

FEMINISM and ART in 2013: a panel discussion

On the 9th March 2013, to coincide with International Women's Day, LEVEL artist run initiative hosted a one-day forum at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane to discuss *Feminism and Art in 2013*. LEVEL has been operating under the direction of Alice Lang and Rachael Haynes and myself* since January of 2010 in various ways; providing space and support to women artists at all stages of their career with a primary focus of facilitating discussion around gendered practice. We are interested in critical, informed and subjective voices. While there has been a renewed interest in feminism, with growing acceptance of the term and its meaning, it seems that the personal voice that was embraced in 'second wave feminism' has largely been discarded for a more academic approach. The experience of co-hosting and witnessing this critical, yet informal and welcoming event has once again reminded me of the power of collectivity. It is this spirit of community and its plural voices that I hope to capture here. Informed by the firm belief that the personal is (still) political, this article aims to contribute to the archiving of women's experience and voice in the 21st century.

The panel members included a variety of speakers: Lisa Bryan-Brown and Laura Castagnini are early career curators who practice with a feminist methodology at the core of their approach. Artists Megan Cope, Kelly Doley, Anita Holtsclaw and Leena Riethmuller have each been involved in discussions of varying degrees with LEVEL over the last three years and contribute an insightful perspective to the feminist conversation. Majena Mafe and Courtney Pedersen both have

varied practices that include but are not limited to making, curating and writing about art, and developing strong mentoring relationships with other practitioners within the field, each with feminist values at the fore. The panels were facilitated by leaders in the field of feminist enquiry: Julie Ewington, Head Curator at the Gallery of Modern Art has been involved from the very beginning of the feminist art movement in Australia and Catriona Moore, Senior Lecturer at The University of Sydney has written numerous pieces that are essential to the understanding of gendered practice. Each speaker provided insight into various practice-driven, curatorial and academic concerns. These varied though unified voices introduced and expanded issues and ideas that were relevant to them in their lives and their work, and encouraged an open dialogue with audience members. The topic was big, but this gave us the permission to ask big questions, and the broad scope encouraged generous open discussion and debate.

The day was separated into two panel discussions: 'Performing Feminisms' and 'Cross-generational Feminisms'. Each speaker was invited to engage broadly with the topic and to focus on their particular interests. For 'Performing Feminisms' we asked: Performance art and women – why is this connection so seemingly natural? What is it about performance that women find so relevant to their mode of expression? Is this connection the same as in early feminist art? Why is performance so gendered? And is it really? Does one perform feminism? What is 'the self' and how does this operate within our current society?



Each panellist presented from their own personal experience and perspective on the topic, and then engaged in a broader discussion with the audience. In the first session, Catriona outlined a history of women's engagement with performative practice, speaking of the corporeal, avant-garde approach that was often violent and bloody, the performance that sought to explore and deliver an 'authentic feminine voice,' a ritualistic practice that explored gendered practice at a fundamental level. Finally, she discussed whether artists can or do perform gender and/or feminism, focusing on the approach of 'doing feminism badly' as a way to engage in a renewed dialogue of contemporary issues in a humorous way.

Lisa talked about her approach to being a curator as a feminist, addressing the issues that arise in curatorial contexts, such as, which is the identity that comes first, and can a feminist curator be 'just' a curator at any given time? Majena focused on language and sound and the impact that these elements have had on women's lives over the decades (and centuries). These examples included the struggle of women to find their voice within the patriarchal framework, the censoring of performed experience in language, and the resulting use of sound to play with the 'unsayable'. Leena brought me to tears with her account of her evolving relationship with her mother, whose textile work has now become a part of her performative practice. Later, when I recounted to Courtney Pedersen that I had felt guilty about crying over someone else's story, she reminded me that the ongoing complications of the maternal relationship were relevant to all women, and that it wasn't really (just) Leena's story at all. Leena also highlighted her understanding of the androgynous and subsequently unifying materials of bodily excretion, and how her chosen materials of saliva, hair and nails can remove gender from the equation. And Anita discussed the role of the gaze and her particular interest in cinematic conventions of gender stereotypes and constructions, and spoke about wanting to be the subject of all of her works so as not to contribute to the objectification of other women.

To the panel members of 'Cross-generational Feminisms' we asked: With the recent resurgence in discussions of gender issues, how are we working together to move forward? What are our inherited legacies and what are we currently leaving behind for the next generation of women? How can we use cross-generational dialogue to continue to move forward? Or should we be trying something new? How do previous generations of feminists feel about the situation now, and vice versa? If 'second wave' feminists were the naughty daughters, are the new generation of feminists the well-behaved granddaughters? Where to now? These were tough questions to try to answer in a short time, and we covered significant ground.

Julie engaged the audience by introducing context to the discussion, giving insights on the history of, and her involvement in, the feminist art movement in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s. She spoke about the hardships of women in the past and expressed joy that she has seen change over the decades, clarifying however, that there is still much work to be done. Laura shared her fascination with 'early' feminist practice, highlighting her particular interest in feminism and humour, and the information that sometimes gets lost

in translation – as she pointed out, perhaps bra burning was intended to be funny! Kelly expressed frustration about those who continually claim that 'I'm not a feminist, but...' and you could instantly feel the solidarity in the room. She discussed her project, *The Learning Centre: Two Feminists* (2012), where she spent three weeks in one-on-one sessions learning from others about feminism. Courtney Pedersen discussed the vital role of mentoring for women with such passion and conviction that I'd be surprised if there weren't new mentoring relationships developed as a result. She spoke of a realness that is required in these relationships as much as professional advice. Finally, Megan brought a question mark with her to the table, hesitant to publicly claim a connection to feminism. She discussed her upbringing as a catalyst for her reserve; suggesting that by being raised on Stradbroke Island in a matriarchal community, surrounded by strong and independent women she inherited a 'legacy of positive power', and perhaps this was why the term feminism seemed somewhat irrelevant to her and the life she is living. Her proposal to the group was to simply keep the conversation going.

The passionate and open discussion that ensued proved to all of us that this day of exchange was indeed both wanted and needed. As a group, we spoke about the implications of care-giving (for both young and old), the relevance of defining terms, the need to look back in order to move forward, the different gender stereotypes presented in various communities and the different approaches to gendered practice in making, curating and writing, just to name a few of the issues that arose on the day. We ended with hesitation. One young woman remarked that at the end of the last panel that she did not want to leave – a testament to the desire that women have to talk about these issues, despite what some may think. The conversation didn't end even after we left the building, it continued long into the night – through an art opening and later at dinner, and for some of us, even later into the evening and onto the following day. It has inspired us (LEVEL) to already think about the next instalment and I, for one, cannot wait to continue this discussion. ■

* Caitlin Franzmann came on board as Project Manager at the start of 2013.

Courtney Coombs is a Brisbane-based artist and Founding Co-Director of LEVEL artist run initiative.

To listen to podcasts from the event visit <http://www.ciprecinct.qut.edu.au/archive/2013/feminism-art.jsp>

OPPOSITE LEFT: Courtney Coombs and Caitlin Franzmann *Focus* 2013, performance. **OPPOSITE RIGHT:** Courtney Coombs, Rachael Haynes and Alice Lang *We need to talk* 2012, audio installation. Photo: Lucy Parakhi. **BELOW:** Courtney Coombs *What Now?* 2013, digital print.

