Roundtable:
A Fictional Script of a Conversation that did not take place between Stephanie Rosenthal and Brown Council: Frances Barrett, Kate Blackmore, Kelly Doley and Diana Smith
Introduction by Bree Richards

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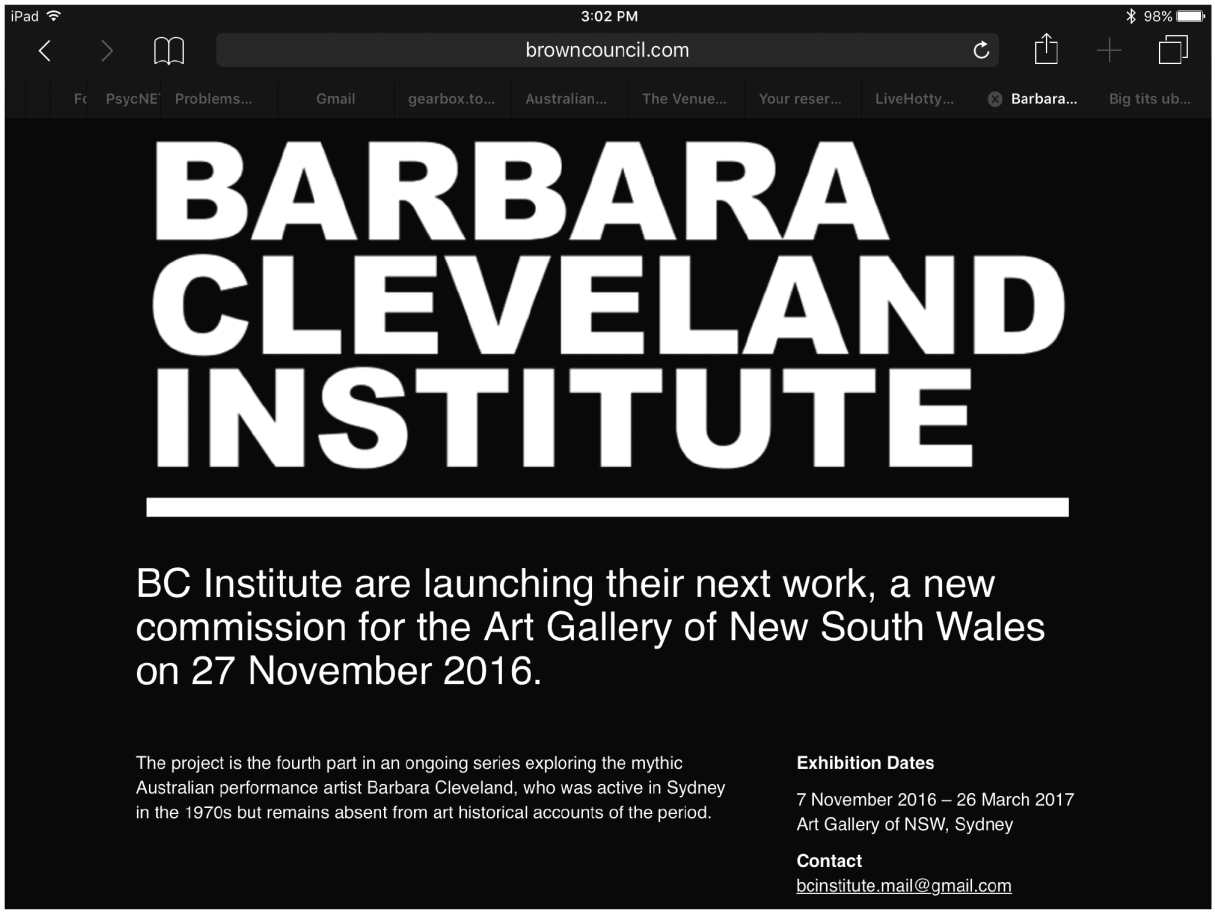

Roundtable: A Fictional Script of a Conversation that did not take place between Stephanie Rosenthal and Brown Council: Frances Barrett, Kate Blackmore, Kelly Doley and Diana Smith (with Introduction by Bree Richards)

INTRODUCTION

Bree Richards

A roundtable conversation between 20th Biennale of Sydney Artistic Director Stephanie Rosenthal and Sydney-based artist collective Brown Council (Frances Barrett, Kate Blackmore, Kelly Doley and Diana Smith) did not take place in October 2015. The following transcript was developed as a script for performance, staged in the artists' studio and developed over email and rapid-fire scribing, and as a back-and-forth dialogue in real time.
The twists and turns of this free-wheeling, if faked, discussion touch on a number of topics to which Brown Council have returned repeatedly within the context of their collective practice – from the processes of collaboration, to feminist methodologies and questions of authorship. Their ongoing research into the life and work of mythic feminist artist Barbara Cleveland takes up a significant portion of the dialogue, and this overlooked figure provides a framework for a broader meditation on performance, memory and history. Brown Council's approach might appear at first glance to be firmly tongue-in-cheek, yet humour is also treated as a means through which to consider how historical narratives are constructed and re-presented.
While this account is a fiction, the opinions, thoughts and ideas expressed here *are* Brown Council's, a polyvocal speaking position inhabited by the one and the many. Within the context of this text myth, rumour and narrative take centre stage, and any resemblance to real living persons is strictly intentional.

IN CONVERSATION (BROWN COUNCIL WITH STEPHANIE ROSENTHAL ON 23 OCTOBER 2015)

Artists' studio, interior (Sydney, Australia): the four artists of Brown Council are seated around a table with 20th Biennale of Sydney artistic director Stephanie Rosenthal. The room is filled with sunlight. Several large sheets of paper are pinned to the walls. Each is covered in scrawled speculations about the future. It is a small room full of outspoken women.

STEPHANIE ROSENTHAL, Artistic Director of the 20th Biennale of Sydney, has an inquisitive and decisive manner. She directs the conversation with her sharp intellect and hand gesticulations.

FRANCES BARRETT, Member of Brown Council, wears a beige suit that broadens her shoulders. She sports a soft moustache and speaks in a low voice.

KATE BLACKMORE, Member of Brown Council, leans heavily into the back of her chair with her long legs stretched forward. One hand rests on her laptop that sits open on the table, ready to record the conversation. She wears turquoise rings and yellow pants.

DIANA SMITH, Member of Brown Council, is dressed definitively in an artist's attire of striped top and rounded glasses. She is expectantly and excitedly perched on her seat.

KELLY DOLEY, Member of Brown Council, has a nimbus of brown curls and wears a single gold sleeper in her left ear. Her shoes are splattered with dry paint and her fingernails sparkle.

STEPHANIE:
I wonder if we can start by discussing the mysterious figure of Barbara Cleveland? I've heard a lot about her, and I know that she has been a key figure in your work. What can you tell us about Cleveland?

KATE:
We know that Barbara Cleveland was an Australian artist working primarily in Sydney in the 1970s. We also know that she disappeared in 1981.

DIANA:
She was an incredibly progressive artist and one of the first female performance artists working in Australia.

KELLY:
Cleveland was also one of the first Australian artists to merge feminist politics with performance art and to really investigate those areas with her body.

FRANCES:
She was also a very ambitious and experimental artist.

KELLY:
Her work was primarily body-based – task-based actions performed on or with the body, testing the physical limits of the body with different materials.

STEPHANIE:
And how did you first find out about Barbara Cleveland?

DIANA:
I was going through an archive of early Sydney performance work and I found a series of lectures and some instructional performances that were signed with this name: 'Barbara Cleveland'.

FRANCES:
There were also a few photographs. One of them we think might have been Cleveland, but we can't quite tell because all it really shows is the back of someone's head with long brown hair.

KATE:
The performance lectures we found of Cleveland's are meditations on performance, but the language she used is deliberately ambiguous. She left out key words, so when she delivered the performances the audience would have to work to uncover the meaning.
(turns to Diana)
Diana, do you want to perform a section of one of Barbara's lectures?

DIANA:
Sure, I can channel her. Just give me a moment.
(shuts her eyes, straightens her spine and lifts her chin)

My name is Barbara Cleveland
What you are about to see is performance.
What you are about to hear is performance.
This is performance.
This is the beginning.

KATE:
As you can see, it is very fragmentary.

DIANA:
Are you still with me or have I lost you?
Who has written this?
This is written by someone, by many people.
Told by friends of friends of friends.
Whose voice are you listening to right now?

KATE:
That's just the nature of memory.

DIANA:
Me standing before you, right now, is painful.
Performing is painful.
Performance is pain.
P for Pain.
P for Performance.

KATE:
What Diana is doing is taking you back to that moment in the Seventies. You can really feel the emotion that Barbara was experiencing when she delivered that lecture.

STEPHANIE:
Yes, absolutely.

DIANA:
It is real.
It is truth.
It is serious.
It is happening now and it will not happen again.
I am real.

FRANCES:
And if you can imagine, Barbara would be naked and rubbing herself with bloody dirt.

DIANA:
But, I lie.
We all lie.
Because it is a lie.
We already know, yet we don't know.
Everything has been done before.
The chains of what has come before me bind me like an animal, like a mangy dog.

FRANCES:
She often worked with faeces, blood and bodily fluids.

STEPHANIE:
(leaning forward)
Yes, it is very visceral.

KELLY:
And animalistic. She would often howl.

FRANCES:
(gesturing with her hands)
Diana, do the howl.

DIANA:
Hooooooowwwwwwwwwlllllll.

KATE:
Her purpose was to make people feel. She thought that people were very desensitised after the war and she wanted people to reconnect with the animalistic body.

STEPHANIE:
I see what you mean. What were the main influences on her work?

DIANA:
Based on the kinds of instructional performances she made, we think she was influenced by the work of Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy and their early *Idea Demonstrations* that were staged in the 1970s.

KATE:
We also know that she became quite interested in ritual, and we think she possibly did a lot of performances in the landscape.

FRANCES:
That's right. She used a lot of symbolic gestures, so often they would be very simple – maybe just a stroke of paint, or a handprint.

STEPHANIE:
Do you have any first-hand accounts of her performances?

FRANCES:
We were recently told about a performance in which she tied a rope across the Sydney Harbour Bridge and didn't allow any traffic to pass for several hours.

STEPHANIE:
That must have caused absolute chaos!

KELLY:
It really did. Someone else told us about a performance where she sat in the corner of the gallery for days wearing nothing but a dunce hat.

DIANA:
Mike Parr also knew Cleveland quite well. He remembers a number of her performances from the early 1970s, in which she adopted personas such as Neil Evans and Barbara Johnson.

KATE:
Apparently as Neil Evans, she ingested tapeworm eggs.

DIANA:
And as Barbara Johnson she did a scarifying piece at Central Street gallery in 1973. According to Mike, she appeared before the audience and unzipped the fly of her jeans and slipped out a large white, plaster penis.

FRANCES:
The audience was apparently appalled, and all fled the gallery.

STEPHANIE:
This is quite a funny piece, I think. It seems Barbara had quite a sense of humour, no?

DIANA:
Well, we'd like to think so! We certainly read a lot of her work as satirical, although in quite a serious way.

FRANCES:
That's right. I would say that the aspect of humour in Cleveland's practice has really influenced us.

KELLY:
I would agree. Humour is central to our work. It's a way of accessing difficult subject matter, and allows you to talk about serious issues, but with a light touch.

DIANA:
I always think of that great Oscar Wilde quote: 'Art is the only serious thing in the world. And the artist is the only person who is never serious.'

STEPHANIE:
I recently discovered that Cleveland was involved in the 2nd Biennale of Sydney in 1976. Do you know much about this?

KELLY:
Yes, we do. This is something we discovered when we were doing a residency in the archives of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

DIANA:
It turns out Barbara was one of the leading artists to protest the '76 Biennale at the Gallery along with around 400 supporters of the Women's Art Movement. This was part of the 50/50 campaign. They wanted equal gender representation and equal representation of Australian artists.

FRANCES:
The '76 exhibition included the work of over 80 artists from ten countries. Only six were women and just one of those was an Australian woman.

DIANA:
Barbara was not happy about this at all. The Women's Art Movement was really gaining momentum in Australia at that time, so this was a key moment in political and activist activities.

STEPHANIE:
Yes, I see. And of course there were similar activities taking place internationally.

KATE:
This was also in the wake of the dismissal of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, so there was a lot happening at this time.

STEPHANIE:
Do you know what happened to Cleveland?

DIANA:
We know that in 1981 Cleveland went to India researching different kinds of performance based in ritual and, as far as we can tell, she went missing.

FRANCES:
So, for us, there is this interesting tension between her actual disappearance and the fact that she has disappeared from the histories of performance art.

DIANA:
There is not a trace of her in any histories on Australian art. This has led us to think more about historical and archival processes and the way that certain artists are mythologised and others are forgotten.

KATE:
We are interested in examining the way that history is written, because often it is recorded by a singular voice – it is a narrative, a story, a fiction. We are interested in critiquing the role of history in cementing these cultural narratives around who is remembered and who is forgotten.

STEPHANIE:
So, you are, as a project, excavating Cleveland as a way to think about broader feminist histories?

FRANCES:
That is a nice way of putting it. Think of Barbara Cleveland as an archaeological tool to bring other stories to the surface.

KELLY:
I like that. We are trying to find other ways of telling histories. We want to make collective, polyphonic histories so we can map out alternative futures.

STEPHANIE:
(leaning in)
Actually, this brings me to my next question about collective practice. Can you tell me why you collaborate?

DIANA:
Partly, I think the interest in collaborating is that new things emerge that you could never have imagined by yourself. There is a kind of fifth, unpredictable entity that comes out of the collective process.

STEPHANIE:
Do you also find it difficult to collaborate?

KATE:
Yes, it is really difficult to collaborate (laughs).
But we keep coming back together because we are all friends, and as artists we are interested in seeing what evolves out of our collaborative conversations.

KELLY:
I also wonder if one of the reasons we initially started working together was a response to the type of work we were seeing during the Sydney warehouse era in the early 2000s. That was a formative time for us, and we were really influenced by collaborations like The Kingpins, Frumpus, The Fondue Set and Gravity Feed.

STEPHANIE:
I see. Yes, I've heard so much about this time. It seems to have been important for some of the other Australian artists in this edition of the Biennale. I'd like to ask you about authorship in relation to the collaborative process. Does Brown Council's artwork have an author?

DIANA:
We all are. We have never worked with a single leader or director. Though sometimes I think it would be much easier if someone directed; we'd probably get more done! But the collective is the individual – we each bring something to the collective voice.

KATE:
The collective is the individual. Is that a quote?

DIANA:
No. Well, it is a quote by me now!

KATE:
Are we still making things up?

KELLY:
Who knows, where are we?

STEPHANIE:
It is hard to keep track sometimes! Now, I'd like to ask you about collaboration and feminist practice. Do you see collaboration as a particularly feminist methodology or a specifically female approach to artistic practice?

KELLY:
It is important to identify that feminism and collaboration is not a specifically female thing – a lot of women are incredibly divisive towards each other, and not inherently feminist due to their gender. However, feminism is inherently collaborative. The history of feminism in a methodological context has its roots in activism, which is completely reliant on collaboration to operate. So, yes, I think collaboration is the linchpin of a feminist approach to practice.

KATE:
It's definitely not inherently female, although sometimes I think women collaborate better than men.

STEPHANIE:
Why do you think that is?

KATE:
I don't know, I think it's because some women are better listeners.

KELLY:
But I think it is counterproductive to concentrate on behavioural generalisations around gender. Let's get over that!

STEPHANIE:
As the fifth member, does Brown Council have a gender?

DIANA:
I think Brown Council has multiple genders.

KATE:
I see Brown Council as genderless.

DIANA:
(begins laughing)
But sometimes we will refer to Brown Council as Daddy BC.

(all laughing)

STEPHANIE:
In what context, exactly?

DIANA:
(laughing)
When we want something!

KATE:
(barely controlling her laughter)

Yes, when we want drinks and treats and sweets!!

(all laughing, shocked amusement)

KELLY:
I think Brown Council is an inherently female identity because we all identify as female and are very proud of that.

STEPHANIE:
Okay, let's move on to the role of the artist in society – specifically, in Australian society.

KATE:
The idea of the 'artist' is fetishised; it is a type of industry. Think of Basquiat or Brett Whiteley and how much they are framed as drug-addled geniuses.

FRANCES:
I think the identity of the artist in Australia is also connected to the mythology of the Aussie 'battler'. So many of the iconic images of Australian art deal with this idea, from Frederick McCubbin's 'Depression Era' paintings of bush folk as heroic figures, to Sidney Nolan's 'Ned Kelly' series.

KATE:
I think what Australia values is sports, not the arts.

KELLY:
No way! Did you know that more people attend arts events than sports events in Australia?

STEPHANIE:
Very interesting, I didn't realise that. I wonder if we might move on. The performance artist Marina Abramović, who was recently in Sydney, writes in her manifesto that an artist must not steal. What do you think about this? Can an artist steal?

DIANA:
As an artist, I think it is impossible not to steal. In a postmodern era, everything is about stealing. Picasso had that great line…
(silence around the table)
'Good artists copy, but great artists steal.'

KELLY:
(excitedly)
Yes, that's it!

DIANA:
No, I don't think that's the line.

KATE:
And it is happening more than ever within art practice because of the speed of the internet where everything is copy-and-paste-able. Think of the rise of the post-internet art genre.

KELLY:
But all aesthetics are based on interpreting what is around us. So, it's *all* stealing.

KATE:
(excitedly)
Yes, it's a kind of regurgitation.

STEPHANIE:
So, you're saying it's not possible to be an artist and not steal?

DIANA:
Well, I'm not sure. Maybe the word 'steal' isn't quite right. Perhaps a better term would be 'borrow' or 'appropriate'.

FRANCES:
Let's change the word 'steal' to 'extend' or 'inhabit'. So, if you are interested in an artist's ideas or imagery, it is a matter of stretching them further or embodying them in new ways.

DIANA:
Also, to say 'an artist must not steal' implies that there is an original object or idea that could be stolen in the first place. This seems kind of absurd in the aftermath of post-structuralism and postmodernism. We're not living in a time of authenticity and modernity. We're in a period where everything is up for grabs and has been for a long time.

FRANCES:
Perhaps a feminist approach would be to reject this idea of stealing, of taking an object and claiming it all as your own, like property. Every 'original' idea or object has come out of many conversations.

KATE:
No one really owns anything. It's a collective pool of thought.

DIANA:
We're constantly in this dialogue with people from the past and the present and the future, in a kind of swirling mass.

KATE:
I guess what Frances and Diana are getting at is that in an 'ideal' feminist, post-patriarchal world, there would be no ownership. It would be more about collectivity and joint authorship.

STEPHANIE:
That's an interesting proposition. But what about the idea that total collectivity in social and artistic practice is impossible? Total collectivity is only interesting when it isn't attached to the desire to make everyone participate in decision making and, as a result, no one takes responsibility. So, I am interested in a clear decision-making process where the entity that takes the decision also takes responsibility, but is then open to change. Here, an 'uninvited outsiders' – a term used by the writer and architect Markus Miessen – can be helpful. I think it is dangerous to justify a decision via a participatory process, as still only a small party is represented. This might be a good place to end. I want to thank you all for this thought-provoking discussion. Let's keep the conversation going.

(All pause momentarily and smile. The conversation energetically continues.)