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Ways of Doing: T&A and the F-ing Gaze

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Cunt: A Declaration of Independence; A Bust Guide; Perilous Chastity; Beyond Burning Bra; It's Time for Action (There's No Option); Wet ... I'm scanning literary options for an entry point into contemporary feminist art. Like feminism itself – the word, the concept, the movement/s – there is no defining authority, no clear way forward.

With its layered past and fractured future, feminism seems to expand at an exponential rate, and yet one of history's ironic cruelties has been its mainstream absorption and subsequent dilution. The feminism formulated in the 1960s and 1970s was a political force appealing to the masses for dissent and change. Today it is a niche product commodified and marketed, or a dirty word met with eye rolls that say, *here we go again ...* The success of feminism is cited as the burden of proof for why women can disavow the movement or be apathetic towards (dare I say, even repulsed by) the claim of being a feminist. Feminist and post-feminist theory along with gender studies have been thoroughly institutionalised; now presiding in the realms of academia they are devoid of militancy, stripped of any real political force. We may talk Irigaray and De Beauvoir in our lecture halls but we come home to *Desperate Housewives* and *Girls Gone Wild*: no wonder there is ongoing debate as to whether the aims of the women's movement and later waves of feminism have been achieved.

Needless to say, trying to define or grasp a sense of what feminism means in the contemporary western world is an infinitely problematic task. Depending on who you ask, feminist proponents can include Hilary Clinton and Lindsay Lohan, and with all this chatter about cougars and pole-dancing ten-year-olds who would dare suggest their definition is *the* definition. Feminism these days is non-prescriptive, and that is really the only common ground we can agree on. And the same can be said about feminist art. The very label is problematic. Of course, not all female artists produce feminist art just by virtue of their biology, and many male artists deal with issues that could come under a feminist umbrella. For some, feminist art is another label that marginalises women or groups them together in dangerous essentialist categories. All this without even starting on the notion of femininity.

So let's narrow the field somewhat and look collectively at the work of a group of young female artists in Australia working with similar media and across analogous thematic lines. On the tailcoats of the third-wave feminist movement these artists are engulfed in a world of options, multiple viewpoints and precarious identity and gender constructions. Their work is a curious mix of honesty, audacity, inquisitiveness and vulnerability as they explore the possibilities of a feminist agenda.

In their 2008 video work *Runaway*, Brown Council—a four-artist collective working in video and performance—explores the stereotypical female victim depicted in various mainstream film narratives and music videos. Members of the group take turns playing the fleeing victim (or is she the perpetrator?) running through the darkness in a slow-motion chase sequence complete with evocative soundtrack, simulated police lights and violently spurting artificial blood. As the music builds, the viewer wills her to push forward at increasing speed away from unseen danger. But her credibility soon dissipates when she rips off her t-shirt mid-run to reveal an orange singlet with the outline of breasts drawn on in thick black marker. No longer a brave and strong-willed escapee, 'she' (after all, this is no particular woman but rather every woman) is rendered comic-like, a clearly constructed character performing the role of 'scared woman with bouncing breasts'. Film theorist Laura Mulvey quotes director Budd Boetticher in her influential 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema':

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.¹

Without being didactic Brown Council illuminates the semiotics of visual culture and performativity, inviting the viewer to share its in-jokes. In the eponymous *Milkshake* (2007), the collective dances to Kelis's infamous song, grinding and shimmying while they each drink a litre of milk. The work becomes increasingly silly and grotesque as the artists (wearing skeleton suits to boot) try to keep up with the fast-paced routine while trying to keep down the liquid. As the lyrics blast—*I know you want it, the thing that makes me, what the guys go crazy for ...*—any sexy or provocative intentions evoked by the hip-hop dance moves are undermined by burps and gag reflexes.

Various feminist artists have addressed the politics of representation and the construction of gender roles through social systems, especially through language. In works such as Barbara Kruger's *(Untitled) We have received orders not to move* (1982), and *(Untitled) Your body is a battleground* (1989), the female body is framed as the site of power struggles inherent to oppressive patriarchy. Male/masculine is the privileged centre to which female/feminine will always be the peripheral, the Other. However, it is clear in the work of Hannah Raisin and others such as Keira Brew Kurec and Jessie Angwin that 'The binaries—oppressor/victim, good woman/bad man, pure/impure, beautiful/ugly, active/passive—are not the point of feminist art today'.² The body is a kind of battleground for these artists, yet one with fluid opponents where many roles are there for the taking and the playing. Raisin extrapolates beautifully on this theme, becoming both victim and perpetrator in her often extreme video works. In *Green Grass* (2008), the artist lies on the ground in an astroturf bikini as an unknown man enters the shot, pulls down his underpants, urinates on her and then leaves. It's uncomfortable to watch (and no doubt to perform) but Raisin's giggling throughout sets her subjugation at bay. In *Body Theatre Mask* (2010), a baby octopus swims in Raisin's mouth, crawling in and slipping out in a slimy struggle that renders both artist and creature simultaneously powerful and powerless. In *Rose Garden* (2009), the artist—with an 'updo' and pearl earrings—proceeds to munch through a bouquet of red roses (that iconic image of the feminine, the beautiful, the desired), causing her to vomit and spew forth their blackened half-digested debris. Raisin highlights the sticking points of normative gender roles with creativity, humour and play.

Facing page: Brown Council, *Runaway*, 2008, video still.



Like Raisin's, Kiera Brew Kurec's work engenders visceral and emotional responses—revulsion, shock, laughter, disbelief. Her work addresses John Berger's (via Lacan) pivotal theorising of the gaze, of men looking and women watching themselves being looked at, which has been at the heart of feminist debate and art production since the 1970s. Brew Kurec's art involves very deliberate and controlled performative aspects that resist, challenge or play into the passivity inherent in traditional representations of femininity. Performing for video as well as enacting live durational performance, the artist undertakes simple body actions, continuing the tradition of feminist artists such as VALIE EXPORT, Carolee Schneeman, Marina Abramović and Hannah Wilke. In her words, she 'enforces' these actions on herself. For *Even Though It Hurt I Couldn't Cry* (2008), the artist chops a large pile of onions as tears stream and make-up drips, all the while addressing the camera with a blunt this-is-me stare. 'I have found it interesting that often my work would be labelled feminist' Brew Kurec says, '... and I would wonder why and answers I got varied from "because you're so aggressive in your work" to "because you're the victim in your work", to "because you're a female and you're working in performance and video". None of these answers seemed to answer anything, they just created more questions'.³ This sense of questioning is central to her practice and reinforces the interesting idea of *doing* rather than *being* feminist.⁴ Brew Kurec has termed her explorations 'a child-like meandering through the symbolic domain'.

Video (especially lo-fi) and performance art are immediately associated with feminist art because feminist artists pioneered these methods in a deliberate attempt to distance their work from the male-centred art world and its favoured materials. Working with these same techniques provides a direct link for and from these contemporary practitioners to their predecessors, which in turn highlights the ongoing currency of the genre. In our culture of obsessive self-documentation these artists speak the most relevant language by employing contemporary methods of representation; most of the works discussed here are freely available on artist blogs and YouTube. There is a curious element of personal ritual involved, yet certainly not the endless litany of grooming ceremonies prescribed to women in magazines, film and television. There is no fear of the unmade body, but instead a refreshing sense of discovery and a bare-all attitude as these artists test their physical and ideological limits, seemingly as much for their own curiosity, pleasure and disgust as that of the viewers'. And wonderfully, these works can be vulnerable and beautiful too without reinforcing essentialist notions of what it means to be a woman.

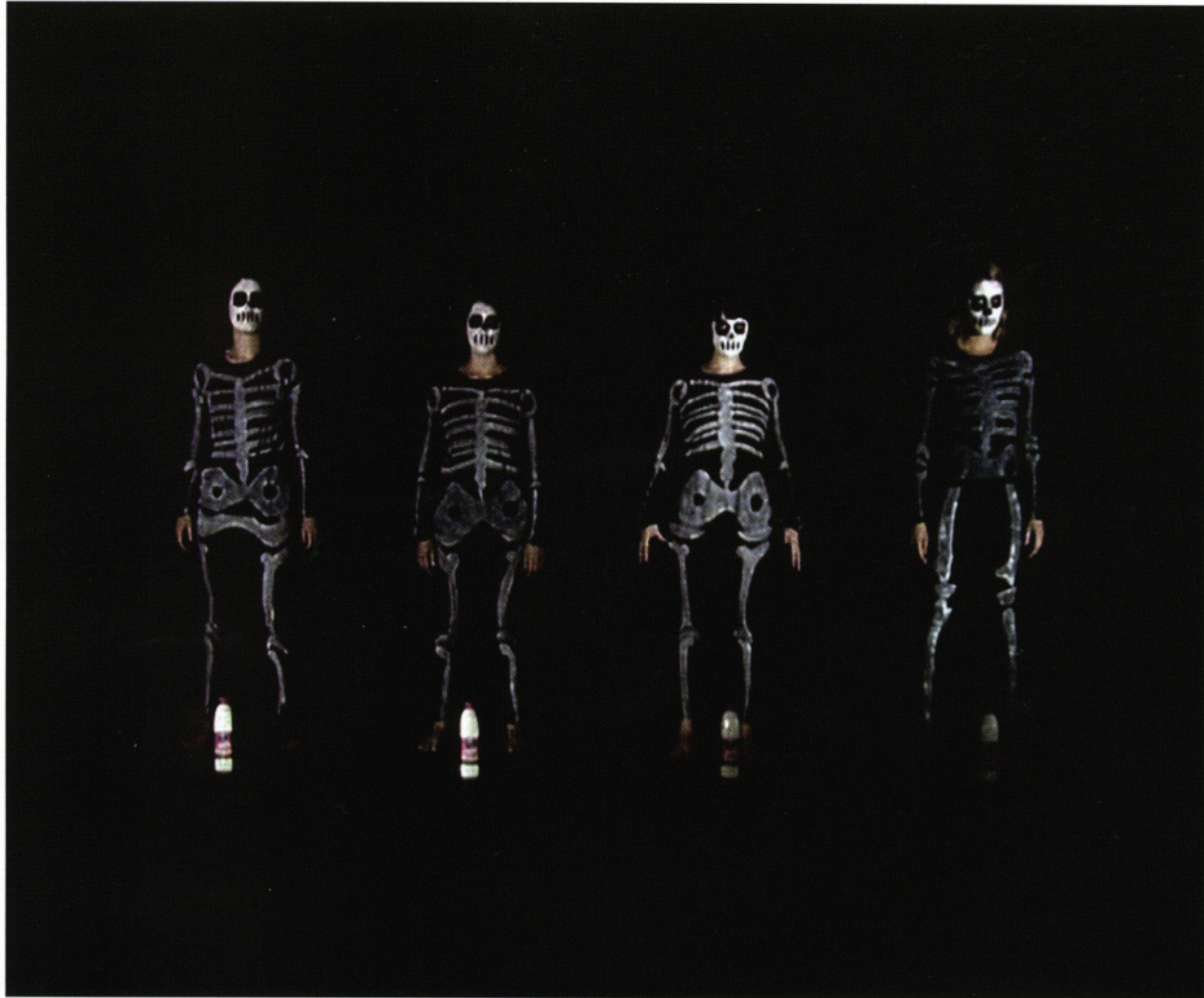
The female body has been a central artistic motif for many feminist artists, utilised in various ways to explore notions of power and gender stereotyping. One approach has been to adopt the modes of today's mainstream sexualised culture, whether it be advertising or pornography, in order to expose the normalisations of particular representations of women. This is not by any means a new phenomenon; sex worker, artist and self-proclaimed 'feminist porn activist' Annie Sprinkle was onto it more than thirty years ago. The rise of sex-positivity in the 1980s and raunch culture in the following decades has added more fuel to the fire, and while too involved a debate to go into here, equating the use and abuse of the body with empowerment obviously has its pros and cons. In Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces' 2007 forum *Feminism Never Happened* curator Emily Cormack commented: 'Women have reverted to using their bodies and not their brains to obtain their objectives. Can someone please tell me how the emblem for liberation shifted from hairy legs to waxed vaginas?'



Above (top): Hannah Raisin, *Body Theatre Mask*, 2010, video still.

Above (below): Jessie Angwin, *Female Chauvinist Pig*, 2006, video stills.

Facing page: Kiera Brew Kurec, *Even Though It Hurt I Couldn't Cry*, 2008, video still.



Jessie Angwin's work comments playfully on these ideas, showing the artist masturbating with Ariel Levy's oft-quoted 2005 text *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, or documenting (to the soundtrack of the Scissor Sisters' *I don't feel like dancing*) the shaving rash Angwin suffered after being asked by a younger female lover to shave off her pubic hair. Angwin's latest work *Freedom*, 2009-10, exhibited recently at Next Waves Festival's *The View From Here: 19 Perspectives on Feminism*, utilises a range of media including video, embroidery and an artist book. Here the artist juxtaposes two real-life events: a bad cycling accident and an affair she had with an involved man. Dedicated to 'a guilty conscience' the work recounts in honest and graphic detail their sexual exploits in the public toilet at a service station, alongside the bicycle accident, with the humble vehicle as a kind of metaphor for the suffrage movement and the liberation it promised women. For Angwin, documenting her experiences of sex, guilt and body-hatred is a way of exploring what these concepts may mean to other women, and between them. She expands on the often assumed phenomenon of 'sisterhood' (another feminist and feminist art polemic), seeing where, if anywhere, it may resonate.

One of the binding facets between these contemporary practitioners is the fact that the artist/s always figures large. At once author/subject/performer/filmmaker/photographer, they assert their agency and employ the(ir) body as the site of power negotiations. As Raisin states: 'Being in the work is really important. I always make work about things that challenge and confront me. I try to be honest and frank in a playful way'.⁵ There exists in these works a strong sense of the self-confessional, which can be at once satirical and earnest, honest yet transparently performative.

Although it is crucial that the artists themselves are their own subjects, these works are not self-portraits in any traditional sense. Stephen Palmer writes of photographer Clare Rae's work: 'The camera is not made to reveal some truth which lies in the features of the face, or the

Above: Brown Council, *Milkshake*, 2007, video still.

Facing page: Clare Rae, *Untitled* from *Climbing the Walls and Other Actions*, 2009, photograph.



surface of the skin ... her image is employed to construct a character; a kind of meta-person, not entirely dissolved from her "self", but certainly a protagonist she plays.' Rae photographs herself in non-descript domestic settings: gripping a window frame as she climbs up a wall or delicately balances on a small glass. Her work is finely staged and beautifully sparse, evoking a sense of tension as if at any moment the artist might come crashing to the ground. 'I am utilising the body to promote ideas of discomfort and awkwardness, generating an approach to femininity that is borne out of frustration ... The outcomes of my practice endeavour to offer a positive creation of subjectivity, one that proposes a new understanding of femininity as non-determined'.⁶

In the last few years there have been a number of major survey exhibitions of feminist art such as *WACK! Art and the Feminist* in Los Angeles, *Global Feminisms* in New York and most recently *Feminism Never Happened* at Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art. The question has been posed: 'Are these an effort to eulogise the event, as if it is something that has passed, or we are actually gathering momentum for the next push forward?' Part of the answer lies in this movement taking place in smaller galleries and infiltrating the online world, contributing in a clever and contemporary way to the continuum of feminist art.

1. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Visual and other pleasures* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, UK, 1989).

2. Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin (eds.), *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (London: Merrell; Brooklyn Museum: New York, 2007) 11.

3. Email correspondence with the artist, May 2010.

4. Artist Alex Martinis Roe discussed this idea in the forum 'Feminism Never Happened' coordinated by Director Alexie Glass and Assistant Curator Emily Cormack at Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, Melbourne, 2007.

5. Email correspondence with the artist, May 2010.

6. Clare Rae, Artist Statement, 'Climbing the Walls and Other Actions', Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 2009.

7. Emily Cormack, 'Feminism Never Happened' forum, op.cit.