

BACKFLIP: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art





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Catherine Bell
Melanie Bonajo
Brown Council
Catherine or Kate
Patty Chang
Guerrilla Girls
Hotham Street Ladies
Alice Lang
Louise Lawler
Tracey Moffatt
nat&ali
Frances (Budden) Phoenix
Pushpamala N
Hannah Raisin
Pipilotti Rist
Mika Rottenberg
Christian Thompson
Paul Yore

Curator: Laura Castagnini

the 1990s, the number of people in the world who are illiterate has increased from 1.2 billion to 1.5 billion.

There is a growing awareness that illiteracy is a major barrier to economic and social development. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has estimated that illiteracy costs the world economy \$100 billion a year.

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Introduction

Feminist art practice is becoming increasingly well documented within an international context, and recent Australian discourse has focussed around exhibitions such as *Contemporary Australia: Women* at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, the artist run initiative Level's *Food for Thought* project for the 2012 Next Wave Festival (in fact, Level's programs more broadly), *A Dinner Party: setting the table* at West Space, to name just a few. The Margaret Lawrence Gallery also has contributed to this dialogue through such exhibitions as *Bird Girls* and *A Time Like This* after which Laura Castagnini approached me, in mid-2011, about the possibility of working together on a project she was researching around humour in contemporary feminist art practice.

We had met a few times previously, beginning several conversations about the current state of feminism – but without really having an opportunity to take the discussions further – and we were certainly interested in one another's perspectives on an issue in which we both felt deeply invested; in this instance, Laura was specifically interested in how humour within feminist practices was often marginalised, misread or overlooked altogether. The Curator Mentorship Initiative administered by NAVA (the National Association for the Visual Arts) seemed the perfect platform for Laura and I – as women from different generations and contexts, and at different stages in our professional lives – to formalise a relationship and commence working together. Thus began nearly two years of meeting, writing, arguing, laughing and finally launching the wonderful exhibition *BACKFLIP: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art*. Along the way, there have been some great highlights (bringing the Guerrilla Girls to Melbourne was a thrill for us both), a few minor disagreements (to be expected when two opinionated women spend so much together) and some terrific opportunities (such as Laura's participation in the 2012 Gwangju Biennale International Curator Course).

In the time we've been working together there have been some decidedly unfunny moments in the cause for women both at home and abroad, with the gang rape and subsequent death of a young student in Delhi late last year representing a single incident that highlighted, most tragically, the daily plight facing women in some parts of the world. The response to Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's charge of misogyny towards Tony Abbott – although widely applauded by feminists, as well as by international media – was largely reported within Australian media as little more than hyperbolic and theatrical double-standard. And, as curators based in Melbourne, presenting an exhibition within a university context, Laura and I are both keenly aware that the high proportion of female-to-male artists in the student cohort is quickly inverted when one looks to career opportunities and commercial representation beyond art school.

Those considerable contexts (among so many others) provided a background for our discussions and continue to inform our thinking but, as Jo Anna Isaak notes within this publication in her discussion around feminist theory, practice and activism of the 1980s: 'Laughter came to be thought of as a metaphor for transformation, for thinking about cultural change.' Indeed, humour is a powerful strategy when it comes to disarming and engaging and, as Laura outlines in her text, that is very much her intention with this exhibition; by presenting funny feminist work, she hopes to engage wider audiences in broader conversations around feminism(s).

Many individuals and organisations have supported this exhibition and the other activity presented in association with *BACKFLIP*. I would like to thank the National Association for the Visual Arts and the Curator Mentorship Initiative supported by the Sidney Myer Fund for providing development funding for this project; and Jan Cochrane-Harry and the Margaret Lawrence Bequest for ongoing, and highly valued, support. I would like to thank Victoria Bennett for compiling the VCA Video Lounge that sits within *BACKFLIP* and especially the artists who have been kind enough to loan video works they made during their student days at the VCA School of Art. They include: Santina Amato, Jessie Angwin, Elena Betros, Maggie Brown, Martha Ackroyd Curtis, Jaya Fausch, Katya Grokhovsky, Danielle Hakim, Heidi Holmes, Hit & Miss, Kate Just, Anastasia Klose, Kiera Brew Kurec, Anna Leaton, Sarah Lynch, Kym Maxwell, Kate Meakin, Adelle Mills, Nina Mulhall, nat&ali, Judy Perfect, Hannah Raisin, Alexandra Saad, Emily Taylor, Kalinda Vary, Inez de Vega and Kellie Wells. I would like to thank the artists, writers and feminists who are generously participating in our forums and events: Catherine Bell, Atlanta Eke, Mish Grigor, Guerrilla Girls, I'm Trying to Kiss You, Catriona Moore, nat&ali, Hannah Raisin, and Linda Sproul.

I thank the remarkable artists who have contributed work to *BACKFLIP*: Catherine Bell, Melanie Bonajo, Brown Council, Catherine or Kate, Patty Chang, Guerrilla Girls, Hotham Street Ladies, Alice Lang, Louise Lawler, Tracey Moffatt, nat&ali, Frances (Budden) Phoenix, Pushpamala N, Hannah Raisin, Pipilotti Rist, Mika Rottenberg, Christian Thompson and Paul Yore for their variously funny, ironic, clever, cutting, feminist work – as well as the many galleries and lenders who have assisted with loans of work. Most particularly, I would like to thank Laura Castagnini for the enthusiasm, the rigour and the wonderful insight she has brought to this project. It has been a delight and a privilege to be involved.

VIKKI MCINNES

Director, Margaret Lawrence Gallery

Right:
GUERRILLA GIRLS
Museums Cave in to Radical Feminists, 2012
Poster, dimensions variable
Courtesy the artists

Following pages:
HANNAH RAISIN
Flowing Locks, 2007
Still from HD single channel video, 1:24 mins
Courtesy the artist

MUSEUMS CAVE IN TO RADICAL FEMINISTS!

RECENT FEMINIST EXHIBITIONS/PROGRAMS:

► "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" PS1 MoMA, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, and National Museum of Women in the Arts, D.C.

► "Global Feminisms" The Brooklyn Museum

► "Making it Together: Collaboration and Contemporary Feminist Practice" The Bronx Museum

► "Feminist Futures" Museum of Modern Art

Stop this dangerous political trend!
Demand that museums go back to the good old days
with lots of (white) male artists AND NO FEMINISM!

Male Art Now!

FOR CENTURIES MUSEUMS HAVE BEEN FILLED WITH MEN'S ART. LET'S KEEP IT THAT WAY!

www.iggleh.com  [indochinaexpress.net](https://twitter.com/indochinaexpress)







ALICE LANG
Same Diff, 2012 (detail)
 Photo and acrylic on paper, two parts, 42 x 42 cm each
 Courtesy the artist

BACKFLIP: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art

I started thinking about this show three years ago when I was interning for Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A Sackler Centre for Feminist Art and, in the evenings, writing for a publication back home about play and performance in the work of Hannah Raisin, Brown Council, Hit & Miss and Jemima Wyman. In the process of writing I became acutely aware that the light-hearted and often silly approaches taken by these young artists was in direct opposition to the continuing stereotype of feminism as earnest, authoritative and humourless. I wondered if humour was perhaps a defining trope of contemporary feminist practice, and quickly drafted a list of artists working in this vein which I excitedly showed to Sackler Centre's curator, Catherine Morris. She had three words for me; 'look back further.' Look back I did, and I was astonished to learn about feminism's rich legacy of wit, satire and playfulness that went right back through the 1970s and beyond. Laughter, as it turns out, has long been used as a strategy of political disruption and therefore lends itself quite readily to feminism. There are many, many, examples of funny feminist art, from all over the world (many more, of course, than I could ever hope to represent in a single exhibition). However when I asked friends to suggest a feminist joke to title my essay, the most popular suggestion was 'Q. How many feminists does it take to change a light bulb? A. That's not funny!' This discrepancy begs the question: why has such a negative stereotype continued to dominate the representation of feminist art within art history, institutions and popular culture?

BACKFLIP: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art aims to provide a counterpoint by presenting a lineage of funny feminist practices in all their mischievous glory. It begins with the local and the contemporary, revealing that some forms of feminist humour continue to be reappropriated and reworked by younger generations of artists. The exhibition then branches outwards and backwards, introducing work by some of the influential artists themselves into the conversation. This somewhat transnational and cross-generational curatorial approach reflects our current point in the development of feminist thought in which we appear to be performing 'backflips.' Constantly looking outside the West but simultaneously back to the second wave for advice and comparisons, contemporary feminists are still giving 'lip' to the patriarchy but carefully reconsidering the strategies of earlier feminisms.

The video *Flowing Locks* (2007), by Melbourne artist **Hannah Raisin**, succinctly describes this contemporary condition. It presents the young artist, in a lycra bodysuit and an extraordinary amount of (fake) bodily hair, blissfully dancing and posing in front of Melbourne's Australian Centre for Contemporary Art. The piece is simultaneously a celebration of the natural female body, an 'up yours' to contemporary ideals of feminine hairlessness, and a nod (or a wink?) to feminist art practices of the 1970s. Raisin's investigations of the body have since expanded to reference non-human species as seen in her new video *Synchronized Sand* (2013), in which a reptile-like Raisin swims a futile effort through the looming desert. Brisbane based **Alice Lang's** series of text based drawings, *The Swell* (2012), presents a more personal view of the meaning, presence and experience of feminism within the lives of Australian women in the past and present. All inspired by ongoing conversations between the artist and her mother about feminism, *Grow A Set*, *Yeah Right*, and *Same Diff* present hypnotic layers of coloured texta that encircle specifically Gen-Y slang.

American artist **Patty Chang**'s performative video *Melons (At A Loss)* (1998) also references the past, specifically the aesthetics (and aggressive stereotype) of 1960s feminist and performance art. In a subtle parody of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1965), Chang, within an unflinchingly still frame, begins by balancing a plate on her head and telling the viewer about a saucer given to her to commemorate an aunt's death. Within seconds she stoically slices open her bra but instead of a bloody breast Chang reveals a cantaloupe, which she then eats with a spoon as she speaks. Dutch artist **Melanie Bonajo** more directly re-enacts an iconic feminist performance, namely VALIE EXPORT's *Genital Panik* (1968). Bonajo's *Genital Panik: An Event for Equality* (2012), while retaining Export's signature crotchless trousers, adopts a more pluralistic and playful approach by painting in fluorescent colours the public hair of her participating performers (both male and female).

Dressed in drag and holding a Nikon camera, South Australia born Bidjara man **Christian Thompson**'s impression of internationally successful Indigenous Australian artist Tracey Moffatt in his photograph *In Search of the International Look* (2005) similarly homages his role model in a light-hearted manner. The work also points to concerns of authenticity within gendered and racially defined categories, which are more fully explored in *Hannah's Diary* (2009). Thompson – again wearing women's clothes (this time, a long white wig and stockings over a dress that boldly proclaims 'realness') and with a bright orange didgeridoo in hand – presents a caricature of Indigenous representation. **Tracey Moffatt** herself is presented in *BACKFLIP*, with a video work entitled *Heaven* (2007). Simultaneously reversing the male gaze and parodying ethnographic documentary, Moffatt's camera spies on a range of male surfers undressing at Bondi Beach. During the course of the 28min film her proximity to the men intensifies (at one point, towards the end, she pulls the towel off a guy for a glimpse of his package) and we witness a range of male responses from embarrassed or outraged to bawdy.

Mum's the Word (2011), one of two maternally themed works presented by Melbourne artist **Catherine Bell**, also uses surveillance technology to capture pockets of social discomfort or unease, namely the racially unbalanced adoption and paid care of children in the United States. Bell, whose work often deals with trauma (including her own childlessness), uses dark humour to explore racial and gendered implications of nannying. The separation of children from their biological mothers is also explored in *Gorilla Baby* (2009), which takes a more absurd turn in its reference to the myth of babies brought up in the wild by gorillas.

Museums Cave into Radical Feminists (2012) and *Museums Unfair to Men* (2012), the picket signs by New York based **Guerrilla Girls**, utilise a similar strategy of reversal to highlight gender inequalities. Envisioning a world where museums do underrepresent male artists really is laughable! At the same time, as with Guerrilla Girls' many other posters and actions, beneath the sarcasm we can detect a glimmer of hope for the possibility of an equitable future. The Guerrilla Girls (along with others including Coco Fusco and Andrea Fraser) propagated institutional critique through parody in the 1980s, and feminist artists have long employed humour as a tool to shed light on unequal gender representation. American artist **Louise Lawler** is a key example, represented here through *Birdcalls* (1972/81), a sound piece for which Lawler squawks the names of famous (mostly white) male artists who were institutional mainstays at the time of its creation. The work is installed in the gallery courtyard, where it will blend with natural surrounds and provide art school students scurrying between



PATTY CHANG
Melons (At A Loss), 1998
Stills from single channel video, 3:44 mins
Courtesy the artist



NAT&ALI
nat&ali do Fragonard's The Swing, 2013
Acrylic on canvas, 58 x 63 cm
Courtesy the artists

classes with a subliminal reminder that institutional bias continues to inhibit the success of women artists.

Melbourne artist **Paul Yore** takes a different approach to institutional critique in his needlepoint tapestry *CUM* (2012). Far removed from his usual chaotic and colourful creations, *CUM* functions as a parody of 'serious' minimalist art purporting to engage with critical theory. Utilising a traditionally feminine craft to spell out sexual bodily fluids, the work also references the phallocentric (and heterosexual) canon of Western art making.

Baking, another domestic task traditionally deemed 'feminine', is subverted through the baked creations of Melbourne collective **Hotham Street Ladies**. Their 'street art' – represented through photographic documentation of live actions as well as the installation of a giant uterus rendered in icing in the gallery's male toilets – combines meticulous attention to detail with absurd and crude imagery to playfully question notions of femininity. The Brisbane based duo **Catherine or Kate**, whose collective title purposefully tricks Google searchers towards gossip about Kate Middleton, also engage female archetypes through positioning their almost sisterly rivalry as subject of their collaboration. In past works they have performed sword fights for naming rights and conducted a survey for who is better looking, and for *BACKFLIP*, Catherine or Kate present themselves as two robotic vacuum cleaners that divulge embarrassing facts about each other.

If Catherine or Kate are bickering sisters, then **nat&ali** are their self-absorbed, antagonistic aunts. nat&ali's well-known antics at Melbourne art openings during the early 2000s (including harassing curators and B-grade celebrities alike for photo opportunities, as well as handing out cards inscribed 'we waz robbed' when they received funding or proposal rejections) provided a backdrop for their ongoing interest in celebrity and failure. Articulated through performative and video installations their work, like that of Catherine or Kate, often used stand-ins or ciphers to represent the artists. *Friendship Is* (2001), which has been recreated in *BACKFLIP*, is one such installation, parodying the idealisation of female friendship and associated 'feel good' mantras. nat&ali have reunited for this exhibition to present two paintings, *nat&ali do Fragonard's The Swing* (2013) and *nat&ali do Drysdale's Australian Traveller* (2004), which cheekily insert their past works into the great 'master' canon of Western painting.

Not all the works in this exhibition are meant to be funny, however. The contribution of Adelaide based **Frances (Budden) Phoenix** tells the unhappy story of her participation in Judy Chicago's iconic feminist collaboration *The Dinner Party* (1974–79). Frustrated with the tight ship Chicago was running, Phoenix made a fabric text piece that read 'no goddesses, no mistresses' (a pun on the anarchist slogan 'No gods, no masters') and tried to insert it into the table runner she was working on. Unfortunately, she was caught red handed by Chicago, but thereafter made a publication *OUR STORY / HERSTORY? Working on...Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party'* (1982) which is presented in the exhibition alongside the insert itself. Considering the intention of this work was 'deadly serious', as Phoenix told me, placing this work in *BACKFLIP* points to one of the contentious questions involved in reading humour in art: does it necessarily rely on the artist's intent? If, as I would suggest, humour lies in the reception of a work, then we must acknowledge that what I – a young, white, queer, middle-class curator – find to be funny may not necessarily connect with every person who enters the exhibition.



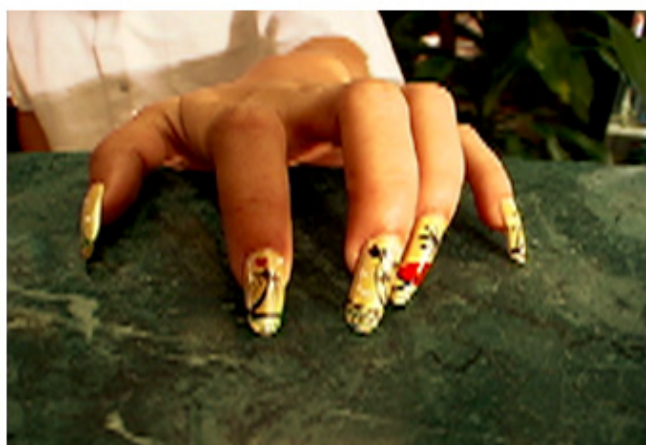


Previous pages:
BROWN COUNCIL
One Hour Laugh, 2009
Still from HD single channel video, 60 mins
Courtesy of the artists

This question was the starting point for Sydney collective **Brown Council**'s new performance, *This is Serious* (2013), which subverts the curatorial rationale by contributing something very serious into a 'funny' exhibition. Through a durational performance at the exhibition opening, as well as a residual installation thereafter, *This is Serious* investigates the point at which the boundaries of performance and social histories slip and collide. In the past Brown Council have explored this terrain within the action of laughter itself, here represented in the video *One Hour Laugh* (2009), in which the artists' hour of continuous laughter cycles through the absurd towards the grotesque.

Repetition is a strategy used throughout the surreal video installations of the Argentinian artist **Mika Rottenberg** to examine manual labour. In *Time and a Half* (2003) we watch a young Guamanian women tap her long fingernails as she waits behind the counter of a Chinese restaurant, ready to serve. Her boredom shifts as a portable fan blows her long hair wildly and she (as does the camera) delights in a fantasy-laden reprieve from serviceability. The filmic pleasure of *Time and a Half* recalls a generation of video artists, including the Swiss artist **Pipilotti Rist**, who, during the early 1990s, engaged the medium on multiple levels to enable an expansion of feminist strategies. *BACKFLIP* presents one such example, Rist's luscious *Pickelporno* (1992) (translating to 'pimple porno', in English), which presents a joyful and sensual representation of (heterosexual) sex that parodies mainstream pornography. Close up footage of naked bodies blurs with hypnotic visuals, MTV special effects and images of nature until the video reaches its 'climax' of joyfully erupting volcanoes.

Paris Autumn (2006), a short film by Indian artist **Pushpamala N**, also playfully engages with filmic genres by adopting the style of gothic thriller to tell the fictive story of her stay in Paris. When strange happenings begin to occur in her room, she discovers she is living in the outhouses of the mansion that had once belonged to Gabrielle d'Estrées, King Henri IV's favourite mistress, who died, perhaps poisoned, at the age of twenty-six just as she was about to marry the king. A detective story ensues, and our brave heroine weaves her way through the city of Paris to find out what (or who) brought upon the tragic death of Gabrielle d'Estrées. Pushpamala N's practice – as does *BACKFLIP* itself – traverses broad terrains: it weaves in and out of feminist histories and potentialities, via homage and re-enactment, through institutional critique and the domestic realm, engaging collaboration, performance, filmic and genre approaches.



MIKA ROTTENBERG

Time and a Half, 2003

Stills from single channel video, 3:40 min
 Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York



Gradually, but especially over the last three years, the negative stereotype of feminism seems to be diminishing. Feminist art, and feminist discourse more generally, is reaching a wider audience and I've noticed more young artists are self-identifying with the term. Accounts of misogyny and the abuse of women's rights are reported in both mainstream media and hip blogs alike. International collectives like Pussy Riot and Femen are making huge waves, while local activists such as Destroy the Joint have parodied Alan Jones' sexist comments to start a movement towards systemic change. Yet the domain of humour remains a patriarchal one, in which feminist voices are often ignored or (deliberately) misread as 'aggressive'. To reverse the stereotype of feminism and, in turn, feminist art as humourless will require an ever watchful gaze on authoritarian cultural gatekeepers.

...

Do you want to know how many feminists it takes to change a light bulb? Two; one to screw in the bulb while the other smokes a cigarette out of her vagina.*

* See Hannah Raisin, *My Cunt Smoking Without Me* (2007) on display in the VCA Video Lounge.

LAURA CASTAGNINI

Curator, *BACKFLIP: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art*

Left:
TRACEY MOFFATT
Heaven, 1997
Stills from digital video, 28 mins
Victorian College of the Arts Collection

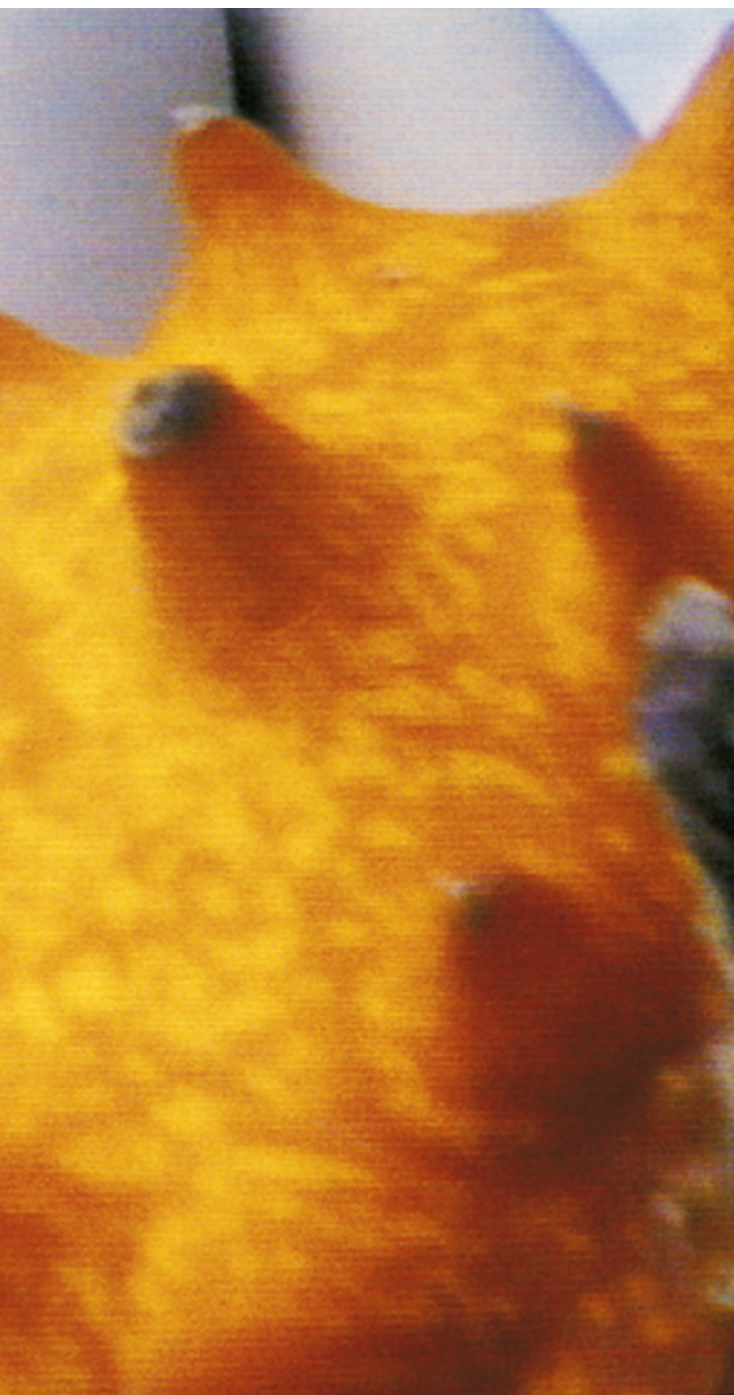


Above:
PAUL YORE
CUM, 2012
Framed needlepoint tapestry, 112 x 59 x 4 cm
Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Devon Ackermann

Right:
HOTHAM STREET LADIES
Labor Cock, 2013
Archival pigment print, sugar, 90 x 60 cm
Courtesy the artists







PIPILOTTI RIST
Pickelporno, 1992
Still from single channel video,
color, sound, 12:02 mins
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI),
New York



MELANIE BONAJO

Genital Panik: An Event for Equality, 2012 with *Anagram Series I-IV*, 2012

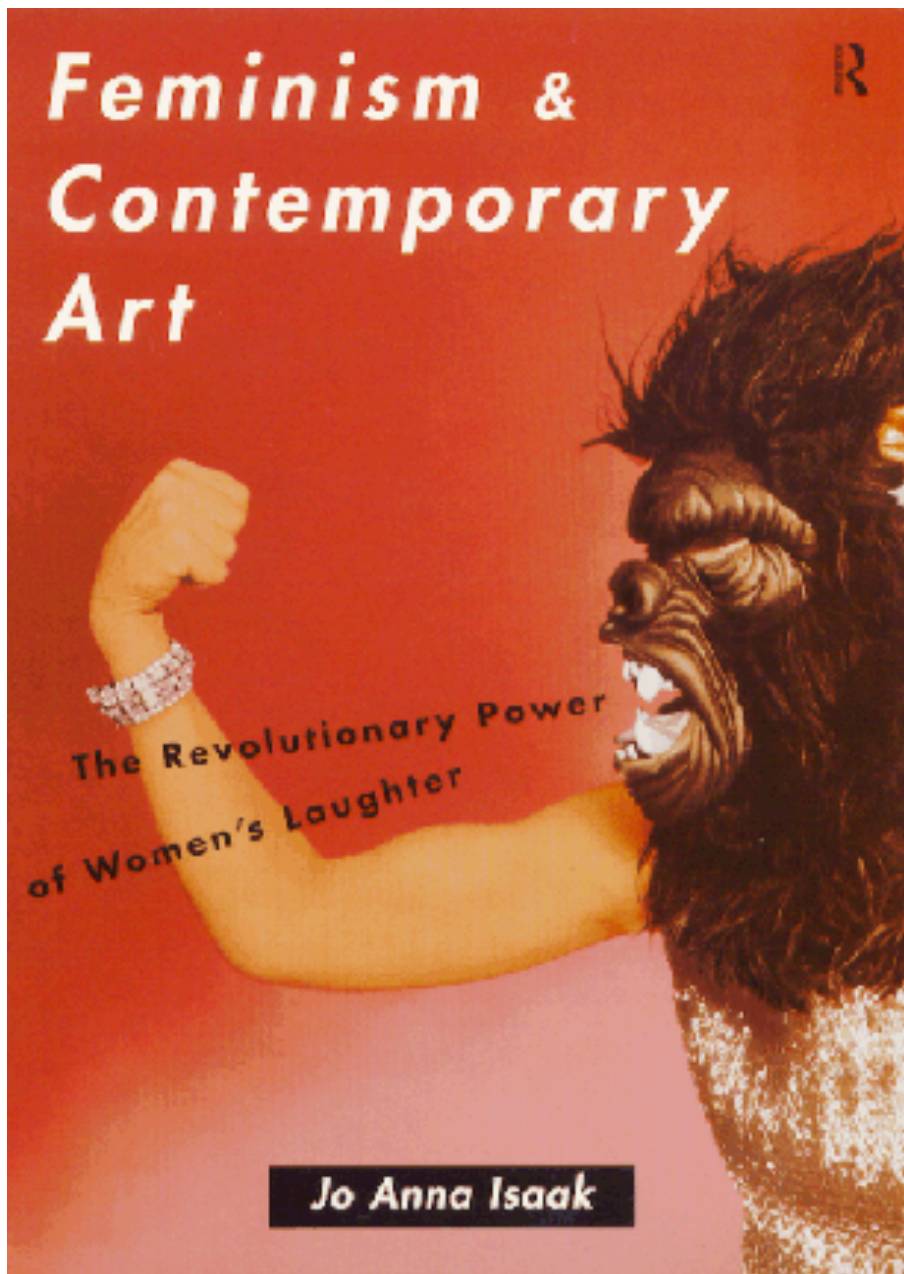
Archival inkjet print (framed), wooden stand, digital prints, dimensions variable

Courtesy the artist and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

VITO ACCONCI
CARL ANDRE
RICHARD ARTSCHWAGER
JOHN BALDESSARI
ROBERT BARRY
JOSEPH BEUYS
DANIEL BUREN
SANDRO CHIA
FRANCESCO CLEMENTE
ENZO CUCCHI
GILBERT and GEORGE
DAN GRAHAM
HANS HAACKE
NEIL JENNEY
DONALD JUDD
ANSELM KIEFER
JOSEPH KOSUTH
SOL LEWITT
RICHARD LONG
GORDON MATTA-CLARK
MARIO MERZ
SIGMAR POLKE
GERHARD RICHTER
ED RUSCHA
JULIAN SCHNABEL
CY TWOMBLY
ANDY WARHOL
LAWRENCE WEINER

LOUISE LAWLER
Birdcalls, 1972-81

Audio recording and text, 7:01 minss
Courtesy LeWitt Collection, Chester, Connecticut



Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter.
London and New York: Routledge, 1996

courage, humor, cunning, and fortitude

One of the happy consequences of having written a book and organized art exhibitions about women and laughter is that I have been invited to participate in numerous discussions about humor and women and their connections with various topics—art, representation, revolution, resistance, revolt, refusal, even refuse. Over the past ten years, there have been numerous symposia in Europe and America.¹ In addition, there have been a prodigious number of recent publications on the relationship between women and humor. All this activity attests to the current interest in this issue.

This has not always been the case. Historically there has been an assumption that women and humor are almost unrelated; in fact, it was generally thought that another thing women lacked was a sense of humor. When I began my search for material on the connection between women and humor, I found surprisingly little. Even during the Surrealist era, which opened up the arena of humor for a wide spectrum of artists and writers, there was little recognition of the role women could play in the comedic revolution. The exploration of the comedic and the erotic led the Surrealists to celebrate the hysterics of the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris. Hysteria, they claim, is the subversion of the 'relations which are established between the subject and the moral world.'² But while the Surrealists may have thought of themselves as artists 'at the service of the revolution,' the only revolution they thought the women of Salpêtrière would service was the sexual one. They were invested in the revolutionary potential of repressed (male) desire, but the role allotted to women was that of sexually liberal muse, not fellow revolutionary. Breton and Aragon's conception of the role women were to play in revolution was the same as Stokely Carmichael's—as evidenced by his response to a question about what position he thought women should have in the Black Liberation movement. His answer: 'Prone!'³

It is Sigmund Freud, of course, who sets out the theoretical basis for the Surrealists' explorations of both sexuality and humor. But when I turned to his writings for insights into the relation between women and humor, oddly, I found very little. In his 1914 essay 'On Narcissism', Freud links women with humorists in a rather bizarre sequence that also includes great criminals, children, cats, and large beasts of prey: all seem to him to have maintained an original, primary narcissism that the adult male has renounced.⁴ It is not until his essay 'Humour', written in 1928, that we begin to see the potential of narcissism for women. What Freud calls the 'triumph of narcissism' occurs as a result of the 'grandeur' of humor:

Humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation. . . . The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than the occasions for it to gain pleasure.⁵

We recall that the human beings who are able to maintain this primary narcissism into adulthood include women, criminals, and humorists. The importance of this grouping becomes clearer when, to illustrate the dynamics of the humorous gesture, Freud cites the example of a criminal about to be hanged on a Monday. On the way to the gallows the criminal remarks, 'Well, this week is beginning nicely.' A certain rationale for narcissism now becomes apparent. The criminal, like the narcissistic woman, is outside the law; both are attempting to evade its effects, *if only briefly*, through humor or pleasure.

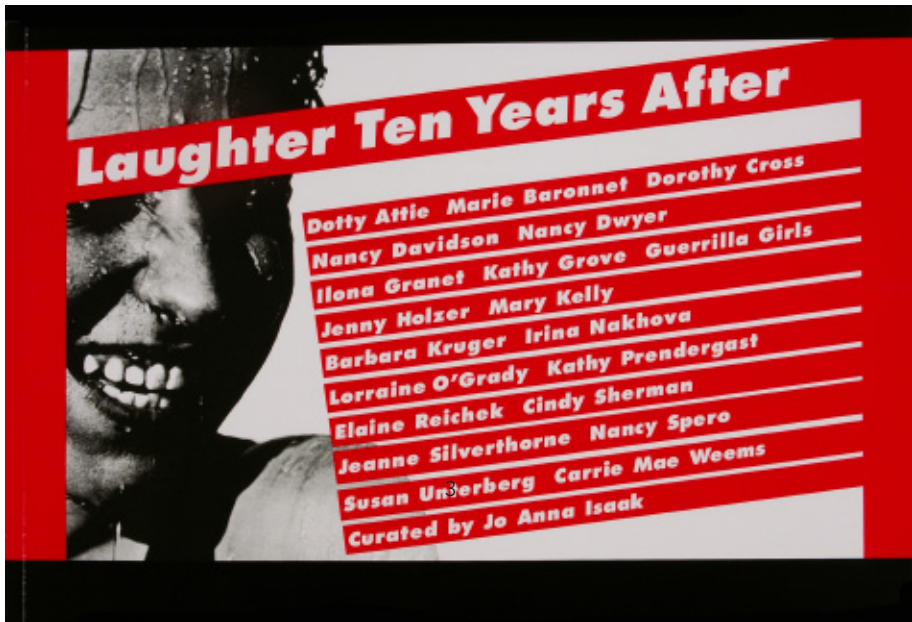
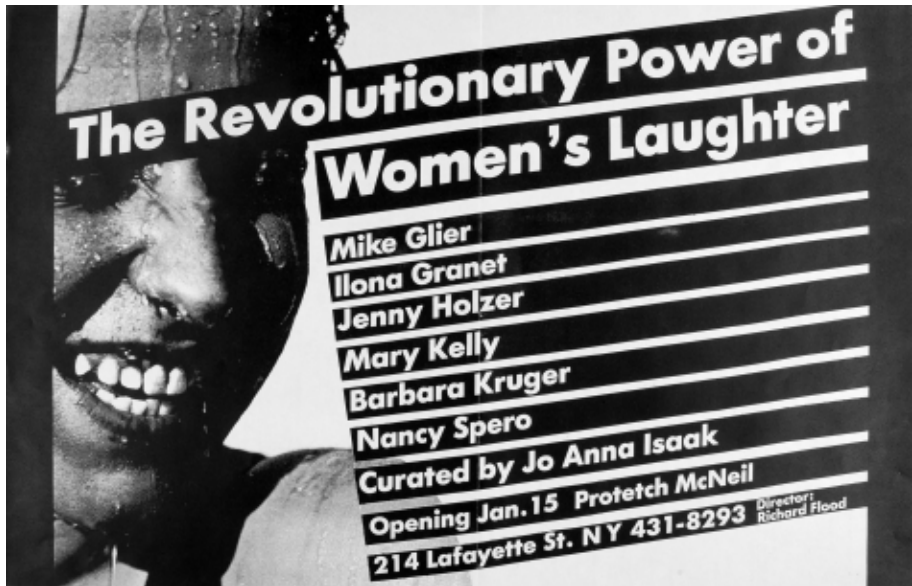
In his essay, Freud assured us that the theory was not developed out of 'any tendentious desire on my part to depreciate women.'⁶ In fact, Freud is not discussing biological imperatives but rather social structures, the constraints they impose upon the individual, and the psychic mechanisms the individual develops to evade these constraints. Indeed, he comes very close to delineating a political strategy for those without access to power:

Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstance.⁷

This aspect of Freud's theory of humor—its rebelliousness, its connection to the pleasure principle, its assertion of the power to evade political and social constraints, is related to a much older and more overtly political theory of laughter: Rabelais' theory of the carnivalesque. Here we encounter the laughter of misrule, laughter with the potential to disrupt the authority of church and state. This is not the private, arcane, black humor of the Surrealist movement, explored by Breton, but what Rabelais describes as the red humor of the masses, in which the explosive politics of the body, of the erotic and the licentious, are pitted against all forms of authoritarianism. Mikhail Bakhtin's monumental study *Rabelais and His World* reveals that women have historically been aligned with the popular comic tradition of misrule and that they have a political stake in this site of insurrection. Because it existed unofficially, outside the church, the carnivalesque was marked by exceptional radicalism, freedom, and ruthlessness: 'carnival celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions.'⁸ Although the carnivalesque was eventually suppressed, Bakhtin suggests that at certain historical moments or in certain cultures the carnivalesque as a form of social revolt would reemerge.

These disparate theories were the thin thread onto which I started beading my notions of humor, women, art, power, and subversion. I was not working alone, however. A feeling of solidarity was developing in the early 1980s as women working in various fields were looking for 'liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order' and using humor as their revolutionary strategy. As more and more women artists and writers started to analyze the systems of representation in which they as artists and as women found themselves, they came to understand their position within these systems. Images of women have long been used as part of the continuous barrage of exhortation and entrapment that, as Susan Sontag put it in *On Photography*, a capitalist society needs 'to stimulate buying and anesthetize the injuries of class, race and sex.'⁹ But by the 1980s the search for what could break the hold of representation was in high gear. Fundamental discoveries in modern linguistics and psychoanalysis had radically affected the understanding of how signifying systems operate. There was a growing awareness that a lot was at stake for women in these new assessments of how meaning is produced and organized in all areas of cultural practice. The feminist intervention moved from a critique of biological determinism to a consideration of positions occupied in the field of signs. It leveled the playing field for women—and women artists, writers, curators, activists, and cultural and political workers of all kinds began to play in the new authority-free zone. We organized exhibitions, wrote books, arranged symposia, changed university curricula, changed art history texts, changed the history of art, changed history

Laughter came to be thought of as a metaphor for transformation, for thinking about cultural change. By providing libidinal gratification, laughter offered an analytic point



Top: Exhibition poster, 1983.
 Bottom: Exhibition catalogue, 1995.

of entry for understanding the relationships between the social and the symbolic while freeing us to imagine these relationships differently. As Walter Benjamin pointed out, 'there is no better start for thinking than laughter. And in particular, convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsion of the soul.'¹⁰ In *Illuminations* he made link between laughter and revolution explicit:

The class struggle, which is always present to an historian influenced by Marx, is a fight for the crude and the material things which no refined and spiritual things could exist. Nevertheless, it is not in the form of the spoils, which fall to the victor that the latter make their presence felt in the class struggle. They manifest themselves in this struggle as courage, humour, cunning and fortitude.¹¹

The revolutionary power of women's laughter does not function like the tendentious joke; this laughter is first and foremost a communal response. The aim is inclusion, not exclusion. By asking for the response of laughter, women artists were engaged in a different and difficult operation. The viewer must want, at least briefly, to emancipate himself from 'normal' representation; in order to laugh, he must recognize that he shares the same repressions. What is requested is not some private, depoliticized jouissance, but sensuous solidarity. As William Carlos Williams realized:

The tremendous cultural revolution implied by this interior revolution of technique tickles the very heart and liver of a man, makes him feel good. Good, that is, if he isn't too damned tied to his favorite stupidities. That's why he laughs. His laugh is the first acknowledgement of liberation.¹²

Writing at the end of the 1980s, Arthur Danto surveyed mainstream contemporary art and acknowledged, somewhat to his surprise, that were he 'to select the most innovative artists of this particular period ... most of them would probably be women.' This realization caused him, in turn, to ask 'whether this particular period, and hence this particular mainstream, was made to order for women.'¹³ Yet, to question whether the mainstream was 'made to order for women,' as if the changeover had occurred by some happy accident, is to fail to realize that the very nature of contemporary art has been changed because of the power of the persistent critique that women have brought to bear on key assumptions about art, art history, and the role of the artist. The crisis of authority and value that is symptomatic of postmodernism has itself in large part been instigated by a feminist deployment of laughter. We were interested neither in valorizing a mainstream nor in exploring, validating, and reinforcing hegemony, which, as Raymond Williams points out, is a process that relies upon the mechanisms of tradition and the Old Master canon in order to waylay the utopian desires that are potentially embodied in cultural production.¹⁴ *It was, and will always be, the waylaid utopian desires that we are interested in.*

...

Epilogue

Recently there has been a resurgence of feminist art activity; the June/July 2007 issue of *Art in America* is devoted to covering this surprising resurgence. Most of this activity has been retrospective in nature, recounting or returning to the heyday of the feminist movement. The aim of the historical exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2006-07) was to examine the international foundations and legacy of feminist activism and artmaking that occurred during the crucial period 1965-80.¹⁵ Even the symposium,

'The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts' (at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, January 2007) was redolent of nostalgia for the early days of the women's movement. And the exhibition *The Deconstructive Impulse: Women Artists Reconfigure the Signs of Power* held at the Neuberger Museum in 2011 focused on the work done by women artists from 1973-1991. I understand the impulse to repeat: I did it myself in 1995 with the exhibition *Laughter Ten Years After*, which was a replay of an exhibition I had organized more than a decade earlier, *The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (1983).¹⁶ Yes, we want to commemorate the past. But we are also anxious that the work undertaken and the progress women have made is often lost or forgotten—that women's history is written in a faint hand and must continually be re-inscribed before it is erased.

JO ANNA ISAAK

Jo Anna Isaak is the John L. Marion Chair in the department of Art History and Music at Fordham University, New York City, where she teaches courses in modern and contemporary art, art of the Russian avant-garde, curatorial studies, and art and ecology. She is a writer and curator. Her publications include: *The Ruin of Representation in Modernist Art and Text* (1986); *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, which examined the work of over 50 women artists (1996); and *Nancy Spero*, with Jon Bird and Sylvere Lotringer (1996). She has organized several exhibitions including: *The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (1983-84); *Laughter Ten Years After* (1995-98); *Looking Forward, Looking Black* (1999-2003), which examined the representation of African Americans in art and popular media; *H2O* (2003-04) which focuses on water and the human body; *And for all this, Nature is Never Spent* (2009) an exhibition of art works addressing environmental issues.

Notes

¹ 'Faces of Laughter—Female Strategies in Art' at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam in 2001; 'Vice-Versa-Vice' at the Jan van Eyck Akademie in Maastricht, Holland in 1998; and 'Virtue and Vulgarity: A Feminist Conference on Art, Science and the Body', held at the University of Reading in Reading, England in 1997, focused in large part on the body, humor and carnivalesque. Even the panel 'Trash and the Abject' at the College Art Association in Los Angeles in 1999 focused on women and humor, as did the conference 'Representing Hysteria', held at Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut in 1988, 'Exquisite/Corpse' at Artsite, Burlington, Vermont, 1996 and the discussion of primary narcissism at the CAPC Musée d'Art Contemporain in Bordeaux, France, in 1997.

² Louis Aragon and André Breton, 'Le Cinquantenaire de L'Hystérie', *La Revolution Surrealiste*, II, (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1928) reprinted (New York: Arno Press, 1968), pp. 20-22.

³ Stokely Carmichael (1914–1998), later known as Kwame Ture, was a Trinidadian-American black activist in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. A leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and later 'Honorary Prime Minister' of the Black Panther Party, he separated from Panthers in 1969, and his early advocacy for integrationism gave way to affiliation with Black Nationalism and the Pan-Africanist movement. His comment about women in the SNCC was made in 1964.

⁴ See, Sigmund Freud, 'On Narcissism' (1914) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* [henceforth SE], trans. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), vol. 14, pp. 88-89. In *Feminism and Its Discontents: A Century of Struggle with Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), Mari Jo Buhle discusses Freud's concept of narcissism as developed in the 1914 essay in the context of his meeting with and fascination for Lou Andreas-Salomé (1861-1937), and her different conceptions of love, narcissism and sexual difference (see, esp., pp. 63-67).

⁵ Sigmund Freud, 'Humour' (1928), SE vol. 21, p. 162.

⁶ Sigmund Freud 'On Narcissism' (1914), SE vol. 14, p. 89.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Humour' (1928), SE vol. 21, p. 163.

⁸ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), p. 10.

⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Doubleday, 1973 reprint 1990), p. 178.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, 'The Author as Producer', in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 235.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 254-55.

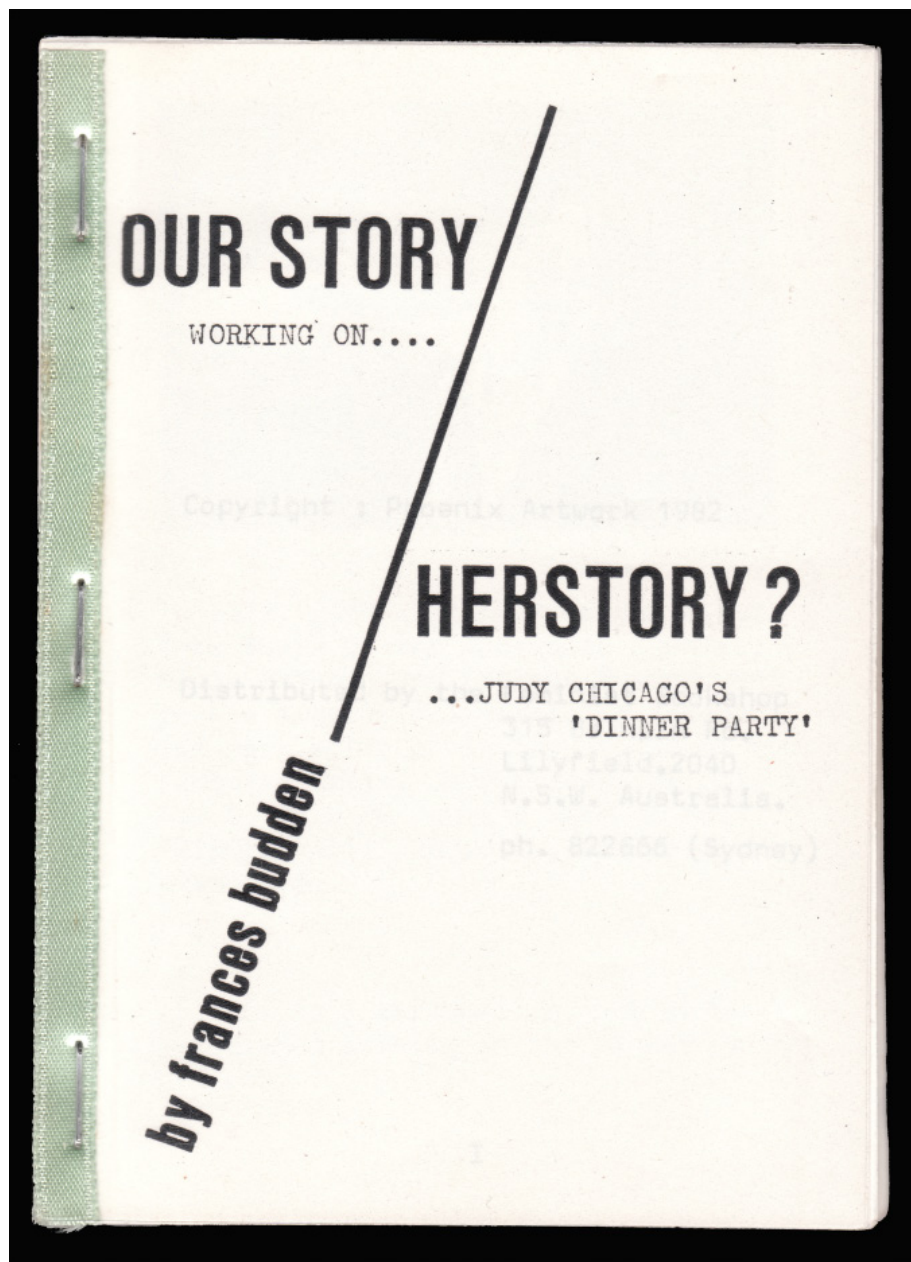
¹² William Carlos Williams, 'A1 Pound Stein', in *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York New Directions, 1954), p. 163. Williams is speaking specifically of Gertrude Stein's break up of patriarchal poetry and prose, but he was among the first to understand her work as part of a broad-based feminists' deployment of laughter.

¹³ Arthur Danto, 'Women Artists, 1970-85', *The Nation* Dec. 25, 1989, p. 794.

¹⁴ See, Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 115-117.

¹⁵ Curated by Cornelia H. Butler, *WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution* was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles and the National Museum of Women in the Arts; catalogue (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007). For an account of some of the ideas and decisions involved in curating this show, see Butler's 'LA Now and Then' in *Recent Pasts: Art in Southern California from the 90s to Now* [SoCCAS Symposia Vol. 1] (Zurich: JRP|Ringier, 2006), pp. 33-40.

¹⁶ *The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* opened at Protetch/McNeil, New York City in January of 1983 and traveled in the U.S. and Canada for a period of two years. Included in that exhibition were the works of Mary Kelly, Jenny Holzer, Ilona Granet, Nancy Spero, Barbara Kruger, and Mike Glier. *Laughter Ten Years After* commemorated the earlier exhibition and the exceptionally prolific decade of woman's art production that followed. It included the work of twenty artists from numerous countries and toured for three years (1995-98).



FRANCES (BUDDEN) PHOENIX
OUR STORY / HERSTORY? Working on...Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party', 1982
Self-published photocopied & stapled artist's book, white paper, ribbon, acetate cover, 15 x 10.5 cm
Courtesy the artist







Previous pages:
 PUSHAMALA N
Paris Autumn, 2006
 Still from an experimental short film created from still photographs,
 B&W, stereo sound (English), 35 mins
 Courtesy the artist and Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi

Above:
 CHRISTIAN THOMPSON
Hannah's Diary, 2008
 C-type print, edition of 5, 100 x 100 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne

Catherine isn't very personable,
she will stay at home and
watch border security when
there are major art events
on.

Kate is sensitive and complains
when there's not enough sunlight in
our workspace.

Sometimes when we are in the
middle of a meeting, Catherine
will just lie down in resignation.

On two occasions I have seen Kate
wearing swimwear instead of
underwear.

Catherine always has something
going on, her grandmother dying,
her house being flooded,
her phone being stolen.

Kate is a cheapskate with a Velcro wallet.

Catherine still works in retail.

Kate is flat chested.

Catherine can't read, and
she is blind in one eye.





Left:
CATHERINE BELL
Mum's the Word, 2011
Digital fabric prints, 150 x 200 cm each

Above:
CATHERINE BELL
Gorilla Girl, 2009
Still from single channel DVD, 2:40 mins
Both courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne



FRANCES (BUDDEN) PHOENIX

no goddesses no mistresses (anarcho-feminism), 1978

Insert for a 'Dinner Party' runner: red embroidery cotton on white commercial doily, 29.7 x 21 cm

Courtesy the artist



CHRISTIAN THOMPSON
In Search of the International Look, 2006
C-type print, 190 x 127 cm, edition of 10
Courtesy the artist and Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne

List of works

CATHERINE BELL

b. 1969. Lives and works in Melbourne, Australia

Mum's the Word, 2011

Digital fabric prints
150 x 200 cm each

Gorilla Girl, 2009

Single channel DVD
2:40 mins

Courtesy the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

MELANIE BONAJO

b. 1978. Lives and works in Amsterdam, Netherlands

Genital Panik: An Event for Equality, 2012

Archival inkjet print (Edition of 3, framed),
wooden stand
Dimensions variable

Anagram Series I – IV, 2012

Digital prints
Edition of 20 each, 40 x 28.5 inches

Courtesy the artist and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

BROWN COUNCIL

Kelly Doley b.1984, Frances Barrett b.1983,
Kate Blackmore b.1982 & Diana Smith
b.1981. Live and work in Sydney, Australia

This is Serious, 2013

Performance installation
Dimensions variable

One Hour Laugh, 2009

HD single channel video
60 mins

Courtesy the artists

CATHERINE OR KATE

Catherine Sagin, b. 1986 and Kate
Woodcroft, b.1987. Live and work in
Brisbane, Australia

Comedy in a Vacuum, 2013

iRobot robotic vacuum cleaners, audio
devices
Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artists

PATTY CHANG

b. 1972. Lives and works in New York City,
United States

Melons (At A Loss), 1998

Single channel video
3:44 mins

Courtesy the artist

GUERRILLA GIRLS

Anonymous

Museums Unfair to Men, 2012

Picket signs
Dimensions variable

Museums Cave in to Radical Feminists, 2012

Picket signs
Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artists

HOTHAM STREET LADIES

Cassandra Chilton b. 1974, Molly
O'Shaughnessy b. 1973, Sarah Parkes b.
1977, Caroline Price b. 1970, Lyndal Walker
b. 1973. Live and work in Melbourne,
Australia

Labor Cock, 2013

Archival pigment print, sugar
90 x 60 cm (image size)

Totes Spew, 2013

Archival pigment print, sugar
40 x 60 cm (image size)

Leinster Sausage Sizzle, 2013

Archival pigment print, sugar
40 x 60 cm (image size)

You Beaut!, 2013

Sugar installation in the male toilets of the
Margaret Lawrence Gallery
Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artists

ALICE LANG

b. 1983. Lives and works in Brisbane,
Australia

Grow A Set, 2012

Photo and acrylic on paper
42 x 59.4 cm

Yeah Right, 2012

Photo and acrylic on paper
42 x 59.4 cm

Same Diff, 2012

Photo and acrylic on paper
Two parts, 42 x 42 cm each

Courtesy the artist

LOUISE LAWLER

b. 1947. Lives and works in New York City,
United States

Birdcalls, 1972-81

Audio recording and text
7:01 mins

Courtesy LeWitt Collection, Chester,
Connecticut

TRACEY MOFFATT

b. 1960. Lives and works in Sydney, Australia
and New York City, United States

Heaven, 1997

Digital video
28 mins

Victorian College of the Arts Collection

NAT&ALI

Natalie Thomas, b. 1967. Lives and work in
Melbourne, Australia

Alexandra Sanderson, b. 1974. Lives and
work in Melbourne, Australia and Phnom
Penh, Cambodia

nat&ali do Drysdale's Australian Traveller,
2004

Acrylic on canvas
63 x 58 cm

nat&ali do Fragonard's The Swing, 2013

Acrylic on canvas
58 x 63 cm

Friendship is....., 2001, with remixes in
2003 and 2013

Mixed media installation with sound on wine
cask speakers
Dimensions variable

Courtesy the artists

FRANCES (BUDDEN) PHOENIX

b. 1950. Lives and works in Adelaide,
Australia

OUR STORY / HERSTORY? Working on...

Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party', 1982

Self-published photocopied & stapled artist's
book, white paper, ribbon, acetate cover
15 x 10.5 cm

*no goddesses no mistresses (anarcho-
feminism)*, 1978

Insert for a 'Dinner Party' runner: red
embroidery cotton on white commercial doily
29.7 x 21 cm

Courtesy the artist

PUSHPAMALA N

b. 1956. Lives and works in Bangalore and New Delhi, India

Paris Autumn, 2006

An experimental short film created from still photographs, B&W, stereo sound (English)
35 mins

Courtesy the artist and Nature Morte Gallery, New Delhi

HANNAH RAISIN

b. 1987. Lives and works in Melbourne, Australia

Synchronised Sand, 2013

HD single channel video
7:21 mins

Flowing Locks, 2007

HD single channel video
1:24 mins

Courtesy the artist

PIPILOTTI RIST

b. 1962. Lives and works in Zurich and in the mountains of Switzerland

Pickelporno, 1992

Single channel video, color, sound
12:02 mins

Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York

MIKA ROTTENBERG

b. 1976. Lives and works in New York City, United States

Time and a Half, 2003

Single channel video
3:40 mins
Courtesy Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York

CHRISTIAN THOMPSON

b. 1978. Lives and works in Amsterdam, The Netherlands and Oxford, United Kingdom

Hannah's Diary, 2008

C-type print
Edition of 5, 100 x 100 cm

In Search of the International Look, 2006

C-type print
Edition of 10, 190 x 127 cm

Courtesy the artist and Gallery Gabrielle Pizzi, Melbourne

PAUL YORE

b. 1987. Lives and works in Melbourne, Australia

CUM, 2012

Framed needlepoint tapestry
112 x 59 x 4 cm

Courtesy the artist

Following pages:
GUERRILLA GIRLS in the Margaret Lawrence
Gallery office, May 2012. Courtesy the artists





Acknowledgments

BACKFLIP: Feminism and Humour in Contemporary Art

Catherine Bell, Melanie Bonajo, Brown Council, Catherine or Kate, Patty Chang, Guerrilla Girls, Hotham Street Ladies, Alice Lang, Louise Lawler, Tracey Moffatt, nat&ali, Frances (Budden) Phoenix, Pushpamala N Hannah Raisin, Pipilotti Rist, Mika Rottenberg, Christian Thompson, Paul Yore

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