

## FORAGING FOR FEMINISM & THE POWER OF DOING

VIEWED THROUGH THE ARTS PROJECT AUSTRALIA MODEL

I want to begin by thanking Catherine Bell, Anne Marsh and the University of Melbourne for the opportunity to present today and to participate. Thanks also to my fellow panelists Jane Trengrove, Lindy Judge and Catherine – I’m really looking forward to our discussion as a continuation of conversations and questions we’ve had over the past months, and in some cases past few years.

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**1** I have to admit to being a little nervous talking to the topic today *‘excavating feminist histories and redefining feminist legacies at Arts Project Australia’*

Not because I don’t fundamentally believe this discussion is long overdue – clearly there is a feminist history to excavate and clearly people with an intellectual disability are largely missing from a raft of documented social, political and cultural histories. It’s because, as an educated female who has a personal history of getting on with it and doing things, I’ve been very lax in reading about feminist theory. Now, having admitted my failings(!), I am very heartened by Anne Marsh’s broader context for this symposium, ‘Doing Feminism / Sharing the World’.

Doing feminism *is* something I can talk to, personally, and also with reflections regarding the incredible people that I work with, around and acknowledge from Arts Project Australia – past *and* present.

Before elaborating, I will start by sharing this with you, “The right for everyone to participate in, and enjoy the arts, has been enshrined in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights since 1948 and there is global recognition of the intrinsic and instrumental value of arts in enhancing wellbeing and strengthening communities.

**2** Despite this, it is only recently, that much of the public, government agencies, and others have sought to enable people with an intellectual disability to enjoy the arts as both practitioners and consumers.”

So, with that in the back of our minds, I’ll share the Arts Project Australia model as a point of reference for the presentations and discussions we’ll share and you will participate in this morning.

But first, I want to be clear in my intention that, in talking here today, I am not speaking on behalf of other women. I am merely presenting some thoughts and viewpoints observed from my professional experiences working at Arts Project Australia, in Melbourne, for the past 10 years, which is informed by a 20-year career in the arts.

**3** What I'm particularly interested in is the role of Arts Project in shaping disability advocacy through *doing*. This includes the way we support the artists we work with in their practice, and the way we talk about and promote their work to the broader public. With regard to this panel, I've been thinking about how Arts Project's role as a peak organisation and leader in the disability and arts sector, has led to advocacy and empowerment for marginalized people.

In my opinion, many artists we support embody feminist values by way of their work ethic, the subjects they explore and the artwork they ultimately create. Through self-directed research and exploration, as well as through friendship and collaboration, I see female artists explore personal narratives as a way to communicate ideas, and to redefine and reposition issues of the female body, gender politics and the self.

Through the act of *doing* feminism, I think distinctly feminist narratives are often created, and are clearly evident in the works of artists working in our studio. And perhaps this becomes most evident through collaborative projects, when artists get to work with their non-disabled peers and deeply investigate ideas one-on-one and with some breathing space.

**4** The female artists we work with are strong independent women with choice and self-agency regarding their professional life and the decisions they make. Through their practice, their artwork and public successes, they become role models for other artists and for people in the wider arts and disability sector.

And they deserve the recognition and respect bestowed on their non-disabled peers. This is still largely ignored, and is pretty much absent from the recorded histories of art. In that way, in terms of an historical invisibility, Arts Project artists have that in common with their fellow artist peers who are women.

Through an artist's lived experience and individual creative practice, ideas can flourish, so long as that person is supported within an ethical environment like the one established by Arts Project. Through acts of *doing* – of creating, working as an artist, presenting and sharing female perspectives – I see the accomplishments of artists and staff at Arts Project as “feminist acts”, or maybe their more of an “accidental feminist”. I've been thinking of this concept as, a kind of,

feminist undertaking born out of *doing* and just “getting on with it”, regardless of whether it’s innately or covertly explored, and notwithstanding the obvious and inherent challenges faced, such as accessibility, mobility, communication etc.

5 Despite the intent, our actions *and* the actions of the artists we work with, are open and transparent. They are also somewhat public – our organization and artists are online and we get out and about, we love to share what we do and connect with people. And this paves the way for marginalised people to see the work of our artists and to witness their success stories.

Our actions and the achievements of our artists *will* inspire other people to act, and *will* shift the way other arts professionals – artists, curators, writers, organisations, government bodies, as well as other supported studios and disability providers – think about the professional life and work of people with intellectual disability and the way they might engage and collaborate with people who are different to themselves.

6 Catherine was talking to Lindy and I a few weeks ago about a set of ethics commonly associated with feminist principles that include: interdependence, reciprocity, trust, friendship and embodiment. I just love these terms - they seem a perfectly reasonable base from which everyone should work, particularly with regard to relationships with an obvious power imbalance.

Without a framework of ethical support, whether it’s from a feminist viewpoint or not, the likelihood of success for anyone is greatly diminished.

Without a conduit like Arts Project, female *and* male artists with an intellectual disability, I think, would struggle to effectively explore the things they are interested in through art, and they would also struggle to get very far in their professional practice, let alone survive and thrive the contemporary art world.

In fact, all artists need a framework of supporters and professionals to mentor and push them; it’s just easier for someone without an intellectual disability to articulate what they need and what that support looks like. Without invested and meaningful reciprocity that’s built on openness and trust – growth – in a person’s individual practice, *will be* limited.

7 By way of defining Arts Project feminist histories it’s worth looking at feminist legacies more closely. And Arts Project artist Cathy Staughton is a good example – she’s an established artist of 30 years, she’s dedicated, has an exhibition CV as long as your arm, solo and group exhibitions

throughout Australia, including international shows. We have even just written and uploaded Cathy's profile and other Arts Project artist's profiles, to Wikipedia, another (technically) inaccessible and underrepresented platform for marginalised people.

Thanks to people like Catherine and Lindy, Cathy has had the opportunity to work on collaborations and have participated in an incredible residency through the University of Melbourne that has allowed her to explore deeper, personal and very female centered narratives. And Catherine and Lindy will talk, on a more personal level, to their experiences and learnings in a minute.

By looking at Cathy's career, and by focusing on her collaborations, we can start to unpack what it is to *do feminism* and come back to the proposition in "doing feminism/sharing the world", which focuses on a "feminist approach to ethics" and asks, "What *does* it mean to share the world? How *do* our differences intervene in our relations with each other? What *does* it mean to 'do feminism', rather than 'be a feminist'?"

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## ABOUT ARTS PROJECT

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**8** So let me pull this into the framework of Arts Project Australia in order to give you a potted history from which to set the scene:

In 1974, a Melbourne woman by the name of Myra Hilgendorf OAM established Arts Project Australia, and she had a daughter Joanna with a profound intellectual disability. Myra experienced first-hand the disparity in professional opportunities for people with intellectual disability, whose artworks – often made in institutions in those days – were overlooked or discarded. She decided to do something about it. So she gathered artworks from institutions around Victoria and mounted shows in mainstream galleries, touring them regionally. It must have been amazing to see at the time. This work – that pre-dates artwork produced by our studio artists – is now held in our Sidney Myer Fund Permanent Collection.

Myra's vision was for artists with an intellectual disability to have their work presented professionally, and for artists to be accorded the same dignity and respect as their non-disabled peers. This was a turning point in social and political history.

Later, in 1982, founding Director Cheryl Daye expanded that vision and established a studio staffed by professional artists, where people with an intellectual disability could come and develop their individual talents in a safe and supported environment, which is now led by our Chair Bronwyn Johnson and Executive Director, Sue Roff who is here today.

In the beginning, Arts Project was an independent, community-based space that received funding to operate half a day a week. Today we run six days a week and support over 130 artists at all stages of their career.

We are a not-for-profit registered charity – although when you encounter us, you'll find we're more like a hybrid organization that operates much like a professional art studio and commercial gallery.

We were the first organisation in Australia, and one of the first in the world, to open a full-time art studio. Other studios of a similar philosophy – though it must be said not that many – popped up globally at a similar time, including in the USA and Europe.

In the early 2000s we purchased a building, renovated it, and moved into our current Northcote location: a beautiful two-story studio and gallery. The gallery is free to visit and open to the public six days a week.

Our mission is to, support artists with intellectual disabilities, and to promote their work and advocate for their inclusion within contemporary art practice.

This philosophy is philosophically the same today as it was at our inception. Today, this approach, that we initiated 43 years ago, is finally becoming more common practice, and other iterations of similarly ethical supported studios are popping up in Australia and overseas.

Some quick facts for you: our artists work across a range of media from drawing, to ceramics, to digital art, around 40 artists work in our open plan studio each day. The artists range from 17 – 75 years old and come from all over Melbourne, from all walks of life and bring with them a wide range of interests and creative abilities. The artists are treated individually with dignity and respect and their practice and artwork enriches their life, the culture of the studio, as well as the lives of their extended network.

A number of artists have worked in the studio for over 27 years, and almost 50% of the artists we support are successful, empowered and creative women.

We support artists to discover processes and materials that best suit their practice in order for them to realise their personal artistic vision. This non-directive philosophy forms the core of our daily focus. It allows the space for artists to create freely, resulting in artwork that is a true representation of each person’s intention. We then promote their work on its artistic merit amongst the wider art community.

The artists come to Arts Project because they choose to come and they want to make art. They also want to be a part of a supportive community. They make life-long friends there and their peers respect them. We don’t select people based on a folio – they just have to have an interest and dedication to art making.

When they come on board, they enter into an “Artist Agency Agreement”, which establishes our professional relationship with the artists. Staff work by a code of conduct set by government regulations and by Arts Project’s code of practice. We stage an annual program of exhibitions both within our gallery as well as at other commercial and non-commercial venues in Australia and overseas, and we welcome collaboration with well-respected artists and curators outside our organization who we respect and trust.

Our artists own their work, including the copyright, and we fiercely protect this on their behalf. Artists receive 60% of every sale through our gallery and 50% elsewhere, they also earn royalties from image licensing and merchandise sales.

For these and other distinctions, we are at the forefront of disability service providers that offer art as a vocational pathway.

In order to do what we do, we partner with significant government bodies, organisations, commercial businesses, professionals, curators and contemporary artists to make lasting connections and so we can have a broader national and international social impact in order to create wide reaching, positive change.

Everything we do, we do to meet our mission – to SUPPORT, PROMOTE & ADVOCATE.

We believe it, we do it and we live it.

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## LEADERS IN THE COMMUNITY

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On a larger scale, we're building a better, inclusive future and make a worthwhile contribution to our local and global community. We are recognised nationally and internationally for the work we do. And people we engage with recognise the inherent respect, care and professionalism we impart to our artists and their work.

SO, in a nutshell, that's the framework with which we're coming from for this discussion today.

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In wrapping up, there is no doubt in my mind that at the heart of everything we do in the arts *is* the artists. Without them, Arts Project would not exist.

Our ambitious and timely mission, posited in the early 1970s, was a call to action. It was a call to change existing social and political paradigms and approaches to representing, respecting and providing opportunities for people with intellectual disability in the arts.

I really believe that by ethically and professionally advocating for the rights and recognition of people with intellectual disability, we are *doing* feminism. We are telling the artists' stories, and by sharing our experiences and our values, we are positively changing the world, step by step, one day at a time.

We're cultivating a lineage of empowered artists and of people who ethically support and promote artists and their artwork – I'm talking about artists outside of Arts project, as well as staff, volunteers, board, partners, sponsors, collectors – everyone we meaningfully connect with. They then take their knowledge and experiences with them, and, in turn they pay it forward and challenge pre-existing archetypes, shifting broader perceptions, and ultimately changing the world by doing and demanding new benchmarks.

As Catherine will demonstrate next – building trust, fostering meaningful exchange and developing lasting professional creative relationships, as well as long-term friendships, enables an ideal space for cultivating enduring feminist legacies.

And I've seen this evidenced time and time again through the various projects we've helped support and develop, that allows artists with and without disability to meaningfully come

together, connect and make art – despite the challenges of difference, communication, movability, access, power dynamics, ethical practice, etc.

By looking at participatory practice as a means to explore feminism, we can see that feminism is obviously present in Arts Project artists' work. The personal narratives are there and clearly present in the work. It's innate. It's in the doing.

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As a final rumination – I do think we've come such a long way since the early 1970s.

It's a credit to the pioneers, the women, and men who have gone before.

And the work is not complete – we still have a long way to go.

From my perspective, it seems that a lived experience and a "*doing feminism*" attitude is good model work from. It's also a great premise from which to start to excavate feminist histories in order to redefine feminist legacies, in an academic and non-academic space that still lacks meaningful analysis and cultural recognition.

By being here today, this conversation will be recorded and will become part of a wider feminist history, which is most certainly another active step towards positive change.

Thank you.

Sim Luttin, February 2018