



Cigdem Aydemir
Plastic Histories for
DARK MOFO Hobart, 2016
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MONA, Hobart
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Queer feminism, intersectionality and awkward conversations



Courtney Coombs

Queer feminism proposes a position that moves beyond identifying, outing and eliminating women's oppression to expand the focus to the structures that enable oppression. As outlined by Dore Bowen, "While feminism is aligned with lesbian and gay politics in seeking liberation from oppressions based on gender and sexual identity, queer theory challenges the norms that constitute these identities."¹ Going beyond gender and sexuality, queer politics also advocates for "all kinds of economic, political, epistemological, and cultural experiments that seek to produce difference and equality at the same time."² In this way, queer feminism is intersectional at its core, and can broaden our understanding of the world and creative practices that seek to break down more than the walls of gender-based oppression.

"Intersectionality" initially promised to expand beyond the limits of privileged cis white women's experience, but real-life outcomes have continued to privilege the dominant group within the "movement." As J. Rogue articulates, "There are many examples of women of color, working-class women, lesbians, and others speaking out against the tendency of the white, affluent-dominated women's movement to silence them and overlook their needs. But generally, instead of acknowledging the issues these marginalised voices raised, the mainstream feminist movement has prioritised struggling for rights primarily in the interests of white affluent women."³ We saw this in Roxanne Gay and Erica Jong's "awkward" conversation during the Q & A that followed their joint keynote address as part of Decatur Book Festival; with Jong responding defensively to Gay's assertion that Feminism needed to adopt a more intersectional understanding of women's experience. Closer to home, Ruby Hamad and Celeste Liddle have recently stated that, "Unmoored from structural analysis, intersectional feminism is fast becoming a shallow buzzword that elevates the individual, stifles dissent, and, most worrying, is being weaponised to silence women of colour."⁴

While there is an expanding field of theorising feminism's relationship to queerness and its politics, there is a hesitancy to discuss this in relation to contemporary art practice; as stated by Amelia Jones, "a visible and influential queer feminist history remains elusive." In the



introduction to *Otherwise: Imagining queer feminist art histories*, Jones asks “Is there a conflict in play between the two discourses?”⁵ I would argue that it is feminism’s continued focus on women’s oppression rather than the oppression of all people, as well as its refusal to reject the concept of binary genders, and the man vs woman that has kept this relationship at in the margins of feminist discourse. Being located on the sidelines is not necessarily a negative position, particularly if we embrace Erin Silver’s definition of contemporary queer feminist art as that which “proudly claim[s] the history of the feminist art movement as part of their own lineage and make[s] interventions from its margins.”⁶ It is from this position in the outer circle that those who work with a queer feminist methodology can gain a clearer view of the centre, exposing the limitations of feminism on its own, and expanding its applications and potential. Since “queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility of another world,”⁷ queer feminist approaches to making and/or readings of work can add much to the dismantling of our heteropatriarchal, cisnormative, white supremacist society.

Kate Britton’s recent article for *Art Monthly Australasia* “Queer Spritz”⁸ was everything I originally intended this article to be. Open, discursive and non-authored, but this intention quickly spiralled into decisions about whose voices to include in the conversation and who would therefore be excluded, which then transitioned into a loop of considering what labels I would need to then impose on these artists. Necessarily partial, rather than a comprehensive overview of queer feminist art in Australia today, I will take these issues further through the practices of Cigdem Aydemir, Frances Barrett and Naomi Blacklock, each of which I read as examples of how queer feminist methodologies and/or readings can broaden the discursive limits of power relations in this country.

Aydemir addresses Western responses to Muslim women in her practice. Using the veil as both material and metaphor, Aydemir’s work adopts serious, critical and at times tongue-in-cheek humour to respond to and unpack racism in our country. *Plastic Histories* (2014, 2016) is a public work that involves the covering of bronze statues of “prominent” men with pink shrink-wrapped plastic. The austere statues of colonising men are transformed into

bright, shining (queer) beacons that aim to draw attention to “the contribution of women from all races, sexualities and genders in the grand narrative,”⁹ of the countries the work has been produced for, South Africa and Australia.

I Won't Let You Out Of My Sight (2015) is a moving image work that depicts Aydemir re-enacting familiar scenes from *Baywatch*, the famous television show that portrayed the dramatic lives of scantily-clad lifesavers. Dressed in a bright-red burqini as opposed to the original almost non-existent swimsuit that was donned by the stars of the show, Aydemir runs, crawls out of the sea, and keeps watch over those swimming in the all-powerful ocean alongside other actions, “some taken from Baywatch others boot camp routines.”¹⁰ Jimi Jamison’s “I’ll Be Here” (Baywatch’s theme song) blares out of the iconic lifesaving flotation device. Unlike the heroic figures we grew to love (and want to be) on screen as well as on our own golden beaches, this lifesaver is a fully clothed, almost genderless, clumsy figure dressed in the globally controversial swimsuit designed for Muslim women. As Aydemir navigates the coastline, we witness beachgoers looking on with confusion as they come face-to-face with a sight they have most-likely not seen on the sandy beaches of Sydney. This work speaks to the roles and expectation of gender and to the ongoing unstable race relations in this country by transforming the quintessential figure of the girl/boy next-door as the beachgoer’s protector into a non-gendered and/or racially/religiously aligned body.

Pressing on further into unsafe territories, Frances Barrett pushes her body to the limits. Whether it’s crawling in a circle for twelve hours straight, ingesting sleeping pills to become a living, breathing, unconscious object, or being physically dominated in the gallery, Barrett forces us as viewers into an uncomfortable and risky space with her.

A key work, *Curator* (2015)¹¹ was performed as part of Liquid Architecture’s *What Would A Feminist Methodology Sound Like?* event. The work involved Barrett being blindfolded and silent for the period of twenty-four hours, handing over all methods of care to the curators of the event, Joel Stern and Danni Zuvela. Stern and Zuvela were responsible for safely guiding, feeding, bathing and including the artist in social interactions as well as providing bathroom breaks and sleeping arrangements without any prompting from the artist. She was completely at their mercy

Frances Barrett

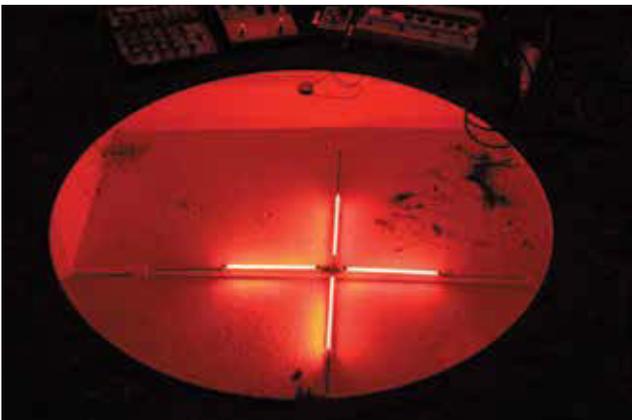
Curator, 2015
24-hour live performance with Joel Stern and Danni Zuvela, for Liquid Architecture’s *What Would A Feminist Methodology Sound Like?*
Photo: Keelan O’Hehir
Courtesy of the artist

Opposite:

Cigdem Aydemir

I Won't Let You Out of My Sight, 2015
dual-channel, HD video with sound, video still
Courtesy the artist
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Naomi Blacklock *Body of Voice*, 2017, installation performance work. Pond, water, glass mirror, soil, red neon lights, waterproof speakers, with sound created through effect pedals, contact microphone, vocal microphone, amplifier. Photo: Callum Mcgrath

and duty of care. In her initial email correspondence with the curators of the project, Barrett refers to the definition of the title, stemming from the “Latin word *cūrāre* which means to care for, to attend to.”¹² She continues, “you as the two curators of this program have asked me to consider a feminist approach to the creation of a sound work and to the act of listening. So Joel and Danni, curators, let’s undertake a project together of careful listening and care taking.”

Barrett placed herself and her safety in the hands of Stern and Zuvella, yet she is the one ultimately in control. In a long email prior to the performance, she outlined many demands as expectations of how she wished to be engaged over the course of the twenty-four-hour period. It is a lot to ask of two people who, while caring for the artist, are also preparing for the event which includes seven other artworks, something that Stern acknowledges in his summary of his experience at the end of the performance (as per Barrett’s instructions). By asking for this commitment and public action of the curators

of the project, *Curator* makes visible and critiques the systems of the art world that create hierarchy and power between those who curate and those who produce art. The work dismantles “the boundaries between studio practice art and related vocations: art historian, curator, critic, visual theorist,”¹³ and leaves us questioning who has the power, and what are they going to do with it?

Naomi Blacklock uses symbols of witchcraft to address the role of the Other in Western society and the violence that has been enacted because of hetero-white power relations. Her work often uses stereotypical elements related to witchcraft such as circles, candles, salt, mirrors and black elements in red light to address the “figure of the ‘witch’ as Other.”¹⁴ It is understood that many historical witch-hunts were conducted and the subsequent accusations of witchcraft were often presented to remove women’s access to property and wages.¹⁵ In contemporary life the term is still used as an offence to those who do not fit into the body of the “majority” — white, straight and male. *Body of Voice* (2017) was produced for Cut Thumb Laundry, the artist run initiative in-residence at Metro Arts, Brisbane. Both installation and performance, red fluorescent lights filled the small gallery, which also contained two circular piles of soil. One pile was positioned around a small circular body of water that vibrated with sound coming from beneath the surface; the viewer was invited to kneel on the soil with an ear submerged in water for more direct experience. The other pile of soil hosted a mirrored disc and instruments of sound, effect pedals, contact mic, hand-held microphone and amplifier. This pile was host to Blacklock during the performance, and indicated past activity for the remainder of the exhibition.

The performance took place with the sound from the pond still quietly filling the space, nodding to how it was originally made. As per previous works, Blacklock sat on the mirrored disc, her feet planted in the soil, the microphone snaked around her leg with sound-distorting equipment in front of her. Over the course of approximately ten minutes, Blacklock poured soil onto the surface-miked mirror tapping and slapping away, while she continued to breathe and groan into the microphone permanently positioned at her mouth. At various intervals she produced a guttural scream that

went straight to the bone. As the audience we were never acknowledged, it was clear that Blacklock was not there to entertain. The all-encompassing and visceral work created an environment of curiosity, discomfort and critique. The work as both installation and performance extended the initial reading of witch=gender politics to create another world, one that is entirely removed from the homogenous daily grind of our polite, quiet, heteropatriarchal, cisnormative, white supremacist society.

Queer theory and feminism challenge one another and extend their potential, but together queer feminism provides the framework for a broader and therefore more inclusive deconstruction of all harmful constructions of identity relating to gender, sexuality, class and race.

¹ Dore Bowen, “On the site of her own exclusion: strategizing queer feminist art history,” *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, Edited by Amelia Jones and Erin Silver. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016, p. 145. ² Renate Lorenz, *Queer Art: A Freak Theory*, Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2012, p. 17. ³ J. Rogue, “De-essentializing Anarchist Feminism: Lessons from the Transfeminist Movement,” *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*, edited by C.B Daring, J. Rogue, Deric Shannon, Abbey Volcano. Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2012, p. 25. ⁴ Ruby Hamad & Celeste Liddle, “Intersectionality? Not while feminists participate in pile-ons,” *The Guardian*, 11 October 2017: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/11/intersectionality-not-while-feminists-participate-in-pile-ons?_5 ⁵ Amelia Jones, “Introduction: sexual differences and otherwise. In *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*. Edited by Amelia Jones and Erin Silver. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. ⁶ Erin Silver, “Epilogue: out of the boxes and into the streets — translating queer and feminist activism into queer feminist art history,” *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*. Edited by Amelia Jones and Erin Silver. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. ⁷ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, New York: New York University Press, 2009, p. 30. ⁸ Kate Britton, “Queer spritz,” *Art Monthly Australia*, Feminist Edition, *Feminism Now*, edited by Susan Best, no. 286, 2015–16 Feminist Edition, *Feminism Now*. ⁹ See http://cigdemydemir.com/plastic_histories.html. ¹⁰ See <http://cigdemydemir.com/swlyooms.html>. ¹¹ Frances Barrett would like me to note that she will not be performing this work again in the future as she has been made aware of some unintentional readings of the work. She would also like to note that, for her, queer feminist practice can be “a process from which we learn, which at time falters to find itself.” ¹² See <http://francesbarrett.com/projects/curator>. ¹³ Tirza True Latimer, “Improper objects: performing queer/feminist art/history”. In *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*. Edited by Amelia Jones and Erin Silver. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016, p. 96. ¹⁴ See <https://www.naomiblacklock.co/about>. ¹⁵ Stacy AKA Sallydarity, “Gender Sabotage”. In *Queering Anarchism: Addressing and Undressing Power and Desire*, edited by C.B Daring, J. Rogue, Deric Shannon, and Abbey Volcano. Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press, 2012, p. 47.

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