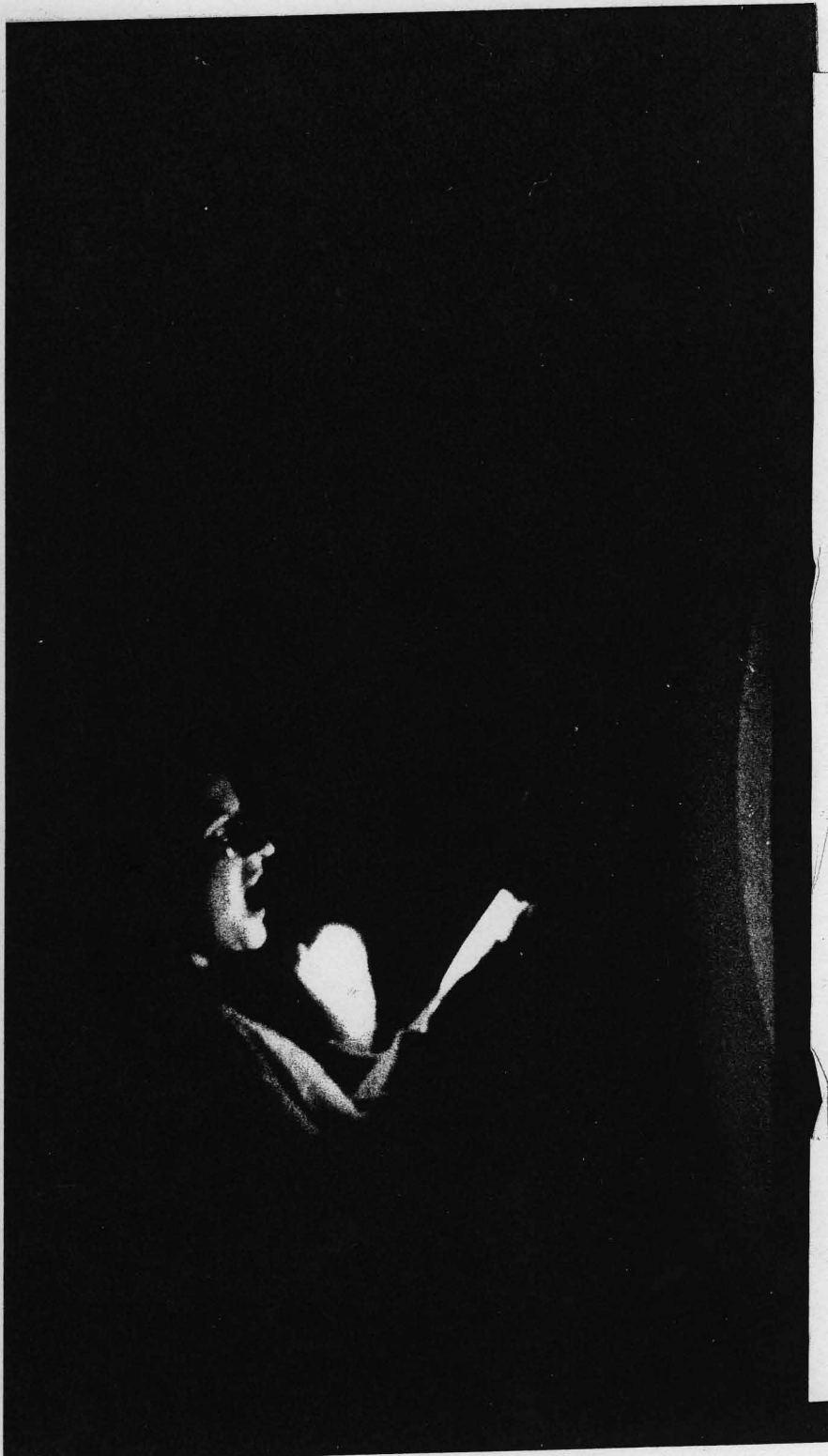


FEMINIST PERCEPTIONS

by Alexis Hunter



Cate Elwes' works have acted as cultural obstructions in the institution that took her on as a student. *Menstruation II* is a three day performance that coincided with the duration of a menstrual period. She enclosed herself in a white box, dressed in white clothes, in one of the studios at the Slade. The front of the box was glass so she could be observed writing answers to questions on the walls . . . and bleeding. Menstruation has no cultural existence, and women have been made to feel ashamed of something that is perfectly natural, because of the fear and jealousy men unconsciously have for women's reproductive function. Cate Elwes is reversing this cultural void, and has to work against taboos that she has experienced in her own conditioning. She feels that the 'material' of women's culture/experience does not work within a masculine structure, and that painting and sculpture, because of what they have been used to express in the past, are too loaded for illicit imagery. Cate Elwes' current involvement is with an extension of the menstrual theme:

Where the activity itself was once the focus of the live work, its psychological pattern now becomes more significant. The cycle is a structure within which experience is filtered and regenerated into expressive imagery. It both constrains and illuminates the relationships between physical, emotional and intellectual life. It exists

culturally only as a negative image in that it is continually suppressed and invalidated. The work reconstitutes menstruation as a metaphorical framework in which it becomes the medium for the expression of ideas and experience by giving it the authority of cultural form and placing it within an art context.

The last live work I saw of hers was *Voice Over*, where she used theatrical dialogue to communicate ideas and feelings. The audience was seated in the dark facing inwards in a square and surrounding a tape-recorder. The artist's taped voice asked thirteen questions about a woman, and each question was answered in turn by the artist, by flashing a torch on a script. This sequence was repeated four times, but with different answers to the same questions, and with the artist moving around the wall and becoming more emotionally involved. Four separate 'truths' were presented in contrast to the static, mechanical, and decreasingly dominant questions on the tape.