

# Into the Circle

by  
Daniel Marcus



In June 1974, artist Billie Miracle attended a Moon Gathering with her lover, Carol Newhouse, and their friend, Dian.<sup>1</sup> Celebrating the final quarter of the lunar cycle, the ceremony was conceived by Jean Mountaingrove, a former Quaker turned lesbian spiritualist. It meant, in Mountaingrove's words, to tap into the participants' deeper sense of self as a form of consciousness-raising. The nine participants, all women, passed around hand-painted stones decorated with images of the earth and moon. Then, arranging themselves in a standing circle, each intoned her own name repeatedly—like a chant, Miracle later recalled, as in the litany of *Les Guérillères*, Monique Wittig's revolutionary feminist novel from 1969. The leader's sermon followed, expounding on the names of the Goddess, linking the personal—given names, first-person pronouns—with the pan-cultural: *She, We, Ours*.

Published in the inaugural issue of *WomanSpirit*, a quarterly journal devoted to feminist and lesbian spirituality, Miracle's account details her observations of the ceremony.<sup>2</sup> While Newhouse and another woman, Fran (later renamed Zarod), seemed captivated by the ritual, Miracle was nonplussed:

**All the time I am aware of Carol: she is taking it in very seriously. I compare myself to how I think she is reacting. I am trying to keep clear of the whole ceremony, not letting myself get too involved. I am also aware of Fran. Both she and Carol seem able to flow with the rhythm of the events. I feel distant, frightened, and skeptical.<sup>3</sup>**

Her sense of alienation intensified with the gathering's final phase. Participants were asked to pass a ring around the circle until, one by one, each woman felt called to express a personal wish or need. The first woman to speak was Mountaingrove's partner Ruth, whose wish "to be whole" stunned Miracle. "It sets the tone for other wishes: very serious, very large wishes."<sup>4</sup> Uncertain, Miracle watched silently as Newhouse entered the circle to speak:

**Finally Carol moves to the center with the ring. She asks for her relationship with Dian and me to pass from darkness into light as the new moon becomes the full moon. She begins to cry very hard. I feel her pain and yet I am surprised by it. I did not expect to be taken back to all of our depressing attempts to deal with our relationship. Fran says that like the seasons this will all pass. Dian puts her arms around Carol. I go to her too and smile, strongly and bravely, I hope, not showing my shock and upset, and say that I will try some more.<sup>5</sup>**

There was more at stake than mere discord between friends: Miracle, Newhouse, and Dian were founders of a young collective and land project in southwestern Oregon, which they would soon name WomanShare. They had conceived the project as members of a consciousness-raising group in Montreal, departing Canada on a road trip from Mexico to Oregon that culminated with the purchase of a twenty-three-acre property outside Grants Pass, a town on the Rogue River in

Josephine County, in April 1974. Although Newhouse nor Miracle had funds to purchase their own shares, the trio had agreed to co-own the property; after cashing in a small fortune of stocks given to her by her father, Dian purchased it alone, and initially hesitated to extend rights to the deed to her comrades. At the same time, Dian's status as third wheel to Newhouse and Miracle left the project on unsteady footing.

These tensions erupted during the first Moon Gathering, tapping a reservoir of feeling that was both personal and collective. Unsettled by the emotional outpouring, Miracle left the circle deflated: "I am very depressed by the time we get [home]. I did not expect to be brought down by a ceremony about the full moon. But we had not seen her all night. The clouds were clearing just as we started to come down the mountain."<sup>6</sup>

Yet the group continued to convene over the following weeks, altering their routine to encourage new forms of expression. For a New Moon ceremony, Miracle devised a ritual of her own that encouraged women to value their personal autonomy. As Carol recalls,

**Billie talks [with the group] about the image of the container, hidden, dark and secret. She has made ten small bags with draw strings, each from a different material. Each has a black bead attached to the draw strings, signifying the dark moon. She gives them to us to keep. We are very pleased as the bags are passed around the circle. We each decide which bag we like best and keep it if we want to. It is a happy exchange of bags and words. We find seeds inside the bags. Seeds, the small beginning, the New Moon.<sup>7</sup>**

This ceremony culminated with a reading of Robin Morgan's 1972 poem "Monster," turning its penultimate line, "I am a monster," into a raucous chant: "We laughed and shouted it repeatedly together. The whole evening feels good to me – a high!"<sup>8</sup>

This change of mood reflected a deepening bond within the collective. By the autumn, Dian had taken up with a girlfriend, Sue Deevy, and the addition of another resident, Nelly Kaufer, brought their number to five. Summer workshops introduced scores of women to the project from as far away as San Francisco, establishing WomanShare as a nexus of lesbian culture on the West Coast. Over dinner one evening, Dian announced that she had added the other members of the collective to the deed, fulfilling WomanShare's promise of distributed ownership. Even so, questions of difference—especially class difference—continued to shape conversations among the five cohabitants, who were now partners in an economic relationship. As the group wrote in its coauthored memoir, *Country Lesbians: The Story of the WomanShare Collective*, "In order to work as a whole, it has been important to consciously recognize [our] differences but not to become too threatened, and, thereby, blinded by them." Incorporating consciousness-raising into the practice of everyday life, WomanShare offered a framework—an optic of accountability—through which the five cohabitants could begin to see themselves as autonomous individuals.

The exhibition *Sharing Circles* is anchored by around 150 photographs and several dozen contact sheets, most made by Newhouse during her four-year term as a full-time resident of WomanShare. In these germinal years, she photographed her fellow "country lesbians" often and with sensitivity, while devoting little attention to the picturesque landscape around them. As Newhouse writes, her purpose was to encourage self-discovery, both for herself and for her viewership:

**As I look back on the images [that] I created in the 70s and early 80s, I understand that I was creating lesbian visibility for myself as well as others. I was looking at lesbians through the lens of my camera much like one looks at a new discovery through a microscope. I wanted to see lesbians clearly and in detail. As I worked in the darkroom, I was discovering and capturing much of what was to become an expression of [the] lesbian culture we were creating together. Through making these images I came into myself, and I think I helped us see the beauty and strength of all we were becoming. If I had a goal back then I feel it must have been essentially the same as my work today: to move lesbians closer to the power of spirit.<sup>9</sup>**

Newhouse's aspiration—to realize a lesbian visual culture—was not unique to her or her practice. It aligned her with other photographers in the Women's Lands milieu, including JEB (Joan E. Biren) and Ruth Mountaingrove, both of whom labored to naturalize images of lesbian affection and self-identification. In JEB's formulation, lesbian photography reflected and anticipated the rejection of patriarchal domination and encouraged "a spiral of existence in which we [wimmin] continually shed our male-identification as we move into a woman-centered world."<sup>10</sup> For Mountaingrove, photography likewise offered a vehicle of self-liberation, by capturing and validating "the independent, strong, happy woman who lives in each of us," and who "needs to be seen" to be fully and freely lived.<sup>11</sup>

Crucially, both JEB and Mountaingrove understood their projects in terms of an aesthetics of similarity, not difference. Individual women might "be affected by race, class, age, regional and other differences," JEB admitted. "But something about those of us who have survived as wimmin-loving wimmin in a woman-hating world is the same and something we are creating is the same."<sup>12</sup> In this formulation, photography reveals not an essential lesbian identity but a shared experience of domination and oppression—in other words, a similarity deriving from what Casey Hayden and Mary King provocatively termed the "sex caste system" in a tract of 1965.<sup>13</sup> Becoming an artist in tandem with her attempted escape from this system, Newhouse's photography expressed lesbian visibility in a different register. Rather than document the collective's common lot as refugees of patriarchy, her camera accompanied—and abetted—their efforts to remake themselves as individuals within a self-defined system.

At times this focus on individuality came at the expense of the category of lesbian photography itself. Not all of Newhouse's photographs are immediately legible as pictures of "wimmin-loving wimmin." Take, for example, a photograph titled *Billie Flying* (p. 7). Newhouse fixes an image of Miracle leaping toward the camera, wiry arms outstretched as if to cast a spell. Not quite naked, Miracle wears a tangle of wispy fibers draped loosely about her neck, an adornment of her own fabrication. Locking eyes with the viewer, the subject embraces the camera's look, returning it in kind. It is a tender photograph, suffused with eroticism—but it is not a portrait of Miracle in any conventional sense. Elevating her beyond everyday life and love, Newhouse presents her subject as a new woman in a new world, self-created and *sui generis*.

Transcending portraiture, Newhouse delivered a vision of her companions at WomanShare from which few generalizations could be drawn. The inaugural issue of *The Blatant Image*, a journal of feminist photography coedited by the Mountaingroves, included her photograph *The 2 of Wands* (p. 15), one of a series of images pairing Miracle with Newhouse's new lover Susann Shanbaum, a singer-songwriter with the Berkeley Women's Music Collective. The women pose naked before a bonfire, its flames licking the bottom of the photograph. Crouching in the foreground, Shanbaum directs her gaze upward at Miracle, who hovers above her, radiating serene command.

A study in vulnerability and support, *The 2 of Wands* channels the charged energy of an initiation rite, and even a sexual awakening. Although the photograph seems at first to position Miracle and Shanbaum



as lovers, the pair were bonded, not through mutual desire, but by their common affection for Newhouse, the photographer. The image not only portrays this love triangle, implicating the photographer as an absent third figure, but also permits a self-conscious exploration—and temporary reworking—of their respective roles.

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"[A]ll this cooperative stuff, and all the talking we do about everything, [makes me] feel like I'm losing myself in it! It seems as if I don't have any thoughts or ideas of my own."<sup>14</sup> Voiced by Dian during one of WomanShare's early sharing circles, this complaint resonated with several members of the collective, who sometimes found it difficult to shoulder the heavy load of self-analysis the project required. To WomanShare resident Nelly Kaufer, the pattern of emotional self-exposure confused a boundary separating romantic from platonic intimacy, leaving her uncertain how to categorize her relationship with the collective:

**I've become scared the last few weeks about us being so intimate, so tight, my feeling vulnerable to everyone here. All of a sudden, I realized this vulnerability I have [toward] you is the same kind of vulnerability I have towards my lovers... even though I don't make love with you... I'm not saying that I want to stop being vulnerable to you all. I crave it! If I wasn't vulnerable to you four, then I would be to someone else, and in fact, I feel it is safer to be vulnerable to the four of you than to one woman. But while I crave intimacy I still fear being vulnerable!<sup>15</sup>**

Kaufer's confession helps to clarify the stakes of Newhouse's photographic practice, which took shape within the same regimen of vulnerability and exposure. By her own admission, Newhouse felt differently about matters of intimacy and individuality:

**I spend much more energy worrying about losing our sense of togetherness than my sense of self. I don't worry about losing my individuality 'cause I am stuck with myself as an individual. I just am me. That's the given. I am just myself and that's not good enough, so I have to do something better than that—which I do—living collectively.<sup>16</sup>**

Yet not all aspects of collective living came easily to her. Raised in a middle-class family, she had internalized her mother's advice not to become "trapped in the kitchen as a housewife/servant."<sup>17</sup> Vexed by the sharing of kitchen duties, which seemed incompatible with women's liberation, she resisted these chores until Miracle called her to account, leading to a lengthy discussion of her "classist conditioning."<sup>18</sup> The kitchen continued to trouble Newhouse, who never warmed to the role of household cook. But the group's willingness to treat her "classism in the kitchen" as an opportunity for growth enabled her to find herself—and to see herself—in the trouble.

WomanShare's rituals of visibility and vulnerability impacted Miracle as well. Although she valued her privacy, and often felt it necessary "to go off alone to feel strong and centered and creative," Miracle nevertheless drew strength and inspiration from the group.<sup>19</sup> Shaped by a lifetime spent on the collective's land, her artistic practice has recently condensed around the symbolic edifice of house and home, a fixation she attributes to her working-class background.<sup>20</sup> Tracing the outlines of single-family dwellings, including the gable-roofed cabins she and her comrades built by hand at WomanShare, Miracle's drawings testify to the need for personal space within the collective. As most cabins at WomanShare were only large enough to sleep a single woman and her lover, these structures provided conditions of intimacy while also offering refuge from the group's interactions, which Miracle likens to "a war / on a hillside."<sup>21</sup> She writes:

**The day's battle ends  
The women go off alone ... each to her own shelter.  
I see tears.  
I see sweat.  
I see exhaustion.  
I see flashes of joy.  
I see sticks in the women's hands...<sup>22</sup>**

Living within the circle was no easy matter, Miracle suggests. WomanShare laid each woman bare, exposing dimensions of the self that were previously hidden or buried. But there was also pleasure in vulnerability—and in nakedness, a source of power:

**I see fierce women!  
Hateful women!  
Strong and courageous women.  
Frightened women.  
Joyful women.  
Wounded women.  
Women fighting.<sup>23</sup>**

1 In reference to her involvement with WomanShare, Dian preferred not to use her patronym. To honor that wish, I refer to her as Dian in this essay.

2 "Moon Over the Mountain: Creating Our Own Ritual," *WomanSpirit* vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall Equinox 1974), 29

3 "Moon Over the Mountain."

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

7 "Moon Over the Mountain," 30.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Carol Newhouse, "Artist Statement," in Tee Corinne, ed., "Lesbian Photography on the U.S. West Coast, 1972–1997," Women Artists of the American West, <https://cla.psu.edu/academic/rueff-school/waaw/corinne/Newhouse.htm>, accessed July 10, 2022.

10 JEB (Joan E. Biren), "Lesbian Photography—Seeing Through Our Own Eyes," *The Blatant Image* no. 1 (March 1981): 51. "Wimmin" and "woman" are alternative spellings of 'women' and 'woman,' respectively.

11 Quoted in Jana Zvibleman and Ruth Mountaingrove, "Seeing a Feminist Vision," *WomanSpirit* vol. 6, no. 21 (Fall Equinox 1979), 49.

12 JEB, "Lesbian Photography – Seeing Through Our Own Eyes."

13 Casey Hayden and Mary King, "Sex and Caste: A Kind of Memo," *Liberation* no. 10 (April 1966), 35.

14 Sue, Nelly, Dian, Carol, Billie, *Country Lesbians: The Story of the WomanShare Collective* (Grants Pass, OR: WomanShare Books, 1976), 33.

15 *Country Lesbians*, 32–33.

16 *Country Lesbians*, 34–35.

17 *Country Lesbians*, 17.

18 *Country Lesbians*, 18.

19 *Country Lesbians*, 35

20 See Miracle's interview with Raechel Root in this volume.

21 *Country Lesbians*, 133.

22 *Country Lesbians*, 134.

23 *Ibid.*



