CHAPTER 5

How the personal became (and remains) political in the visual arts

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Second-wave feminism ushered in major changes in the visual arts around the idea that the personal is political. It introduced radically new content, materials and forms of art practice that are now characterised as central to postmodern and contemporary art. Moreover, longstanding feminist exercises in ‘personal-political’ consciousness-raising spearheaded the current use of art as a testing ground for various social interventions and participatory collaborations known as ‘social practice’ both in and outside of the art gallery.¹

Times change, however, and contemporary feminism understands the ‘personal’ and the ‘political’ a little differently today. The fragmentation of women’s liberation, debates around essentialism within feminist art and academic circles, and institutional changes within the art world have prompted different processes and expressions of personal-political consciousness-raising than those that were so central to the early elaboration of feminist aesthetics. Moreover, the exploration and analysis of women’s shared personal experiences now also identify differences among women—cultural, racial, ethnic and class differences—in order to

1 On-Curating.org journal editor Michael Birchall cites examples such as EVA International (2012), the 7th Berlin Biennial and Documenta 13 that reflect overt and covert political ideas. Birchall outlined this feminist connection at the Curating Feminism symposium, A Contemporary Art and Feminism event co-hosted by Sydney College of the Arts, School of Letters, Arts and Media, and The Power Institute, University of Sydney, 23–26 October 2014.

serve more inclusive, intersectional cultural and political alliances. These shifts continue to challenge and open up opportunities for more diffused 'personal-political' art projects and forms of united feminist action. This paper articulates these shifts and challenges for feminism through a discussion of key Australian artworks, exhibitions and organised actions since the mid-1970s.

Arts as a vehicle for feminist consciousness-raising

We start by exploring the rise of these events that were a part of a transnational, feminist movement in the visual arts from the later 1960s.² In 1969, the New York group, Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) split off from the Art Workers' Coalition (AWC) because the AWC was male dominated and would not protest on behalf of women artists. In 1971, female artists picketed the Corcoran Biennial in Washington DC for excluding women artists, and New York Women in the Arts organised a protest against gallery owners for not exhibiting women's art. Then Linda Nochlin set the ball rolling by challenging the status quo of the Euroamerican art academy with her provocative essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', first published in the American publication *ARTnews* in 1971.³ It rapidly found a receptive audience with Australian artists, art historians and junior curators, and by 1973 the title of her provocative article was the subject of student essays in visual arts and fine arts courses at universities and art schools. Toni Robertson, then a Sydney University art history student (and artist), produced one of the first Australian elaborations of feminist art history and aesthetic theory.⁴

2 In Australia, the Sydney Women's Liberation group first met in Balmain and Sydney University in 1969. Two years later, Sue Bellamy and others organised the Art Workers for Liberation group in Sydney. See Barbara Hall, 'The Women's Liberation Movement and the Visual Arts: A Selected Chronology, 1969–90', in *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970–90*, ed. Catriona Moore (St Leonards, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 277–78.

3 Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists', *ARTNews* 69, no. 1 (1971): 23–39, 67–71.

4 Toni Robertson, 'From Dabbler to Artists: Towards a Feminist Art', *Arena* 7, no. 3 (1974): 12–15. The essay was reprinted in Catriona Moore, ed., *Dissonance: Feminism and the Arts 1970–90* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 12–21.

The women's liberation movement of the late 1960s was changing the face of art history and art exhibitions, and importantly the status of women artists and the sense of worth in living women artists. Some key international milestones that reflect these changes are the publication in 1973 of Thomas Hess and Elizabeth Baker's book, a follow-up to Nochlin's foray, entitled *Art and Sexual Politics: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*⁵ This was followed by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin's important exhibition first seen at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976, *Women Artists 1550–1950*, which turned the tables on the masculinist canon by showing 'the greats' such as Angelica Kauffmann and Judith Leyster whose work had been kept in museum stores.⁶ But one year earlier, the Ewing and Paton Galleries in Melbourne under Kiffy Rubbo's direction had already hosted an exhibition, *Australian Women Artists: One Hundred Years, 1840–1940*, which reclaimed the history of women's art for International Women Year (IWY) in 1975. It was opened by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam's Advisor on Women's Affairs, Elizabeth Reid. The idea to 'examine more closely the contribution which women have made to Australian art' and to 'redistribute the art historical balance' evolved from a 1974 Ewing and Paton exhibition, *A Room of One's Own*, which featured the work of three contemporary artists, Lesley Dumbrell, Ann Newmarch and Julie Irving, and heralded an explosion of feminist exhibitions across the country through IWY.⁷

The feminist return to the archives began a trend that brought to light new histories, what has been called 'Part Two' in the history of Western culture.⁸ Early counter-canonical texts included Karen Peterson and J.J. Wilson's *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* in 1976 and the British-based Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race* published in 1979. The archival recovery and reappraisal of women's arts and crafts fuelled the development of academic and studio-based feminist historiography, which gained real pace in the 1980s and 1990s, although it took on differing complexions

5 Thomas Hess and Elizabeth Baker, eds, *Art and Sexual Politics: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* (New York: Collier Books, 1973).

6 Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists 1550–1950* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976).

7 Kiffy Carter, 'Foreword' and Janine Burke in Janine Burke, *Australian Women Artists: One Hundred Years, 1840–1940* (Melbourne: Ewing and Paton Galleries, University of Melbourne Union, 1975), 9. The 1974 exhibition *A Room of One's Own* (curated Kiffy Rubbo and Meredith Rogers) included work by women artists, filmmakers and video artists.

8 Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Abrams, 1994), 10.

across nations. In Australia for instance, and especially under the guidance of Joan Kerr, it was not a matter of finding more ‘Old Mistresses’ or great woman artists, as a corrective to the existing art history canon, instead she pointed out that ‘we have to paint a new canvas and carve a new frame to fit [it] in’.⁹ For Kerr then, you could not ‘add in’ women’s arts to the history of Australian art without broadening the very conception of art upon which the national canon rests.¹⁰ A liberal-feminist, ‘add women’, equal-opportunity strategy was not sufficient for the much-needed structural change to the art historical canon and its academic, market and museum supports. Women’s work in its myriad forms challenged the canon’s masculinist, institutional structures and biased assumptions concerning artistic subjectivity, media hierarchies and aesthetic value.

The idea that ‘the personal is political’ was an important strategy driving these ventures: it was one strand of a larger feminist project, and it grounded a speculative, studio-based feminist aesthetics that challenged the narrowly conceived formalist canon of late modernism. It set in motion an approach to art and art making that was radically different from what had come before by male artists, and to a certain extent by women artists. It drew on, explored and critiqued female experience through innovative processes, media and forms. We sensed that these experimental modalities constituted a new, open-ended aesthetic category that allowed for the expression of non-canonical cultural perspectives: we called it ‘feminist aesthetics’. Lucy Lippard called this approach to art and cultural politics ‘a revolutionary strategy’ because the traditional divide of what belonged in the public and private realms was discarded.¹¹ That divide had largely ignored domestic female experience, for instance, although there are some notable art historical exceptions, such as Vida Lahey’s *Monday morning*, 1912, and Mary Cassatt’s *The child’s bath*, 1893.

As women artists turned to their own lives and the self as the source of art, they became the subject rather than the object of representation. The personal as political was both an aesthetic move and a political step that saw a melding of art and politics, as in the ‘washing machine’ street

9 Joan Kerr, ‘Introduction’, in *Heritage the National Women’s Art Book*, ed. Joan Kerr (Roseville East, NSW: G & B Arts International, 1995), viii.

10 Joan Kerr, ‘Art and Life’, in *The Humanities and a Creative Nation: Jubilee Essays*, ed. Deryck M. Schreuder (Canberra: Australian Academy of Humanities, 1994), republished in Joan Kerr, *A Singular Voice: Essays on Australian Art and Architecture*, ed. Candice Bruce, Dinah Dysart and Jo Holder (Sydney: Power Publications, University of Sydney, 2009), 51–66.

11 Lucy Lippard, ‘Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to Art of the 1970s’, *Art Journal* 39, no. 2/3 (1980): 362–65, doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1980.10793628.

performance by South Australian Women's Art Movement (WAM) members, organised by Jude Adams and others in 1981. It was an art performance that simultaneously aimed to 'cross through' the art institution and engaged with broader public audiences in order 'to get across some other social reality'.¹²

'The personal is political' challenged the mythic opposition between public and private realms, including art world divisions between the domestic spaces of home and studio (often the same space), the 'politics of the street' and the art institution. As today, in the 1970s feminist artists working in domestic and community settings drew connections between their own studio work and what they did in other fields—parenting, curating, teaching and community activism.¹³ The phrase 'the personal is political' was understood 'to imply that the reality of women's lives was larger than their traditional circumscription in the realm of the private and the personal and that, indeed, the very categories of private and public, were themselves, political fictions'.¹⁴ Norma Broude and Mary Garrard argued that the aligning of the political with the personal had two components: that it self-consciously articulated 'female experience from an informed social and political position', and that it had a universalising tendency of 'defining one's experience as applicable to the experience of other women'.¹⁵

North American artist and writer Judy Chicago integrated these ideas into an institutionally based, feminist art teaching program in 1970 at Fresno in California, which she expanded with Miriam Schapiro in 1971 at the California Institute of Art (CalArts) north of Los Angeles. The radically new 'personal is political' approach of working intensively with women students in spaces away from the campus, reading feminist material, sharing experiences and focusing studio classes on the subject of the body, often in collaborative performative work in the Feminist Art Program, led to an outburst of new work, especially that produced at *Womanhouse* in 1971. Their site, a condemned 17-room house in Los Angeles, was cleaned up and made into a feminist environment. Each room became a living breathing space, such as Vicki Hodgett's *Nurturant kitchen*—the walls

12 Angela Dimitrakaki, *Gender, artWork and the Global Imperative: A Materialist Feminist Critique* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 210.

13 See Catriona Moore and Jacqueline Millner, 'Introduction', in *Feminist Perspectives on Art: Contemporary Outtakes*, ed. Catriona Moore and Jacqueline Millner (London: Routledge, 2018).

14 Broude and Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art*, 29.

15 *Ibid.*, 12.

and ceiling covered with breasts (that loosely resembled fried eggs)—or Judy Chicago's *Menstruation bathroom*. Chicago and Schapiro theorised and publicised their experimental and immersive art environment, *Womanhouse* in California, particularly how the ideas, forms and content for this immersive, environmental artwork had been created through collective feminist consciousness-raising techniques to assert a combined 'personal-political' art practice.¹⁶

Australian women artists, abreast of this, were mobilising to set up Women's Art Movements in Melbourne (1974), Sydney (1975) and in Adelaide in 1977¹⁷ (initially in 1976 as a WAG, Women's Art Group, with the aim of setting up a slide register similar to that already underway in Melbourne). Slide registers were set up to create an archive of work by women artists in order to counter their absence in the art museums; the impetus for their establishment was the 1975 visit by US feminist art critic and curator Lucy Lippard. She had delivered the annual Power lecture on contemporary art, and she spoke to a women-only group in Melbourne and Adelaide about how women in the United States had set up such a slide register, the West-East Bag (WEB).

The Women's Art Movements were run as collectives, facilitating studio and exhibition-based consciousness-raising as a means to analyse the political implications of women's personal experiences through the forms, materials and processes of visual art. In a similar way to feminist art groups and programs overseas, the WAMs and their associated all-women events fostered safe and non-judgemental consciousness-raising (CR) methods derived from women's liberation—such as 'doing the circle'. This entailed taking turns to speak of one's own personal experience, sometimes around an agreed issue or theme, in order to individually and collectively articulate how the most intimate or personal areas of our lives are embedded within patriarchal relations of power and knowledge. These exchanges also took place within art studios and workshops, exhibitions, and in the fledgling Women and Art courses in Australian art schools, so that CR became a shorthand for creative methods of 'using one's own experience as the most

16 Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, 'The Education of Women as Artists: Project Womanhouse', *Art Journal* 31, no. 3 (1972): 269. See also in this context Lucy Lippard, 'Household Images in Art', *Ms.* 1, no. 9 (1973): 22.

17 In South Australia, for instance, WAM was originally housed in the Jam Factory at St Peters, Adelaide, along with the Experimental Art Foundation.

valid way of formulating political analysis'.¹⁸ The 'personal-political' basis for CR also became a platform for institutional intervention, as when Bonita Ely called for equity in art school staffing and the teaching methods be more sensitive to the experiences of the female art student majority back in 1977:

[The student] may want to express something very personal in their work. If they've had a baby, if they've had a miscarriage they may want to make a statement about that. If they've become involved in the cycles of nature and would like to express a very personal affinity through their menstrual cycle, they could very well be made to feel embarrassed about such work and find that experience has to be sublimated or sidestepped.¹⁹

In contrast to the male-dominated art institution, the autonomous feminist studio, workshop and exhibition spaces were generative hothouses for queer, radical and socialist-feminist personal-political explorations of gender and sexual difference. More often than not, an idealist, universalising idea of a 'global sisterhood' sought the commonality of women's experiences, and affirmed affinities between women. Also worth noting is that the affirmation of women's shared experiences was often also shaped through the recognition in differences of class, sexuality, religion, geography, language, culture and race.²⁰

'The personal is political' introduced radically new content, materials and forms of art practice, such as Ann Newmarch's screenprint *Women hold up half the sky* of 1978. This image (taken from the family album of her aunt Peggy and her husband) was cheekily titled with the oft-quoted Maoist slogan from the period, radicalising the social and political change under way by humorously showing women as literally fundamental to familial and social order. Moreover the medium of screen-printed images and photography producing multiple prints was seen as democratic and affordable, in contrast to the exclusive medium of oil paint or acrylic on canvas, and was adopted by many feminist artists and radical collectives at the time.

18 Judith Papachristou, *Women Together: A History in Documents of the Women's Movement in the United States* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 23.

19 Bonita Ely, 'Sexism in Art Education', in *The Women's Show 1977* (Adelaide: South Australian Women's Art Movement/Experimental Art Foundation, 1978), 48, cited in Catriona Moore, *Indecent Exposures: Twenty Years of Australian Feminist Photography* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 9.

20 The political emphasis and academic theorisation of intersectional feminism accelerated with the emergence of neoliberalism, as attested through early feminist slogans from the late 1970s such as (ex-British Tory PM) 'Margaret Thatcher: not my oppressed sister'.

Figure 5.1: *Women hold up half the sky*, Ann Newmarch, 1978, Prospect, Adelaide, colour screenprint on paper.

Source: Courtesy of Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

In August 1977, the Women's Art Movement in Adelaide hosted *The Women's Show* for the entire month. This was much more than a conventional visual arts exhibition. It was organised through an ambitious, multicollective structure of between 50 and 60 women, and was national in scope and participation, with subcollectives organising women-oriented elements for theatre, music, film, photography, poetry and literature, media, a conference and a visual art exhibition. Another collective arranged childminding. Funding was minimal for the entire event, which was realised through a \$1,000 grant from the South Australian Government and \$500 from the host institution, the Experimental Art Foundation.

The exhibition component of *The Women's Show* was of work submitted by women artists irrespective of profile or experience, with the aim of showing every work submitted, which amounted to over 350 works on view. The collective opted for a 'mixed show', which meant it was not ordered by an artworld-imposed theme, subject or genre—rather the universality of the women's experiences was the key factor. Unsurprisingly, in the lead-up to this decision, there was much discussion as to whether the event should be an unselected and inclusive women's show, or a more tightly curated feminist show. The politically acute decision for inclusion resulted in creative tensions, evidenced in the broad exhibition call-out and its unforeseen, overwhelming response; in the show's loose installation process; and in its eclectic exhibition design, where work of 'very different sorts of artists of entirely different backgrounds and experience were hung side by side'.²¹ For instance, Margaret Dodds's *Made to serve*, c. 1977, a non-functional bright pink ceramic teapot bearing a woman's face whose head was covered with hair rollers and bex tablets, and Frances Budden's (later Phoenix) *Relic*, 1977, featuring the embroidered text, 'Mary's blood never failed me' along with her *Period*, 1977, shared the cavernous viewing space of the Jam Factory with the work of lesser-known women. This inclusive approach to process and display, while grounded in the feminist politics of the time, prompted one mainstream art critic (Peter Ward) to ask whether it was 'incorrigibly bourgeois' of him to complain that the exhibition areas weren't adequately swept, while much discussion at the accompanying conference theorised the feminist value of inclusivity.²²

21 On that tension, see Anne Marsh, *Difference: A Radical Approach to Women and Art* (Adelaide: Women's Art Movement, 1985), 2; and J. Ewington, 'Hanging the Exhibition', in Women's Art Movement, *The Women's Show, Adelaide, 1977* (St Peters, SA: Experimental Art Foundation, 1978), 10–11.

22 See P. Ward, 'Of Women, by Women for Women', in Women's Art Movement, *The Women's Show, Adelaide, 1977*, 37; and 'Julie Ewington Answers Peter Ward', and Ewington, 'Hanging the Exhibition', in Women's Art Movement, *The Women's Show, Adelaide, 1977*, 10–11.

Figure 5.2: *Kitchen Bench C*, Ann Newmarch, 1977, colour screenprint on paper.

Source: Courtesy of Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

Picturing life experiences

Ann Newmarch probed her own life experiences in two exhibits in *The Women's Show*. In *Three months of interrupted work*, 1977, she focused on the difficulty of combining her work as an artist with motherhood in which she suggested her world *is* her kitchen with its tidy, ordered objects tastefully arranged on the bench and the shelf above, rather like a Morandi sculpture. Then her photograph *5 years and 5 days*, 1977, of her boys Jake and Bruno, documented and validated the intimate moments of motherhood. By 1980, Newmarch was working with a group from the Women's Art Movement and the Prospect Mural Group on an anti-rape mural, *Reclaim the night*, 1980. Newmarch has had a longstanding commitment that 'art should be made out of personal experience not out of "art" concerns', but, she added, 'personal experience is only a useful source of art when it is accompanied by an understanding of the social conditions in which it arises. An artist has a responsibility as an image maker to concerns wider than herself or her art'.²³ This focus has continued in later decades in work that continued to take in the personal—such as *Tear*, 1992, in which a high chair she made for her middle son was modified to have 'a very unstable base—almost like a crutches high chair',²⁴ becoming a metaphor for life itself.

In 1975, founding Sydney WAM member Marie McMahon similarly reread her family photo album to investigate the social construction of femininity through institutions of the family, school, church and community. Her critical, autobiographical focus also followed the feminist tenet of 'the personal is political', giving the (then unfashionable) category of 'personal experience' a sharp, analytic purchase. McMahon scaled up her family photographs on vitreous enamel panels to challenge the related ideological and social apparatuses that contour women's lives. Intimate photographic moments are cast as turning points in the formation of feminine identity. McMahon questioned the material traces of a woman's life—the family album, the confirmation dress, the wedding ring, the baby's layette. Like Newmarch, she proposed a different sense of time (what the psychoanalyst and cultural writer Julia Kristeva would later call

23 Ann Newmarch quoted in Julie Robinson, *Ann Newmarch: The Personal is Political* (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1997), 27.

24 Julie Robinson interviewed by Catherine Speck, 21 April 2015; Janine Burke, 'Taken at Face Value: Self Portraits and Self Images', catalogue essay, *Self Portrait/Self Image*, Victorian College of the Arts Gallery, July–August 1980, 8.

‘women’s time’).²⁵ McMahon’s herstory measured a life of (re)productive labour as punctuated by birthdays, the onset of menstruation, the loss of virginity, weddings, child-rearing, home maintenance and menopause, rather than the time of productive labour (measured by the shareholder’s report, Budget night or the financial year).

Feminist artists emphasised women’s shared experiences of migration and cultural heritage, traditional craft skills, domestic and (low) paid labour, often within community arts and trades union–hosted art projects of the 1980s. These activist projects visualised what gender-sensitive multiculturalism might look like, and spearheaded a form of social art practice that emphasised dialogue over proselytising or directive artistic authorship. In this way, the predominantly middle-class, Anglo-Celtic feminist artists working on these projects were challenged by the diversity of women’s socioeconomic, racial, religious, political and cultural agency.

Figure 5.3: *Innocent reading for origin*, Elizabeth Gertsakis, 1988, gelatin silver prints.

Source: Courtesy of Monash Gallery of Art, City of Monash Collection.

25 Julia Kristeva, Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, ‘Women’s Time’, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981): 13–35, doi.org/10.1086/493855.

Through the 1980s, the Macedonian-born, Melbourne-based artist Elizabeth Gertsakis and others (like Dina Tourvis and Jacky Redgate) also pulled images from personal albums to dislodge related stereotypes of Australian immigrant experience.

Gertsakis's *Innocent reading for origin* (1988) resisted any simple recourse to her family album as a purveyor of naive or unmediated personal experience, however. She played up the family photograph's 'untutored' informality as a visual equivalent for broken English, adopting a pseudo-innocent, interrogative voice in captioning each of her family photographs. This enabled the artist and spectator to ask disarmingly humorous questions that dislodged the stereotyped migrant narrative of the 'voyage out' and arrival in 'the new country', with its well-worn tropes of emotional authenticity and nostalgia. Gertsakis instead wanted to complicate the push and pull of the migrant story, with its driving theme of homesickness/sickness of home. She wanted to test the personal experiences showcased in her family album up against the commonly understood character of white Australian identity, to argue against any essential or a priori quality to either migrant or host cultural identity. This work challenged any self-evident understanding of 'the personal' as an authentic, essential or originary locus for identity politics. Increasingly through the 1980s, feminist art reinvented 'the politics of the personal' as a more nuanced, differentiated social field. The Sydney-based, Turkish-Australian artist Cigdem Ademir's performance work continues this tendency—a longstanding strength of Australian arts feminism—of dislodging stereotyped or essentialist images of 'the personal'. Through clever clowning she enacts a spectrum of mass-produced nightmares: veiled, feminised Islamism; the subjugated and suppressed woman; the sexualised Orientalist beauty; the veiled woman as exotic cultural commodity; the unknown terrorist threat.

Indigenous artists' use of the family album as counter-narrative also challenged essentialist notions of 'the personal' as the well-spring of a politically reductive, unitary female perspective. Brenda L. Croft's group portraits from 1993, collectively titled *The big deal is Black*, bounced off the huge colonial archive of ethnographic studio portraits of Aboriginal people, group portraits and 'typical Aboriginal scenes' that formed a staple of the colonial view trade, tourism glossies, instrumental welfare imagery and human interest documentary photography. While most of this massive image-bank is characterised by unbalanced power

relations between the (white, colonial) photographer and his dispossessed, powerless and scrutinised subjects, Croft says her series ‘is about letting you see something of us on our own terms’.²⁶

Her large-scale yet emotionally intimate family portraits were shot in the context of Prime Minister Paul Keating’s ‘Redfern speech’ (1992), Mabo (*Native Title Act 1994*; amended in 1998), the Stolen Generations (‘Bringing Them Home’ inquiry 1995–97) along with other Indigenous art projects charged with reconciliation politics. These renditions typically combined oral histories, film, photography, maps, paintings and other archival citations to stress family and community connectivity. Croft stresses these qualities in her portraits of local Aboriginal families in easy relationship with the photographer. These crisp, informally shot colour portraits are scaled up, larger than life: this is a ‘big deal’, and we sense these women are big personalities. Together, they command our attention and play the room. They were first exhibited at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney, accompanied by audiotapes discreetly placed in the corner of the gallery, which played a soft soundscape weaving snatches of domestic conversation, laughter and shared memories, and grounding both portraits and spectators in a living, communal setting. As Brenda L. Croft explained:

The Big Deal—is a card game, is the Mabo issue, is a land deal, is no big deal, but it all comes down to being BLACK and living in the city, and all the roads that lead you here ... All this BIG DEAL is about letting you see something of us on our terms. This is about being a Black woman—you might be mother, sister, aunt, cousin, daughter, friend—no difference, the DEAL is the same.²⁷

Feminist insistence upon the personal as political challenged the public/private divide and knitted together art and domestic spheres in new ways. Australian feminism derives extra benefit from the strategic links that Indigenous artists and curators make between art practice, personal experience, community wellbeing, customary law and

26 Brenda L. Croft statement regarding *The Big Deal is Black*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, n.d., accessed June 2016, www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/392.1993/. Also cited, Lisa Belleair, ‘The Big Deal is Black: Brenda L. Croft’, 100% mabo, *Photofile*, no. 40 (November 1993): 19–22. See also Wayne Tunncliffe in Hetti Perkins and Cara Pinchbeck, *Tradition Today: Indigenous Art in Australia* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2014).

27 Brenda L. Croft, *The Big Deal is Black*, catalogue, Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative at the ACP, Sydney, 1993, cited in Belleair, ‘The Big Deal Is Black’, 19.

environmental justice. As we have argued elsewhere,²⁸ feminists now acknowledge how Indigenous communal spaces of art production, reception and exchange push the radical possibilities of personal-political ‘domestic critique’ still further. Today we see the indigenous bush camp, ceremonial ground or community art centre as related sites of art and education, landownership and custodianship, law and kinship. In this sense, ‘the domestic’, as a privileged location of personal experience, does not denote specific home or studio spaces in the Western-colonial sense.²⁹ For instance, in the remote Eastern Kimberley region of Western Australia, young Gija people may first know a particular *Ngarranggarni* (creation) story through looking at a painting by their father, aunty or grandmother. They might then be taken to the country where the story took place and that it shaped: knowledge central to Gija identity.³⁰ Indigenous artists and curators relay personal, community, cultural, environmental and political issues in a way that resonates with, and subtly reformulates, the longstanding feminist slogan, ‘the personal is political’. Importantly, Indigenous artworkers stress the need to recalibrate art and teaching institutions to ensure that cross-cultural ethics and protocols are practised—a necessary part of forging intersectional alliances.

We have described a broadening, at times fragmented, yet generally aligned cultural field of identity politics shaped through the feminist idea: ‘the personal is political’. We now also acknowledge how the force of our feminist critique has evolved through the genius of radical drag. A feminist, queer politics continues to question the gendered and embodied nature of personal experience, and how this may link to a broader cultural and social politics. For instance, in an early work, Sydney-based artist Liam Benson simply and elegantly interrogated the neat fit between masculine heteronormativity and the national story of egalitarian mateship and common prosperity, as sung to the Oz-country twang of John Williams’s iconic song ‘True Blue’ (*True Blue*, 2010).

28 Jo Holder and Catriona Moore, ‘A Feminist Curator Walks into a Gallery...’, in *Feminist Perspectives on Art: Contemporary Outtakes*, ed. Catriona Moore and Jacqueline Millner (London: Routledge, 2018), doi.org/10.4324/9781315162072-2.

29 Ralph Juli, ‘Story Is Good for Me’, in *Garnkiny: Constellations in Meaning* (Western Australia: Warmun Art Centre, 2014), 81.

30 Anna Crane, ‘Introduction’, in *Garnkiny: Constellations in Meaning* (Western Australia: Warmun Art Centre, 2014), 3; Shirlee Purdie, ‘Ngali-Ngalim-Boorroo (For the Women)’, in *Curating Feminism: A Contemporary Art and Feminism Event*, ed. Alana Hunt and Anna Crane (Sydney: University of Sydney, 2014), 28.

Figure 5.4: Liam Benson, *True Blue*, 2010, video still from single channel video.

Source: Courtesy of the artist and Arterreal Gallery. vimeo.com/69784371.

In closing, we note that, in the absence of an organised feminist art movement, today the personal is political remains a vital form of arts activism. In a variety of social spaces, personal-political analysis drives a 'pop-up' arts pedagogy and political networking that are elaborated as performance, feminist 'teach-in', curatorial laboratory and as a form of contemporary art known as social practice. For instance, the Brisbane feminist collective LEVEL invokes the communal, domestic power of the personal is political through their ongoing project *We need to talk*, a series of picnics, salons and dinners from 2012.³¹ Their 'convivium' format emphasises collectivity and inclusion, in contrast to art market traits of individualism, careerism and opportunism.³² They pay homage to longstanding consciousness-raising strategies, but in a contemporary context, following bell hooks' advice that 'consciousness raising groups, gatherings and public meetings need to become a central aspect of feminist practice again. Women need spaces where we can

31 LEVEL at the time included Courtney Coombs, Caitlin Franzmann, Rachael Haynes, Anita Holtsclaw and Courtney Pedersen.

32 An early outline of the critical possibility of communally based artwork is conceptual artist Mel Ramsden's 'On Practice' (1975), cited in Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 8. Another LEVEL-associated project is *Conversation Pieces* (Curator: Rachael Haynes), Boxcopy Contemporary Art Space. Artists included Catherine or Kate, Agatha Gothe-Snape, Alex Martinis Roe, Hannah Raisin, Scott Ferguson, Courtney Coombs and Caitlin Franzmann. International Women's Day, 8–29 March 2014, www.boxcopy.org.

explore intimately and deeply all aspects of female experience'.³³ In June 2014, for instance, a themed picnic (*Talking feminism and food*) on the Queensland Art Gallery's GoMA (Gallery of Modern Art) forecourt at the opening of the *Harvest* exhibition provided a critical focus for the exhibition: 'how we can use the idea of the "recipe"—a shared set of ingredients and methods—as a way forward to a better world. Together we will develop a recipe for a revolution'.³⁴

'The personal' now mixes diverse sexual, gendered, cultural, racial and class-based experiences as active political ingredients. It continues to generate diverse intersectional action, without recourse to its more universalising companion slogan from the 1970s, 'global sisterhood'. The personal is political remains a cornerstone of today's more fluid identity politics, not simply invoked to safeguard difference but, as Angela Dimitrakaki proposes in the UK context, 'to justify the social demand of acting with others ... Identity, including self-identity, is mobilized to enable alliances rather than question their desirability of viability'.³⁵ We have demonstrated that the personal is still political. This directs the consciousness of addressing and fighting for the rights of *all women* and it has been a prevalent feature of feminism in the arts since the early 1970s. Intersectional alliances require more than ethical-behavioural choices, of course, although we would argue that white feminists need to follow protocols of permission and acknowledgement when collaborating with Indigenous artists and their communities. More than this, however, we suggest that non-Indigenous feminists engaging in the struggle for environmental justice and against racism need to couple pragmatic, ethical-behavioural issues with an understanding of structurally embedded

33 bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 639.

34 'We Need to Talk Feminism and Food', 23 June 2014, artists' statement, blog.qagoma.qld.gov.au/we-need-to-talk-feminism-and-food/, in the 'We Need To Talk' gallery installation (SEXES, Performance Space, Carriageworks, Sydney; Curators: Bec Dean, Deborah Kelly and Jeff Khan; 25 October – 1 December 2012 www.performancespace.com.au). Note earlier in 2012 LEVEL organised a series of dinner party and banner-making workshops, including 'Food for Thought', a collective project by LEVEL, 2012 Next Wave Festival, Melbourne, Footscray Community Arts Centre, Melbourne.

35 Dimitrakaki, *Gender, artWork and the Global Imperative*, 231. She also cites, in the context of organising a common transnational platform for feminist curating in Europe, papers presented at the Common Differences symposium (Tallinn, May 2010), especially Katja Kobolt's paper 'Feminist Curatorial Practices and Feminist Canon-Building Strategies as Political Actions'. See common-differences.artun.ee (accessed 1 February 2017). Dimitrakaki, *Gender, artWork and the Global Imperative*, 239.

inequities of race, class and gender privilege.³⁶ This is what 'the personal is political' has taught us, after all. Forged in the hothouse of postmodern feminism, it still provides a useful conceptual bridge for contemporary political alliances. Of all the old feminist slogans, 'the personal is political' possibly remains the most useful in respecting difference and strategic, identity-based separatism, while continually probing the meaning of inclusivity and democracy.

36 Ibid.

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