



Linsey Gosper, *Furie*, 2011, c-type print, 90 x 107cm; from the solo exhibition *Object Love*, Stills Gallery, Sydney 1 to 25 February 2012. Image courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery, Sydney

## To the person who said feminism is over as though she was right

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Not so long ago, someone I wouldn't have expected to say it told me that, in relation to art, feminism was *dead* and – much worse than dead – *passée*. These assertions, delivered in a slightly bored voice but definitively, like a briefcase snapping shut, have so much evidence running against them that I'm not sure what she meant by feminism or, for that matter, art. Facts oppose the first claim of death and you might think self-interest, as well as facts, would oppose the second of irrelevance.

Actually, over the last five or six years, identification with feminism among Australian artists and curators, and especially younger artists and curators, has increased rather than diminished. Numerous small- to medium-sized exhibitions and talks with feminism or a surrogate concept in the title and rationale have ranged from the academically inclined *Different Temporalities: Aspects of feminist art practice from 1975-1985* at MUMA to events staged by the more playfully named Dawn Conspiracy and Cherchez la Femme. (I see from the list in the footnote that many of them have been in Melbourne, which may reflect either my localism or something more interesting).<sup>1</sup> Even without the explicit

connection, feminism – a project to include and recognise women's experiences, points of view and actual selves in the mainstream of culture – is implicit in plenty of other art projects. An abstract painter to whom I mentioned the claim in the first paragraph said crisply that feminism had made it possible for her to still have a career in her fifties.

So pervasive is the reach of feminism in contemporary art that it's both evident and invisible in the work of many male practitioners. Djon Mundine developed *Cold Eels and Distant Thoughts*, a long-running exhibition of black-and-white photos of Indigenous men by male Indigenous photographers as a response to the demonisation of Aboriginal men by the Intervention's rhetoric and policies.<sup>2</sup> No one connected with it is claiming it as a feminist show, but feminism and feminist art have helped to make it both possible and intelligible in a way that means you hardly notice the walls are full of men (as I'd say if I didn't think it would be misunderstood). North American artist and writer Carey Lovelace said, the 'mix of psychological inquiry, politics and art is only one of the gifts that first generation feminism has left'.<sup>3</sup>





Vivienne Binns, *Vag Den*, 1967, synthetic polymer paint and enamel on composition board, 122 x 91.5 x 2.5cm. Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, © Vivienne Binns





2/ (foreground) Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*, 2001, fabric and stainless steel, 227.3 x 38.2 x 30.4cm. Installation view, *21st Century: Art in the First Decade*, 2010/11, Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane. Image courtesy Cheim & Reid New York, Galerie Karsten Greve, Cologne and St Moritz, and Hauser & Wirth, Zurich, London and New York

Likewise, the small group show of both male and female artists, *Into the closet*, that ran for a couple of weeks in 2008 at the Carlton Hotel and Studios in Melbourne, would have been in some ways undoable and indecipherable without feminism. Ostensibly about men's dress and dandyism – 'panache' as the curator Geoff Nees put it – the show carried a charge of insecurity about what was under the empty clothes, and an anxiety to please with what covered the invisible body that got its context and language from feminism.

Or compare Phuong Ngo's long one-shot video *How to make spring rolls and other Vietnamese cultural traits* (2011) with the various gladiatorially competitive food shows currently on TV. In *How to make spring rolls* Phuong's mother Thien Thi Kieu Thai gives him a cooking lesson in her Adelaide kitchen while he tries to get her talking about how and why members of their family came to Australia. This modest but absorbing portrait of their relationship, mixing cookery, politics and personal histories, joins certain feminist artists in the kitchen, whereas *MasterChef* colonises, industrialises and almost militarises the same space for male authority with its parade ground-sized cook-a-teria, matching uniforms, rankings and submission to arbitrary disciplines.

During the same half dozen or so years that feminism has been spelled out again in art, women's presence in certain major exhibitions, art institution collections and publicly funded galleries has declined (as the amount of blue for boys on the pie and bar charts in the CoUNTess blog shows<sup>4</sup>).

CoUNTess has been sporadically checking the gender balance in Australian art since 2008. A post in late April showed the relative numbers of men and women who exhibited last year in eight publicly funded contemporary art

spaces. Only one, 24 Hour Art in Darwin, showed more women than men, with Brisbane's IMA (or the Institute of Men's Art as CoUNTess calls it) just beating Adelaide's CACSA to bottom place with 82% male artists exhibited to only 18% female.<sup>5</sup> CoUNTess's posts on the Kaldor collection, Sydney Biennale, MCA new acquisitions and Adelaide Biennial of Art also make entertaining and informative reading.

Meanwhile, during the last decade in the USA numerous large survey exhibitions of work by women particularly from 1960s and 70s have re-positioned that work for new audiences.<sup>6</sup> These exhibitions were not just nostalgic tributes to an interesting, closed chapter in art history but surveys of 'the most important artistic movement since World War II' as Blake Gopnik's review of *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* in the *Washington Post* put it.<sup>7</sup>

It's easy to forget that feminism brought to contemporary art combinations of new subject matter, materials, aesthetic and curatorial strategies, ways of working, ideas about who the artist is and the viewer's role in the work that have been so completely naturalised over the last half-century they now seem normal and inevitable. In particular – crucially and causatively – feminism brought *women* and women's experiences into the middle of the masculine stronghold of high modernism, and changed it.

In 2010 artist Lynn Hershman Leeson released *WAR Women Art Revolution: A secret history*, her visceral eighty-three-minute video history of the US women's art movement. Built around interviews with artists, curators and writers collected in the mid-1960s and mid-2000s (among them Yvonne Rainer, Nancy Spero, Judy Chicago, Adrian Piper, B. Ruby Rich, Faith Ringgold, Howardina Pindell, Martha Rosler, Martha Wilson, Joyce Kozloff, Judith Braca and Lucy Lippard), it took forty years to make. Leeson said in the voiceover that she waited that long for the right ending, keeping the tapes under the bed with early work of hers that a male buyer returned in 1975 on realising the artist was female. A couple of decades later, when she sold the rejected work for 9000 times the original asking price, it financed the production.<sup>8</sup>

Film critic Ruby Rich speaking about this challenging historical document and brilliant piece of gestalt said its importance was 'that it truly recaptures an era when ... positions were being worked out, and ... fought over'.<sup>9</sup>

Over the same period, there have been no projects in Australia exactly comparable with these American ones, the Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art's recent *Contemporary Australia Women* notwithstanding. Though a welcome event with a feminist background, this is not a historical show and GOMA eschewed the word feminism in its branding. It is, rather, a survey curated by Julie Ewington of some contemporary art practice by Australian women whose name accurately advertises its content, unlike that of GOMA's 2010 show, *21st Century: Art in the First Decade*, which included nearly 70% men.

Two decades ago, art historian the late Joan Kerr (1938–2004) initiated a three-part women's art project from her base at the Power Institute using Australian Research Council funding. There were three main outcomes. The first, the encyclopaedic *Heritage: The women's art book, 500 works by 500 Australian women artists from colonial times to 1955*,<sup>10</sup> appeared in 1995 on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of International

Women's Year. A huge collective effort, with several hundred writers besides Kerr and her colleague Anita Callaway, it is fascinating, scholarly, very readable and incredibly useful.

The project also produced the *National Women's Art Exhibition* organised by Kerr and Jo Holder with more than 150 exhibitions of both historical and contemporary art by women spread out across the country from a cluster around International Women's Day, March 1995. Finally, Kerr and Holder edited *Past and Present: The National Women's Art Anthology* memorialising and critiquing the program with reflective commissioned texts, extracts from catalogue essays and reviews of particular shows.<sup>11</sup>

*Heritage* is now, infuriatingly, out of print (the plates either lost or destroyed) but still so much in demand you can pay up to \$600 for a secondhand copy.<sup>12</sup> *Past and Present* is also out of print, and apart from copies of the newsprint guide to the art exhibition that are held in libraries and personal collections, the main public memory of this huge undertaking is in the online CVs of those who participated in it. In a sense this colossal enterprise has already been publically forgotten in less than twenty years, sunk in the same bucket of amnesia as the huge 1907 *Exhibition of Women's Work* at the Exhibition Building in Melbourne and numerous now overlooked exhibitions and books of significant women's art produced in the past.<sup>13</sup>

Talking about the way important Australian books have slid out of print through neglect, the director of the Melbourne Writers' Festival, Steve Grimwade, said '... without some recognition and understanding of our literary history we're forever focused on the new – as if history, knowledge and culture don't play a part in our understanding of ourselves.'<sup>14</sup>

If there's a problem, that's it right there; not a mythical use-by-date for feminism, but the possibility of complete historical rupture followed by wheel reinvention at some later date. But not yet.

Isobel Crombie and Maggie Finch at the National Gallery of Victoria are preparing a major Sue Ford retrospective to run from mid-2014 and until early 2015.<sup>15</sup> It would be hard to over-estimate the importance of Sue Ford as a photographer and film-maker or her ability to connect with salient detail. She worked consistently from the early 1960s till her death in 2009 using her own experience as a starting point. Her series *Woman consumed*, made in 1962 at the Little Collins Street studio she shared with artist Annette Stevens (the figure among the salvaged point-of-sale signs and over-sized packets in those images), is a harbinger of a diverse body of later work by multiple artists dealing with oppressive domesticity and overbearing consumerism. (It pre-dates Martha Rosler's now frequently shown 1975 video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* by thirteen years, and Barbara Kruger's use of advertising slogans by seventeen.)



1/ Linsey Gosper, *Domestic Python*, 2011, c-type print, 90 x 107cm; from the solo exhibition *Object Love*, 2012, Stills Gallery, Sydney



Sue Ford, *Woman Consumed 1*, 1962, black-and-white print, 20 x 21.28cm. © Viscopy



Alex Martinis Roe, *Telling stories*, 2011, two-channel installation of online video conference recordings of Razia Parveen, Wendy Webster and Alex Martinis Roe, 15:08min, 5:35min. Image courtesy and © Courtesy the artist; photo Viki Petherbridge=



Overlapping and complementing the NGV show, the Monash Gallery of Art in the outer Melbourne suburb of Wheeler's Hill is staging a exhibition of feminist photography from the 1970s and '80s, towards the end of 2014.

For 2013, Margaret Lawrence Gallery manger Vikki McInnes and independent curator, writer and artist Laura Castignini are organising an exhibition around humour and feminism – 'an array of funny feminists' aligning contemporary artists with figures from recent feminist art history.<sup>16</sup> The brief speaking tour to Melbourne in May by two Guerrilla Girls founders, Frida Kahlo and Käthe Kollwitz, was a precursor to that exhibition.

The Art Gallery of NSW on the other hand is attempting the impossible by promising this year to tell the story of contemporary art through the Kaldor collection, which includes only two women among nearly 200 male artists.

More pertinently, the young Brisbane feminist collective of Alice Lang, Rachael Haynes, and Courtney Coombs at LEVEL ('LEVELing the playing field.')

<sup>17</sup> organised *Food for Thought*, four dinner parties of ten invited guests each for Melbourne's Next Wave Festival around subjects including 'Generations: plurality and difference' and 'How can art contribute to political change for women in the 21st century?' They are, their website says, building connections between visual artists of different generations and providing 'a new platform for discussion'.

Travelling down the same road in a more extensively theorised vehicle is Alex Martinis Roe who is part of the exhibition *Post-planning* curated by Bala Starr at the Ian Potter Museum, Melbourne University (on until late July). Martinis Roe, who lives between Australia and Berlin, describes herself as 'making artworks that create and document spaces for ethical relations'.<sup>18</sup>

Her aesthetically blunt and very smart *Genealogies: Frameworks for Exchange* (2011-2012) records conversations between pairs of feminist intellectuals of different generations or relations to power or knowledge, but withholds most of the content from the viewer. Thus the conversationalists can speak to each other without having to think how they might sound to an audience or deal with what one of her participants, Carla Cruz, called 'spectacle logic'.<sup>19</sup> Through her constructive exploration of 'textual relations' between different generations of feminists Martinis Roe is doing what is necessary to proceed.

That's some of what I've got to say to the first paragraph.

1. Among them, *Feminist Actions*, Spacemint, Melbourne, 2006 (curated by Veronica Tello); *Bird Girls*, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Melbourne, 2007 (Kate Daw and Vikki McInnes); *Girls, Girls, Girls*, Carlton Hotel, Melbourne, 2008 (Nat Thomas and Lyndal Walker); *A Time Like This*, Margaret Lawrence Gallery, 2008 (Samantha Comte, Jirra Lulla Harvey, Kate Rhodes and Meredith Turnbull) as part of the project *Are We There Yet?* which was supported by the Victorian College of the Arts and the National Council of Women of Victoria for the 100 year celebration of Victorian women's suffrage; *The View From Here: 19 Perspectives on Feminism*, West Space, Melbourne 2009 (Claire Rae and Victoria Bennett); *The Feminist Salon Group, The Envelope Residency*, The West Wing, West Space Project Site, Melbourne, 2010 (co-ordinated by Caroline Phillips and Sarah Lynch); and *A Different Temporality: Aspects of Australian feminist art practice 1975-1985*, MUMA 2011 (Kyla McFarlane).

2. Its seventh appearance, at Monash Gallery of Art, Wheelers Hill, 30



Phuong Ngo, *How to make spring rolls and other Vietnamese cultural traits*, 2011, still from single-channel digital video, 52min. Image courtesy the artist

April to 3 June 2012, included Michael Aird, Mervyn Bishop, Adam Hill, Gary Lee, Peter Yanada McKenzie, Ricky Maynard, Michael Riley and Jason Wing

3. 'Feminism at 40', *Art in America*, 2003, p. 73.

4. <http://countesses.blogspot.com.au/>

5. The others were PICA, Artspace, Gertrude Contemporary and CAST.

6. They included *Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art of the 1970s*, White Columns, New York, 2002; *Personal and Political: The Women's Art Movement, 1969-1975*, Guild Hall Museum, NY, 2002; *Global Feminisms*, Brooklyn Museum, NY, 2007; and *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, which opened at MOCA, Los Angeles in 2007, and finished three venues later at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2009. In differently focused exhibitions, the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography staged Michiko Kasahara's *Life Actually: The Works of Contemporary Japanese Women* in 2005, and the Manchester Art Gallery hosted Patricia Allmer's recuperative *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* in 2009. In 2010 and 2011 respectively MOMA New York and the Pompidou Centre, Paris dug into their own collections for *Modern Women: Women Artists at The Museum of Modern Art*, and *Elles@Centrepompidou*.

7. 'What is Feminist Art?', April 22, 2007, and available at [www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/20](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/20)

8. The website [www.womenartrevolution.com](http://www.womenartrevolution.com) leads to the American distributor and hours of interviews not included in the video.

9. 'Miriam Bale, 'Women Art and Revolution: An Interview with B Ruby Rich'', *Slant Magazine*: [www.slantmagazine.com/house/2011/06/women-art-and-revolution-an-interview-with-b-ruby-rich/](http://www.slantmagazine.com/house/2011/06/women-art-and-revolution-an-interview-with-b-ruby-rich/)

10. Craftsman House, Sydney.

11. Craftsman House, Sydney, 1999.

12. Some biographical content from *Heritage* is available without images on Design and Art Australia Online at [www.daa.org.au/](http://www.daa.org.au/)

13. For information about the 1907 event see the catalogue produced by the Castlemaine Art Gallery and Historical Museum in 2007, *Portrait of an exhibition: centenary celebration of the First Australian Exhibition of Women's Work 1907*.

14. Amanda Dunn, 'A loss for words: winning books hit the dust', *The Sunday Age*, 29 April, 2012, p. 1-2.

15. Following *Time Machine*, a smaller 2011 exhibition of Ford's work at Monash Gallery of Art in outer metropolitan Melbourne in 2011 and at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery till the end of June this year. *Time Machine* featured the last series Ford developed before her death in 2009, the 47-part *Self-Portrait with Camera*, of which there is also a small excellent book, *Sue Ford: Self Portrait with Camera 1960-2006*, published by the MGA in 2011.

16. From their working brief. The project is supported financially by NAVA's Curator Mentorship Initiative, the Copyright Agency Limited's Career Industries Fund and the Victorian College of the Arts.

17. <http://levelari.org/>

18. 'Letter: Milan Women's Bookstore Collective' from Alex Martinis Row (ed.), *Genealogies: Conditions*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, 2012, p. 24.

19. Row, 2012: p. 18.

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