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 psychotherapist, 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 out of the insecurity we are taught to feel about our bodies – 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
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 Czyzelska, 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

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.

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