

All Girl Line-Up.

Italy has been spoken of as 'the land that feminism forgot'. What the English speaking world knows as 'International Women's Day' on the 8th of March, translates in the *Bel Paese* as 'Festa della Donna', which might translate back as something like 'celebration of woman'. Note the lost collective and authoritative dimensions and you'll come to appreciate the reality of a largely commercial appropriation that has more in common with the art of chivalry calendar dates of Valentine's and Mother's Day, dragged out into a week-long occasion for men to buy specifically mass-marketed flowers and chocolates for the women in their lives. To all appearances, many Italian women find it a load of tokenistic rubbish. Younger women in particular aren't falling for it, as a series of interviews with school students in the national newspaper *La Repubblica* for the event made clear; one saying simply that all she had to do was take a look around to see that no positions of authority in her society (read judges, lawyers, editors, politicians) were occupied by women. While comparatively this makes the role of women in public life in Australia look pretty progressive (though hardly as progressive as New Zealand), local indicators might otherwise be pointing some way towards 'a land that is forgetting feminism'.

A current series of exhibitions facilitated by Marrickville Council titled 'Ironside' claims to celebrate all Australian women artists whilst commemorating the life and art of Adelaide Ironside (1831-18670, 'the first Australian-born professional woman artist to study overseas and exhibit and sell work internationally'¹. By all accounts Adelaide fully worked the scene here in Sydney before contributing to what we now call 'the brain-drain', heading overseas for further study and a successful practice. Typically, this failed to translate to her esteem back in Australia

and after dying young in Italy ‘many of Ironside’s paintings were donated to the Art Gallery of New South Wales where they were stored in what was known as the “women’s shed” in the Domain. The shed fell into disrepair over some twenty years with broken windows, a leaking roof and vermin infestations; consequently most of the paintings were destroyed’².

Fascinating stuff.

The Ironside series is not unique of late in featuring a line-up of all female artists. A veritable rash has been spreading across all sorts of cultural programming, including the ‘Ladies First’ hip-hop event in Sydney in May, performative arts paper *Real Time’s* women artists focus ‘The Women’s Pages’ (issue no.55 June/July 2003), ‘360°’ featuring all-female sound artists as part of the *Liquid Architecture* program in Melbourne (July), the *Shangri-La Collective* exhibition of female, Sydney-based artists making music videos at Artspace (April), as well as this chick’s issue of *Lives of the Artists*. My own feeling for such events is typically a ‘power to the ladies’ positivity and excitement at seeing the work of my female friends and peers getting the exposure it needs and deserves. No doubt the setting of such a defined curatorial parameter also works to circumnavigate usual-suspects syndrome somewhat, generating opportunities for artists that might not have been thought of in the first instance. Expanding awareness on the multitudes working away beneath the shiny surface of visible art. Yet I’ve come to feel that this instinctive response is an uncritical one, and am curious that despite the sudden necessity for focus-programming of women artists, I’ve not come across too much discussion or elaboration on why this is so.

The most obvious presumption you might make on the logic of gender specific programming is that of redress. Which follows that we have all observed the persistent imbalance in sex representation and male bias in public exhibitions and events, where show dominated by he-practitioners

are rarely dubbed gender affairs or plagued by utopian subtexts (unless they're gay)³. Yet the very real persistence of these instances leads one to doubt that you, or perhaps many other people, have in fact noticed. And the genuine lack of analysis renders this a weird, unspoken terrain. In a generation hallmarked by the dumb claim "I'm not a feminist, but...", feminist oriented complaint or criticism seems to have been vested with an air of the mealy-mouthed spoilsport, in the company of the artists included. Whilst the first to agree that terminal seriousness is a total bore, the general pall of thoughtlessness on a topic like this, here and now, is kind of remarkable. What is the current thinking on the place of feminism, affirmative action or positive discrimination in the professional (visual) arts in Australia today? I'm not sure and I can't think of anybody amongst the many artists and arts professionals I know who could tell me.

The interesting thing about artists is their tendency to self-organise. And that they should replicate gender bias one way or the other in their projects is symptomatic of both entrenched societal discrimination and the mutable organicism of artists' interests⁴. More dubious is inequity generated via the output of our prominent arts institutions. Here we see the comparative infrequency of solo exhibitions by female artists well cemented into long-observed fact⁵. This is relative to early-career artists in particular, who on one hand might be more interested in the scope and flex of collaborative practice, and the on other more obliged than their male peers to mobilize and market harder (think the girl artist 'collective' or novelty duo). Despite tertiary arts courses being typically dominated by female students and the swelling rank of younger female curators. Solo exhibitions are universally interpreted in the art world as signifiers of status and development; by necessity somebody believes enough in you and your work to hand over space and all that goes with it to you alone. Running with belief, do curators and/or institutional galleries believe in male artists more than they do women artists? Too crude a question

really, it being much more obvious that they believe in good art. Could it follow that the blokes are more often trusted to consistently develop and put forward good work? Also touchy, but perhaps heading toward part explanation for some recent instances of imbalanced programming. Neatly closing the circle of self-explanation, for how better to earn esteem and have curators feel they're 'backing a winner' than having had a good opportunity to shine in public exhibitions and events. Or benefit from other professional development opportunities such as studio residencies. As Linda Nochlin asserts in her decisive 1971 essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?':

'It is no accident that the crucial question of the conditions generally productive of great art has so rarely been investigated, or that attempts to investigate such general problems have, until fairly recently, been dismissed as unscholarly, too broad, or the province of some other discipline, like sociology'⁶

Should we deduce that this is where the all-girl line up slots in - quietly, earnestly looking to animate and expand these currency cycles of 'now' practitioners? Perhaps a little too quietly.

Most things around here take their cue from the commercial sector. And indeed a look at the books of some Sydney dealer galleries is relevant and revealing. Most support a larger proportion of male artists than female: Sherman galleries 10 women of a total 32, Darren Knight 8 of a total 23, Sarah Cottier 8 of a total 20, Boutwell Draper 7 of a total 24, Kaliman 2 of a total 13, Grant Pirrie 1/2 (of a duo) in a total 10. With the interesting exceptions of Roslyn Oxley and Mori galleries, who both feature 25 female artists in total stables of 36⁷. It's telling that it is these longer established galleries that best represent the dynamic breadth of Australian women practitioners, whilst some recent blow-ins look more fashion conscious and less with the program. And reassert in this millennium the research and

findings of Heather Johnson in her thesis 'The Sydney Art Patronage System 1890-1940' that:

'...although women artists did have some work purchased by the Gallery (AGNSW), did have one-artist exhibitions in some of the private galleries, did have works hung in exhibitions of the artists' societies, and did have work purchased by private collectors, none of this was done in a relative proportion to the number of women artists working in Sydney or to the amount of work they produced'⁸.

A present notion of the quantity of women practitioners was well illustrated by 'The Shangri-La Collective project at Artspace, which mobilized work by 31 artists, virtually all with established exhibition histories. Yet simultaneous to their time on show in the gallery, Artspace held its Annual General Meeting and re-elected a Board containing no female artists whatsoever. In fact all-male save for their smart chick lawyer whose unfortunate official title is 'Secretary'⁹. Something here doesn't compute - like the contribution and participation of women in the processes of authoritative decision-making within the organization. A bit upstairs/downstairs. Linda Nochlin suggests that:

'...those who have privileges inevitably hold on to them, and hold tight, no matter how marginal the advantage involved, until compelled to bow to superior power of one sort or another. Thus the question of women's equality devolves not upon the relative benevolence or ill-will of individual men, nor the self-confidence or abjectness of individual women, but rather on the very nature of our institutional structures themselves and the view of reality which they impose on the human beings who are part of them'¹⁰.

And if these institutional structures are no more mindful of looking like a men's club than other areas of the sector? It starts to make your well-intentioned all-girl line up look more than a little passive. Some tricky

terrain, as ‘to be “for women” can also mean being “against women”, not only because the category of “women” is often cast in the specificities of race, class and sexual privileges, but also because women are often themselves vigorous protectors of patriarchal power’¹¹.

‘Embedded’ is an interesting buzzword going around at the moment, ‘Embedded journalists’ – ‘embedded’ this, that and the other. The New Shorter Oxford English defines it as ‘fixed firmly in a surrounding mass of solid or semi-solid material’ (sounds like the Artspace Board!). A while ago I was attracted to attend a book launch, ‘The Work/Life Collision’ by Barbara Pocock, due to the mention of ‘embedded gender inequity’ in the press blurb. This was discussed within the frame of current debate on work design, paid maternity leave and workplace sensitivity to home life. Very interesting, though not quite in this orbit, and looking back at my notes all I wrote down were the phrases “jacking up” and “take more power”. Fine sentiments unmistakably framed in the active stance. Whereas a passive or inarticulate position looks more likely to undermine than affirm. Pocock also discussed an interesting notion of ‘disembodiment’, concluding from a period working at Parliament that the peculiar life led by our largely male politicians in Canberra - remote from the inanities of the daily grind and tended (fed, driven, laundered) by an army of staff - sees them making high-impact policy decisions from a vantage of curious disembodiment to the everyday role of caring. Likewise, could it follow that to corral women artists is to disembody their practices from the broader cultural conversation? Ian Burn wrote that:

‘the meanings or sense of art activities are governed by the contexts they derive from and occur within. ‘Paintings’, ‘objects’, ‘conversations’ lose all sense and indeed purpose if divorced from the social framework in which they occur... All the participants have learned in similar ways and are therefore capable of communicating

with each other - and what any one of them is doing is in principle intelligible to the others'¹².

In asserting women's practice as distinct within this social framework are we fixing ourselves up another women's shed? Unfortunately it's certain that such programming is liable to play into some people's lesser imagination and/or latent sexism. Penny Drop, the hip-hop promoter behind 'Ladies First' and many other Sydney events said in a recent interview: 'I don't think that anyone's ever really been judgemental about the fact that I'm female. I'll tell you what does piss me off is when people see things that I'm putting on like film nights or parties and say, "Oh, is this a female event?" Regardless of the line-up, it's suddenly got this female tinge to it. Just because it's me and I'm a female putting on an event, all of a sudden it's a "female event"'¹³. Collective solidarity mowed down all too easily by collective disparagement.

At the end of it all it's really no big deal being a female artist in Australia these days, with heaps of women doing great stuff and cool role models to be had in our older artists and professionals. Yet while it's feasible to discount ideas of explicit disadvantage felt by women, it might not be quite time to gloss over the implicit advantages of being a male artist. All debates, gender included, might be more lively in the arts were they vested with a more interrogative and less reactive personality. Obviously an ideal-world scenario will be when positive female bias is propagated as unwittingly as male is now and the only issue is what it should be - engaging and dynamic art and practitioners. Somehow it feels like we were closer to this nigh on ten years ago in the mid-90's.

And really this might well be part of the biggest context of them all - the Great Australian Backwash under the government of John Howard, with right wing creep retarding so many dimensions of the national mindset,

forgetting feminism along with it. In this case, waiting it out isn't working and it needs to be taken on. As urged by journalist and writer David Marr in a lecture earlier this year titled 'The Role of the Writer in John Howard's Australia'¹⁴, looking at "the ways writers are addressing (or shirking) the challenge of working in a country, where dark political forces are being stirred, 'elites' are once more denigrated, and the 'mainstream' is supposed to set the agenda"¹⁵. It's no great leap to conceive of artists here along with writers, questioning and intensifying the resonance of these issues in the cultural community. For as Marr suggests, "something has happened in Australia and for some writers the emergence of this new old Australia is not something to flinch from but to write. It's the most compelling raw material". Here is exactly where risk-taking creativity is most called for, "to shake off the new philistinism of John Howard's Australia and find absolutely unexpected ways of doing this"¹⁶.

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Lives of the Artists #5

Spring 2003 - Chick's Issue

Edited & published by Elizabeth Pulie

¹ Terry Cutliffe, curator 'Ironside' unpaginated catalogue 2003.

² Terry Cutliffe, *ibid.*

³ Some examples: six months of all-male shows at the Studio foyer, Sydney Opera House curated by Anne Loxley (August-December 2003); perennially blokey *Impermanent Audio* events curated by caleb.k, including *I.Audio* at the Performance Space featuring something like 18 male artists and 2 female; *Art+Film* show at the CCP in Melbourne, with 2 women artists in a total 8. And the upcoming *Primavera '03* at the MCA, curated by Julieanne Pierce, will feature 5 solo dudes, 1 solo chick, 2 collaborating dudes and the *Kingpins*, consisting of 4 chicks (effectively presenting one work), hilariously, way-ironically in character as men.

⁴ Standout example: *Desk Job Mori* gallery June 2002, curated by 5 young artists (including 2 women), overall featuring 6 female artists in a total 21.

⁵ The current Susan Norrie double-bill is a fine exception - though unquestionably as a senior artist, whilst the opening period was still

described unfetchingly by the *Herald* as ‘Norrie’s biggest week in Sydney since 1987’ (*SMH* 19.7.03 p.7)

⁶ Linda Nochlin ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ 1971, in ‘Women, Art and Power, and other Essays’ by Linda Nochlin, New York: Harper & Row, 1988 p.152

⁷ All information as on gallery websites, August 2003.

⁸ Heather Johnson ‘The Sydney Art Patronage System, 1890-1940’, published Grays Point NSW: Bungoona Technologies, 1997 p.29

⁹ Artspace Board 2003: Brad Buckley (Chair), Kate Gilchrist (Secretary), David Cuda (Treasurer), David Haines, Brian Mahoney, Ralph Kerle, Laurens Tan, Sean Lowry, John Potts (Artspace newsletter issue no. 123 July/August 2003).

¹⁰ Linda Nochlin ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ p.152

¹¹ Diane Elam & Robyn Wiegman ‘Contingencies’, introduction to ‘Feminism Beside Itself’, edited by D. Elam & R. Wiegman, New York: Routledge, 1995, p.7

¹² Ian Burn ‘Art is what we do, culture is what we do to other artists’, ‘Dialogue: Writings in Art History’, North Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1991, p.132

¹³ ‘That’s Not How You Make Hip Hop: An Interview with Penny Drop’, Georgina O. Smith, issue 10 ‘Lucky Bitch’ (women’s issue) 2003

¹⁴ Colin Simpson Lecture, Redfern Town Hall, Sydney 29th March 2003, organised by the Australian Society of Authors. Speech archived at www.asauthors.org

¹⁵ David Marr *Books & Writing* with Michael Shirrefs 6/4/03, Radio National <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s823973.htm>

¹⁶ David Marr ‘The Role of the Writer in John Howard’s Australia’, Colin Simpson Lecture 29/3/03