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## Could we be any more feminist? Make me barf<sup>1</sup>: Responses to Art at a Women's University<sup>2</sup>

By Rhoda Zuk and Patricia Baker

We began this research with the observation that one finds hostile environments for women in the unlikeliest places. For we found an instance of extreme misogynist rancour -- in art exhibit commentary books, in a library, at Canada's only women's university. This is a campus where 60% of faculty and 85% of students are women. Sixty per cent of students are over the age of twenty-four and therefore categorized as "non-traditional." Moreover, the university emphasizes and honours its difference from traditional universities in its explicit dedication to the education of women, as evidenced in its mandate: the university states that it

considers the educational needs of women to be paramount, although men are welcomed. Programs, class times, facilities and services are specifically tailored to provide maximum accessibility for women. All the programs we offer are periodically reviewed to ensure that women's concerns are reflected in courses and curriculum ...

[T]he objectives of the university [are] to educate women and provide strong leadership role models ... the university's commitment [is] to provide a positive learning environment where women's contributions and perspectives are valued. (Mount Saint Vincent University Academic Calendar 1999-2000: 15)

The University's Art Gallery's mandate affirms its participation in this women-centredness: "[t]he Gallery reflects the University's educational mission by emphasizing the representation of women as cultural subjects and producers" (msvu art gallery, 1999-2000). Given these clearly stated academic and curatorial intentions, as well as the enactments of artists and curators of the Art Gallery's innovative "Window Box" series of installations in the library -- the focus of our study -- meant to "extend the gallery's activities into the university and in so doing expand its audience, especially among students, and raise critical awareness about contemporary art issues ..." (Collyer, n.d.,

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<sup>1</sup> From Aprons comment book; all subsequent quotations from comment books have been transcribed ad literatim in order to communicate the tone and impact of the comments. ("barf" is a North American slang expression meaning "vomit" [The Cassell Dictionary of Slang, 1998])

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to the following: Ingrid Jenkner, Director, Mount Saint Vincent University Art Gallery; Glynis Humphrey; Gillian Collyer; Mount Saint Vincent University Internal Research Grant; Helen Marzolf, Director/Curator, Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina Public Library; Renee Dankner; Mount Saint Vincent University Faculty Association, for conference funding; Fifteenth Annual Conference of the Canadian Association Against Sexual Harassment in Higher Education (Nov. 1999); Maggie Ross, University College of the Fraser Valley; Josye Andmore and Nancy Bourey, Camosun College; Dale Hall, York University; Jane P. Lind; Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Women's Collective; Chris Ferns; Departments of English and Women's Studies and Art Gallery, Saint Francis Xavier University; Mount Saint Vincent University International Women's Day Committee; Susan Stackhouse, Theatre Department, Dalhousie University, and her students Amanda Levincrown, Julie Grant, and Brye Hathorson.

p.1), it is to be supposed that artists and curators might have felt confident of a respectful, even welcoming, response from their audience. They were wrong.

Grotesque abuse characterized a significant proportion of comments associated with each of three exhibits, spanning a period of two years, from 31 January 1997 to 22 February 1999. It is our description and analysis of comments written about these three exhibits, all part of the “Window Box” series, which are the subject of this article. The art exhibits in question are: (1) *Waiting* (artist, Kim Dawn; curated by Glynis Humphrey); (2) *Aprons* (Gillian Collyer, artist and curator); (3) *Possessed* (objects from personal collections of well-known campus figures; Gillian Collyer, curator). Each installation was located outside the University’s Art Gallery, within vitrines consisting of two pairs of built-in display windows, in a corridor at the rear of the university’s library. Ingrid Jenkner, the Art Gallery Director, explains that the “Window Box” “exhibitions provide opportunities for artists who work in ephemeral or context-oriented modes. They also give beginning curators a chance to produce small, manageable projects for a broad viewership, the staff and users of the university library” (Humphrey, 1997:1) Thus, these exhibits represent a deliberate attempt to engage students with art exhibits in a location where one would typically expect students to be found. As Jenkner has noted in an interview conducted for this research, the corridor in the library “is a place of intervention.”

Viewer response to these exhibits has been recorded in comment books, made available for written commentary with each exhibit. A large minority of the comments (between 27% and 40%) comprise a hostile, often obscene, debate concerning women artists, women’s equality, and the role of the university as a university primarily dedicated to the education of women. We have termed this category of comments “gender debates”: that is, both misogynous comments that refer to women, sexuality (generally, but not necessarily, rude, scatological, prurient, or obscene), and gender relations, and derogatory comments about women and feminism. Many comments in this category disparage women, art made by and about women, or constitute such responses to more thoughtful comments. Also included are responses to the above-mentioned hostile and offensive comments.

Our research, consisting of content analysis of the comment books and interviews with the two curators of these exhibits and the art gallery director, has been driven by two overarching concerns. The first is the role of art on campuses and the efforts of artists and curators to encourage visual literacy among their audience. The curatorial intention in the “Window box” project reflects a preoccupation described by American curator Mary Jane Jacob: “what if the audience for art (who they are and what their relationship with the work might be) were considered as the goal at the centre of art production, at the point of conception, as opposed to the modernist Western aim of self-expression? And what if the location of art in the world was determined by trying to reach and engage that audience most effectively?” (1995: 50). Our project here tells the story of such an audience and the prolonged curatorial struggle to communicate with it.

Obviously, we are not suggesting that the artists and curators were remiss if viewers interpreted their work in particular ways. There are several notorious cases of

intense curatorial controversies,<sup>3</sup> but the most typical of these are not analogous to the example we bring forward, since here a sizeable proportion of the audience is neither interpreting nor misinterpreting, but is, rather, seeking a scapegoat, for, it would seem, the challenge of incorporating artistic and textual interrogation of culture into their world view.

This is a more general and much theorized problem. Cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu argues that resentment on being alienated from the field of cultural production, on realizing one's lack of cultural capital, is at the root of much resistance to art, and brings to bear the question of the relation between art and artists and their audiences: for the making and viewing of art is -- among other things -- a social experience (Bourdieu, 1993). Anne Brydon and Paula Greenhill deploy this analysis when they remark that "[a]rt's evocative power is such that the connections between it and its makers are not easily severed" (Brydon and Greenhill, 1998: 22). They also observe that too often an art gallery -- or, as in this case, exhibition site -- is perceived either "as a temple" or "a courtroom" (22). What ensues are audiences assuming positions as devout observers or arrogant accusers.<sup>4</sup>

In the "Window Box" comment books under consideration here, many specific comments, as well as larger patterns of discourse, indubitably characterize such large problematics of visual art practice and criticism. Thus, one starting point of our research can be summarized in Suzanne Lacy's description of recent critical concerns:

Contemporary critics, following the lead of artistic practice, have begun deconstructing the audience, most often along the specific identity lines of gender, race, and, less often, class. But the relationship of the audience to the work place is not clearly articulated. Of interest is not simply the makeup or identity of the audience but to what degree audience participation forms and informs the work -- how it functions as integral to the work's structure. (1995: 178)

More specifically, if, as Jenkner suggests, "feminist art-making teaches you to address an audience and to generate a subject position for the viewer" (interview with Jenkner) -- to what extent does the "Window Box" audience's refusal to occupy a women-centred position signify curatorial failure and to what extent the existence of bedrock resistance to the aims of an institution for women?

Our second concern is a corollary of the first: we aim to define the ways in which the comment-book comments instantiate the existence of a "chilly climate" in the university.<sup>5</sup> As Bernice Sandler and Roberta Hall explain, the term "chilly climate,"

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<sup>3</sup> Some Canadian examples include *The Spirit Sings* (Glenbow Museum, Calgary, 1988); *Into the Heart of Africa* (Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, 1990); *The Moral Imagination* (Plug-In Gallery, Winnipeg, 1996); and recently, Tamara Sanowar-Makhan's *Ultra-Maxi Priest* (Oakville, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Even the cognoscenti are brought up short for resisting real engagement with art that is produced by and represents marginalized groups. Rinaldo Walcott, for instance, in his consideration of art criticism and Black artists in the Canadian context, points to the failure of art critics to negotiate the extremes between "exuberant celebration or racist denunciation" (Walcott, 1999: 11). He exhorts art critics to "a serious engagement with the work" (1999: 16).

<sup>5</sup> In doing so, we engage in the sort of institutional research Caplan recommends: "Find, or help promote the gathering of, data relevant to the position of women on your campus and throughout academia" (Caplan, 1993: 101).

known also as “hostile” or “offensive” “environment” “captures the subtle standing conditions that marginalize women” (Stalker and Prentice, 1998: 19). A “chilly climate” is created through sexist behaviours and attitudes expressed by students, faculty and administrators, and is typically associated with traditional universities and with traditional sites of learning, such as the classroom, within universities (see, for example, Caplan [1993] and Stalker and Prentice [1998]). This conceptualization pertains to our research in two ways: in relation to gender debates between students and with regard to the targeting of artists, curators, and professors. “Peer harassment,” says Sandler, “occurs at virtually all schools ... [and] [a]lthough some institutions may have fewer instances than others, none are immune.” While “[v]ery little has been written about peer harassment, “it is clear that “[its] aim ... is to intimidate and to show power and dominance ...” (Sandler, 1997: 53). The findings of these researchers are crucially relevant to our analysis, since all or most of the comments are scripted by students, and so many of them abuse and harass other commentators. Also pertinent, given the hostility directed at artists, curators, and professors, is the concept of “contrapower harassment” (Gratch, 1997: 286), which signifies the targeting of women in positions of authority “not because they lack power, but precisely because they have power and prestige which is incongruent with their traditional gender status” (Sev’er, 1999: 477).

We approached close readings of the comments for each exhibit with these two overarching concerns in mind: the scapegoating of art and artists and the chilly climate that scapegoating creates. Ironically, the first exhibit, *Waiting*, created by Kim Dawn and curated by Glynis Humphrey (31 Jan. - 6 Apr. 1997), represented a deliberate attempt to integrate the art with its space and was directed to its mostly female users, as Humphrey made clear in our interview: “The idea of confronting women in the institution was the whole thing about the piece ... I wanted the system to confront the fact of women being there.” Humphrey elaborates on this in the catalogue for the exhibit:

Behind the library lurks a kind of misplaced hallway, a cell of grey tiled walls and floor, sealed with efficiently snapping metallic doors. Located in this anti-room, Kim Dawn’s site-specific installation entitled *Waiting* becomes a space for engagement, confronting the boundaries between the space of the female body and that of the university. Paradoxically, Kim Dawn transforms a barren utility corridor into a metaphorical space where viewers may encounter corporeality on an experiential level.

*Waiting* occupies two identical vitrines, large glass cases set into the wall on either side of an elevator [in the passageway at the back of the library]. The west vitrine is divided in half, the left side filled with multiple colour-photocopies of a photograph of a woman’s upper body. The figure’s blurred, moving face is seen in profile. Filling the space on the right side are stacked rows of nylon stockings stuffed with brewed tea bags pressed against the glass. Each swollen form has been cut and tied off, as if at the ankles, the stump and amputated ends covered in red lipstick. The east vitrine is similarly divided, with the left side filled by the repeated image of a body in motion, blurred almost beyond recognition. On the right side of the pane, methodical rows of lipstick smears cover the glass, forming a reddish membrane. (Humphrey, 1997: 1)

Humphrey goes on to explain that

The secure system of the academy demands the separation of mind from body, invariably privileging the former, making the female doubly abject. Kim Dawn's are not the self-contained disciplined bodies of academe; these organic bodies ooze, they secrete blood and fluids which threaten to seep uncontrollably into the sterile, silent space. Like pain and disease, they violate the invisible barrier that divides mind from body. The suggestion of absence and death is countered by Dawn's repeated photographic images which are elusively mobile in their resistance: the once-passive, once-disavowed body resurfaces in rebellion. (Humphrey, 1997: 2)

Analysis of the gender debates in the comment book for this exhibit reveals that thirty-seven of one hundred thirty-seven, or 27%, of the comments include: references to the art either as pertaining to women or to the artist's incompetence. Particularly striking is the ferocity of the objections: the persistent crudity about and hatred for the art, for commentators trying to grapple with its meaning, and even for other commentators objecting to obscenity. We note here two discursive movements -- or, more accurately, degenerative movements. The first is, broadly speaking, concerned with the self-gratification commentators derive from the art. Comments at the beginning of the exhibit are typified by this one:

I like! That's odd! I hate the colour pink.

Later, hostility sets in:

It is too pink. And I think it sucks!!!!!!

"Scratch and sniff." I farted right here. It smells better than this exhibit does too!!!!!!

Even grosser obscenity, this time aimed at the artist, ensues:

This exhibit reminds me of a pink piece of shit with peanuts and corn in it. You should go back to kindergarten and learn to paint. I hope you didn't get paid for this. I could do a better job than you. I am more talented too.

When someone responds that

Accepting You wasn't the Best Move for MSVU,

the commentator retaliates:

Fuck off and eat my cock. I have an A average. What do you have. My guess is F for Failure and Fuckface.

These are just some examples of hateful speech.

The second troublesome discourse involves feminism. The crudity of one comment, "Naked woman' Blurry and on a wall. Looks like fun" is shortly followed by a remarkable engagement involving self-identity, feminist identity, and feminist art:

As a female, I feel inclined to understand, even like this exhibit. But as a person, I find it a complete waste of time. Even with the pamphlet [text by curator] I see very little meaning to the display. Perhaps this is because I am a science student, but, would anyone understand this without the little instruction booklet? Perhaps we should all try to get a BFA to understand this sad excuse for feminist art.

What is especially noteworthy here, perhaps, given that the catalogue states that the artist's intention is to resist the academy's traditional mind/body split, is that the student employs at least two binary oppositions -- that of woman/not-woman and of art student/science student -- to construct her criticism. She articulates three self-identities: "female," "person," "science student." The first two are viewed, by means of invoking gender voluntarism, as mutually exclusive: while a "female" can be sympathetic toward and comprehend the artist's purpose and the exhibit, a "person" -- presumably, one who proceeds without consciousness of gender, or who, perhaps, assumes a masculinist consciousness -- reacts with impatience and hostility. The comment -- a kind of internalized sexism -- may well reflect or typify women's reaction to feminist work and indeed to a women's institution. Secondly, in citing herself as a student of science, as a specialist in her own right, who lacks access to another disciplinary code, the commentator offers criticism of the art as exclusionary. It is possible, then, that her critique of feminism lies in the artist's failure to communicate: if this problem was eradicated, would the respondent consider femininity as an issue, and art centred on feminist theory and representation as a worthy practice? Or is it rather that she has found not one but two tactics for dismissing the art? First, it is meaningful exclusively to women -- but a woman may choose to disavow her gender; second, the artist is elitist.

The very next commentator focuses on this contradictory self-description, and also addresses what she perceives as the prejudice of the "science student":

Funny how you separate being female from being a person. (!?!). Art isn't meant to be read + understood like a textbook. I thought it was a provocative + a telling comment on the nature of femininity (especially the pantyhose + lipstick!)

This commentator, unlike the person to whom she is responding, offers praise, albeit vague, of the exhibit. This suggests sympathy with feminism while it reveals lack of understanding either of the images or the art practice itself. In other words, the skepticism of the first commentator and the approval of the second reveal that neither comprehends nor engages with the artist's aesthetic.

Meanwhile, two ensuing comments - "Gett off this women shit!" and "That's what I'm sayin'" -- are demands that dialogue about women or feminism cease. Subsequent attempts to halt such incivil language are greeted with contempt. This pattern is in keeping with research on the futile attempts of women to resist intimidation: silence, humour, and assertiveness is, each one, futile (Sandler, Silverberg and Hall, 1996: 17; Benard and Schlaffer, 1997: 396). Indeed, the observation that resistance often prompts men to "escalate the exchange in order to maintain control" (Lenton et al, 1999: 520) obtains in these comment books.

The second exhibit, *Aprons*, created and curated by Gillian Collyer, had three phases. The first phase was an installation performance, in which Collyer stood by the vitrines ironing vintage aprons before hanging them up for exhibit in the two window boxes, and which culminated in the exhibit entitled *Aprons*. This phase was followed by two others, entitled *Comment Book*, and *Aprons/Flags*. *Aprons*, in contrast to *Waiting*, was more accessible to a student audience with minimal training in visual literacy -- but fully 43% of the remarks in the accompanying comment book comprise what we define as “gender debates”: nineteen of thirty-one (61%) of this subset are negative in the extreme.

Significantly, Collyer, because she was employed as a special projects worker by the gallery during this time, was able, unlike the curator of the first exhibit, to engage in interventions with sexual harassers in her audience. To wit, in response to the preponderance of scurrilous comments, she removed the aprons from one of the vitrines/window boxes and replaced them with photocopied enlargements of the comment books -- thereby hanging out the university’s dirty laundry. Collyer explains her intervention: “my aim was to throw it back at them, I guess -- to reflect back how silly some of their comments were, and to just put them up there and make them part of it” (Collyer interview). In addition, she posted her own commentary on the wall over the lectern on which a new comment book was kept. This phase of that exhibit was entitled *Comment Book*. The result was that the proportion of comment book remarks dedicated to gender debates actually increased -- from 43% to 45% -- although the number of hateful comments decreased to six of fourteen (42%).

Finally, to mark the “Week of Reflection” instituted by the university to commemorate the Montreal Massacre,<sup>6</sup> Collyer selected some of the aprons from her collection and hung them on flagpoles in the foyer of the main academic building. In addition to investing feminist meaning into a nationalist symbol, the Canadian flag, by making the feminine visible, and thereby defying the public/private split, Collyer’s intervention alludes to the Montreal mass murderer’s fury that women occupy public space. Given that the first stage of her exhibit -- aprons hanging on clothes lines in library window boxes -- provoked such irrational rage, Collyer’s exhibit acquires real plangency. Intriguingly, although this exhibit was not accompanied by a comment book, many comments were directed toward it nonetheless. Appropriating pages of the comment book associated with another “Window Box” exhibit, entitled *Grid Works*, students wrote on the back page of that book and worked forward. Such an intentional misuse of a comment book suggests students considered the new exhibit as provocation in the extreme. Six of the fourteen comments in the book (42%) are directed at the apron/flags: five of these six (83%) are negative.

A close reading and detailed analysis of the content of the comments reveal that a destructive momentum builds from phase to phase of the *Aprons* exhibit. The apparent futility of the curator’s strategies -- “No, nothing really worked ... Nothing stopped it ...” (Collyer interview) -- and of commentators’ interventions, remains constant, in that a perverse pattern of hostility emerges with the first exhibit and escalates with subsequent ones. We adjudge this pattern to constitute “chilly climate.” In the first phase of the

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<sup>6</sup> On 6 Dec. 1989, fourteen women at Ecole Polytechnique in Montreal were massacred by a man who separated men from women and murdered the women because he believed them to be “feminists.” He blamed feminism for his failure to gain access to that engineering school.



Aprons exhibit, nineteen of thirty-one comments express rage, scorn, or contempt at women or for feminism. As such, the comments qualify as those that create a hostile environment,<sup>7</sup> while the remaining twelve protest these. That the fury and obscenity are out of all proportion to the actual exhibit suggests the existence on campus of a population who are deeply resentful of women, of a focus on women's history and issues, and indeed of the presence of so many women in the institution: women are not welcome in a women's university.

The discourse in Comment Book is even more polarized. Four<sup>8</sup> commentators directly, and sympathetically, engage with the artist's intervention. There are two anti-feminist responses to this grouping of comments. The first student believes art's domain is purely aesthetic and resists and resents the implication that the exhibit might be perceived as having a social function:

The display should be admired for its originality. [do not] babble on about the 'underlying' or 'hidden' ... message, which, in most cases, is probably nonexistent.

A second commentator is similarly impatient with the notion of political content in art, and exhorts "feminists" to 'Get-a-life!' ... It's great to want equal rights lalala -- Im all for that ... [but] We should be focusing on relevant issues -- such as violence ect not whining over aprons and how they've put 'women' in bondage and made them slaves or whatever your trying to get through.

The remaining "gender debate" comments are even less encouraging: one suggests that only men can be "great" artists; two are verbally, one visually, obscene. One comment, expressing a sense of male persecution, is a case study in moral panic and demonization of women -- a classic response to women's activism (Stalker and Prentice, 1998: 28):

Why don't we just put a man burning at the stake, with his dick cut off, telling every woman that he hurt sorry. in this display case! Would that make you happy!

A far more civil but equally resistant response comes from a comment signed by a male student suggesting an exhibit of men's neckties. He thereby implicitly objects to, by deflecting from, the woman-centredness of the exhibit. This entry is signed by a student who had, in another context on campus, publicized his view that woman-bashing is freedom of speech. A significant exchange then occurs. A second commentator, presumably a woman, writes Die you woman hater in the margin. A third commentator,

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<sup>7</sup> That is to say, they are "[c]omments that demean women's abilities, scholarship, seriousness of academic commitment, or their very presence ..." (Sandler, Resnick, Silverberg and Hall, 1996: 16).

<sup>8</sup> One, for instance, attempts to explain art's function, women's history, and class roles, and refers to the university's distinctive demographics:

Art is not only a portrait, or a starry night, but also a way to bring to our attention certain ideas important, obviously to the artist, and hopefully to us as well. These aprons represent a time when women did not have the same resources or opportunities ... Not every apron is the same either, many are made of better quality ... This symbolizes class diversity as well. As students in a predominantly female school, we should recognize the "idea", the "truth" and the "message" being sent to us.

presumably a man, asserts the right to freedom of speech, and then, revealingly, exercises it in a misogynous manner:

Why should he die for his opinion? Are you some sort of psycho-bitch.

This series of exchanges is significant for two reasons. First, it is oblique evidence that hostile debates concerning women have had an impact in this context. Second, it illustrates women's impotence in their reactions -- whether they affect indifference, remonstrate, or -- as in this rare instance -- retaliate. Women protest misogyny, which is then defended as freedom of speech; when a woman uses the same tactic -- hateful language -- she is denounced as curtailing freedom of speech, and is, moreover, herself targeted with hateful language. The circle is unbroken! -- and women remain entrapped in misogyny.

In sum, while the commentary associated with Comment Book is less substantial, the misogyny and anti-feminism are if possible more vituperative than in Aprons. Indeed, anti-feminist forms of expression are at once more varied and more entrenched.

The anti-feminist fury intensifies with the Aprons/Flags debate. Commentators claim that feminism -- and the artist/curator -- demeans women, disgraces the university and degrades or at least distresses men. Only one commentator, a woman who signs with her name and student number, refers to the Montreal Massacre. A self-identified male, out of ignorance or insolence, refers to the artist/curator as "The decorator." He insists that she owes an apology to those over the years who worked so hard on seeing this university comfortable for both sexes.

He deplores that Aprons/Flags contributes to the stereotypes of a deep-rooted feminist University. This, of course, is a tired but familiar argument: women's equality is reverse discrimination.

Perhaps inspired by the former comment, but anxious to distance herself from its excessiveness, another writer, the self-identified woman, objects that the aprons/flags send the wrong signal about a women's university:

I enjoyed the aprons in the showcase but I disagree entirely with their display on the flagpoles in the Seton lobby. I do not view it as a creative memorial of the Montreal Massacre. I view their display in the lobby as offensive in the extreme. It cries out to me "Look, we're a school full of women and see what we've learned? Domesticity!". PLEASE remove them.

In other words, she believes that femininity has no place in public discourse. What emerges in this comment book, for the first time, are demands that Collyer's aprons be censored: as unpatriotic, or hateful toward men, or too feminine for women. As we will see, calls for censorship arise in the commentary books associated with the third and final exhibit as well.

The third exhibit, Possessed, featured objects of art owned by four well-known members of campus, with accompanying texts describing each owner's position and record of achievement, together with a brief testimony and explanation of her or his relationship to the object. Possessed also represents another of Collyer's interventions, one which includes three aspects. First, she focussed on "possessors" -- intellectuals from

the campus, including the President, a research award recipient, a fine arts professor, the art gallery director -- rather than artists. Second, each testifies to her or his passion for and personal investment in the art: how it evokes memory, place, identity, and so on. Third, none of the four objects in the exhibit -- pottery, vase, androgynous mask, book -- includes any reference to gender. According to Collyer, *Possessed* was meant to “engage with the students. I felt one way was to make this show with objects from people they knew -- that essentially that would be interesting to them” (Collyer interview).

Collyer therefore encouraged students to focus on the art rather than the artist or on women in the hope of redirecting and engaging student commentary more productively. Again, the strategy failed. Many angry comments were directed toward, of all things, the book on exhibit -- an object of high aesthetic sophistication<sup>9</sup> -- and also toward its possessor, a male professor:

[The Professor] sucks!

The results are startling in other ways: fifty-two of one hundred thirty-four (40%) comments focus on hatred of women, gays, and especially lesbians. Almost none of these comments focus on the exhibit itself. Indeed, as the petulance of one comment makes clear –

Is this ... about gender? I may be stupid - but I'm not sure I get it

– students seem anxious to find a scapegoat, a focus of some sort, to deflect their hostility from the challenges of art interpretation. This comment was answered and signed by Collyer, the curator:

I don't know where you got the idea it was about gender - read more carefully.

Confronted with an exhibit that did not deal with the representation of women, misogynists resorted to even more startlingly spurious attacks against women, specifically lesbians, and introduced mindless abuse against gay men as well.

Homophobic comments arise when a commentator says “SUCK IT!!” and persist when someone, having painstakingly explained why the expression is misogynist, is labelled “DYKE.” A squalid barrage ensues. A group of commentators variously resists this onslaught (“lesbian is the best”; “I am a dyke -- and proud of it”) to no avail. It is at this point that three commentators call for the removal of another, permanent library exhibit, organized by the library, the art gallery, and faculty members. That exhibit consists of rare books -- the university's lesbian pulp fiction collection, notable for its vivid covers. Astonishingly, commentators at the beginning of the *Possessed* exhibit express disgust with an avant-garde text within the exhibit, then go on to demand that popular books -- lesbian pulp fiction -- and their representations of women, be removed from view in another library location. Thus students demonstrate disdain both for high literary art as well as highly accessible fiction concerning women's sexuality.

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<sup>9</sup> *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)* was created by the New York Artist Dennis Ashbaugh and the Canadian Cyberpunk writer William Gibson.

All of this battering of art, books, artists, curators, collectors, women, gays, lesbians, and feminism had a conclusively chilling effect. Once *Possessed* was removed from display -- that is to say, after three deliberate curatorial interventions in these "gender debates" -- the art gallery director, perceiving the extent of the hostility and the futility of attempts to address it, forewent the exercise of offering the commentary books, at least until new curatorial strategies could be developed, as an hopeless cause. Clearly, all the exhibits, including *Possessed*, which did not centre on women, were subject to de facto censorship. Misogynist sensibility displaced feminist attempts to occupy public space -- a public space dedicated to women.<sup>10</sup>

In attempting to address our two concerns about art reception and chilly climate, we draw several interrelated conclusions from our analysis of this course of events. What at once intrigues and distresses us is that resistance to the art in the *Window Box* series takes misogynist form: for feminism is the flashpoint. We are also concerned that the misogyny in the comment books appears to have redirected or discouraged other students' attempts at serious engagement with the exhibits. That is to say, the comments instantiate the effects of hostile environment, in that freedom of inquiry -- the artists', curators', and audiences' -- is curtailed by sexism.

We are interested not only in absolute and proportional numbers of negative, misogynist comments in the books, but in attempting to understand, interpret, and explain the quantity and quality of those comments. To this end, we have compared and contrasted these commentaries with the content of comment books from several exhibits in another art gallery, the *Dunlop*, situated in a public library in Regina, Saskatchewan. Two points of departure are apparent: *Dunlop* patrons attempt to express gratitude for the space and personnel of the gallery and the presence of art, even when a specific exhibit leaves them cold: which it very often does not.<sup>11</sup> Also, and more obviously, *Dunlop* patrons, while they are in the setting of the library, are self-selecting. By contrast, the many commentators at the university regarded the art, the artists, as well as feminist or even women-friendly commentators as an imposition. There would seem to be a relation between the anti-intellectuality of the commentators and their anti-feminism.

Aside from this concern with the significance of the location (a university library), targets (women artists and feminist commentators), and consequences of misogynist comments (chilly climate) -- their immediate impact within a specific space and time -- we are concerned with the broader implications of these comment books. Our study contributes to research on chilly climate in two areas. First is the notoriously under-researched subject of peer-to-peer harassment. To date, and understandably, studies and reports document peer-to-peer harassment in classrooms, dormitories, fraternities, and athletic and social events. The sordid series of exchanges under examination here

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<sup>10</sup> Informal consultation with faculty, students, and sexual harassment officers at colleges and universities across Canada suggests that the issue of the ownership of public space is usually the crux of debates and uproars about feminist art.

<sup>11</sup> We undertook a content analysis of the written comments about one exhibit from the *Dunlop Art Gallery* -- an exhibit entitled *Normal* (2 Aug. - 17 Sept. 1997). We chose this exhibit because of its explicit feminism and women-centred content, and thus of its comparability to the exhibits in which we are interested. Out of a total of 272 written comments about *Normal*, only 9, or 3.3%, could be considered to approximate what we have termed "gender debates." However, none of these 9 comments contained the virulent anti-woman, antifeminist obscenity with which we were unfortunately all too familiar in the three exhibits which we examined.

occurred among students in the library, the very heart of a university. Second, these events occurred in a women's university, where it could be reasonably expected that the organizational dynamics would preclude chilly climate. This case study supports Margaret Gillett's contention that "[t]he academic context is still infused with a residual belief in male superiority and, even if they achieve what is considered to be a critical mass of women, we have to remember that numbers are not as important as ideology" (Gillett, 1998: 44). We conclude, then, what many feminists have probably suspected: that male cultural power has force and effect even in an institution where women are in the majority, and where the institution explicitly claims to welcome women.

The implications of the anonymity of the comments for our understanding of the scope and impact of sexual harassment are also important. The worst of them were, predictably, anonymous, and, as such, comparable to three other recognized forms of harassment. First is electronic sexual harassment -- "computer-mediated communication" that allows for "uninhibited" behaviour (Dalaimo, 1997: 86). Second, the comments are comparable to and in some cases consist of harassing graffiti -- the most recent publicized Canadian example being posters addressed to women students at Queen's University at Kingston, Ontario: "Go Down or Go Away" (Sept. 1999). Finally, obscene telephone calls have long been recognized as a form of harassment. As in the case of the first two categories, the anonymity of such calls lessens neither their impact nor their social importance. Indeed, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise observe that obscene callers "articulate ... contempt in anonymity and so with no repercussion in the rest of their lives" (Stanley and Wise, 1983: 198). But there are repercussions for those commentators who want to engage seriously with art and debate, and those who outrightly call for respect from other commentators. They are effectively silenced and with no recourse. In her interview with us, Jenkner went so far as to say that "under conditions of total anonymity you can't have civil discourse."

A further issue complicated by anonymity has to do with the gender identity of the commentators. We have a shrewd suspicion, based on handwriting, style, and tone, that the most objectionable comments were scripted by men. Stanley and Wise contend that "sexist men are a perfectly valid, and very useful, source of information about sexism" (Stanley and Wise, 1983: 198,199). We would add, moreover, that sexist women are also a valid source of information; many female commentators would seem to have subscribed to masculinist prejudices. As a result, perhaps, when on occasion a protesting commentator refers to the writer of an abusive epithet such as "suck my cock" as male, the following accusation arises: "How do you know it's a man?". Anonymity along with the insistence on gender voluntarism allow for the confusion and denial of gender identity and hence preclude meaningful engagement with gender issues, including male sexual bullying and cultural supremacy.<sup>12</sup> Not only does the anonymous hateful individual

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<sup>12</sup> Benard and Schlaffer conclude the following in answer to the question "What is going on in the minds of men" who harass: "Not much ... The notion that women disliked [being harassed] and felt infringed upon ... was a novel one for most men, not because they had another image of the woman's response but because they had never given it any thought at all. Only a minority, around 15%, explicitly set out to anger or humiliate their victims. This is the same group that employs graphic sexual commentary and threats" (Benard and Schlaffer, 1997: 396-397). Lenton et al conclude that "[d]etailed information is required about ... the characteristics of the harassers as well as the victims" of harassment (1999: 536). Sev'er agrees that more knowledge about perpetrators would clarify "their behaviour and ... the male biases that protect the status quo."

evade repercussions, but anonymous discourse entrenches misogyny and supports collective male domination, which includes, of course, women policing their own oppression.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, for the most part, debate -- or, sometimes, more accurately, slanging matches; or, to use the metaphor coined by electronic mail analysts, "flaming" -- pervades the commentary books. Bourdieu's (1993) arguments about cultural capital provide a framework for explaining the direction if not the intensity of the debate. It would seem that commentators, lacking an aesthetic context or criterion by which to interpret the exhibits, opt to judge, assess, harangue, and answer back to other commentators. In other words, attention is deflected from art objects and frustration directed at artists or audience reaction. In the end, as we have seen, students call for the removal of any challenging representations. Such relentless abuse and calls for censorship of intellectual life, particularly as it pertains to representations and thoughtful discussions by, of, and about women, is the essence of hostile environment.

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<sup>13</sup> Compounding the difficulty of anonymity is the inability of women students to recognize harassment and offensive behavior -- and misogyny in general -- as wrong. See Gratch (1997), for instance, for profiles of women students and faculty confronted with harassment.

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