

Remembering ARTEMIS

A Western Australian Women's Art Forum

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edited by Gemma Weston

SHEILA
A FOUNDATION FOR WOMEN IN VISUAL ART



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Contributors

Penny Bovell's abstract paintings, print work and public art explore the transient nature of sky, air and space. Bovell's artwork is held by major public and private collections and she has also worked extensively in arts administration and education.

Michele Elliot is an artist and writer based in Codale, New South Wales. She works across multiple disciplines but is predominantly focused on sculpture and installation. At the time of writing she is presenting a survey of textile works 1995–2014 at the Tamworth Regional Gallery, and is an artist-in-residence at Tender Funerals.

Pam Kleemann is a photographer and conceptual artist who lives and works in Melbourne, Australia. Her photo-media installations have explored issues relating to colonialism, consumerism and commodification, with a focus on the fragmented body.

Anne (sometimes known as Elizabeth) **Jeppe** is an artist living and working in Melbourne, Australia. Her artworks incorporate a variety of different media and range from images on paper, oil on canvas to three-dimensional sculptural pieces.

Kath Letch has an extensive career in community broadcasting, including roles as Station Manager at Perth's RTR FM, General Manager of Triple R (3RRR), Melbourne and General Manager of the Community Broadcasting Association.

Linda Rawlings is still wondering what she wants to be when she grows up – in the meantime she’s trying to make the world a better place wherever she happens to be. One day she’ll be dead.

Taylor Reudavey is a multimedia artist, writer and performer from Perth, Western Australia. She is working towards a PhD at Curtin University.

Dr Zoë Sofoulis is an interdisciplinary researcher with an adjunct position at the Institute of Culture and Society, Western Sydney University. Recent work applies qualitative cultural research in fields where technology and engineering predominate, especially urban water management. Earlier publications, mostly as Zoë Sofia, explored topics including science fiction studies, cyberculture and women’s electronic arts.

Gemma Weston is Curator of the Cruthers Collection of Women’s Art at The University of Western Australia. She also maintains an independent practice in curating and writing with a research emphasis on contemporary art, collaboration and ‘embodied criticism’.

Terri-ann White is Director of UWA Publishing and a published writer. Titles include *Night and Day*, a short story collection and a novel, *Finding Theodore and Brina*

Introduction

This publication accompanies an exhibition held from 1 September to 8 December 2018 at Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery at the University of Western Australia: *No Second Thoughts: Reflections on the ARTEMIS Women's Art Forum*. The 'engine' that drives both exhibition and book is an archive of documents related to the ARTEMIS Women's Art Forum Inc., an organisation active in Perth between 1986 and 1990, held at the State Library of Western Australia. *No Second Thoughts*, which is ironically titled after an ARTEMIS exhibition held thirty years prior in 1988 at the Film and Television Institute in Fremantle, introduced four artists – Penny Bovell, Jo Darbyshire, Teelah George and Taylor Reudavey – to this archive to inspire the production of new artworks based loosely on its contents, considering the legacies of feminist art practice, the ways in which women work and organise, and how histories are produced or erased, placing these artworks in dialogue in the gallery with material from the archive. Penny Bovell and Jo Darbyshire are former ARTEMIS committee members and Teelah George and Taylor Reudavey were born, like myself, in the decades in which ARTEMIS was active – making us, in today's

parlance, ‘millennials’. The intent of this exhibition was, as much as the production of artworks and thinking-on-history, an experiment in the production of intergenerational exchange between women artists in Perth.

The announcement of the exhibition came long before any confirmation of the existence of this book, which does some of the historical work that the format of an exhibition does not allow for: the naming and contextualising of goals, experiences, lives, art practices and beyond of ARTEMIS and its members. *No Second Thoughts* 2018 was announced when only preliminary research for both projects was underway – a first parse of the archive, some tentative emails – but as exhibition publicity is hungry for visuals, an image was required. I secured a photograph from the State Library archive, taken at an ARTEMIS Committee meeting in 1988 of the then committee: Jo Darbyshire, Pam Kleemann, Joanne Purser, Thyrza Michelle (sometimes named as Thyrza Callard), Michele Elliot and Anne Jeppe. This photograph was reproduced in a brochure in late 2017 revealing the exhibition program for Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery for the coming year.

As this book documents, ARTEMIS was, in its less than five years of operation, a complex entity of multiple incarnations that captured the attention and involvement of a substantial portion of women artists active in Perth at the time, as well as a good number of women working within the broader contexts of what now might be called ‘the creative industries’ – film, radio and publishing. Several weeks after the brochure began circulating, I received an email from a concerned member of these broader creative industries critiquing the choice of image. The exhibition and the photograph, the correspondent pointed out, did not represent a number of foundational ARTEMIS members. The writer hoped that the project was not, therefore, ‘WA revisionist history at work’.

At the time I did my best to assure this correspondent that I had indeed been in contact and planned to be in contact with as many of the core ARTEMIS members named in the archive as time permitted. And in this I did my best, but I ultimately cannot promise that this book approaches any kind of ‘complete history’ of the ARTEMIS Women’s Art Forum Inc. In fact, it does not intend to offer one.

As documented in the appendix, the membership of ARTEMIS was large and varied and it rotated. In my discussions with former members, I found that perspectives on what ARTEMIS was supposed to be and what it became varied considerably depending on when the member joined and how much they were involved, and on their prior experience – or not – with the Women’s Liberation or Women’s Art Movement. Members who joined after funding had already been secured and the membership base was already large did so without knowledge of the context of the group’s foundations, with expectations different to those of its founding members. Some members simply received the group’s newsletters; others regularly attended the monthly ‘informal’ meetings, others only once or twice. Others aspired to be committee members and run projects. Some wanted the group to be more radically political, others simply wanted to make connections or desired an information service for women artists similar to, but more niche than, the National Association for the Visual Arts or the Women’s Information Referral Exchange, and found the conflicts of ‘radical’ politics and consensus decision-making unproductive. This book captures a limited number of those perspectives. I acknowledge that there are substantially more.

This book concentrates on a number of members of the ARTEMIS core committee active in the years 1987–88, when a substantial amount of activity – exhibitions, performances, forums, foundational decision-making and lobbying – took place, although I also acknowledge there were other important activities and discussions that took place on either side of this time frame. My own text attempts to outline a more comprehensive timeline of activity for ARTEMIS and to evaluate its core objectives and its feminisms against the context of 1980s Perth, Western Australia – a time in which the visual arts and the ‘women’s agenda’ in politics more broadly were reaching new points of critical mass. My text acknowledges the context of its content, too, drawing from the differently embodied experiences of history-making: history archived through documentation, captured and solidified in the careful boxes and folders of a state archive, for example; or history recounted from memory by voices on the telephone or by women over coffee in their homes; or history felt in the inflection of voices and in wisdoms received as though by osmosis. There is a different care and generosity

in each kind of history-making. This book would not be possible without the thoroughness and complexity of that formal archive, but it would not be possible either without the willingness of former members, and others, to talk and share. The format of the writing in this book, often conversational and reflective, intends to acknowledge those different modes of remembering and of making history.

Discussions with Pam Kleemann – a photographer, self-started administrator-agitator and the first officially employed ARTEMIS ‘arts resource officer’ – and Linda Rawlings, a committee member whose studies in film and performance carried her into a career focused on community midwifery and birthing practices, have produced two texts that record each woman’s experiences through the prism of recollection. Terri-ann White, whose bookshop provided a physical venue and a conduit for feminist thought, also reflects on her role within the organisation and on the opportunities available for women in this vibrant decade.

Michele Elliot draws from her own personal archives of letters, photographs and visual diaries that catalogue her work from the period and also her friendship, four decades strong, with artist and fellow ARTEMIS committee member Jo Darbyshire. Elliot’s text approaches prose as a poetic form, reflecting on the role of intimacy in memory, in art, between women. Taylor Reudavey reflects on her engagement with the State Library records and the artwork she has conceptualised from it, speaking from a position firmly of the now. A selection of texts written during the 1980s are featured and speak with the voice of that era directly to its concerns. The texts republished here have, in some instances, had minor edits made by their authors, with additional minor changes made for clarification during editing. Finally, although it is a meagre olive branch towards comprehensiveness, I have included a roll call of all the names recorded either as financial members or in attendance at ARTEMIS meetings that I have been able to locate in the State Library records, listed by their various roles and responsibilities. I am hopeful that this list is complete, but I know that hope is probably naive.

It feels as though ‘feminism’ has recently resurfaced as a vital discussion in the visual arts nationally and in the wider world, too. At the time I am writing this, the status of women, the progress or lack

of it made towards legal equality and basic respect, is central to many public discussions that gather around a trending social media hashtag: #metoo. Consciousness raising in the networked age. This feeling, that feminism is ‘back from the margins’, is part of the motivation to embark on this project because, though women’s rights has become more prominent in public consciousness in the last five years, these discussions have never really ceased, not among women at least.

Recent large-scale exhibitions and curatorial projects focused on feminist art – *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on Art and Feminism*, 15 December – 17 March 2017 at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in Melbourne; The Feminist Renewal Art Network’s *FRAN Festival*, 25 August – 24 September 2017, in Adelaide and wider South Australia; the series of conferences and exhibitions produced by the Contemporary Art and Feminism research cluster at the Sydney College of the Arts in 2016 and 2017, to name several – although catalysed by a feminist zeitgeist, have all taken pains to stress the continuity and ongoing-ness of feminist practice, while making space to address its limitations and consider its futures. It’s notable that, although these projects are often nationally focused, Western Australian participation is limited. It is timely therefore, and will never stop being timely, to consider the achievements of women and the roles that they have played in building the world as we know it now, in Western Australia in particular. It is important, too, to recognise that there are particular stories we tell ourselves and particular formats for those stories that seem to cause some of those activities to ‘disappear’, if not from history then at least from attention. This publication is fundamentally partial, but is a small gesture made towards a bigger picture and a more nuanced story.

For all its anxiety about its relation to the national ‘canon’, Perth, as in most western ‘centres’, has its own canon of accepted art and cultural history full of anointed players. This canon is itself a story made through repeated telling. This is not to say that the work of those anointed does not deserve its status in our collective memories, simply that there are other stories to tell and other people who were there and who contributed, who did good work. On reflection, my reply to that concerned correspondent should have been this: all histories are revisionist. The work of feminist historians, labelled as revisionists

themselves, has long been directed at making the construction of history and its partiality visible, pointing to its negative spaces, filling them in or creating something new in their place.

Fundamentally, what I hope for this book is that it serves as the foundation for more work. The accessibility and relatively concise nature of the ARTEMIS records and the short but densely packed tenure of the organisation makes this kind of volume and the research it requires more immediately manageable, but there are other groups in the arts from this period – ARX, Media Space, Praxis, for example – and their messy and contested interrelation that require similar examinations, multiple and from different perspectives. There are other women's groups and other women, too. At the very least, I hope it is useful that some of what is currently accessible one on one in the Leah Cohen Reading Room at the State Library of Western Australia is brought out of that archive and into wider circulation.

In the meantime, those records and many others remain cared for and preserved in perpetuity in the Batty Library stacks, as open to visitors as this book is to correction and elaboration. Please don't forget.