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Jacqueline Millner, Catriona Moore and Georgina Cole*

Introduction

Feminism scrutinises the building blocks of culture and identity, seeking to explain how power relations—including those that naturalise gender inequality—are embedded in knowledge and practice. It illuminates the assumptions that shape understanding and exposes gaps in perspectives to generate more complex, inclusive and comprehensive histories and theories, creating paths to greater social justice and equity. Feminist critique has suffused the thinking of many disciplines, from anthropology and postcolonialism, to literary studies and indigenous history, and of course art history and art practice. For decades now, feminist art history and feminist art practice have honed the tools to analyse one of the most powerful means of narrating power relations and transmitting dominant values: our image culture.

By pioneering this critique nearly 50 years ago, feminist artists helped to forge the transition from modernist to postmodernist cultural strategies. They prioritised skills, subject matter, media and design principles that had been neglected in late modernism's formalist enthusiasms. They criticised the idea that art was separate from society and beyond politics and power, and communicated purposefully with broader audiences through video, performance, interventions in public space, mixed media, installation, mail art, posters, photography and collage. Questioning the hierarchies of high art and 'lowly' craft; challenging the boundaries between disciplines; insisting on the centrality of the body and subjective experience in all social formations and ideas; highlighting the importance of social connections and working through community are some of the key themes of contemporary art that are part of the feminist legacy, yet rarely acknowledged as such. For, despite its generative, transformative force, in the visual arts, feminism has experienced a history of institutional neglect.

A spate of international and national exhibitions and initiatives in recent years suggests that there is growing recognition of feminism's contributions to contemporary art.¹ Nonetheless, suspicions around 'the F word' remain. In Australia, the current conceptualisation of feminism has undergone substantial critical review, especially in the context of museums and galleries. Writing on 'a new generation of feminism' in 2009, curator Alexie Glass noted that most artists she interviewed for her article expressed the

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view, quite forcefully, that they did not want to be 'tainted' with the label (although all agreed to participate in the article).² Does feminism, then, curtail interpretation and rebuff broader engagement? Or, on the other hand, is it 'a hollowed-out signifier' used to validate essentially conservative ideas that affirm a woman's right to a mythological individualism (an idea that feminism in fact critiques)?³ Feminism's 'radical pluralism' was identified as a problem in an exhibition and symposium at Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art in 2007, provocatively entitled 'Feminism Never Happened'. The curatorial premise was that, since the old battlelines around social equality had dissipated and new ones had formed along the more problematic considerations of representation and desire, 'feminist art' could cut all ways and tolerate every possible difference. What one feminism valorised, another rejected, so the exhibition included

works which relish traditional gender roles, which romanticise sex-crime landscapes, which savour glamour photography, which narcissistically parade pathetic victim status, which appropriate male-gaze pornography, which imagine a polymorphously perverse Eden, which indulge mixed feelings about haute couture and svelte models, and which vacillate between come-on and critique.⁴

Yet, for all its inclusivity, we propose that this is a simplistic view of the pluralistic model of feminism. To begin with, as the CoUNTess art blog and others note, the 'battlelines of social equality' have sharpened of late, and have done so in light of the unhappily small gains made towards equitable representation and employment opportunities in the Australian art world.⁵ We have witnessed a surge in activist-oriented, feminist practice that confounds any easy opposition between 'equal opportunity' and 'radical feminist' aesthetic ventures.⁶ Moreover, it is all too easy to misinterpret an inclusive approach to art and politics as a situation where 'anything goes'. Over the past 40 years a range of aesthetic practices and ideological positions have been proposed, scrutinised and evaluated for their strategic usefulness. It remains important to acknowledge ideological differences as much as core beliefs within feminism, whilst distinguishing these from a cultural movement.

In Australia, in parallel with the intensification of debate about the status of women in society more broadly, initiatives devoted to reclaiming the tactics and insights of feminism for the hard work of producing and analysing visual culture have grown rapidly. The more effective initiatives take a strategic approach: they draw directly upon feminist art history and theory to drive their own innovative art practices and cultural critiques, and articulate the relationship between feminist art and activism as it responds to changing institutional and discursive conditions. They are motivated by the realities of current times, including the significant under-representation of women in the arts industries, and the urgent need for dynamic new ways to assert the agency of the artist. Australian expatriate artist Alex Martinis Roe has observed that it is more important for a younger generation of artists to *do* feminism than to *be* feminist for the sake of solidarity:

If feminism is collective through a culture of practices rather than because of a common identification—i.e. she *practices* a range of feminisms, rather than she

is feminist—it places an emphasis on the relevance of diverse feminist projects to all sorts of people who need not have a common identity.⁷

Martinis Roe argues that to use feminist aesthetics to lay claim to feminist credentials is problematic: it risks historicising feminism and engendering nostalgia for an activist past that worked towards a culturally specific agency for the feminist artist. This agency needs to be adapted to contemporary conditions, where artists are adept at the many means of self-representation and critiquing the gaze, and are much more familiar with author–audience dynamics.⁸

The articles in this special issue of the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* represent a range of such contemporary adaptations of feminist agency. They embrace the power of the historical legacy of feminism, which expresses itself not in slavish imitation but in a robust and often witty dialogue which recognises that there is neither one privileged strategy nor a definitive generational shift. We propose that the practice and scholarship represented here evidences less a new phase of feminism (what Amelia Jones has termed ‘parafeminism’, for example) than a continuity of the many fronts, many types of engagement and many more attempts that remind us of the endless need for nimble, situated critique. There is still the drive to uncover institutionally overlooked women artists through original archival research; we continue the project to craft an art-critical language grounded in alternative values; representation remains a key focus as we try to do sex, desire and feminine experience differently and render the relationship between viewer and artwork more intimate; and equal-opportunity feminism’s call-to-arms still motivates. The distinction is that contemporary artists and theorists have the benefit of a wealth of hindsight.

Part of that hindsight is the theoretical framework offered by feminist critiques that are based on psychoanalytical and phenomenological perspectives, and the many revisions they have undergone in the last three decades. Theories of the gaze still inform visual analysis, while both artists and theorists strive for embodied knowledge and embodied viewing—‘haptic viscosity’ or synaesthetic effects—as a means to undermine conventional subject–object positions and move beyond binaries to facilitate new relations. Luce Irigaray’s ‘two lips’ and Helene Cixous’s *écriture féminine* remain key points of reference, as much of the work seeks a language that speaks not only through the body but also ‘through the cracks’ of culture—a language that is both in- and outside. The tone is less angry than bemused. Indeed, humour and playfulness are regularly invoked both as destabilising forces that disrupt order, hierarchy and expected readings, and as resources that empower artists and theorists to face another round. ‘Humour’, as Freud wrote, ‘is not resigned, it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able to assert itself against the unkindness of real circumstance’.⁹ Humour operates in these contemporary works also as a language of common experience, of inclusivity, for the humour is less satirical than absurd and carnivalesque. And these two qualities are also foregrounded in performance, today a

preferred site and strategy for critique, affirming Peggy Phelan's assertion that 'the promise of feminist art is the performative creation of new realities'.¹⁰

Artist and theorist Elena Knox, in 'Reinventing the Wheel: The Hostess Trope in the Twenty-First Century', aims to 'work loose the gendered strictures of the performance trope of the professional hostess'. Knox identifies 'the hostess trope'—the female figure—as eternally mute and smiling helpmeet, perhaps best personified by Adriana Xenides in the popular game show *Wheel of Fortune*—as not only persisting into the twenty-first century through discourses and activities common in the events, promotions and hospitality industries but, more dangerously, underlying the emergent world of androids that will soon facilitate many of our technological interactions. Knox sets out in her analysis, deployed through writing and artwork, to 'ruin the stereotype', to render the fantasies associated with the hostess untenable. She maintains that 'feminist-mediated performance is particularly suited to producing generative critique based in the assumed body on the screen'.

In 'The "Nature" of Sex: Parafeminist Parody in Pipilotti Rist's *Pickelporno* (1992)', curator Laura Castagnini undertakes a close analysis of a work she considers to offer that much-sought-after feminist aesthetic experience: the involvement of all the senses in the act of viewing and the consequent collapse of the boundary between subject and object. Castagnini argues that through a set of strategies including close-up, sound, and first-person point-of-view, *Pickelporno* dislodges vision from its conventional position as the privileged sense closest to cognition, and moves it instead to the realm of the irrational and corporeal. In order to complicate received readings of Rist's work as essentialist, Castagnini proposes that it evokes Amelia Jones' notion of parafeminism. This neologism attempts to capture a feminist position that borrows from feminist forebears, but leaves behind the 'closures' encountered in foundational thinking and rejects the normative subject, including the proper feminist. In *Pickelporno*, Castagnini not only sees full sensorial immersion, but also the distancing effect of satire, in particular of mainstream pornography, sexual intensity and feminist essentialism. As such, the work simultaneously sends itself up and achieves a distinct feminist aesthetic experience without re-iterating problematic notions of a feminine essence.

Issues around feminine aesthetic experience also inform Anne Marsh's 'A Language of the Feminine in the Works of Eugenia Raskopoulos'. It is notable that Marsh, like Castagnini, focuses primarily on work from the 1990s to consider the question, how can screen or photo-media work project 'a feminine sensibility' or evoke 'a feminine experience'? In both these close readings of screen-based artists, a feminine/feminist voice is thought to emerge from 'haptic language', such as when Raskopoulos uses sound derived from the act of touch. Marsh refers to the continual slippage between one sense and another in the artist's work, which echoes the slippage between subject and object, individual and broader social forces, dominant language and migrant's speech. Re-activating debates from the 1990s that interrogated the high theory of the 1980s through the body, Marsh specifically states that Raskopoulos' aim is 'to create a new syntax that speaks the feminine'.

Taking a broader historical sweep, Victoria Carruthers and Donna Roberts in 'Emila Medková: A Female Photographer of Prague' make the case for a corrective historiography that acknowledges feminist methods in art that pre-dates the 1990s and was produced outside the West. Medková's work has not been institutionally overlooked, so much as over-determined by surrealist and formalist readings that do not do justice to the feminist nature of her photography's 'oblique glances', retreat into 'cracks and fissures' and tactile invitations to the viewer. The authors suggest that such a feminist method privileges embodied over cognitive perspectives, the haptic over the visual, and embraces humour—a response that disregards established hierarchies and abandons the pursuit of mastery—both in the work and in the analytical process. The method also involves collaboration and playfulness in the crafting of new takes on art history, suggesting that to undertake such a 'corrective historiography' achieves not only an enhanced understanding of the artist's work, but also of the discipline and of feminism itself. Carruthers and Roberts argue that feminist art history, as much as feminist art, is a continual, materially situated process that entails a complex relationship between the corporeality of the author, the text and the reader.

A perhaps more conventional revisionist art-historical approach informs Yvonne Low's 'Becoming Professional Artists: Feminisms and the Rise of Women-Centred Exhibitions in Indonesia'. Low tracks the growth of feminist consciousness among a group of Indonesian women painters through the careful historical retrieval of sources related to women's art associations and all-women exhibitions. As such, she provides a valuable cross-cultural perspective and point of comparative analysis that stands as a corrective to assertions about feminism's lack of currency outside the West. Low's analysis serves as a compelling defence of the all-woman environment for its ability to provide a forum for women to 'talk back', particularly in a society that enforces very traditional gender roles and allows women rights only insofar as they do not compromise their family responsibilities. It also reminds us of the power of collaboration and collective action, where women respect each other's differences while acknowledging shared goals that are far more achievable with critical mass and the breadth and strength of argument their mass can muster. In this instance, the goals were targeted and distinct: women artists were not attempting to change the social structure, but rather to provide a professional forum whereby they could promote their participation and foster their ambition in the art world. Yet such an action can provide a model to the wider society. Both Low and Carruthers and Roberts argue for the relevance of Western definitions of feminism to art practice in Indonesia and Soviet Prague. In so doing, their papers contribute to the articulation of global feminisms, drawing parallels between Eastern and Western forms of women's art making and self-determination.

The feminist practice of collaboration is the subject of Louise Mayhew's survey of the rise of women-only collectives in Australian art since 2000, which examines performance works by The Kingpins, Gabriella Mangano and Silvana Mangano, Tarryn Gill and Pilar Mata Dupont, Soda Jerk and Brown Council. For these artists, working in pairs and small groups, collaboration is both a process and a theme that

engages specifically with issues of gender and authorship. Flexible, organic, collective working practices destabilise singular artistic agency and make outcomes fluid and unpredictable. Not only is the collaboration a means of building a supportive network for women's participation in the art world, it also highlights the negotiations that take place between singular, group and gendered identities. While Mayhew situates this return to collaboration within a history of feminist art-making, she identifies a 'new collectivism' in the small, well-defined, and long-standing groups.

Art and Feminism: Twenty-First Century Perspectives assembles, to use Martinis Roe's term, a 'culture of practices'. These practices traverse art-historical retrieval and analysis of women artists' work, to the scrutiny of feminist aesthetics in their diverse forms, and the documentation and evaluation of feminist political associations. This editorial strategy was elaborated some 40 years ago under very different institutional conditions in the Australian feminist art journal *LIP* and related Women's Art Movement initiatives. In our estimation, feminism is neither an a priori political identity, nor a prescribed set of cultural practices, nor indeed is it a space of uncritical, neo-liberal 'choice'. While some younger artists appear to be unsure of what constitutes feminist aesthetics, or still wonder whether their own work evidences a feminine sensibility, for others, the self-conscious exploration or referencing of feminist aesthetics helps them gain professional traction in a formless and unregulated 'events management' art economy that is crying out for purpose, argument and action. What the essays in this issue suggest is that the tools of feminist critique are still yielding valuable new insights, both about historical and contemporary art, while at the same time providing sources of strength to combat the effects of ongoing social and institutional misogyny.

1. These include: 'Global Feminisms' (Brooklyn Museum, New York, 2007); 'Wack!' (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007); 'elles@centrepompidou' (Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2009–11); 'Kiss Kiss Bang Bang' (Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, 2007); and 'The Furious Gaze' (Montehermoso Cultural Centre, Vitoria-Gasteiz, 2007). Local projects and exhibitions in Australia that attest to this growing recognition include: the artist-run feminist collective and gallery LEVEL established in Brisbane in 2010; 'A Different Temporality: Aspects of Australian Feminist Art Practice 1975–1985' (Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2011); 'Slow Burn: A Century of Australian Women Artists from a Private Collection' (S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney, 2010); 'The Baker's Dozen' (UTS Gallery, Sydney, 2012); 'No Added Sugar: Engagement and Self-Determination/Australian Muslim Women Artists' (Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney, 2012); 'The F Word' (Melbourne Social Equity Institute, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 2012–2015); 'Look. Look Again', the first major exhibition and symposium on the contribution of women artists to Australian life and culture (Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, University of Western Australia, Perth, 2012);

'Contemporary Australia: Women' (Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2012); 'Sexes', a month-long program of feminist- and queer-inspired work (Performance Space, Sydney, 2013); 'Backflip: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art' (Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, 2013); 'Chicks on Speed: SCREAM' and feminist art symposium (Artspace, Sydney, 2013); 'Janis I and II' (The Commercial and MCLEMOI Gallery, Sydney, 2013); CoUNTess blog (Melbourne, 2008–present); 'Curating Feminism', exhibition and conference convened by the Contemporary Art and Feminism project (Sydney College of the Arts, Sydney, 2014); and 'Future Feminist Archive', exhibition and symposium convened by the Contemporary Art and Feminism project (Sydney College of the Arts and Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2015).

2. Alexie Glass, 'Extimacy: A New Generation of Feminism', *Art and Australia*, 47, no. 1 (Spring, 2009): 132–139.

3. For example, some critics argue that feminism is used to validate the work of artists such as Charmaine Wheatley and Vanessa Beecroft who assert their right to be sexual objects, while leaving sexist

assumptions intact. See Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006).

4. Robert Leonard, 'Feminism Never happened' (catalogue essay, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2010).

5. See CoUNTess, www.countesses.blogspot.com.au/

6. Consider the radical didacticism and activist orientation of recent work by Brown Council, Kelly Doley and Amanda Rowell's 'JANIS' exhibitions, Margaret Mayhew, Jane Polkinghorne, Courtney

Coombs and the LEVEL collective, Caroline Phillips' 'F-Word' projects, and many others.

7. Alex Martinis Roe, interviewed in *Review Interview*, August 2012, www.reviewinterview.blogspot.com.au/2012/04/artist-interview.html (accessed May 15, 2015).

8. Cited in Glass, 'Extimacy'.

9. See the often-cited passage in Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (London: Routledge, 2002).

10. Cited in Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 87.