



## Rose & Blue

3 November 1997 to 2 November 1998

St George's Hospital

Fetal Medicine Unit

Lanesborough Wing, 4th Floor

Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm

### **A personal view on curating at St George's Hospital, Fetal Medicine Unit, London.**

**By Françoise Dupré. Artist and curator of Rose & Blue.**

For me curating is a creative process which is very close to my art practice. The themes and concepts that I explore in the exhibitions I curate are also investigated in my own work. However the exhibitions are never illustrations, demonstrations of a particular theory. On the contrary they are part of my on going enquiries and often help my practical and theoretical work to progress. For me curating is a way to promote pluralism in the visual arts and raise women artists visibility. My exhibitions include artists of different age and with a wide range of artistic and cultural background.

In the early 80s I began organising exhibitions at the Brixton Art Gallery. <sup>1</sup> Many of its exhibitions were put together by members of the Brixton Artists Collective. We never used the term curating. In those days things were rather organic and experimental. I was also involved in Women's Work, a women artist organisation based at the Brixton Art Gallery. Women's Work <sup>2</sup> organised exhibitions and education activities. The Brixton Art Gallery was a tremendous place which allowed me to grow, share skills and gained experiences in organising exhibitions.

After the Brixton Art Gallery it seems rather 'natural' to continue collaborating with other artists in particular women and put together exhibition proposals and if we were lucky, exhibit.....

The first exhibition I 'officially' curated and received payment for, was in 1997 for St Georges' Hospital Fetal Medicine Unit in Tooting, London. The exhibition titled Unfolding (February to November 1997) was initiated by the director of the Fetal Medicine Unit Dr Yves Ville who wished to improve the Unit's environment. Yves Ville believes that exhibiting women artists' work which celebrates women's creativity and strength is appropriate to the Unit where patients are often anxious about their pregnancy. With the help of the Women Artists Slide Library, Yves Ville had begun selecting artists. I was invited to continue with the task of curating and organising the exhibition. For Unfolding I decided to remain 'cautious'. I needed time to become familiar with the Unit, its space, function and its patients. Unfolding was an exhibition of two dimensional work and the theme was accessible to a wide audience. Drawings, paintings and prints explored the theme of water, imaginary landscapes, the body, the folding of cloth. The artists were Sarah Cawkwell, Heather Connelly, Françoise Dupré, Jacqueline Morreau, Roxane Permar, Françoise Sergy, Almuth Tebbenhoff, Patricia Townsend

In 1997, I was already working as an independent curator for the London Borough of Camden Women in Focus Festival 1997. The exhibition was called Off Centre <sup>3</sup>. I was chosen to curate the exhibition because of my wide knowledge of and commitment to contemporary women artists. For Women in Focus 1998 I curated the exhibition Touching Matters <sup>4</sup>. For both exhibitions I worked for and with Camden Arts and Tourism Officer and Festival Co ordinator Anya Whitehead. For me Touching Matters has been an important exhibition because it engaged with the creative process and its siting, issues which are at the centre of my own work.

There are many ways in which artists and curators collaborate. It depends on the nature of the projects and the artists involved. For example with the project Emplacements<sup>5</sup> which I am curating with artist Roxane Permar, we aim to create work which responds to places which are or were conceived as non art sites. For each site we invite artists to join us. Roxane Permar and myself as curators are responsible for the overall concept and realisation of the project. When developing individual projects we intend to work closely with the host organisation, its location and the guest artists. We hope that each artist will produce individual work which is a result of the collaborative process and function as an integrated whole.

My collaboration with Doctor Yves Ville at St Georges Hospital Fetal Medicine Unit has been altogether different. We have different kind of expertise. His knowledge and understanding of the site: the Fetal Unit Medicine, its staff and patients are crucial. To the collaboration I bring my knowledge of women artists and experience of curating and organising exhibitions. Our partnership is based on a mutual respect. At the Fetal Medicine Unit my professionalism is respected and the artists are valued. I have found this situation refreshing. Within the Museum and Art Gallery world, except for few exceptions, artists are treated badly, contracts and payments are often late and artists fees are rarely paid.

Unfolding, was well received by staff and patients. The context of the exhibition and the possibility of misreading work raised questions about the kind of images one exhibits in a hospital and in a Fetal Medicine Unit. Concerns were raised about patients' cultural identity, their feeling and response to their medical tests and treatments and finally their perception and understanding of the art work on display. Yves Ville and I felt it was important to develop further the partnership and debate. Curating and exhibiting work outside the gallery context raise many issues. Some are purely practical, to do with the site: Within a working environment the exhibition should not interfere with the every day running of the place. Although staff are committed to the project they cannot take responsibility for the work. The other important issues is the curator's accountability: to the artists and to the audience. When people visit a gallery they know they are going to view art. For an hospital patient, who has come to see a specialist or for treatment, the exhibition is an accidental part of the visit. It might not necessarily be something he or she desire to see. I believe the curator's responsibility is greater here. At the Fetal Medicine Unit there are two different type of spaces the public spaces: the waiting room and the corridors where patients can choose to look at the work or move away from it. The private spaces are the consultation rooms and the counselling room where patients have to stay for consultations or counselling. The work must be chosen accordingly although one knows that it is impossible to fully guarantee the way in which a work is interpreted. There is always the possibility that work will be read in an unexpected way. To anticipate patient's response and to assure that the work does not offend or upset one has to communicate and consult with staff and artists. The curator must be in regular touch with the artists and discuss their work. Choosing the artists is obviously the first important stage. Within the hospital context it was important for me to choose sensitive and sympathetic artists. Second, one must make sure that the artists understand the brief and become familiar with the Fetal Medicine Unit. However it is important to give space for experimentation. As a curator one has to take chances. In exhibitions, I curate, I have found that there is always one or two work which can be problematic because of what it might convey or because it is not well resolved. It is a gamble that I am prepared to take because I believe it is important for artists to be given an opportunity to experiment.

But how far does one protect patients? When the patient is worried about the health of her unborn baby is it fair to confront her with images which might make her feel more vulnerable? But being pregnant does not turn one into an idiot. Life goes on, pregnant women do engage

with every day life. Indeed they might be grateful to be treated as intelligent adults and enjoyed looking at a stimulating exhibition. With the second exhibition Rose & Blue I believe I have managed to bring together experimentation and enjoyment. The artists are: Amanda Benson, Lubna Chowdhary, Françoise Dupré, Echolalia, Ruth Fownes-Walpole, Leila Galloway, Emma Hathaway, Margaret Proudfoot, Angela Wright. Rose & Blue explores with humour and imagination issues of gender. It is an exhibition of three dimensional work, including some interactive ones, made with a wide range of materials which are not part of the conventional sculpture making vocabulary, something which surprised the Fetal Medicine Unit staff at first. For the exhibition artists made new work most are site specific and respond to the Unit's architecture and human characteristics. Artists have responded to the theme in a wide range of ways. Some have explored the theme in formal and conceptual ways, others tapped into their personal experience of motherhood and infertility. Rose & Blue proves that it is possible to engage with a grave subject matter within the hospital environment. With Rose & Blue many patients and staff have been exposed for the first time to contemporary art and have discovered that it can be fun and even aesthetically pleasing.

Françoise Dupré. August 1998

<sup>1</sup> The Brixton Art Gallery, on Atlantic Road and the Brixton Artists Collective were founded in 1983. I was one of its founder.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the origin and history of Women's Work read Women's Work publication: Women's Work. Two years in the life of a women artists group. 1983 -85. On sale at the BrixtonArt Gallery 35 Brixton Station Road, London SW9 8PB.

<sup>3</sup> Swiss Cottage Central Library in London ( March - April 1997) Off Centre brought together nine women artists : Emily Bates, Amanda Benson, Echolalia, Rita Keegan, Miwa Kojima, Niki Kyriakidou, Nic Percy, Lesley Sanderson, Lois Williams whose work crossed the boundaries between art, domesticity, public and private spaces. Working with different media, including drawing, embroideries and video the artists challenged cultural and racial stereotypical images of women.

<sup>4</sup> Swiss Cottage Central Library in London ( March - April 1998) Touching Matters was an exhibition which explored the creative process and contemporary ideas about the art object. The artists were Asa Andersson, Phyllida Barlow, Mohini Chandra, Pamela Day, Naomi Dines, Leila Galloway, Sophie Horton, Jenny Jones, Rehana Mughal, Elizabeth Rosser, Angela Thwaites, Emma Woffenden.

<sup>5</sup> The first Emplacements project will take place at the Woodlands Art Gallery in January 1999. Titled, DisEmplacement it includes artists Naomi Dines and Michelle Lewis. The second Emplacements project is still in it embryonic form and might take place in Norwich in collaboration with artist Emma Hathaway in late 1998 or 1999.

 Return to Rose & Blue

**For more information about Rose & Blue, visit: <https://www.pinkink.net/newart/rnb.htm>**