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2+2=5: A Collective Inspiration

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Johnston, P., 1989. *My Mother Earth*
Sand painting from exhibition titled *Delineation* at Ivan Dougherty Gallery,
COFA UNSW.

The following works by C. Moore Hardy and Cate McCarthy document a particular facet of their relationship with Dr Pam Johnston focussing on the time she was a member of the artist collective 2+2=5, a collaboration of artists that began in the 1980s and continues today. Pam was a central person in the collective and so these two writers not only celebrate the larger arena of Pam's life as well as her involvement in 2+2=5 but also document the interconnectedness of community to the world of art and the importance of this to Pam's artistic practice as well her personal life.

Dr Pam Dahl-Helm Johnston was a maverick (by C. Moore Hardy)

Not only was Pam Dahl-Helm Johnston an inspiration to me but she was a close friend, collaborator and a prolific artist. We met at the National Art School, in 1987, where doing the foundation course in those days meant that older students could get a foot in the door with a portfolio. Pam was already accomplished in painting and drawing but was after more skills and knowledge. Josie Newtown was also at the National Art School at this time, along with Louanne Mitchelmore and Deborah Young, the first group to form the 2+2=5 art collective.

2+2=5 was instigated and inspired by that group of women, who, having completed art school, recognised the competition, lack of support and myopia of the art market that they were all entering. The decision was made to document our lives, regularly exhibit our works and somehow support each other through life. The intention to document and record was to preserve our voices in a sea of competition. The Guerrilla Girls, a subversive New York group of women artists who would turn up at important art events wearing Gorilla masks, inspired Pam. At a time when women, particularly women artists were underrepresented in major galleries and collections, she believed it was important to write ourselves into history and encouraged us to document everything. It was Pam's intention that we document our lives so that those records would remain a testament to our achievements. We were to be the women who celebrated our feminist manifesto. The desire for a consistent, supportive yet critical analysis of our work was the aim; all this when feminism was still a 'popular' concept. This utopian dream resulted in a collection of works, numerous exhibitions in a variety of formats, documentation, long conversations and great friendships.

Pam was the one who again and again ensured we committed to another exhibition to discuss what had happened in our lives and as women and practising artists where we were now. We brought together our accumulated, collected histories ready to be unpacked, examined and discussed for the next phase. Apart from being in the group, we examined why we were going to do another show, how that could come about (as we all had different practises now) and how it would work. We began a number of collaborative pieces that we passed around to each other, making marks that attempted to work with one another.

We enjoyed some subversive moments along with praise for collaborative exhibitions at the Women's Gallery in Melbourne (1989); the Tin Sheds Gallery at the University of Sydney (1990); the Sparks Gallery at Wollongong University (1991); and the Dissonance Festival at Selenium Gallery in Redfern (1992). WOMENHOUSESPACE was painted onto numerous buildings around Sydney in the late 1980's. Sydney College of the Arts was fortunate enough to be blessed with one, along with University of Technology in Ultimo. Creative subversion was part of an art's student guidance in those days.

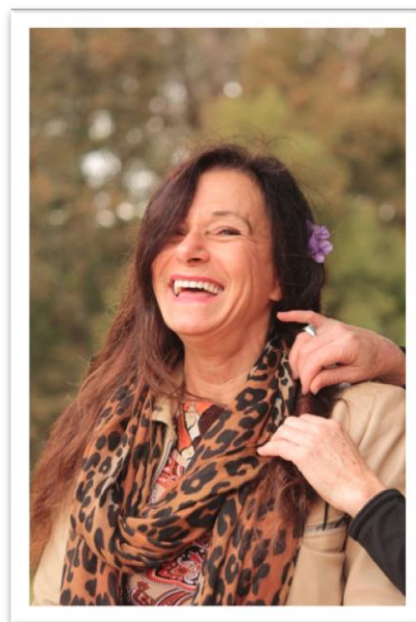
Pam always pulled together the texts that supported the 2+2=5 exhibitions. She was our writer and most prolific storyteller. She pulled together our words, works and made the exhibitions events to celebrate our collective passions. Her special Aunty was Ruby Langford Ginibi, who came along to early exhibitions to see our work. 2+2=5 had a few collaborators in its incarnations, including Deborah Foletti, Rox de Luca, Cate McCarthy and Rita Georgiardinis.

Pam was mischievous, driven, highly creative and in possession of great wisdom mixed with vulnerability. Around the same time that website names were being sold for millions, Pam

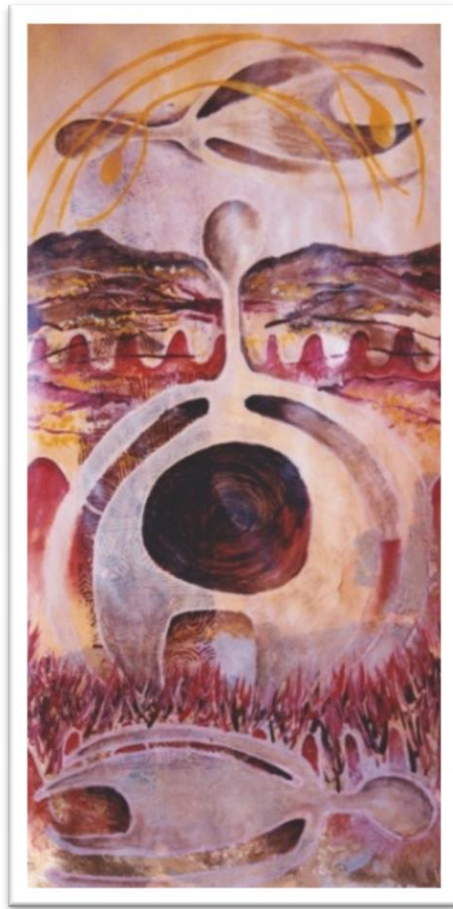
registered the name SYDNEY BIENNALE at the office of Fair Trading, when she realised she could. She settled the matter amicably, but she relished the possibility of being able to hijack one of the Sydney art world's sacred organisations. She also spoke of her being persecuted by a 'Black Watch' indigenous group, who had a self-styled evangelic determination to cast doubts on her identity. I have seen the documentation that described on her birth certificate that she was born with the label 'half-caste', but, through this group's actions, Pam was ostracised and many galleries refused to show her work although she exhibited for many years with James Harvey Gallery. Harvey was supportive and refused to be influenced by the gossip. In spite of this Pam managed to find success outside of her comfort zone in Europe and particularly in the UK, and she spoke at many conferences and exhibited widely. However, she always came back to Sydney to reunite with family and friends and continue her painting and writing.

2+2=5 was a means to create, support, collaborate and question issues that we all experienced: the challenges of being an artist in the twentieth and now the twenty-first century, the maintenance of relationships, the content of the work and convictions that were the core of our individual and sometimes collective beliefs. The National Art School brought us into contact, developed and nurtured our skills, and then propelled us into working together. Pam's legacy will be that 2+2=5 has remained a collaborative working group of artists.

It was last year (2013), just prior to Pam's sudden death that Pam, Josie Kim, Cate McCarthy, Deborah Young and I had reunited at Cate's Fat Wombat Farm to discuss the next phase of our collaboration and the future documentation of our lives. 2 + 2 = 5 were planning another show before Pam died and we still hope to exhibit her and our last work in the future, which will include pieces about our relationship to her and to each other. The fact that she succeeded in gaining a PhD in Philosophy of Education and a Doctorate in Creative Arts puts her achievements way ahead of the combined efforts of 2+2=5. Doctor Pam Johnston was an inspiration, a testament to how much can be achieved despite adversity. The exhibition will be our tribute to an extraordinary woman.



Pam with Josie Kim (Newton) at Fat Wombat Farm
Photo by C. Moore Hardy, 2013



Johnston, P. 1996, *Transition [life]*
Mixed media work on archival paper exhibited at Project
Space Keira Lane Wollongong (1996) and Tap Gallery
Darlinghurst Sydney (1997)

A Big Life (by Cate McCarthy)

Pam was a stubborn mix of intelligence, politics, fashion, creativity, thrill seeking, activism, strong social and community conscience, bigheartedness and extreme tenderness. Doctor Pam Dahl-Helm Johnston was my dear friend.

Our relationship was not always an easy one; we discussed and argued on many occasions about every topic under the sun from postcolonialism and children to art and politics, often at her home in Woolloomooloo. There were times when we would be interrupted by a local community member knocking on the door and Pam would come back with a pile of legal papers or fines that she would put aside to write a letter on behalf of this person. She was a strong advocate for her community and always agreed to help in any way possible. Woolloomooloo is a mix of community housing interspersed with the more recent gentrification of the area that has taken place in and around the wharves and the base of Kings

Cross. Pam lived there with her children for around 34 years and was an integral part of the community. Her daughter, Keera, was born in that house and her eldest son Cass's funeral service was there, as was her own wake. That house holds many memories.

For many years Pam worked as an advocate for women victims of domestic violence at Women's Place, Kings Cross and the Marrickville Women's Refuge. In more recent times she held art groups at the Juanita Neilson Community Centre at Woolloomooloo and mentored many young people from the area. She was an active volunteer at Plunkett St School and the nearby N.A.V.A. (National Advocacy for Visual Arts).

We met in Tamworth in western New South Wales in 1977 when many of us had fled the cities in search of a different life. It was there I discovered music and many other young like-minded people. Along with friends Jacqui Glynn and Clelia Adams we became ensconced in the local country music scene. Pam and her new partner Carrl arrived in town fresh from Melbourne when Pam was searching for her roots in Gamileroi Country. They cut a grand couple as they strode into the various venues: Carrl was tall and a known musician and Pam had such flair and style. She made her own clothes and was always so glamorous. Tamworth at that time was an incubator for music and the establishment of long and enduring friendships. For many of the musicians of that time Pam was a catalyst for bringing us all together over many years. Music had always been one of her great loves.

One night in Sydney I remember her calling with a request for my daughter Billie and me to come and sing a song she had written at a vigil for the family of an unarmed young Woolloomooloo man who had been shot by police. Pam had written the words and Billie and I sang a tune and played as the whole community walked from the wharf with candles to the place in the city where young Edison had been gunned down. She had a big heart and we shared many such joyous and sad times.

Pam and I exhibited together at Byron Bay, in Sydney and in Melbourne. In 1991 I was asked to join 2+2 =5, a group of 4 artists. This group of women artists from Sydney had been together for some time and I had previously known them only socially. The underlying aim of the group was to document our own and each other's lives. We came together to discuss philosophy, ideas, formats and venues for exhibitions. Pam was always the driver in this group. She was adamant that we write ourselves into history, to tell our own stories as artists and as women.

Pam, along with writer and adoptive Mum, Ruby Langford Ginibi, visited Billie and me several times in Lismore New South Wales when Ruby was researching her book, *My Bundjalung People*. Pam had been awarded the Women and Arts Fellowship for that year to document Ruby's journey back to Bundjalung Country photographically, which included Cabbage Tree Island, Box Ridge, Mulli Mulli and Baryugil Indigenous communities. The images from Cabbage Tree Island were exhibited at Lismore Regional Gallery and given back to the community afterwards. I was fortunate to spend days with Pam, Ruby and Auntie Eileen Morgan at Evans Head and "Cabbo", listening to stories and witnessing first-hand the generosity of the people even though I was dismayed at the level of poverty still existing at the community.

After a dreadful car accident in 1996 Pam needed to take a break from the work she was doing at Mulawa Women's Correctional Centre. She had been teaching Art and Indigenous

Studies there for some years and had mentored many women both in and out of prison. I took over her classes and stayed for seven years. Pam was held in great esteem by the staff and inmates at Mulawa and Emu Plains Women's Correctional Centres, having initiated a number of innovative programs in arts and education; she advocated for the rights of Indigenous women and the right to be educated both in and out of prison. Pam was very philosophical about the accident as the time now allowed her to concentrate fully on her art and writing. She then completed her first Doctorate, exhibited and had a number of papers published.

After a five year absence she returned to teach at Mulawa and and Emu Plains Women's Correctional Centres and she also worked at Long Bay Men's Correctional Centre, always encouraging and setting new benchmarks for Indigenous education and mentoring many aspiring artists.

Her family and friends were everything to her. They inspired and supported her as she did them. Pam searched for herself through a difficult upbringing fraught with abuse and dysfunction. She had her own mentors in her life including her eldest son Cass's grandmother, her dear Phyllis. Her grandchildren were a constant joy, her women friends were friends for life and she was the centre around whom many of us gathered. She taught me to value my women friends and to never be afraid to love.

In recent years loss, transformation and death had been a constant theme in her life and her artwork.

I clutched my heart despairingly as I grieved for my first-born son and I clutched my heart in pride at the achievements of my daughter. I clutched my heart as I cried with happiness at the birth of my grandchildren. Without my heart I am not living. Without my heart I cannot connect, cannot feel, cannot love, cannot understand the meaning or the connection to life. Yet my heart is a pump medically and legally, that can stop, or not, at death (Johnston, P., 2007, p. 3).

Dr Pam Johnston has had a big life, an extraordinary life, where she has made us think differently about many things. I won't say encouraged us as she often rammed it down our throats. She was confronting and loving, a paradox really, capable of extreme sensitivity, love and loyalty mixed with in-your-face opposition to many issues. She was a wise woman who earned all of that wisdom through tenacity and compassion. Pam was loved dearly by all of her friends and family, revered and admired by many others. She took up riding a motorbike when 65 years old. I miss her terribly.



2+2=5 at their last meeting at Fat Wombat Farm, Bathurst
Left to right Cate McCarthy, Deb Young, Pam Johnston, Josie Kim (Newton)
(Photo by C.Moore Hardy 2013)

References

Johnston, P., 2007. *HEARTLAND: Anatomy of the Human Heart*. Catalogue for exhibition at Kendal gallery for Women's Arts International Festival, Kendal, Cumbria.

Biographical notes

C. Moore Hardy studied at National Art School, Sydney College of the Arts and COFA. She has documented the Gay, Lesbian, Bi Transgender, Intersex & Queer Sydney Community for over 30 years, and her documentary photographs are available for research online at the City of Sydney, Archive Pix. The exhibition she curated, *We Are Family*, is currently on at The Australian Centre for Photography, until 18th May 2014. Her works are in numerous state & private collections and she remains an activist and a feminist (with a sense of humour).

Cate McCarthy, M Phil (Fine Arts) Newcastle University, is a freelance artist, arts worker and musician who has taught in prisons, Tafe, with regional communities and in schools. She has exhibited widely in Australia and overseas. Her life as a community artist has seen her work with Indigenous Australians, refugees, Art and Health programs, youth and people with a disability. She has been a working musician, vocalist and songwriter since the 70's touring nationally and playing at festivals. Cate has a strong interest in performance theatre and politics and is an advocate for social justice. Her most recent exhibition was at Newcastle University in 2013, titled *Dig a bit deeper - connection and contemporary landscape art*.