

Making

Suffrage Year Celebrations and the Visual (A)rts in New Zealand Difference

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Earlier this year I described our Centennial of Women's Suffrage as a timely caesura in which to assess the complex of issues confronting women in the visual arts in New Zealand.⁽¹⁾ Certainly, across the nation, artists, curators, writers and cultural commentators have focused their attention, in exhibitions, publications, conferences and seminars, on this very subject. Now, as the year draws to its close, it seems relevant to consider just what this year-long focus on women has achieved.

Firstly, I cannot help but acknowledge that amongst some of my colleagues and associates I can detect a certain guilty lassitude. Perhaps this is due to the fact that some may have taken this opportunity more out of a sense of duty to the occasion, or, more cynically, to take advantage of the New Zealand Government's largesse in the form of its \$4 million grant to the Suffrage Centennial Trust, rather than because of any strongly held social or political feminist agenda. Or perhaps this tiredness stems from the fact that there have been so many projects, positions and points of view presented over the course of the year that any clarity of purpose has been obscured.

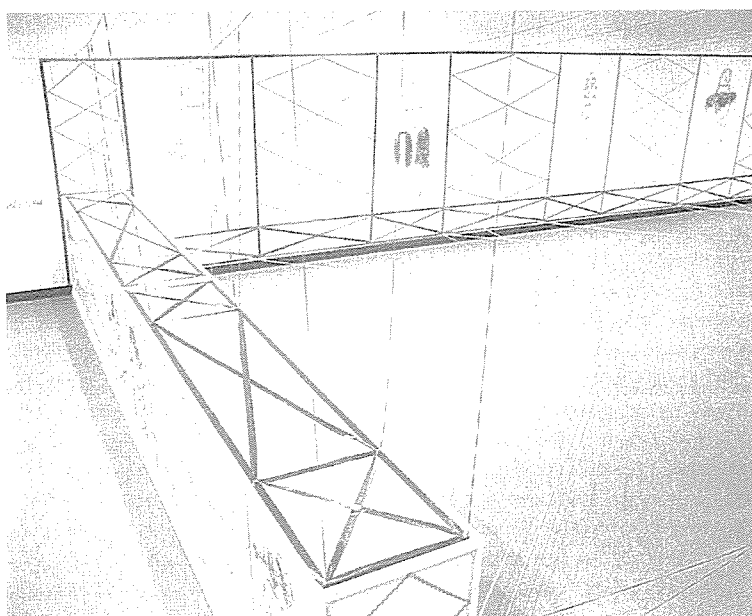
In September 1991, I noted a similar weariness and multiplicity of viewpoints when I attended the *Frames of Reference* conference at the University of Sydney which also addressed the state of feminism and the arts. There, first generation feminists urged us to remember the bad old days when women in the arts were discriminated against because of their gender; almost in the same breath as soft-spoken academics delivered densely argued analyses based on recent post-structural theory. Somehow, in the midst of this confusing plurality of approaches, it felt like a more urgent debate was happening elsewhere. Maybe a

discussion of feminism as the Gulf War raged was somehow mis-timed.

While the centenary of granting women the right to vote offered more reason than the event in Sydney (which as far as I could gather was not linked to any particular commemorative occasion), one cannot help but wonder whether, without Suffrage Year as a spur, the debates and discussions would indeed have occurred. Certainly it was not the political and social circumstances of women in 1993 that proved the

stimulus for, nor the focus of visual arts events.

Instead, many institutions took the opportunity to celebrate women's achievements in the visual arts with a plethora of exhibitions that unproblematically surveyed women's art practice. Often regional in focus, these shows presented work chronologically, putting biography to the fore, and, for the occasion, downplaying women artists' relation to their male peers. Generally inclusive, such shows tended to avoid





Opposite page:

Top: Joyce Campbell, detail of *Saving grace*, installation, High Street Project, Christchurch, May 1993.

Photo: Joyce Campbell.

Below: Jacqueline Fraser, detail of *He Tohu*, installation, City Gallery, Wellington, 1993. Photo: City Gallery.

Above left and right: Deborah Smith, *Untitled (ardours and endurances)*, photo-installation, *Mediatrix*, Artspace, Auckland, 1993; Detail of *Untitled (ardours and endurances)*, photo-installation, *Mediatrix*, Artspace, Auckland, 1993. Photo: Deborah Smith.

qualitative judgement, yet they also refused to test the boundaries between 'high' and 'low, by failing to include traditional 'women's work' like needlework and weaving. If these omissions reflected the collecting policies of art galleries, then there was little acknowledgement of the narrowness of their parameters, nor was there any attempt to account for it in the broader framework of established cultural hierarchies.

Well-meaning in intent, these projects devolved from the politics of the Women's Art Movement, wherein reclamation, celebration and inclusion were the key terms for selection. The most successful were shows like the Dowse Art Museum's *No-man's Land: Extending the Boundaries of Women and Art in Aotearoa New Zealand*, which attempted to address the arbitrariness of the boundaries between art and craft; or less obviously, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa's re-hang of its long-term collection show, *Perspectives*. Here, art by women or images of women were inserted into the narrative of New

Zealand art history, without upsetting its principal trajectories but nevertheless, subtly changing its emphases. More, though, could have been made of both these shows, especially to contextualise the politics of their respective transgressions and re-orientations.

Even at its most contemporary edge, the occasion was used simply as an opportunity to program exhibitions which were vehicles for the presentation of new work. From artist-initiated projects like *Femmes Vitales* (first seen at the Hawkes Bay Museum) to Artspace's *Mediatrix* in Auckland, the tendency was still to down-play the politics of gender-specific selection or to deny the relevance of culturally inscribed sexual identity to the outcomes of art-making.

One of the few projects to openly engage the complexities of a feminist debate was *Alter/Image*, an exhibition, film and video program and performance series co-organised by the City Gallery, Wellington and Auckland City Art Gallery. The

intention of myself and Deborah Lawler-Dormer (of the City Gallery), as joint curators of this project, was to use this occasion to investigate the relation of feminism to the visual arts over twenty years of art practice in New Zealand, attempting to bridge the divide between essentialist and critical feminism by addressing our topic not as an historical survey but rather as a non-linear investigation of women and representation.

Critics have been quick to point to omissions in the selection as well as to the foolhardiness of attempting to do too much in too little space. More interesting, perhaps, are those criticisms of the project for its categorisation of works *as* feminist, and therefore 'strait-jacketed' within a certain political frame. This suggests not only a reluctance to allow certain readings and theorisations of work, but more importantly, it points to a more general suspicion of any connection between the politics of feminism and art. As I have pointed out elsewhere,³ New Zealand does not have a strong tradition of political art and this perhaps accounts for our general eschewal of those artists and commentators who have attempted to operate in these terms.

In contrast, one must look beyond the official programs of Suffrage Year

to find a pressing political cause that women are beginning to address, one which has had and will increasingly have considerable impact in the visual arts. This is the issue of Maori feminism, its relation to cultural production and its mission to redefine the role of women within Maoridom.

By and large the Suffrage Centennial failed to involve Maori women. As Cushla Parekowhai has stated:

Maori lack of enthusiasm for 1993, the year celebrating the centenary of white woman's suffrage, is hardly misplaced ... Securing the vote for women did not seem to dramatically improve the options available to Maori people at all - even though we might have hoped so, since Pakeha women know themselves what it feels like to be politically and economically disadvantaged.³

Maori women believe that the occasion has offered little for them to celebrate. Interestingly, their arguments not only stem from the fact that they are Maori and that the power structures within which they operate are essentially Pakeha; but also that they are women who, in Maori society, have been discriminated against.

In Auckland, in August, at Artspace's *Trick or treat? Feminism and post-colonialism* conference, filmmaker Merata Mita adamantly proclaimed that Maori women have nothing in common with middle-class white feminists, that their first task is to address those issues that confront Maoridom as a whole: racism, injustice, land issues and language. Her concluding suggestion that Maori women had yet to define the parameters of Maori feminism was subsequently taken up in *Mana wahine*, a discussion at the City Gallery in Wellington, by artists and cultural commentators like Roma Potiki, Teremoana Hodges and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku. They, like Merata Mita, avoided any suggestion of solidarity with Pakeha women, preferring instead to address the patriarchal structures of Maori society, pointing to the suppression of women's stories, to the circumscription of women's roles in Maori protocol and to the secondary status accorded to weaving, an art-

form traditionally associated with women; ascribing this situation not to a naturally given history but to Pakeha colonisation which imposed its patriarchal religious and social structures and encouraged an alien ethics of individualism.

Although there were exhibitions that celebrated the achievements of Maori women, notably *Pumanawa: A celebration of whatu, raranga and taniko*, organised and toured by the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and *He tohu*, a major project by Jacqueline Fraser at the City Gallery, Wellington; it must be concluded that Maori women's suspicions of Suffrage Year and their reluctance to join in the celebrations are perhaps one of its most telling outcomes. Where their discussions go from here will undoubtedly have considerable impact in the next one hundred years of New Zealand's history.

"We are way post [sic] suffering through gender configurations that have scarred our lives throughout the '80s. We want to break through a new vulvatic gate where theory is nothing but a bead of sweat on the brow of a dead mule."⁴

I want to conclude this brief overview by considering another event which occurred during Suffrage Year but which knowingly sought to occupy a position outside its celebratory, gender-specific parameters. No guilty lassitude here, but rather an in-your-face refusal of the very terms within which other Suffrage projects have been construed.

Suffer, an artist-organised exhibition first held at Auckland's Teststrip Gallery in May and toured to the Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington in August, consisted of "small and sexy" works, as the catalogue stated, by a range of male and female artists: recent graduates, filmmakers, installation artists and sculptors who perhaps constitute New Zealand's version of the so-called 'grunge' aesthetic, neo-Dadaists and recession conceptualists who wanted nothing to do with the positive promotions of Suffrage Year. Their contention was that the politics of gender construction is old hat in the context of what has happened to the body in recent times. In the era of AIDS, bio-genetics and the wholesale consumerisation of sexuality, the body - its surfaces and

specificities - has been utterly transgressed. Gender is of little consequence here, sacrifice more relevant than suffrage.

As many of the artists in *Suffer* also contributed to other 'official' Suffrage projects, the point here is less that a genuinely radical underbelly has positioned itself to contest the politics of official culture, than that there is an emerging strand of younger artists who simply do not care whether their work is framed by established political and cultural agendas, who are much more excited by the possibility that ideas and aesthetics are moving elsewhere.

Undoubtedly Suffrage Year has marked a particular moment. Never before have women enjoyed such sustained and comprehensive exposure, and there has been much to assess, review and celebrate. It should be said, though, that much promising energy lies beyond the year's temporal frame. Aside from the benefits (and shortcomings) of an open-handed pluralism and attempts to more critically gauge the relation of feminism to the visual arts, Suffrage Year must also be seen as a watershed. It is a point from which the issues confronting Maori women must urgently be addressed and a moment from which to ponder the new and frightening possibilities that spring from a consideration of what it now means to be 'human'. If nothing else, the Centennial of Women's Suffrage will be remembered as the reason why we chose this year, 1993, as the moment in which to catch this particular breath. One can only wait to see whether the year's activities will indeed have made a difference. □

Footnotes

1. See my overview, 'Ten years on, reviewing the terrain for women in art in New Zealand', *Art New Zealand*, no 68, Spring 1993, p 52.
2. *ibid*, p 52.
3. Cushla Parekowhai, 'Puea o Te Ao: Rise to the surface of the world', in *Alter/image: Feminism and representation in New Zealand art 1973-1993*, City Gallery, Wellington and Auckland City Art Gallery, 1993, p 25. Although Maori women were also granted eligibility to vote in 1893, Parekowhai's point is that the situation for Maori was not vastly improved by this legislative decision.
4. Collective artists' statement, *Suffer* catalogue, Hamish McKay Gallery, Wellington, August 1993, unpaginated

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ART & THE FEMINIST PROJECT

GETTING EVEN

NEW STATISTICS

EXPLORING DIFFERENCE

WOMEN LOOKING AT WOMEN

WOMEN AND NATION

HERESIES

