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The Unpopular Practice: Being Feminist in an Anti-Feminist Age

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The Unpopular Practice: Being Feminist in an Anti-Feminist Age

**By
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November 1st 2005

Abstract

The position being explored within this dissertation is that feminism has been deemed 'passé' within contemporary western popular culture. The research wishes to counteract this overriding negative impression of feminism, which extends through from popular culture, into the institutions of academia, and beyond, into the gallery context. Female artists are often subjected to gender based readings of their artwork such as 'feminine' or 'feminist', which serve as a way of dismissing the importance of their work. Labelling work feminine involves similar implications as work labelled feminist – both can be seen as negative, which in turn can render the work of women artists ineffectual. I would suggest that the unpopular position of feminism places not only feminist, but female arts practitioners in a position of having little market value, and consequently affects the showing of those works. The dissertation will explore these notions, and will look at ways of 're-visiting' the site of feminism through multi-valent and subversive practices in order to address and possibly reinvigorate its position within a contemporary western context.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

Brooke Zeligman _____

Date 3.2.06

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Introduction

The position being explored within this dissertation is that feminism has been deemed 'passé' within contemporary western popular culture. The research wishes to counteract this overriding negative impression of feminism, which extends through from popular culture, into the institutions of academia, and beyond, into the gallery context. A quick Guerrilla Girl¹ styled survey finds that women artists make up less than 20% of those artists currently being exhibited in major galleries around Perth. This raises interesting questions as to why this is the case.

Female artists are often subjected to gender based readings of their artwork such as 'feminine' or 'feminist', which serve as a way of dismissing the importance of their work. New York artists collective Guerrilla Girls addressed the notion of reception, and how women's art is viewed with their 1988 poster *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* (fig.1). With the use of satire the Girls state on the poster *The Advantage of Being a Woman Artist: Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labelled feminine* (Guerrilla Girls, 1988). Labelling work feminine involves similar implications as work labelled feminist – both can be seen as negative, which in turn can be seen to render the work of women artists ineffectual.

I would suggest that the unpopular position of feminism places not only feminist, but female arts practitioners in a position of having little market value, and consequently affects the showing of those works. The dissertation will explore these notions, and will look at ways of 're-visiting' the site of feminism in order to address and possibly reinvigorate its position within a contemporary western² context.

¹ The Guerrilla Girls wear gorilla masks and stage protests both live and through printed material that target the imbalance in the ratio of men to women within art institutions, their catch cry is "Fighting discrimination with facts, humour and fake fur." Their methods for surveying the institutions they target are 'unofficial', and involve the members simply going around the galleries and doing a count of male and female artists on show, they then act upon their findings (Guerrilla Girls, 1988). Whilst this reference would appear dated the Guerrilla Girls are currently active and continue to fight discrimination with facts, fun and fur.

² For this essay I use the term 'western' and am referring specifically to the English speaking countries of the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, with particular focus on Australia.

THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST:

Working without the pressure of success
Not having to be in shows with men
Having an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs
Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty
Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminine
Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position
Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others
Having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood
Not having to choke on those big cigars or paint in Italian suits
Having more time to work when your mate dumps you for someone younger
Being included in revised versions of art history
Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius
Getting your picture in the art magazines wearing a gorilla suit

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM **GUERRILLA GIRLS** CONSEQUENCE OF THE ART WORLD
WWW.GUERRILLAGIRLS.COM

Fig.1 Guerrilla Girls, *The Advantage of Being a Woman Artist*, 1988, digital print

Starting with an investigation into the 'shock' of an unexpected feminist reception of my work, I will look at how feminism is positioned within contemporary popular culture as a 'dirty word'. The dissertation will explore the mechanisms at work that created the unpopular position of feminism and consequently the 'shock' of that unexpected feminist reception. I will look at what the basic tenets of the feminist movement are, and the myths that exist around feminism and feminists that prevent younger generations of women from recognising the importance of the feminist movement, with particular reference to the writings of Virginia Trioli, Chilla Bulbeck, and Susan Maushart.

I will then discuss how the current unpopular position of feminism has far-reaching effects that result in a continuation of the history of unbalanced gendered power relations, particularly within the gallery, referencing the writings of Griselda Pollock, Katy Deepwell and Chilla Bulbeck. I will discuss the idea of 'post-feminism' promoting feminism's position as 'passé' and without value, and establish what feminism is within a

contemporary context in order to assess its current value as a movement, and to further assess whether we are in the 'post-feminist' stage of the debate or not.

There will be a discussion on the intentions of my artwork, as I embrace my practice as feminist and explore notions of femininity, addressing historical paradigms of the placement of women through history as mother, prostitute and feminist. How do contemporary views on feminism position those artists who like me, are labelled or have chosen to operate as a feminist practitioner and how does it then affect the reading of their work? The writing also looks at how group action is a possibility in combating the negative position of feminism, with reference to the artist collective the Guerrilla Girls, as well as strategies for the individual practitioner like myself. I will be referring to the writings of French feminist and theorist Luce Irigaray and exploring the work of other feminist arts practitioners such as Vanessa Beecroft, Linda Sproul and Kikki Smith in relation to my own practice.

The issue of unexpectedly being labelled a feminist arts practitioner raises the question of what makes a work feminist. Amelia Jones feels that 'she' the artist must be aware of intentionality versus perception³ (cited in Fuller, & Salvioni, 2002, p. 174). I will explore notions of reception and how intentionality becomes essential. And finally, how do we address the findings?

³ Perception is how the work is received and viewed.

Why am I such a bad feminist?

During a solo exhibition at Free Range Studios and Gallery in Subiaco (Fig. 2), a woman approached me and stated; “It seems to me that you are communicating within a strong feminist context.” I was stunned. My internal dialogue was screaming; “ME? FEMINIST?” I had made a huge leap; ‘communicating within the context’ became ‘being’ feminist, and not only did I feel fraudulent, I was pretty sure that ‘being feminist’ wasn’t good. I found myself flinching at the word. As I fumbled awkwardly through the conversation, wracked by self doubt⁴, I decided that if I was a feminist, I was a bad one. I say bad feminist because of my embarrassment at the idea of being a feminist.



Fig.2 Brooke Zeligman, *Vitro* and *Bastard Child*, 2004, glass and mixed media

At the time of this exhibition my practice centred upon communicating my experiences whilst considering childbearing as an option instead of an obligation – I was using the ‘personal as political’, which communicated an obviously female perspective, but historically, it also located me within a feminist context⁵. Still, I struggled with the

⁴Self doubt or ‘radical doubt’ is a “pervasive feature of modern critical reason... as well as philosophical consciousness” (Giddens, 1991, p. 17). And “...is an action-system, a mode of praxis, ... its practical immersion in the interactions of day-to-day life is an essential part of the sustaining of a coherent sense of self-identity” (ibid, p. 99).

⁵ The ‘personal is [as] political’ was considered a catch cry for the second wave feminists of the 1960s and 70s. Peggy Phelan discusses the notion of the ‘personal is political’ and how it helped to establish the

feminist label; the work was deliberately ambiguous and had been made so in order to avoid the label of ‘women’s work’ and not be construed as feminine or essentialised as ‘woman pining for child’ and even though my intention had not been to communicate within this context, it was seemingly unavoidable.



Fig. 3 Brooke Zeligman, *bad feminist*, 2004, decal printed t-shirt

The phrase ‘bad feminist’ was born; it became my catch phrase. It was an attempt at verbalising my struggle with the idea of being feminist and was meant as a play on how feminism is positioned as a ‘dirty word’. I printed t-shirts with *bad feminist* emblazoned across the chest and wore them proudly, and decided that I would position myself as feminist – even if I wasn’t a very good one.⁶

As Anthony Giddens (1991, 19) states; “Self-identity becomes a reflexively organised endeavour”, and whilst I struggled with the initial choice of being feminist, having to decide between the alternatives was essential⁷. The resulting investigations into that

politics of everyday life and became an important mechanism for the feminist artists of the time, in the essay *Feminism & Art (9 views) – Panel Discussion* (cited in Nochlin, 2003, p. 12).

⁶ This was an attempt at humour but also an embracing of being feminist. However, the constant misreading of the slogan by people on the street soon became more of a frustration. Often it was read with a sexual connotation – i.e. I was promiscuous, or, and I found this reaction fascinating, it seemed as if people managed to invert the position of the text and read it as ‘Feminist – Bad!’ and I would get comments such as “I better get out of your way then!”. The t-shirts played on popular cultures current commodity fetishism, and the unsophisticated clutter of sentimental products culture industries produce, whilst still trying to maintain a critical form that might lead people to actually questioning the idea of feminists being positioned as bad, and referenced the ideas of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer in, ‘The Culture Industry’, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

⁷ In being presented with an opinion of being seen as operating ‘within a feminist context’ I then had a choice to either position myself as feminist in that I was operating within the feminist context, or as not

feminist reception then raised questions of intentionality – just what was my purpose, as artist? And what were my intentions for my art? To actively label myself as 'contemporary feminist practitioner' became a pivotal step within my practice. It was a very conscious “reflexive project of the self” (ibid) that created an ownership of my work I had previously lacked.

The ready acceptance of myself as contemporary feminist practitioner then raised issues of homogeneity. There was already the common assumption⁸ that I was feminist - because of my gender, I found myself neatly bundled up into a binary position of ‘us and them’. There is a history of women artists being seen as “a direct extension of their gender”⁹ (Molesworth, 1998, p. 86). The dismissive comment of ‘it’s just women’s work’, it’s a ‘feminist work’, or it’s a ‘feminine work’ all seemed to be ways of undermining the value of not only my own work, but other female practitioners. In many ways being seen as a feminist artist is comforting, as it provides a sense of belonging and community - yet it’s also problematic - as it seems to involve a dismissal of importance, and it raises questions of why this is the case? How exactly is my gender, and feminism positioned? And how does that then impact upon my work? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to understand the mechanisms at work that set up that shock reaction to the ‘F’ word.

feminist and not operating within that context. Giddens states that “deciding between alternatives is not itself an option but an inherent element of the construction of self-identity” (Giddens, 1991, p. 178).

⁸ When I use the term ‘common assumption’ I refer to the shared experiences between myself and my contemporaries of how we found ourselves positioned within our field.

⁹ Griselda Pollock discusses in detail the tradition of ‘gender based readings’ in art, in her book *Vision and Difference*. The central issue with women’s art being seen as an extension of their gender is that it limits both the art and the artist. “Gender based readings means limiting the artist to what is projected onto her as her female gender from which derive (circumscribed) meanings in the artwork” (Pollock, 2003, p. xxvi).

Reacting badly to the 'F' word.

Feminism has a negative image within western contemporary popular culture¹⁰. The mere mention of the word can bring to mind thoughts of left wing extremism - embraced by stereotyped images of hairy arm-pitted, man-hating, bra-burning lesbians.

How many men does it take to wallpaper a feminist's bedroom?

It all depends on how thinly you slice them.

Jokes like these ridicule and demonstrate how feminists can be positioned as aggressive man haters. This image is extremely detrimental to feminism, encouraging the pointless stereotypes above and is misrepresentative of what feminism stands for, yet it unfortunately reflects a populist attitude.

Australian academic, Professor Chilla Bulbeck (2005, p. 65), head of Women's Studies at the University of Adelaide writes;

It has become a truism of women's studies that feminism is a dirty word.¹¹ Indeed, more and more people ... believe that the earth has been contacted by aliens than believe that the term feminist is a compliment¹².... The feminist that is rejected is the image of the ball-breaking, man-hating, victim feminist.

In terms of attitudes towards feminism young Australians appear to be no different. They too have been seduced by the prevailing stereotype: when young Australian women were asked if they would consider themselves to be feminists, "a little less than seventy percent

¹⁰ By popular culture I am referring to the people's culture that is in large influenced by industries of mediation such as film, television, and publishing, as well as the news media. My focus is on the attitudes of the Australian people's culture, which is shaped by, and reflected in, various mass media.

¹¹ Surveys consistently report that feminists are popularly understood as man-hating, lesbian, boiler-suited, fat and ugly: the 224 women of 'middle Australia' in Barbara Riley-Smith, "The Women's View: Market Research Study on Women's Perceptions of Themselves and Government Programs and Policies" (Office of the Status of Women, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet) Canberra, 1992, p. 48: Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism* (Little, Brown and Company) London, 1998, p.36 (Bulbeck, 2005, p. 74).

¹² While 27 per cent of people in the United States of America believe the earth has been contacted by aliens (a Gallop poll in 1990), only 18 per cent believe that 'feminist' is a compliment (a Time/CNN poll in 1990): Jodi Dean, 'Coming Out as an Alien: Feminists, UFO's, and the "Oprah effect"' in Nan Bauer Maglin and Donna Perry (eds), *Bad Girls/Good Girls': Women, Sex and Power in the Nineties* (Rutgers University Press) New Brunswick, NJ, 1996, pp. 101, 105 (Bulbeck, 2005, p. 74).

of the sample [polled] said they ‘would not call themselves feminist’¹³ (Trioli, 1996, p. 49). The ages of the women surveyed were between eighteen and thirty years, women who had grown up with the fruits of feminism’s early labours, the kind of equal opportunities that their mothers only dreamed of, and yet the majority of these young women thought feminism not only ‘irrelevant, but odious’ (ibid).

This is particularly worrying when considering that the feminist movement is a movement for women, by women. A movement that has strived for the rights of women since the suffragettes, the first wave feminists of the 1920s who broke through the barriers of their time to speak in public, to demand property and parental rights¹⁴, and to claim a stronger political voice. Then came the second wave feminists of the 1960s, who founded feminist organizations and raised the consciousness of women and men, focusing on winning pay equity for women, access to jobs and education, recognition of women's unpaid labour in the home, and a rebalancing of the double workload of family and outside work for women in the paid labour force. Third wave feminists looked for greater integration of women into politics, economics, and social forums. In spite of this, all the determination, effort and awareness raising seems to be viewed in an unflattering light, and now we have ‘post-feminism’¹⁵, which assumes that the imbalance of these issues has been addressed.

That young women view feminism as odious indicates the extent of feminism’s negative image. Ironically, these same women, who do not want to position themselves as feminist, also feel that women deserve equality but are ‘not getting a fair go’ (Trioli, 1996, p. 50). Surely this alone should be cause enough to embrace a pro feminist stance? Chilla Bulbeck (2005, p. 65) states that: “The ‘I’m not feminist, but...’ tag denotes that while

¹³ 1994, AGB McNair poll found in Virginia Trioli’s *Generation F: Sex, Power and The Young Feminist* (Trioli, 1996, p. 49).

¹⁴ In Australia women were not seen as equal legal guardians of their own children until 1934 (Lake, 1999, p. 86).

¹⁵ Post-feminism is an anti-essentialist philosophy, opposing simple binary oppositions such as man/woman in the hope of exploring or finding new subject positions for women outside of the mother/whore dichotomy and is in this respect linked to postmodernism.

The term refers to the ways in which the boundaries between feminists and non-feminists have become increasingly blurred. This is partly due to the success of feminism in addressing gender inequality to the point where it is no longer the preserve of a minority group, but rather, has become a staple concern of mainstream culture (Wikipedia, 2005).

some women reject the label feminist they do endorse many of the political struggles and goals of the women's movement".

My own initial reaction to the 'dirty word' was a common one. And yet what was problematic to this reaction was that whilst I, like the majority of young Australian women, do have a profound and unshakable belief in the tenets of feminism, (such as 'getting a fair go' with pay equity and the sharing of unpaid labour within the domestic arena) I found the stereotype carrying tag (Trioli, 1996, p. 50) almost unbearable, and the idea for *Bad Feminist* evolved from that position.

The generation in the above mentioned survey is my own; I was 24 when this survey was conducted, and it reveals a demoralising contradiction that needs further investigation as to why it exists. Recent surveys conducted by Chilla Bulbeck¹⁶ and Barbara Pocock¹⁷ indicate that these attitudes are ongoing. It seems important to state here that the idea of the word 'feminist' as insult is, in itself, insulting. I am none of those stereotyped things. The feminists I know are proud, peaceful, man-loving (and women-loving) women. The stereotype of the 'radical feminist' is a false one, which, 'understandably, dissuades women from having anything to do with the movement' (Trioli, 1996, p. 51). This stereotype is a myth - the 'myth of the rampant radical feminist' (ibid, p.68) and has evolved from existing within a heavily mediated¹⁸ position to becoming accepted as reality. Looking at the mechanisms that have created, and continue to create the myth is important in understanding how it has developed.

¹⁶ Bulbeck (2005, p.65) "obtained an Australian Research Council grant to support a survey of young South Australians concerning their attitudes to feminism and gender issues. [Securing] a sample of 380 young South Australians and 130 of their parents between 2000 and 2003." Found in "Women Are Exploited Way Too Often": Feminist Rhetoric's at the End of Equality' in *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol.20, No. 46, March 2005, p. 65.

¹⁷ Survey results found in Barbara Pocock: 'Youthful Aspirations Meet Unbending Cultures? How young Australians Plan to Organise Their Jobs, Care and Housework', in *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol.20, No. 46, March 2005, p. 91.

¹⁸ Subject to industries, that disseminate cultural material, for example the film, television, and publishing industries, as well as the news media such as those that I have cited in previous chapters.

Are you a boiler suited ball breaker?

The 'myth of the radical feminist' is a powerful tool that undermines the importance of feminism (Trioli, 1996, p. 68).

The 'rad/fem' is becoming synonymous with feminism – ... and the slippage between the terms is fast and loose. The term [feminist] has been imbued with such terror that it can be used to demolish the credibility of a target¹⁹, and it has reduced much of the otherwise important debate about contemporary feminism to meaningless epithet.

This undermining of the importance of the feminist struggle renders the feminist rhetoric as powerless within popular culture.

Local Perth writer Susan Maushart (2005, p. 25) summarises the popular belief that feminists and consequently feminism are to be avoided when she writes:

Feminism ...has been afflicted...[with] po-faced suspicion of pleasure for its own sake. And the perception that feminists are not particularly happy people – and, even worse, do not entirely approve of happiness – has resulted in a backlashparticularly among young people.

In conversations with my contemporaries²⁰ I find the reaction of educated, reflexive individuals to the word feminist to be a negative one. A belief that has been promulgated by opinions put forth within the media. Suggesting that the work of my contemporaries could be read in a feminist context begets the exact same reaction as mine, one of horror. The unpopular position of feminism reaches far and wide.

In *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, in which Susan Maushart (2005, p. 24) comments: ...the notion of a 'happy feminist' is vaguely oxymoronic. Feminists are supposed to be people who specialise in outrage. Almost by definition, a feminist is someone who is dissatisfied with life as we know it – who has a knack for stirring things up, is written for a particular Australian hegemonic: predominantly white, upper-middle class and

¹⁹ There are countless examples of the mediated image of the radical feminist being used as a tool to disrupt the feminist argument, for detailed discussion of this see chapter 2 in Trioli's *Generation F: Sex, Power and the Young Feminist*.

²⁰ Fellow female arts students.

predominantly conservative. This hegemony, which Bulbeck (2005, p.73) describes as 'neo-liberal', is that which Maushart writes from.

Australian writer Helen Garner accused feminists of "a determination to cling to victimhood at any cost" (cited in Trioli, 1996, p. 31). Maushart (2005, p. 31) continues to refer to this view within *What Women Want Next*, and writes: "Feminism has encouraged a victim mentality". When viewing sources such as Maushart's writing, the news media, and sitcoms such as *Everybody loves Raymond* - which portrays domestic labour as a purely female role, and any attempt to paint it otherwise by the harrowed and winging, quasi-feminist female characters as humorously²¹ ludicrous, we see examples of how ingrained the 'myth of the rad/fem' is within popular culture.

Maushart (2005, p.26) raises the question of whether feminism failed in providing what it promised, and questions if that promise was one of happiness. Citing factors such as high divorce rates, low birth rates²² and even a lack of intimacy within relationships, Maushart (ibid, p.30) suggests that feminism has inadvertently paid a social toll – she points out that the price of feminism has been perceived as an eternity of belly-aching²³.

Western women have benefited greatly from feminism's early struggles. Maushart, as stated, writes from within a privileged socioeconomic group that could be said to have benefited the most from feminism, but unfortunately does seem to neglect women and feminism outside of that privileged neo-liberal position. Maushart opts for the 'that was

²¹ I would have to say humourlessly, and point out that I find even the mere title of this sitcom offensive, however, what I am attempting to do here is give mediated examples of feminism within popular culture from two different perspectives, one that appeals to the 'neo-liberal', conservative hegemonic – *The Australian*, and another that reaches a larger audience again – *Everybody loves Raymond*

²² A recent study suggests that whilst difficulties do arise within the domestic arena as a result of gender differences and preconceived notions of domestic responsibility between men and women, the declining birth-rate has more to do with the 'gap in fertility plans of young Australians and their likely experience in the future' and in "uncertainties about security, financial stability, and quality of life" (Pocock, 2005, p. 106). Giddens (1991, p. 19) also notes that feminism has impacted upon birth rates; "Certainly the destabilisation of the traditional family unit, a product of modernity via factors including globalisation, Diaspora and feminism are major influences in this trend", but does not attribute it as the only factor.

²³ It is precisely this stereotyped 'bellyaching' which is portrayed within *Everybody loves Raymond* as supposedly humorous, that is effectively rendering ineffective the underlying protest at unequal gendered power relations within the domestic sphere.

then this is now' position of 'post-feminism,' a term that is extremely problematic and one that I will discuss further in the next chapter.

Dr Anne Summers²⁴ wonders why this contemporary generation of feminists seem so inarticulate (cited in Trioli, 1996, p. 28)? Perhaps one reason is that feminism's unflattering image acts as a silencer; who, after all, wants to put themselves on the firing line only to be viewed, now, and as Maushart notes via the young people's 'backlash', more than ever before, in an extremely unflattering light? Or, given that there are such journals as the *Australian Feminist Studies*, in which active discussion continues within and on feminist issues, that it is popular culture that silences the feminist voice. One thing seems certain; the unpopular position of feminism within popular culture is evident, with far reaching-effects. My own reaction to being called a feminist is a good example of the widely accepted, mediated view of feminism which is the myth of the boiler suited 'rad/fem'.

²⁴ Anne Summers was a prominent feminist in the 'second wave' feminism of the 60s. She continues to be a prominent advocate for women's rights. Her recent book *The End of Equality: Work, Babies and Women's Choices in 21st Century Australia* (Random House Australia, 2003) asserts that although much might have changed in the last 20-odd years and some high-flying women have managed to make some decent cracks in the so-called glass ceiling, for other women, not a lot has changed.

Maybe you are a Goddess or a Cyborg feminist?

(A liberal humanist feminist; a socialist feminist; a Marxist feminist; a post-Marxist feminist ; a radical feminist; a lesbian separatist feminist; a right-wing or a reactionary feminist; a post-feminist feminist; a postmodern feminist; a feminist postmodernist; or a modernist feminist postmodernist?)

Katy Deepwell (1999)

“Why do you use the word ‘feminist’? Don’t you think its passé? I worry that it’s a label which is putting off lots of people, especially men” (Deepwell, 1999). These were questions asked of Katy Deepwell, English feminist, academic and writer, by one of her students, questions that had been asked of her with disturbing regularity. These questions are an excellent example of how the mediated stereotyping of feminism is affecting the perspectives of young women throughout western culture, and are then carried into the institution of academia.

In Bulbeck’s survey found in “Women Are Exploited Way Too Often: Feminist Rhetoric at the End of Equality”, a sample of first year Australian university students was included, in which the views appeared to be similar to those of Deepwell’s students in the United Kingdom. These young women (and men), had fallen prey to the ‘myth of the rad/fem’: they embraced the tenets of feminism yet they did not want to associate themselves with the word (Bulbeck, 2005, p. 65). Deepwell (1999) sees it as a very disturbing:

reflection of what students are now receiving as ‘accepted wisdom’ about feminism ... i.e. a total acceptance of the stereotyping of feminists as man-haters; the active discouragement or wholesale dismissal of feminist research as without value, ... and the use of stigmatism as a reason for dismissing or discouraging enquiry into some very basic questions about their own position and the general position of women .

And it is clearly a position that needs to be addressed, not only outside of the institutions of academia where it is well ingrained but also within. It was, after all, academia that spawned the term ‘post-feminism’ and possibly terrifies young women with the abundance of feminisms available.

'Post-feminism' carries with it the assumption that gender inequality, the central concern of second wave feminism, is no longer an issue and sees the 'rejection of the feminist label' (Soccio, 1999) by young women. Outside of the institutions of academia 'post-feminism' promotes the individual rather than the group, debasing any form of collective power, and the individual is encouraged to embrace femininity "which has become associated with purchasing power" (Bulbeck, 2005, p. 66). Young women are encouraged to "articulate an aggressive sense of their sexuality, alongside an ironic and nostalgic sense of child-like femininity" (Soccio, 1999). These together contradict principles of earlier, 'second wave' feminism (ibid) which fought against the position of woman as object.

"Dainty handbags, satin, lace, silk, frills and sequins" and "long glossy hair" are the prescribed uniform for 'girlie power' which supposedly combine "femininity (girlie) and feminism (power)" (Bulbeck, 2005, p. 66). Yet patriarchy has a history of trivializing femininity: "the pre-feminist is trapped in femininity; the feminist rejects femininity. In contrast to these limited understandings, the 'post-feminist girlie' ... chooses to 'do femininity' although the femininity they [the post-feminist girlies] choose to do is almost exclusively a performance of commodity feminism" (ibid) and carries with it little power. The use of 'post-feminism' assumes that there is no longer an imbalance in gendered power relations. It was originally a term that was designed as an affirmation of the success of feminism and yet Maushart demonstrates how the term can be seen as a critique – i.e. in this 'post-feminist' world feminism has failed to bring happiness, and feminists are 'belly-aching victims', which, as previously stated, undermines the successes of feminism.

Lisa Soccio (1999) in her essay *From Girl to Woman to Grrrl: (Sub)Cultural Intervention and Political Activism in the Time of Post-Feminism*, finds the term 'post-feminism' embraces a 'liberal equality fallacy'²⁵ and in relation to the current unpopular status of feminism, finds within 'post-feminism' a 'disavowal of feminism'. Certainly Maushart illustrates this 'liberal equality fallacy' with her use of 'post-feminism' from within the

²⁵ The liberal equality fallacy assumes that within the western, free thinking world, women have achieved equality.

'neo-liberal' hegemonic when she adopts the position of critique of feminism. "Even the conservative Australian Prime Minister John Howard claims that 'we are in the post-feminist stage of the debate...Of course women are as good as men'²⁶" (cited in Bulbeck, 2005, p. 65). Surely this is the perfect example of the 'liberal equality fallacy', by using the term 'post-feminist' in such a simplistic, placatory way to suggest that we have achieved total gendered equality.

Australian academic, Barbara Pocock (2005, p. 91) sees 'post-feminism' as a "cloaking discourse of 'pseudo-mutuality' that clouds a true assessment", of feminism's impact and at best 'defers' the promises of second wave feminism (cited in Socio, 1999):

In *Feminism Without Women*, Tania Modleski describes post-feminism as a decidedly conservative and reactionary phenomenon in which both popular culture and cultural criticism assume that the goals of feminism have been attained ... This assumption is at the very least premature, and its pronouncement in academic and popular texts actually undermines the goals of feminism.

Bulbeck's (2005, p. 73) gender studies students often point out to her that in Australia, women are not forced to wear veils, or be confined to the home, neither are they "visibly oppressed by lack of educational opportunities or [the] denial of political rights". The underlying position here is that feminism has achieved its goals and is no longer needed. However, as Bulbeck is quick to state the "violence against women persists, perhaps at higher levels in a backlash against women's expanded choices"²⁷ (ibid). Points like these indicate that we are yet to reach the 'post-feminist stage of the debate.'

It seems essential to establish just what feminism is, in light of the unflattering name calling and confused status. Deepwell believes that: "Feminism is not a fashion item, a fad which can pass and become 'passé' ...it's a politics. It requires thought, engagement, critical reflectiveness and self-consciousness, as well as active enquiry and its central subject remains the situation of half the world's population" (Deepwell, 1999).

²⁶ Considering Howard's ultra conservative 'family first' stance I find his use of 'post-feminism' extremely disturbing.

²⁷ The Guerilla Girls 1992 poster "If you are raped, you might as well 'relax and enjoy it', because no one will believe you" (Guerilla Girls, 1992), provides a powerful commentary on the ongoing issue of violence against women and its lack of priority within the judicial system.

The question of what feminism is is an interesting one and it can be said to be many things for many people. Feminism is a diverse collection of social theories, political movements, and moral philosophies, largely motivated by or concerning the experiences of women, especially in terms of their social, political, and economic situation. As a social movement, feminism largely focuses on limiting or eradicating gender inequality and promoting women's rights, interests, and issues in society. What is absolute is that feminism is a political movement, and whilst there are many 'isms' within the movement itself, it is essentially a movement that is for women, by women, and is concerned with the inequality of power that lies between genders.

Trioli too believes that feminism 'incorporates a wide spectrum of thinking and action' and is 'a philosophical and political ethos' that goes far beyond its negative stereotyping (Trioli, 1996, p.9). However, what this negative image does, is that it results in feminism "being overlooked and ignored as non-essential, not worth investing in, [and seen as] an area which has minimal market value. [That denies] just how far feminism has come and what its achievements are" (Deepwell, 1999). I would then suggest that the idea of 'post-feminism' strengthens the unfavourable position that feminists hold within contemporary popular culture and relegates the movement to the annals of history.

Understanding the mechanisms at work that created the 'myth of the radical feminist' and more importantly, understanding what feminism is – outside of its bad image and 'post' status –, was important for my practice. "[My] generation ... can now experience feminism as something its founders never could: a historical continuity, flowing from one generation to the next, always adaptable to the needs and strengths of a new wave of the curious and the bold" (Nochlin, 2003, p. 146). And I call for feminism not to be viewed in terms of 'post' or divided up into types, but to be embraced for what it is - a politics for women, by women, that promotes equality.

Establishing an understanding of feminism led me to question my intentions as a female practitioner. I had chosen to position myself, and my work as feminist, but did I want to be

held accountable for my gender, particularly when “the prospect of being a feminist constitutes a politics of identity that includes occupying contradictory positions in relation to feminism, academia, cultural production, and generational politics”? (Soccio, 1999) And why does being positioned as feminist as a female arts practitioner, seem like something that was so unavoidable? As Deepwell states; “This problem of misunderstanding and just plain ignorance is not going to go away. Such misunderstandings remain to be addressed, we can’t simply sweep them under the carpet and pretend they don’t exist as we pursue our own vision of ourselves and our creative labours” (Deepwell, 1996).

I speak as a woman

(not for women)

When the gender-free desire doesn't match the reality, and when that desired state appears to be denied precisely because of your gender, sex clearly becomes everything.

Virginia Trioli (1996, p. 62)



Fig. 4 Brooke Zeligman, *Body Armor(e)*, 2001, recycled tin.

After my initial 'shock', an overview of my work revealed that I had always dealt with the questions that revolve around the feminine²⁸ and consequently, feminist, from early works like *Body Armor(e)* (fig. 4), to a later focus on issues of motherhood and how they pertain to the feminine ideal. My original objective for the year was to cast a child's high chair in glass. The project was a continuation of earlier work (fig. 5), and had arisen out of personal struggles with the decision to have, or not to have children. Child-bearing and rearing are central to a woman's position and identity within contemporary society. For those who choose not to bear a child this can become very problematic and it raises

²⁸ There are two central questions when assessing if a work is feminist or not; "firstly that of author-ship and intentionality, and secondly that of feminism in relation to female subjectivity" or the feminine (Kuhn, 1982, p. 9).

questions of how one is then positioned in terms of the feminine ideal²⁹. However, what became more pertinent was exploring notions of femininity and feminism outside of motherhood and ways of communicating within an obviously feminist context. If my art was to be read as a direct extension of my gender, and to be subjugated to the 'gender based reading' then my gender and its position is what my work would become about.



Fig. 5 Brooke Zeligman, *Childlessness*, 2004, glass and mixed media, dimensions variable.

Laura Mulvey states; “[to take] a feminist stance - often considered subjective or emotional - encourages interest in, identification with, and nurturing of awareness. ... to adopt a feminist stance is to refuse to "dis" one's interest and to acknowledge and even encourage an interested approach” (cited in Zeglin Brand & Korsmeyer, 1995, p. 245). My intention was to make my feminist position within my practice clear, with an aim of promoting a feminist awareness. Amelia Jones believes that “intentionality is one of the most important methodological issues” (cited in Fuller & Salvioni, 2002, p.163) and

²⁹ A very recent discussion of this was widely published in newspapers in an article by Laura Thompson - “Please, let me be childless in peace,” in which she discusses the still seemingly controversial position of being a woman leaving her childbearing years childless, and how ‘mother love still holds an iconic position within western culture’ (Thompson, 2005) and is promoted as central to the feminine ideal.

becomes central within a feminist arts practice. The arts practitioner 'must be aware of how the work is to be received and not just focus on what she is doing' (ibid).

This exploration into communicating within an obvious feminist context started with a series of performances entitled *bare*. Notions of the mediated commodification and fetishisation of the female body were addressed through performance. *bare* sits comfortably within the realms of feminist work, and references the installation performance works of Italian artist, Vanessa Beecroft, the performance work of Australian artist Linda Sproul, and American feminist arts collective the Guerrilla Girls.

The *bare* performances are time based. The notion of time becomes an important recurring theme within my body of work, whether it is in a sense of nostalgia and referencing the traditions of the past with lace and filigree, or in a museological sense which embraces the idea of the preservation of the past, through the containing of imagery in glass. I will expand upon these points later. There was a week between each of the three *bare* performances, the time passing in consideration of feminism's linear development from 'first wave feminism' to 'post-feminism,' (on a more personal note, it also references my own journey as a woman when struggling with body issues and acceptance).

Feminist writer Julia Kristeva, notes that "in its beginnings, the women's movement... aspired to gain a place in linear time as the time of project and history" (Kristeva, 1986, p. 193). Feminism has achieved that place within linear time in terms of generations of women 'growing up with feminism', as well as the four linear stages of feminism³⁰. Beecroft also uses a time based practice with her installation performance by numbering the performances consecutively (fig. 6).

³⁰ From first, second and third wave feminism to post-feminism.



Fig. 6 Vanessa Beecroft, *VB46*, 2001, Vibracolor print, 88.9 x 63.5 cm

bare was a collaborative work between myself and three performers³¹ who have shared, lived experience as women, and share a common interest in the position of women. However unlike Beecroft, who uses extremely beautiful, thin models who represent such a tiny portion of the population, the women performing in *bare* are what is commonly termed ‘real women’. As Trioli (1996, p. 241) states; “THE PERUSAL OF A BEAUTIFUL WOMAN GETS YOU NOWHERE ...it is meaningless”, because disappointingly, we see mediated images of such women everywhere and they are unrealistic portrayals of what women are.

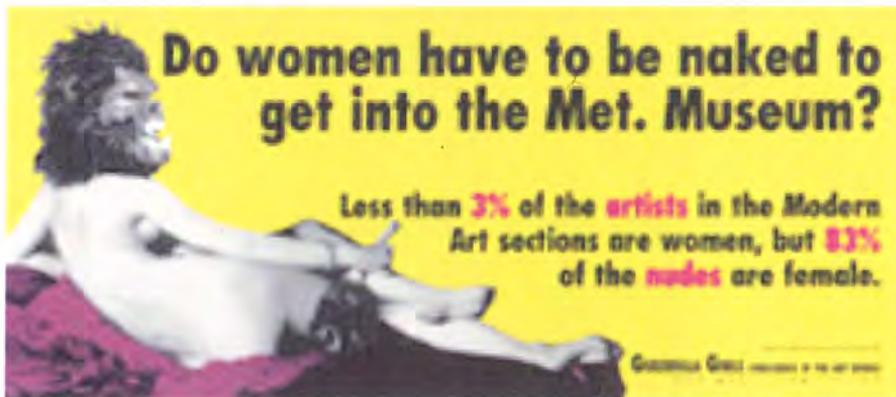


Fig. 7 Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women have to be Naked to get into the Met Museum?* 1989, digital print

Within contemporary culture it seems that protest is readily absorbed, and that collective political protest should even be shunned (Deepwell, 1996). I would suggest that the protest

³¹ The *bare* performers are Tarsh Bates, Claire Canham and Emma Peterson.

in Beecroft's performances (through confrontation between the nude performers and the audience in order to question the mediated obsession with the female body and the stereotypes of the female body as sex object) is readily absorbed because of the heavily mediated imagery of beautiful women that Beecroft uses. Creating work that is, in itself a protest, such as *bare* carries with it the challenge to be collectively proactive and navigate around the absorption and shunning of political protest. *bare* aimed to create a shared experience with the audience that would result in a critical dialogue of the issues addressed, much like the tactics of the Guerrilla Girls (fig. 7) and their collectively proactive stance. This was set up by inviting the viewers into a forced social situation, in which there is food and wine and conversation between audience members, whilst amongst them are the naked blindfolded or gagged performers.



Fig. 8 Linda Sproul, *Listen*, 1993, performance at Linden Gallery St Kilda

Linda Sproul's performance, *Listen*, in which Sproul "uses the theatrical imagery of sadomasochism and fetishisation to expose the more sinister side of being a woman" (King, 1994, p. 60), was a reference point for the idea of the blindfold and gag as they play important roles within sadomasochism; they are tools of domination and submission

and place the wearer in a situation of vulnerability and bondage. I would suggest that Linda Sproul's performance inadvertently eroticised the narrative of domination and in turn the violence that results. Holding a torch to the bruised and naked flesh (fig. 8) to view it at close range is highly problematic – the viewers become voyeurs, the perusers of the signs of domestic violence and as such become complicit with the act. There is no action taken, it is a mere inspection, like an act of window shopping, and consequently it does not address the gendered power relation that allows the abuse to exist in the first place. How do we then address issues of domination such as domestic violence without propagating the language? *bare* attempts to shock the viewers out of their complacency with the imagery and language that are being presented, with techniques that are designed to rupture the narrative and catch the viewers when they are at their most comfortable.



Fig. 9 *bare*, *Just Browsing*, 2005, performance at Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts

The *bare* performers were subjected to the perusal of the gaze³², to which their response is limited, from lack of sight but also from lack of voice. By remaining mute, and responding with a turn of the head to gaze blandly back at the audience member, the performers mimed their complicity with the act of being selected. However, the blind, mute stare carried with it an accusation and the mime negated that complicity³³. Their mute stance was shattered when an audience member took it upon themselves to breach unspoken boundaries by an unwanted touch.

Within *bare* the unwanted touch brings into question the subjectivity of the performance - the ownership of the body, which is answered by the touched performer keening for a loss or reacting to the audience member by grabbing them in turn. Keening not only references the Sirens of mythology but also the sex siren of commodified culture which has replaced the Sirens of history (Robson, 2004, p. 29). The keening is not just an act of mourning but also an act of empowerment for "women have found considerable cultural power and authority in managing the communal emotions surrounding death, ...[as it has been] one of the few leadership positions available to women in patriarchal societies" (ibid, p. 36).

Within both the performance and history (ibid, p. 42);

The vocality of the Siren [keener],...is thus dangerous, unbearable,...transgressive [,] because it does not seek to cover or symbolise trauma but rather, in its all-consuming excess and presence, admits it, confronts it, and attempts to bind one to it.... [By] binding to the experience, the pain, and the suffering ...she finds meaning.

And the viewers were equally bound to the transgression of the unwanted touch and consequent loss of ownership with their shared experience of the performance.

³² Laura Mulvey identifies the action of *possessing* a gaze as being intrinsically male (the "male gaze"), and identifies the action of being gazed upon with the female. A discussion of which can be found in Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. This harks back to binaries of male/active, female/passive. (Mulvey, 1975, p. 6)

³³"Femininity is displayed as a façade behind which the 'real' is endlessly displaced. Subjectivity has no central meaning... it cannot exist except as surface, as a series of staged identities in which gender itself becomes the performance. To mime suggests at once an intimate knowledge of ways of femininity and yet a critical distance which allows it to be seen as a construct. Elizabeth Gross suggests that: To mime is not merely a passive reproduction, but an active process of reinscribing and recontextualising the mimicked 'object'. It is to position oneself both within and outside the system duplicated to produce something quite other than and autonomous from it, using recognisable actions for new purposes" (Betterton, 1996, p. 98).

Artist Drusilla Modjeska asks: "To find a voice. What does it mean? What does it mean when a woman finds her voice? And when she finds it, what then"(cited in White, 1994, p. 31)? Keening and mourning for the various spoken and unspoken transgressions against women was one way of answering those questions, it was emotive and powerful and still managed to operate outside of language. French theorist Luce Irigaray insists "that language usage both constitutes, and perpetuates, sexual inequality" (Holmlund, 1991, p. 283), in that language has constructed the binary terms of man/woman and woman is positioned as other, so the performers are not only being silenced by the position of women but also by how their gender is constructed within language.

Shock played an important role within these two performances. They were designed to create critical dialogue between audience members without alienating them. In earlier feminist performance the exploration of the body as a site involved acts that would use explicit sexuality or bodily fluids, known as cunt art. They were designed to disrupt normative assumptions of gender difference; however they were quite problematic as the explicit nature of the works tended to alienate the unsuspecting viewer. *bare* took a less explicit route but the intention was to rupture normative assumptions. Upon reflection I feel the first two performances were quite successful, while unfortunately the third performance lacked impact. This was the least confrontational of the three performances and it did not fulfil my intentions; instead it seemed to invoke a position of 'post-feminism' with its simplistic, politically correct reception. It left me wondering if it is only overt work, such as cunt art, that will have the necessary impact.

Lips like strawberry wine

There is something about saying 'cunt'. The 'C' word. There is a juvenile thrill, a little rush. It's a bad word referring to a bad thing. It's a forbidden pleasure. It makes me want to stand up and yell CUNT CUNT CUNT! On the wall of my partner's parking space someone has scrawled 'FUCK YOU CUNT' and it makes me think – yes please. I like to read it out aloud in a silly voice and my partner always looks around slightly embarrassed and says; "would you stop that!" There is something wonderfully empowering about saying the word with joy.

The common unease over a word used to describe the female genitalia in a negative fashion indicates how deeply ingrained the cultural shame about these body parts are. Cunt art was a fiercely joyous and liberatory movement by feminist artists and activists in the 1970s who used the cunt as an icon; "a generally denigrating term [it was] reclaimed ... by feminist artists who wished to assert their own sexual and corporeal subjectivity and agency, [cunt] means vagina and vulva, together (Frueh, 2003, p. 139), Amelia Jones notes (cited in Fuller & Salvioni, 2002, p. 169):

Artists ...saw the cunt as the site of their feelings of disempowerment. They argued for a feminist strategy of zooming in on the site of the feminine lack, to the site of their subordination to men, in just the most obvious sexual way of being penetrated by men, to the site for which they were always made to feel inferior.

My own comfort with the 'C' word took time and as demonstrated I now have a fondness for the word (and why shouldn't I? after all, I do have one). The negative connotations of 'cunt' become a profoundly important and deeply political issue when it comes to gender power relations.

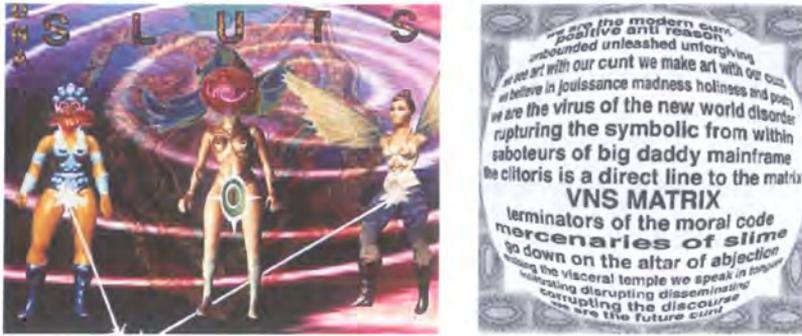


Fig. 10 & 11 VNS Matrix, *DNA Sluts*, and *Bitch Mutant Manifesto*, 1994

Unfortunately I've always found cunt art, particularly aggressive or explicit cunt art such as that of the VNS Matrix (fig. 10 & 11), highly problematic. I have often used sexual imagery within my own work (fig. 12,13 & 14), but not explicit imagery. I recognise that "taking that which is devalued and valuing it is a powerful strategy" (Fuller & Salvioni, 2002, p. 169), however when a work creates affront with explicit sexual imagery, the result can be alienation, which prevents any further enquiry as to why the work exists.



Fig. 12, 13 & 14 Brooke Zeligman, *Ova*, 2004, detail, sand cast glass, *Home Sweet Home*³⁴, 2005, detail, sand cast pate de verre glass & *Mine*, 2005, hot cast glass and print inclusions.

The VNS Matrix used aggressive, sexually explicit imagery in an attempt to present an alternative to gendered power relations, yet as Maria Schaffer (1996, p. 162) points out, the result was a simple mirroring of "the current operations of power and knowledge that [feminists]³⁵ seek to dismantle". They reversed the roles, giving the female characters of

³⁴ The work pictured here is from a series that started with an exploration into domestic tradition and memory with particular reference to the great Australian dream of a little federation style home on a quarter acre and an exploration into gender roles within that sphere. The work is incredible fragile and is as such, almost ephemeral.

³⁵ Schaffer uses cyberfeminists here, but as I believe that women should not be forced to choose between their feminisms and instead present a united front, and have replaced cyberfeminists with feminist.

their work the masculine positions of power. The result was that they became “complicit with and subversive to patriarchy at the same time” (ibid, p. 160). To simply subvert pre-existing modes of sexualised language manages to do little else than perpetuate the binaries.³⁶ The VNS Matrix’ subversion of the ‘narratives of domination’ was aggressive and clichéd, alienating viewers and consequently limiting their audience, and is a good example of why Jones believes that a feminist practitioner must be aware of how a work is received.

What must also be taken into consideration is pornography’s current trend to reduce women to nothing but a vagina, which continues the trend of objectification within the hegemonic and certainly renders early cunt art as ineffectual: the cunt – which was once such a taboo and monstrous subject/object - has become an object of fetish (Betterton, 1996, p. 149). Yet the imagery of cunt art is important; it is the site of difference, historically shamed and feared, a site of lacking that paradoxically creates envy, “sex is already made, constructed, in discourse, like a sign; but it also gestures, actively, like a sign to this discourse” (Holmlund, 2002, p. 299).

Luce Irigaray terms this gesturing sex’s semaphoric function. “By gesturing outward, toward the act of annunciation, [the] metaphors ... [that surround sex] may ... serve as prompts for investigation” (Holmlund, 2002, p. 299) into the history and politics and ideology that act as oppression (Betterton, 1996, p. 79):

The question of how women can be represented through a variety of visual media has been central to feminist cultural politics over the last two decades. These debates have continued to focus primarily on questions of signification – to what extent, and to what means, can feminist practices contest the inscription of gender in cultural forms?

C Horse was a site specific performance installation done at the Moores Building in Fremantle (fig.15). I was interested in exploring the notion of gender being a language construction, an issue I had touched on briefly with *bare*. Once again I relied on

³⁶ Perhaps this was unavoidable as the work was based on Donna Haraway’s concept of the cyborg avatar as feminist icon, which invokes an entire history based on sexual stereotypes.

collaboration with three performers³⁷. “Since women have always been represented as body and nature against the masculine appropriation of mind and spirit, reclaiming the materiality of the body in any straightforward way is impossible” (Betterton, 1996, p. 79) and so an attempt was made to focus in on the very site of difference by examining the markings left by both types of genitalia.



Fig. 15 Brooke Zeligman, *C Horse*, 2005, installation view, Moores Building, Fremantle

It was designed to contest the notion of gender as language construction which results in the idea of sameness, for when we remove language we are left in a space of not just equality but sameness. By straddling and pressing down on paper raised up by saw horses (fig. 15) male and female performers left marks via an action that involved not just sexuality but sex, resulting in ambiguous markings that displayed traces of, and became metaphors for, difference (fig. 16 & 17).

³⁷ The performers are Tarsh Bates, Brett Watts and Lou Rygue.



Fig. 16 & 17 *C Horse*, detail, male and female signs of difference

Irigaray believes that when woman is reduced to the same as man, equality is impossible as within western metaphysics the male is grounded in neutrality, objectivity, reality and truth. Removing language as construct clearly promotes sameness even though we are still clearly left with the inherent difference of the physicality of our sex. What is needed is to deal with difference, without constituting an opposition (Holmlund, 2002, p. 296) that promotes restrictive binaries.



Fig. 18 *C Horse*, detail, female

C Horse was an exploration into not only the possibility of sameness, but also the space between, the differences that lie between the genders. I included a male performer within the work, if only to prove to myself that the idea of sameness was unsound. On reflection the inclusion of the male gender in my work proved problematic as I felt I was addressing

issues that added another layer of complexity. What needs to remain central to my work is addressing issues of female difference without the promotion of binaries.

Irigaray believes that “metaphor is, by definition, elusive. To interpret a metaphor is to close off the play of meaning it sets in motion” (Holmlund, 2002, p. 286). The lips, in particular, are associated with female autoeroticism, conversation and communication. Irigaray’s selection of the lips bypasses the either/or phallogentric opposition of the cunt, and plays back and forth between sexuality (the lips below) and language (the lips above) (ibid, p. 297). Irigaray says only an “abuse of metaphors” or what “is abusively designated as metaphors” can in any way convey the ineffable (ibid). The choice of the lips is both motivated by a desire to go beyond “the phallogentric equation of women’s sexuality with their reproductive organs” and to inscribe an erotic female sexuality built around openings and permeable membranes which are neither unitary nor immediately visible (ibid, p. 297). By using the lips as metaphor we circumnavigate the explicit imagery of the cunt whilst still embracing the historical importance of the cunt as metaphor.

Two lips, above and below.

It cannot be easy to move from oppression and its mythologies to resistance in history: a detour through a no-man's land or threshold area of counter-myth and symbolisation is necessary...the metaphor and emblems which belong to desire rather than to reason.

Laura Mulvey 1989 (cited in Betterton, 1996, p. 176)

“In art practices that deal with food and sex...we see an investigation of aspects of the abject which have been specifically identified with the female body and its appetites” (Betterton, 1996, p. 138), that offer a way of exploring the role of the female subject. All women have two lips, both above and below, and when used as metaphor link talking, kissing, eating and nonreproductive female sexuality (Holmlund, 1991, p. 288) and is a metaphor that belongs to ‘desire, rather than reason.’ They are also a metaphor of the abject being the sites of intake and expulsion. Luce Irigaray sees the two lips as a central metaphor for femininity as they are evocative of openness, fluidity and touch.



Fig. 19 Detail of converted print from *C Horse*

Using the image of the lips – taken directly from *C Horse* (fig. 19)- within my glass work brings a subtlety, an ambiguity that links to the abject, and allows room for curiosity rather than shock. It is within this space that the exploration into meaning is seeded (Betterton, 1996, p. 134):

The abject is ‘the place where meaning collapses’ the liminal, the borderline, that which defines what is fully human from what is not. It is precisely that which can not be imagined, at the edges of meaning, which threatens to annihilate the existence of the social subject. What is at the borderlines or indeterminate is potentially dangerous, because it is ambiguous.

And it is here that the metaphor for lips dwells. By combining the image of the lips with glass, notions of ambiguity and abject are pushed further (Fig. 20).

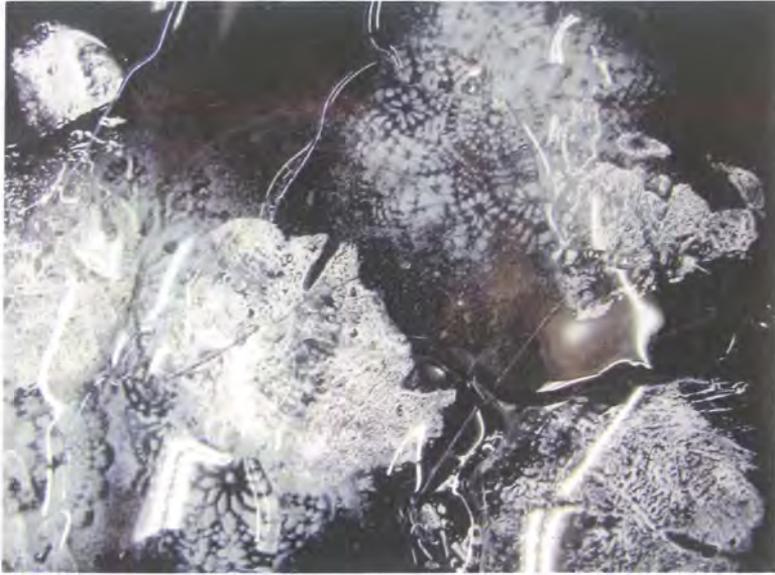


Fig. 20 Brooke Zeligman, *Two Lips, above and below*, 2005, hot cast glass with printed inclusions, 60cm x 45cm

I choose to work with glass because on a personal level I feel an affinity with it; perhaps it is my history as a chef that makes me comfortable amongst the kilns and the ladles and the casting pots. I often refer to my making process as cooking and it is here that glass becomes abject. In its fluid, molten, toffee-like (fig. 21) state it pulls at the viewer inviting a taste, a touch that would result in injury and so is forbidden. Glass carries with it an inherent fragility. It is sensuous and desirable and has an overt sense of sexuality that links it to the fetishised female body. Just as the “fetishised surface of the female body masks the horror of the marginal matter contained in its interior” (Betterton, 1996, p. 135) the seductive surface of glass hides the danger contained within its fragility.

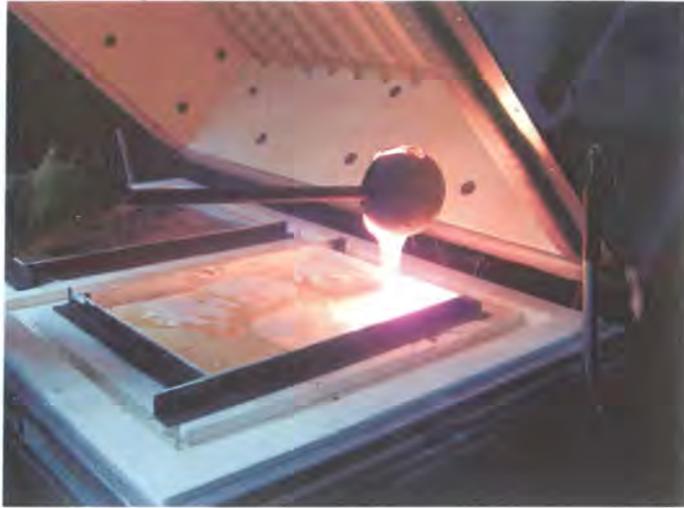


Fig. 21 Pouring *Two Lips* series

Glass also has a functional history, located architecturally as the border that allows us to view between inside and out (Betterton, 1996, p. 134):

The most significant border line is that [which] separates the inside from the outside of the body, self from others. It is for this reason... that the object holds powers of fascination as well as horror and, as such, is subject to a range of cultural and social taboos. Food, bodily wastes and sexual activities are all keys to transgressive symbolic systems since each traverse the external boundaries of the body.

The power to fascinate that glass holds is in itself ambiguous. As a border it prevents the unknown from getting in (or out), and as an object of domesticity, the vessel, it contains and stops spills, and yet is in itself a liquid.³⁸ Irigaray believes that the feminine is not just a passive matter of inscription and whilst the feminine body constitutes a form of invisible surplus, as invisible flesh, she exerts or causes a strong transformative power (Sjoholm, 2000, p .95). Surely this too is glass, invisible, transformative – “never fully unveiled, disappearing rather than appearing, she is the excess of the flesh” (ibid, p.96).

The plurality of glass defies hierarchical relationships, and could be the elemental metaphor for the feminine that Irigaray searches for within *Elemental Passions* in order to replace the bodily metaphor of the lips, which Irigaray found that for some would appear

³⁸ Glass has a viscosity, despite its solid appearance, and its molecular structure remains liquid below its melting point, which within physics is known as a ‘super cooled liquid’.

problematic as it was swapping one essentialist metaphor for another – the lips for the phallus. An elemental metaphor has the ability to envelop, and so protects the individual from being reabsorbed, assimilated or consumed (Sjoholm, 2000, p. 98). By combining the two metaphors, the lips become enveloped in the glass, preserving the metaphor from assimilation (fig. 22).

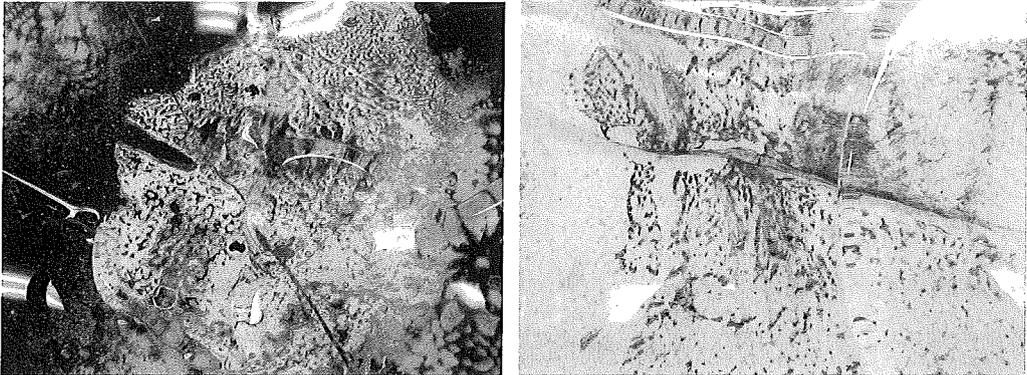


Fig. 22 Brooke Zeligman, *Two Lips, above and below*, 2005, detail

The notion of preservation returns to my practice being time based. The preservation of the lips within glass acknowledges the museological tradition. Within the panels, the site of difference has been preserved. This then opens up issues of the gaze, however the gaze is subverted by the image remaining static whilst the glass veils it, disappearing and reappearing like the folds of flesh it encases. “Within the system of representation and desire, the woman’s sex organ represents the horror of having nothing to see’ (Irigaray, 1985, p. 26) and therefore not being seen; there is a continuous struggle between visible and invisible. Femininity is has been politically coded on the side of the invisible (Sjoholm, 2000, p. 99) and the use of glass plays with this notion. The invisible "flesh" is coded as feminine: a remainder which forces us to return to sexual difference as a form of alterity primary to the "flesh" (ibid, p. 97).



Fig. 23 Kikki Smith, *Red Spill*, 1996, blown glass

American artist Kikki Smith uses glass, stating that she uses many materials that have a 'lumpen malleable' quality that she can work with (Posner, 1998, p. 37). Certainly Smith uses glass to refer to the abject. Her work *Red Spill* (fig. 23) mimics the forms of platelets or drops of blood spilt across the floor; in previous work I have used similar tactics mimicking the form of the ovum (fig. 24).



Fig. 24 Brooke Zeligman, *Over*, 2005, sand cast glass, installation detail at Moores Building

Smith maintains that all that is associated with the feminine, such as nature, the body, and the spirit, is constantly devalued, and all that is associated with the male, such as culture

and the mind, is esteemed³⁹.” (Posner, 1998, p. 10) Amelia Jones reaffirms this position when she comments “I have a problem with the dichotomy made between conceptual work and feminist work, where the former is thought of as obviously theorized [culture, mind] and the latter is intuitive, naïve [body, spirit, nature], and overly sincere.” (cited in Fuller & Salvioni, 2002, p. 170) Smith would often think of herself as a ‘housewife artist’ and was criticised by a male member of the arts co-op she belonged⁴⁰ to, for making ‘fragile and potentially ephemeral work’. She defiantly decided to work in the most vulnerable manner she could, “working in a feminist tradition, she employed craft orientated materials and techniques to express a contemporary feminist sensibility” (Posner, 1998, p. 14). The history of glass as a functional, craft material links it to the tradition of using craft orientated materials to express a feminist sensibility⁴¹.

³⁹ Similarly, Janet Wolff has argued that ‘reinstating corporeality’ is an important but necessarily fraught and contradictory enterprise for women artists. Since women have always been represented as body and nature against the masculine appropriation of mind and spirit, reclaiming the materiality of the body in any straightforward way is impossible. While recognising that the grotesque female body which eats, has sex, menstruates, excretes and ages has been systematically denied and suppressed within European bourgeois culture [and consequently Australian culture], Wolff warns against a too literal attempt to reclaim it. Such transgression by women, she suggests, is all too often punished. However, Wolff leaves open the question of whether the grotesque or the monstrous-feminine can render ‘the (abject) body a potential site of transgression and feminist intervention (Wolff, 1990, p. 130).

⁴⁰ Colab was the Collaborative Projects, Inc., a 70s New York artists collective that ‘investigated various forms of art presentation in unconventional venues’ (Posner, 1998, p. 12).

⁴¹ Its interesting to note that within Australia the art glass community is dominated by women. Traditionally glass was always a male dominated craft area, however, as glass moves from its craft context it seems women artists such as Holy Grace, Pam Stadus, Estelle Dean, Emma Camden, Liz Kelly – to name just a few, are the ones pushing the boundaries

Shattered

My Great Great Grandmother – Alice Coombs – had nine children, and after the fifth, every time she thought she was pregnant, she would hitch the horse to trap and gallop down hilly paths in an attempt to make the baby abort. I met her once, when I was very very young and she seemed not much taller than me at the time, with translucent skin, watery blue eyes and a weird smell. It's the smell that stays with me now.

Earlier this year I inherited much of Grandma Alice's lace work. Yellowed with age, it had been shoved carelessly into boxes and forgotten: delicate, intricate and beautiful, a whole life time of patient, careful work was stuffed away. There was some of my Grandmother's lace work too - my mother had never learnt – and it amazed me that in the space of one generation an entire tradition had disappeared.



Fig. 25 Pamela Gaunt, *Disc-grace*, 2000-2001, vinyl records, installation view at Craftwest

In 2001, *Lace – Contemporary Perspectives*, an exhibition held at Craft West (fig. 25), current attitudes to lace were explored. Interestingly enough, almost all the artists involved focused on either loss of tradition or the “increasing fragmentation of ... societal structures” (McMillan, 2001, p. 94). *How old are you grandmother?* is a work that explores the notions of not just lost traditions, but also the increasing fragmentation of what is left of those traditions.

Anthony Giddens demonstrated that the demise of tradition was inevitable within modernity as increasing technologies replaced traditional structures and practices in his 1994 essay *Living in a Post-traditional Society*. Tradition was seen as an important locus of symbolic and social orientation as well as belief systems, and in the absence of tradition, individual narratives, rather than traditional customs, take centre stage in identity construction, replacing the importance of kinship (Giddens, 1994, p. 63). It is important to note that tradition seemingly has a dual nature in that whilst tradition allows for the potential for a freer, unchained self; on the other hand, that lack of tradition is also the lack of a meaningful context in which to function (ibid). It is interesting to question just how this then affects feminism.

Certainly feminism has challenged many traditions, particularly in the attitudes towards the role of women, however, with that change did we also lose kinship? And with the loss of kinship is there then a loss of history and support? Certainly within my own family the support networks that would have evolved from time spent in the act of making is long gone with the tradition. It seems important to acknowledge this loss (Holmlund, 1991, p. 300):

The project of recreating a lost past does not simply consist in excavating those women forgotten in history ... to be able to trace a female genealogy of dissent entails new kinds of language, new systems of nomenclature, new relations of social and economic exchange – in other words, a complete reorganisation of the social order.

The idea of the loss of kinship encourages a particularly individualistic approach which seems evident in the 'post-feminist' stance.

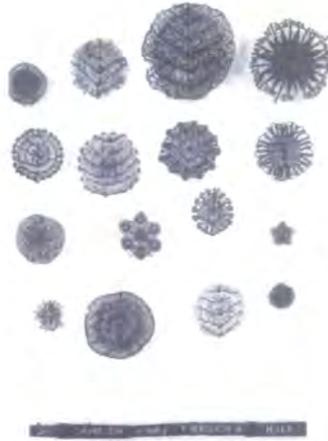


Fig. 26 Kikki Smith, *Through a Hole*, 1995, silicon bronze

Kikki Smith employed an ‘overtly feminine’ tactic with her work based on decorative doilies (fig. 26). At the time, bringing in something so obviously female and craft like was seen as a breaking down ‘of barriers for women artists in blue-chip galleries’ (Posner, 1998, p. 10). By using the ‘overtly feminine’ she was challenging the notion that women’s work was of less value. *How old are you grandmother?* – uses the feminine imagery of the lace doily (Fig. 27), presenting the objects in glass. They are incredibly fragile and will snap in the hand if the tiniest bit of pressure is applied.

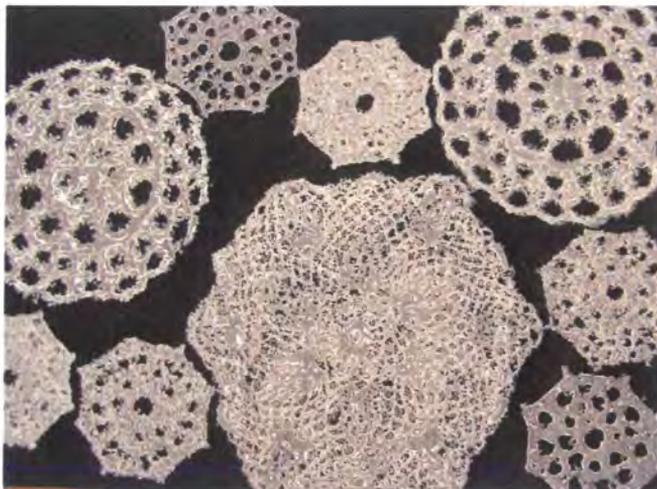


Fig. 27 Brooke Zeligman, *How old are you grandmother?* 2005, pate de verre

And the song remains the same

Amelia Jones notes that “in spite of the increased visibility of feminism in art discourse, [feminists] are still viewed as ...marginal” (cited in Fuller & Salvioni, 2002, p. 178). This is reflected in the amount of women being shown in ‘blue chip’ galleries, particularly as women artists are all too readily subjected to ‘gender based readings’ that categorise their work with terminology such as ‘feminine’, ‘feminist’ or ‘women’s work’ as a means of devaluing it. It is interesting to point out that Irigaray saw “sexual difference [as] not situated in reproduction (natural or artificial) but [located] in the access of the sexes to culture” (Holmlund, 1991, p. 300). I would suggest that the low number of women currently exhibiting in blue chip galleries is a good example of how that access to culture continues to be thwarted despite feminism’s achievements.

Certainly feminism’s unpopular stance and the fallacy of ‘post-feminism’ would affect the idea of its market value within such galleries, so, if female artists are to address this imbalance then where would they start? Re-invigorating feminism within the minds of future generations of women is a must (Deepwell, 1999):

If feminists intend to educate and reach not just these young women who are already in the art school system, but the society and the culture as a whole, into a different more profound understanding of what feminism is about, has been about and the importance of it for the future as a social, political and cultural movement in the last thirty years, then we have got to find some better answers, strategies, means of intervention and forums for discussion about these issues.

We know that feminism is not about being man-haters, nor is it about separatism - the us or them binary which so many seem to confuse with the reality, which is that feminism is a multi-valent political movement designed to promote the standing of women in culture. As suggested earlier, ‘re-visiting’ the site of feminism is one method which I have been employing throughout my own practice.

My approach had to be as varied and exploratory as possible, embracing methods that are overt without being explicit or alienating, through exploration of the body as a problematic site which disrupts normative assumptions of gendered difference. However,

instead of approaching the issue in terms of essentialist binaries, which characterised earlier feminist body art, the attempt was made to represent experiences of the feminine body that are physically and culturally determined (Betterton, 1996, p. 138).

The basis of cunt art and much of the performance art of the 70s was to make the invisible visible, by revealing hidden aspects such as menstruation, and it has been argued that this inverted, rather than deconstructed the binary division through which the female body is identified with base matter. Although their aim was to challenge the silencing of women's sexuality within culture, the problem that this work raised was whether such revelation can of itself transform the discourses through which women's sex is seen as monstrous or unclean (Betterton, 1996, p. 137). An "aesthetic that is based on transgression, on 'breaking open boundaries' of the dominant discourse, can only have a limited viability for a feminist politics of the body" (Nead, 1992, p. 69).

In *Elemental Passions* Luce Irigaray says that: "Difference creates an abyss. And is there anyone who does not fear the abyss? Not in me but in our difference lies the abyss. We can never be sure of bridging the gap between us. But that is our adventure. Without this peril there is no us. If you turn it into a guarantee, you separate us" (Irigaray, 1992, p. 28).

Perhaps then the goal is not just to invert the binary with transgressive work but instead to create thought and questioning through work that leaves behind aggression and objectification (a practice routed in sameness) and instead embraces tactics that are multiple and varied (Holmlund, 1991, p. 284):

Sexual difference is a site of conflict, determined by language and enacted in the form of historical contingencies. We need a proper theory of sexual difference to counter the violent effects of these codes. Only if we relieve ourselves from their engulfing force can we begin to explore the weighty attraction of the phenomenal world without becoming its prisoners.

Sexual difference remains unaccounted for, we need to explore it, using multifarious methods. If the states of femaleness are, as Irigaray says, reciprocity, fluidity, exchange and permeability, then surely this is the language we should adopt in order to challenge the imbalances of gendered power relations. Irigaray insists that women need an identity

of their own, not an identification with men. She argues that because of the rhetoric of equality, if we are the same then we are too easily absorbed within the state, so sexual difference is one of our hopes for the future (Holmlund, 1991, p. 285). It is not about separatism, as "posing such either/or/choices, she says, will lock women into being "among themselves" once again, with the result that "history will repeat itself in the long run, would revert to sameness: to phallogocentrism" (ibid, p. 289).

In embracing the idea of multiplicity, rather than confining myself to any one form of prescriptive practice, and working with the states of femaleness of 'reciprocity, fluidity, exchange and permeability', across a broad spectrum of areas, from collaborative action involving overt political statements to more subtle and delicate works. I have tried to express a specific feminist point of view that avoids sameness, embraces difference whilst not giving in to separatism. The focus of my work encapsulates the challenge to the notion that we are in the 'post-feminist' stage of the debate and has aimed to bring awareness to the site of feminism within a contemporary context.

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