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Recurring Questions, Cyclical Energies:
A History of Feminist Art Practices in Australia

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On 26 July 2015, I went to Sunday School. This was not a religious event, but a quasi-pedagogical project by artists, staged at Artspace, Sydney’s long-established ‘alternative’ gallery. Two young women – Kelly Doley and Diana Smith – presented The Lucy R. Lippard Lecture, an interpretation of the American critic’s presentations on contemporary feminist art during a tour of Australia during International Women’s Year, 1975 (Figure 1.1).¹ Lippard’s tour was a signal event: as Sunday School suggested, the lecture tour ‘is said to have kick started the Women’s Art Movement and other important feminist activities in Australia.’²

Like most mythologies, this is only partly true: by 1975, feminist visual arts collectives and projects had already been established in Sydney and Melbourne. What is undeniable today, however, is that young artists are claiming the feminist past: as Smith and Doley say, ‘Forty years on, [The Lucy R. Lippard Lecture] considers the legacy of feminism in Australia and how it ghosts and overlaps with the contemporary context.’³ What interests me, then, is how women artists in Australia have explored, navigated, colonised and re-invented feminist arts over 40 years, and the contemporary effects of these persistent, intermittently flourishing, ideas and practices.

Geography may not be destiny, but location is a powerful factor in cultural life – not always detrimentally. Australia is thousands of kilometres from the cultural centres of the northern hemisphere, with which its Angophone society is still principally aligned in cultural matters; but what was in 1966 dubbed ‘the tyranny of distance’ by historian Geoffrey Blainey has brought unexpectedly rich opportunities to Australian artists who explore feminist ideas.⁴ I will argue that women artists in Australia have thrived – at different times, in various ways – during the resurgence and redevelopment of feminist intellectual and creative life in recent decades. Not without difficulties, delays or deferrals, to be sure, but the cultural, social and political landscape inhabited by Australian women artists today is unrecognisable from the extremely bleak prospect they faced in the early 1970s. Looking back over 40 years of involvement in these practices, I see rich cyclical energies for feminist arts practices and discourses in Australia, with successive generations taking up issues that sustain a number of feminist positions. I want to sketch my sense of the apparently discontinuous (but strongly recurring) gestures, practices and campaigns that have marked feminist visual arts in Australia. These have taken many forms, but are sustained by ongoing disquiet, even dismay, about women’s access to opportunity as artists, and by socially and culturally ingrained resistances to

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women’s expressions in art, which arise from their perspectives as women, however defined. I am arguing that Australian feminist artists, while enjoying the recent enhanced success by women artists in this country, remain energetically opposed to the continuing diminution of their potential as artists.

Sunday School’s *The Lucy R. Lippard Lecture* in Sydney, in its reconsideration of an event 40 years ago, is one marker of this recurring feminism. So, differently, was the selection of senior artist Fiona Hall for the official Australian pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale, entirely without comment about her gender, marking to an extent the normalisation of women’s achievement in Australian cultural life. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau observed, writing about Australian photographic artist Rosemary Laing: ‘woman artist’ is a ‘marked term’ that means the ‘woman artist operates in a more or less alien territory, which is, after all, the symbolic order of patriarchy itself’. At the same time, in July 2015 Sydney’s venerable broadsheet newspaper published a news story on continuing male domination of the prestigious and nearly century-old Archibald Prize for portraiture. This annual exhibition has become an occasion for mainstream advocacy for women artists, part of the current broad interest in women’s participation in society more generally.

Why is this happening now? It is set against a general recent upsurge of discussion across Australian society about gender equality in politics and the workplace, but there are two primary reasons for the recurring cyclical energy, and considerable success, of feminist arguments in the arts in Australia over four decades. The first goes to women’s participation as artists, one of two persistent issues addressed by feminists from the early 1970s. A strong Australian emphasis on equal opportunity discourses stems from the egalitarian traditions of Australian settler society: from the late nineteenth century Australia, together with its neighbour New Zealand, was one of the ‘social laboratories of the world’, noted for its progressive policies in women’s suffrage, education and social
rights: New Zealand and Australia (in the then colony of South Australia) were the first in the world to grant the vote to women, in 1893 and 1895 respectively. This egalitarianism, however, did not extend to Australian Aboriginal peoples, the original inhabitants of the land, who were not able to vote until 1967.

This history of social rights is certainly why ‘equal rights feminism’ from the 1970s onwards was so powerful in Australia and, eventually, so successful in the arts: the long-established egalitarian ethos suggested extending access to creative opportunity to women. Clearly, this is not yet entirely achieved, as statistics on women’s participation in the arts show; and feminists point, with justice, to the qualified delights of achieving an equality already compromised by convention. Yet a strong social and political consensus, and legislative foundation, exists in Australia for supporting achievement by women and, from the early 1970s onwards, the key role of the newly established Australia Council, the national arts and funding and advocacy body, was of critical importance in responding to growing claims for affirmative action for women in the arts.7

The second perennial question concerns the nature of women’s artistic expression. A crucial factor in the sophisticated flowering of feminist arts discourses in Australia was access to influential strands in late twentieth century feminist thinking globally, through the English language and its educational and cultural apparatuses. Though historically aligned to British art, by the 1970s Australia had also begun to develop strong links with American and European artists, critical discourses and institutions, through formal links (touring exhibitions, artists’ visits, educational links and lecture tours such as Lippard’s), but also through individual contacts initiated by Australians, such as the visit of writer Barbara Hall and artist Peter Kennedy to see Judy Chicago and Arlene Raven in Los Angeles in 1973, to discuss the 1972 Womanhouse project made with their students at CalArts, while filming experimental artists in the northern hemisphere.8

This knitting of Australian feminist practices into international discourses was amplified, and made more complex, by the energetic participation from the late 1970s of a distinguished group of Australian philosophers in contemporary European theoretical work. This effected a kind of triangulation with the sharply different tenors of Anglophone feminist cultural discourses in the United Kingdom and the United States. The Australian context and contribution was, in fact, decisive: many important French texts of the 1970s and 1980s, including feminist texts, were first translated and interpreted in Australian universities, by scholars such as Meaghan Morris, Paul Patton, Moira Gatens and especially Elizabeth Grosz at the University of Sydney.9 The speculative and imaginative character of texts by, for instance, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray carried women artists, as well as philosophy and literature students, into stimulating possibilities in creative assertion that leavened existing feminist discourses based on equality and social justice.

All these developments had an incalculable impact on Australian women artists, especially in Sydney and Melbourne, through the universities and art schools. It was a heady mix, and ran through the Sydney art schools, particularly the newly established Sydney College of the Arts (1977), like wildfire, influencing artists who came to maturity in the 1980s, such as Janet Burchill, Merilyn Fairskye, Anne Ferran, Narelle Jubelin, Lindy Lee, Jennifer McCamley, Margaret Morgan, Susan Norrie and Julie Rrap. These artists became, in their turn, teachers and mentors of the next generations: Helen Grace
taught Anne Ferran at Sydney College of the Arts in the 1980s, for example, and in her turn Ferran taught there from the 1990s to the 2000s; in Melbourne, senior artist Elizabeth Gower and art historian Anne Marsh taught for many years at the Victorian College of the Arts (now part of the University of Melbourne) and at Monash University, respectively: Gower cites Kate Just as an example of one younger feminist artist with whom she has an ongoing relationship over several decades.10

Australian women brought their particular issues, and critical responses, to international feminist discourses. Most importantly, the place of Indigenous women, from Australia’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, was acknowledged. The gradual emergence from the 1980s of Indigenous women artists such as Fiona Foley, Judy Watson, and Tracey Moffatt, some in dialogue with First Nations artists elsewhere, eventually profoundly altered the cultural landscape in this country. In Australia, Aboriginal women artists have played a crucial role in the history of contemporary painting since the 1990s, and, through presentation of their contemporary fibre works in museum settings, have complicated distinctions between fine art and craft.11 Importantly, perhaps ironically, the strength of Australia’s equal rights ethos, together with multiple sources of developed feminist theoretical positions, has ensured that a certain agnosticism has prevailed about the character of women’s work as artists in Australia. To put it simply, despite ongoing urgent questions about forms of expression that can be seen as specifically female, no single feminist meta-theory of ‘women’s’ art, such as the American thesis of ‘central core’ imagery or British psychoanalytically derived theories of representation as applied to feminist art, has dominated Australian feminist histories and debates. Australian feminists tended to glean widely, opportunistically and serendipitously from texts, exhibitions and, importantly, from extensive travel, for whatever suited their practices. This factor is crucial: Australians are, because of geography, hypersensitive to metropolitan art; energetic artist-travellers have also had access over the period to international fellowships and residency studios, especially in Europe and Asia, that are maintained by universities and funding agencies, and have kept in constant communication with their peers, and with curators.12

It is almost impossible to overemphasise, decades later, how episodic and discontinuous these illuminations were. Often what Australians accessed from international debates, events and publications was scant, fragmentary and precious. Of necessity, the development of feminist ideas in this country was independent and socially grounded, while internationally connected through language. This was a boon, however: it ensured a richness and flexibility in feminist practice, and from the 1980s onwards a characteristic strategic sense and tactical nimbleness. This was highly prized: in Australia’s rigidly gendered social environment, strategy and subtlety were seen as essential, and in cultural matters, Australian feminists were alive to the necessity of constant revision. In 1985 I wrote: ‘The women’s movement is still the most remarkable contemporary site (as well as the product) of a persistent determination to understand and alter social life by making and using theory. Reassessment and refinement are part of this process, and intellectual and creative work is an essential part of it.’13 Thirty years later, while feminists have been joined by queer and many other interrogative social theories, this engagement is still alive.

All these questions are still being played out today: let me point to several key recurring issues in Australian feminist art.
Collectivity and collective action

This longstanding principle has taken different turns in different Australian cities over the decades. In Melbourne, initial feminist arts discussions coalesced around the magazine *Lip*, published between 1976 and 1984 by a loose collective.\textsuperscript{14} *Lip* remains impressive today, available once more in an anthology edited by the younger Australian curator Vivian Ziherl, based in Amsterdam; it was driven by artists, such as Elizabeth Gower, and the late Isobel Davies and Erica McGilchrist, with writers, curators and art historians such as Janine Burke, Suzanne Davies and Ann Stephen. The focus of feminist cultural thinking in Melbourne, it was read widely across the country. Also in Melbourne in 1975, the Women’s Art Register was initiated by artists including Lesley Dumbrell and Erica McGilchrist and curators Kiffy Rubbo and Meredith Rogers, at the University of Melbourne’s Ewing and George Paton Gallery. Formed to research and document work by women artists for educational use, it is now one of only two such surviving projects in the world.\textsuperscript{15} The Women’s Art Register moved in 1978 to an inner-suburban municipal library and is now available online.\textsuperscript{16}

The formation of the Women’s Art Movement (WAM) in Adelaide in August 1976 was a direct response to Lippard’s accounts of American feminist groups. Margaret Dodd, educated in ceramics in southern California, initiated WAM; I was her first recruit. In August 1977 WAM Adelaide presented *The Women’s Show*, a national ‘women only’ unselected exhibition, with over 400 works, including by Adelaide’s political printmakers Ann Newmarch and Mandy Martin and a collaborative work by Sydney’s Women’s Art Group, and with programs ranging from theatre to poetry readings. This was a ground-clearing exercise, to seek out women practitioners.\textsuperscript{17} The assumption was women had been discouraged from practising. However, while the standard public markers – solo exhibitions, museum surveys, monographs – overlooked women, the reality was that many women continued to practise, albeit often part-time, making a living in teaching or support capacities (during planning for *The Women’s Show*, senior artist Dora Chapman (1911–1995) cautioned that WAM was mistaken in believing women had abandoned working as artists, and correctly predicted the hundreds who would participate.) *The Women’s Show* was among many collective exploratory projects in Australia at that time. Significantly, in August 1978 WAM Adelaide co-hosted what was probably the first Aboriginal feminist event in the country: two women Elders from the Indulkana people from northern South Australia held a joint women’s song/dance workshop with CASM (Centre for Aboriginal Studies in Music, now based at the University of Adelaide).\textsuperscript{18} Crucially, these discussion groups, exhibition and journals stimulated debate and public awareness, encouraging artists, art college lecturers and students in succeeding decades. Many artists who participated, such as Adelaide-trained Jackie Redgate and Anne Marsh, went on to become major artists and scholars; their influence on succeeding generations has been profound.

At the same time, Australia’s vibrant political print and poster-making collectives from the early 1970s to the late 1980s included important feminists, such as Toni Robertson (radicalised through the University of Sydney’s General Philosophy strike to secure feminist courses) and Marie McMahon, Frances Budden and Jan McKay, from the first Sydney group. In poster collectives in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Brisbane and Canberra, limited-edition prints as well as large editions for street use were produced on women’s issues and for campaigns. One of the largest editions, over 1000, was produced in a single night in 1980 by Toni Robertson and Jan McKay to contribute to a
long and eventually successful campaign about legal defences available to victims of domestic violence in homicide cases, and to free those already imprisoned.19 Eventually, with the advent of digital imagery in the 1990s, screen printing became untenable, but these collective artists’ groups and workshops provided a model of activist imagemaking in the community, which persists in studios such as Canberra's Megalo, originally established in 1980.

While women-driven community projects were widespread and influential, close attention was also paid to ‘official’ art. In both 1979 and 1982, protest actions advocating women artists’ participation were staged at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Biennale of Sydney’s principal venue, and in 1983 demands for equal representation of women in major exhibitions were still being made at that year’s Australian Perspecta (the biennial national contemporary art survey staged in Sydney, 1981–1999). These appeals to equal rights focused on redressing systemic discrimination in the arts, such as in awarding of major trophies like the Archibald Prize or in the paucity of major solo exhibitions of work by women.20 Throughout the late 1970s and into the 1980s, this appeal to equality bore fruit. In 1984, the Australia Council’s The Women and Arts Report, a project originally developed by the 1982 NSW Women and Arts Festival, presented the first comprehensive research about women artists’ incomes, participation rates in exhibitions and success with applications to funding agencies.21 After that time, data on women was collected by the Australia Council in its regular surveys of artists’ incomes and conditions, and these findings also influenced the state arts ministries in Australia’s federal system.

Eventually, the significant participation of feminists in Australian government agencies led to proactive programs for women in the arts. These interventionist women, the best known of whom is historian, activist and journalist Anne Summers, were affectionately dubbed ‘femocrats’ in the Women’s Movement. The endorsement by the Australia Council in 1984 of affirmative action policies was incalculable in its effects, not only on women practitioners who benefited directly but on other entities, especially the Council’s organisational clients. To a certain extent, these campaigns were successful, and in higher education institutions, where many feminist artists studied and later taught, their impact has been felt both in course content and pedagogy, and in concern for the success of educational programs: put simply, what are the implications of educating a large number of students for failure? Of graduating women artists who are disenfranchised from professional success?

Thirty years later, the principle that women should have equal access to education and employment in Australia is, ironically, as firmly enshrined in policy as it is consistently betrayed by social and industrial practice.22 This is exposed in the visual arts through the website CoUNTesses (2008 to present), a project of feminist artists and scholars led by artist Elvis Richardson that addresses museums, exhibitions and prizes for female participation rates, and continues to critique egregious failures in gender equity.23 Equal rights feminism has proved a powerful negotiating tool in the arts, as in other fields, and continues to be so.

Multiple sources, local resources

From the 1970s onwards, increased participation in the global Anglophone sphere introduced Australian feminists to rich resources. Very early, in the first half of the 1970s, the Australian feminist movement – then called Women’s Liberation – found
resonant images, texts and ideas in art, cinema, literature and pedagogy from both the UK and the USA, and these multiple sources filtered into established Australian feminist culture. Local energies were complemented by comparing notes with women from other countries – artists, critics, scholars. This was not a new phenomenon: Australian cultural life, sometimes stigmatised as ‘provincial’, was always part of the English-speaking world; what was different at the precise moment when feminism re-emerged in the 1960s and 1970s was the faster pace of transmission of ideas, texts and people, as noted earlier.

The UK was an early source of inspiration and comparison, because of long-established colonial relationships. Lively interchanges took place between the UK and Australia in the 1980s, with the availability of texts by art historians such as Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker. These fed into recuperative historical projects about Australian women artists, whether surveys (such as the nationally touring Australian Women Artists 1840–1940, staged in International Women’s Year in 1975) or monographic exhibitions (for example for Margaret Preston in 1980 and Joy Hester in 1981). Moreover, Sydney-based artists, in particular, including Helen Grace (a member of London’s photography group, Hackney Flashers, in the mid-1970s), Sandy Edwards, Jude Adams and Merilyn Fairskye, saw parallels between their work and the politically interrogative work of British artists. Australians investigated the powerful strand of post-conceptual practice of some artists based in the UK, exemplified by Mary Kelly: her influential Post-Partum Document was shown in the 1982 Biennale of Sydney in its entirety and one section acquired by the National Gallery of Australia in 1983. (Arguably, British practice and writing, through Screen and other journals, was equally, if not more, influential on experimental and feminist cinema in Australia.)

Photography proved crucial for a new feminist criticality, now enriched by postmodernist theories; it can be seen as the quintessential postmodernist medium in this country, with notable works by feminists such as the late Sue Ford and Destiny Deacon in Melbourne; Anne Ferran, Rosemary Laing, Tracey Moffatt and Julie Rrap in Sydney; and Pat Brassington and Anne McDonald in Hobart. Intense interest in the interrogative capacities of photography saw a convergence of multiple strands of feminist investigations into photographic depictions of women, not only in art but also in the mass media, together with renewed and theoretically informed scrutiny of the ways that photographic imagery signifies to, and works with, audiences. Most importantly, in the feminist context, the new theorisation of photography enabled feminists to problematise photography’s positivity, and to develop sophisticated ways to apply photographic techniques to the interrogation of issues as various as women’s corporeality, history, domestic labour and family structures.

The implications of this complex address to imagery and image making had profound effects on understandings of the operations of power, not only in the image regime but in social life, including in the art world. From this time, Australian feminist artists were alive to the instability of imagery, to its dependence on context; ‘positive’ imagery, in the more venerable feminist sense, was seen as vulnerable to challenge, or irrelevance, and the notion of interventionist imagery became increasingly important. This was the mid-1980s moment when the academic dissemination of postmodernist theories, from Barthes to Foucault to Derrida, including the French feminist theorists I cited earlier, was at its height in Australian universities and art colleges. With considerable suspicion attaching to painting as the canonical (gendered) art form, photography became central to feminist arts practice.
This investigation of photography’s possibilities has proved a rich and enduring aspect of contemporary feminists’ arts practice, with important effects on gay representational strategies and, later, connections with queer theory: Anna-Marie Jagose’s internationally influential *Queer Theory* was published by Melbourne University Press in 1996. What was clearly at stake in these photographic discourses—a key issue from the very beginning of the Women’s Movement—was reframing women’s corporeality. Photographic work from this period onwards had an incalculable effect on succeeding generations. These positions came to inform the works of Australians working not only in photography but also across both performance and video, in works by artists as diverse as the Kingpins (a girl drag group, active from the early 2000s), soda_jerk, Salote Tawale, (all from Sydney), Gabriella Mangano and Silvana Mangano, and Cate Consandine (the last two from Melbourne).

Broadly speaking, Australian feminism was suspicious of the evangelical strands of American feminist essentialism, and by the mid-1980s many Australian artists were keenly aware that theirs comprised a number of practices—the use of the plural was typical of the period, and remains important—situated in complex historical and geographical contexts. The intricacy of these positions was registered by two important projects: *Frames of Reference: Aspects of Feminism and Art* in 1991, a major group exhibition in Sydney staged by Artspace, followed by *Dissonance*, an anthology edited by Catriona Moore and published in 1994. Around this time, however, feminist scholars began to devote considerable energies to researching women’s historical achievements in Australia, often implicitly comparing them with the situation in the present day, as an attempt to come to terms with the complexity of Australia’s post-colonised society.

**Heritage and discontinuity: two perspectives**

In the years around the Bicentennial of British colonisation in 1788, the particularity of being Australian, members of a ‘settler’ society, began to be explored more critically. This bore on understanding women’s, and feminist, art practices. During the 1980s, interest in historical Australian women artists continued to develop, building on the revelations of the previous decade. Art historians such as the late Joan Kerr in Sydney, specialist gallerists such as Jim Alexander in Melbourne and Stephen Scheding in Sydney and the important Crothers Collection of Women’s Art in Perth, now located at the University of Western Australia, consolidated scattered research. The 1990s saw the institutionalisation of these histories: the sheer weight of teaching, research and writing about women artists began to familiarise audiences with the appearance of women artists in the public domain. And with that familiarity, audiences were brought into contact with feminist interests.

In the mid-1990s, after two decades of feminist debate, and a legacy of teaching women’s art and feminism in university courses, there was a cyclical upsurge in feminist activity in the visual arts. The provocatively titled *Mad and Bad Women*, curated by Candice Bruce at Queensland Art Gallery in 1994, was the first of a succession of themed exhibitions examining art by women, from a variety of perspectives, admittedly not all explicitly feminist. Since that time, group exhibitions of historical and heritage works by women have become a staple of exhibition programs, particularly in university art museums and regional galleries; these are often retributive projects, spurred by the established Australian commitment to equal opportunity.
Key research projects creatively mobilised this commitment to equality: in Sydney, Joan Kerr spearheaded cooperative research in the early 1990s, developing earlier biographical research into a new project focused on Australian women that was collected in the 1995 book *Heritage*; this was accompanied by the National Women’s Art Exhibition in Sydney and other cities, marking two decades since International Women’s Year in 1975. This broad collaborative approach proved enormously successful in attracting new audiences to work by women. If the 1980s marked the apogee of formal agitation, research and assertion for women’s access to exhibition and employment opportunities in Australia, into the 1990s and 2000s a certain settled pattern of acceptance was achieved.

Yet the highest accolades in Australian cultural life were reserved for men. Two incidents during the 1990s betrayed persistent cultural anxiety when women became bearers of national aspirations, especially in international art-world contexts. Of all these, the Venice Biennale is the most prestigious, and the critical response that greeted Jenny Watson’s exhibition in Venice in 1993 as the first woman to represent Australia in its official pavilion was classically conservative. Her sketchy fabric-collaged paintings of female subjects were derided by newspaper art critics in gendered terms, informed by opposition to her diaristic style, and in 1997, when the decision was taken to present works by Aboriginal women artists at Venice, there was a chorus of dissent, both published and throughout art-world circles. In Watson’s case, her style was seen to correlate with femininity: the informality of her paintings seemed to suggest girlishness; with the three distinguished Aboriginal artists – painters Emily Kngwarreye and Judy Watson and weaver Yvonne Koolmatrie – the affirmative action taken by Australian officials was decried. The convergence of gender and style proves particularly combustible on official international occasions.

By 1997, however, amongst the most important artists in the country were a number of Indigenous women, hence the decision to feature their work at Venice. The 1980s and the 1990s saw an extraordinary flowering of Aboriginal artists, both from remote communities and in the cities, especially in Sydney’s Boomalli collective, with a number of the most significant artists being women. This immediately, and with brilliance, complicated discussions about women working in the arts in Australia. Many Aboriginal women in remote communities were, and are, amongst the poorest and least privileged people in this wealthy country, but with the development of art centres as cultural and economic agencies, and with art making on remote communities from the early 1970s, many Aboriginal women seized the opportunity to make art, with considerable success. In many cases they were painters, but in remote communities in the Arnhem Land region of the Northern Territory, women’s longstanding skill as weavers and basket-makers working with native vegetation and dyestuffs was recognised from the mid-1980s onwards, with curators and scholars such as Jennifer Isaacs, Diane Moon, Louise Hamby and Diana Young introducing this work into urban cultural fora and collections. This was, in effect, a special case of recognising women’s customary and domestic practices as culturally significant, and owed some part of its success to previous feminist revisions of the artistic canon.

One extraordinary phenomenon in Aboriginal art has been the emergence of senior women in remote communities who transfer their cultural authority and social leadership into singular achievement as artists. Two notable figures are Emily Kngwarreye (1910–1996), from the Anmatyerre people of the central desert region, and Sally Gabori
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(c.1924–2015), from the Kaiadilt people of the Gulf of Carpentaria in tropical north Queensland. Their brilliance, and her community leadership in Kngwarreye’s case, offered instances of female talent and drive that served as models for many communities in wider Australian society. For Kngwarreye, this extended to significant international exposure, as her gestural paintings based on customary body painting, or on the curvilinear rhizomatic root forms of the indigenous yams with which she identified, challenged established Western histories of abstract painting, and even provided new sources for it. Of all recent Australian cultural developments, the emergence of senior Aboriginal women painting in a gestural mode is perhaps the most celebrated inside Australia, and the most misunderstood outside it.

At the same time, from the generation that came to maturity in the 1980s emerged a number of exceptional urban artists, whose fierce sense of their Aboriginality was married to feminist perspectives. Destiny Deacon, a Melbourne-based artist of Torres Strait Island heritage, who often collaborates with non-Indigenous artist Virginia Fraser, is inspired by her heritage; her pungent and often hilarious photographs and videos, based on family and close friends, both celebrate and problematise the life experiences of an urban diasporic community, living thousands of miles from its island homes. Other works, however, have addressed archival collections, both family photographs and early film taken by colonial officials in 1899 on Erub, her mother’s natal island in the Torres Strait, in biting indictments of government policies towards Australia’s Indigenous peoples.

Similarly, Judy Watson’s family history in Waanyi country in far north-western Queensland, and her affiliation with her maternal line, has driven her work over more than three decades. Working in printmaking, painting and installations, she researches the hardships experienced by Aboriginal women in colonial Australia, and their resilience: both her great-grandmother and her grandmother were from the ‘Stolen Generations’ mixed-race children forcibly removed from Aboriginal mothers because of the federal government’s assimilationist policies of the period, for which then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd publicly apologised in 2008 in the Australian Parliament. At the same time, Watson feels a deep connection with the land these women sprang from, and reasserts Aboriginal claims to land rights in exquisite paintings that draw on the beauty of her Country, as well as the pain of being forced to leave it.

Fiona Foley, from the Badtjala people of southeast Queensland, has mined museum collections for images and artefacts that link her contemporary Aboriginality with her ancestors and their land. Like others amongst the brilliant contemporary cohort of Australian Indigenous artists, she insists on the continued presence of her people on this continent, making sculptures and installations and, more recently, public artworks, that testify to a greater public acceptance of the issues she articulates. In Black Velvet (1996), titled for the sexualising nickname given to Aboriginal women, she applied the form on a set of cotton dilly bags, to devastating effect (Figure 1.2). Foley links gender with labour: the reiterated bags allude to the many Aboriginal women historically enslaved in white households, very often in sexual service. The work turns on the use (and abuse) of textiles, stuffs associated with domestic life, which in Foley’s hands is shown to be a sad instrument of colonisation.

The work of Tracey Moffatt, perhaps Australia’s best-known contemporary artist internationally, also with Aboriginal heritage from Queensland, reveals the complexity marking the practices of post-colonised Aboriginal artists. Refusing the category of
‘Aboriginal artist’, and regularly eschewing exclusively Indigenous art exhibitions, she nevertheless draws on experiences as an Aboriginal child placed with a white family: her 1999 film *Night Cries* poignantly evoked the emotional difficulties and divided loyalties of that situation. After many years living in the US, Moffatt returned to working with images of the land, the enduring subject and emotional heart of Aboriginal Australia. Her *Spirit Landscapes* of 2012, a number of suites of photographic works, are haunted by the twinned legacies of black and white Australia.

More recently, the Western Australian painter Julie Dowling has brought to portrait an unflinching view of both historical and contemporary Aboriginal women; her black womanly bodies interrupt complex uncertainties in Australia, both more conservative as well as feminist, about depicting Aboriginal bodies in their personal and sexual powers. What is abundantly clear with Deacon, Watson, Foley, Moffatt and Dowling is that a broadly feminist position infuses their work. Their confidence in exploring their own histories attests to fluid and flexible interpretations of feminist principles across contemporary Australian culture. At the same time, younger Indigenous feminists are now drawing on the work of Aboriginal scholars, particularly the influential Aileen Moreton-Robinson, to challenge Australian feminists in our attitudes to race.38

**Renewal and dissent**

In the new century, the cyclical energy that seems to characterise Australian feminist practice has resurfaced. A rash of feminist exhibitions and projects has for the most part been achieved through the agency of women, sustained by the example of large exhibitions mounted in the northern hemisphere, such as *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum (2007), which, unusually, included several Australians, and elles@pompidou in Paris (2009–2011). Importantly, artists working today are nourished by a wealth of information about women artists, both historical and contemporary. One instance: in

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*Figure 1.2* Fiona Foley (Badtjala people, Wondunna clan, Fraser Island). Black velvet 1996. Linen fabric with cotton appliqué. 9 bags: 99 × 20 cm (with handle, each); 180 × 200 cm (installed, variable). Collection: Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. © Fiona Foley. Image courtesy: QAGOMA.
2012 a group exhibition at Melbourne’s Heide Museum of Art, which accompanied a solo exhibition by the late Louise Bourgeois, featured works by, for example, Janet Burchill and Jennifer McCamley, and Del Kathryn Barton, that spoke (variously) to Bourgeois’s imagery and interests. Where Australian artists borrow from Bourgeois, they do so knowingly.39

There is widespread commitment by younger women to supporting feminist projects, research and curatorial theses. One notable manifestation of this new energy was ‘Feminism Never Happened’, a discussion in 2007 at Gertrude Contemporary in Melbourne, a provocative title that was again used by Robert Leonard for a 2010 group exhibition at Brisbane’s Institute of Modern Art.40 In subsequent years, Melbourne’s thriving art community has hosted excellent projects that canvass current issues: notable examples include The View From Here: 19 Perspectives on Feminism, a group exhibition in 2010 at West Space, a long-established artist-run organisation; BACKFLIP: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art, at the Victorian College of the Arts in 2013, curated by Laura Castagnini; in 2012, the same college and curator invited the perennially popular and, it seems, still relevant Guerrilla Girls to lecture and conduct a workshop, both enthusiastically received (their previous visit had been in 1999); and, a 2014 group exhibition in Melbourne, Benglis 73/74, revisited American artist Lynda Benglis’s notorious 1974 Artforum advertisement.41 This (re)turn to feminism was seen in numerous other groups in other cities, such as LEVEL, the Brisbane artist-run group originally established in 2010, whose name neatly incorporates both equal rights feminism and archetypal female authority.42

This recent upsurge of activity has not been without its tensions. This is not surprising – much is at stake, and while women in art colleges, according to anecdotal and exhibition evidence, are asking questions about women’s status and achievements with continued energy, there is by no means unanimity about the answers. In this period a resurgence of certain ‘postfeminist’ positions might be seen, ironically, as both positive and negative symptoms of public feminist success: some young women expect access to serious consideration as artists as their birth right; others no longer wish to be associated with feminist agitation (in both its senses). More recently, a fashionable commitment to feminism has been criticised by other women: where is the action – they ask – where are the results?43

I saw something of these polarised attitudes in reactions to Contemporary Australia: Women, a major group exhibition I curated for the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art in early 2012. Some responses were hostile to a women-only exhibition as ‘unnecessary’; others ferociously critical that its naming, and framing, was not more explicitly feminist. My reading at the time was that such a prominent large-scale exercise was particularly provocative to remaining prejudices against women as artists: this lavish high-profile exhibition was conspicuously ignored by mainstream critics, but at the same time women observers often wished to distance themselves from what was seen as special pleading. These positions are familiar, recurring and still relevant today. It was challenging to realise that arguments resisting exhibiting work exclusively by women were still current, alongside strong evidence of commitment to feminism among younger artists, critics and curators. One telling response was from Melbourne artist Emily Floyd: initially she thought this all-woman show redundant, but changed her opinion when she saw the exhibition, and what could be achieved with opportunity and support.44
It is instructive to consider two recent exhibitions in Melbourne. At opposite ends of the institutional spectrum, they had feminism in common. Emily Floyd’s *The Dawn*, a survey of nearly 20 years of work, was presented in late 2014 at the National Gallery of Victoria, the country’s oldest and largest art museum (Figure 1.3). Floyd celebrates feminist history as an archival source, problematising memory, personal investments in events and how histories are recorded. Her most recent project started with inheriting in 2012 her mother’s archives of material related to 1970s community collectives, which she mined to reconsider feminist practices. This work, in large sculptural works made with aluminium components that often draw on texts or educational toys, including books, was driven by personal connection, especially her mother’s work as a community activist in developing childcare and learning in feminist collectives. Floyd not only charted connections between art, play, education and personal development; importantly, she prized these categories open, keeping them mobile: interactive works encouraging children’s play continue her mother’s commitment to childhood development, this time in the art museum setting. This major project by a feminist, presented by the country’s most prestigious art museum, was accompanied by a substantial commission. As art historian Helen Hughes noted, ‘*The Dawn* is an intervention...’45 One might add, Floyd’s topics are now mainstream: the audiences interested in these topics are enormous.

At the same time, 2014, *Re-Raising Consciousness*, a modest group exhibition, was presented at an artist-run space TBC Art Inc., Melbourne. Curated by artists Katherine Hattam, her daughter Harriet Morgan, and artist/writer Fayen d’Evie, this reconsidered feminist practices, specifically the widespread use in the 1970s of consciousness-raising.

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*Figure 1.3* Emily Floyd, *The Dawn*, 2014, detail. Collection National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Photo: Courtesy the artist and the National Gallery of Victoria.
Including around 70 artists, the exhibition was notable for its cross-generational mix and interest in collectivity. The lively installation in a dense salon hang mimicked the conversational process of conscious-raising, as did the collective ethos of the exhibition: ego was left at the door. Many works reflected on the feminist past, such as Abbra Kotlarczyck’s *Sweeping Exchanges (Lucy)* 2014, which borrowed Sue Ford’s 1975 photograph of Lucy Lippard meeting women in Melbourne. Other sculptural works, by Janet Burchill and Jennifer McCamley, and by Rose Nolan, explicitly reflected on the ironies of this recapitulatory exercise in text-based works that implied the qualified success of decades of feminist action, while Elvis Richardson and Virginia Fraser’s *Femmo* 2014, a series of covers for a spoof publication, satirised both canonical feminism and its detractors. 

*Re-Raising Consciousness* was an instance of the current widespread feminist dialogue across Australia, and a number of projects revisiting the history of feminism. In Sydney, this curiosity led to the development of a feminist archive, launched in 2013 by a group of university-based scholars as *Contemporary Art and Feminism (CAF)*, an ‘independent platform for art, scholarship and activism,’ with activities scheduled for 2015, 40 years after International Women’s Day and 20 years after the National Women’s Art Exhibition. Here the model pioneered by Joan Kerr, of dispersed cooperative action allied with historical research, is put at the service of the future, including through regional workshops: how might the feminist archives of the future be sustained, in physical or digital form? Similarly, a special feminist issue of *Art Monthly Australia*, published over the 2015/16 southern hemisphere summer, featured an illustrated timeline by younger scholar Louise Mayhew, essays testifying to contemporary feminist arts discourses in the northern city of Brisbane and evidence of collective activity by women artists. Like the Heritage and National Women’s Art Exhibition projects, the CAF Archive project and the work of *Art Monthly*’s emerging artists and writers comes directly from the feminist equal rights agenda, but also commitment to histories of art in Australia.

Indeed, what connects the work of younger artists as diverse as Sydney’s four-person performance group Barbara Cleveland, Melbourne’s Emily Floyd and the Brisbane collective *LEVEL* is attentiveness to the past, in a challenging but ultimately splendid degree of intergenerational contention. The crucial circumstance for artists, audiences, scholars, critics and curators interested in feminism in Australian art in the 2000s is that there is now a substantial body of evidence to consult. A body of work put together, in the main, by women. Forty-five years ago, Linda Nochlin’s plaintive question ‘Why are there no great women artists?’ was interpreted variously, not always positively. Now, this is understood as a subtle interrogation of past history, and an indictment of its prejudices.

**At the minute: 2017**

This returns me to artists working now, such as Sunday School in Sydney, with whom I began. Today, Australian feminists have a wealth of information about women’s historical artistic practices: they have a plethora of exemplars and, most importantly, teachers, mentors and collaborators amongst preceding generations of feminist artists. The question is: what are they doing with these inheritances? In all this, a number of issues continue to fuel women’s work in Australia. Artists as various as Del Kathryn Barton, Patricia Piccinini and Nell explore women’s sensuality or
the experience of motherhood; Aboriginal artists from remote Australia have addressed the social dislocation of their communities – the Ken family from the APY lands in northern South Australia, in paintings invoking customary knowledge but also the Jirrawun Girls from Wyndham, in northern Western Australia, whose 2006 works mimicked local graffiti; Mikala Dwyer works with the possibility of women’s occult knowledge; Helen Grace attends to the photographic registration of daily events around her; Justene Williams whirls like a female dervish set loose in complex video installations that deconstruct the modernist canon. These artists are accorded serious critical attention: their subjects derived from female lives, and feminist perspectives, are now part of the broader picture of Australian cultural life. Here, even as the cultural landscape is changing rapidly with the continual growth of LGBTI perspectives in social and cultural life, we see the beginning, perhaps, of a consolidation of images and tropes that, being shared, may come to be signifiers for female presence in Australian art, or as Australian art historian Susan Best suggested in a different context, make contributions to refashioning contemporary art practice.48

Yet the feminist blog CoUNTesses is still correct: recognition of work by women artists is slow and sporadic, even as major Australian museums, despite continuing resistance, now more frequently exhibit their art. And for one excellent reason: museum visitors are curious about what women have been doing all these years and are doing now. Women are an enormous force, as audiences. In this fluid and yet still unsatisfactory situation, how may one calibrate the optimism necessary for political and social change with the disappointing reality of contemporary experience? The pattern in Australia of recurring feminist interrogation of the status quo derives precisely from unfulfilled expectations, as women accustomed to the rhetoric of equal opportunity find it wanting in practical application. In 1985 I wrote about deep ‘disappointment’ after a decade of feminist action in the arts, which is today multiplied and widely diffused among young women.49 Clearly, despite all the advances of the last 40 years, today this is business that has hardly been begun. Yet begun it has: Australian audiences for art may have finally started to catch up with the desires of feminist artists: to be seen, and to be heard, and on their own terms.

Notes

1 Lucy Lippard delivered the Power Lecture, sponsored by the Power Institute at the University of Sydney, in 1975, touring to major Australian cities. For Sunday School, see kellydoley.com/Lucy-Lippard-Lecture-1, accessed 8 August 2015.
3 See kellydoley.com/Lucy-Lippard-Lecture-1.
7 See Australia Council for the Arts statistics on women's employment as artists, which have been maintained through research for three decades: http://artfacts.australiacouncil.gov.au/search/?s=women, accessed 16 November 2018. In 2009, it was estimated that 63% of professional visual artists and 79% of craft practitioners were women. See David Throsby and Anita Zednik, Do You Really Expect to Get Paid? An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia, Sydney: Australia Council, 2010. Women's earning as artists are far lower than men's, however: see http://artfacts.australiacouncil.gov.au/tags/demographics, accessed 29 August 2015. See also the feminist blog CoUN'Tesses: Women count in the Artworld, at http://countesses.blogspot.hr, and for a recent assessment, Melissa Miles, ‘Whose Art Counts?’ Art Monthly Australia, no. 224, October 2009, pp. 5–8.

8 Peter Kennedy, Other than Art's Sake, interviews with Steve Willetts, Hans Haacke, Judy Chicago, Arlene Raven, Adrian Piper, David Medalla, Charles Simonds, Ian Breakwell, 1973. See http://www.milanigallery.com.au/artist/peter‐kennedy, accessed 16 November 2018. Also, the impact of increased access to international travel for Australian artists since the 1970s, through the introduction of long‐haul wide‐bodied aircraft, cannot be overestimated; the institution of the Biennale of Sydney in 1973 also had an incalculable effect on the international activity of Australian artists.

9 Influential Australian interpreters of French theorists included Moira Gatens, Meaghan Morris, Paul Patton and especially Elizabeth Grosz, all initially teaching at the University of Sydney.


12 For example, since the 1970s the Australia Council has established studios in Barcelona, New York, Paris, Tokyo and Los Angeles; since the 1990s Asialink has enabled artists and curators to undertake residencies and projects in Asia: see http://asialink.unimelb.edu.au/arts, accessed 18 November 2018. Since 1992, Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships, at the University of South Australia, Adelaide, have supported overseas study for Australian artists.


15 The other, the previously independent Women's Art Library, is now in the library of Goldsmiths, University of London

16 See http://www.womensartregister.org/about‐the‐register.php, accessed 20 August 2015


See countesses.blogspot.com.


For Level, see levelari.wordpress.com.

Among a plethora of voices and positions, see Eva Cox, ‘Feminism has failed and needs a radical rethink’, published by the respected online site *The Conversation*, for a lively polemic by a sociologist active in Australian feminism since the 1970s. See www.theconversation.com, dated 7 March 2016.


Contemporary Art and Feminism (CAF) was instigated by Sydney-based academics Catriona Moore and Jacqueline Millner, and curator Jo Holder. See http://contemporaryartandfeminism.com.


