

## Alex Martinis Roe

**'It was an unusual way of doing politics: there were friendship, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...'**

The Cross Art Projects

In *Who's Afraid of the Neo Avant-Garde*, Hal Foster calls for new genealogies of the avant-garde that complicate its past and support its future. Australian artist Alex Martinis Roe is working on a series of films that take a similar approach to a number of feminist collectives and currents, the earliest of which became active in the 1960s and 1970s in Europe and Australia, and all of which still exist today. Her film 'It was an unusual way of doing politics: there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...' (2014) was presented at The Cross Art Projects, Sydney, as a two channel installation, curated by Jasmin Stephens. One section of the film was projected onto the wall, while another was played on a small monitor. The subject of the film is a week long meeting in 1972 between two groups of feminists, *Psychanalyse et Politique* and some of the women who went on to found the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective. It opens with a close up shot of a horse that shows all of its minute movements, its nostril flaring in and out, while ambient sounds can be heard from the local environment. Shots of the rural landscape on the West Coast of France, where the original meeting took place, are accompanied by a spoken text, composed of interviews that Martinis Roe conducted with some of the women who participated. The narrative mentions ideas of 'consciousness raising' and 'sexual difference'. It suggests that sexuality and relationships were central issues to the group. The artist asked a separate group of young women involved in feminist projects in Nantes to re-enact the meeting. According to Martinis Roe, this situation provided a way to discuss feminist politics and try to relive the encounter between *Psychanalyse et Politique* and the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective. The film intersperses this re-enactment, comprised of women dressed in white clothing, gathered together, sitting in a circle or in a more casual group, with images of empty dormi-



Alex Martinis Roe, *It was an unusual way of doing politics: there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...*, 2014. Super 8 (transferred to digital) video still. Courtesy the artist.



tories and communal spaces that have an atmosphere of absence or abandonment. In these shots chairs are stacked on top of tables and tables are pushed against pale green walls. One of the first scenes of the film that was shown on the small monitor is the action of the young women taking the chairs down off of the tables; this is suggestive of the re-animation of the site as well as the ideas of the original collectives.

Interviews, workshops and oral histories are key elements of Martinis Roe's practice, which often highlights an ethical responsibility to the viewer and to those who participate in her work. Her work facilitates a dialogue between different generations of feminists, activists and cultural producers. She uses practices that come from feminist oral history, interviewing and postcolonial documentary filmmaking, to represent the history of others and to challenge the conventions of traditional documentary. Her film 'It was an unusual way of doing politics: there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...' raises the question of how feminist collectives might exist under the changed circumstances of contemporary neo-liberal society, and how various feminist histories might be re-activated for use and interpretation in the present. Martinis Roe

uses a genealogical method to track how knowledge is shared and formed and how it is re-interpreted over the course of time. By inviting different individuals and groups to participate in her work and in the production of the work's meaning, she aims to break away from the traditional model of the individual artistic author. Her work draws on the theory of sexual difference that was developed by Luce Irigaray and aims to put this into practice by performatively producing a language of sexual difference. Irigaray encourages women to declare and define a new subjectivity, as she believes that female subjectivity is yet to exist independently of the phallogentrism of Western culture. Martinis Roe's desire to examine the structure and nature of communication stems from this utopian impulse to create an alternative model of communication and language. The images and narrative of her film show an intimate account of a much larger international feminist movement. By doing this she is able to shed light on the personal accounts of the individuals who were involved, and to suggest the everyday settings in which political change and organisation can take place.

Benison Kilby

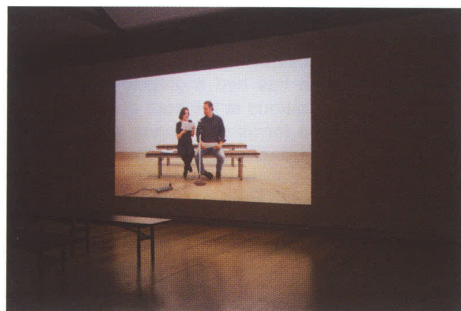
## A Working Script in Shorthand: Leigh-Ann Pahapill

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Expectation is principally a matter of norms rooted in experience, whether taken from art or life: what is conventionally said and done in the circumstances; how things are supposed to happen.<sup>1</sup>

Leigh-Ann Pahapill's video work *A Working Script in Shorthand*, recently exhibited at Screen Space (Melbourne),<sup>2</sup> consists of a pair of actors reading to camera. The text being spoken is not a play, or some other literary form, but a chapter from Martin Meisel's book *How Plays Work*, which concerns the structural condition of the audience within theatrical production. Pahapill's work plays between several different genres or forms of address—the spoken monologue, the critical commentary, the video installation, the reading group, the theatre workshop—each of which call into being a certain idea of an audience. The work develops, in an overt manner, on the performative nature of artistic production and reception, and the articulation of spaces, actual and virtual, within this process; concerns which seem to be ongoing in Pahapill's practice.<sup>3</sup>

The actors voice Meisel's words as if they are giving a preliminary reading of a script, as is also



Leigh-Ann Pahapill, *A Working Script in Shorthand*. Installation view, Screen Space, Melbourne. Photograph Kyle Weise. Courtesy the artist.

implied in the work's title. This reading, or rehearsal, seems to be about hearing, or listening to, the text. It appears uncertain what will happen to it when it is read aloud. Indeed the actors do not manage to render Meisel's lines with sufficient ease to suggest that they are in a position of mastery in relation to his arguments, but rather follow the exposition with a degree of trepidation, or an uncertainty as to where it is taking them. The labour of translating the academic text into spoken form is underlined by the moments in which lines from existent plays are quoted by the

author, prompting the speakers to modify their delivery. The benches in the gallery space, which seem to match those which are occupied in the video, clearly demarcate a space in which the visitor will take up the position of audience. The viewer becomes both an audience to the actors' reading, and a co-audience (with the actors) to Meisel's words.

Meisel's text is concerned with the process, and politics, of the identification of the audience as a necessary protagonist within the system of theatre. This identification relies upon, and is always implicit in, the partitioning of the *mise-en-scène*, and is explicitly reflected upon within certain theatrical examples. This occurs sometimes through an expansion of the space of the representation, to include the auditorium and the spectators which fill it.<sup>4</sup> This sort of gesture of inclusion is suggested in Pahapill's work through the actors' direct address to camera, and in terms of complementarity between the performing and viewing spaces. But it is simultaneously undermined by the interruption in space and time implied by the video medium. This subtly picks at the fact that, while in some sense the audience's 'presence' is a necessary condition of the artwork, at the same time their presence in its particularity is a matter of indifference. The audience is therefore manifested as a number of possible phantasms or silhouettes, multiplied by the various modes of address noted above. Pahapill's installation forces us to consider the audience as something in the fabric of the genre which we are lured towards,