

“Text for Raquel”

Opening speech by Vanessa Berry, writer and artist, author of the Sydney exploration blog, *Mirror Sydney*

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In 2011 Raquel wrote to me to ask if I'd read the entry for "Vanessa" on the DAAO: I hadn't seen it before and it surprised me for many reasons.

First of all I was surprised that my zine "Psychobabble" had been defined as art. To me it was a teenage thing I did, cut and paste, photocopied, dashed off with much passion but little premeditation across 20 issues from 1996-1998. It was a collection of newspaper clippings and scrawled observations. If I was an artist then, a visit to my "studio" would have been a visit to the messy shrine of a teenage goth's bedroom, with flyers for punk gigs on the walls, piles of cassette tapes full of songs taped off the radio, and school books pushed off to the side somewhere.

I photocopied the first issues of Psychobabble at the 7-Eleven, where there was a 10c per page photocopier, and left them in city record stores for whoever might find them. The content was whatever came into my head, the cynical rantings of a teenager who felt she'd been born in the wrong time and was now stuck in a surreal and perplexing world. So that was Psychobabble.

But who was Vanessa?

I wrote back to Raquel, joking that it was usually my surname - Berry - that people thought to be the pseudonym. It wasn't - Vanessa Berry was the name I was born with. But the world of zines was indeed the world of pseudonyms. I routinely addressed letters to people like "Violet Slaughter", "Penny Dreadful", "Miss Helen", or "Steph Piecemeal". These were rockstar names, created as alter egos, a way to be someone other than yourself.

Even using my own name I'd become someone else. In Joan Kerr's description of me in the dictionary, my name "Vanessa" was a nom-de-plume. The entry reads: *A contemporary Sydney zine cartoonist, Vanessa produces "Psychobabble" - one of the longest established zines. It's likely that Vanessa chose her nom-de-plum in honour of the 1960s cartoonist Mollie Horseman, who also used that name.*

I liked the idea I'd been aware of a lineage of women cartoonists when I started to make Psychobabble. I wasn't though - my influences were more immediate, the zines I'd found in record stores in which the authors seemed to write just whatever they wanted to. But reading of the Mollie Horseman connection, I imagined her and Joan as two aunts or elders, passing down to me two things without me being aware of it: the desire to pick up a pen and write, and the name Vanessa.

I don't know how Joan Kerr found my Psychobabble zines back in the 1990s. Did she find them in Waterfront Records? Did someone give a copy to her, thinking she'd be interested in the re-emergence of zine culture? I like to picture her turning through its black and white pages and thinking it part of something bigger, and wondering where it might fit in, and then, seeing my name it clicking into place - here she was again, Vanessa, in a different form.

Although at the time of making Psychobabble I didn't consider it as "art" or as "writing", or myself an artist or writer, I slowly grew into these identities as I continued to make zines and expand beyond them. I often imagine identity like a kind of baboushka doll, with many versions of peoples' selves stacked up one inside the other. All the identities we have been or might have been. This dictionary entry was like finding evidence that one of the Vanessas had escaped and was living her own creative life.

I have long had an affinity for marginal things, places, stories and people that exist on the fringes of the mainstream and popular. I know that Joan's work with the Dictionary, and her interest in forms such as cartoons and illustration, especially those by women, was a way of redrawing the boundaries to include artists who had not been considered part of the history of Australian art. Collecting these artists together and suggesting connections between them was a way to populate and diversify this history. In this exhibition Raquel has picked up on some of the mysteries and suggestions that occurred through making this archive - and me and all the Vanessas are very delighted to be a part of it.