

open space

114 | recipes and revolutions: consciousness-raising and feminist picnics

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The intimate connection between food and feminism was well documented in the consciousness-raising groups of the second wave. As Miriam Schapiro (1972, p. 269) observed in 1972, 'the kitchen was a battleground where women fought with their mothers for their appropriate state of comfort and love'. LEVEL was founded in Australia in 2010, initially as an all-women space with dedicated exhibition, studio and residency programmes, and has since evolved into a feminist collective realising a complex of projects in different locations and contexts. The five current Co-directors of the initiative, Courtney Coombs, Caitlin Franzmann, Rachael Haynes, Anita Holtsclaw and Courtney Pedersen, are artists and feminists, each with their own working definition/s of feminism and its role in society. Ongoing conversation and sharing of personal experience are integral to the way that we as LEVEL negotiate difference and collaborative decision-making within the collective. Employing the format of the picnic, socially engaged artworks such as *We Need to Talk* (2013–ongoing) extend LEVEL's open-ended dialogue around gender equality to the public domain.

We Need to Talk is an ongoing series of public workshops and feminist picnics where all are welcome to participate. The project celebrates the melding of the political and personal through the sharing of food and ideas. As part of this, *We Need to Talk (Recipe for a Revolution)* (2014) was a public event held at the Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA), Brisbane, where participants devised a collective social 'recipe' by conversing and sharing food at a mass picnic. By bringing significant recipes and plates of food to the picnic rug, the participants connected through personal narratives. This group was diverse in terms of genders, social backgrounds, political persuasions and individual histories. The project discussed the role food plays in women's lives, whether the kitchen is a playground or the battleground that Schapiro described forty years ago, and how we can use the idea of the recipe—as a shared set of ingredients and methods—to open up possibilities for activism and advocate for change, while acknowledging difference and diversity in women's experiences and identities.

feminism, collaboration and collectives

Largely inspired by the collective models of second-wave feminism, LEVEL utilises collaborative methods and is committed to critical engagement with gender and social space. Identifying with the concerns of 1970s all-women exhibitions and projects in the United States, such as A.I.R (New York), Womanspace (Los Angeles) and Artemisia (Chicago), LEVEL formed as a direct response to the continued underrepresentation of women artists in Australian public galleries and collections.¹ As an artist-focussed and operated space, LEVEL has provided opportunities through dedicated exhibition and residency programmes. Such spaces, or 'feminist locations' as Joanna Gardner-Hugget (2012, p. 57) characterises them, operate as sites for dialogue and resistance. This twin set of concerns is at the heart of the LEVEL programme. While initially setting out to determine another all-women space, it is the capacity for real and radical social change (a revolution, no less) that motivates the project *We Need to Talk*, as well as each member of the collective. In this way, LEVEL builds on the strategies of alternative spaces that emerged during second-wave feminist movements and considers how the cooperative or feminist collective can be relevant and employed in contemporary art and society. This resonates with Lisa Bloom's (2003, p. 21) conception of 'feminist networks', in which she argues for replacing any grand narrative of feminism with dialogic models that are context-rich and collaborative in nature.

Collaboration has long been a method of feminist practice, but not an uncomplicated one. Feminist collectives and cooperatives employ anti-patriarchal management and governance methods that reflect women's values and experiences (Gardner-Huggett, 2012, p. 60). This approach often involves lengthy decision-making processes; however, investment of time and commitment to listening, as much as voicing ideas, are at the core of LEVEL's strategy. This approach also requires participants to accept and work within a framework of diversity. As Gil Coleman and Ann Rippin (2000, p. 576) 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'. The challenge for the collaborative work of LEVEL is to negotiate diversity rather than succumb to the lure of a coercive consensus. The ideas shared by the individual members of LEVEL are often divergent, and we have come to understand that this diversity of voices and viewpoints is integral to the feminist project. Providing an open forum, where these ideas can be voiced and questioned, extends our individual as well as collective understandings of the complexity of feminist experience today. LEVEL recognises that maintaining openness and resisting the illusion of a 'resolution' is particularly complex when working within rigid timeframes and institutional demands for clarity and coherence. For this reason, *We Need to Talk* has taken the form of the never-finished conversation, moving across locations and timeframes, with each chapter opening up to the next, reflecting our own interest in continuing the complex conversation of gender equality, difference and diversity in women's experiences.

Central to this effort has been the dialogue-focussed approach of consciousness-raising, another central methodology of the feminist movement in the 1970s (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000, pp. 13–14). As Vivien Green Fryd (2007, p. 36) has explained, 'Feminist consciousness-raising became the prime educational and organizing program of the women's liberation movement. Intended to raise awareness

¹This is documented by the CoUNTess website, an ongoing project dedicated to collecting data regarding gender representation in the Australian contemporary art world since 2008; CoUNTess: Women count in the artworld, 'The Countess report', <http://countesses.blogspot.com.au/2016/03/the-countess-report.html> [last accessed 2 November 2016].

and understanding of women's lives and concerns, the group dynamics raised consciousness that the "personal is political" and that individual concerns were not unique but common among women'. Through collective work, we have found that the political thread of patriarchy can be brought to the fore and challenged through the sharing of personal experiences. However, the collective remains aware that diversity and differences of experiences, backgrounds and contexts also need to be recognised in this process. As Agerstoun and Auther (2006, p. viii) argue, the appeal of these methods, now as then, is their ability to 'subvert the myth of individual artistic genius, use art as a teaching tool, mitigate the isolation of women artists in the art world, and uncover and underscore previously hidden aspects of women's lives'.

art, ethics and food

Alongside the rise of second-wave feminism, an 'increasing number of artists set aside conventional object making in favour of idea-, process- and performance-based work' (Smith, 2013, p. 14), often choosing to operate outside of traditional art galleries. A number of predominantly male-led artist-run restaurants and salons were founded in the 1960s and 1970s in an attempt to bridge the divide between art and life. However, Stephanie Smith (*ibid.*) argues that 'women created many of the most notable meal-based artworks of this period' that in many cases 'radicalized the form and function of the private domestic meal' and encouraged a rethinking of 'femininity' and 'the domestic'. Since this period, Juliana Engberg (1999) states, 'the joining of women, food and art has been about mixing a metaphoric concoction of consciousness raising, community and corporeality'.

Food and the sharing of meals often formed an integral part of feminist activities in Los Angeles in the 1970s. As a key participant, the artist Suzanne Lacy, reflecting on her time as a student and her shift in consciousness, noted: 'I resented doing the dishes while men talked in the living room, but the kitchen and the women doing the dishes became a much more interesting place to be—even THE place to be' (Smith, 2013, p. 78). As Elke Krasny (2009, p. 260) observes, 'Open dialectics traverse the kitchen space, where revolutions come about only very slowly, but also become extremely effective on a micro-political level'. In the *International Dinner Party* (1979), Suzanne Lacy and Linda Pruess invited women from around the world to host a global dinner party to celebrate living women in their community.² Collecting women's own stories about their life experiences was central to the spirit of the work.

Food-based projects re-emerged in the 1990s with the trend towards collaborative and dialogical practice. In Australia, this was typified by the work of Anne Graham, whose situational works during the 1993 Sculpture Triennial in Melbourne and elsewhere established urban food camps.³ The power of these works was derived from their location outside the gallery; as Susan Best (2001) observed, 'what we learn from Graham's performances is that domesticity can be a portable action'. Deep cultural and emotional associations with food also render it an ideal material for making the unspoken or unexamined

²See Suzanne Lacy, 'International Dinner Party (1979), Suzanne Lacy and Linda Pruess', <http://www.suzannelacy.com/international-dinner-party/> [last accessed 28 February 2015].

³See Anne Graham, 'Streetlight—The Fifth Australian Sculpture Triennial, Melbourne, curated by David Hanson, 1993', <http://www.annegraham.info/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/anne-graham-streetlight-1993.pdf> [last accessed 2 November 2016].

physically present. A compelling example of this is Dutch-Indonesian artist Mella Jaarsma's work *Pribumi–Pribumi* (1998). After the anti-Chinese riots that took place in Indonesia in 1998, Jaarsma produced her first political performance work. As a response to the rape and murder of Indonesian women of Chinese ethnicity, Jaarsma and her friends cooked frog's legs in the street and offered them to passers-by. The offering of this traditionally Chinese dish effectively invited strangers to inhabit the tastebuds of an ethnic minority, while encouraging discussion of the treatment of Chinese and other groups in Indonesian society (Antoinette, 2007, p. 223).

Several global survey exhibitions have recently taken the production and sharing of food as a curatorial theme, including *Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art* (Smith, 2012) at the Smart Museum; *Eating the Universe* (2009) at Kunsthalle Dusseldorf; and the recent *Harvest* (2014) exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane—where LEVEL's *We Need to Talk (Recipe for a Revolution)* took place. In these exhibitions, the meal is understood both as attending to a basic physiological need and as a site of pleasure, conviviality, dialogue, sharing and politics. These exhibitions have also reflected on what underlies the everyday activities of the kitchen: the societal norms, memories, cultural histories and codes of behaviour that make women's relationships with food highly complex and ambivalent.

LEVEL initiated its own food-based projects in the contexts of both the history of feminist art practice and the more contemporary resurgence of interest in food's symbolic and sensual possibilities as material for political art. These histories and contexts also shape the relationships that LEVEL has developed with museums. Our projects have literally skirted around the edges of major institutions; intentionally embracing an ambiguous position in the art world through strategic engagement with peripheral sites and spaces. These spaces—proximal to the museum, under its protection but separate nonetheless—are temporarily designated as safe spaces for feminist discussion, where lived experience is tested against the artistic legacy of important earlier works.

Food for Thought and We Need to Talk

LEVEL's first collaborative work in this mode, *Food for Thought* (2012), was developed in 2012 for the Next Wave Festival in Melbourne as an invited response to Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979). As its installation in the Melbourne Exhibition Building in 1988 prompted furious discussion about the significance and visibility of Australian feminist art practice since the 1960s (MacNeill, 2008), *The Dinner Party* has particular significance for a local audience. Acknowledging its importance in feminist art history, LEVEL intended to pay homage to Chicago's work, while also exploring its problematics and potential relevance for feminism in the twenty-first century.

Food for Thought included a reading corner and dining table set up in the gallery, with handmade feminist banners suspended overhead. Over the eight-day festival period, LEVEL hosted four dinner parties, to which were invited a selection of academics, artists, curators and writers from around the country to attend, as well as members of the broader public through an anonymous ballot process. Aligning with the idea that 'honest communicating among women is a revolutionary act' (Baumgardner and Richards, 2000), the work responded to the proposition that a revolution can start at the dinner

table. Subsequently reflecting on *Food for Thought*, LEVEL agreed that the work needed to move into the public realm, where an unrestricted number of participants could be invited; *We Need to Talk* was the result. The transition to public picnics highlighted the importance for feminist discussion to move from private spaces and into forms of activism. Revolution may start at the dinner table, but it manifests in the street.

In 2013, LEVEL was invited to host a picnic in association with the exhibition *War is Over (If You Want It!): Yoko Ono* at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney; in this context, *We Need to Talk* (2013) operated in a conceptually and physically liminal zone. Though it was advertised and managed by the public programme and education team, the museum's curators understood that the picnic was an artwork. *We Need to Talk* took place on the front lawn of the MCA, a piece of precious Sydney real estate overlooking the Opera House usually more popular with tourists than museum visitors. Polemical banners from the *Food for Thought* dinner parties metamorphosed into cobbled-together picnic cloths. Participants were asked to respond to the statement 'I want a world where...' by writing on small index cards their suggestions, which were shared to prompt discussion. Each cluster discussed the difficulties that women experience in their work and personal lives and—most importantly—how they imagined a fairer world. As the afternoon drew to a close, LEVEL drew up a manifesto of demands and delivered it outside the museum under the Yoko Ono banner.

We Need to Talk (Recipe for a Revolution)

Energised by the discussions of its previous dinner parties and picnics, LEVEL hosted *We Need to Talk (Recipe for a Revolution)*, as part of the *Harvest* exhibition at the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane, to further explore the possibilities of the site of the picnic as a place for social revolution. Reflecting on LEVEL's work, Linda Carroli (2014, p. 48) noted, 'While the group, through its support of female artists, aspires to "LEVELing the playing field", they are also changing the nature and composition of the field by offering alternative spatial and social ecologies for developing cultural capital'. It is this ecological change of the art world and contemporary society more broadly that *We Need to Talk (Recipe for a Revolution)* sought to imagine by creating a collaborative recipe.

Participants of this picnic were invited to bring along a plate of food and a treasured recipe, and to discuss the role food plays in women's lives. They were asked how a 'recipe'—as a shared set of ingredients and methods—could be used as a strategic map towards a better world. As in LEVEL's previous works, the sharing of food facilitated a non-hierarchical exchange among participants. Sharing cooking stories reopened gendered discussions about the loaded site of the kitchen, as well as the social role of food. Embracing the fluid nature of dialogue, the conversations ranged across wildly varying topics. Some addressed the patriarchal nature of a single list of instructions and proposed a collaborative and open-ended recipe comprised of many approaches and many voices as a solution to this problem. While food provided the common ground for the conversations at the picnic, the final list of desired ingredients and methods was as diverse as the participants involved:

Recipe for a Revolution

ingredients

People; Free education; Free childcare; Gender-integrated sports; Honest, open and inclusive sex education; Solidarity and collectivity; Safe spaces; Courage and resilience; Empathy, respect and compassion; Energy; Fun, laughter and hope; Creativity; Resources; Action, and more action

method

1. Learn from previous experience; engage with history
2. Add ingredients as needed
3. Taste, touch, smell
4. Talk, listen, share
5. Take risks
6. Build networks
7. Support each other
8. Be ethical, be vigilant
9. Celebrate the wins
10. Dress as desired
11. Enforce quotas
12. Invite everyone
13. Make power structures visible
14. Practice, repeat, revise
15. Mix well
16. Agitate when necessary
17. Share equally

While veterans of feminist activism may be familiar with these conclusions, demanding originality of consciousness-raising activity misses the point. For each generation of women and their friends, the realisation that patriarchal values shape and restrict their lives is a revelation that requires examination. The tension between second- and third-wave feminists over the apparent rehashing of old arguments has been noted before. As Kimberley Springer (2005, p. 6) has observed, 'One aspect of the generational tensions between feminists in general is the frustration older feminists feel at watching younger women reinvent the wheels of social change'. For women who experienced the feminist campaigns of the 1970s, this 'recipe' may appear self-evident, but while previous generations of feminists feel exasperated by the repetition of these realisations, they know all too well how and why this cultural amnesia occurs. As sexual violence, ever-increasing invigilation of the body and economic austerity's disproportionate impact on women leave their mark, the presumption of individualistic privilege, which third-wave feminism took as a given ten years ago (Henry, 2005), has been revealed as a smoke-and-mirrors trick. Contemporary consciousness-raising is important because of the silences that continue to exist regarding women's lived experiences and aspirations. Structurally, society has not changed enough to even guarantee that young women will be aware of the struggles their mothers have faced, let alone how they

may directly benefit from them. As hooks (1995, p. 639) advised in the 1990s, 'consciousness raising groups, gatherings and public meetings need to become a central aspect of feminist practice again. Women need spaces where we can explore intimately and deeply all aspects of female experience'. *We Need to Talk* creates a space for this ongoing conversation.

recipes for a revolution: women, public space and food

Drawing on the heritage of feminist artworks and activism for contextual relevance and developing strategies for engagement, LEVEL has developed a series of works that utilises consciousness-raising approaches of second-wave feminism, such as collectivity, collaboration and protest. The repetition of the consciousness-raising exercise poses serious challenges in the area of art practice, where originality and innovation are still highly valued. By self-consciously referencing the conceptual and aesthetic frameworks of feminist art practices and their relationships with consciousness-raising, LEVEL draws attention to the inherent tensions at play. As such, LEVEL operates as a discursive space between contemporary art and feminisms. However, as a form of contemporary consciousness-raising, *We Need to Talk* does not represent a nostalgic return to these strategies; it is a contemporary feminist reclamation of participatory art processes that extends current interest in the potential of conversation, opens up possibilities for activism and advocates for change.

The visceral and communal qualities of food have provided a central logic for the development of LEVEL's work. From structured dinner parties and picnics to collective political rallies, it has evolved from the starting point of scoping the landscape of contemporary feminist activity, to surveying the desires of women today, to displaying a more focussed united political voice. In these projects, each of which has given voice to individuals in a collective setting, food has been the primary vehicle in enabling women and their friends to gather, discuss, argue and share private and emotional experiences, thoughts and feelings. The informal setting of the shared meal has eased the sharing of intense and sometimes personal subject matter. As the culmination of our collective projects to date, the structure of the recipe has provided a younger cohort of women, for whom organised politics can be foreign and intimidating, with an entry point to political imagination, as well as with a cross-generational point of reference.

While LEVEL originally envisioned the picnic as a political Trojan horse for sneaking in radical consciousness under the patchwork rug, it has become apparent that the very act of sitting en masse in a public space and eating food that has not been 'governed' or even 'curated' is potentially subversive in and of itself. The picnic may once have been seen just as a wholesome pastime, but in an era of asynchronous eating—when so many people eat quickly and alone—the invitation to sit, eat and talk for as long as it feels comfortable and desirable, constitutes an act of resistance. The pursuit, celebration and negotiation of these differences are at the heart of LEVEL's cultural activism. *We Need to Talk* utilises the simple premise of sharing food and conversation as a means to establish nurturing connections between women, sustaining ideas through shared experiences and feeding the active potential for change in the political and personal spaces of our daily lives.

author biography

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