

THIS IS NOT THE WORK

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LEVEL

Courtney Coombs

Caitlin Franzmann

Rachael Haynes

Anita Holtsclaw

Alice Lang

Courtney Pedersen

QUT CURATORIAL TEAM

Senior Curator, Digital Media Lubi Thomas

Exhibitions Officer Rachael Parsons

Assistant Project Officer Laura Brinin

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Steve Bourne

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO

Alison Clifford

Kym Maxwell

Nigel Oram

Samford Scout Group

Marianne Templeton

Blair Walkinshaw

Emily Wakeling

Vivian Zihert

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precinct

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THIS IS NOT THE WORK

LEVEL is an artist-run-initiative and feminist collective, co-founded in 2010 by Courtney Coombs, Rachael Haynes and Alice Lang; joined by Caitlin Franzmann, Anita Holtsclaw and Courtney Pedersen in 2013. LEVEL focuses on generating dialogue around gender, feminism and contemporary art through exhibitions, discussions, workshops and participatory works. Informing LEVEL's approach are models of collaboration and collectivity and a commitment to critical engagement with the diversity of women's contemporary arts practices. By strengthening relationships between artists, writers and curators, LEVEL seeks to provide a new platform for discussion; LEVELing the playing field.

For the exhibition *THIS IS NOT THE WORK*, LEVEL continues to explore alternative curatorial methods. The project responds to the question: 'how do feminist politics relate to the art institution, if it is not just about entering the latter but also [...] hoping to get across to some other social reality?' (Dimitrakaki 2013, 210). The collaborative process employed in producing this exhibition emphasised conversational and dialogic modes – actively constructing connections and challenging ideas in an evolving curatorial method. Collaboration has long been a method of feminist practice, but not an uncomplicated one. As thinkers, artists and creative practitioners, women are often battling to establish their own distinct identity in difficult circumstances, but collaboration offers the opportunity to move (at least temporarily) beyond this battle for self-assertion and enter into a dialogue with others that is mutually affirming. It also requires all participants to accept and work within a framework of diversity. As Gil Coleman and Ann Rippin have discussed with regard to their research, 'in describing our desired approach as collaborative, we are highlighting mutuality, and explicitly pointing to the different sorts of knowledge that partners in the collaboration bring' (Coleman and Rippin 2000, 576). This collective approach values a multiplicity of perspectives. While exhibitions are usually structured around a predetermined curatorial theme or vision, *THIS IS NOT THE WORK* has evolved in response to a range of practices and viewpoints. Over the duration of the project's development, these viewpoints have turned, shifted and flexed in response to conversations between artists and collaborators in the project. By effectively surrendering overarching control, the project rejects the contemporary celebration of 'management' as the pre-eminent form of creativity.

Surveying a selection of community-engaged creative projects from different locations around the world, this exhibition followed the pathways of women-centred social networks in order to initiate further collaboration and conversation. Reaching out to artists, curators and collaborators from previous LEVEL projects as an initial starting point, this network has expanded to include a range of projects that traverse the line between 'art' and 'community based' practice. The projects range from political responses to environmental issues, artist's engagements with diverse communities of women in order to facilitate various forms of expression, social activism, pedagogical approaches, and craft-based interventions. To extend this networked and inclusive curatorial method further, the reading room in the exhibition includes resources and documentation from an array of organisations and projects, invited through an open call process. The exhibition invites its audience to be part of its broader mission. Women and their friends are encouraged to occupy the space and take part in its activities.

The projects documented in this exhibition are examples of artists working with women and community in challenging and unpredictable ways, demonstrating feminist strategies and a commitment to non-hierarchical and collective structures. Many of these projects operate in the interstices between art and community

contexts, and are either excluded from museums and galleries, or choose to operate outside of these institutions. This exhibition re-examines and problematizes the hierarchies that operate between these contexts and the power dynamics inherent within this legitimising process. As Grant Kester suggests, 'rather than posit a hierarchy between museum-based art and projects developed in non-art environments, it is more appropriate to think of these as two equally productive sites, each with its own appropriate strategies and potential compromises' (Kester 2004, 188-189).

Feminist practices have been actively engaged at the forefront of these issues since the 1970s and this historical context is important to consider in the contemporary turn to 'the social'. Numerous commentators, including George Baker and Liam Gillick, have pointed out how the legacy of feminism was largely ignored in the rush to embrace Nicholas Bourriaud's term 'Relational Aesthetics' in the late 1990s (Reckitt 2013, 140). Bourriaud described what he defined as a *new* development in art: socially engaged arts practices that took as their 'theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space' (Bourriaud 2002, 113). The influence of his text was far-reaching, and 'relational' became a catch-all term for social, community orientated, activist and site-reflexive projects, both within and outside of the gallery. As Angela Dimitrakaki points out, the ensuing artistic activity and debate displayed a blatant disregard for the collective and affective forms of work that have long been adopted and adapted by women artists and feminist groups (Dimitrikaki 2013, 47). *THIS IS NOT THE WORK* joins other contemporary curatorial projects that reclaim the 'relational' or 'social practice' space in the art world as an explicitly feminist and activist one.

LEVEL uses the gallery as a conceptual base-camp or frontline, rather than just a site of display. The exhibition brings together textual and photographic documentation, material culture, ephemera, digital resources and workshops. The title of the exhibition, *THIS IS NOT THE WORK*, questions where the 'art work' takes place and emphasises its location 'elsewhere'. The work gains significance both through its documentary modes and its primary sites of engagement, in each case inviting the potential for radical activism. It questions the necessarily flexible dividing line between art and community-based feminist practice. By reinstating this important feminist legacy, the exhibition engages with and challenges some of the most dominant discourses in art today. It does not represent a nostalgic return to the strategies of second-wave feminism, but a contemporary feminist reclamation of the processes of collaboration and negotiation that open up a myriad of future possibilities. This is not the work; the work goes on.

LEVEL

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