LOOKING BACK:
CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST ART
IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

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Master of Arts by Research

December 2016

School of Culture and Communication

Submission in total fulfilment of Masters by Research
at the University of Melbourne
ABSTRACT

This thesis sets out to examine the ways in which feminism manifests itself in contemporary art, focusing in particular on Australia and New Zealand. Interviews were conducted with practicing contemporary artists Kelly Doley, FANTASING (Bek Coogan, Claire Harris, Sarah-Jane Parton, Gemma Syme), Deborah Kelly, Jill Orr and Hannah Raisin. During these interviews, a number of key themes emerged which form the integral structure of the thesis. A combination of information drawn from interviews, close reading of art works, and key theoretical texts is used to position contemporary feminist art in relation to its recent history. I will argue that the continuation of feminist practices and devices in contemporary practice points to a circular pattern of repetition in feminist art, which resists a linear teleology of art historical progress. The relationship between feminism and contemporary art lies in the way that current practices revisit crucial issues which continue to cycle through the lived experience of femininity, such as the relationship to the body, to labour and capital, to the environment, and to structures of power. By acknowledging that these issues are not tied to a specific historical period, I argue that feminist art does not constitute a short moment of prolific production in the last few decades of the twentieth century, but is a sustained movement which continually adapts and shifts in order to remain abreast of contemporary issues.
DECLARATION

This thesis is comprised entirely of original work, except where other authors and stated opinions have been cited. The thesis is fewer than the maximum word limit in length as approved by the Research Higher Degree Committee.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my supervisor Kate MacNeill for her tireless support and encouragement throughout the preparation of this thesis. Without her, this project would not have come to fruition and would not have taken the form it has. Thank you for your kind words, insightful comments and understanding over the past eighteen months.

My deepest thanks also go to the artists who participated in the interviews for this thesis: Kelly Doley, Deborah Kelly, Bek Coogan, Claire Harris, Sarah-Jane Parton, Gemma Syme, Jill Orr, and Hannah Raisin. Without their valuable contributions, this thesis would not have been able to take the form it has, nor would it be able to represent the views of the artists whose work has profoundly inspired and informed my work.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the University of Melbourne for funding this project with an Australian Postgraduate Award. This allowed me to move to Melbourne from New Zealand, and to realise this project over an extended period of time with financial support. I feel very lucky to have been given this opportunity, and give my sincerest thanks to the University for its support.

I am grateful, finally, to my friends and family for their unwavering support over the course of my candidature at the University of Melbourne. Whether showing support from New Zealand or here in Melbourne, the encouragement and faith they showed me during this academic endeavour has meant more to me than I can express.
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Introduction

This project was born out of recognition of the quantity and quality of contemporary art responding to feminist themes in Australia and New Zealand, and a desire to frame these practices in relation to feminist art history, feminist theory, and writing about contemporary art. I perceived a number of women artists producing interesting, reflective work in response to themes such as performance, collaboration, and humour, as well as engaging critically with the lineage of feminist art produced since the late 1960s. The primary question that drives my research is: how does feminism manifest itself in the work of contemporary artists? Throughout this thesis, I openly claim the term “feminist art,” despite the fact that this is a contentious label, and definitions have shifted over the years. Rather than imposing a definition, I have embraced an approach proposed by writer Ellen Yoshi Tani when she suggests, “Perhaps feminist art in the twenty-first century has more to do with identifying as a feminist, and often with identity more broadly, than with a set of universally shared goals or a concrete agenda.”¹

For the purposes of this thesis, I have engaged with artists who self-identify as feminist. This ensures that I can confidently read their work through a feminist vein, as opposed to imposing meanings that they might resist. I examine their artistic oeuvres and argue that there are a number of practices and devices which run through them. I have identified these as: performance, collaboration, humour and re-vision. Taking a multifaceted approach to contemporary feminist practice, the thesis weaves together contemporaneous accounts, theory, history, and practice in order to conceptualise a framework for understanding contemporary feminist art.

In this chapter, I introduce the artists whose works are analysed and who contributed valuable insight to this thesis, during interviews which I conducted over the course of research. I will also outline the methodology used in researching and writing this thesis, which included interviews with artists, content analysis, research on feminist theory and recent writing on Australian and New Zealand contemporary art, and visual analysis. Finally, I will briefly introduce the key ideas and art works that make up the four central chapters that follow, thus paving the way for an in-depth discussion of the literature to which this thesis contributes in the first chapter.

Throughout this thesis, I refer to artworks which at times appear similar in intent, form and execution, to earlier feminist art. However, I will claim that this art is clearly contemporary, as it responds to the current political and social context in which the artists are situated. Contemporary art, like feminist art, is a contentious term, and requires some expansion. The notion of the “contemporary” has been used since the 1920s and 1930s, but may now refer to either a temporal period (extending anywhere from the 1960s to the present) or an ideology relating to postmodernism. Contemporary artists produce work in response to their social, political and cultural context, including global events such as the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre, the ensuing “War on Terror”, the global stock market crash in 2008 and subsequent minor crashes, numerous environmental disasters including the BP oil spill in 2010, and the decimation of the Greek economy resulting in the destabilisation of the European Union. Art responding to these, and other political, social and global issues of the present can be considered to be “contemporary.”

The relationship between feminism and contemporary art lies in the way that current practices revisit crucial issues which continue to cycle through women’s lived experiences, such as women’s relationship to their bodies, to labour and capital, to each other, to the environment, and to structures of power. By acknowledging that these issues are not tied to a specific historical period, we are able to understand

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feminist art as a sustained movement which continually adapts and shifts in order to remain abreast of contemporary issues.

In this thesis I will frequently refer to “second-wave feminism,” which is a precedent for many of the art practices I discuss. This term is often conflated with a specific image of feminism associated with early 1970s activism, and is understood in a narrow sense. I intend to expand this term to encompass a feminist consciousness which is concerned with women’s reproductive freedom, legal rights, sexuality and the equality of men and women. This consciousness arose in the late 1960s and was particularly predominant in the 1970s; however, throughout this thesis I will refer to “second-wave feminism” not as an historical period, but as a feminist attitude which is still embodied by some feminists today. I hope to resist the usual “generational” model of feminism, which positions different generations of women in opposition to each other. Rather, I understand feminist attitudes, issues, politics, and artistic practices as existing through and across time, creating a complex and nuanced understanding of “feminisms.”

The artists whose work forms the basis of my research and analysis are: Brown Council³ (Frances Barrett, Kate Blackmore, Kelly Doley, Diana Smith); Kelly Doley (Australia); FANTASING (Bek Coogan, Claire Harris, Sarah-Jane Parton, Gemma Syme; New Zealand); Deborah Kelly (Australia); Jill Orr (Australia); and Hannah Raisin (Australia).

Brown Council is a collaboration between four female artists based in Sydney, who have been using performance and video works since 2007 to explore and subvert conventions of theatre, performance art, history and audience. I will discuss a number of their performances throughout this thesis, including A Comedy (2010), One Hour Laugh (2010), Mass Action (2012), Fifteen Actions for the Face (2014), This is Barbara Cleveland (2013) and Making History (2016).

³ From June 2016, Brown Council will be known as BC Institute or the Barbara Cleveland Institute. I refer to the collective as Brown Council throughout this thesis, as this is the name the artists were known by while making the work under discussion.
Kelly Doley, one of the artists who established Brown Council, has also developed an individual practice which combines performance, collaboration with her audience, and painting, to reimagine the role of the artist as performer and collaborator. The works I analyse by Doley are The Learning Centre: Manifestos for Living (2010), The Learning Centre: Two Feminists (2012), and Things I Learned About Feminism (2014).

The reimagining of the artist’s role is also crucial to New Zealand collective FANTASING, a group of four female-identified artists4 who produce music, live shows, performances and installations in an exploration of gender, labour, and the collective. In particular, I will discuss their exhibition Stars Rocked (2015) at The Physics Room gallery in Christchurch.

Deborah Kelly’s extensive practices, spanning four decades, encompasses design, film, collage, activist protest, and painting. Kelly employs an immensely varied approach to dealing with social issues such as immigration, feminism, climate change, and sexuality in her work. In particular, I analyse Beastliness (2011), No Human Being is Illegal (in all our glory) (2014), and her work with the collective We Are All Boat People.

Jill Orr has engaged with performance since the late 1970s. Her work deals with themes of environmentalism and feminism as intertwined and inextricable, using the body as a medium. I discuss these issues through a number of her performance pieces, including Bleeding Trees (1979), Antipodean Epic (2015) and Trilogy III – To Choose (2015).

Melbourne-based performance artist Hannah Raisin also uses her body as the central vehicle in her work to address ideas of gender and femininity, pushing the limits of the body through performance to engender new ways of thinking about

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4 This is a self-identification by the artists which allows them to conceive of their gender and sexuality as fluid and unfixed from specific genders.
these issues. The key works on which I will focus are *Flowing Locks* (2007) and *Dear Carolee, Love Cindy, Love Hannah* (2013).

The methodology which I have used in this project can be summarised by Craig Owens’ statement in his seminal essay, ‘The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism’:

The kind of simultaneous activity on multiple fronts that characterises many feminist practices is a postmodern phenomenon. And one of the things it challenges is modernism’s rigid opposition of artistic practice and theory.\(^5\)

Owens highlights the importance of erasing such oppositions, both for feminism and postmodernism. This includes rigid differentiation between materials and practices, resulting in “simultaneous activity on multiple fronts,” and oppositions between, as he indicates, artistic theory and practice. I extend Owens’ claim by not only demonstrating that challenging the dichotomy of artistic practice and theory is an inherently feminist enterprise, but also by employing this duality of theory and practice as a methodology in my research. Rather than writing an exclusively theoretical paper, or one based solely in practice, this thesis combines first-hand accounts of feminist praxis by contemporary artists, and theoretical analysis; an approach rarely found in the literature. Thus, in my own research methods, I seek to emulate the postmodernist position that Owens outlines, resisting rigid oppositions of any kind.

The multi-faceted approach to research I have applied in this project allows me to look at secondary sources, such as exhibition catalogues, theoretical essays, first-hand and art historical accounts of feminist art through a more critical lens, based on the insights which the artists provided in interviews. Artists’ voices, particularly those of women, are often left out of art historical or theoretical accounts, thus foreclosing certain viewpoints on the current state of feminist art from an artist’s perspective.

perspective. While my research has been built on feminist theory and a historical knowledge of feminist art, it was important to me to include the voices of feminist artists, rather than speaking for them as a researcher.

Throughout this thesis, I also use first-hand accounts from writers, theorists and journalists who were present at many of the performances under discussion. This enables me to provide more information about the performances, and to include an embodied response to them, as in most cases I did not attend the performances. Although the authenticity of performance documentation such as films, photographs and written accounts is contested, without such documentation, many of the performances crucial to this thesis would not be accessible to myself or to future audiences. Performance is an ephemeral medium with a unique relationship between the artist and the viewer in the flesh, and temporality forms an integral part of performance. However, it is also important for future generations of artists, researchers, writers and art enthusiasts that a trace of the performance is preserved, to allow the performance to live on through time, taking on a new temporal existence. The documentation, as a residual trace of the performance, exists independently of the performance itself, but nevertheless provides a valuable perspective on the themes, complexities and phenomenology of the original performance, hence its usefulness for this project.

I conducted one-on-one interviews with Kelly Doley, FANTASING, Deborah Kelly, Jill Orr and Hannah Raisin. The interviews were informal and conversational, allowing for descriptions of the work to emerge in the artists’ own terms. Often, the discussion deviated from art, and moved to issues such as politics, family, and work. This demonstrated the way that feminism is woven into different parts of these artists’ lives as well as their art practice. I carried out content analysis of each interview in order to identify common themes, which have formed the four main chapters of this thesis. The kind of content analysis I employed is most closely

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6 Klaus Krippendorff defines content analysis as ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use.” Klaus Krippendorff,
related to what Klaus Krippendorff calls “conversational analysis.” He describes this as the “recording of verbal interactions in natural settings, (which) aims at analysing the transcripts as records of conversational moves toward a collaborative construction of conversations.” With this methodological approach, a range of perspectives are able to be included and woven together to present a more nuanced and complex view of contemporary feminist art practice.

Chapter One outlines the key theoretical texts on which I draw throughout my analysis. Reviewing these feminist approaches to art history at the outset of this thesis will allow me to contextualise the conditions in which contemporary feminist artists work, and how this work has been historicised.

The substantive analysis is divided into two sections: practices and devices. During interviews and afterwards, when carrying out content analysis on the interview transcripts, I identified a number of key themes that recurred in each of the artist’s practices: performance, collaboration, humour, and re-vision. These form the four main chapters of this thesis; the concept of practices frames Chapter Two on performance and Chapter Three on collaboration, and the concept of devices frames Chapter Four on humour and Chapter Five on re-vision. Practices include modes of working which feminist artists have employed since the early 1970s, and devices are “tools” in the work belt of feminist artists, which they deploy in order to activate, politicise or engage their art. In particular I will focus on humour and re-vision as devices which have recently returned to contemporary feminist art. All four of these chapters share the same structure, with an outline of the beginnings of each practice or device, and then a discussion of the return of this device in contemporary artworks. This is a gesture towards the circularity of feminist art and the reappearance of the four key themes on which I focus in this thesis.


The second chapter centres on the practice of performance, a mode of working common amongst the artists whose art and voices provide the data for this research. Performance art has its origins in the 1950s, as part of a broader movement to democratise and dematerialise the arts. This made it particularly appealing to feminist artists in the 1960s, who felt excluded and disregarded by the various hierarchies of the art world. These hierarchies favoured traditional media such as painting and sculpture, valued the work of white men over women and people of colour, and made the bodies of artists, particularly women, invisible. The artists interviewed for this thesis use performance to express their political, social or artistic viewpoints in a way that is innovative, ephemeral and resistant to these artistic hierarchies. They also return to performance strategies of the past to imbue their performances with added meaning, suggesting that the temporality of feminist art is not linear, but instead cyclical, as it constantly looks back to the past in order to imagine feminist futures.

The third chapter addresses collaboration and collective practice. Collaboration is a fundamental element of almost all of the artists’ practices, as they are either part of a collective, or have worked collaboratively at some point in their practice. I argue that collaboration is a particularly feminist methodology, as it challenges the patriarchal ideal that an artist is an individual genius, implicitly male and working alone. In interviews, the artists discussed how working collaboratively is a way for women (and other minority groups) to thwart the art world’s “star system,” which prizes recognisable artists over anonymity, and places emphasis on solo shows. While some collective groups, such as Brown Council in Australia and the Guerrilla Girls in the United States, have gained notable recognition in the art world as a single entity, their identity is still collective, rather than individual, and allows them to subvert expectations of artists working alone. In terms of feminist history, collaboration and collective effort is extremely important, particularly for those second-wave feminists who focused heavily on consciousness-raising groups. Within

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8 Anne Marsh, ‘Performance Art and Its Documentation: A Photo/Video Essay’, About Performance, 2008. [https://www.academia.edu/3370153/Performance_Art_and_its_Documentation_A_Photo_Video_Essay](https://www.academia.edu/3370153/Performance_Art_and_its_Documentation_A_Photo_Video_Essay), accessed 12/1/16
these groups, no member held authority, but everybody’s voice was heard and treated with equal weight. Artist collectives began to form around the same time as these consciousness-raising groups, including “Double X” (active 1975-1985), “Where We At” Black Women Artists Inc. (formed in the late 1960s) in the United States, and in Australia, Women’s Art Movement groups (formed in Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and Adelaide from 1974), VNS Matrix (1991-1997) and Brown Council (2007-present). The works I analyse demonstrate that for feminist artists, working collaboratively or as part of a collective is a powerful way to contest the authority of the individual, and to create work that is a result of community and mutual cooperation.

In Chapter Four the discussion turns to devices, where I analyse humour as a subversive tool in feminist art. The artists deploy humour and parody in their work to subvert gender norms and art world standards. Through an analysis of key artworks, I argue that the use of humour is a critical tool for feminists, as it challenges and deconstructs political ideologies that silence and diminish women’s power. While humour may seem like a flippant mode of critique, feminist art which employs humour is often dark, insidious, and tackles political and social issues head on. Feminist humour can be double-edged: almost as soon as we laugh we are not sure if we were supposed to, and I will argue that it is this ambiguity that gives the art its power.

Chapter Five explores the continuous return of feminist artistic tropes as a device. All of the artists interviewed for this project refer to and acknowledge earlier feminist artists, projects and practices, showing a tendency for feminist artists to recycle and reuse strategies from the past in a way that reinvests them with new life and meaning. I will argue that this is inherently feminist, as it is a way of contesting masculine discourses of art history, teleology and avant-gardism, in favour of circular temporality. By discussing the thread of re-vision and return, I hope also to resist the tendency to look at the lineage of feminist art as occurring in discrete “waves” or sequences, but instead to introduce the idea of cycles and overlapping threads which weave in and out of each other to create a rich tapestry of feminist art work.
and theory. This idea of circular temporality is central to the thesis, as it allows us to rethink the relationship between contemporary feminist art practice, and earlier feminist art works which appear to have similar concerns or formal qualities. It also subverts the tendency of art history to fragment the past, breaking it up into artistic periods which seemingly supersede each other in a relentless progression towards formal or conceptual perfection. Rather, the idea of circular temporality allows us to think of art history as a loop, not a line.9

9 Brown Council, *This is Barbara Cleveland*, performance for film, 2013. “It is not a line, it is a loop.”
Chapter one

Literature review

In this chapter, I establish the theoretical framework for the thesis, through which I will analyse interview material and artistic practices in subsequent chapters. I have organised this literature review in three sections: the first will address recent writing about feminist art from Australia and New Zealand; the next will discuss feminist theory which I deploy in this thesis; and the third will survey a number of texts on contemporary art, and relate this literature to women’s art and feminism. By establishing a foundation of literature on which to build my argument in the chapters that follow, I will position my research within the recent body of writing relating to contemporary art, women’s art, and feminism in Australia and New Zealand.

Feminism and Art in Australia

Australia has a rich history of feminist art practice, with Women’s Art Movements beginning in Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne in the mid-1970s. Records of this practice including catalogues, art journals and anthologies have been produced in strong number; however, the relation of feminist and other theory to art practice is an under-developed area of the country’s art history. In this section I will chart a number of significant contributions to the history of feminist art in Australia, which have been pivotal in recording, publicising and historicising feminist art since the 1970s.

Catriona Moore assembles twenty years of feminist scholarship in Australia in her edited volume *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970-1990* (1994), tracing the various strands of art theory which characterised Australian feminism throughout these decades. However, she resists a teleological construction of this history, noting
that: “The first temptation is to describe the progression from more ‘rough and ready’ work of the seventies to more nuanced work influenced by psychoanalytic, semiotic and deconstructivist models.”¹ Moore circumvents this teleology by combining records of exhibitions; essays by important feminist art historians such as Helen Grace, Judith Adams, Julie Ewington and Susan Best; theoretical texts such as ‘Feminist Theory and the Politics of Art’ by Elizabeth Grosz; and an interview between Vivienne Binns and Banduk Marika. This multivocal approach shares a similar intention with my own, which is to include multiple and diverse perspectives on feminist art without reinscribing the usual parameters of this practice, but which instead “opens up new approaches of how to relate economic, political and cultural spheres.”²

The most important, and indeed one of the only accounts of the history of performance art in Australia, is Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969-1992 by Anne Marsh, published in 1993. In this seminal text, still unmatched in its breadth and depth of research, Marsh traces the history of performance art from its roots both in Australia and internationally, and gives an account of performance art practices since the 1960s and 1970s. Marsh sees this project as being particularly necessary, following the perception in art historical discourse of a “return to painting” in the 1980s and ensuing “cultural amnesia” around performance and other experimental art practices from previous decades.³ Marsh describes the socio-historic context in which performance art developed, which stressed the dematerialisation and democratisation of art. I return to this context in my chapter on performance, where I argue that this shift away from art’s focus on objects was particularly important for feminist artists. Marsh also emphasises the participatory turn in performance, with a new conception of audience and their involvement in the work, on which I draw in Chapter Three, where I discuss collaboration. Marsh’s crucial distinction between performance and other art is the artist’s presence before

² Ibid. p. 6
an audience, something which I argue is particularly important in the case of female artists. Their physical bodies are always marked by cultural inscriptions of gender, race, as well disability/ability, and this is both brought to the fore of the audience’s attention with the presence of the live body in space, and allows the artist to retain agency over the body as it is not mediated by other forms of representation.

More recently, Marsh has written on the complexities of documenting and historicising performance art, an issue which is also at stake for many of the artists in this thesis. The way a performance is documented and recorded impacts on its presence and endurance in the archive of art history, and this has been addressed in different ways by a number of Australian and New Zealand artists. In *Performance, Ritual, Document* (2014), Marsh argues that: “Performance art is ephemeral and made to be lost in time. This aspect of the medium was championed as a form of resistance in the 1970s since it appeared to be a mechanism that would resist commodification by the art market. However, it is now clear that performance works enter the history of art and the museum as photographs, videos, films and texts.”

These traces of performances are crucial to understanding the context in which they were performed, and preserving them for future generations of artists and art audiences. The issues surrounding the archive, documentation and performance which Marsh addresses in this text will be explored in relation to work by Jill Orr, Brown Council, Zoe Leonard and Kelly Doley.

In *Erotic Ambiguities: The Female Nude in Art* (2001) Helen McDonald examines the representation of the female nude in contemporary art. She focuses on three key themes of power, idealism and ambiguity, and considers the way in which visual art produced by women is informed by feminism, specifically visual art by women which invokes the female nude. Particularly important is the chapter discussing the process of re-visioning the ideal female body in the 1980s, in the wake of anti-pornography

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controversy among feminists. McDonald argues that this process of re-visioning entailed the destruction of the classical ideal of the female nude, the foregrounding of ambiguity, and an implicit proposal for a new, more inclusive ideal of an erotically appealing body.\(^7\) In Chapter Five, I discuss the notion of re-visioning in relation to contemporary feminist artists’ use of earlier feminist practices. I argue that to re-vision is to deconstruct traditional notions of artistic influence, ingenuity and teleology, to foreground cross- and inter-generational dialogue, and to propose a new conception of art history and temporality which is circular, rather than linear.

Temporality, and its particular complexities in Australia, is addressed by Kate MacNeill in her article discussing the reception of Judy Chicago’s seminal work *The Dinner Party* in Melbourne in 1988.\(^8\) MacNeill argues that while Chicago’s work was criticised in Australia for being dated and inferior to what was being done by local Australian artists in the late 1980s, its political agency lay not in a contemporary aesthetic but in its intervention in the conventional masculinist representations of nation that dominated Australia’s Bicentenary celebrations, with which the work’s display coincided.\(^9\) MacNeill invokes Julia Kristeva’s concept of “women’s time”, which is one of the key feminist theories I deploy in this thesis, to explain the iterative nature of Chicago’s work. Chicago’s work, MacNeill argues, is emblematic of the generation of feminism which Kristeva describes as being concerned with finding a place for women in “linear time.” The author calls the work’s place within the program of Bicentenary celebrations an act of “visual hijacking: designed to celebrate women’s contribution to the project of nation building and to write women into pre-existing, though partial, versions of Australian history.”\(^10\) This act of nation-building, to which Kristeva explicitly refers in her text, was the central project of the Bicentenary, MacNeill argues, making Chicago’s work perfectly suited to the occasion. *The Dinner Party* can be understood as one of many ways of critiquing the interconnected structures of history, patriarchy and nation, rather than as the only

\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^10\) Ibid.
way in which this critique could be mounted. MacNeill’s claim that the exhibition of Chicago’s work in Melbourne, particularly at the time of the Bicentenary, was “both a monument to a feminist movement extending beyond the boundaries of any one nation and a strategically timed reminder of the selective nature of the Australian nation’s own official history”\textsuperscript{11} resonates with many of the art practices discussed in this thesis. Feminist artists continue to find ways to deconstruct accepted narratives of history, temporality and nation, as Judy Chicago did so emphatically with \textit{The Dinner Party}.

MacNeill’s discussion of this exhibition of a single feminist artwork is enlarged upon by Susan Best in her article ‘What Is a Feminist Exhibition? Considering \textit{Contemporary Australia: Women}’ (2016).\textsuperscript{12} The exhibition in question is \textit{Contemporary Australia: Women}, organised by Julie Ewington for the Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, in 2012, which included over seventy new and recent works by thirty-three Australian women artists and collectives. The exhibition was composed entirely of and by women artists and curators, and examined themes common in women’s practice such as “performing” femininity; the place of personal and intimate spheres such as sexuality, the body, motherhood and ageing; the return to everyday materials; and the ways some artists are “redressing” the canon of painting. However, the exhibition deliberately avoided the use of the word “feminism” in any of its promotional or accompanying written material. This garnered criticism from those who felt the exhibition was shying away from the challenge to address the importance of feminism now, and those who felt that an all-woman show was an insulting anachronism.\textsuperscript{13} Best explores these criticisms in detail, but points out that eschewing the “feminist” label allowed the exhibition to avoid conflating women’s art with feminist art, or creating a slippage between feminist interpretations of art and feminist art. Feminism, she argues, was posed as the background that made \textit{Contemporary Australia: Women} possible, rather than

\textsuperscript{11} Kate MacNeill, ‘When Historic Time Meets Julia Kristeva’s Women’s Time: the Reception of Judy Chicago’s \textit{The Dinner Party} in Australia’, \textit{Outskirts Online Journal}, vol. 18 (May 2008), n.p
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. p. 192
constituting its theme. This meant that the exhibition is “thematically and ideologically open-ended and not explicitly about inequality, the legacy of feminism or feminist-identified artists.”

Best associates this broader exploration of women’s art practices with a host of other exhibitions which foreground the investigation of gender, rather than feminist politics. This, she argues, stems from the exhibition curated by Catherine de Zegher in 1996, *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art, in, of and from the Feminine* (Kanaal Art Foundation, Kortrijk, Belgium). This exhibition reframed some of the earliest concerns about women’s art that emerged in the 1970s, including the idea of a “feminine aesthetic” which informed women’s art practice. De Zegher engaged with Julia Kristeva’s feminist theory to suggest that “the feminine” is aligned with the disruption of meaning, ruptures and recurrent cycles.

Best argues that a number of ensuing exhibitions of women’s art either implicitly or explicitly refer to De Zegher’s curatorial strategy, including *Contemporary Australia: Women*. This exhibition, she says, provided a rare opportunity to consider how, what de Zegher refers to as “new beginnings”, are evident in women’s art now. While it may not be considered a “feminist blockbuster” exhibition, the likes of which proliferated in the first decade of the twenty first century, Best argues that *Contemporary Australia: Women* allowed contemporary Australian women artists to realise their various projects on a scale not previously seen in Australian museums.

Debates surrounding contemporary feminist art, and a number of issues which surface throughout this thesis, are succinctly summed up in Best’s article. Of particular relevance is the naming and categorisation of feminist art, which is not always made by, or for, women. Best’s use of De Zegher’s conception of “the feminine” as a move to deconstruct meaning and language is a useful way to

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15 Ibid. p. 197
16 Ibid. p. 197
17 Ibid. p. 202
conceptualise contemporary women’s art practice, the themes explored in this practice, and the ways in which contemporary women’s art is informed by feminism.

**Feminist Theory**

This section examines a number of feminist texts which have informed this thesis on a theoretical level. I have already mentioned Julia Kristeva, whose important essay ‘Women’s Time’ was pivotal in informing my understanding of circular temporality in contemporary feminist art practice. First published in English in 1981, ‘Women’s Time’ outlines three feminist positions which characterise the feminist movement more broadly. Crucially for Kristeva’s argument, and for this thesis, is the notion that these attitudes can, and do, exist simultaneously, extending across and through time, unlike the generational model of “first wave”, “second wave” and “third wave” feminism, which is the model usually deployed in feminist history and art history.

Kristeva’s three feminist attitudes are characterised by their position towards history and temporality: the first being the desire to “gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history;” the second being the almost total refusal of linear time, and an “exacerbated distrust of the entire political dimension”; the third position, and the one Kristeva advocates for, is an amalgamation of the first two attitudes: “insertion into history and the radical refusal of the subjective limitations imposed by this history’s time on an experiment carried out in the name of irreducible difference.”

This tension between linear and monumental time is a key aspect of the works I discuss in this thesis, which return to and revise earlier practices, while at the same time remaining abreast of contemporary issues and ideas. In Chapter Five I discuss artistic practices which employ the device of re-vision, returning to earlier feminist motifs and themes in their work to emphasise the circularity and iterative nature of much feminist art. This echoes Kristeva’s claim that “female subjectivity would seem to provide a specific measure (of time) that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time known through the history of civilisations.”

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19 Ibid. p. 16
Kristeva has also written an important text on abjection, the psychoanalytic concept used to refer to that which is opposed to the self, which threatens the whole, “clean” subject’s identity through its relation to death. In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), Kristeva describes the abject as that which “disturbs identity, system, order. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”

The disruption of order and systems is an important feminist intervention, as artists seek to challenge and undo accepted structures of power which systematically oppress women. Kristeva argues that the abject is fundamentally associated with the maternal body – the body from which all bodies are separated in order to become. Abjection is also associated with bodily fluids such as menstrual blood and breast milk, thus linking it closely with the feminine body. Abjection is deployed, in conjunction with humour, by a number of feminist artists discussed in this thesis to draw attention to the subversive potential of abject humour, to disrupt speech, logic and the symbolic order.

Kristeva is one of the pioneers of feminist theory who used a feminist perspective to “read” the mainstream of psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory in the 1970s. Dianne Hunter conducts her own feminist reading of a key psychoanalytic text in her essay ‘Hystera, Psychoanalysis and Feminism in the Case of Anna O’ (1983), in which she offers a psychoanalytic feminist reading of Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer’s *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), particularly the patient known as “Anna O”. She focuses in particular on the patient’s speechlessness during hysteria and her communication through translation, gibberish and pantomime. Hunter argues that this regression from patriarchal language allowed “Anna O” to liberate herself from an oppressive German cultural identity. The disruption of speech is an important concept of this thesis, particularly in Chapter Four where I discuss the use of humour in

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21 Ibid. p. 6
22 Ibid. p 70
24 Ibid. p. 468
contemporary feminist art. Hunter’s essay itself is a disruption of the patriarchal discipline of psychoanalysis, dominated by figures such as Freud and Breuer, and a kind of re-visioning of psychoanalytic theory. By re-visioning their work through a feminist lens, she sheds new light on Freud and Breuer’s work and allows it to be used in feminist discussions of psychoanalysis, language and hysteria.

Like Kristeva’s and Hunter’s texts, Barbara Creed’s *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1993) gives a feminist reading of psychoanalytic theory in order to conceptualise the notion of the female monster, or monstrous-feminine, which recurs frequently in popular cinema. Creed links the monstrous-feminine to Freud’s castration complex and the monstrous mother; and to Julia Kristeva’s formulation of the abject.25 Images of blood, vomit, pus and faeces are central, Creed says, to our socially and culturally constructed notions of the horrific, and are based on an idea of the self’s clean and proper body, which Kristeva calls the “fully symbolic body.”26 While Creed’s analysis focuses on the genre of horror films, I use her theory to discuss art which parodies the monstrous-feminine in order to expose the fact that this notion of femininity is, in fact, socially constructed. Through parody, feminist artists pose incisive critique of both the social codes that women are expected to conform to, and the “monsters” they supposedly become when they transgress these codes.

Many of the practices I discuss in this thesis echo feminist theories of non-reductive identity, such as that proposed by Judith Butler in her essay ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’ (1988). In this text, she outlines her theory of gender performativity, which suggests that gender, rather than being an inherent aspect of one’s identity which is given from birth, is constructed through repeated and socially regulated gestures. She claims:

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Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts.  

This understanding of gender as unstable and unfixed is helpful in analysing the works of feminist artists who use performance, installation and video works, such as the artists in this thesis, to explore issues related to gender. It is also significant as a means of delineating what constitutes feminist art, as this cannot always be determined by the gender of the artist producing the work. The exploration of fluid, non-reductive identities is a key component of feminist art, and particularly the works discussed in this thesis, making Butler’s theory of gender performativity an integral theory on which this thesis relies.

**Contemporary Art Writing**

As well as recent writing on feminist art in Australia and feminist theory, this thesis builds on recent writing about contemporary art, and questions how this relates to feminism and feminist art. The connection between contemporary art and feminism lies in the way that current practices revisit crucial issues which continue to cycle through women’s lived experiences, including the body, labour and capital, environmentalism, and their relationship to structures of power. The texts I refer to are not necessarily concerned with feminism or feminist art, but offer ways to think about contemporary art more generally, and how feminist theory might intersect with these practices.

Collaborative practice is a key theme in this thesis, as it informs almost all of the work discussed in the following chapters, whether in the conceptualisation, execution or reception of the work. Claire Bishop discusses the proliferation of collaboration in contemporary art, which she calls the “participatory turn”, in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012). Bishop claims that, rather than being an entirely new practice, the development of participatory art is a return to the social, part of an ongoing history of attempts to

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rethink art collectively.²⁸ For instance, the Dadaist and Surrealist movements, as well as Fluxus artists, all conceived of a type of collective and collaborative art practice which would allow them to achieve their political aims. Bishop situates participatory art as part of a set of practices which aim to channel art’s symbolic capital towards constructive social change, rather than towards the production of marketable objects.²⁹ I acknowledge these aspects of collaboration in the work of the artists I discuss, and relate Bishop’s theory of participation, spectatorship and collaboration to feminist art practices. I argue that collaboration holds unique power for feminist artists who strive to challenge deeply ingrained notions of artistic identity, the labour of art-making, and audience.

Jo Anna Isaak has worked extensively on feminism and humour, producing the exhibition The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter in 1982, and a book of the same title published in 1996. In this volume, Isaak invokes an extensive range of writings: Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of laughter and the carnivalesque as potential revolutionary strategies; Barthes’ and Kristeva’s notion of laughter as libidinal license; the jouissance of the polymorphic, orgasmic body; Freud’s analysis of the liberating potential of laughter which emerges from plays on language, and Freud’s essays on narcissism, to demonstrate why those in possession of the most radical humour might be women.³⁰ Isaak deploys these theories to build connections between feminist humour and psychoanalysis. Laughter, she argues, is a liberation of repressed desires and fantasies, and this liberation holds revolutionary power. Like Julia Kristeva, Dianne Hunter and others, Isaak intervenes in psychoanalytic discourse, as well as contemporary art discourse, to present a feminist reading of canonical theories and of a number of contemporary art works.

Isaak’s intervention in this field has recently been extended by Laura Castagnini, in her writing on parody and parafeminism in the works of Brown Council, Hannah

²⁹ ibid. p. 13
Raisin, the Hotham Street Ladies and others. My work draws on both Isaak’s and Castagnini’s writing, and aims to develop from and contribute to the same field of literature, arguing that women artists, specifically those working in a feminist vein, deploy humour in revolutionary and subversive ways. I expand on Castagnini’s invocation of parody and Amelia Jones’ notion of “parafeminism”, to analyse the way in which contemporary practices develop and extend those of earlier feminist artists in a knowing nod, or playful wink, to the history of feminist art. I extend this more fully in Chapter Five, where I discuss re-visionist practices that place themselves alongside earlier feminist works and artists in order to view these in a new way.

Notions of return, repetition and re-vision have been central to a number of recent texts on contemporary art, indicating a gradual shift away from teleological art history, in which a timeline of rupture and progress is deployed. Giovanna Zapperi explores the notion of “feminist time” in ‘Woman’s Reappearance: Rethinking the Archive in Contemporary Art – Feminist Perspectives’ (2013). Her theory extends upon Julia Kristeva’s “women’s time”, and comprises returns, accelerations and discontinuities. Zapperi applies this concept to a number of artists who are concerned with uncovering that which has been overlooked or repressed. In turn, I draw on these writings in my analysis of contemporary feminist art practices that highlight and amend gaps and inconsistencies in the archive of feminist art, and expand the definition and conception of the archive itself. Zapperi’s “feminist time” is useful in conceptualising feminist artworks as existing alongside of, and parallel to, earlier feminist practices. She writes:

Reclaiming women’s agency through the work of history has become an increasingly crucial concern for women artists: archival research, re-enactments and other creative re-workings of past events have gained a decisive role in the redefinition of critical feminist art practice, up to the

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current re-evaluations of the history of 1970s feminism in contemporary art.33

This labour of reclaiming women’s place in history is about more than adding names to the history books or proposing an alternative view of history, but must seek to uncover genealogies and connections that would otherwise be lost or invisible.34 This is precisely the work which a number of artists in this thesis undertake, positioning their own work alongside and in relation to both historical and contemporary feminist practices.

The concept of “re-visioning” is further developed by Victoria Horne in her article ‘Kate Davis: Re-Visioning Art History After Modernism and Postmodernism’ (2015). Horne develops a framework for understanding contemporary artist Kate Davis’ practice within a feminist logic of re-visioning and re-citing, strategies which she suggests are paradigmatic to feminist art production. I use Horne’s concept of “re-vision” to discuss feminist practices which incorporate strategies and imagery from earlier artists and their work, to re-present it in a contemporary context. Horne writes: “To ‘re-vision’ is to break off, possess and reframe a visual fragment from art history to make it anew in the present.”35 This strategy resonates with much of the work I discuss here, and I have expanded Horne’s concept into a more nuanced theory.

“Re-vision” has multiple meanings: to “revise” an art historical period or artistic practice is to alter, amend, improve or update it. This is one aspect of revisionist feminist practices, which intervene in art’s histories to change the way an artist’s practice has been perceived or to revise the canon of art history. However, to “re-vision” also means to see something in a different light, to view it through a different lens, and it is in this sense that it is adopted as a strategy of contemporary feminist artists, who “break off” and “possess” (or perhaps re-possess) fragments of visual

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34 Ibid. p. 25
culture in order to reframe them and visualise them anew. Adrienne Rich has spoken of the importance of this as a feminist practice, saying “Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival.”

Women’s drive to self-knowledge, through understanding and reappraisal of the past, is part of a refusal of constructed identities forced upon women by male-dominated society.

As part of the multi-faceted approach I take in this thesis, the literature discussed in this chapter will be interwoven with information gained from, and observations made, during interviews with the artists whose work I discuss. Combining theory, conversation and visual analysis allows me to present a more nuanced discussion of contemporary feminist art practice, in a way that reflects the multi-positional nature of the work itself.

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37 Ibid.
PRACTICES

In the following two chapters I discuss artistic practices that are central to the artists I have engaged with in this project: performance and collaboration. These are modes of working which are particularly productive for feminist artists for various reasons; performance appeals to feminist artists because of its experimental and ephemeral nature, its lack of canonisation and its focus on the body, which is a key site of contention for feminist artists. In discussing elements of contemporary feminist performance art, I reflect on earlier works which contain traces of this practice and suggest that the practice of performance has allowed feminist artists to intervene in the dominant artistic paradigm at a number of different points in monumental time.

Similarly, working collaboratively allows feminist artists to resist the artistic model of individuals working alone to produce discrete object, which become products of exchange in the art market. Working collaboratively allows women and other marginalised groups to react against and critique an oppressive condition.¹ Both performance and collaboration are practices which enable the artists I discuss below to challenge the framing of many artistic pairings: between medium and concept, aesthetic and process, and the role of the “active” artist and the “passive” audience.

Chapter two

The Practice of Performance

In 2013, Australian performance artist Hannah Raisin performed *Dear Carolee, Love Cindy, Love Hannah* (2013) at Next Wave festival. Wearing a white dress with raw eggs hanging round her neck, Raisin cracked the eggs to reveal that they were filled with coloured dye, which she smeared over her body and clothes. She then pulled an auxiliary cord from her vagina, plugged it into a speaker, and played Cindy Lauper’s 1983 popular song ‘Girls Just Want to Have Fun.’ Almost four decades earlier, feminist performance artist Carolee Schneemann entered a dimly lit room filled with women artists, at the exhibition *Women Here and Now* in East Hampton, New York. She undressed, wrapped herself in a sheet, and proceeded to read aloud from her book *Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter*. Then, after climbing onto a table, Schneemann read from a scroll which she pulled from her vagina, in a work that is known as *Interior Scroll*.¹ Raisin’s performance is both homage to and re-vision of Schneemann’s earlier feminist work.

In this chapter, I argue that the history of performance is inextricably linked to the history of feminism and feminist art. I begin by tracing a brief history of feminist performance art to demonstrate this long-standing mutuality, and then turn to the contemporary performance practices of Jill Orr, Hannah Raisin, Brown Council, Kelly Doley, and FANTASING. Returning to my primary research question of how feminism manifests itself in the work of contemporary artists, I discuss a number of performances in depth, and draw parallels between performance now, and feminist performance of the 1960s and 1970s.

A number of common threads recur throughout this chapter, woven throughout the numerous works discussed. These include: breaking down distinctions such as those between male and female, object and subject, and aesthetic and process; constructive dialogue between earlier feminist performance artists and contemporary artists; and cyclical temporality. I use the term cyclical temporality to refer to the recycling of earlier feminist performance strategies by contemporary artists, circumventing linear time. All of these threads appear in different ways in the work of the artists discussed here, but the works are united in their attempts to create links to one another, and to the archive of feminist performance art.

**Beginnings**

Performance art’s roots lie in the “Happenings” devised by Allan Kaprow and other male artists in the 1950s and early 1960s, such as *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* (1959) at the Reuben Gallery in New York. Working from a carefully conceived and tightly scripted score inspired by experimental composer John Cage, Kaprow created an interactive environment that involved the audience’s participation to a degree virtually unprecedented in twentieth century art.\(^2\) Although Kaprow referenced “performance” in his instructions to his audience, the term “performance art” was not coined until the 1970s, and did not become widespread in the art world until the 1980s.\(^3\) Instead, critics and artists referred to “body art” or “action art” to describe performative actions by artists working with their own bodies, and sometimes with the bodies of other artists or participants. Early feminist performance artists such as Bonita Ely, Yayoi Kusama, Lyndall Milani, Yoko Ono, Gina Pane and Carolee Schneemann explored performance’s unique subversive capacity, as a new mode of practice which was not yet dominated by male artists. As Kristine Stiles argues, performance art was not structured by the “overarching hegemony of the concept of male genius.”\(^4\) Performance art was a way for feminist artists to subvert the male-dominated mainstream of art at the time, as well as the masculinist performances of

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4 Ibid.
Vito Acconci, Yves Klein and others. These works were, at times, frankly misogynist. Women were often used in performance art as “objects,” such as the women in Yves Klein’s series *Anthropométries* (1960), who performed nude as “living paintbrushes,” covering their bodies in blue paint and rolling on canvases in front of a live audience. While they played an active role in creating the work, they were viewed as objects of art, rather than artists. In a performance titled *Manipulations* (1970), Vito Acconci burned hair from his chest, “pulling at it, making it supple, flexible – an attempt to develop a female breast,” then tucked his penis between his legs to “extend the sex change,” and finally “acquired a female form” by having a woman kneel behind him with his penis “disappearing” into her mouth.⁵ Acconci’s work aimed to explore the nature of the body in space and its relationship to other bodies; however, by using a female body as a prop in this performance, he reinforced the dichotomy of active male and passive female, and exploited the woman’s body by turning her into an object.

Accustomed to seeing women’s bodies as objects, in art, popular culture, and performances, audiences are forced to make a conscious shift to understand women as subjects with agency in their own right. Artists were already challenging the idea of the male subject/female object pairing in the early 1960s, when Carolee Schneemann first performed her work *Eye/Body* (1963). This performance took place in the artist’s studio, amongst her completed and as-yet-unfinished works (fig. 4, p. 39). Schneemann covered herself with fur, paint, paper and transparent plastic, materials that have recurred over and over within her entire practice.⁶ Viewers, or perhaps more accurately, participants, who visited Schneemann’s loft studio in December 1963 were greeted with 4x9 foot panels, broken glass and shards of mirrors, photographs, lights, and motorised umbrellas. Schneemann incorporated her own naked body into the scene by painting, greasing and chalking herself.

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⁶ Regina Flowers, ‘Material and Motion: Phenomenology and the Early Work of Carolee Schneemann 1957-1973’, *Theses, Dissertations and Student Creative Activity, Department of Art and Art History*, 2012. [http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/artstudents/24](http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/artstudents/24), accessed 8/2/16
Rebecca Schneider, in her book *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997), discusses the importance of this work in terms of the way it challenges a male perspective:

In *Eye/Body*, Schneemann was not only image but image-maker, and it is this overt doubling across the explicit terrain of engenderment which marks *Eye/Body* as historically significant for feminist performance art...

In *Eye/Body* Schneemann manipulated both her own live female body and her artist’s agency.

Schneemann draws the viewer’s attention to the way that concepts of artist, creation, art work and audience are implicitly gendered male, and contests this gendering through the use of her own body as an artist with agency.

Performance art emerged in a period of cultural uprising against the commodification of the art object and the ability of capitalism to co-opt even the most radical art practices. Around the same time that more artists were turning to performance to express their ideas, conceptual art was gaining in popularity, often for the same reasons. Anne Marsh states that: “both performance and conceptual art stressed the dematerialisation of the art object and rejected the commodity-based materialism of the art world during this period.”

Performance is inherently ephemeral and not disposed to commodification or institutionalisation. Many performances in the 1960s and 1970s were one-off, and were only attended by a small number of “in-the-know” audience members, thus foreclosing the opportunity for collection and incorporation into the art market. Resisting commodification was also important to feminist artists, many of whom were well aware of the connection between the commodification of the art object under capitalism and the use of women’s bodies to sell products, and wanted to situate their practice outside this system. Performance uniquely allowed them to do this in the 1970s and 1980s, until, inevitably, the art world caught on to performance’s popularity and marketability, and began to adapt in order to promote, buy and sell performance. This is perhaps

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most obviously demonstrated by “blockbuster” performances by Marina Abramović, such as *The Artist is Present* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010) and *Marina Abramović: In Residence* (Kaldor Public Art Projects, Sydney, 2015). Abramović has become a household name, somewhat like a brand, and her work is one of the more extreme examples of performance art’s co-option into institutions.

In Anne Marsh’s recent book *Performance, Ritual, Document* (2014), she argues that performance art was originally made to be lost in time, however it is now clear that “performance works enter the history of art and the museum as photographs, videos, films and texts.” While the potential of performance art to resist commodification has diminished somewhat since the 1970s, the relationship between feminist art and performance persists. In the following section, I turn to the contemporary performance practices of Jill Orr, Hannah Raisin, Brown Council, Kelly Doley, and FANTASING, and argue that the continuing significance of performance stems from contemporary artists’ meaningful engagement with second-wave feminist practices.

**Return**

Jill Orr’s almost forty-year-long oeuvre provides an important link between second-wave feminist performance and contemporary practice. Her continuing dedication to performance, the body and political activism in her artistic practice attests to the enduring importance of performance. Orr’s 1979 work *Bleeding Trees*, and the accompanying series of photographs documenting the performance, has become one of her most recognisable and much-cited works (figs. 1-3). For this performance, Orr suspends herself naked from tree branches, submerges herself in the earth and coats herself in chalky clay to signify her bodily and spiritual connection to the environment. Orr also references the notion of woman as goddess, particularly a goddess of the earth or nature. The image of the female goddess was popular in feminist art and theory in the 1960s and 1970s, as a gesture to matriarchal societies.

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throughout history which contested the prevalence of patriarchy and allowed women to explore their femininity in terms of power, agency and spirituality.10

The landscapes in *Bleeding Trees*, from various locations in Victoria, Australia, are comprised of dead, gnarled trees that reflect the stiff, mute body of the artist in the photographs, or rocky terrain and dry earth which cover and seem to suffocate her. Orr’s naked body is strung from a tree branch, in the manner of a crucifixion, and buried in a mound of earth with the artist’s open mouth at the centre of the image. Perhaps she is emitting a cry for help or, as Anne Marsh suggests, the artist’s open mouth acts as “an opening through which fear can pass.”11 Orr’s performance and photographic documentation make a powerful statement about the destruction of the environment in the post-industrial era, an issue that she revisits throughout her extensive practice.

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11 Ibid. p. 121
Fig. 1: Jill Orr, *Bleeding Trees*, 1979. Performance for camera

Fig. 2: Jill Orr, *Bleeding Trees*, 1979. Performance for camera
At the 2015 Palimpsest Biennale in Mildura, Orr performed a new work titled *Antipodean Epic*, which revisited environmental themes, including, on this occasion, mass-production of food, sustainable farming and genetic modification (fig. 4). In the photographic documentation of the performance, Orr appears as a bird-like figure in the vast landscape, and is doused in a shower of grain which covers the fragile creature, overwhelming her with its sheer weight and volume. Since it is the body that takes centre-stage in Orr’s performances, the degradation of the body becomes a symbol for the degradation of the environment.
Orr’s performance work is particularly interesting for the emphasis she places on documentation, such as the exquisite photographs taken by Elizabeth Campbell for *Bleeding Trees*. This particular series, Orr says, bears no resemblance to the original performance, for which there was no live audience. There has been considerable debate surrounding the authenticity of performance documents, and whether live performance, which is inherently ephemeral and sensory, can be captured by film or photography.

Orr herself says of the *Bleeding Trees* documentation:

> I think the whole thing’s just different ways of communicating the central concept….Actually, the challenge was, how do I take the bush into the gallery space. I thought if I go and do photo shoots in the bush, take it and then incorporate that through slides, projections, in the gallery, that would answer that question, and it sort of did. But then, the following representation of that piece had nothing to do with the live performance, because the images I took in the bush were powerful in their own right, and I thought that’s the documentation, I don’t need the other.\(^{12}\)

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\(^{12}\) Interview with the artist, 30/11/15
This documentation of feminist performance is crucial in creating a dialogue between the work of established feminist artists like Jill Orr, and younger artists, researchers and writers, who would not otherwise experience the work without documentation. It also allows the work to enter the archive of feminist art, creating a richer and more complex record of feminist works, not just those which are held in public collections or which have entered the canon of feminist art history by other means.

While Orr is able to reflect back on her own practice through the archive of her work, other artists look to earlier practices which can only be experienced through documentation. As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Melbourne-based artist Hannah Raisin has revisited Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* performance in her 2013 work *Dear Carolee, Love Cindy, Love Hannah* (figs. 5-7). Raisin playfully quotes particular idiosyncrasies of *Interior Scroll*, as well as alluding to aspects of 1970s feminist performance more broadly. These include the presence of the artist’s body and the use of the vagina as a “source” of creativity, which are presented through the distinctly contemporary devices of play and parody.

![Fig. 5: Hannah Raisin, *Dear Carolee, Love Cindy, Love Hannah*, 2013. Performance, dimensions variable](image-url)
Fig. 6: Hannah Raisin, *Dear Carolee, Love Cindy, Love Hannah*, 2013. Performance, dimensions variable.

Fig 7: Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975.
Beet juice, urine and coffee on screenprint on paper. 905 x 1830 mm, Tate Collection.
Raisin’s performance embodies Frederic Jameson’s postmodern notion of pastiche and parody, in the way it pieces together fragments of culture, both popular and artistic, and invokes circular temporality by collapsing three time periods into one performance. Jameson explains pastiche as “the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language.”\(^{13}\) I argue that contemporary feminist artists imitate peculiar styles and wear “stylistic masks” in a way that is both celebratory and sanguine. Raisin, for instance, assumes the style of second-wave feminist art practice through abjection, the use of the body and reference to Schneemann’s performance, in order to acknowledge and celebrate this kind of work. However, she does so in a way which updates the visual language of feminist performance practice, and positions her performance within the contemporary field. This allows Raisin, and other artists who work in this vein, to imagine feminist futures that are responsive to the past, engaged with the present moment, and invested in a more hopeful future. Raisin’s pastiche of earlier styles situates her performance practice in a lineage of feminist artists like Schneemann and Cindy Lauper, while remaining decidedly contemporary with her knowing “nod” to earlier feminist performance. She describes her relationship to previous feminist artists thus:

> When I started making work, I sort of un-beknowingly was making a lot of work that was quite aligned with the seventies feminists. So I discovered this whole dialogue of artists and work that had been happening before me, and that I was working into, which I was really excited about.\(^{14}\)

Raisin views the history of feminist performance art as a “dialogue,” an interesting and useful way to view the relationship of early performance artists to contemporary feminist artists. Rather than seeing influence as something which comes directly from older feminist artists and is adopted by younger artists, a dialogue suggests multi-directional conversation, in which artists like Raisin “speak


\(^{14}\) Interview with the artist, 7/11/15
back” to earlier feminist performances artists, and perhaps even “influence” this work, by allowing audiences to read performances like Interior Scroll in a new way.

Fig. 8: Kelly Doley, The Learning Centre: Two Feminists, 2010. Performance.

This is an acknowledgement of the fact that ideas are not produced in a vacuum, but emerge from lived experiences. Thus, the fact that Raisin found herself responding to some of the same issues as earlier feminist artists indicates that these experiences are held in common, across generations and through time.

Kelly Doley, one of the members of Brown Council, has explored the notion of dialogic performance in her solo practice. For a work at West Space, Melbourne, in 2012 called The Learning Centre: Two Feminists, the artist invited sixteen participants over a period of three weeks to come and teach her about feminism, in return for a portrait of themselves by Doley (fig. 8). This performance opened up conversations between the artist and other feminists about a vast range of issues, from Julia Gillard (the first and then-current female Prime Minister of Australia), Christina Aguilera’s lyrics, rape culture and the SlutWalk protest movement.  

15 For more information on the topics of discussion in The Learning Centre, see Doley’s blog twofeminists.wordpress.com.
performance reverses the role often played by artists, of playing a didactic role to educate their audience about a particular issue, or revealing a certain message through their work. Instead, Doley positions herself as a pupil, being taught different ways of thinking about feminism by a range of writers, activists, artists, and curators.

As a performance, this work is intriguing, as it does not involve the artist undertaking “actions” for a designated “audience,” but involves other feminists who become part of this work as active participants. In this way, Doley engages in the distinctly contemporary mode of what Claire Bishop calls “participatory art,” which will be addressed at length in Chapter Three. According to Bishop, artists working within this framework are committed to “the creative rewards of participation as a politicised working process.”16 Participatory, or collaborative art as I am calling it, is similar to performance art in that it opposes itself to the commodification of art, and the conception of the artist as an individual “genius.”

In Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship, Bishop states:

The artist is conceived less as an individual producer of discrete objects than as a collaborator and producer of situations; the work of art as a finite, portable, commodifiable product is reconceived as an ongoing or long-term project with an unclear beginning and end; while the audience, previously conceived as a ‘viewer’ or ‘beholder’, is now repositioned as a co-producer or participant.17

Thus, Doley’s performance at West Space engages both the second-wave feminist strategy of consciousness-raising, and the distinctly contemporary mode of participatory art. This model conceptualises the artistic process as an end in itself, rather than as a means to an aesthetic end. Bishop discusses the relationship between aesthetics and the market:

...social history and identity politics...have repeatedly drawn attention to the way in which the aesthetic masks inequalities, oppressions and exclusions (of race, gender, class, and so on). This has tended to promote

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17 Ibid.
an equation between aesthetics and the triple enemy of formalism, decontextualisation and depoliticisation; the result is that aesthetics became synonymous with the market and conservative cultural hierarchy.\textsuperscript{18}

This lead to a rejection of aesthetics, on the basis that it was too closely aligned with consumer culture, and an emphasis instead on process, which is less amenable to commodification. Thus, in a project like \textit{The Learning Centre}, Doley's aim is not to produce a number of objects in a studio environment, which is the usual model of putting together an exhibition. Instead, the exhibition itself consists in the conversations Doley had with participants and the process of learning more about feminist issues. There were portraits produced as an outcome of the project, and a separate exhibition titled \textit{Things Learnt About Feminism} at Boxcopy in Brisbane (2014), where Doley exhibited posters with catchy slogans of the “lessons” she received, in the style of 1970s protest signs.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{tlf_posters.png}
\caption{Kelly Doley, \textit{Things Learnt About Feminism #1 - #95}, 2014. Ink on 220 gsm card, 52 x 60 cm.}
\end{figure}

However, these were not the main focus of the project, rather it was the conversations between Doley and other feminists which comprised the central

\textsuperscript{18} Claire Bishop, \textit{Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship}. London: Verso, 2012, pp. 17-18
component. This mode of practice is not necessarily anti-aesthetic, but it works towards breaking down the distinction between aesthetic and process. The material objects, such as the portraits of participants and the posters at Boxcopy (fig. 9), are still important parts of the work, but the process behind their creation is not hidden from sight, and instead becomes an integral part of the exhibition with its own “aesthetic”; the aesthetic of performance.

Finally, the documentation of The Learning Centre at West Space adds another dimension to our understanding of the work. Doley kept a blog at “twofeminists.wordpress.com,” recording what she learned from each visiting feminist throughout the duration of the project at West Space. As a documentation strategy this is unique, and gives readers an intimate perspective on The Learning Centre: Two Feminists. It performs a similar function to Elizabeth Campbell’s photographs of Jill Orr’s Bleeding Trees, as it creates an enduring trace of the ephemeral performance, which outlasts the performance itself. Some of Doley’s blog entries are touchingly personal, such as her session with activist Karen Pickering:

Karen began by saying that she had been crying all day. It was the day that Jill Meagher’s case went from missing persons to rape and murder.\(^{19}\) They found the guy, he’d confessed and took the police to the body that morning….That day was a really heavy day, I remember thinking it when I was in the gallery, before I knew about the changes in the Jill case. Me and Karen were very sad together, she said today she feels like the whole world hates women but she will feel like that only today and then move on.\(^{20}\)

This poignant retelling of a moment of grief shared between the two women communicates far more than a documentation photograph of the performance. It gives us the artist’s own insight into her conversations by combining objective information shared by her visitors (such as statistics about women in the arts, or domestic violence), with personal anecdote and emotional affect, without privileging the former content over the latter. Doley’s work challenges the divide between

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\(^{19}\) Jill Meagher was an Irish woman living in Australia who was raped and murdered by Adrian Bayley on September 22\(^{nd}\) 2012.

objective knowledge and subjective opinion or emotion, which Jane Duran argues is a gendered one. In her 1991 book *Toward a Feminist Epistemology*, Duran writes:

> The tradition that has its origins in Plato and Descartes begins with an assumption that being encased in the body, or simply being embodied, leads one to confusion. The simultaneous emphasis on reason, pure and speculative, divorced from the influence of the passions and bodily functions, and the conceptualisation of woman as other, as immersed in the body, as having difficulty in – or being completely incapable of – divorcing her reason from the body, has led to a tradition in epistemology that is at once virtually exclusively normative and staggeringly androcentric.²¹

Duran’s critique of the view that women have difficulty, or are completely incapable of, separating their mind from their body, is affirmed in Doley’s documentation of her performance, as she shares both her personal interpretation of the learning sessions she undertook, and the factual information she learnt, thus resisting a hierarchy of cognitive styles.

This project is also important in the way that Doley has documented her work in order for it to enter the archive of feminist art, which I will discuss in more detail in Chapter Five on re-vision. The entries on her blog rely on memory, something which the Australian theatre writer Sarah French has explored in depth in her work. She writes that history and memory are often construed as opposites, with memory being personal, subjective, and emotionally resonant, and historical research being objective and requiring critical distance from its subject.²² Doley’s work would appear to coincide with the former cognitive model associated with memory; however, French advocates for a dual perspective of history and memory, and argues that we should see them as complementary discourses.²³ Memory is a way for feminist work such as *The Learning Centre: Two Feminists* to enter history, and for artists and audiences to remain critical of past and present incarnations of...
feminism. Doley came away from The Learning Centre: Two Feminists, with no “truisms” or answers about feminism, but with an expanded view of feminist theory and politics, prompting an unravelling of expectations, further questions, and more conversation around the subject.

Doley has engaged in performance which subverts audience expectations for a number of years, particularly in her work as one of the four members of Brown Council. One of these performances is A Comedy (2010), a four-hour endurance performance in which the audience are asked to choose from a list of tropes of traditional comedy for Brown Council to perform: slapstick, the dancing monkey, cream pies and magic tricks (fig. 10). The performance explores comedic timing, questioning when the usual routine of comedians stops being funny, and then when it becomes humorous again after extensive repetition.

One audience member, performance-maker and writer Megan Garrett, describes her experience of A Comedy as follows:

A single line of chairs formed an intimate semi-circle that made the experience one of watching your fellow audience members as much as the performers, and leaving no escape from involvement. A coloured dunce hat was set on each seat for the audience to don, to match the ones Brown Council wore…. The presence of tomatoes at the audiences' feet seemed from the offset to be an invitation to actively express our judgement on the night's entertainment. As the bad jokes and failed tricks rolled out, I was tempted to throw a tomato or two, but was also aware that this would implicate me further in the humiliation of these women. There was also my sense of the limits of audience participation - a reticence to act unless explicitly asked to do so. Sure enough, in the final act Kelly Doley's face was painted as a target and she was presented, bound by rope and kneeling, to the audience. Admittedly, I threw the first tomato. But if I hadn't someone else would have, I think. A barrage soon followed. Are we horrible people? We had the power to end the humiliation and we decided to create its climax.24

Garrett highlights the key role the audience plays in this work, as it is ultimately their decision whether to engage in the work. It is clear from her account that *A Comedy* is, ironically, not a comedic work. Rather, it is an endurance performance, one in which the audience is invited to, and indeed compelled to, subject the artists to exhaustive and humiliating tasks. This creates a particular bond between the artists and the audience, as each enters into a silent agreement about the lengths to which each will go for the performance.

By placing themselves at the audience’s disposal, Brown Council situate their practice in dialogue with second-wave feminist artists such as Marina Abramović, who let audience members strip off her clothes, cut her skin with razors, commit minor sexual assaults on her and even hold a loaded gun to her head in *Rhythm 0* (1974), ²⁵ or Yoko Ono, who allowed audience members to cut her clothes off her body in *Cut Piece* (1964). In *A Comedy*, Brown Council tests the limits of not only the artists’ own bodies, but also the limits of the audience, who must “endure” the four-

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hour performance, and decide how far they take the acts they subject the artists to. As Garrett notes, the audience had the power to “end the humiliation”, and instead chose to further it by throwing tomatoes in the artists’ faces.

Furthermore, Brown Council pushes the limits of comedy itself, to see how long it takes before the performance becomes gruelling rather than funny, and, perhaps, when the length of the show becomes comical again in a circular fashion. The programme for *A Comedy* at Melbourne’s Next Wave festival (2010) hails the audience: “Prepare to laugh, then groan, and finally realise how creepy you are for laughing at all!”26 Brown Council reveals the dark, sinister side of comedy and the lengths that comedians, and perhaps also audiences, will go to for a laugh.

The final works to be discussed in this chapter are by New Zealand collective FANTASING, whose members Bek Coogan, Claire Harris, Sarah Jane Parton and Gemma Syme combine music, installation and live performance in what they call a “cosmic alignment.”27 For the show *Stars Rocked* (2014/2015) at The Physics Room gallery in Christchurch, New Zealand, the artists conceived a show which, like Kelly Doley’s project at West Space, collapses aesthetic and process (figs. 11-12). The entirety of the show, from the start to the finish of the exhibition, constituted the performance: it included the artists coming and going from the gallery, working within the space and outside of it, as well as live shows held at the opening and closing of the exhibition. At the end of the performance, the gallery displayed a video work by Claire Harris, a music video for FANTASING’s song “Instant Fantasy,” featuring rocky outcrops and nearby “Shag Rock,” which collapsed in the February 2011 earthquake. These landmarks were echoed in a shagpile rug and mound-like, sculptural rocks made of foam in the same room as the music video. Elsewhere in the gallery, there was an “Employee of the Month” display, with the artist’s portraits and office mugs on plinths, a whiteboard which was used for various planning and

doodling purposes throughout the exhibition, a desk and some seating, as well as a pot plant, creating the ambience of an office environment more than a gallery space.

Fig. 11: FANTASING, *Stars Rocked*, 2015. Installation view, The Physics Room gallery (detail). White board, office chair, speaker, musical equipment. Dimensions variable.

FANTASING members Sarah Jane Parton and Gemma Syme identify some of the constraints of this performance, which was fragmented by the artists often being unable to be in the space all together due to other commitments. Syme says, “When I’m in here it feels like I’m an attendant. Because people come in and see me, cos I’ll sit in the office area, and (they think) ‘she’s the attendant, looking after the space.’” Parton adds,

It’s funny isn’t it, how you almost have to clearly delineate yourself, or to clearly look like a performance artist...just being seems to be not quite enough for people. It’s like you need to be wearing a leotard.28

As Parton suggests, simply “being” in the performance space as an artist often feels like it is insufficient, and one has to delineate oneself as a “performance artist.” However, by refusing to do so, I suggest that FANTASING invokes the practice of “expanded performance”, a concept linked to a show at Stroom den Haag in the Netherlands, entitled Expanded Performance (2012). In this exhibition, the curators assembled art works “that evolve or change from week to week through activities and visitor participation rather than an exhibition in its finished form,” and focused on art which “moves beyond body- or live-centred performance.”29

FANTASING’s performance gradually and organically took shape rather than arriving at the gallery in a finished state. It also shifted attention away from the physical body, which was the central focus of early feminist performance art. This signifies the changing nature of feminist art, despite the many parallels that contemporary practice shares with earlier works. The female body is still present in the space and is usually the medium for performance work, but the focus has now moved “beyond” the body, as the curators at Stroom den Haag note. The purpose of expanded performance, which at times appears no different from the everyday activities of gallery attendants or even office workers, stems from Allan Kaprow’s approach to his early Happenings:

28 Both quotes from an interview with the artists, 11/2/15
By making the ‘nuts and bolts’ involved in performance visible, Kaprow encouraged the audience to explore their own lives by focusing on everyday life activity as a performance of secular rituals.\(^{30}\)

This approach to performance has been fundamental to the development of feminist performance art, as it makes the audience active participants in the art work, brings process to the forefront of the artistic model, transfers some of the authority and agency from the artist to the audience, and incorporates performance into everyday life. This is precisely what FANTASING did at The Physics Room, drawing visitors into the performance and prompting them to consider the acts of daily life not as mundane acts of necessity, but as performance.

In this chapter, I introduced a number of themes in contemporary performance art, including the breakdown in distinctions between object and subject, and aesthetic and process. I also discussed the presence of meaningful dialogue between contemporary feminists and earlier feminist artists, as well as dialogue with each other. I argue that this is exemplary of the cyclical nature of contemporary feminist art, which resists the relentless historical progression of modernist time. The artists discussed in this chapter return to performance as a feminist practice utilised since the late 1960s, and demonstrate the importance of the connection between performance and feminist art, as well as the enduring relevance of this mode of practice to feminist artists. Some contemporary feminist performance artists use their bodies in ways similar to earlier works by Carolee Schneemann and Yoko Ono to explore and critique societal inscriptions of gender on the body, such as Jill Orr’s *Bleeding Trees* and Hannah Raisin’s *Dear Carolee, Love Cindy, Love Hannah*. Other artists remove the presence of the artist’s body from the performance space and instead focus on the traces that are left behind. This is still a powerful statement, and reminds us that the body is, after all these years, still a battleground, and that removing it altogether can take reductive notions of women’s bodies out of the process of meaning production.

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The Practice of Collaboration

From the early days of the feminist art movement, feminist artists recognised collaborative and collective practices as particularly effective ways of working, as they foster a sense of solidarity, allow groups to include a wider range of voices, and enable them to resist the system of individual art “stars.” These motivations for working collectively have persisted in contemporary art, as evidenced by art collectives recently formed in Australia such as the Hotham Street Ladies (2007), Brown Council (2007), LEVEL (2010), and Sleepover Club Initiative (2015), which have been established to create, curate and promote feminist art, and to support women artists. Outside of officially established collectives, other artists choose to work in collaborative modes with activist organisations, artist colleagues or volunteer participants. Feminist artists in particular, working as collectives or in collaboration with other artists, confront modernist notions of authorship (usually the individual male “genius”), thwart the art market’s demand for singular personalities with a recognisable brand, and re-imagine the artist’s relationship to their audience. In this chapter I will explore some recent examples of feminist collective and collaborative practices by Brown Council, Kelly Doley, Deborah Kelly, and FANTASING. I use a framework developed by Claire Bishop in her 2012 text *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, to argue the efficacy of this practice for feminist artists, and demonstrate the way that collaboration has been used to make a political statement.

Claire Bishop analyses the turn towards participation, collaboration and collectivity in art over the last two decades, grouping these practices under the term “participatory art.” Bishop’s central project is to find ways of accounting for participatory art that “focus on the meaning of what it produces, rather than attending solely to process,” thus examining more closely the intersection of
aesthetic and process I discussed in Chapter Two. Bishop distances her own critique from that of French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who coined the term “relational aesthetics” in 1998. The crucial difference between participatory art and relational aesthetics, as well as between earlier performance and conceptual art, is the move away from visuality. While theoretically the two might seem to have a number of commonalities, Bishop argues that “the artists are less interested in a relational aesthetic than in the creative rewards of participation as a politicised working process.”

I argue in this chapter that participation may pertain to artistic collaborations as well as the participation of the audience. Contemporary participatory art thus emphasises process over a definitive image, concept or object, which, as Bishop argues, requires a new analytical framework. Aesthetics or visuality have been the basis of art history for as long as the discipline has existed, so to develop a new way of analysing art from a non-visual perspective requires rethinking our definition of art itself. For this reason, Bishop uses theories and terms from political philosophy, theatre and performance studies, cultural policy, and architecture. Bishop suggests that participatory engagement happens most emphatically in the live encounter between embodied actors in particular contexts. Bishop continually explores the particular relationships that persist in the discourse of participatory art, including aesthetic and process, artistic and social aims, and singular and collective authorship. She concludes by arguing that art and the social are not to be reconciled (or opposed), but sustained in continual tension.

The other theoretical framework I use here to analyse collaborative feminist practice is Roland Barthes’ ‘The Death of the Author’ (1968). Barthes deconstructs the figure of the author as the primary producer of meaning in a text.

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2 Ibid. p. 2
3 Ibid. p. 7
4 Ibid. p. 3
5 Ibid. p. 278
He claims that:

A text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single “theological” meaning (the “message” of the Author-God), but is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, none of which is original: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture.6

While Barthes’ criticism is focused on literature, the concept of the “death of the author” can be readily applied to the visual arts in order to separate the object of art from the intentions of its creator. According to Barthes, “the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of.”7

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, following Barthes’ publication, a number of art theorists took up his arguments and applied these to artworks, with the viewer becoming an integral site of meaning making.8 This entails a shift away from the individual “author” towards a theory of cultural reception, and destabilises the meaning of texts and images, making them multi-vocal and contingent. I argue that it is these characteristics that make the artworks discussed in this chapter, particularly feminist.

Beginnings

Contemporary collaborative artistic practice has its roots in the early twentieth century, when political art groups like the Dadaists and Surrealists produced manifestos, performances, and art works collaboratively. These early groups had concrete political aims: Dada, to parody the absurdity and inanity that the group’s members saw in post-World War I society, and Surrealism, to explore the untapped human psyche that could produce such horrific crimes against humanity during the war. In these early cases, however, collaboration was merely a means to an end, rather than an integral part of the art-making process.9 This idea came later, towards

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7 Ibid. p. 6
8 See, for example, Berger (1972), Fried (1968), and Krauss (1973)
the end of the 1960s, with the emergence of new notions of collective authorship as a political strategy.

Artist collectives such as The Guerrilla Girls, and Gran Fury (part of the larger ACT UP AIDS activist group), were established in the United States in 1985 and 1987 respectively, and aimed to critique the sexist and heteronormative values of art institutions. Such politically engaged collaborative efforts also extended to feminist practice, including Judy Chicago’s Feminist Art Programme at California Institute of the Arts, established in 1971, and the collaborative artwork *Womanhouse*, which followed in January 1972 as a joint effort by Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, and their fifteen female students. Chicago also collaborated with over 400 people on her monumental work *The Dinner Party* from 1974 to 1979, although there have been mixed responses to how well this collaborative model succeeded.10 In Australia, Women’s Art Movement groups were established in Sydney in 1974 and Adelaide in 1976, creating spaces for supporting and promoting women artists, educating members on the problem of discrimination, and working with one another to overcome sexism in the arts and society. Catriona Moore’s book *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970-1990* gives an in-depth account of this period of feminist art in Australia, assembling a collection of feminist scholarship which combines exhibitions, theory, art works and interviews.11 Later, in the 1990s, collectives like VNS Matrix brought together artists to intervene in the growing online sphere, questioning discourses of domination that persisted even in cyberspace.12

**Return**

Brown Council have been practising as an art collective since 2007, exploring notions of identity, femininity, humour and history. In this chapter I focus on a new work by the collective, produced for the 2016 Sydney Biennale, *Making History* (figs. 13-14). For this series of performances, Brown Council invited the audience to recount their

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10 See Sheriff (1980)
memories and experiences of past performances, in order to build an archive of performance art through an alternative, feminist methodology.

Fig. 13: Brown Council, *Making History*, 2016. Performance and installation, dimensions variable.

Fig. 14: Brown Council, *Making History*, 2016. Installation view, dimensions variable.
In June 2016 I attended one of these performances in what was previously the Grantpirrie gallery in Redfern, Sydney. In her introduction, Kelly Doley acknowledged the need to address the archive of feminist performance art, and drew our attention to other installations in the gallery space. These included two videos which showed artists re-enacting well known performances in the Redfern space, and, according to Doley, sketches by the Australian performance artist Barbara Cleveland of a stage set, which, she advised us, Brown Council had recreated in the gallery for the occasion (fig. 14). The seats we sat on were wooden blocks with letters painted on them that spelled out “performance,” an idea, we were told, coined by Barbara Cleveland in the 1970s. Cleveland is in fact an invention of the collective, an imagined “forgotten” performance artist who they claim “disappeared” after a short career in the 1970s. Because the performance was being recorded, Brown Council member Diana Smith stated the date, location and time of the performance, then the members of Brown Council passed around a microphone, sharing their personal memories of performances they had witnessed or heard about.

Members of the audience were also invited to contribute, thus weaving together a collective and personal “history” of performance, through memory and personal anecdote. Stories were prompted by others’ accounts or by a spur of the moment recollection. Threads wove through the stories, with a number of performances related to themes of electrocution, cars, and being locked in galleries or performance spaces. The performances discussed ranged from those by Brown Council themselves, Mike Parr and other iconic Australian performance artists, to one audience member’s memory of a “performance” he witnessed of a girl and her father struggling with an umbrella outside his house a couple of days earlier. The humour of this account was not lost on the audience present, who had themselves battled Sydney’s worst storm in a decade to attend the performance in Redfern. The entire performance was recorded and will be archived by Brown Council, allowing these unreliable and subjective narratives to take their place in the history of art. This is a neoteric and distinctly feminist way of writing history, allowing otherwise marginalised voices of feminists, people of colour and LGBTQ people, to be written into history. It is also a means of letting slippages in memory, personal bias, factual
inaccuracy, and historical distance enter the archive of performance art, through performance itself.

Sarah French, who has elsewhere written on Brown Council, explores this alternative approach to history in her text *Memory and Subjectivity in Feminist Film, Literature and Theatre* (2006). Taking a non-hierarchical view of “objective” history and “subjective” memory, French proposes a two-pronged approach which appraises history and memory as complementary discourses. While recent cultural theory has placed a great deal of emphasis on memory as a way to reassess our historical past, French argues that “problems emerge when individual memory is emphasised at the expense of history, politics and culture, resulting in narcissistic and melancholic repetitions of the past that offer little hope for the future.” Particularly important for feminism, French writes, is the ability to envision positive futures, even while we grapple with traumatic memories:

> As a project that is explicitly concerned with empowering women and imbuing them with agency, feminism must utilise memory in order to look towards the future and not become defined by repetitions of women’s traumatic pasts.

Memory lies at the core of Brown Council’s *Making History*. The work is described as exploring “how feminist methodologies and alternative historiographical approaches can be used to reimagine past acts and events in the here-and-now.” Working collaboratively with an audience is a kind of reimagining of feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s in 2016. This feminist methodology, as well as that of using memory to write or rewrite history, engages both the audience and the artists with the recent past of performance art in Australia, weaving together contemporary practice and past events.

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14 Ibid. p. 10
Brown Council member Kelly Doley says, “I always work with other people, either in a formalised way like with Brown Council...or with participants that I recruit for a particular project.”\textsuperscript{16} One of these projects was The Learning Centre, which Doley has explored in various different forms, one of which I discussed in the preceding chapter (Two Feminists, 2012). Another is a performance which Doley did in 2010 called The Learning Centre: Manifestos for Living at Tin Sheds gallery in Sydney (figs. 15-16).

\textbf{Fig. 15:} Kelly Doley, The Learning Centre: Manifestos for Living, 2010. Performance and installation, Tin Sheds Gallery, Sydney

\textsuperscript{16} Interview with the artist, 8/10/15
Doley offered a painting of the participants’ choice in exchange for a “lesson” from them on a topic they were particularly knowledgeable about. Topics ranged from “Lesson on Benrik Cult” by Margaret Sevenjasi, to “Lesson on How to Break Up With Someone” by Mish Grigor.\textsuperscript{17} Rather than being an authoritative figure who passes on knowledge to a passive audience, Doley positions herself as a student, or at least a collaborator with her participants.

In *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Claire Bishop argues that since the 2000s, there has been a rise in pedagogic projects which appropriate the tropes of education, as both a method and a form. One of these tropes, Bishop argues, is the tendency for artists not to present themselves as a central pedagogic figure, but to outsource the work of lecturing and teaching to specialists in the field.\textsuperscript{18} This is embodied in Doley’s project, where she relinquishes

\textsuperscript{17} http://kellydoley.com/The-Learning-Centre-Manifestos-for-Living, accessed 24 August 2016

authority to an outside expert, framing the lessons more as conversations than one-sided lectures.

As well as sharing certain aspects with pedagogical art projects, *The Learning Centre: Manifestos for Living* also reconceptualises the artist’s relationship to the audience, reframing these as co-creators. Doley chooses, as her collaborators, people who would not usually interact with, let alone participate in, contemporary art.\(^ {19}\) *The Learning Centre: Manifestos for Living* was an ongoing project which spanned almost a year, beginning with the lessons Doley received from her participants, and ending with an exhibition of the paintings Doley completed as “payment” for the lessons, which were slowly removed from the gallery over the course of the exhibition as they were returned to their owners. In a similar format to *The Learning Centre: Two Feminists*, discrete objects were produced for the exhibition, yet they were part of a much bigger collaborative project where knowledge was exchanged for art, rather than art being exchanged for money. Doley says she wanted to subvert the conventions of the hermetic “white cube” of the gallery by bringing social situations and rituals (such as the classroom setting) into the space, and challenge historical traditions of art which focus on the object’s presentation and display.\(^ {20}\)

Artists who choose to work collaboratively challenge the normativity of the “lonely artist” figure, and also contest accepted notions of the audience as passive receptors of culture. Charles Green argues that the “lonely artist” is a historically specific construction, “deeply embedded in media representations of artists, in market valuations based on authenticity and originality, and in so much public discourse that it is generally perceived as ‘normal.’”\(^ {21}\) In this way, Green argues, artists working collaboratively examine the shape and limits of the self, and redefine artistic labour.\(^ {22}\) In the case of *The Learning Centre*, Doley transforms artistic labour from

\(^{19}\) Diana Smith, ‘Returning the Gift: Art in Exchange for Knowledge’, *Runway Magazine*, no. 17 (2010), p. 37

\(^{20}\) Ibid. p. 38

\(^{21}\) Charles Green, *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*, University of Minnesota Press, 2001, x

\(^{22}\) Ibid. xvii
the process of making objects for consumption, to a process of knowledge exchange between herself and her participants.

In *Artificial Hells*, Bishop states that it was Guy Debord’s critique in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967) that consolidated the importance of participation as a project, because participation has the potential to re-humanise a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalist production. Debord’s claim that “all community and critical awareness have ceased to be” might be seen as having provoked Kelly Doley’s engagement with the community and her critical position towards a capitalist system of exchange. The artist has stated, in relation to her motivation for starting *The Learning Centre*, that she became “disenchanted with the art world; I found myself questioning the validity of artistic practice, and rethinking my role as an artist.” Instead of an art market completely engrossed in cultural capital and the exchange of art for (increasingly large) sums of money, Doley envisaged a system of exchange which would trade art for knowledge. “Because you can’t buy or sell these works,” she says, “the potential market value and the role of the ‘dealer’ has been removed from the equation.” Doley has removed her work from the art market, and therefore from the logic of capitalism, and attempts to imagine, through creative practice, a potential alternative to this system, which values different kinds of exchange.

So far I have described two different collaborative and participatory models: the official art collective, Brown Council (who have also participated with members of the public and other artists) and Kelly Doley’s collaboration with participants from outside the art world. Australian artist Deborah Kelly’s practice can be seen to embody a third kind of collaborative model. For the 19th Sydney Biennale in 2014, Kelly facilitated a number of workshops, where participants worked together on

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26 Ibid, p. 39
cutting images from magazines the artist had collected, and applying them to nude portraits of volunteer sitters. The finished works, which consist of twenty life-sized nude portraits, were exhibited under the title *No Human Being is Illegal (in all our glory)*. The project was conducted again at the Murray Art Museum Albury, with different workshop participants (figs. 17-18). The collage workshops were open to any and all participants, who worked while talking with each other, reading texts on art, and listening to music over a period of nine months.

Fig. 17: Deborah Kelly, *No Human Being is Illegal (in all our glory)*, 2014. Pigment ink print on Hahnemühle papers bonded to aluminium, with collage from books and found materials, glue and UV protective varnishes, 2.1 x 1.12 m each. Installation view for 19th Biennale of Sydney (2014), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.
Kelly describes the process of creating *No Human Being is Illegal*:

> That project evolved in order to make a work that could not be made by a single person, that showed the evidence of collective work and collective thinking, so the work is both process and object.\(^{27}\)

Like Bishop’s argument in *Artificial Hells*, Kelly does not pit process and object against one another, or denigrate one in favour of the other, but sees both as integral to the work. Here we find another echo of the erasure of pervasive tensions in art, a tactic which has been fundamental to much of the feminist work discussed so far in this thesis.

Deborah Kelly is interested in creating an ethical collaborative practice, which became a contentious issue over the course of the 19th Sydney Biennale. The portraits were exhibited with all of the collaborators’ names listed in alphabetical order.

\(^{27}\) Interview with the artist, 31/10/15
order, rather than assigning Kelly’s name to the work. While this was an effective way of acknowledging that many people contributed to the work, it also meant that there was no institutional interest in the portraits, because of the lack of artistic personality associated with them. Kelly says she was told by curators that “no institution is going to buy a work that’s made by sixty-seven people.” The fact that institutions are only interested in works that are claimed by singular artists with a recognisable name is a symptom of an art market which favours artists working individually with a discernible brand. Kelly realised this during the Biennale, and, out of fear that the work would fade into obscurity (and have to be put in storage at a large cost to the artist), she decided to put her name back on the work. Museums and Galleries New South Wales has since agreed to tour the work throughout the state until 2018.

Kelly describes her mixed reaction to this outcome:

It’s so wonderful, because now it’s got a life, for a start, and the main thing is that I don’t have to worry about where to put it! At the same time I was very disappointed to have to step back from the position of naming everybody together, so now it’s kind of Deborah Kelly and the elves...and the truth is people have made very significant creative decisions in the work, so that’s been really hard.

The iteration of the project at Murray Art Museum Albury (2015) was more obviously the result of collaborative practice, with the names of each participant and the nude model printed in the accompanying text to the exhibition. New participants, who had not worked on the Sydney Biennale project, were recruited and taught Kelly’s method of collage, using images from the many National Geographic magazines that the artist has been collecting for years. They then decorated the nude portraits of other participants with material that reflected the sitters’ personalities. There were also collages of well-known images from art history given an idiosyncratic twist by Deborah Kelly in the exhibition. Titled The Venus Variations, these parodic images posed a critique of the history of the female nude in the history of western art.

28 Interview with the artist, 31/10/2015
This work involves collaboration on a number of levels: Kelly with the collage participants, the collage workshop participants with their nude models’ portraits, and with each other. This creates a system of exchange, where ideas, imagery and skills are shared between people who would usually not interact with each other. In this sense, Kelly’s project is similar to Doley’s *The Learning Centre: Manifestos for Living*, in the way that it subverts the elitist and often inaccessible nature of the “white cube” gallery, and the system of exchange enforced by the contemporary art market. Both projects also reconfigure the relationship of the artist to their audience, by making the audience direct collaborators and producers in the work.

Deborah Kelly has adapted her collaborative workshop model in different locations including Indonesia, Turkey and Germany, where she teaches people the skills to make collages, while playing recordings of texts such as John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972). Most recently, she has been engaging participants in workshops at the University of New South Wales’s School of Art and Design Galleries, where her exhibition *Scenes from the Death of Books* was on display from June to July 2016. In collaborative workshops throughout the course of the exhibition, passages are again read from a text by one of the participants, while others choose images of the female nude from art history, and cut them out of the frame, thus “freeing” the nude woman from her position as a sexualised and commodified object.

This mode of working collectively and attributing the work to all of its makers, is how Kelly understands hers as a feminist practice. However, as evidenced by her work in the 19th Biennale of Sydney, it is often impossible to work outside the system. Michel Foucault addresses the opposition of outside and inside in relation to power in an interview conducted in 1977, published as ‘Power and Strategy’ (1980). Foucault notes, “It seems to me that power is ‘always already there’, that one is never ‘outside’ it, that there are no ‘margins’ for those who break with the system to

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29 Interview with the artist, 31/10/15
However, Foucault goes on to say that this does not necessarily entail an acceptance of power as an inescapable form of domination: “To say that one can never be ‘outside’ power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what.” If this is true, and there is no way to operate outside of power relations which are oppressive to various groups, including women, then women must find ways to work within structures of power which already exist. Indeed, Foucault argues that there are no relations of power without resistances, and that, like power, resistance is multiple. One way in which women artists have continually sought to work within the power relations of art history, then, is through collaboration and the resistance of ingrained notions of authorship and the individual. In this way collaboration cannot be periodised, but represents an ongoing practice of resistance on the part of feminist artists.

Deborah Kelly has collaborated in a more structured capacity with other members of the Sydney-based collective we are all Boat People (formed in 2001). The collective investigated and challenged the way that images are used in mainstream media to promote and perpetuate certain stereotypes, and to generate fear amongst the public. In Australia, this is especially true of refugee politics, which is still an extremely contentious issue almost fifteen years after we are all Boat People began producing their now-widely recognised images. In 2002, Deborah Kelly described the collective’s process to RealTime arts magazine:

> We have decided to spread our own message of unity and compassion...the strategy of the SWARM. A thousand small actions, lots of individuals doing something, anything. The message gets out, but more importantly, it gets into the minds of ordinary Australians.

We are all Boat People aims to keep their ideas and messages mainstream in order to appeal to a wide audience across Australia, rather than just the contemporary art

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31 Ibid. p. 142
32 Ibid.
public or those with advanced knowledge of Australian politics. In order to reach a wider audience, we are all Boat People’s images of tall ships have been projected onto large public buildings and even onto Parliament House in Canberra, where protest is illegal (fig. 19). The collective has also invoked community actions, such as the creation of 3,301 origami boats (one for every refugee in detention as of 2001).³⁴

![Projection image of Boat People](image)

Fig. 19: we are all boat people, Boat People, 2006. Projection, dimensions variable.

Working collaboratively in this context allows the artists to present a united front on political issues, and reach a large audience with the amplitude of skill sets involved in the collective. Members of we are all Boat People range from visual artists like Deborah Kelly, to writers, media and web designers, video activists, an architect and an IT expert. This enables the collective to target a number of media outlets and produce work that is easily disseminated through a variety of avenues. In the spirit

of anonymous collectives like Gran Fury and Guerrilla Girls, working under a collective title also eschews the media’s need to associate a particular personality with a work of art or activism. While the members of we are all Boat People are not anonymous, working as a collective makes it more difficult to attribute their images and actions to certain individuals. Moreover, the fact that members of the public often participate in their actions, either by distributing images themselves on social media or by taking part in community activities, further complicates the notion of authorship.

New Zealand art collective FANTASING also challenges conventional forms of authorship in their work, in a way that aligns with Charles Green’s theory of the “third hand”. In Green’s formulation, the product of collaborative work is not merely a merger of two or more artistic identities, but becomes a third (or fifth, in FANTASING’s case) identity of its own. FANTASING describe their collaborative model as a “rhizome,” a network with no central point. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of the rhizome was popularised in philosophical discourse as that which “ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences and social struggles.”

This concept clearly resonates with those engaged in collaborative practice, as it emphasises connections, multiplicities and non-hierarchical systems, which are central tenets of collaboration. Of their collaborative method, FANTASING member Sarah Jane Parton says:

> Sometimes I think it’s kind of easy (working collaboratively)...easier than a practice as a person by themselves, and then sometimes I think it’s challenging. It’s less work and more work all at once. That’s about the process more than the outcome, but the outcome often mirrors the process anyway.  

This emphasis on process is a constant throughout the collaborative practices discussed in this chapter, and is related to contemporary art’s rejection of the

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36 Interview with the artists, 14/10/15
discrete art object in favour of a situation, participatory event, or process-based art. This is certainly true of FANTASING’s practice, which is organic – like a rhizome – and often grows in directions its members can’t foresee. One member, Claire Harris, says that their practice is “teetering on the edge of collapsing into embarrassment, at all points.”37 Parton adds,

> Sometimes it does collapse, but then the great thing about it being a collective or a collaboration is that all of us don’t tend to collapse at the same time, so it kind of holds itself together. Someone can always keep going, when the others falter.38

FANTASING member Bek Coogan claims that this idea of embracing collapse, failure, and the abject is a kind of feminist methodology. Indeed, Julia Kristeva relates her concept of the abject directly to femininity, that which is “other” to the self, which threatens the subject’s autonomy. FANTASING embrace the chaos and disruption associated with the abject, and, as an extension, with femininity. Coogan observes that the collective allows their practice to be ruptured to a certain extent by real life, which she sees as a “hugely feminine way of being.”39 This is also an important part of working as a collective, according to the artists. The idea of supporting each other, both emotionally and artistically, is a central part of their practice; so central, in fact, that Coogan says “sometimes that is kind of the art.”40 For instance, during their exhibition Stars Rocked at The Physics Room in 2015, Parton was bedridden with a physical disability. She was able to contribute to performances by broadcasting to the gallery on the opening night performance from her bed, via Skype. The artists incorporate these kinds of personal obstacles into their art, rather than obscuring the perceivable “failures” that could potentially derail the work. FANTASING consciously resist the patriarchal pressure to work to a certain standard, and instead work on their own terms, outside of the institutional codes of the mainstream art world.

37 Interview with the artists, 14/10/2015.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid.
The members of FANTASING also recognise that they are part of a trajectory of female art collectives, and are aware that these groups often fade into obscurity rather than being canonised in art history. Parton says, “There’s always been collectives of women artists working because it works well for women artists to work in collectives. I don’t think it’s a new thing.”

Harris adds:

I think women bands or art collectives constantly come and go and don’t get canonised. They don’t exist in stable enough and long enough forms to connect up much with other ones.

This lack of canonisation has both positive and negative effects, and has been an issue for women artists for decades. Griselda Pollock explores the problem of canonisation in her book *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art* (1988). Pollock argues that it is not enough to add women to existing histories of art, because these histories themselves have been constructed with an embedded gender hierarchy. She calls instead for a deconstruction of the history of art, including the privileged masculine individual: “The point is to mount a sustained and far-reaching political critique of contemporary representational systems which have an over-determined effect in the social production of sexual difference and its related gender hierarchy.”

If artistic canons reinforce gender hierarchies and privilege visual culture produced by men, then for women artists to be inserted into this canon is potentially damaging to the integrity of their work, particularly for artists working within a feminist framework which aims to critique gender hierarchies. However, if women are only allowed to work within marginal spaces, their work and their artistic identity will remain marginal, and a feminist critique of art and art history will not replace the dominant paradigm. Here we can revisit Foucault’s argument, that there is no

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41 Interview with the artists, 14/10/2015.
42 Ibid.
“outside” of power, only resistance from within, and align this with Pollock’s call for a “feminist intervention in the histories of art,” which would take place from within the discipline, since there is no way for feminist artists to operate outside it.

All of the practices I have outlined here are concerned, in one way or another, with the democratisation of art, the rejection of the art object, and the re-conceptualisation of the artist’s relationship to the viewer. No longer are artists seen as singular authorities on culture who present objects to their audiences for consumption, but are collaborators and participants in their own practice. I argue that this is a particular concern of feminist artists, who are constantly challenging an art system which undervalues and marginalises women’s art. This same art system also presents difficulties in accounting for artistic collaborations, despite the fact that these have been in practice since the mid-twentieth century. Collective practice enables contemporary feminist artists to exchange ideas and skills with each other, and with those who are not usually exposed to contemporary art practice. In turn, this allows them to resist the cult of artistic identity which plagues the contemporary art market, and to receive both artistic and emotional support from collaborators. As a result, collective practice is still as integral to feminist art practice as it was in the 1970s and 1980s.
In the following chapters, I introduce two artistic devices used by both early and contemporary feminist artists: humour and re-vision. I will argue that these devices, as part of the broader practices discussed in Chapters Two and Three, allow feminist artists to disrupt both language and chronology in a critique of the exclusive nature of these structures. They work both within and against dominant discourses to challenge accepted notions of gender, meaning and representation. Feminist artist Barbara Kruger has argued that women “loiter outside trade and speech and are obliged to steal language.”1 Humour is one way in which feminist artists can “steal” language, as humour often involves using language against itself to disrupt and subvert meaning, as well as implicating multiple layers of meaning in the work. The use of re-vision in feminist art involves returning to earlier practices and approaches to imbue them with new meaning. This disrupts chronology and resists the idea of history as a linear sequence of events, each different from one another. I argue that that artists using these devices are both aware of and critical of the limitations of both speech and chronology, and use humour and re-vision in their work to displace and disrupt accepted meanings.

Chapter four

Humour as Device

This chapter explores humour as a device deployed in contemporary feminist art practices to pose a serious critique of cultural constructions of gender through parody, irony, absurdism and pastiche. In much of the work discussed, viewers are provoked to laughter, and then forced to consider the impetus behind their laughter. In some cases, the audience is lead to feel guilty for laughing, as the gravity of the work’s content dawns on them. Humour, however, does not necessarily refer to something that actually makes us laugh. Irony, parody and satire are forms of humour, but often they are more sobering than they are funny, and can provide incisive commentary on political, social and cultural issues. I will discuss different forms of humour in the work of Brown Council, Deborah Kelly, Hannah Raisin and FANTASING, and argue that humour is a vital tool for contemporary feminist artists to playfully critique societal structures which often silence women, and for women to insert themselves into language, ironically, by subverting its rules and codes. This chapter will also address the issue of audience, as different forms of humour have the potential to appeal to audiences with varied experiences, allowing them to encounter and react to the work in new and unexpected ways.

Beginnings

Jo Anna Isaak’s *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter* (1996) utilises a psychoanalytic framework to examine humour in feminist art. Isaak draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s interpretation of Rabelais’ carnivalesque, Julia Kristeva’s concept of jouissance, Roland Barthes’ notion of laughter as libidinal license, Lacan’s ideas on feminine sexuality, as well as Freud’s conception of humour as fundamentally rebellious and linked to the pleasure
principle.\textsuperscript{1} With a strong theoretical basis thus laid for her exploration of humour in contemporary feminist art, Isaak goes on to examine the work of artists as diverse as Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Carrie Mae Weems, Lorraine O’Grady, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Elaine Reichek, Lorna Simpson, Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith and Nancy Spero, all of whom deploy aspects of humour in their work. Isaak’s psychoanalytic framework provides one way of thinking about humour in feminist art, which I will use to discuss the performance \textit{One Hour Laugh} by Brown Council in this chapter.

Building on Isaak’s work, curator and writer Laura Castagnini has recently explored contemporary feminist art’s relationship to humour. She draws on writers such as Amelia Jones and Catriona Moore, and makes specific reference to contemporary art practices which restage earlier feminist strategies in deliberate and often funny ways.\textsuperscript{2} This chapter develops the idea that Castagnini introduces in her writing, and which she further expanded in a 2013 exhibition \textit{BACKFLIP: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art}. This is the notion that contemporary feminist artists are speaking directly back to their “feminist foremothers,” demonstrating an awareness of, as well as a critical distance from, earlier feminist work. I argue that this is an important feminist device, as it both acknowledges earlier feminist practices, and extends their legacy through the use of humour as a device.

\textbf{Return}

In their 2009 performance for film \textit{One Hour Laugh} (fig. 20), Brown Council combine performance and humour to test the limits of comedy, as well as their own physical limits, by sustaining laughter for a full hour. Their laughter ranges from forced and uncomfortable to watch, to genuine hilarity amongst the artists. They appear to take their cues from one another, changing the tone, volume and pace of their laughter according to what the others are doing. This creates a domino effect, as one artist will catch another’s eye and dissolve into genuine laughter. For instance, at one point they begin hitting each other with their tall, pointed paper hats, creating

\textsuperscript{1} Jo Anna Isaak, \textit{Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter}. London: Routledge, 1996, p. 3

\textsuperscript{2} Laura Castagnini, ‘\textit{Parafeminism}’ and \textit{Parody in Contemporary Art}. University of Melbourne, Masters Thesis, 2014
authentic laughter. These moments are the most enjoyable and humorous to watch, given that it’s hard not to laugh when you witness the artists relinquishing some of the control of the performance, and giving in to their laughter. However, when this laughter dies out, as it inevitably does; the artists must continue to force laughter in order to sustain the one-hour performance. It is at this point that the performance becomes uncomfortable to watch, and laughter dies in the throat. Throughout the performance, the artists wear all black clothing with colourful pointed hats on each of their heads. These hats invoke the historical figure of the dunce, someone who is persecuted for being, in a word, stupid.³ Shane Haseman argues in his catalogue essay for Brown Council’s ‘Big Show’ that the laughter derived from the dunce’s actions is inevitably malicious, and the pleasure associated with this laughter is taken from another’s adversity. This makes the audience complicit in the maliciousness, and leads them to feel uncomfortable about laughing at the performance.⁴

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Fig. 20: Brown Council, One Hour Laugh, 2009. Performance for video
Brown Council’s One Hour Laugh also references a different kind of historical figure: the female hysteric. In the late nineteenth century, prevalent medical opinion held that hysteria was a woman’s disorder: a psychological manifestation of “the emotions rising from the womb.” Dianne Hunter has executed a feminist rereading of Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer’s Studies on Hysteria, originally published in 1895, on which I draw in order to analyse the figure of the hysteric in relation to Brown Council’s work. Hunter points out that speech is a fundamental part of the diagnosis, as well as the cure, of hysteria, particularly evidenced by the case of Freud and Breuer’s patient whom they refer to as “Anna O.” and whom Hunter calls “Bertha Pappenheim,” her real name. Hunter writes:

In moments of extreme anxiety, her powers of speech either deserted her entirely or she used a mixture of languages. At times when she felt most free, Pappenheim spoke French and Italian. She had amnesia between these times and those times when she spoke English. She also made up words in German, and invented names in English for the process which she and Breuer had begun – she called it “chimney-sweeping” when she was joking and “the talking cure” when she was being serious.

There are two key points to highlight in this passage, both pertaining to language. Firstly, Hunter (through Breuer) observes that the patient lost her powers of speech during her fits of hysteria, resorting to foreign languages or gibberish to communicate. In One Hour Laugh, Brown Council exhibits this symptom of the hysteric, communicating to the audience, and to each other, by laughter alone. The loss of language can be understood as the loss of ability to express oneself, which Brown Council challenges in this performance by attempting to communicate to each other and to the audience simply through laughter. Hunter argues, in her feminist reinterpretation of Freud’s hysteria, that Pappenheim’s use of gibberish and

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gestures as a means of expression “can be seen as a regression from the cultural order represented by her father as an orthodox patriarch.” Hunter further explains:

She (Pappenheim) regressed from the symbolic order of articulate German to the semiotic level of the body and the unintelligibility of foreign tongues. Her communication in signs, mutterings, and made-up jargon indicates an attempt to recreate the special semiotic babble that exists between an infant and its mother.

Hunter appears to be associating gibberish, gesture and “unintelligible foreign tongues” with the feminine by way of the semiotic. Julia Kristeva formulated the semiotic as the period in a child’s development before they enter the “symbolic order,” or the order of language. The semiotic is associated with emotions, instincts, the musical, the poetic and the rhythmic, or that which lacks structure and meaning, and is opposed to logical, structured speech. Hunter mentions the relationship between an infant and its mother as related to the hysteric’s means of communication and expression, providing an alternative to “articulate” language.

The second point to note is that Hunter tells us Pappenheim used the phrase “chimney-sweeping” to refer to the treatment of hysteria which she undertook with Dr Breuer, or alternatively called it “the talking cure” when she was being serious. The treatment she refers to involved talking about the traumatic incident Breuer believed had caused the patient’s hysteria, until the patient was able to relieve the physical tension caused by this trauma. Pappenheim’s ability to make jokes and be playful is associated with her hysteria, something Brown Council also addresses in One Hour Laugh through their playful actions, irreverent laughter and genuine displays of hilarity.

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8 Ibid.
Following Hunter’s argument, hysteria is characterised by an undoing of male language; a regression from articulate speech into gibberish, foreign tongues, or nonsensical laughter, and cured by rejoining the symbolic order through language. In \textit{One Hour Laugh}, however, Brown Council never achieve this conversion back into language. The laugh simply ends after an hour, leaving the audience, and most certainly the artists, somewhat out of breath. The sense of hysteria lingers, suggesting that Brown Council does not reject hysterical laughter and regression from the symbolic order as a productive and valid mode of communication. Rather than enforcing the binary between “male” symbolic language and “female” semiotic babble, the artists blur the lines between the two, and imagine the potential for laughter, hysteria and feminine expression to take their place alongside other modes of expression.

The collective returns to humour as a device in \textit{15 Actions for the Face} (2014), as part of their project \textit{Performance Art} in the Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney’s Jackson Bella Room (fig. 21). This is intended to be a “multi-sensory and interactive
artwork” for people with specific needs. For this work, the members of Brown Council each performed a series of instructions for the camera, taken from title cards and read aloud; for example “Say ‘hello’ without moving your face” and “touch your nose with your tongue.” The audience, comprised predominantly of school students, are also encouraged to perform the actions.

The artists wear black and white striped shirts, similar to those of a mime, and the colourful hats of One Hour Laugh make a reappearance, this time modelled on the costumes created by Dadaist artist Hugo Ball, for his performance Cabaret Voltaire in 1912 (fig. 22). They are constructed in bright, primary colours from cardboard and crepe paper, like something a child would make at kindergarten, and add to the naïve, funny actions that the artists perform on command. Despite the seemingly

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childish overtones of the performance, the work is rooted in Dadaist and absurdist work from the early twentieth century, which aimed to shock and surprise audiences with illogical, absurd actions and artworks, in order to undermine the overly-serious and self-satisfied art establishment of the time. The humour in absurdism stems from the work’s unpredictability, illogicity and subversion of the audience’s expectations. Thus, like the hysteric’s laughter and self-expression through gibberish, absurdist humour does not rely on coherent language, but on something more organic and unexplainable.

15 Actions for the Face also contains elements of educational strategies used in children’s television programs, such as Pee-wee’s Playhouse and Mulligrubs. Educational children’s TV shows often depict characters who use print or who make positive comments about literacy, as well as by displaying print onscreen. In 15 Actions for the Face, participants follow a series of simple instructions such as “Smile as big as you can” that are communicated through subtitles and read aloud in the artwork. The artists combine sight, sound and the audience’s own gestures to fully immerse them in the work, as well as to include students who are, for instance, sight-impaired, who would otherwise not be able to engage with visual art on the same level as others. Thus, the nature of the audience plays an important role in Brown Council’s work; the performance is not directed at a typical contemporary art audience, but at a younger age group, and those with disability or access needs. Humour allows Brown Council to make their work more accessible to a wider audience, as does the incorporation of educational strategies and the direct engagement with the audience through speech and action. As they perform the actions that Brown Council demonstrates, students become performers and collaborators in the work, and are able to laugh at themselves as well as at the members of Brown Council. According to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, some visitors to the work created and presented their own performances, or used Brown Council’s performance as inspiration to create their own costume and set

designs, demonstrating the extent to which the collective’s use of humour allows and encourages the audience to engage with the work.\textsuperscript{12}

The laughter elicited by \textit{15 Actions for the Face} disrupts the usual serious atmosphere of the gallery. This allows those with specific needs, who might otherwise feel alienated from such a serious space, to feel more comfortable and included in an institution dedicated to contemporary art. The inclusion of marginalised groups is a distinctly feminist concern, particularly for the four female members of Brown Council. As Jo Anna Isaak writes in her catalogue entry for the exhibition \textit{BACKFLIP: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art}, “the revolutionary power of women’s laughter does not function like the tendentious joke; this laughter is first and foremost a communal response. The aim is inclusion, not exclusion.”\textsuperscript{13} Humour, particularly in a project with as many layers as Brown Council’s works, can appeal to a number of different audiences on different levels, and break down barriers between those who might find other modes of expression in art more difficult to access, and those who are well-versed in art history and contemporary art practices.

Deborah Kelly incorporates absurdism and laughter in her animated film \textit{Beastliness} (2011, fig. 23). The animation draws on surreal and fantasy elements, as well as aspects of the abject and grotesque, to provoke laughter in the viewer and subvert expectations of acceptable femininity. The film begins with an image of a woman’s face, heavily made up, with a head of thick red hair. Soon, the hair begins to sprout on her face until all we can see are her bright yellow eyes and lipstick-coated mouth. Her mouth then opens and the viewer descends into it, ending up “inside” the feminine body, where a high-energy, strangely surreal, orgiastic party is taking place, with hybrid creatures from Kelly’s earlier collage works, dancing and copulating to an upbeat, carnivalesque soundtrack.


\textsuperscript{13} Jo Anna Isaak, ‘Courage, Humour, Cunning and Fortitude’ in \textit{BACKFLIP: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art}, ed. Laura Castagnini. Melbourne: Margaret Lawrence Gallery, 2013, p. 30
On first viewing, I found myself tapping my feet to the beat and laughing at the sheer absurdity of it all, and vicariously enjoying the freedom that these creatures indulged in onscreen. However, the deeper implications of Kelly’s animation, concerning cultural codes and restrictions placed on the gendered body, gradually emerge. What appears on the outside as conforming to these codes, for instance the beautiful face we see at the beginning of the animation, is soon shown to exceed its boundaries by growing facial hair and hosting a wild orgy, representing inner sexual desire and Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject. She describes abjection as follows:

Abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger….Abjection preserves the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be.14

Ambiguity is crucial to Kristeva’s concept of the abject, because it ensures that the “clean, proper body” is never fully separated from the abject body, the body without form or integrity. Even when the abject is rejected from the clean body, or what Kristeva calls the “fully symbolic body,” she says, “the abject does not cease challenging its master.” The abject is sometimes impossible to identify, being neither

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fully subject nor fully object. “Not me. Not that. But not nothing either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognise as a thing.”\textsuperscript{15} However, blood, vomit, pus, faeces and other bodily fluids are most often cited as examples of abjection, as they represent that which is usually contained within the body, exceeding its boundaries.

As a result of its maternal functions bearing witness to its debt to nature, the female body is, according to Kristeva, more likely to signify the abject. The feminine is seen as being transgressive, horrific, degenerative, and threatening to the concept of a hermetically sealed “self,” while the masculine is seen as contained, structured by language, and clean. Abjection is thus fundamentally associated with the female body, and more specifically the maternal body, the body from which all bodies are separated in order to be. Deborah Kelly parodies this in \textit{Beastliness} by showing us the interior of the female body, a dark and absurd place, whose contents are then expelled through the woman’s mouth at the end of the film, perhaps alluding to the “violence” of birth which Kristeva describes in her theory of the abject.\textsuperscript{16} In any case, the strange hybrid creatures which we see safely contained inside the female body, copulating and dancing with abandon, eventually transgress the boundary of the body and escape, or are deliberately expelled by the woman herself.

This portrayal of subversive femininity recalls Barbara Creed’s notion of the “monstrous feminine,” and, most particularly in this work, the idea of the “woman as monstrous womb.”\textsuperscript{17} Kelly invokes notions of female “beastliness,” related to Creed’s notion of monstrous femininity, in order to parody the cultural codes that women are expected to live by. The aim of parody is to imitate or poke fun at an original text, in this case the notion that a woman who does not conform to certain standards of appearance and behaviour is “monstrous.” This parody is further emphasised by the animal/human hybrids which dance across the screen in \textit{Beastliness}; they are crude yet clever exaggerations of the beastly woman. In

\textsuperscript{16} ibid. p. 10
\textsuperscript{17} Barbara Creed, \textit{The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis}. Hoboken and Francis: 2012, p. 1
particular, the image of the praying mantis, which recurs throughout Kelly’s short animation, is a universal image of deadly female sexuality, as the female mantis is known to eat the male after copulation. Feminine legs with high heels are paired with foxes and bird’s heads, with butterflies covering the genital region to further abstract the body, and to allude to an animalistic sexuality. Kelly has acknowledged the negative affinity of women with animals; in 2010, she read a long list of “animal-like” adjectives used to refer to women. Among these were “stupid cow”, “bitch”, “turkey neck” and “beaver”. While we can find humour in this parodic portrayal of sexist stereotypes, we are also reminded of the ease with which these kinds of derogatory names roll off the tongue, as well as the sheer number of animalistic names given to women in order to degrade and dehumanise them.

Hannah Raisin’s 2007 work, **Flowing Locks** (fig. 24), also alludes to ideas of the monstrous feminine in a humorous way, provoking laughter as well as serious contemplation. In this performance, the artist stands outside the striking architecture of the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne, wearing a nude lycra body suit with holes cut in the armpits and pubic area. Attached to these areas are long hair extensions, which flutter around the artist’s body and into the space surrounding her as she dances gracefully, proudly showing off her “flowing locks.” This performance for film subverts the usual depiction of female bodies, by covering those areas of skin usually exposed (the arms, legs and torso) and displaying those areas usually covered (the armpits and pubic area). Raisin challenges negative perceptions of body hair and depicts it instead as something beautiful, graceful and feminine, something to be celebrated and displayed proudly. The exaggerated length of the hair extensions also brings an element of comedy to this work, as the audience is at first startled, and then perhaps amused, by the amount of hair attached to the artist’s body.

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Laura Castagnini, who curated Raisin’s work as part of the 2013 exhibition BACKFLIP: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art, describes Raisin’s performance as “simultaneously a celebration of the natural female body, an ‘up yours’ to contemporary ideals of female hairlessness, and a nod (or a wink?) to feminists of the 1970s.”\(^1\) Castagnini’s mention of a knowing “wink” to earlier feminist women artists captures the way a number of contemporary feminist artists deploy humour in their work. In Chapter Two, I discussed Raisin’s work Dear Carolee, Love Cindy, Love Hannah (2013), which was both an homage to, and parody of, Carolee Schneemann’s 1975 performance Interior Scroll. Raisin added a humorous element to Schneemann’s visceral, anti-sexist performance through the upbeat, pop tune of “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” by Cindy Lauper. Flowing Locks may not reference a specific performance from the earlier years of the feminist art movement, but it can be seen as a knowing parody of earlier artists who have incorporated body hair in

\(^1\) Laura Castagnini, ‘Backflip: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art’, NAVA Quarterly: Women in Art (2013), p. 6
their work, such as Catherine Opie, Lorna Simpson and Zoe Leonard. Raisin plays on this legacy of feminist art without detracting from the seriousness of the critique that this kind of work poses. Raisin seems to be fully aware that these stereotypes, and the cultural expectation of feminine hairlessness, still persist, and addresses this poignantly in her performance through subtle parody and a dignified acknowledgement of the feminist women artists who have come before her.

FANTASING also use parody and subtle humour in their work, to critique contemporary notions of labour and art. In their 2015 performance and installation Stars Rocked, the collective created an office-like environment in the gallery space of The Physics Room. They set up a whiteboard for “strategic planning,” hung Employee of the Month portraits on the walls, and brought in office mugs and a pot plant (figs. 11-12). With tongue firmly in cheek, FANTASING undermines the seriousness of much contemporary art, which is often mired down in theory and inaccessible to many viewers.

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20 See, for example: Catherine Opie, Being and Having (1991); Lorna Simpson, Wigs (1994); Zoe Leonard, Pin Up #1 (Jennifer Miller Does Marilyn Monroe) (1995)
While FANTASING’S performance and installation for *Stars Rocked* may not be immediately obvious as art to many people, the humour is fairly easy to grasp. The Employee of the Month portraits, for example, feature each of the artists in matching, psychedelically patterned dresses, staring intensely at the camera or smiling awkwardly, like a school photo one tries to get rid of later in life. The portraits are accompanied by a display of four mugs, sourced from charity shops, to “represent” each artist, with the artists’ names and star signs on a plaque beneath each one (fig. 25). The “frivolous” addition of astrology signs serves to undermine the serious implications of an office environment. Sarah Jane Parton says:

> The mugs came about as a sort of ‘office mugs’ thing. My boss has a Dolly Parton mug that nobody else is allowed to use. So Gemma and Claire (other members of FANTASING) did this op shop mission to find representational mugs for us, and then put them on these marble plinth
things. Hilarious! It’s all a bit silly. And we’ve used the whiteboard in different ways as well, this is the second or third incarnation of the whiteboard. We use it to brainstorm, hilarious things like brainstorming.21

The members of FANTASING find humour in the small things, but like the other artists discussed in this chapter, there is a more serious critique at work in their deployment of humour. Their references to labour, more specifically artistic labour, speak to the artists’ concerns over whether they have “done” enough; in other words, whether they have produced enough artwork. Parton describes this anxiety:

I always have these moments where I’m working where I say ‘better make some drawings, better make a sculpture.’ Every time I kind of freak out about things and I have to put something in that people can go ‘oh look, you can draw!’...It’s so funny, and then you think why am I doing that? It’s almost twee and you’re almost embarrassed by yourself.22

At times, the artists measure themselves against a patriarchal standard of work, while simultaneously trying to resist and subvert this standard. FANTASING member Bek Coogan says, “I do think we live in a capitalist society that is so bound on goals, profit (etc.), ‘don’t stop the show, don’t get messy, you’ve got to meet these requirements,’ and we’ve just got to go ‘f*** that.’”23 FANTASING’s self-aware and humorous approach to art-making is one way the collective is able to reject patriarchal and capitalist expectations of labour and production, in turn making audiences laugh at aspects of their performance. The labour of art-making is revealed in the way Stars Rocked came together through performance, with elements taking shape throughout the duration of the exhibition. The layout of the galleries and the nature of the art included in the exhibition changed and evolved over time, placing emphasis on the process of putting together an exhibition, which is usually shown as arriving at the gallery fully formed. The artists of FANTASING embrace mistakes, allow themselves time to work through difficulties and problems that arise in the gallery space, and open themselves up to vulnerability by questioning the validity of what they allow in the gallery space. There is always self-

21 Interview with the artist, 11/2/15
22 Ibid.
23 Interview with the artist, 14/10/15
deprecating laughter present in their work, however: Sarah Jane Parton remarked when sitting in the gallery space: “I might just get rid of (the photographs), maybe we should have less stuff in here. Then we’d end up with an empty gallery….I don’t know, I’d probably end up with this plant.”24 The question of challenging the patriarchal space of the gallery is addressed with tongue-in-cheek by the artists, as they draw attention to the sometimes ridiculous standards that artists, particularly female artists, are held to when producing art work. The artists poke fun at these standards while showing, through thoughtful engagement with the space, with each other, and with their audience, that their labour is valuable.

The artists discussed in this chapter deploy humour as a subversive device to critique entrenched structures of language, cultural codes of femininity and patriarchal standards of labour. Employing a broad range of psychoanalytic concepts, such as Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Dianne Hunter’s feminist reading of Freud and Breuer’s Studies on Hysteria, and Barbara Creed’s notion of the “monstrous-feminine,” I have argued in this chapter that these artists successfully deploy humour as a feminist device in their work in ways that complicate and expand an understanding of contemporary feminist art. Artists such as the Guerrilla Girls, Sherrie Levine, Barbara Kruger and Carrie Mae Weems have used humour as a feminist device to expose the exclusionary nature of language, the media, art institutions and art history. Contemporary artists extend this critique by parodying not only the limits of these disciplines, but also paying homage to earlier feminist artists, often in a playful, whimsical manner. Humorous parody adds further layers of meaning to contemporary feminist work, and demonstrates Jo Anna Isaak’s claim that “those in possession of the most radical humour may be women.”25

24 Interview with the artist, 11/2/15
Chapter five

Re-vision

In this chapter I explore re-vision as a device through a discussion of a number of works which employ repetition, parallel threads, circular temporality and return. The artists I interviewed return to earlier feminist art practices in critical, thoughtful and sometimes playful ways, imbuing their own work with complex layers of meaning, and enabling a new perspective on feminist art practices of the last forty years.

Re-vision has also been recognised by a number of writers in recent years as a common practice in contemporary art, particularly feminist art.¹ In this chapter, I draw on the work of Julia Kristeva, Victoria Horne, Giovanna Zapperi and Amelia Jones, to discuss the importance of re-vision as a feminist device. I suggest that contemporary feminist art is not a rejection of previous feminist art practices, but instead, artists use repetition and return as a means to create a continuum of feminist practices looping back across time. Notions of pastiche, parody of earlier practices and the collapsing of time periods are all central to this chapter, as well as the revision of the archive of feminist art history, the way this archive has been constructed, and how it might be deconstructed. I will first return to some of the key literature pertaining to circular temporality and re-vision which was outlined in Chapter One, and then provide an analysis of some selected works by Brown Council, Kelly Doley, Hannah Raisin, and Jill Orr. I argue that the resistance of linear time and the use of re-vision as a device is a crucial tool for contemporary feminist artists.

In Chapter One I introduced Victoria Horne’s feminist logic of re-visioning and re-citing, strategies that she suggests are paradigmatic to feminist art production. Horne, describes “re-vision” as a process of breaking off, possessing and reframing a

¹ See, for example, Judith Adams (2015); Victoria Horne (2015); Claire Colebrook (2009); Amelia Jones (2008); Victoria Browne (2013); Clare Johnson (2013); Giovanna Zapperi (2013)
visual fragment from art history to “make it anew” in the present. Contemporary women artists may also “re-cite” earlier feminist work, a practice in which they “respond to, play with and extend the legacies of their feminist forebears,” in order to trace connections between themselves and older women artists across art historical narratives. In this chapter I adopt Horne’s framework to discuss a number of artworks and the ways they return to earlier feminist strategies, in order to reimagine a contemporary iteration of feminist art practice. These new feminist narratives provide alternatives to the accepted teleologies of art history, such as Alfred Barr’s infamous modernist narrative of linear and uni-directional influence which traces the trajectories of modernist art movements. By re-visioning and re-citing fragments of art history, contemporary feminist artists resist an avant-garde discourse, in favour of continuity and return.

This chapter also builds on Griselda Pollock’s argument that it is necessary to orient art historical studies toward that which we come after. Pollock draws on Julia Kristeva’s important essay “Women’s Time,” discussed in Chapter One. Kristeva argues for a feminist positionality which oscillates between linear, historic time and “monumental” time, which involves repetitions, resurfacings and repetition. This allows us to see feminist politics, theory and artworks as unfixed from specific historical periods, and instead to see them as indicative of certain ideas that reappear at significant points in feminist history, and which persist through women’s lived experiences across historical time periods.

The notion of “women’s time” has been used by other writers, such as Clare Johnson in her book Femininity, Time and Feminist Art (2013) and Kate MacNeill in her article ‘When Historic Time Meets Julia Kristeva’s Women’s Time: the Reception of Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party in Australia’ (2008). These writers read earlier feminist works through a contemporary lens, imbued with the experience and knowledge of

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3 Ibid. p. 44
more recent feminist art practices and theory. Kristeva’s conception of temporality has the potential to prompt feminist art historians to continue to examine history in order to recognise its mistakes, its omissions and, most importantly, its achievements. Giovanna Zapperi also mentions the notion of “anachronism” in her work on the archive and feminist art:

An anachronical procedure in historical research is as necessary as it is challenging: the historian must consciously decide to pose a set of questions to an epoch that did not ask them, or at least not in the same way. This ‘controlled anachronism’ does not imply that the past foreshadows the future, but it challenges the very notion of time as an uninterrupted continuum, along with the position of the historian as disinterested and objective.5

As Zapperi argues, contemporary feminist artists and historians must pose questions of earlier feminisms and pre-feminist eras that were not, and some that could not, have been asked. These questions concern issues of race, such as visibility for women artists of colour, or transgender issues where potentially essentialising concepts such as a universal female existence, discovering femininity through the “female” body and the primacy of the body itself, have been raised. These questions have inspired vigorous critiques of prior movements as exclusionary, essentialising and bourgeois. Contemporary feminist artists explore these complex questions by revising and revisiting previous works, either of their own or of other artists, in order to evaluate how they operate differently in a contemporary context and with the benefit of past criticisms. For instance, the American artist Zoe Leonard, who will be discussed later in this chapter, has incorporated intersectional critiques of sexism, heteronormativity and racism in her work The Fae Richards Archive, which fabricates a fictional biography of an African American, lesbian singer. Works such as these create ruptures, simultaneities, and resurfacings that disrupt the conventional concepts of linear time.

Linda Nochlin recognised the constant erasure of women’s history in her groundbreaking essay ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ (1971).

Nochlin’s essay discusses the systematic exclusion of women’s art from Western art histories, and highlights how important it is for feminist artists and art historians to conserve and expand the history of feminist art in the face of this systematic exclusion. Throughout history, educational restrictions have prevented women from studying the live nude for drawing, and the lack of exhibitions and catalogues dedicated to women artists ensured that any work that was produced, was largely unseen. Nochlin and her colleague Ann Sutherland Harris mounted a monumental exhibition of women artists in 1976, *Women Artists 1550-1950* at Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the first of its kind to celebrate and display women’s art on such a scale. This was an intervention in linear time, a means of looking back to the past of art history to retrieve forgotten or under-appreciated women artists, and bring them into the contemporary consciousness.

In her essay ‘Women’s Time’, Julia Kristeva identifies a generation of women who aspire to “gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history.” This stands in contrast to a feminist impulse which “situates itself outside the linear time of identities which communicate through projection and revindications,” and which “rejoins, on the one hand, the archaic (mythical) memory and, on the other, the cyclical or monumental temporality of marginal movements.” Kristeva identifies a third manifestation of feminism, comprised of an intermixing of these two attitudes to temporality. If contemporary artists are to adopt this third attitude, how can they both add to a linear archive, and at the “same” time, critique the dominance of the avant-garde privileging of rupture and origin? This chapter will examine instances of feminist interventions which attempt to make visible the history of feminist art, while simultaneously contributing to this history.

One way of approaching this task is that advanced by writer Victoria Horne, when she argues that art which revisits and re-cites earlier works allows for a way to

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8 Ibid. pp. 19-20
rethink art history, or to think art history differently, in a way that pays close
attention to the materiality of women’s labour. Revisionist practices highlight the
labour of women’s art making by returning to earlier practices and making them
visible again. In doing so, feminist artists commemorate earlier women’s work,
emphasise their own art as labour, and allow audiences to re-vision the work in the
present. Horne’s example in her article is that of Kate Davis, whose practice employs
complex strategies for adopting and adapting motifs from within the archive of art
history, such as Willem de Kooning’s *Woman* paintings. Davis utilises cheap postcard
reproductions of de Kooning’s work to construct sculptural objects which deny the
flat, violent nature of the original canvases. She then redraws the folded postcards in
pencil works that employ the art historical method of chiaroscuro and allow only
small glimpses of the de Kooning women. Davis “encourages her audience to look
anew at these famous works that they might think they know.” Horne argues that
this re-vision of art works of the past constitutes a kind of historiographical labour:

> **The exposure of the process of cultural accumulation denaturalises the
> myth of artistic creativity that rests upon ideal and unpredictable
> moments of inspiration. Instead it emphasises art as work and
> concurrently indicates women’s prior exclusion from these gendered
> spaces of labour.**

The emphasis on *art as work* is particularly crucial for women artists, who continue
to earn significantly less than their male counterparts, and who also make up the
majority of underpaid (or unpaid) volunteer and intern positions in the art world.
Thus feminist artists act as producers, custodians and historians of their own
practice, building a visual archive of feminist work which links geographically and
temporally distinct artists to each other.

In her essay, Horne also addresses feminism’s relationship to postmodernism,
particularly in relation to practices that quote, cite and parody earlier art works.

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10 Ibid. p. 41
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid. p. 36
These strategies might be thought of as instances of Jean Baudrillard’s conception of simulacra. Horne, however, distances these feminist practices from a direct association with postmodernism because of the “patrilineage” of modernist art history, which both pre- and post-dates the shift from modernism to postmodernism. Nonetheless, I argue that there are elements of Baudrillard’s critique which are invoked in contemporary feminist practice. These quotational approaches which parody, but do not directly copy, the original art work, might be thought of as a copy of something which either never had an original, or for which an original no longer exists.13

Abigail Solomon-Godeau has discussed Zoe Leonard’s work with filmmaker Cheryl Dunye, *The Fae Richards Archive* (1993-1996, fig. 27) in terms of its relation to the simulacrum. She writes: “As a postmodernist mode or tactic, the book is best described as a Baudrillardian simulation, a facsimile of a simulation to be exact.”14 In this work, the artist and filmmaker created eighty-two documents of the life and work of an imagined African-American lesbian actress and blues singer. *The Fae Richards Archive* highlights the invisibility of such “historical” figures due to their race, gender and sexuality, and challenges the status of the archive as an objective, factual account of history. Leonard acknowledges the artifice of her *Archive* by listing those who were cast to play Fae Richards in the fabrication of her life, and in doing so highlights the constructed nature of the archive itself. *The Fae Richards Archive* is also fettered with inconsistencies, gaps in history and unexplained ruptures, accentuating another crucial problem with historical archives themselves: that they are never complete. This incompleteness is the reason Leonard and Dunye were prompted to create a fictional historical figure, who could represent African-American women’s unacknowledged impact on the film and music industries.

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Brown Council’s work *This Is Barbara Cleveland* (2013) is an similarly compelling example of the way artists address the partial archive of feminist art in their contemporary practice, and resonates with Leonard and Dunye’s project. This performance, which was recorded on film to create a document of the work, opens with a close-up of a lipstick-coated mouth, speaking the words:

My name is Barbara Cleveland. What you are about to see is performance. What you are about to hear is performance. This is performance. This is the beginning. B-e-g-i-n-n-i-n-g. At the beginning, it is only you, and me, and that is all that matters.¹⁵

Other signposts such as this are given throughout the film, for example “This is the middle. M-i-d-d-l-e. Here we are.” The speech in these segments is highlighted as being “word of mouth.” Quite literally, the mouth is the only thing on screen, and without other facial features to gain context from, the words seem disembodied and abstract. In contrast to these shots are clips of staged interviews with the members of Brown Council, who discuss aspects of Barbara Cleveland’s practice in a “talking heads” format. These interviews are interspersed with archival videos and photographs of “Cleveland’s” performances (fig. 26). The juxtaposition of still, steady shots of the artists giving “factual” information about Cleveland, with shaky, handheld shots of Cleveland’s practice overlaid with loud, jarring sound, gives the performance a slightly surreal and fragmented atmosphere, and adds to a sense of authenticity.

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¹⁵ Brown Council, *This Is Barbara Cleveland*, performance for film, 2013
Brown Council’s *This is Barbara Cleveland* might be described in similar terms to Leonard and Dunye’s archive, in that it is a record or image of something, or rather someone, that never existed: Barbara Cleveland herself. The work embodies Baudrillard’s postmodern notion of the simulacra, which he describes as that which is “never exchanged for the real, but exchanged for itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference.”  

Solomon-Godeau refers to the disjuncture in the narrative of *The Fae Richards Archive*, which is filled with temporal gaps in Richards’ life and missing information about figures and events, saying, “The fragmentary quality of the narrative parallels the fractured record of its larger history.” These gaps, then, are not necessarily meant to be filled, but are part of the always-imperfect histories of women. *This is Barbara Cleveland* is also fragmented and somewhat disorienting, with its jumps between blurred, grainy footage of Cleveland’s visceral performance art, similar to that of Carolee Schneemann, Yoko Ono, Gina Pane and Marina Abramović in the 1970s, and interview segments with members of Brown Council.

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By presenting a fragmented, incomplete history of an invented figure, Brown Council draws attention to the gaps and missing fragments of the history of Australian feminist art itself. The viewer is led to realize that archival documentation cannot be objective: history is written from a certain subjective position, and memory is necessarily incomplete. Brown Council respond to the archive and memory from their own subjective position as young, white, female artists from Australia, with access to a limited history of feminist art by women, who have similar experiences to their own. This history is not accessible to all women, but it enriches Brown Council’s work within the archive, and allows them to critique the lack of representation of feminist art in Australian art history.

The “archival” footage in Brown Council’s film shows Cleveland smearing paint over her naked body, using rope to contort and restrict her body, performing energetic tasks while blindfolded (like stepping onto and off a chair), and sitting naked in an exhibition space with a dunce’s hat on her head. Painting the body might be read as a reference to early performance pieces such as Yves Klein’s *Anthropometrie* (1961), in which women became human paintbrushes, or Carolee Schneemann’s visceral group performance *Meat Joy* (1964). I would suggest, however, that images of “Barbara Cleveland” in a dunce’s hat refer to previous works by Brown Council
themselves, such as *A Comedy*, discussed in Chapter Four. In this performance, the artists donned colourful pointed hats as a way to invoke the historical character of the “dunce” or fool. This collapses the temporal distance between early performance practices and contemporary works, as well as conflating Brown Council’s own work with Barbara Cleveland’s. Brown Council weaves the archive of Barbara Cleveland into their own work, inserting themselves into the history of Australian feminist performance art, and the history of performance art more broadly.

In Chapter Two, I described the way in which contemporary feminist artists speak back to, and through, previous generations of feminist artists by way of a dialogue. This is a productive and meaningful way for contemporary feminist artists to situate their work within the historical archive of feminist art. It points to a trajectory of practices and devices that feminists can draw upon, as a means to engage with gender identity, sexuality, cultural codes of femininity and masculinity, and women’s place in art history and society. It is also a way to expand the archive and to suggest that it is not a fixed entity, but something that is constantly being revised and reviewed (or re-visioned), in a way that is more inclusive and more critical with each revision. Griselda Pollock expands on this notion in her catalogue for the exhibition *elles@centrepompidou* (Paris, Centre Pompidou, 2009), writing:

> (Women artists of today) need to know the complete history of art, including their varied women predecessors, in order to feel at home in the inclusive, expanded, multi-sexed and multi-positional aesthetic field of the present post-colonial world.18

Pollock’s claim that “women artists of today need to know the complete history of art” is a complicated argument, and requires some further attention. It is clear that feminist artists of today are aware of their predecessors, as they pay homage to and

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sometimes parody them in their work as a way to acknowledge the trajectory of feminist art which has led to the contemporary moment. However, at the same time that Pollock urges women artists to know “the complete history of art,” she must also recognise the impossibility of the task. As I am arguing, the history of art, and particularly feminist art, is never complete. It is constantly being written and is itself iterative, always being produced and reproduced. One line in Brown Council’s performance film *This is Barbara Cleveland* stands out as summative of this idea: “This is a document in time. *It is not a line, it is a loop.* It repeats, is forgotten, and repeats again.”  

This is an apt analogy for the history of feminist art itself, as a series of cycles, renewals and reappearances: a loop, not a line. While feminist artists today must remain aware of the artists and practices that have come before them, they *cannot* know the complete history of art, since, as I have noted, history is never complete. Brown Council enters into a dialogue with earlier feminist artists in *This Is Barbara Cleveland*, giving a nod to feminist artists who are excluded from the canons of Australian performance and feminist art. Brown Council’s performance achieves this acknowledgement with striking subtlety, drawing the viewer into a web of connections, inventions and fabrications that provoke more questions than answers.

Alongside her work with Brown Council, which engages with the history of Australian feminist performance art, Kelly Doley addresses feminist histories in her individual practice. Her 2012 exhibition, *The Learning Centre: Two Feminists*, discussed in Chapter Two as an instance of feminist performance, invited participants who were “experts” in feminism to come and give Doley a lesson on feminism, in exchange for a painting of themselves by the artist. In the sense that the lessons took the form of a dialogue, the performance is reminiscent of second-wave feminist methods of education and sharing experiences, such as “consciousness-raising.” Many of these sessions had no assigned leader, and every woman was encouraged to speak about her own experience in turn.  

Doley re-visions this practice of shared consciousness-

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19 Brown Council, *This is Barbara Cleveland*, performance for film, 2013.
raising in the contemporary moment, to raise her own consciousness as well as the
consciousness of others interested in feminism, and to build a web of connections
between herself, a young Australian feminist artist, and women whose experiences
and knowledge are different in some ways to her own. She describes *The Learning
Centre* as an inquiry into her own relationship to feminist history, as well as its
contemporary manifestations. Doley’s attempt to understand the social, artistic and
political history that has shaped contemporary feminism today is reminiscent of
Pollock’s claim that women artists must understand the “complete history of art”.
Doley understands that as a young female Australian artist, she has a particular
relationship to feminism, and positioning herself as a “student” of feminism in this
project is crucial to developing this relationship. Doley perceives that young artists
today must understand what has come before, in order to be able to be engaged
with, critical of, and responsive to, this history. The blog documenting the
performance serves a dual purpose: as a permanent record of the work, which is
transient and not object-oriented; and as part of the archive of feminist performance
art. Doley writes:

> By collating this knowledge from an eclectic range of sources it will
> become a sort of hobbled together archive of Feminist thought and
> history, and a space for imaginings of Feminism’s future…. I hope it
> generates new constructive dialogue surrounding Feminism.21

Doley references the “archive” here as well as “constructive dialogue,” placing her
performance firmly in the realm of feminist art which exists both alongside and as an
extension of its own history, in dialogue with other works. Here, it is useful to
consider art historian Amelia Jones’s notion of “parafeminism,” which she describes
as feminism which exists alongside, rather than in opposition to, earlier feminisms.22
In *The Learning Centre*, Doley consciously aligns herself with feminists from both her
own generation, and those who are more closely aligned with second-wave
feminism. By doing so, Doley challenges the idea of feminist “generations,” which
implies obvious distinctions between different generations of women with feminist

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Magazine*, vol. 10 no. 4 (2008), n.p.
consciousness. Feminisms which have developed over time are more nuanced than this, however, and cannot be confined to particular historical periods. Feminisms cycle through generations, in a form of Kristeva’s women’s time, and exist alongside each generation in accordance with Amelia Jones’s notion of parafeminism.

Brown Council establishes a dialogue with a long-standing women’s group, the Country Women’s Association (CWA) in their 2012 work *Mass Action: 137 Cakes in 90 Hours* (fig. 28). For this endurance performance, the four members of Brown Council baked non-stop for 90 hours to reproduce all 137 recipes from the iconic Australian *CWA Cookbook*. This performance was a celebration of the domestic products of the CWA and an acknowledgement of their support of women in rural communities in Australia. It included current members of the CWA, who judged Brown Council’s efforts in the kitchen at the end of the 90 hours. Members of the art public were invited to attend the bake-off and sample the products, creating a broader network of connections between the Sydney and wider Australian art world, and the CWA. As a celebration of women’s work and the domesticity associated with
the CWA, *Mass Action* also drew attention to the unpaid labour of women in the home.\(^{23}\)

This performance might be read, on one hand, as an instance of curator Nicolas Bourriaud’s concept of relational aesthetics, which he defines as “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”\(^ {24}\) On the other hand, to define the work within this framework would be to co-opt it into the very canon which it resists by being performative, ephemeral and based outside of an art institution. As Pollock argues, canonisation is not necessarily helpful to women artists, because it reinforces the structural tools of art history as they currently stand, rather than deconstructing them to expose their inherent gender bias.\(^ {25}\) Instead, we can view this work through the history of feminist art, as the concerns in *Mass Action* have been addressed by feminists since the early 1970s, when women campaigned for greater recognition of domestic labour such as housework, child-rearing and cooking. Not only do the members of Brown Council return to some of the political and social concerns of second-wave feminism, but they also hark back to the social and artistic methodologies of that time, particularly collaboration and consciousness-raising groups. Brown Council, a contemporary artist collective, working in conversation with the CWA, an organisation through which generations of Australian women have cycled, is in itself a materialisation of Amelia Jones’ notion of parafeminism. Brown Council’s performance creates a dialogue between multiple generations of women, placing the work at the nexus of different feminist concerns and desires, including the desire for “female” labour to be recognised, to draw connections between different groups of women, and to strengthen the relationship between art practice and communities.

\(^{23}\) Judith Adams, ‘Fashionable, Fleeting and Influential: Feminist Art Revisited’, *Broadsheet: Contemporary Visual Art + Culture*, vol. 44 no. 3 (Summer 2015), p. 35


In 2007, artist and writer Ulrike Müller stated:

I hope that there are feminist ways to think about our movement’s herstories other than in terms of generations, ways to think in simultaneities and continuities. I like to think that I live in a feminist continuum that goes back to feminist groups and radical sexual politics in the 1970s and beyond.26

Müller emphasises the feminist nature of her hope, and relates this to a timeliness that circumvents generations, or linear time. As we have seen, the work of Brown Council and Kelly Doley’s individual practice revisit feminist groups and radical politics associated with second-wave feminism, not so as to define a new generation of feminist art in opposition to earlier generations, but in order to highlight simultaneities and continuities between temporalities. Hannah Raisin’s work similarly revisits past feminist moments. Her early work at art school in the mid-2000s included an outfit made of meat, which was partly inspired by Canadian artist Jana Sterbak’s meat dress in the work Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorectic (1987, fig. 29). Then, in 2010, pop music artist Lady Gaga attended the MTV Music Awards in a meat dress (fig. 30).

We might think of the meat dress as an instance of what Horne has recently theorised as “untimely resurfacings” in feminist political history, suggesting that the challenge “is to build an alternative model of historical time and change [which can] position and value repetition as generative and productive.”27 By recognising these three temporally distinct moments in feminist art history as interconnected, linear temporality collapses and new patterns of repetition emerge, allowing us to view the history of feminist art in a new light.

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Feminist artists such as Raisin and Brown Council have reiterated methodologies and practices of earlier feminist artists to reconceive of them in a different light, and to
imbue these existing practices with new meaning. However, one of the most poignant examples of re-visioning occurs within Jill Orr’s own extended practice, a practice that, for more than four decades, has continually circled back to the same themes and motifs. Her performances have addressed issues surrounding the body, the environment, refugee asylum, and sexuality since the late 1970s, and continue to do so today, creating an organic cycle within an individual practice. For instance, her work for *Performance Presence/Video Time* (2015) at the Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide, incorporated elements of pagan ritual and shamanism that have recurred in Orr’s and other feminist work since the 1970s (fig. 31). Ben Brooker, an audience member at *Performance Presence/Video Time* and writer for RealTime magazine, describes the performance as follows:

The artist, swaddled in white cloth and suspended by means of a heavy underarm rope, dismounted a boulder and approached the audience, leaving behind a striking outline of her body on a grid of panels made an eerie green by washes of phosphorescent paint. A thrashing, expurgatory choreography followed, after which Orr ceremonially removed her cloth foot bindings and serenely exited the space, the afterimage of her body still visible on the grid, her presence continuing to haunt the gallery amid the dispersing crowd.28

Orr’s body is central to all of her performance work, as we have seen in previous chapters. Also central to her work, then, is the notion of femininity and how this is inscribed on the body. Much of this is rooted in ritual – the feminine rituals we perform every day such as shaving, applying makeup, and choosing the clothing we wear. Moreover, many of Orr’s rituals are tied to pagan ritual and shamanism. Her works use the primal elements of fire, earth and water, juxtaposed with images of sacrifice and endurance, to explore the fate of the female body under patriarchy.29

In her more recent work for *Performance Presence/Video Time*, Orr looks back to the beginnings of her practice, such as her seminal 1979 performance and series of photographs, *Bleeding Trees*, discussed in Chapter Two. In particular, the suspension of the body in space is a striking motif in both of these performances, and gestures

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to the limits and restrictions placed upon the female body in society. Thus Orr explores patriarchal oppression across time in a subtle and poignant way, through her visually arresting and socially incisive performances. She traverses attitudes and temporalities, re-visioning her own earlier work in a decidedly contemporary context.

Fig. 31: Jill Orr, *Trilogy III – To Choose*, 2015. Performance, Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide

In this chapter I have argued that contemporary feminist art does not signal a rupture with the past, but rather that this work exists alongside and as an extension of feminist art history, in dialogue with other works, either historical, imagined or nascent. By this, I mean that contemporary feminist works are as forward-looking as they are backwards-looking, creating, as Kelly Doley puts it, “space for imaginings of Feminism’s future.” The artists I have discussed imagine their work in terms of its relationship to feminist artists of the future, who may use these works in new (or perhaps old) ways. In this way, the cyclical movement of feminist art perpetuates,
constantly renewing and revisiting itself so as to resist falling back into entrenched patterns of avant-gardism, progress and rupture.
In this thesis, I have identified a number of key themes in contemporary art which are reminiscent of, and at the same time appear to anticipate, those explored by feminist artists in the 1970s. I have drawn parallels between contemporary feminist artists who also use these modes of practice to challenge artistic hierarchies and widely accepted notions of authorship, and which expand the definition of art practice, and earlier feminist practices, which were performative and collaborative. I have also observed the role of humour and re-visioning in the contemporary practices of feminist artists, and highlighted how these devices allow a number of artists to establish a dialogue between theirs and earlier feminist practices. I have argued that these parallels are part of a cyclical pattern of feminism in art that resists the progressive impetus of avant-gardism, and is more suitably positioned within a framework of return, rupture and re-vision.

At the beginning of this thesis, I set out to answer a central question: how does feminism manifest in the work of contemporary artists? After conducting interviews with four artists and two collectives, I identified a number of key themes which are exemplary of contemporary manifestations of feminism: performance, collaboration, humour and re-vision. I argue that it is through the use of these practices and devices, rather than through explicitly feminist content, that feminism manifests itself in contemporary art. The subject matter which these artists address may appear very different from feminist practices of the past, and may not even be explicitly feminist at first glance. However, I argue that these practices and devices allow women artists to intervene at different points in historical time, and to envision a different approach to temporality which is circular, rather than linear.

This cyclical nature of feminist practices is consistent with the writings of Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler, whose theories of non-linearity and non-reductive
identity resonates with much of the work discussed in this thesis. The significance of these works is not their variation from, or challenge to, past practices, but the very continuity with the past, and continued relevance into the future, challenging the very notion of a teleological narrative. Theorists writing of earlier feminist practices continue to be relevant in unpacking this circularity, such as Kristeva’s essay ‘Women’s Time’, discussed in the literature review. Kristeva’s notion of multiple feminist attitudes, which exist simultaneously, allows one to think outside of oppositional feminisms, or a linear teleology of feminist politics and practice, and instead to approach feminist politics in a way that allows for multiple positions and a resistance of irreducible difference.¹

Kristeva’s non-linear conception of history in regard to feminist politics resonates with Judith Butler’s theory of non-reductive identity, also outlined in the literature review. Butler argues for a conception of gender identity which is performative, suggesting that the identity expressed by performative gestures “are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.”² Thus, identity is not tied to either the physical body or an internal substance, but is constructed solely through performative acts. Butler goes on to argue that:

> If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.³

The feminist artists discussed in this thesis also endeavour to deconstruct this discourse of stable identity, exploring instead fluid and unfixed identities. This is poignantly expressed through the work of contemporary feminist artists, who explore different gendered identities through performance, collaboration, humour and re-vision. These practices and devices are in dialogue with feminist theories of

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³ Ibid. p. 137
non-reductive identity, creating a continuum of feminist art practice that is engaged with theory, politics and history.

The need for a project which examines contemporary feminist art seemed pertinent, to me, because often the feminist politics of contemporary art go unnoticed. Feminism in the works that I have examined is not manifested in a didactic way, but I have argued that it is woven into art through very specific practices and devices. A corollary of this is that the identity of feminists, and indeed women, is less a case of being a feminist or a woman, and a more contextual, or contingent subjectivity. This is how we can understand the importance of theories of non-reductive identity such as Butler’s, which offer an alternative to identity politics which are directly tied to binary genders or sexualities. As Butler suggests:

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.4

The denial of gender as a “locus of agency” is particularly significant for feminist politics, as a singular gender position or sexual identity is no longer required for the mobilisation of feminist politics. Rather, an array of heterogeneous identities is brought together through a shared set of political and social beliefs, as demonstrated through the feminist practices I have discussed. The presence of multiple and fluid identities within feminist politics at large has made the identification of a singular “feminism” more difficult in recent years, and an understanding of who might be called “feminist” somewhat problematic. The arguments around what constitutes a feminist resonate with the problematics of identifying what constitutes a “feminist” art practice, something I have set out to address in this thesis. Feminism can be read through the gender identity of the artist who produced the work, or through explicitly feminist subject matter. However, I have argued that alongside such work runs an enduring feminist project manifested through a set of practices and devices.

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Many of the works discussed adopt a practice of meaning construction developed over the course of the work. Rather than being expressed through the subject matter of art, feminist politics are present in the collaborative effort between audience and artist. In this way, politics are re-democratised, as artists relinquish didactic control over a reading of their art to the audience, recalling Roland Barthes’ famous claim that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.” On one hand, this poses a risk for the political elements of feminist work to be ignored or overlooked entirely; on the other hand, it allows for a more open and complex reading of artistic practices, such as the one I have outlined in this thesis, which acknowledges implicit political concerns which have endured in feminist art practice since the early 1960s.

My research necessarily has been limited by a number of factors. I engaged with artists from Australia and New Zealand because of their geographical proximity to myself, and the familiarity with which I am able to talk about their art practices and the art history of this area. The artists I selected and interviewed make art in response to a certain number of shared experiences related to gender, sexuality, race, economic background, education and an infinitesimal number of other personal idiosyncrasies. They have access to a certain set of shared experiences and a particular legacy of feminist art which is not available to all contemporary women artists. These experiences are not universal; they do not take into account, for example, transgender experience where the body in performance becomes even more contentious, and the notion of an essential femininity is revealed to be a false construction.

Western feminism has been widely criticized for privileging the experience of white, middle-class, heterosexual women at the expense of women of colour, women from

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6 See, for example, the work of Heather Cassils, Vaginal Davis, Zackary Drucker, James Helenski, Evan Ifekoya, and Wu Tsang.
working class backgrounds and queer women, who do not enjoy the same visibility or access to representation in society, the media, or the art world. It might be thought that the processes of return and re-vision that I have described perpetuate these absences, and in fact that appears to be the case in works I have examined. However, it also opens up possibilities for different voices to be heard, such as in Zoe Leonard’s *The Fae Richards Archive*, discussed in Chapter Five. Leonard’s work draws attention to the lack of visibility of lesbian women of colour by creating an archive of a fictional musician and actress, Fae Richards. The history that Leonard responds to is different, for instance, to that of Brown Council’s Barbara Cleveland archive, although their strategies do overlap in interesting and important ways. There is certainly the need for a project which considers the way in which women artists of colour respond to the history of feminist art, though it would require a broader scope than that of this thesis.

I have established a framework in this thesis for understanding the specific ways in which contemporary feminist art sustains a dialogue with the archive of feminist art, as part of a practice of return, re-vision, circularity and simultaneity. Within this framework, I argue that contemporary practices engage with a legacy of feminist issues which stretch through and across time, escaping historical periodisation. From this research I conclude that feminist art does not exist in the margins of mainstream art history, nor as something to be co-opted by hegemonic art historical discourse, but as a practice with the potential to transform the discipline of art history from a line, to a loop.
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2016

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