

Endangered Species

Roanna Mitchell reports on the summit.

On 4 March 2011, a large, sunlit room on the fifth floor of the Royal Festival Hall is filled with concentrated energy and determination. Seated at large round tables, the 120 participants of the Endangered Species Summit London have come together with a common goal: to move forward in challenging the culture that teaches girls, women, and increasingly men, to hate their own bodies.

Those present include government officials, educational institutions, multi-national corporations, the fashion industry, the mainstream media, grass-roots organisations, artists, performers, youth ambassadors and more. The work of participating artists is shown on surrounding walls and screens, the tables are cluttered with notebooks, pens and leaflets: this is a working summit that demands dedication and input from all who are there.

Hosted by the organisation Anybody, convened by psycho-therapist, social critic and activist Susie Orbach, this is the first in a series of international summits, taking place in London, New York, Buenos Aires, Sao Paulo and Brazil.

The idea for the summit was born in collaboration with Luise Eichenbaum, co-founder of The Women's Therapy Centre Institute in New York, when both she and Susie Orbach decided to 'have a great big meeting to draw attention to the hurt that is done to women's bodies'.

Endangered bodies

The aim of Endangered Species – now re-named Endangered Bodies – is to bring together as many as possible of the stakeholders that have an interest in and duty of care for, who critique and influence, our bodies and through them our identities. This includes those in advertising, in education, in the film and performance industry, healthcare workers (with a particular focus on midwives and health visitors), the

diet industry, the fashion industry, the fitness industry and so on almost endlessly, as the issues fan out and intertwine with all aspects of life.

The premise of this campaign is that we cannot take for granted something that is intellectually, physically and emotionally limiting, and thus threatening basic human rights. The anxiety that so many people feel about their bodies is not a fact of life – it is created by humans, and so there must be a way to deconstruct it and pass beyond it. It should, perhaps, be seen as our duty, especially when we look ahead at the future and children today.

An unsustainable view

There is much talk about sustainability for the future world of our children – well, this is about sustainable bodies. We cannot sustain a situation where make-up is marketed to two year olds (see Pink Stinks' campaign *Slap, on the Face of Childhood*, www.pinkstinks.org.uk), where pole-dancing kits are sold in the toy department, and where eight year olds say no to a piece of their birthday cake, for fear of getting fat. The Girl's Attitude (2009) survey undertaken by Girl Guiding UK, shows that, out of 289 girls asked, 79 per cent of 10 to 11 year olds would like to change something about their appearance.

We cannot sustain a media landscape in which artistry, technology and economics use their creativity and power to create a human reflection that has no basis in reality and offers hardly any scope for life-enhancing, inspirational role models. We need to question a health setting and pharmaceutical industry that focuses on the extremes of obesity and anorexia as a scapegoat, hiding and normalizing in the process the whole spectrum of body anxieties in between. We need to raise awareness of the complex and nefarious practices of the diet industries, owned by the largest food

companies in the world – and generating profits of \$55 billion per year in 2006 – out of the insecurity we are taught to feel about our bodies from infancy.

Susie Orbach's opening speech in London is a call for responsibility, and a reminder that agency is still possible, as she states: 'Our aims are not modest. They are ambitious. We want every girl to grow up feeling a matter-of-fact right to her body. Without attack. Without self-criticism. Without being watchful.'

In a culture where anxiety about our bodies is accepted like gravity, as a part of the everyday, and where body hatred is our biggest export to the furthest corners of the planet, this summit was initiated to re-situate the issue, taking it from its place in the shadows of the personal – to which it repeatedly has been confined over many years – to be examined again, as an urgent social, political, economic issue.

A broad base of support

At the London Summit, individuals and groups from the UK, France, Italy, Ireland, Peru, Mexico, Argentina and New York, were joined by initiatives throughout Europe to showcase the work they are already doing with and about young women – from projects in schools, colleges and communities to web-based groups and campaigning organisations. Performance, videos and artwork framed and underlined the message of the summit.

Equalities Minister Lynne Featherstone, and Jo Swinson MP, co-founders of the Campaign for Body Confidence, framed the day with their presentations on the government's recognition of the problem, and their dedication in supporting the groups who are making active change.

Grass-roots activists such as Lancashire-based Feminist Webs and London-based Pink Stinks, Body Gossip and Object reported on their energetic activism in the areas of sexualisation of childhood, body confidence and the objectification of women.

The fashion industry was represented by Debra Bourne of the organisation All Walks Beyond The

Advert courtesy of Endangered Species



Catwalk. Bourne described their work with the London School of Fashion and their recent project, *Snapped*, where the narrow definitions of legitimacy in the fashion industry were questioned.

Contributions from other countries throw into stark relief the differences between cultures: Professor Beate Wimmer-Puchinger

from Austria described a setting in which the government has long taken these issues onto its agenda, to be financed and supported in many ways. At the same time, in Argentina, many shops will not sell clothes above a UK size 10, making it impossible for women to buy clothes. As Sharon Haywood reported from her activist work in Buenos Aires,

although there is a 'Size Law' that demands that stores stock a variety of sizes, many shops do not comply.

Two lively panel discussions included Rosi Prescott, CEO of Central YMCA, Katherine Rake, CEO of the Family and Parenting Institute, Jane Czynszelska, editor of *DIVA* magazine, Natasha Walter, author of *Living Dolls*, Lynne Featherstone and, as chair and provocateur, Susie Orbach.

This was a buzzing, optimistic, thoughtful and courageous day, and it was a successful day. Relationships were formed and strengthened, new initiatives founded, and women and men are joining the campaign every day. It is a good start and we are all, inevitably, in it for the long haul. ■

Roanna Mitchell is Artistic Director, Endangered Bodies, London.

Podcasts of all Endangered Species presentations are available at: www.endangeredspecieswomen.org.uk

References

Girl's Attitude (2009), survey available at: www.girlsattitudes.girlguiding.org.uk/2009_survey.aspx.

**TWENTY-FIRST ANNUAL
EVE SAVILLE MEMORIAL LECTURE**

Susie Orbach

Susie Orbach is a psychoanalyst, writer and activist. In 1976 she co-founded The Women's Therapy Centre and in 1981 The Women's Therapy Centre Institute, a training institute in New York. She's written extensively including *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, *Hunger Strike*, *The Impossibility of Sex* and *Bodies*. She is chair of The Relational School and a Trustee of The Freud Museum. She has been a consultant to the World Bank, Unilever and the NHS and visiting Professor at the LSE for 10 years.

**80th
ANNIVERSARY
CENTRE FOR CRIME
AND JUSTICE STUDIES**

Wednesday 16 November, 6 to 7 pm

Please email: events@crimeandjustice.org.uk
to register your place