

ART AFTER OBLIVION

■ Lily Hibberd and Bonney Djuric

the Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Memory Project

Not many Australians know that the first forced removal of children from their mothers in Australia originated in our colonial penal system at the Parramatta Female Factory. Few of us realise the role this intervention played in laying foundational ideologies in the provision of welfare services for women and children. This site in Parramatta is a crucible, where ideas of female immorality, criminality and insanity melded; realised in the hybrid institutional architecture of the Refuge, Workhouse, Asylum, Penitentiary, Orphanage, Girls Industrial School, Girls Training Home, Children's Shelter and Women's Detention Centre.

For over a decade National Art School graduate Bonney Djuric has campaigned to have the historic Parramatta Female Factory Precinct appropriately recognised and preserved. When she met contemporary artist Lily Hibberd in 2011 it was instantly obvious that they shared a desire to contend with issues of institutional history and its representation in creative ways, so they teamed up. The result of their partnership is the *Parramatta Female Factory Precinct Memory Project*, a contemporary art and social history work. Funded by Arts NSW, the project aims to activate the Precinct, first of all as a cultural hub for Western Sydney, with the added vision of its registration as a Site of Conscience that will remember Australia's marginalised women and children. Since early 2012, Djuric and Hibberd have assembled a team of artists and writers, seeking those with direct connections to the Precinct or other institutional sites of confinement. The team includes contemporary artists Elizabeth Day and Leanne Tobin,

both of whom work for the New South Wales Department of Corrections, playwright Alana Valentine, librettist Lisa Sampson and Indigenous author and speaker Christina Green.

The Memory Project is crucially centred on the last of the precinct's child welfare institutions, the Parramatta Girls Home, where both Djuric and Green were inmates in the early 1970s. The Project also bears witness to the contradictory nature of its riverside location, once sacred to Darug women and yet, since colonisation, a place of incarceration for many generations of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal girls. From February until September of this year, the project team will undertake a creative development phase, meeting regularly on the Girls Home site to conduct workshops, create works, discuss ideas and engage with the community and other former occupants, known popularly as Parragirls. Events and activities will follow throughout 2014 and 2015, both on site and in a prospective curated exhibition program in conjunction with a New South Wales contemporary art space, museum or other venue.

While in its early stages, the creative work of the Project team is already taking shape. In the context of this issue of *Artlink*, Hibberd interviewed the group's artistic collaborators Djuric, Day, Green and Tobin, asking them to consider their motivations and the work they are developing so far in terms of women's identities and what opposition they feel they've faced in the public expression and acknowledgement of their experiences as women with a story to tell of Australian institutions.

Bonney, what was the initial objective to begin your work with Parragirls on the site? Was there a reason to make a stand for women from Parramatta Girls Home in distinction from the general recognition of Forgotten Australians?

Back in 2003, when I started asking questions about the Precinct, I really didn't have any intentions of working with women survivors of the site. It was very much a personal quest in trying to make sense of my own experiences. In doing so, I found that information about the site was almost non-existent. This began to change after the 2004 Senate Inquiry into Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care as children, known as the *Forgotten Australians Report*. By this time I had discovered that what I had known as Parramatta Girls Home had been originally built in 1840 as a government orphanage for Catholic children, whose mothers were held in the adjacent Parramatta Female Factory. I'd also made contact with quite a few Parramatta Girls who, like me, were concerned that we were again being marginalised, this time by other Forgotten Australians, so in 2006 I established Parragirls and created a dedicated website. My concerns may seem curious but within Forgotten Australians circles so-called 'state children' were considered inferior to those who were placed with religious or philanthropic organisations. I attribute this prejudice in part to the legacy of the Female Factory, as a site created for the sole purpose of controlling females and their sexual behaviour, and its influence in the development of a system of care for children.

I often get asked why I would want to save this place. The answer is simple. Its buildings are a testimony to our experiences, for me and for the thousands of women and children who passed through these institutions. They have witnessed our pain and our suffering. The walls resonate with our memories: from our words that are carved into their stones, to the Female Factory's mortar, which is held together with hair shaved from the heads of convict women. Ask any Parramatta Girl why the concrete of the covered ways shines so well and she will tell you it's because of the skin worn from her knees as she scrubbed it night after night.

Leanne, what is the significance of the Girls Home and its environs to Darug women?

The environs were once a living area for the Darug clan of the Burrumattagal. The term Burrumattagal translates as "a place where the eels lie down". The Girls' Home is located on a site along the river known as the Crescent. It is also the place where the salt water meets the fresh water and still today the eels gather on their way out to sea as part of their migratory path to the northern parts of Australia. The local

Burrumattagal would meet with other clans at the time of the full moon when the eels were running and corroborees would be held late into the night, as the local clans from far and wide would feast on the fattened eels. Women and children laid fish traps and fished with handlines and gathered food from the river and nearby surrounds. The river provided all that was needed and not far from the banks are sites that are thought to contain birthing places and ochre markings can be seen on the faces of rocks and caves.

Parramatta Girls Home also became a repository for those Darug women caught up in the system with the imposition of government policies that caused separation and dispossession among the local Aboriginal communities. Many of those women, like my Auntie Lorna Burke, are gone now but there are still those who survived and are living with the scars of that experience today.

Christina, when you were first interned in the Girls Home you were charged with neglect. How did this come to pass?

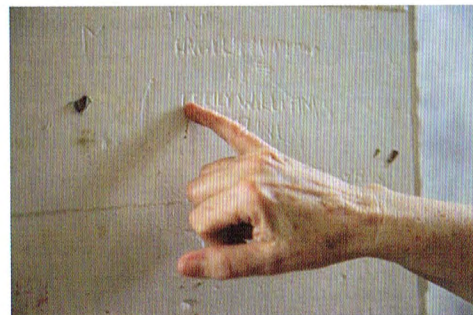
I was placed before the Children's Court at the age of three and charged with neglect. After that I was signed over to the State Welfare Department as a state ward. I was then fostered out, and physically, sexually and emotionally abused over those years. I continually ran away and I was moved from one institution to the next, until I was old enough to be sent to Parramatta. I was discharged just before my eighteenth birthday, and on my eighteenth I received a letter saying I was now no longer under the state's welfare care.

Liz, what forms of contemporary art have been used in your work with women inside New South Wales prisons? What ways do you think creativity is useful for women in this context?

I have an unusual insight into the value of creativity within institutions and how it can productively lead people into something better. When I began in 2006 to work with women prisoners on the Dillwynia prison garden project it was clear to me that many of those women had no awareness of what creativity could do for them, or even that a contemporary art world existed. I realised then, and it is a general perception of mine, that cultural development is an amazing way to reduce crime and also to promote mental health. I wanted to see the women that I was working with at Dillwynia come into contact with creativity in the broader sphere. But creativity suits some more than others. In doing the gardens inside prisons, I was operating from a perspective of wanting to respond to the site, in other words, the spaces inside the prison. I asked them to design gardens with an aerial view in mind. Even imagining that their gardens could



Bonney points to Kamballa House, Sept 2012. Photo: Lily Hibberd.



Bonney points to women's names, Bethel House, Sept 2012. Photo: Lily Hibberd.



Liz Day describes her onsite garden design. Photo: Lucy Parakhina.



Signage public launch, Feb 2013. Photo: Catherine McElhone.



Bonney compares first orphanage and Kamballa House, Sept 2012. Photo: Lily Hibberd.



Jeannie speaks about her painting. Photo Lucy Parakhina.

go through the walls. They came up with ideas which I then helped to elaborate. I really wanted to get them to think about where they were. They also were learning gardening. I've seen produced what I'd call "reconnections with a sense of purpose" every day in the course of this teaching.

Leanne, Do you think that the obliteration of women's stories from public consciousness has contributed to the obscurity of the Darug history of the site today? What restorations do you envisage that contemporary art might make to this obliteration?

The absence of women's stories from the public account contributes to the obscurity of the Darug history of the site because a history untold goes unnoticed. Many of the stories of this place are cloaked in shame and humiliation. Many Aboriginal women at the time of the Girls' Home were silenced and stopped from continuing their cultural ways. The speaking of 'lingo' was discouraged and made punishable.

Women and their stories are the glue that connects and sustains community everywhere throughout the world. Artists, through the use of contemporary art, will help revitalise the women's stories from here and give them a voice. It will also help highlight the importance of the women's silent stories and the need for them to be heard as a symbol of survival, tenacity and resilience to women everywhere.

Christina, what part did your Aboriginality play in the story of your time in Parramatta Girls Home and Hay Girls Institution? And were there any added issues in being female?

Being Aboriginal amongst your peers at Parramatta or Hay meant nothing because we were all in the same situation as young girls and just as powerless, while equally valuable to each other, regardless of our background. Being Aboriginal and a state ward and being a girl, who could not receive visitors or letters, meant that the male perpetrators, who were the officers in the Parramatta or Hay Institution, were free to physically emotionally and sexually abuse and humiliate young girls without any fear of being caught because these young girls had no one to complain to apart from other male officers.

Bonney, the neglect of the site has caused you much anxiety and grief. What connection could the old Girls Home have to deep-seated notions of the threat of the female delinquent? Is there any way that you can see the artwork of the Memory team confronting this symbolic violence?

Yes, its present state of neglect has caused me much grief and anxiety, more so just recently in December with the destruction by fire of the 1850s western structures. Even in the longer view, when I'm confronted with questions such as, why is Australia's oldest Female Factory not included on the National Heritage List when similar sites such as Port Arthur, which it pre-dates, are? Why aren't sites associated with violence and control of women, let alone children, remembered and valued as part of the Australian narrative? I remember during my time in the Home it was always driven home to us that our 'female-ness' was the source of our rottenness, so I liken the Precinct to a radiated zone where only the very brave or the very foolish will enter. I think the women who make up the Memory team are very brave and

are at the forefront of making these edifices work for women, not against them.

Liz, you have spent some time over the last two months mapping the site. On first impression, what ways could the environment, design and essence of the Precinct's buildings and its gardens be related to the history of female institutionalisation in Australia?

Drawing on my background in and knowledge of confinement and long-term work in the marginal space of the prison, as well as a lengthy practice in site-specific work, I am developing another garden for the Parramatta site, after the one 'inside', but that will invite participation from its community. The structure for the garden design at Parramatta will recognise the history of gardens and buildings that once existed there. These earlier configurations might be echoed in new plantings. While recognising that the history was one of exclusion and pain, the plan is to contradict the histories' sombre traces with colour, surprise and adventure. The vision is to entice the visitor's interaction, and through the play and laughter of children, and the inclusion of community groups, create the fullness that has been missing there.

Bonney, this isn't the first time women have returned to defend or contend with the Girls Home. Tell us about the activism of Bessie Guthrie and what occurred several years ago to prevent Norma Parker's conversion to a men's prison.

Well, firstly, it's not just the Parramatta Girls Home, the entire Precinct has been a focal point for women's actions. For instance, back in 1827, convict women of the Female Factory staged a riot demanding better food and conditions. Many claim this was Australia's first industrial action. Then, during the 1940s, reformer Mary Tenison-Woods called for changes to the welfare system, after undertaking extensive investigations into the operations and procedures at the Girls Home. Mind you nothing much changed until activist Bessie Guthrie rallied the Women's Movement in the early 1970s. This saw the closure of the Hay Girls Institution in 1974, a maximum-security annex of the Girls Home, and by 1983 the repurposing of the Parramatta Girls Home to the Norma Parker Detention Centre for Women. There have been other battles as well, like the attempt in 2008 on the part of Corrections to turn Norma Parker into a low security prison for male sex offenders. We fought against this and won but still I wonder about the insensitivity of the state in even contemplating such a proposal, given that by far the majority of girls confined to this site had been victims of sexual abuse. Does our experience still mean so little? Has anything really changed?

These last three questions were addressed to all four of the artists.

What kind of identity do the women survivors of state institutions have?

BD - We are all different, some are strong and resilient, some defiant and oppositional, while some are submissive and compliant; we are all scarred.

LT - Resilience, fierce defiance and loyalty to each other and a pressing need to have the dark brought to the light.

CG - Institutionalised women's identities are emotionally and physically marked and marginalised by their sufferings.

ED - That's a really difficult question. There are so many varieties of identities of people getting out. Some go out

fighting. Many are defeated and with deeper addictions or damage of whatever variety. Education is helping more and more plus available therapies to get girls back on track. As I mentioned earlier, I have met women who've had zero contact with 'culture' as I know it. Seeing women achieving through creativity and finding a basic sense of connectedness is, I think, useful to other women who have been unaware of that avenue.

How might one of the artworks or collaborations that you are currently developing for the Memory project be useful for women with experiences of institutionalisation?

BD - I have found in making our commemorative quilts that the Parramatta Girls have shared laughter and tears, especially in remembering our young selves sitting under the covered way. To be remembered in a place that made us feel so invisible is very healing.

LT - I am working on a *Remembrance Pool*. The idea is to create a water feature; a water cycle that relates the passage of water through its various states: from the original clean pure form of drinking pools that provided sustenance to the Darug, through to the use of water in colonial days in the early milling process of flour on the river and the drawing of water using a pail, to the Industrial School's use of water for the laundry and the gardens, then back to a drinking pool, culminating in a reflection pond. The transition of water through these stages will represent the various changes of purpose conducted on the site but also provides a place for contemplation, peace and meditation.

CG - It will be a work of healing and of gratification, a legacy.

ED - I had various members of my family who disappeared into institutions and were never spoken of again. I think that both through my work in a prison and in my role as an artist on this project that I am resolving something in myself. I'm facing an inherited shame. I went to the recent feminist forum at Artspace, Sydney, and there was a response from someone there who thought that feminism has completed its work. I see a corresponding risk in the Parramatta site, which too faces its history being denied, which tells me that we have not yet learned to live with or fully accommodate support for the female abject, especially those dimensions of women's experiences which are thought too difficult to accept. A place of healing next to a contemporary art space would be amazing.

Does the form of the ideas you are working on have any connection to activities that occurred inside the Girls Home, as in women's work or in resistance to that concept?

CG - Yes, the experiences of the women connect past and present generations.

BD - As a rule, the only acceptable forms of creative expression available to females confined to institutions of this kind were the so-called industrial arts of sewing, weaving, knitting, embroidery and lacemaking. These were very much part of the institutional experience, so the development of a range of textile works such as commemorative quilts or tapestries which tell the story of the site in a visual and tactile way and which, in their very form, challenge perceptions as to what is an acceptable form of art, is fitting.

LT - Yes, one idea we are developing is to string up a whole lot of washing lines across the grounds of the Home with images cast over them at night. The clothes on the line make a connection to imposed duties but they also refer to the idea of 'airing the dirty laundry', releasing the secrets kept within the walls of the Home. Projected images of 'spirits' onto the sheets will represent the presence of those who have passed on the grounds or within the institution's walls.

ED - I think that in modern corrections, especially at Dillwynia, there's a great emphasis on education. I could often only get the women to do fairly basic things. I guess gardening is one of those 'home' processes and asking them to connect to their cultural identities through food and plants and gardening has a similar association to sewing, so in that way the garden work does link in to feminist tradition. But in Dillwynia it has no connection to the moral training of the Girls Home. These days, to my knowledge, women in prisons don't do any tedious scrubbing or repetitive punishment. There is an emphasis on developing their employability, in programs like barista tuition and other practical training, and anger management programs, and so on. I've started to think that gardening has a 'grass roots' eco-rebellion thing about it, which ties in with some feminisms too. But I think that the Parramatta garden will need to be open to a variety of groups. I'd like to include people from the disabled institution across the road, for example. So, if Parramatta Girls Home became an inclusive eco-site, it would be fabulous. ■

(For more information on the project or the full history of the Precinct visit <http://www.pffpmemoryproject.org> <http://www.parragirg.org.au>)

Lily Hibberd is an artist and writer.
Bonney Djuric is a Parragirl founder.



Parra Girls Home Doco, April 2012. Photo: Lily Hibberd.



Bonney in PFFP Girls Home grounds, Sept 2012.
Photo: James Oliver.



First site access, Feb 2013. Photo: Catherine McElhone.