

About "Joan's Room": Mary Sparling Interviews *Atlantis* Guest Artist Marie Koehler-Vandergraaf

MS: Where you're very much an environmental activist and Joan's Room is about a woman who was an environmental activist who didn't think of herself that way, why don't you say something about Joan, since this is about Joan's Room?

MKV: Her name was Joan Aker Ward and she was born in 1940, died in 1982 of cancer and raised three children. I met her husband walking dogs. As we walked we would chat and he told me that he was still grieving for his wife and he began to tell me the wonderful things that she had done. And one of the things that really stuck in my mind was that she, he said, had got rid of a junk yard which had been spewing out all sorts of terrible fumes and soot around the neighbourhood and that she had actually fought City Hall, ...and I was kind of interested by this idea. I heard a little bit more about her from various other people in the neighbourhood; they'd given me clues, but I didn't *really* research Joan. But she took root in my mind.

MS: And your imagination.

MKV: Yes. And I guess I drew a parallel between Joan doing good works in a city — trying to make life better for her children in the city — and what I had done in the country. And what I had done in the country was fight against uranium mining.

That had happened sort of accidentally. I hadn't really seen myself as an environmental activist but, because the proposed mine was only 17 kilometres away from my home, I had to do something. It was a

very valuable year for me — well, actually, it was a year and a half that I spent a working person's full-day week/month/year working against uranium mining.

As it turned out, the New Ross hearing was the first one on the advisability of uranium mining in Nova Scotia. It was one of the high points of my life, that year. Living in the country is problematic, particularly for someone who views herself as a feminist, and even though I wasn't *acting* like a feminist when I lived in the country, I still regarded myself as a feminist. And I think the fact that I was so vigorously active that year and I was using my mind in a way that I hadn't used it for quite a while was one of the things that gave me this tremendous feeling of energy and feeling as if I were living my life to the full. And also, I wasn't earning money or I wasn't earning enough to make a living for myself, so that my self-esteem was getting lower and lower as each year went by. The uranium debate widened my circle of friendships and it made me realize that there was something missing. When I came to the city, I guess I was still holding that year as a high point in my life. To think of Joan, in the city, doing the same things as when I lived in the country ... made me feel that maybe I hadn't really lost the country entirely.

MS: You came to the city to go to the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, didn't you?

MKV: Yes. My husband and I separated and I needed a way to make a living ...so I went to the Art College (laugh). Maybe I should explain that, as an artist, it is very difficult to make a living. However, I'm probably

making more of a living than I would have made if I had worked with the Credit Union in the country. At least I'm getting more than minimum wage. A bit.

MS: So you were a feminist when you started at the Art College?

MKV: Yes, ...but I didn't know how to use the concepts of feminism in my art. And I don't know what happened to me that I never read about other people's art. I was insulated; didn't have much contact with other artists while I lived in the country and I didn't have the language. Coming to the Art College gave me a language. When I took Feminist Criticism and studied with women who were active feminists, I began to pick up the language and a way of thinking about how to make art that was more satisfying.

For a long time when I lived in New Ross, I was doing watercolours and I was doing flat ones. I did begin to work with molded paper, but I still didn't know how to use it. I knew that I had terrible things that I wanted to say. I wanted to talk about how we were destroying the world; I wanted to talk about nuclear radiation and how it damages people; and I wanted to talk about things like child abuse.

Now that I was at NSCAD there was a new community. I was there for six consecutive semesters, and semester number five, the bells started going off and everything that I had been doing came together. It was very hard work to get to that point but, when I did, I saw that it didn't matter whether my work lasted, for instance. That was a very important thing to get over because, before NSCAD, I was still thinking that work was precious and that it was also a commodity. But at that point, I realized that I didn't have to sell my art, that I could do other awful jobs (laugh) rather than living by making art. Art didn't have to last, although I do have a passion for good materials and I do think about the archival quality of the materials I use. But I realize, at least intellectually, that art doesn't have to last.

Another thing I realized was that if you introduce time to an artwork, then your ideas have an opportunity to...

MS: ...work out a way through.

MKV: That's right.

MS: Could you describe your piece, "Joan's Room"?

MKV: Joan's Room was really designed for the Mount Saint Vincent Gallery because, working there as Exhibitions Officer the year before I did Joan's Room, I was very attached to and impressed by the Gallery — its enormous sky or ceiling over the artwork, which I really liked. Before I actually finished Joan's Room, I was imagining incorporating that space in the piece. I saw that space as sky in the piece, but I didn't actually put any objects in that space.

Joan's Room is a room which I constructed of steel studs and tracks, which were painted and clothed both inside and out with sheets of translucent oriental paper. It's 12 feet long by 10 feet wide by 8 feet high, and rests on a canvas carpet which a friend and I painted in shades of blue, resembling the sea; it's grommetted around the edges resembling perhaps a sail. And the carpet has a red stencil of whales spouting all around the edge, recalling various women's crafts such as hooking, canvass rug painting and quilting.

The Room sat diagonally at the end of the Gallery, furthest from the balcony, and there were two representations of houses, about 20 feet high, like the ones on the street where I live — one facing you and one to the left. They are made of assembled sheets of Japanese paper, printed with woodcuts to look like wooden shingles and windows and doors. Again, looking at the house from the balcony, to the left, facing the room, is a television set with a video playing — basically a talking heads video of anybody I could get hold of who would come and read a news report. Under the balcony was a mural, 7½ feet high by 12 feet wide, composed of 20 panels, each containing 15 photographs ... taken daily over a period of a year ... of a scene in the harbour, every day, six thirty in the morning, for a year. The colours are mainly blueish grey and blueish brown.

The room itself, from the outside, changes from pale peach through plum to purple. It glows in the dark because it's lit from the inside which is very pale and, with the outside glowing through inside, it has a peachy silvery look. There are also little star stickers on the underside of the ceiling braces.

The backs of all the outside sheets of paper — 44 sheets in all — were woodblock printed in colours and had daily news stories traced on them. Over a period of five or six weeks, I had cut out all the news items I could find on the environment, about Halifax harbour and what seemed then to be the dying sea. Then I selected those that struck me as most interesting. In the end, I used only a small percentage of the stories.

The outside of the room begins at a pale peachy corner and its diagonal opposite is purplely plum. That corner starts off with really awful stories, such as racism in South Africa but, on a personal level, the purple corner represents a bruise, a wound located in my past. The sides then lighten from plum through pink to an orangey colour and to a pale peach colour, depending on how hopeful the story seemed to me. The inside is very beautiful with its white glistening fibrous Japanese paper on which I wrote, with gold ink, excerpts from a journal I kept the year before I moved to Halifax, from interviews with volunteers and an interview I had with Joan's daughter, Kathy, about her mother. This interview made me admire Joan's way of trying to infuse her daughter with her strength during her last year.

MS: You had a lot of help ... and you really organized the help, too, in highly structured ways so that all this could come together....

MKV: Yes, I had an enormous amount of help. I didn't know that I was going to want so much help when I started, but asking for help is one of my personal issues, because it's one of the things I've always found difficult to do. As the work progressed I realized that I couldn't do it myself. Initially, I had planned to interview people and I had thought, "Well, if I'm interviewing people who are volunteers, then they are really helping me do this and, therefore, it's a collaborative effort. But as time went on, Joan's Room became more and more collaborative, because more of my friends helped with it and even people I didn't know very well who became friends would say, "Well, call on me anytime. Ask me for something and I'll be very glad to give it." And, contrary to what I had done most of my life, I did ask. You know, it was really a wonderful experience to be given so much. I felt really nourished.

MS: So this was a very communal enterprise...

MKV: It was! And people got very excited about helping. And it made me realize that I really would like to continue doing that kind of work, because it was very pleasurable.

MS: Sort of a continuity of the quilting bee, to a certain extent... You didn't realize, when you got into the making of Joan's Room, that you were in fact initiating that very kind of activity.

MKV: No. I hadn't thought of that before. I guess I was recalling the activity partly because I was recalling the country ... because Joan's Room, for me, was important because it was joining what I experienced in the country with what I experienced in the city. It was also relinquishing that part of my past.

And Joan's Room is also an exhibition that involves time. It takes time to go through it. It takes time to experience it. And if a person stands in front of a flat painting, even if it's very colourfully about ideas, for three quarters of a minute — the average length of time someone will look at a painting? — they'll never get it. So I stopped doing that kind of work. I just can't do it anymore.

So time was another element, and I also discovered, at NSCAD, that I had a strong sculptural streak which I had used in practical things. I had done sculptures before, but again, I had been thinking of them as individual objects which could be sold and I could never really quite get over that.... But now, now that I can make huge rooms or things that people can walk into, which I can dismantle, I am free to make sculpture.

There are a lot of skills that I have to acquire ...that I only have *in part*. For instance, adding video made a tremendous difference. Being able to use sound also would. I would *love* to introduce "feelies" and "smellies" and "sniffies" (laugh) ...all of that, which I may yet do.

MS: Another factor of this whole process was how it changed as you went along. I mean, the Joan's Room that was on exhibit was not the project that you first outlined...

MKV: ...and that was really very thrilling — for it to change. I have a feeling that most sincere art making is that way. You meet a lot of painters who aren't necessarily feminist who are always changing their work, and it's very hard to wrest them away from their work, because they keep seeing that there's something there that they could change. And I think that being able to do something up to the last minute, which I think is one of the virtues of doing an installation like this in the city where you live, means that it's alive and it's exciting and if something happens at the very last minute, you could incorporate it.

MS: We've drawn parallels between bring together Joan's Room and the making of a quilt, but there are great differences between the kind of collaboration

which you have in quilt making and the kind that you had in making Joan's Room.

MKV: Making a quilt, a person would probably make the squares, put them together and then ask various people to come and stitch the quilt, the top to the bottom. When you're doing it with somebody else, and you're laughing and joking and telling stories — it's fun. And in my case, I had the overall image and as people worked, they made changes. Mind you, with a quilt, people would make changes, too. The person who originated a quilt would hope that the people she invites to quilt it could be able to take tiny little stitches, and she might take them out if they weren't good enough. In the case of Joan's Room, I kept what came. I accepted suggestions from people who'd have really neat ideas for doing things.

This work is also about time in the sense that I got better as time went on. I got better at operating the video camera as time went on and the ordinary camera taking photos for the mural. So it was the story of the process of my learning how to acquire these technologies in addition to actually doing the work.

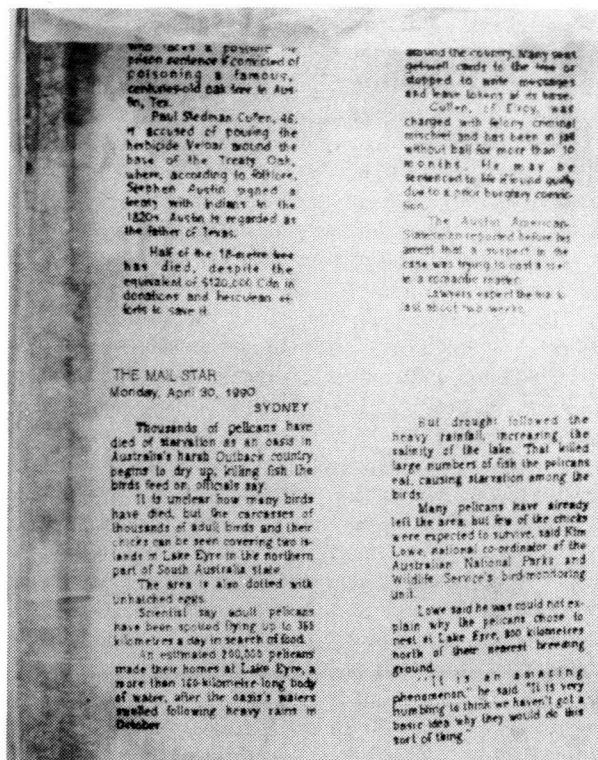
I also learned trying to balance the personal with the political when I selected the 44 news stories, because it's very popular now to say that if individual people do things, then the world will be perfect. But it's really more complicated than that. When you think that most of the wealth in the world is not divided among people equally, you have to realize that most of the power isn't divided equally either. Although we can make a difference — which is what volunteering is all about — it's still very, very difficult to change the structures of inequality.

MS: So ... Joan's Room was a piece of feminist art practice with very much the hand of the author; Joan's Room is by Marie Koehler-Vandergraaf...

MKV: But Marie Koehler-Vandergraaf *defined* by all those other people as well, or *incorporating* all these other people.

MS: But Joan's Room was not done by a collective and Joan's Room was not done by somebody who chooses to remain anonymous.

MKV: Nor by somebody who chooses not to acknowledge the democracy of the act of making art. Done by someone who is not a genius.



I think one of the things that makes Joan's Room a feminist piece of art is its questioning of things which the male cultural establishment took for granted for so long. A lot of male art has concentrated on the formal elements with the emotional and intellectual aspects sort of subdued, so that if you knew the artist, or if you knew art history, you would be able to say, "Yes! This piece was about such and such." That would be very hard to derive if you were untutored. Whereas, I have a message, as do other feminist artists less transparent than I am. It's very important to me to talk about the ideas. The shape and the form are very interesting but formal elements bore me to tears all by themselves. The art is the form. But ...the art is also the message.

MS: Of course, a lot of art has changed during the last twenty years. Art has become much more pluralistic... but, at the same time, feminist art is work from your point of view as the Other: you were making a piece of work that was concerned about what was going on in your world ...and the world around us. Building on those bricks of stories of unhappy events in our world, you've made an arch...

There's something very biblical about Joan's Room ...in the Old Testament sense, where the patriarchs were always on the move, would pitch their tents and establish themselves for a little period of time, and would then move again. Joan's Room is also very archeological in the sense that what you have done is what one does on a dig: go down through layers that are marked by the different kinds of earth, which is one of the ways by which one dates while on a dig. Your work makes people think in metaphorical terms.

MKV: I think those are some of the differences between art which is made by feminists and feminist art. If you are a feminist, obviously, you can make any kind of art you like, but it doesn't necessarily have feminist content; it doesn't necessarily view the world through the eyes which are critical of the status quo. It's the nature of being a feminist to be on the outside, to be the Other. And so, your perception of the way the world works is going to be different, just as, within feminism, Black feminists are going to have a different perception of the world and see it from a different point of view than White feminists or Jewish feminists, or whatever. So feminist art is going to have to criticize not only the nature of the life that you may be leading or that you're experiencing, but attempt to tackle some of the structures that make it that way...

MS: In the way that Joan's Room itself was constructed?

MKV: It might ...in my case, yes. I don't think it necessarily has to. I think the intellectual content has to attack some aspect of patriarchy and, for many of us, capitalism and capitalistic thoughts. Another concept is the idea that art is not created by "genius" but as a consequence of certain activity, some of which is not given credit — in other words, women's work.

MS: Another reoccurring feature in feminist art is the use of text.

MKV: I used to think that it was a big drag to think that I was going to see something visual, and then have to read. Although I love reading and I spent a lot of years writing, I had never joined text to image. So it's

ironic that it's become an essential aspect of most of my art making, as a graphic element in itself or as clarification. For me, it's really important to make what I'm saying clear. I know one of the reasons I was opposed to text initially was that writing in English limits who can understand you. But there's no such thing as a universal visual language anyway, so tough!

MS: In the beginning was the word ...and that's your starting point, really. I mean the word as a structure or the impetus that set you on the path. Not having known Joan, I can only deduce that, but Joan began with the word, too.

MKV: It gave me a wonderful feeling of satisfaction to hear people say that they were moved by the work because, by the time it got up, I didn't know...

I liked the way people went around the outside and read as much as they could, and then went inside. And I liked the way they were very hesitant about going inside, because it seemed private. And I liked the way they said that the inside felt really peaceful after the outside ...and I suppose that's where individual initiative takes place — on the inside. Some of those transcriptions on the inside are with my friends in the country, all of whom are doing small, local things: they're planting flowers by mailboxes, and in front of the church and community centre or they're making dinners and donating their time ...all the time ...to the church, to the school, to the community centre, to any neighbour who needs it, not to mention all the other things they do. From those concerns, the transcriptions change to conversations with strongly feminist friends who are environmentally politically active, and are talking about global issues. In addition, they talked about how living in the country gives you a different point of view about the world than living in the city. And we discussed at length how it may be that living with animals is the important thing, because when you live with animals, you realize that they have souls, too; they have lives of their own, just as important as yours. Human beings only think about themselves and the supremacy of the human being, whereas all creatures, to me, are important simply because they exist ... not because a cure for cancer for human beings might be found in the intestine of a toad.