

An unusual way of doing politics: Alex Martinis Roe **[Macushla Robinson](#)**

I went to a screening some months ago, hosted by curator [Jasmin Stephens](#) at [Cross Art Projects](#) in Kings Cross (Sydney). The piece, created by [Alex Martinis Roe](#) and titled *It was an unusual way of doing politics: there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...* (2014), explores the evolution of feminist groups in 1970s France and Italy.

The work evokes this encounter from the perspective of a participant. It does not try to present an overarching objective narrative. Rather, voices weave in and out, and I can't keep track of who is speaking. In the end I think that is what is compelling about this piece. It is personal, its speakers are not identified and nobody is an authority.



Alex Martinis Roe, *It was an unusual way of doing politics: there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...*, film still, 2014. Image courtesy of the artist.

Alex says her film 'brings a number of voices together to explore a genealogy of political practices that together build a particular culture of gathering.' *Gathering*: to assemble for a specific purpose. For me the word brings to mind Meaghan Morris' essay [Sustaining the Festive Principle: Between Realism and Pleasure in Institution-Building](#), an essay that looks back to a history of feminist film-making in Sydney and argues for a festive, and by festive, she means empowered, approach to institutions.

Morris argues for 'the pragmatic, survival-oriented, and world-changing energy of being 'festive' in contrast to the ubiquity of institutional critique. Indeed she poses the question:

What is an institution? I mentioned a moment ago that the English verb 'to institute' can mean 'to start'. More exactly, though, it means to 'to set up', to 'establish', and these words combine the sense of activity and movement with that of 'settling', or 'putting in place'. Institutions are ambiguous: enabling action, they also stabilise and constrain.

Bearing in mind the constraining nature of many institutions, she nonetheless urges us to embrace and mold, co-opt, or otherwise reform the institutions in our lives, and indeed, to make our own. Morris's argument requires a modicum of having your cake and eating it too, because 'we *can* fight the corrosive negativity of the institutions that also sustain us and give us space to work.' It seems to me that this is exactly what the Milan's Women's Bookstore Collective was doing. Perhaps they did not understand it that way themselves, since so many of these groups operated under the rubric of the anti-institutional. Yet the work that they accomplished was also foundational.

What Alex does is also a kind of institution building: she explores and resuscitates the institutions that are largely unknown to women today. She both documents and re-imagines the nurturing and reciprocal relationships between women: ideological, inter-generational, professional, unprofessional, sexual.

And because this is a real history, she also touches on the emotionally complex experience of feminism. The double bind that gatherings, which often become institutions, can lead us to. Sometimes people from the past don't want to share their histories; sometimes gatherings become exclusive, defined against those who have not gathered. This is all part of the ambiguity that Meaghan Morris speaks of: institutions both enable and constrain. Maybe in the end, what Alex's work represents is not such an unusual way of doing politics. With or without tears and flowers, there will always be ambiguity.