

WOMEN- SUIT YOURSELVES!

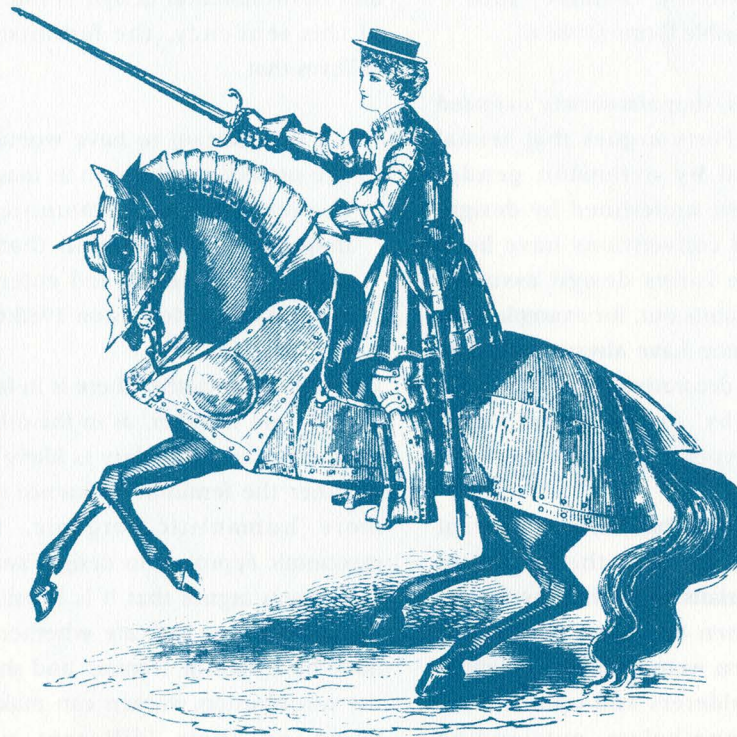
Jeanne van Eeden

South African women have for years lagged behind women in many other countries regarding gender equality and political representation. The needs of women in the political and social arena have become extremely topical in the light of the April 1994 election, and much attention has been focused on feminism and its role in South African society.

Feminism and the women's movement have become increasingly prominent in Western society since the 1960s. The doctrines of feminism have been incorporated into many streams of thought, and it has been recognised as an academic approach that owes a debt to Postmodern paradigm shifts. Although radical feminists hold that woman is essentially superior to man, the most commonly accepted definition of the feminist proposition is the equality of woman with man, or that

...in respect of their fundamental worth there is no difference between men and women...The nature and value of persons is independent of gender (Charvet 1982:2).

Amongst other issues, feminism is opposed to traditional (male) hierarchies and categories of exclusion, through which power has been wielded over the female. Feminism in general is critical and wary of socially generated gender stereotypes which condition and determine our patterns of behaviour, usually via the media. The arbitrary nature of gender stereotypes (which typically have little connection with biological sexual differences), and the inhibiting effect



these have on men as well as on women, are issues that are being examined worldwide in an effort to reach greater gender equality.

Gender stereotypes are the products of a patriarchal (and some would argue capitalist) ideology. Stereotypes make patterns of behaviour predictable, become role models, exploit the female, and perpetuate falsities (and fantasies). Stereotypes are popular in the media because they are a shorthand system for communication - clichés (the dumb blonde, the good housewife, the faithful secretary) with

which we can all identify or at least recognise because we have been subjected to shared enculturation. The feminist argument against these stereotypes is that they emphasise passivity and the traditional male / female hierarchy.

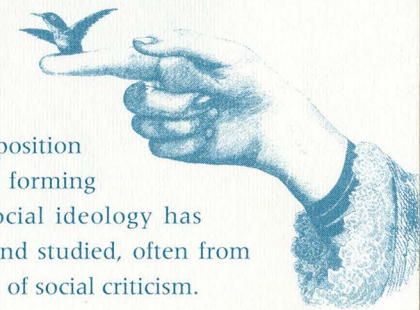
In the 1960s the most prevalent media stereotypes of women were identified as:

women's place is in the home
women make no important decisions
women are dependent on men
women as sex-objects with decorative appeal (Courtney & Whipple 1984:105).

The traditional conceptions of women as primarily passive and emotional do not in themselves mean that these qualities are bad, but insofar as these characteristics are considered inferior to so-called male qualities, there are grounds for feminist protest.

FEMINISM AND DESIGN

In recent years the position of product design in forming and perpetuating social ideology has become recognised and studied, often from a Marxist perspective of social criticism. As B Forty states:



...design...has much more enduring effects than the ephemeral products of the media because it can cast ideas about who we are and how we should behave into permanent and tangible forms (1986:6).

Design, in other words, supports society's created myths about itself. Forty argues that sexual differentiation (and by extension gender stereotypes) has been underlined by design, implying that social conventions have been made visible in the forms design assumes (1986:62-66). Forty points out, for example, that objects made for women have always tended to be smaller and more decorative than their male equivalents, thereby entrenching social paradigms and stereotypes.

The influence of feminism has become apparent in recent books dealing with the history of design. Feminist historians argue that there were few recognised women designers in the past mainly because women were employed solely as seamstresses, embroiderers and upholsterers (Conway 1987). Nonetheless, outstanding female designers have emerged in the twentieth century, including Eileen Gray, Lucienne Day, Ray Eames and Alison Smithson. In my view, to write an alternative feminist history of design would be merely to repeat standard biased sources, but with a different bias.

Interestingly, the profile of the design profession has changed over the last decade. In the United States and Britain more than 50 per cent of design students and professional designers are female (McQuiston 1988:6). McQuiston believes that although women have usually been

associated with design fields related to textiles and fashions, they are now also making contributions to industrial design, graphic design and environmental design (1988:7). In support of this tendency, the feminist perspective believes that

...it is important to have women involved in a profession which, in its many guises, is responsible for communicating the majority of information that instructs, persuades, educates and entertains us in everyday life (McQuiston 1988:6).

One may ask whether there is in fact a 'feminine design', and whether, as in the other visual arts, an alternative vocabulary is likely to emerge, or whether the feminine influence might imply a more humanistic, organic, holistic and ergonomic approach to design issues in general. McQuiston argues that it is usually not possible (or desirable) to indicate whether a design was done by a man or woman, and she stresses that the contribution women can make to design is based on their 'different psychological framework and life experience' (1988:7). An interesting difference between feminism in the fine arts and feminism in design may be emerging. In the former, shock tactics and subversive styles have often been used to undermine male hegemony and to break down expectations regarding the female artist, whereas in the latter it seems to be precisely the 'feminine' qualities which are needed to rehumanise design.



SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

In the West the possibilities offered by design to create new paradigms for society have been coupled with feminism's attempts at egalitarianism. South Africa, unfortunately, still falls short on both counts. One reason for this may be that South Africa has not yet really been confronted with feminism and a women's liberation movement as occurred in America and Europe. One of the standard definitions in South Africa of a feminist continues to be 'a woman who doesn't shave her legs', as recently noted in a television programme on feminism. The level of awareness about the aims and implications of feminism is still unsatisfactory, and the very word often elicits mistrust and scorn. The April 1994 election has, however, given impetus to women who are interested in contributing to the political future of South Africa.

While it has been commented that South African feminism has perhaps become unduly politicized, women argue that if change does not come about now, in the midst of great political upheaval, it never will. Many feel that in striving towards democracy it is important to ensure the end of sexism as well as racism. Women's issues have therefore become a major focal point and very pertinent in the various election manifestos. Efforts to redress the imbalance of female representation in Parliament have been spurred on by bodies such as the National Women's Coalition, which represents over 80 national women's organizations and about a 1000 local and governmental groups (Van der Westhuizen 1994:9). The National Women's Coalition has been instrumental in compiling a manifesto

dealing with equal rights for women, which has been submitted to the Legislative Assembly. A couple of political parties dealing with women's agendas have been formed, including the Women's Rights Peace Party under the leadership of the artist Nina Romm.

An article in the National Women's Coalition manifesto specifically calls for the monitoring of the depiction of women in the media (Van der Westhuizen 1994:9). Advertisements such as the Steers' television commercial, which is blatantly sexist, are not conducive to the levelling of society. The National Women's Coalition has stressed that negative and derogatory stereotyping of women ought to be addressed. Women concerned with politics and equal rights in South Africa have commented that there is a shortage of positive female role models in the media.

VOTE FOR WOMEN

In the light of the above discussion, it was interesting to view a student project dealing with women's rights, where many of the students used stereotypes as a point of departure. During

the course of 1993 the senior Information Design students in the Department of Visual Arts and Art History at the University of Pretoria were given a brief for an advertising project dealing with the need for more equitable female representation in the South African Parliament.

The brief given to the students read as follows:

Within the current set of structures and channels, a group of women are concerned that the election and formation of a new government in South Africa will result in a disproportionate number of male candidates being elected.

The women's group sponsoring this campaign is not aligned to any particular political party, but wishes to raise the public's general awareness to this 'social injustice' (the election being the current crisis point of an ongoing situation).

They ask you to view the following statistics:

1. *Women make up more than half of the world's population.*
2. *Women perform two thirds of the world's work.*
3. *Women receive one tenth of the world's income.*
4. *Women own only 1 per cent (one hundredth) of the world's property (United Nations 1991).*

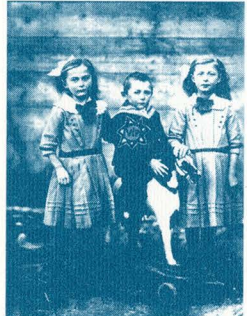
Your task is to formulate this information into a strong campaign which addresses all the above issues.

If I became more of a man, would I be considered more of a woman?



Vote for women

If we form the majority, why are we considered the minority?

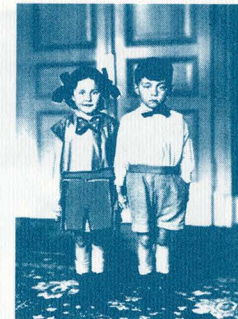


Vote for women

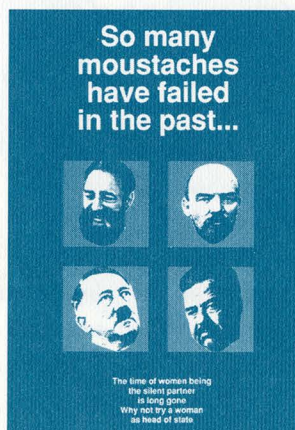
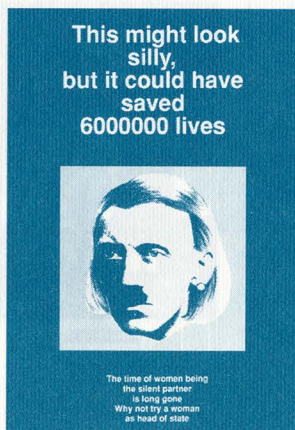
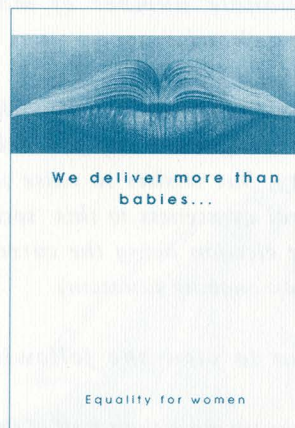
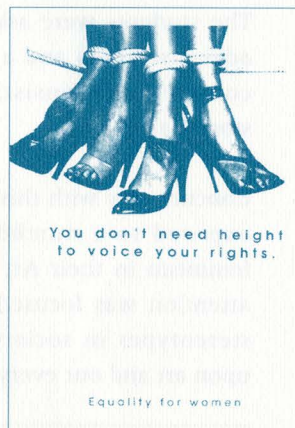
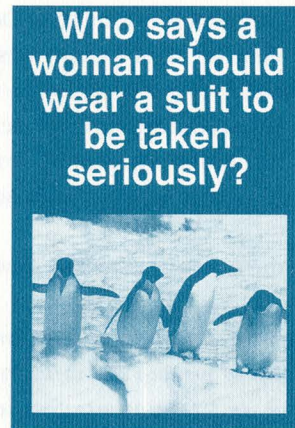
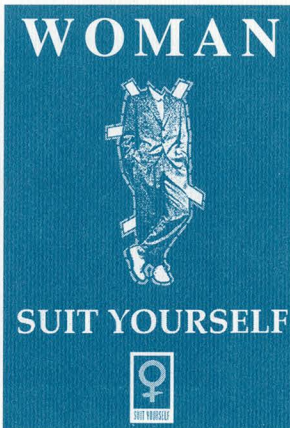
The students were asked to submit three print advertisements and a thirty second television commercial consisting of a script and a storyboard.

Concurrently with this project the students were exposed to a number of theories regarding feminism in their Art History lectures. Specific attention was focused on the origin of gender stereotypes in society and how these impact upon art and our everyday perceptions.

If I dressed like you, then, would I have been considered your equal now?



Vote for women



The most successful student projects were those which adopted a forceful approach in attempting to undermine stock stereotypes and expectations regarding female behaviour and appearance. By using verbal and visual puns stereotypes were inverted, especially those dealing with traditional male images of power such as the suit, moustache and height. In deconstructing the ideological implications of stereotypes, the students attempted to show that people ought not to be judged according to preconceived gender images. Interesting comments were also made on language as a social medium of control, as illustrated by the slogan 'A vote could place her in a government *undermanned* with women', and showed an awareness of the current problem of gender inequality in South Africa.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

- p5 - Nicole Wood
- p6 - Jackie Zietsman
- Stephanie van Wyk
- Sané du Preez
- Steyn Pretorius
- Bernice Human
- Photography - Helga Nordhoff

