



Shulamith Firestone  
1945–2012



Memorial for Shulamith Firestone  
St. Mark's Church in the Bowery, Parish Hall  
September 23, 2012

Program 4:00–6:00 pm

Laya Firestone Seghi  
Eileen Myles  
Kathie Sarachild  
Jo Freeman  
Ti-Grace Atkinson  
Marisa Figueiredo

*Tributes from:*  
Anne Koedt  
Peggy Dobbins

*Bev Grant singing May the Work That I Have  
Done Speak For Me*

Kate Millett  
Linda Klein  
Roxanne Dunbar  
Robert Roth

Open floor for remembrances

*Lori Hiris singing Hallelujah*

Reception 6:00–6:30

## SHULAMITH FIRESTONE

### ANTICREDENTIALS

After six years of schooling in the creative arts(see educational summary) I came to New York to pursue a painting and writing career. Finding it nearly impossible at that time(1967)for a woman to "make it" legitimately,I instead gave my creative energy to founding a womens liberation movement:

I was one of the original founder-organizers of the first independent radical womens groups in the nation(Chicago,Ill.); of the first such group on the Eastern seaboard(New York City);of the first national womens liberation convention(organized through the Institute of Policy Studies,Washington,D.C.);and of most of the better-known radical feminist groups in New York,notably Redstockings and N.Y.Radical Feminists. I was a movement editor(I founded and edited the first radical feminist anthology-journal in the country,the model for many others)and finally I became its theoretician(I wrote the first book of feminist revolutionary theory).

After three years of such concentrated political activity,I deserve to unite these split personalities: artist and politico. However,far from seeing it as a handicap,I now feel that my dual background uniquely qualifies me to lay the foundations of a powerful new womens art-with the potential to transform our very definition of culture.

## Shulamith Firestone

### Achievements & Education

#### Writer:

- 1997 Published *Airless Spaces*. Semiotexte Press 1997.
- 1970–1993 Published *The Dialectic of Sex*, Wm. Morrow, 1970, Bantam paperback, 1971.
- *Translated into over a dozen languages, including Japanese.*
  - *Reprinted over a dozen times up through Quill trade edition, 1993.*
  - *Contributed to numerous anthologies here and abroad.*

#### Editor:

Edited the first feminist magazine in the U.S.:

- 1968 *Notes from the First Year: Women's Liberation*  
1969 *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*  
1970 Consulting Editor: *Notes from the Third Year: WL*

#### Organizer:

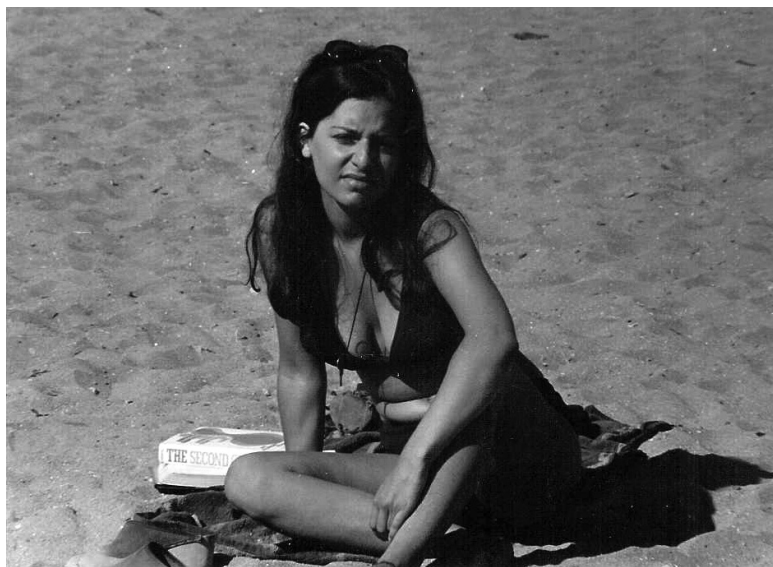
- 1961–3 Activist in early Civil Rights Movement, notably St. Louis C.O.R.E. (Congress on Racial Equality)
- 1967–70 Founder-member of Women's Liberation Movement, notably New York Radical Women, Redstockings, and New York Radical Feminists.

#### Visual Artist:

- 1978–80 As an artist for the Cultural Council Foundation's C.E.T.A. Artists' Project (the first government funded arts project since W.P.A.):
- *Taught art workshops at Arthur Kill State Prison For Men*
  - *Designed and executed solo-outdoor mural on the Lower East Side for City Arts Workshop*
  - *As artist-in-residence at Tompkins Square branch of the New York Public Library, developed visual history of the East Village in a historical mural project.*
- 1972 Visiting Artist, Nova Scotia School of Art and Design (Art Press).

#### Education:

- 1961–1963 Washington University, Honors in English and History.  
1963–1967 The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, aesthetics and art history in conjunction with the University of Chicago. Bachelor of Fine Arts in Drawing and Painting. (1967)
- 1968–1969 St. Mark's Poetry Project, informal poetry and fiction workshops, New York.



Shulamith on the beach reading *The Second Sex*. 1969, Vancouver, BC Canada. Photograph courtesy of Laya Firestone Seghi.

## *Remembrances*

8	Jo Freeman
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12	Ti-Grace Atkinson
14	Alix Kates Shulman
16	Anselma Dell'Olio
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25	Beth Rashbaum
27	Andrew Klein
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I FIRST MET SHULIE over Labor Day weekend in 1967, at the National Conference for New Politics—an unsuccessful attempt to unite the organized Left behind a presidential ticket that would campaign against the war in Vietnam. A couple of women who were not themselves part of the Left had persuaded the conference organizers to give them some space for a women's caucus. Black caucuses at such meetings were common and accepted, but one for women was by itself radical.

Shulie was one of about four dozen women who met daily to hammer out a resolution that called attention to women's issues—equal pay, childcare, abortion on demand, and other things that today don't seem very radical. She didn't say much, but what she did say stuck in my mind. I would now characterize her views as radical feminism uncontaminated by left-wing rhetoric—something one didn't encounter much of in those days.

When we took the women's caucus resolution to the Resolutions Committee we were told that we were too late; the agenda already had a resolution on women, and there was only time for one. That resolution was written by members of Women Strike for Peace, none of whom had attended the women's caucus; it was about peace, not women. I walked out mad. I probably would have gone home had I not run into Shulie. At first, she didn't believe what I told her. But after she found out for herself, she was angrier than I was.

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Alone, neither of us would have done anything, but together we fed on each other's rage. We decided to propose a substitute resolution when the Women Strike for Peace language was read for discussion before voting the next day. We stayed up all night revising the women's caucus resolution. The more we talked, the more radical it got.

We printed copies and passed them out. By the time the agenda reached the women's resolution, a handful of us stood at the microphone, our hands stretched high, waiting to be recognized to propose our substitute. After reading the



“women’s” resolution, meeting chair William Pepper didn’t acknowledge any of us. “All in favor, all opposed, motion passed,” he said. “Next resolution.”

As we stood there in shock, a young man pushed his way in front of us. He was instantly acknowledged by the chair. Turning to face the crowded room, the young man said, “Ladies and Gentlemen, I want to speak for the forgotten American, the American Indian.” Infuriated at being “forgotten,” we rushed the podium, where the men only laughed. When Shulie reached Pepper, he literally patted her on the head. “Cool down, little girl,” he said. “We have more important things to do here than talk about women’s problems.”

Shulie didn’t cool down, and neither did I. We put together a list of every woman we knew who might be interested in working on women’s issues and invited them to a meeting at my Chicago apartment. What came to be called the West Side Group met for seven months. Shulie only stayed a month before moving to New York; her sister Laya took her place in our group.

She took with her the names of some New York women interested in women’s issues. With them, she founded the first women’s liberation groups in New York.

For the next couple years we stayed loosely in touch. When the *Dialectic of Sex* was published in 1970, she inscribed the copy she gave me. “To Jo: With Whom It All Began.”

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By 1975, Shulie had faded away. I had to track her down to give her a copy of my first book when it was published that year. Years later I was told by others of her mental illness and its effects, but I didn’t see it myself.

We reconnected for a few years when her next book, *Airless Spaces*, was published in 1998. She invited several of her old friends to celebrate. She seemed fine, but others told me that she wasn’t.

The last time I saw Shulie was in 2000, at the book party Gloria Steinem hosted for my latest book. Even though

they lived only three miles apart, they had never met. Gloria told her how honored she was to meet the author of such an important early feminist book. They hugged, and they talked.

Shulie and I managed to stay in touch through 2003. Afterward, I only got her voicemail when I called, and no reply to my emails. Carol Giardina and Kathy Sarachild kept me apprised of her ups and downs through 2007. After that, none of us could reach her. The next time I heard of Shulie was when I got word of her death.

Thinking back on those years and Shulie's contribution to the women's liberation movement, I see Shulie as a shooting star. She flashed brightly across the midnight sky. And then she disappeared.

—Jo Freeman

I FIRST MET SHULIE in New York in the fall of 1967 at the apartment of Bill Price, a writer for the *National Guardian*, an independent Left movement newspaper. They had both recently been at the NCNP conference in Chicago where Bill had witnessed the incident of Shulie being patted on the head and told to make way for "more important issues" when she tried to read a list of women's demands. Bill was aware of my growing interest in feminism and said she was someone  
10 I just had to meet. He was right. Shulie was livid about the treatment of the feminists at the NCNP and she wasn't afraid to show it. Her anger was right on target. She was obviously a doer and an organizer, as well as a thinker.

As a result of this meeting, I became an early member of New York Radical Women, which Shulie was organizing with Pam Allen. Kathie Sarachild and I had been talking about the possibility of a movement for women's liberation, but it was Shulie and Pam who actually called that first meeting in New York that made history and changed the direction of many lives, including mine.

NYRW's first action was at the Jeanette Rankin Brigade, a women's peace march in Washington, DC in January of 1968. Shulie was very clear from the beginning that we should go there to point out the futility of women protesting the war when we had so little real political strength ourselves. There were others in NYRW who were not so sure this was the right tack to take, but Shulie, as always, stood her ground. She also took a leading hand in shaping the details of the protest itself, bringing her humor, her creativity, her political insights, and her passionate insistence that the oppression of women be on the front burner. Then she followed through with a public analysis of the action printed in *Notes from the First Year* for others to learn from.

She had such courage. I listened in awe as she spoke out in front of a big New York City cathedral about what an unwanted pregnancy was like for women and the need for legal abortion. It was at a demonstration in support of Bill Baird who was facing a jail sentence for his abortion and birth control activism. She really laid it on the line, and this was early 1968, before abortion was something you talked about in public or even with your friends. Instead of berating women who didn't show up at the rally, she publicly acknowledged her own fears about coming out openly for free abortion and pointed out how real societal power was brought against women who stepped out of line.

*Notes from the First Year* was her baby, but she didn't try to control its content by editing or vetting, as far as I know. It was to be a group project. Most women brought their articles to the SCEF office mimeograph machine ready to run. She did write several of its articles which showed the range of her knowledge and activism. There was an eye-opening history of the 19th-century women's rights movement, ending with three lessons she thought we should learn from it. All of them are still relevant: don't compromise basic principles for political expediency; women's consciousness must be raised first in order for us to use any single-issue freedoms we might win; and when women make

alliances with other oppressed groups, they must demand a piece of the pie before they fight for it. She also wrote “Women Rap About Sex,” a seriously funny piece based on a consciousness-raising meeting. It was unsigned, but it really captured her biting wit.

She went on to help found Redstockings and then New York Radical Feminists and to edit *Notes from the Second Year* with Anne Koedt—all by 1970. The second *Notes* carried a broad roundup of the thinking and actions evolving in the WLM and added to the Movement’s amazing upsurge.

Many people focus on *The Dialectic of Sex* as Shulie’s major contribution, but I believe these early writings and actions are even more crucial to understanding the early Women’s Liberation Movement and her leadership in it.

I’ve heard that later in life Shulie preferred the more formal Shulamith. But Shulie was what she called herself back in those years when she had a big impact on my life. I hope she would forgive that she lives vividly in my memory, mind, and heart as Shulie.

—Carol Hanisch

I REMEMBER SHULIE once saying to me: “The revolution will begin when women stop *smiling*.” She sure had that right.

12 Shulamith Firestone can only be fully appreciated in the context in which she flourished. I first met Shulie in September 1967 at the New Politics conference in Chicago—I had come from New York with Florynce Kennedy and Peg Brennan—where I encountered both her and Jo Freeman for the first time. We introduced ourselves at the mimeograph machine, running off copies of our feminist resolutions.

What else was happening in the Fall of 1967? The Columbia–SDS sit-ins and university takeover; the Black Power Conference in Newark, NJ, in July; the march on

the Pentagon in DC, in October. Historically, women's movements have arisen within the context of widespread social unrest. Ours was no exception. We were greatly influenced by the black movement; the National Organization for Women (started in 1966) called itself the NAACP for women. By 1967–1968, some of us were more inspired by black power.

I came to know Anne Koedt better than Shulie, but they were often together. I remember both from early 1968, when Anne called me to compare notes on women's rights (I was president of the New York chapter of NOW at that time). We discovered right away that there was a natural alliance between some members of Radical Women and some of the younger, more radical women in NOW. This alliance initially focused on our willingness to take public stands on so-called "sexual" issues, beginning with abortion. There was no intention at this time to subsume feminism under any sexual revolution. I remember both Anne and Shulie came with me to Philadelphia the day after Martin Luther King was killed. My speech was entitled: "Vaginal Orgasm as a Mass Hysterical Survival Response." I was very grateful for their support! Radical Women was also in general much less freaked out by Valerie Solanas in the summer of 1968 than NOW was. I remember Shulie and Anne both came up to my place for Valerie's birthday party. It was a small party.

After I left NOW, Anne and I worked together organizationally. I never did so with Shulie, but we were always friendly and enjoyed many political conversations together.

Later, for the 1970 Ladies' Home Journal sit-in, a group of women in media put out a call to the general women's movement for support. Shulie and I both responded. The editor, John Mack Carter, ended up sitting atop his desk, with some 100 women seated at his feet on the floor. Many hours dragged on with little progress for the media women's demands. The situation was ghastly. Shulie and I were there in support, but were forced into this humiliating position: the sultan on top, his seraglio below. What to do? Finally—I

don't remember why or how—Shulie and I threatened to throw this guy out the window (we were many floors up). Some of the women in media protected him.

I most fondly remember Shulamith Firestone as never a “patient” woman. She didn't take shit. At least—never with a smile.

—Ti-Grace Atkinson

I HAD SEEN HER at meetings of New York Radical Women, the earliest WLM group in New York City, which she, fresh from Chicago, had organized in 1967. I didn't know the name of that fierce presence with the thick black mane and piercing eyes, but among the fifty or sixty women who met regularly in a large downtown hall to talk about the new ideas of women's liberation, she, with her startling opinions and analytical prowess, made an impression on me.

After NY Radical Women grew too large for everyone to be heard, we decided to meet in smaller groups. With Ellen Willis, she co-founded the group called Redstockings. When I attended my first Redstockings consciousness-raising (CR) meeting, I learned her name: Shulamith Firestone. Even then she was editing the groundbreaking *Notes from the First Year*.

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The CR subject at my first Redstockings meeting was sex—always a hot topic, but at that moment, in the early days of WLM, one that so roused women's resentment of being mistreated by men that there was barely room to sit on the floor of that small East Village apartment, across the street from a concurrent meeting of WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell) and down the block from the New York headquarters of Hells Angels.

For CR, every woman speaks in turn about her experience. That night the room was so packed, and the subject of sex so explosive, that it took weeks of meetings

before everyone had spoken on the topic.

Seated in our rough circle, I was about four people ahead of Shulie. When it was my turn to speak, I described how, when I became pregnant with our second child, my husband took up with other women, and I responded by eventually taking a lover of my own. I spoke of my fear that if he should discover my love affair he would abandon our children. In the room I felt sympathetic vibes for my “testimony,” but what Shulie took from it was something entirely unexpected. An attractive, forceful heterosexual woman, she’d had any number of lovers (though not, apparently, at that moment); but none, she said, had treated her as an equal. She was enraged by the power disparity between the sexes that enabled men to treat her any way they wanted and get away with it. If she — if women — made demands, the men could simply walk away and quickly find someone else. Then she turned her piercing eyes on me, pointed her finger, and said: “You have two men and I have none. It’s unfair.”

I didn’t take it personally; she was addressing the question of scarcity and pointing out that just as there was no justice in the conduct of sexual relations, there was none in its distribution, either. Who but Shulie would be able to step back and see it as another aspect of what we then called male supremacy?

She was energized by righteous rage. More than anyone I’ve known, she was able to harness negative emotions around her — resentment, outrage, confusion, sadness, hurt, and more — and turn them into the kind of rage needed to fuel a revolutionary movement.

After another summer or two, our Redstockings group died of burnout and attrition. Shulie had long since decamped to co-found yet another important WLM organization, New York Radical Feminists, which I joined upon the demise of our Redstockings group — as usual, several steps behind her. Three of the most important movement organizations in New York City were founded by

her and would not have existed without her; in hindsight I see I was, unwittingly, dogging her footsteps.

Soon afterwards, she left the movement. I lost sight of her until 1997, when she came to Barnes & Noble for the launch party for the 25th anniversary edition of my first novel, *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*. I had written it back when I was in the groups she founded, and it burned with the insights her work had sparked. I have a photo of us together taken at that book party posing with two more old Redstockings: Irene Peslikis and Corrine Coleman, who are now both deceased. Shulie was writing her own collection of short stories then, the spare and moving *Airless Spaces*, based on her time in and out of a mental hospital. Debilitated by medications (as she describes in *Airless Spaces*), she could do little to publicize her new book. I had the honor of helping arrange a group reading from the book and to be among the readers. Her inscription in my treasured copy of *Airless Spaces* shows her generosity: “To Alix, With enormous thanks for a wonderful reading and for being a great role model.”

I, her follower, a role model? For what? Persistence? Survival? She was the one whose visionary ideas and organizing passion had forever changed our lives.

—Alix Kates Shulman

THERE WERE TWO MAJOR divisions in the Women’s Liberation Movement: the uptown women and the downtown women. Kate Millett and I both were founding members of NOW NY. She and Fumio Yoshimura were artists and lived in a loft on the Bowery, but somehow she landed in NOW. When we first heard of Radical Women and read its magazine, Kate said, “Let’s go, I’ll join any feminist group around.” I happily agreed, and took off with her, miniskirt, eye-make-up and all, and sailed into a possibly rent-



controlled flat south of 14th street.

I was impressed with Shulie's writing, as most people are: cogent, original, seminal, stimulating, bursting with brilliance. It was Shulie who marched up to me, as the other downtowners eyed me warily, and got straight to the point: "I've heard so many terrible things about you, I knew I had to meet you." Already captivated by her mind, I was bowled over by her beauty. The masses of curly, dark hair and sensuous mouth, set above a curvy, well-proportioned body; she could have been an adored icon of European cinema. Big, all-seeing, black-brown eyes, magnified by granny glasses, held a steady gaze as she looked at my face, in my eyes; none of that invasive, insulting old up-and-down we get from too many women, sizing up the merchandise or the competition, so to speak.

I fell in love with all of her, and though we rarely met, we would speak for hours on the phone about everything. Mostly we spoke of ideas, ours and those of other feminists, and much more. Even men. She approved of my feminist theater project (pronouncing it "theetur") and we often discussed how best she might honor her ambition. She absorbed Mailer's *Advertisements for Myself*, and explained her strategy for making her mark as an artist. She felt the book she was writing would put her on the map, easing her transition to recognition as a painter. She anguished over a *New Yorker* article about a Redstockings' CR group: names and professions had been changed, but she felt she was recognizable and that the ironical tone of the piece would damage her credibility. She was often hard up for money. After the first dough came in from the book, she was mugged on the street by some homegirls with a knife. She told them that she lived in the neighborhood (Alphabet City in the raw), and that she was far from prosperous. They rifled through her waistpack anyway, and waving in her face the little checkbook they found, said accusingly, "So what's this?"

I talked myself hoarse to get her to stop feeling guilty for the little bit she had earned with her hard work. And it

did cost her. I lost her for weeks and months as she kept the phone unplugged to concentrate on writing. Then she'd surface again. One day she left the country and vanished altogether. I grilled everyone I could think of, but got only vague answers. I received the odd postcard, always with a terse message, like this one from Africa: "Hi Anselma. Bye. Shulie."

I never stopped looking for her. In the '80s Susan Brownmiller said she'd seen her wandering around an organic restaurant with paperback books falling out of her pockets. When at long last I found her a few years ago, she was curt on the phone and said she had no interest in seeing anyone "from back then." It was a body-blow. Not long after, she wrote to say that after my call, she felt a surge of love for me in her heart. Mine leapt. On my next trip to New York we met downtown, but my Shulie was AWOL for good. She said the medication she was on destroyed her ability to think and write. I was unable to get through the thick curtain of blues she drew around her like a shroud. I asked if I could take her book to an Italian publisher and she quickly sent me one her sister had written, too. Even in her misery, she was thoughtful. We never met again. Then, I mourned the loss of her *élan vital*, hostage to implacable forces. Now that she is dead, I grieve anew with fresh sorrow. She burned so bright, the flames consumed her; yet the mark she left on the world—and on my soul—is indelible. I love you, Shulie.

18 Bye. Anselma.

—*Anselma Dell'Olio*

FOR A LONG TIME, our movement was haunted by the terrible absence of Shulamith Firestone. The disappearance of so shining and brilliant a star always reminded me of Sylvia Plath's sudden demise. People—feminists too—have always mourned when young genius has been cut down too

soon. Only in this case, Shulie was very much alive. Either she was holed up in her fifth floor apartment in the East Village or holed up in a hospital. She was still here, without really being here.

I remember reading *The Dialectics of Sex* when it first came out in 1970. I was writing *Women and Madness* and this book inspired and challenged me to dare even more. The work is fierce, as sharp as a diamond — logically precise, somewhat frightening, and extremely liberating. I will never forget how her chapter on Love (as an illness) made me laugh out loud with relief.

And the fabulous *Notes from the First and Second Years*! Shulie was the Editor-in-Chief, Anne Koedt the Associate Editor. The collection was bliss, true badass bliss. (Koedt, by the way, wrote about the “Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” in this same issue.)

We — and the rest of America — had never seen anything like us before. Cracked, belligerent, misguided, and strangers to each other, radical feminists were giants on the earth. Since the mother-daughter relationship had been painful and humiliating for many of us, we called each other “sisters.” But as Ti-Grace Atkinson quipped: “Sisterhood is powerful — it can kill sisters.” Although we knew that this was true, most feminists denied that it was really true.

Many years later, Shulie and I were talking. She said: “Phyllis, if only you had written *Woman’s Inhumanity to Woman* long ago, it might have saved our movement.” I told her that no book, at the time, could have reversed our own internalized sexism, competition, and “indirect” aggression toward other women. Many feminist leaders had been nervous about my writing the book, and their disapproval stayed my head for years.

“Why did you listen to them?” she asked. She was a bit agitated.

Once, before this conversation, Shulie had called and asked me to visit her in my capacity as a psychotherapist. I immediately agreed. However, she said I would need to

come to the fifth floor by climbing up the building from the fire escape. She would talk to me through the window.

I told her I couldn't. I might fall to earth and shatter. Still, I could not persuade her to open her door.

Her book, *Airless Spaces*, is a small and tender gem. Humbly, carefully, she wrote about her madness and her time in various asylums. When it was published, she asked a small group of us, myself included, to read aloud from it and we did. I remember that Shulie stood off a bit, watching, listening, perhaps approving of her words and of our reading. But she remained silent, at a remove. Always removed.

For many years now I have kept a list of the feminists we've lost. At one memorial service in 1987 in a large West Village courtyard I saw the faces of many Second Wavers: they were ashen, shocked, stunned, frightened. I remember speaking and doing a ritual at a memorial service for our lesbian feminists gone probably in the early 1990s. We have lost so many dear friends. And now, Shulie has joined them.

But her work will continue to inspire women to dare to be brave, to understand that heroism is our only alternative.

May she rest in peace, and may her memory be as a blessing.

—Phyllis Chesler

I REMEMBER SHULIE. We all do. Even people who never met her—only read her. Probably they remember her best. We always put the best part of ourselves in our books. The rest is gossip and trash. Opinions, even disdain.

There was a lot to object to in her books. After all, Shulie was making the case for Marxism and for sexual freedom. Reshaped entirely, with the Kibbutzim writ large; even group infant care by both sexes so the female would not be borne down with the “barbarity” of pregnancy and childcare. It was, of course, just “poppycok” and “dream vision.” It was

also, on the other hand, a huge paradigm shift to liberate human sexuality out of millennia of patriarchy.

We all had notions like that once. We had all been driven by the cruelty of sexual abuse and predation and cried out that it stop. At once. We hadn't even entered upon rape and genital mutilation, the enslavement of women as property. We didn't even have a good idea of what we were up against. It seems Shulie did.

Which was odd. She was one of the youngest among us when *The Dialectic of Sex* hit print. Way too young for the onslaught.

I was ten years older than Shulie when *Sexual Politics* came into print, teaching English up at Barnard and married to Fumio, a Japanese sculptor who had been through the War and was even a feminist.

Still, I went a little crazy too, endlessly having to repeat myself. The real problem with patriarchy: it's an entire social system of status, temperament, and role—centuries old. We regard it a “nature.” The Movement, but also Fumio, cheered me on; we all had a hilarious time laughing at the conceit of Mailer and Miller. It was outrageous fun even to say these things aloud. The wind blew hard at times: my family tried to control me with psychiatry but finally gave up. Eventually, I went off to England to make a movie.

But imagining what Shulie went through in America. She didn't just mince words over literary criticism; she took on the whole show of capitalist society. How was it for her with the malice of the critics, the “talk show” hosts, anti-Semitism, the residual mess of anticommunism? Shulie lived inside the Movement; she had no idea yet of the “real world.” It destroyed her, overwhelmed her. Burned her alive, consumed her.

She went in and out of asylums. She wrote: “... reading Dante's *Inferno* ... and at a quite a good clip too.” But out of the hospital, “couldn't even get down a fashion rag.” The isolation, unreality. The medication and the fright of the experience had devastated her.

We tried to get together once to help—with the American Civil Liberties Union, even just to get them to leave her in peace, to leave her alone. We lost. It's hard to argue against family, against doctors, against a whole society.

Finally a text did emerge, from Columbia, an experimental thing pretending to be fiction. *Airless Spaces*. Unheralded, unadvertised. It was her account of the useless days on the ward, without any rights or voice or purpose. It is a terribly sad and harrowing account of a fine mind, wasted. It tells more than any other book of what we do to “people with a few ideas.”

In other places you get lined up and shot. In America you get drowned out, locked away, made even less authentic. Shulie looks back at us, the beautiful long hair she seemed to hide behind, her owl-like glasses she used to take off when everyone talked at once and wouldn't listen to her speak. She was beautiful and somehow inscrutable with something fragile and youthful about her—a mystery. I remember her from so many meetings, then she disappeared. Where were her Leftist buddies? Where was everybody?

Other feminists dominated the scene; other voices, other books, other fads and figures; secondary sources. The *New York Times* predicted feminism's death very solemnly. Twice already. So far.

22 Shulie died alone, found days after her death. Her book hardly read anymore, but still assigned in classes. A newspaper reports that a “curious” building super finds her body; her landlord proclaims she had been a “prodigy.”

Strange how much of it has come true without our even noticing it. How maliciously it has been applied: babies are purchased by blue-eyed Americans at a price in order to avoid the “trouble” of pregnancy; male medicine rules the world, charging more and more for its services. If you're rich, you can buy any organ. Not what Shulie had in mind at all.

Maybe we could reconsider how we have turned her utopian vision into our own nightmare as we converted her bright promise at 25 into the voices in her head that made her

life hideous.

I recently read of a young man who kept “beating up his refrigerator,” pummeling it with cobblestones, calling it “St. Frigid.” A silly thing to do. Of course he’s an artist, and now famous. Good thing Shulie never tried that; she’d have been carted off in a moment. Consider what a refrigerator means to a man versus what it means to a woman. Women were not rolling much steel in Shulie’s time; few of us had even heard of Kelvin or had any notion of how the damn thing ran.

Shulie went on writing and painting, and the world continued to call her crazy. By that time she was mostly on meds and resigned to her fate; silenced effectively. In the enormous despair of your last days, Shulie, what of that solitude? You wrote other things: what were they? Whom, what, did you choose to paint? What were your paintings like? What will happen to your work?

— Kate Millett

SOME TIME IN 1997, the artist Beth Stryker wrote to ask me if Semiotext(e) would like to consider a new work by Shulamith Firestone for our Native Agents series. My heart leapt. The timing seemed almost magical. For the last couple of years, I’d been obsessed with researching the histories of second-wave feminist critics, artists, and writers. I’d just published my first book, and at the time it seemed like the worthiest goal of any life was to appear. *Where are they now?* I wondered. The answers, as they arrived, formed a nauseous testament to the personal cost of American activism. Some had become New Age shamans and healers, living in tee-pees and tents in the Southwest. Some had been institutionalized. Some, when I managed to reach them, were impossibly bitter and cranky, having been backed so far into a corner they could no longer speak to the world.

Others had simply stopped working and dropped off the cultural radar.

Throughout this research, I'd wondered what had become of Shulamith Firestone. The most intellectually brilliant and bold of her contemporaries, surely she hadn't succumbed to these disappointing conciliations. Published when she was 25 years old, Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* fused the dizzying extrapolationist logic of Solanas's SCUM Manifesto with the analytical rigor of any great work of philosophy. When it arrived, Firestone's manuscript seemed to answer the question. *Airless Spaces* is a series of pointed vignettes about the lives of the poor inside and out of public psychiatric institutions. And, I must confess, at that time I misread the book. Like the obituary writers who choose to memorialize Firestone through the lens of her mental illness, I found it heartbreaking proof of the isolation suffered by women pursuing ideas when they are no longer popular.

Shortly after *Dialectic* appeared, Firestone walked off the stage of professional feminism, an arena in which she could have pursued a distinguished career. Instead, she returned to her earlier work as a painter, which she continued even after the onset of schizophrenia in the late 1980s. During this time, her income and life were extremely marginal. The hospitalizations she describes in the book were confinements in public institutions, where the words "treatment," "activities," and "community" rightly appear in italics.

24      Fifteen years later, I'm struck less by the fact of Firestone's death — frankly, 67 is a ripe old age within the indigent, mentally ill population — than by the book's astonishing literary achievement. Far from a rehab-or-hospitalization memoir, *Airless Spaces* makes no mention at all of the author's diagnosis and treatment. Its first person merely observes, with impeccable, damning detail, the small and large acts of brutality imposed by the patients themselves and the institution that must eventually culminate in the annihilation of personality and will. No one outside of this world could have written the book; no writer I know



who's undergone the experience has ever described it with Firestone's lucid sangfroid and dispassion. *Airless Spaces* is singular testament not only of madness, but of the psychic condition of poverty and all forms of institutionalization. The book is a miracle.

—Chris Kraus

WHAT SHULAMITH FIRESTONE will be best remembered for is *The Dialectic of Sex*, the manifesto she wrote arguing for women's liberation from their reproductive biology. What I will remember her for—one of many things, but the one that was the most important to me, at a critical moment in my life—is how she helped liberate me *into* my own biology.

I got to know Shuley when I was still in high school in University City, just embarking on my first affair. Her sister Laya was my classmate and friend, and we were part of what we thought of as the bohemian set. Shuley was a couple of years older than us, rooming at the time with a woman who was in the Catholic Worker movement. Somehow the Catholic Workers and a bunch of us high-school kids had found each other through the Civil Rights movement and become friends. They were older and seemed like the most glamorous people in the world to me—selfless, idealistic, dedicated to the poor and the downtrodden. “We Shall Overcome” was our anthem on the picket lines, and we believed in it. A strange concept of glamor to be sure, perhaps available only to the very young and naïve, and perhaps only at that particular moment in time.

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I no longer remember why I went to Shuley for advice about how to get birth control, but I do recall what she told me to do: Go to Planned Parenthood. Show up wearing a ring on your left hand and tell them you're married—because for whatever reason (no doubt something mandated by the morals-police of the time), PP was not

allowed to dispense “the pill” to unmarried women. And so I did. Which was how I obtained a prescription for those little dial-a-pill packs that, in those days, were salvation for anyone trying to avoid getting pregnant.

My next memory of Shuley — my memories are like disconnected snapshots, taken at long intervals — was when I was at the University of Chicago and she was at the Art Institute. Now I was married, but still very naïve, very unsophisticated. Shuley invited my new husband and me to Thanksgiving dinner, and we showed up only to discover a raw turkey, since Shuley, never known for her domestic talents, had no idea what to do with it. Neither did we, but my husband was actually something of a cook and figured out what had to be done — quite simply, putting it in the oven, for what was, of course, a very long time, which made for a very long evening. It was an evening made even longer in my mind by Shuley, who passed the time unpacking ideas for the book she would eventually publish several years later — ideas that were not just foreign to the earnest, romantic, and at heart conventional girl that I was, but actively repellent. Not have children? Shocking! Or have them via some kind of futuristic technology? Beyond weird! Men as the enemy? Not my man! Eventually I retired to the bedroom, sobbing quietly into a pillow if I recall correctly, leaving Shuley to debate her revolutionary ideas with my husband — a man who loved nothing more than a verbal slugfest with anyone, from Shulamith Firestone to the Seventh-day Adventists who used to show up at our door peddling their pamphlets.

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I eventually left Chicago to go to graduate school, and while I was doing that Shuley published her book and became famous. The ideas were no more appealing to me in book form than they had been over raw turkey, but one of the most brilliant women I know today remembers what it was like to have that book in her hands. “Prose on fire,” she said, adding that she always wondered what would happen to the author, because “a mind of that intensity would be hard

to carry around.”

And so it proved to be. When next I encountered Shuley many years later, when we both lived in New York, she was slipping in and out of mental illness. She surfaced triumphantly once during that period, publishing her only other book, *Airless Spaces*, a fictionalized account of her own grim experiences with hospitalization and the psychotropics that were the only thing standing between her and insanity. As part of a support group that met with Shuley every month for awhile in her psychiatrist’s office, I was one of many urging her to stay on those drugs. But in the end she couldn’t. They stole too much of her soul.

I shall remember Shuley as one of the luckiest women I’ve known—gifted with a mind of searing intensity and brilliance, beautiful, and, when she was on, charming and funny in her sly way. But she was also the unluckiest, cursed with a mental illness that destroyed that mind and left her with no way out.

As for us, we—even those of us who didn’t appreciate her when she was with us—were lucky to have her.

—Beth Rashbaum

MY DEAR FRIEND SHULIE was the best of conversationalists. She was always totally immersed in the topic at hand, and focused on the person at the other end of the exchange. It mattered what we talked about, but what mattered more was how we talked. Because Shulie had an unerring ability to cut right to the chase, she was always a stimulating sparring partner. She astonished me with her flashes of originality, and she had many of these. She was never dogmatic, and always open to rebuttal. There was a fluidity to talking with her; it felt like a process of mutual searching, rather than just a simple exchange. It was delirious and exhausting, but always exciting.

I had a feeling early in our friendship, around 1963 at

the Art Institute of Chicago, that painting would not demand the greater part of Shulie's attention. One day, in the school cafeteria, she asked me timidly if I would be interested in seeing some of her poetry, and I replied of course. I expected the kind of post-adolescent efforts that I had also engaged in (she was 18, and I was 23). What she presented me with were reams of pages written in a large bold hand, running uninterrupted across the pages, threatening to set the paper on fire. The thoughts were wild and apocalyptic, as Shulie herself was at that time. She was a triple incarnation of Emma Goldman, Rosa Luxemburg, and a bit of St. Francis thrown in for good measure. I don't believe she ever made these poems public.

On one of my visits to New York to see Shulie, thirty years ago, she invited me to see a mural that she was in the process of completing. Because she was interested in all of the world's tragedies, Shulie had approached the Goethe-Institut New York with an offer to paint a commemorative mural of the General Slocum Ferry Disaster of 1904. Over 1,000 recently arrived German immigrants, on a holiday outing on the East River, had drowned when the ferry caught fire and sank only thirty minutes out of the harbor. The Institute had accepted her offer and provided a schoolroom for her use as a makeshift studio. Besides this, they only paid for her materials. Shulie declined remuneration, as it was to be an act of gratuitous compassion for a bygone event.

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Shulie asked me to critique the mural, but with the caveat that if I thought the work bad, she would never paint again. I protested that she was putting me in an impossible situation. I considered her talented as a painter, and I would never lie to her. I said that I would rather not look at the work than risk her never painting again. She would not relent. She insisted that a friend was obliged to give an opinion regardless of the consequences.

I gave in and went to see a large canvas, thirty feet wide and six feet high, tacked to a wall. I told her what I thought of it with great trepidation, watching as her face dropped and

assumed a forlorn expression. She said she would attempt to finish it, but that she would make no further attempts at painting. I couldn't argue in the face of her stubborn decision. She followed her convictions to the bitter end; half measures were not a part of her repertoire. This was Shulie.

Shulie was a talented portrait painter. We both admired German expressionists like Otto Dix, and there was a measure of their influence in her work. I still have a portrait that Shulie did around 1965 and gave to me, which I treasure.

One thing about Shulie that many people don't know is that she became somewhat indifferent to the pressures of speaking about her days in the Feminist Movement. On one occasion, perhaps in the '80s, she accepted an invitation to speak at a University. While onstage she realized that the subject bored her to exasperation, and so she found herself drifting into a talk about Jewish mysticism—a subject she was investigating at the time. The audience was appalled and she was gently escorted off of the stage. Regardless, she was paid! When she shared this story with me we both burst into hysterics. It was not that she had lost respect for the radical feminist Movement; she simply didn't want to talk about it any more. I remember when Shulie was fired from her last conventional job, at \$6 an hour, on account of her illness. She had to survive somehow, and these speaking fees were a great help.

Shulie experienced disappointment, bitterness, and great sadness in her life, and not only because of an illness over which she had no power. When I last saw her, she confided matter-of-factly that her mental state had long been flat on account of medication—and what infuriated her most was that it affected her ability to do creative work. The greater part of her—the part I most remember and treasure—was her enormous compassion for others, her simplicity, and her insatiable curiosity. And of course, the originality of her creativity.

TODAY MY SISTER'S body was lowered into a deep mud hole. It was a simple affair. No fanfare, not even chairs or a tent to cover us from the sun. Just the deep trench, a pile of earth pierced by four shovels, and a few family members standing together sadly; women in long skirts, men in black hats and suits. And Shulamith herself, of course.

First the men trudged her in from the hearse, reciting a Hebrew psalm in low tones, and pausing their procession the customary seven times to show reticence to this act of burial. Then, before placing her on the straps that would lower her into the earth, someone asked us, her three siblings: Do you want to ask her *mechilah*, forgiveness? This was when fifty years of primitive feelings and memories came roaring through me.

We placed our six hands on her box and sobbed.

To ask forgiveness? The very thought elicited a lifetime of failures (for there was no correct way to love this woman). Nevertheless, I asked Shulamith's forgiveness: for expecting this moment, for dreading it without preventing it, for not bearing her suffering, for betraying her again and again, for trying to make her fit into this world, for misinterpreting her, for oversimplifying her ideas, for pandering, for apologizing for her, for not living up to what she stood for, for forgetting her for months and even years at a time, for not breaking through to her, for not understanding her disease, for not understanding her brilliance. Would there ever be an end to my need of forgiveness?

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A small knife appeared. I saw my brother's lapel being cut and heard a loud rip as he pulled the fabric apart with force. I was next. No matter that I was wearing an Armani silk. No little black ribbons for these people; it was all or nothing. The knife approached and I did not demure. My collar was cut. I ripped it further, listening to the shrill rip that mimicked the wail within me.

The men lowered the casket carefully into the earth. I peered down the deep hole. How remarkably austere it all was. The simple unvarnished box that held her remains

was like something pulled out of an old studio warehouse; just like my sister, without façade or apology. Surprisingly, a paper label with her name on it had been stuck on the casket lid. As if to make no mistake that she was contained inside, I thought, lest she elude us, evade us, slip away from us one more time.

But of course, she had slipped away, this time for good. The sound of dirt hitting hard on her casket brought me back. I grabbed a shovel.

I don't know how it works, whether our diseases fall away with our troubled bodies when they die. But I am counting on Shulamith finding herself again as her soul navigates its way into the upper chambers of this universe: her unobscured self, the one that might have flourished had she found enough understanding and love in this world: the wildly creative, overwhelmingly generous being, voracious for change, desperate for a redeemed feminine principle.

When my turn came to say some words, a verse from Torah popped to mind. It felt too dark to speak aloud at that moment, but I see now that it has her name on it, just like the label on her box:

*Tov Shem mayshemen tov v'yom hamavet miyom  
hivaldo.*

*"A good name is more precious than fine oil, and the  
day of ones death better than the day of ones birth."  
(Ecclesiastes 7:1)*

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Shuley, you are finally released from this harsh world.  
Time for rest. It is due you.

—Tirzah Firestone

Contributors:

*Alix Kates Shulman* met Shulamith in 1967, when she joined the Women's Liberation Movement as a member of Redstockings, WITCH, and the New York Radical Feminists.

*Anne Koedt* and Shulamith worked closely together as the premier radical feminist voices in New York Radical Women since its earliest days. Together, they edited the radical feminist journal *Notes From the Second Year* and founded New York Radical Feminists late in 1969.

*Andrew Klein* is an artist. He was Shulamith's fellow student at the Art Institute of Chicago and her lifelong friend.

*Anselma Dell'Olio* is a film critic on Italian television (Cinematografo, RaiUno) and for the daily paper *Liberal*, in addition to being a columnist for the weekly women's magazine, "Grazia". She first befriended Shulamith at a meeting of Radical Women in NY in the late '60s.

*Beth Rashbaum* is an editor and writer who lives in New York .

*Bev Grant*, singer/songwriter, cultural worker, and veteran feminist was in the first NY consciousness raising group with Shulamith in 1967.

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*Carol Hanisch* knew Shulamith through her involvement with York Radical Women and Redstockings. Her paper, "The Personal is Political," was first published in *Notes from the Second Year*.

*Chris Kraus* edited Shulamith Firestone's book *Airless Spaces* for Semiotexte in 1998.

*Eileen Myles* is a poet who has lived in the East Village since the '70s, read Shulamith in the '60s and met her in the '90s and got to know her a little bit and admired her work always and invited her to read



her writing in a series called *Scout at Threadwaxing Space* which Shulamith did for an enthralled audience.

*Jo Freeman* met Shulamith in 1967, at the National Conference of New Politics, and was an original member of the Westside group in Chicago with Shulamith. She is an activist, political scientist, and writer.

*Kate Millett* was active in the NYC feminist ferment of the late 1960s, sharing thinking with Shulamith and drafts of what was originally her pamphlet *Sexual Politics*. Both shared and suffered the full media glare of being authors in the same year of the first book-length work to emerge from the new movement.

*Kathie Sarachild* has been a friend and on again, off again radical feminist collaborator with Shulamith since 1967. She is the founder of the Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives for Action, to which Shulamith gave a treasure trove of material.

*Laya Firestone Seghi* is the third of the six children of Sol and Kate Firestone (Daniel, Shulamith, Laya, Ezra, Miriam Tirzah, and Nechemia). She was married to the artist Tom Seghi whom she met in 1967 when both he and Shulamith were attending the Art Institute of Chicago. She is a currently a psychotherapist living in Hollywood, FL.

*Linda Klein*, a Boston artist, became a close friend of Shulamith at the Art Institute of Chicago. Shulamith was maiden of honor at Linda's wedding in 1967.

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*Lori Hiris* is an artist and filmmaker. She met Shulamith in 1990 after she produced *With A Vengeance: The Fight for Reproductive Freedom* and Shulamith became her mentor and close friend.

*Marisa Figueiredo*, a new generation Redstocking and an admirer of Shulamith's work, delivered the reading of Shulamith's message to the Simone de Beauvoir Memorial that Redstockings held in 1986.

She worked closely with Shulamith on *Airless Spaces* and other projects in the 1990s.

*Peggy Dobbins.net* is still just one old WITCH (Women In Time Change History)

*Phyllis Chesler* is an Emerita Professor of Psychology and Women's Studies at City University of New York.

*Robert Roth* is co-creator of *And Then* magazine and author of *Health Proxy* and a friend of Shulamith's for many years. He published Shulamith's art and poetry in *And Then* magazine from 1992 to 1997.

*Roxanne Dunbar*, co-founder of Cell 16 and a veteran of the women's liberation movement, was profoundly affected by Shulamith's brilliant formulations of women's oppression and reconnected with her a decade ago, forming a close personal bond.

*Ti-Grace Atkinson* is a writer, philosopher, feminist and radical activist. She met Shulie at New Politics Conference, Chicago, September 1967, and spent many an hour in this era discussing and developing radical feminist ideas with Shulamith and Anne Koedt. She remembers with especial fondness Shulie's classic guts and panache as displayed at the *Ladies' Home Journal* sit-in.

34 *Tirzah Firestone* is a Jewish Renewal rabbi, as well as an author of books on female figures in Jewish mysticism and the Kabbalah, a Jungian psychotherapist, and spiritual leader of Congregation Nevei Kodesh in Boulder, Colorado.

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