leaf*

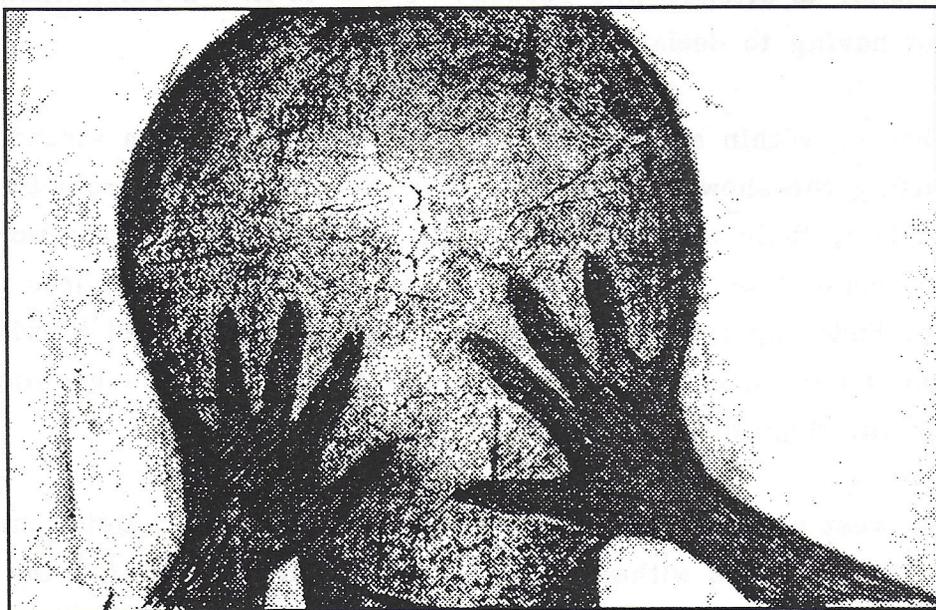
This was an endeavour extremely well integrated into its context - with and from the Survivors Network group, the gallery and the larger community. Leaflets and information had been well distributed in Brighton's clubs and numerous cafes - and had to be re-supplied. The Survivors' Network exhibition's success has also been in providing a sensitive public forum for broadening awareness of child sexual abuse and issues around it.

My last comment is a personal one. Recognisable in the show's organisation, management and sensitive atmosphere was the element of work coming out of a successful women's group. This is a rare, joyful and energising thing to see and therein lay much of the project/exhibition's success. A compliment to the whole group and their work.

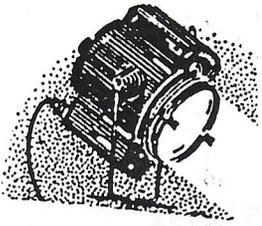
With best wishes for the continued success of the Survivors Network and it's important life-mending and inspiring work.

Monica Ross

thou shalt not be aware



survivors network / red herring gallery



LET ME KNOW WHEN THE NEXT ART SHOW IS ON.....

Last month the Survivors' Network organised an Art Exhibition by women survivors. This was hosted by the Red Herring Gallery whose support and encouragement did not go unnoticed..

A lot of valuable communication went on during the two weeks of the exhibition. Some people who visited wrote down their comments and some stayed to chat and debate issues around sexual abuse with whoever happened to be attending the exhibition. All in all there was a genuine sense of growing awareness.

But this was only true of the public who visited. The artists and organisers directly involved in putting the show together also had a strong experience of increased awareness.

For me, being part of "Thou Shalt Not be Aware" was such a rewarding experience. Having come from Art School it was the first opportunity to be involved with artists outside of the 'institutional' experience and scrutiny of the "professionals". My piece of work on show was made last year at art school and exhibited in a space which I have always felt was inappropriately seen. The piece was the first work in which I declared my own position having experience of child sexual abuse. Although I had tremendous support from my tutors with the work, I was never comfortable with the feedback I received. I felt isolated, misunderstood, ashamed at what I had done and incredibly wary of all male contact from tutors and students. Even some students changed their attitudes towards me and were cold, even suspicious of me. But amidst all this confused energy and these indirect responses I felt I had done the right thing.

Perhaps now that a year has passed since leaving college and becoming involved with the Network, I have found a sense of place for myself which I never properly felt at college. An opportunity like the recent art show enabled me to find a suitable environment for my work too. As a safe space to be around it was a healing experience for me as an artist and I could really own my own work. I also need to admit that in the past I have always felt reticent about 'all women' art shows not wanting to be labelled a 'feminist artist' in case I lost favour with the all-knowing, ever-genius modernist tradition. I had learned how to merit my work against avant-garde values. After three years of believing in a patriarchal system, it came as quite a shock to realise that mutually supportive events about commonly shared experiences, which have been entirely organised by women, are not only healthy, exciting, fun, spontaneous, creatively challenging, healing and meaningful, but also good for the public too.

I feel released from a culture rampant with secretive hierarchy, petrifying me into silence and denial in my work. Now I want to search for my new crazy self from cellar to attic in my new safe house. Now I understand how vital it is for grown up adults to have a safe space in which to express the fragmented past of a childhood which won't let go until it feels safe to.

Tertia.

.....

The Survivors' Network would like to say a big thank you to all those people in the Network, supporting the Network, and from Red Herring, who helped to make the show such a success, and to all those visitors who came and were moved by it. THANK YOU! Let's do it again!

.....

For some years now my art work has reflected my inner feelings and appears rough , unfinished and experimental, as opposed to early work which tended to be more polished and removed from myself. I always seemed to have a camera between me and the real world! I am much more comfortable with my drawings and claywork now, not least because I use my hands directly to express what comes from inside.

When I began to do Art Therapy I started to value creating images spontaneously regardless of theory or aesthetics. Over time I began to methodically explore recurring themes identified as 'shell' 'eggs' 'birth' 'alienation' and 'abuse'. Through my art work I have developed a new awareness of fine balances in my life, and an acute sense of where my edges are.

Recently I have used figurative drawings and claywork as a way of affirming some of my beliefs . I have a great respect for women's bodies as containers of emotions. I have also been examining some of the facets of child sexual abuse in the work displayed in this exhibition.

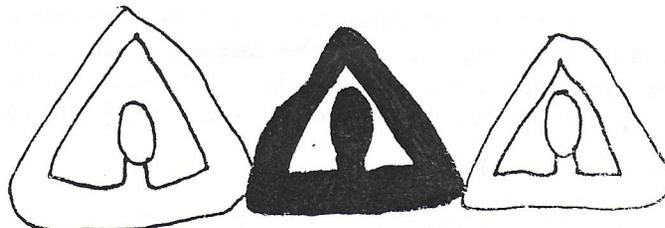
In particular I am interested in the power of silence. The powerlessness of silence. The feeling of being silenced. The silencing of feeling.

The drawings of animal-like women are trying to scream. The plaster model and clay figures are remembering pain. Screaming can be a response to pain. What happens if there is no scream? Silence is a sort of screaming.

Rohinton Mistry has written in a short story (Soho Square III): " Bullies, torturers, executioners, prefer silence. Exceptions are made: for their instruments sounds, their own grunts of effort, their victims' agony. The rest is silence. No wisdom like silence. Silence is golden. I associated silence with virtuous people. Or at least harmless , inoffensive people. I was thinking of Trappist monks, of gurus and babas who take vows of silence".

I took a vow of silence once, so my pictures and sculptures have to scream for me.

Taking part in this exhibition was a scary experience as a 'sort-of-but-not-quite' artist, and I was very surprised by my reactions to exposure. I had not anticipated the anxiety I felt at the Opening. I did not expect people to comment about my work. I never thought people would offer me money to sell it! Horrors! The success of the exhibition as a whole, the pain of the content of all the work, the friendship of the women who worked so hard to put it together, and the fun we had celebrating, will stay with me for a long time. Carole



SURVIVORS' ART EXHIBITION RED HERRING GALLERY

STOLEN

When I exhibited my art work in the Survivors' Network art exhibition it was with the aim to express my experiences and feelings as a woman who had been sexually abused as a child. I wanted to share with other people the effects sexual abuse had on me and the way art had given me a voice to speak out.

My main piece in the exhibition was a sculptured figure of 'me' as a child and through it expressed the pain and suffering I went through.

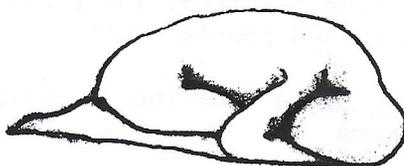
Therefore when I found out that someone had STOLEN it I was completely stunned. I felt angry, threatened, my space violated, I felt vulnerable and unsafe.

I had felt really proud to be involved in such an exhibition as it took me a lot of courage to publicly express myself as a survivor of sexual abuse. The theft of 'me' left me feeling empty.

I do not understand why someone stole my figure, or what they could have gained from it. It's not the type of sculpture you'd show off in your lounge or to your friends. Only in the environment of such an exhibition could it be shown and understood.

I find this person has been abusive, insensitive not just to myself, but to what the exhibition meant as a whole. They have stolen part of me, my growth, my experiences, my feelings, they have taken something that is not theirs and never can be. I find this act of theft unforgivable. They destroyed the rest of my exhibition and left it empty and ruined. My art was my voice and someone tried to silence me I will never forgive that.

Willow



Speak **OUT!**

*Are you in the "Caring Professions" ...
and how much do you really care?*

STUDY DAY. JULY 5th

THANK YOU to all the women who spoke out so forcefully. Your honesty, courage & strength was an inspiration. The day was a resounding success which more than fulfilled its objectives. As an added bonus, after all costs your efforts raised for the Network :



Thank you also to Charmian who chaired the day in such a sensitive & professional manner.

WHO CAME?

The day was attended by range of workers from statutory & non statutory agencies, including social workers, family centre workers hostel workers, community nurses etc. Feedback from the evaluation was extremely warm & positive. The value of the workshop was considered to be in heightening awareness of the long term effects of child sexual abuse; provoking thought on issues around appropriate responses for social workers removing children/perpetrators from the home and giving hope for the potential healing of others. Some comments made:

"I found the honesty & obvious friendship between the women good"

"Very powerful!"

"Very moved by survivors ability to heal"

"I feel honoured that we were trusted with these confidences"

"More than met expectations"

"Really impressed!"

"I feel very sad now but I have met some strong women today"

WHO STAYED AWAY?

Many more applications were made than returned. The reason for this is not clear although several individuals expressed problems with getting funding.

There was a notable absence of response from the Magistrates, Probation Service and Paediatric Hospital Consultants.

The disparity between the reality of sexual abuse with its long term consequences and the current legal, social & political responses to it must be confronted . If the balance is to be redressed it is precisely these groups who

I believe that the day gained its force through the clarity & perspective of each speaker as an adult. The personalisation avoided the safe distance of theoretical discussion and they could not be dismissed or patronised as the 'disruptive', 'angry', 'over reactive' teenager or naive 'fantasising' child.

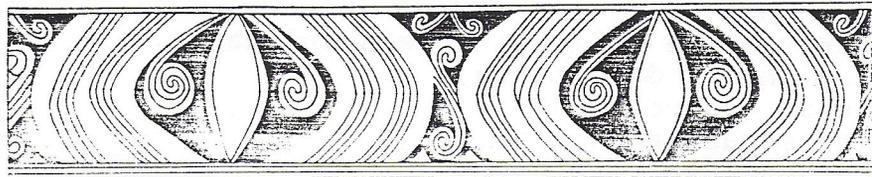
Each story was powerful, moving & vividly real. I learnt something about myself from every presentation without exception & am continuing to do so. Feelings, consequences & insights were expressed that abused children are not only unable to articulate but are yet to discover.

I would challenge anyone with the "no lasting scars" attitude to sit where I sat that day and not reassess their attitude to perpetrators and survivors.

Increasing acceptance & understanding of the long term effects of child sexual abuse not only gives possibility for better provision for adults but plays a crucial role in our approach to children & their abusers. The Speak Out, for me, reinforced the importance of us all taking responsibility as adults, 'professionals' and parents for the care, protection and healing of children, not forgetting the child within ourselves.

In admiration of all those who spoke out for themselves & all survivors.

Sal.



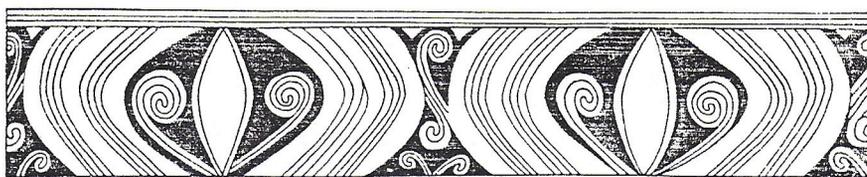
IN TRIBUTE

You are brave and courageous women
To speak out and tell of your pain
To speak out and give voice to your anger
To speak out and say never again
To the silence and burden of shame.

You are brave and courageous women
To speak out for those locked away
To speak out for those who cannot remember
To speak out and declare your survival
To tear down the veil of silence
To show there can be a different way.

You are brave and courageous women
To expose the myths and the lies
To stand up and demand to be counted
To refuse to let the world turn a blind eye
To the agony and pain of the victims
Who cry alone, in the dark and in fear
Your testimony demands a response
You have that right, and others must hear.

Charmian Tye
6.7.91



MY WORLD - MY WAR

I live in a world,
A world that is too dark - too violent for you to enter even on
hands and knees,
A world that is my own war within,
Brought on by years of abuse, of beatings - of hatred by my parents,
Within me volcanoes silently erupt,
Each letting out untapped, unknown emotions
That have been buried beneath years of "I'm fine. It doesn't matter,"
Shadows lurk around every corner - waiting to pounce
When I least expect them to,
There is no time to rest, to sleep,
Memories from past chambers don't know what rest is,
These fragments fall into my largest volcano marked angry,
Giving it fuel - giving it strength,
It waits for me to explode - as does my father,
So I can be at his level,
No one sees that I want to release the hurt, the rejection, the
sadness, the pain,
I run fast through the endless tunnels and caves,
Boulders flying in all directions,
There is no easy escape,
If there is an escape at all.
My eyes shine out like cats' eyes,
Years of practice has made me see into the darkness and blackness
of the night,
I pass many caves,
I stop,
Suddenly I see children,
Playing, laughing, crying,
I see parents wiping away tears, cuddling them, praising them,
Holding out their arms to their children,
I bang on the barriers - shouting - but they don't hear,
For these were my dreams of a child and adult,
I bang with all my strength still believing that I can break through,
That I can touch and feel for a while my dreams,
To grasp all I have ever wanted to be loved,
As I stare and look, frustration over takes me,
So near and yet so far,
My dreams become blurred and distant,
My father's voice echoes around the cave - "not a word or else",
I call out pleading for help - but no one hears,
There is no one.
No one has ever managed to get inside,
To give me a hand a lead to follow.
It has always been up to me,
To fight and live or lay down and die,
My war within is a constant battle,
A nightmare without ending,
And though people probe and try,
With an analytic eye,
And listen to all my talk with silent looks,
They can't find the centre - the door,
Where it all begins,



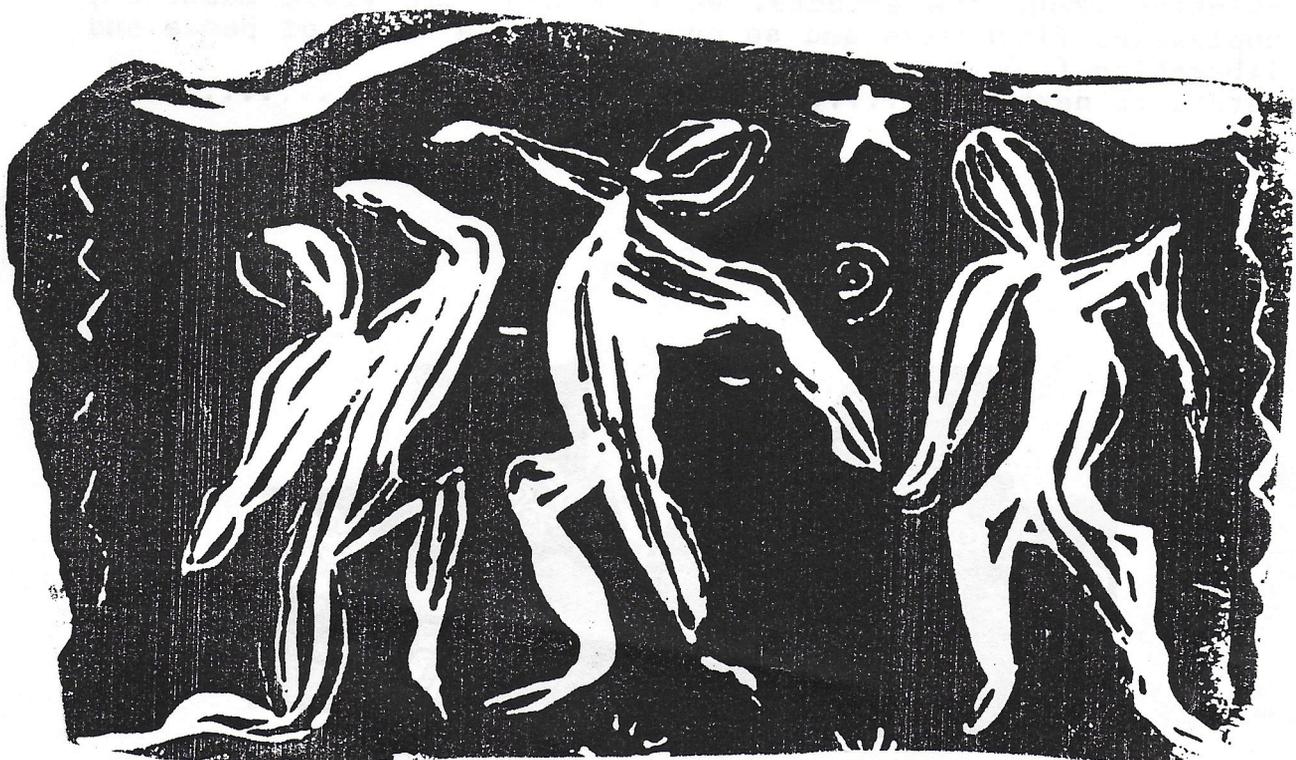
Where the fighting still continues,
Where pain reaches into the deepest corners,
Where memories constantly flow,
Like the running of a waterfall,
Where no light shines,
No laughter calls out,
Where emotions crush into each other,
All knotted and heaped up,
I have found no exit - no hole - no window - no door,
I live within this my personal war.

This poem was part of my presentation when I participated in the Network's Speak Out day. Even though I have spoken to groups of people before it is still a nerve-racking experience and one which still brings up a lot of emotions and memories for me. Only after this event did I realise fully the amount of pressure I was really under prior to and on the day.

It has been a long time since I've had a week where I have smoked so much (I had given up before that week), had so many sleepless nights, gone off food and done gardening at two in the morning, (which, I might add caused a lot of concern to my neighbours.) I am however thinking of starting an all-night survivors' gardening club as it happens to be very therapeutic. I have achieved an enormous amount by participating in this Speak Out day; it has not only given me confidence, but a sense of freedom. I am at last able to speak freely about my abuse without guilt or shame.

Lastly I would like to thank the other brave women who spoke on the day and our two chairpersons whose support didn't go unnoticed, because without all of them I wouldn't have managed to speak. Thank you all. Here's to the next one.....

Willow



IT REALLY DID MY HEAD IN!!!

SPEAK OUT

How we did it.....

Seven of us met,- some of us for seven times - spending about ten hours together finding out what we might say to a 'professional' audience that wanted to know about the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse. During that time we got to know each other well. We discussed our expectations, safety nets, who we wanted to invite, what our aims would be, what the 'professionals' might expect, the possible formats, and our fears. We became expert at avoidance techniques!

Our rehearsals brought up a great deal for all of us, recounting our own 'stories', and learning about the traumatic pasts of all the other women. The stress built up gradually and we were all panicking by July 5th. Lots of tears were shed, cigarettes smoked, and much food consumed. (Some of us forgot to eat for several days!). It was a very moving experience hearing each other, offering support, feeling the pain.

We eventually produced an extremely informative Study Day which ran very smoothly thanks to the efforts of Sal and Charmian who organised the practical details and gently held us all on the day. The stories, photographs, artwork and poetry had a significant impact on all those who were present.

In trying to evaluate our work immediately afterwards we came up with the following thoughts: that we felt relieved, lighter, energised, angry, chuffed, proud, sad, shocked, brave, surprised. We wondered how it had been received. We were ambitious to do more! We felt a unity and warmth within the group. We felt that we had achieved something important for the Network and that we could go on to do more training, even making a video. A couple of weeks on and women are still thinking about the effects. We have had some vivid memories, unpleasant flashbacks and so on, but also a sense of peace and liberation from the past.

Here's to next time.....

