

FEM-aFFINITY #3: Anne Marsh on doing feminism

PODCAST TRANSCRIPTION — PUBLISHED 26 MARCH 2021

ANNE MARSH [INTRODUCTION QUOTE]

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INTRODUCTION

Hello and welcome to the Art Guide Australia podcast with Tiarney Miekus. This episode is the second of a three-part series on feminism, contemporary art and disability, that looks at the intersections between the three. It focuses on the nationally touring exhibition, *FEM-aFFINITY*. *FEM-aFFINITY* is a collaborative female-led show. It features a series of collaborations between seven female artists who practice from Melbourne's Arts Project Australia, a studio and gallery for artists with an intellectual disability, and seven female contemporary artists including the likes of Yvette Coppersmith and Prudence Flint.

In this final episode, we hear from Anne Marsh. Anne is a contemporary art historian and critic, who's also one of Australia's leading academics at the cross sections between contemporary art and feminism. Over the last four decades she's published widely on art and is currently undertaking an expensive project looking at women, feminism and art in Australia since 1970. In a really insightful conversation we talk about feminism in Australian art from the 70s to now; we discuss how women, neurodiverse and marginalised artists can also be activists; and we talk about what it means to do feminism rather than be a feminist.

And before we get started, a kind thank you to our sponsors for this series, NETS Victoria, who are nationally touring *FEM-aFFINITY*, assisted by the Australian government, through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.

TIARNEY MIEKUS

When I was reading your writing and your research, I found it so interesting that you devoted so much of your time and your career to feminism and art making in Australia. But I was really curious as to where that impulse came from?

ANNE MARSH

Interesting question. When I was at art school, alternative art movements were very much on the agenda and I was initially involved in a sculptural workshop when I was at still art school, and then I became aware of the women's art movement. It was doing a huge exhibition in 1977, I think it was '77, called The Women's Show, and it was curated by a collective of 50 women. And I became involved in that at the time because of my involvement in alternative art spaces and the association with the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide. So, in lots of ways I always think that I've worn two hats because my heartland in terms of a medium is definitely performance art and expanded sculpture, and I guess it's that that brought me, segued me, into the women's art movement. And at the same time, I was coming out as a gay woman.

So, there were two things happening. There was my coming out process, I guess, and being associated with the women's art movement. And those two things kind of came together in my life at the same time. So I subsequently became involved in the women's art movement when they, after they'd done that show and everybody collapsed from fatigue, and then they got their own space, and I was involved as a curator in that space. And there was a collective smaller, much smaller collective, that basically ran the women's art movement in Adelaide. And it had kind of experimental theme to it, or focus if you like, because the key alternative art space was the Experimental Art Foundation. And it's a critic in America, I think it's Cindy Nemser, who said that the avant-garde has always been male and pale, and the EAF was a bit like that. It was fairly male dominated.

TM

So that would have been, sorry, the late 70s in Adelaide?

AM

Yeah, the late 70s. But those two things, my coming out as a gay woman and becom-

ing involved in the women's art movement and then becoming involved in feminism because of the women's art movement, because the gay world at the time wasn't necessarily feminist. So those two things were, you know, that was emerging more, but the gay world—I was in gay bars, for example, you wouldn't call them feminist in any sense of the word at that stage. I mean, subsequently these two things, I guess this is what we call intersectionality these days, these two things kind of came together and things evolved in a more multi-various kind of way.

TM

So, is there anything that happened before that, that made you want to be involved in those women's groups? Like, I mean, was it just, was there something that you felt was unfair or you were looking at the men around you and it didn't... Nothing seemed right?

AM

Not really. I've got a strange background. Because I had done sculpture, I was used to being in a male dominated environment. Like in the sculpture department in my year there was only one other woman. I mean, there was only 12 students in the whole year because art schools were small, more boutique than they are now, but there was only one other woman. And when we made the sculpture workshop and I was the chair of that workshop, and she was involved in that too, but not as actively as I was. So I was the chair of this workshop that was all men basically. But at the time, it just seemed normal to me. You know, just kind of... So it was the women's art movement for me, and subsequently finding feminism through that process and subsequently reading around those things, it was life-changing for me, yes. Especially in career terms.

TM

Yeah. It started to seem not normal.

AM

It certainly did. Yes. It certainly did. And some of the things that had happened in the sculpture workshop in the sculpture department, I've subsequently I realised how sexist it was really. But they were unconscious about it and I wasn't aware of it at the time. Cause the art world's pretty competitive, well was and still is I think, very competitive kind of place. And so everybody's competing with everybody else and the sexual competition, you know, is just another layer on top of all of everything else.

TM

When the word feminism was starting to get used, was it getting used quite popularly in the late 70s?

AM

Yeah, absolutely. And people were, especially in that because my focus was always with art, there was a lot of stuff coming out of America and I subsequently went to America and visited places like the women's building in Los Angeles. And there's another like-minded group in San Francisco and was reading a lot of Lucy Lippard's work about artists meeting for cultural change. And there was a lot of left-wing activity that was happening in the art world in America and was subsequently happening here around the Biennales. And that had to do with equal representation of male and female artists. And so that debate was starting to be had definitely in Australia in the late 70s. And women's art movements had formed in Sydney in '74, '75 and subsequently in Adelaide and Melbourne, there was various groups. And then around Australia in the early 80s, everywhere had a kind of associated group, which was around women in the arts and lobbying for equal representation.

TM

I guess to jump forward almost to now and the last 10 years, you have this idea in your work of doing feminism rather than being a feminist, can you explain the distinction between the two?

AM

Yeah. So I mean, I think it's, it's slightly controversial. It's not actually my phrase. I picked it up from somewhere during the research project and I can't for the life of me find the first reference to that anymore. So I've just taken it on, but it seemed to me that being a feminist is so kind of, I don't know, locked into some kind of identity. And I think that feminism is more fluid. I think that feminism is not just an ideology. I think there are ideological feminists, but in my encounters with feminism, right from the women's art movement all the way through my career, it's a multi-various platform. Women can be feminists and be radically right-wing, you know. So, over the years I've come to believe that the doing of feminism as a kind of an

informed practice is more important than proclaiming that one's a feminist, or proclaiming that one is, how would you put it, all for women's equality and all this kind of stuff. Because it depends from... Always depends on where the person is speaking from. So, you know, Margaret Thatcher was probably a feminist in some, you know, even though she was anti-woman, there was some, you know, she had some kind of feminist platform in a way, and people would put her up as a female icon of the prime ministership on the right side of politics. And so I think that actually having feminism as a doing word, rather than a being word, one opens it up so that anybody can be a feminist. And I'm a great proponent of men taking on some kind of feminism. And I think that really, they should be kind of morally obliged to. So I think it opens it up.

It also kind of sheds the light on the multi-variousness of feminisms. That feminism is a plural thing, not a singular thing. And people can go through their lives, take on a kind of feminist ethical position, and may never take on a feminist ideological position. I think feminism, the idea of being a feminist or that there is a feminist group, or there is a definition around feminism, tends to polarise. And I think that being a little more liberal about it, and thinking about it as a doing thing, then people can pick up feminism and they can do feminist acts or activities, or they can make a feminist lobby for their group or for their position or from when, from where they speak from, without being laden down with what it is to be a feminist. And perhaps, you know, if you look at feminist history, it is so multi-diverse and it is about, it tends to be about people in groups taking positions around particular issues. Or, you know, when you see things like we've got, again, exploding in the press, you know, the sexual harassment of women in the workplace, for example. That really coheres people around a particular issue and they can do feminism there, you know, and they will stand up and be counted as doing feminism in that arena.

But then some of those people would also be anti-abortion. And we can't, you can't legislate against these beliefs that people have. So I think for feminism to be a change platform within societies and across societies and groups, that it's better that it's a doing word; that you can do it rather than be it. I mean, people can argue, you would probably argue against that and say that it's too much of a liberal position, but...

TM

Yeah, well, I mean, I suppose just to backtrack a tiny bit, the 'Doing Feminism' project is something that's being sponsored by the Australia Council and it has a lot of events and residencies and a book associated with it. When you're taking such a liberal view of the word feminism, and you're looking at female art-making from the 70s onwards, that seems like a huge area to try and cover. I mean, are there challenges that you've had in trying to cover such a big field with such a liberal definition?

AM

No. It allows me to cover that field. I mean, I'm not doing a book or a program which is just about feminist art. So it's called Women's Art and Feminist Criticism. So there are two things. I think that women's art is very, very powerful and has been through the 20th and the 21st century. And hasn't been acknowledged for its power and its importance, and the way in which it has changed the mainstream art world. And then I think there's feminist criticism and feminist philosophy and feminist theory that has done the same. Now, sometimes those two things come together and sometimes they don't. Right. So there would be women that I have in the book that wouldn't call themselves feminist, and they wouldn't say they're making feminist art, but I believe I can put the whole package together and call that a kind of doing feminism, because everybody has contributed in one way or another, in different ways to creating this big change movement.

TM

Is there... Cause I mean, I guess you've lived through this as much as you're now reflecting on it and bringing all these different threads together. Is there something overarching that sticks out for you, or something that you've learnt in this process?

AM

That women have contributed an enormous amount to the visual arts basically, and they haven't been acknowledged enough for the importance of that work. There are major, major, major leaders who are female in the art world, and they're not getting as much recognition as their male peers. Like there aren't... We get on the agenda women's show, like there's one in Canberra at the moment, *Know My Name*. Okay.

Which is a big splashy show with lots of women in it. But we don't get the same gallery putting on a retrospective on a major artist. Like even somebody who's as apolitical as Rosalie Gascoigne does not have that thing. And yet Mike Parr had a major retrospective there quite recently. Now I've got a great deal of respect for Mike Parr. I've written about him and I think he was certainly deserving of that, but Rosalie Gascoigne has been dead for several years and she hasn't had one, you know. And then, you know, Pat Brassington—and you can just name name after name, after name, after name of very, very, very significant artists in Australia that have not had the recognition that they deserve.

TM

Why do you think that's the case? I mean, especially in the last five, six years with #MeToo, and things like that, you would think...

AM

Australia really lags behind their western colleagues in this way because the boom in the blockbusters for women's shows and feminist shows was definitely much earlier in the 2000s. So from 2007 was a massive year, but there have been shows: 'Inside the Visible' was here. It toured from America to here in 1997, was shown in Western Australia. And that was a huge show on women's art in the 20th century. But, you know, even Spain's done shows, Korea's done shows, you know, all of these places had done shows by 2010, 2011. [In] 2011, I think it was 2011, Julie Ewington did Contemporary Australia Women at QAGOMA, but that was quite a small curated show. It was a good show, but it was a small and curated and it wasn't what we call a blockbuster. So Australia's really behind in this recognition of women in these blockbuster shows, and also in the other majors marker is the solo retrospective show. And then of course the monograph on the artist. And I think it's part of being... I think in Australia there's not a big enough philanthropic support for Australian culture. You know, we do have a smaller population, that's one problem. But we don't put enough money into our own culture. You know, we prefer to buy American music or English music. We prefer to read their novels, their magazines. We consume other white western cultures before we consume our own. And our own tends to be denigrated in strange ways.

TM

What do you do with that history where of feminist art making, I guess feminism in Australia, that has been seen as very white and very middle-class.

AM

I think it's true. I mean, especially in Australia and we have a huge Indigenous population, and of course Indigenous artists here have created one of the most powerful art movements of the late 20th to 21st century, with the painting that's coming out of the desert and also out of the city. And feminism has been very pale until, until the 21st century. I think until people have started to... Well, white feminists have started to recognise their whiteness and to realise that this is a problem, they can't speak for all women and they haven't—they certainly haven't, you know. They have tended to be a middle-class movement to a certain extent because it lost that, you know, radical left-wing edge a little bit. And black women certainly feel that their issues weren't addressed up until... Well, I think it's changing now slowly, but that has to do with a lot of black activists and authors standing up and saying, "No, you haven't, you know, you might think that you're not racist, but in actual fact you are because you've, you know, you haven't given us enough power in your platforms. You haven't given over to us enough basically. And in that you haven't recognised your whiteness."

TM

And then disability just seems like another marginalisation on top of that.

AM

That's been marginalised for sure. I mean, I was asked this question in the conference, "How can people mobilise?" And I'd say again, going back to that thing about activism having better tools in the 21st century, I think if people have a desire to be heard and recognised, that feminism is a good example, it's taken years, of how one might do that. And it has to do with the small group. Everything starts by two people talking about it and then expanding that, expanding it. And it doesn't have to be very many people to make a big noise. And I think that we're going to start seeing that now. We're going to start seeing those lobbies. And I think society is very, well, can't speak for everybody, but I think society is more ready to hear that now. And the work that feminism's done about inclusiveness. I mean, I know it's been pale, but

their idea of including all artists, for example, like not having this very mainstream idea of what a career in the arts looks like. I think there are different models and people can kind of look at those models and look at small group processes and look at how people have managed to make change happen. It's not impossible to become empowered, even if you're in a very, very powerless position. And I think somewhere like Art Projects, if they could attract some really good philanthropic money, then books could be written, scholarships could be given, prizes could be made available, that would create a coterie of kind of group where people can be acclaimed for their achievements in their own terms. And that that will then burst through.

TM

And going on from Arts Project, obviously there is the show *FEM-aFFINITY* where Catherine Bell has paired seven neurodiverse artists with seven neurotypical artists, and has also fostered a collaboration or at least a pairing between the 14 artists. Is that a unique show in your knowledge?

AM

To the best of my knowledge it is, but I think it's a great project. I think the artists that are working in collaboration, there will definitely be amazing kind of two way—I think I talked to some of them when the show was on—amazing kind of two way relationships that happen where both artists are gaining some insight into the other one, and learning different skills as well.

TM

I worked at Arts Project for time, and I often talked to people who were looking at either buying the work or coming to the shows, or people involved in the art world, or curators. And one thing I felt like I continuously had to do was legitimise the art as art first and foremost.

AM

And that's because of old paradigms. I mean, it's exactly the same thing happened to women. You know, I've got some quotes from women that are in their eighties now in my book where, you know, they were told just to go home and have children cause that could be, that would be the most creative thing they could do. And that was a standard kind of phrase, even when I was at art school. And so women's art was illegitimate because women would never have, you know, starved in a garage and become this heroic kind of Jackson Pollock type figure. But all of the Jackson Pollock type figures are manufactured, cosmetically, usually through dealers and galleries. So it's the dealers and the galleries to a certain extent set the agenda. And then the museums.

Now, some of those people are great. Some of them are, you know, they do magnificent things for their artists and who wouldn't want to be in a strong commercial stable with, you know, whoever, we won't name the gallerists, but, you know, and be supported by them, of course. And if you're an artist and you don't have an income and you're taken on by one of these people, you're going to become what they want you to become. Some artists leave because they don't want to do that. You know, there's famous cases of that. But the gallerists know how to prime the artists to success. And that's why the artists want to be with the gallerist. The gallerist do a lot of work to make that happen. But they're also making greatness within the paradigm of greatness that has been before. So it's what they call the canon.

You know, somebody like Cathy Staughton comes along, who's a fantastic painter at Arts Project, you know, and she doesn't fit the paradigm. So, she's not great because, you know, she's, I mean, I don't know if you've met Cathy, but she's kind of so 'out there' and everything, she's just an amazing person. And you could say she's the ultimate Jackson Pollock figure, really, but they can't handle that much difference because it's... They don't feel that it's, it can't be contained enough. And it was the same with women. So people that are living in differently abled bodies or have differently abled minds or whatever, do not fit the paradigm of what is a healthy white male individual of 30-something. So, society needs to be tired of the paradigm and open to shifts in the paradigm. And I think that is starting to happen and will continue to happen. I think the future's a lot brighter for a lot more people than it used to be.

TM

Because you're a writer and you obviously write so much on art, there's been such a little writing on the field of disability as well, or artists with a disability. And I guess in the case of Arts Project, it's sort of like you were saying before, about how women's shows get grouped as women's shows and you don't get like the attention paid to the solo artist. And I think a lot of the time it can be the same for artists with an intel-

lectual disability. You know, there's studios in almost every capital city in Australia and those studios get written about, but not the artists themselves. Do you see a change in that?

AM

I think it will start to happen. I mean, the same thing happened with Indigenous art. People used to talk about Indulkana and Utopia and on the art centres, so I think to a certain extent, it's a process. And change always happens slowly. We always think it's going to happen fast, but it usually happens slowly, slowly, slowly, and then there's a tipping point and suddenly it happens. And so I think that that will happen. So, if people writing about the studios, from those studios, artists emerge, and then those artists fit the paradigm more, you know...

I don't think we're ever going to kill the canon because, you know, it's a business. As you know, art is a business in the end and it's not necessarily artists that get rich, it's the collectors that get rich. But you know, the artists make the work and they want to be part of a system blah blah blah. We wouldn't want to foreclose on those artists that do start making money, especially if they're in the Western Desert, for example. You don't rain on that parade because you know, Emily Kame Kngwarreye's family is getting some money back now. No, no, no. We go, "Okay, the canon's now working to a certain extent."

But I don't think we will see a total breakdown of the canon. But I think that that canon relies on this concept of the avant-garde and that avant-garde at its best is experimental practices, and experimental practices are porous. And they can have dialogical food courts everywhere, they can, you know, they can then be canonised, which is what happened to them. And those things will happen. But at that kind of experimental level, it's more porous. More things can come in. More things can be accepted. More things can grow. And more artists do their different thing, and eventually that will become canonised.

CONCLUSION

And that was Anne Marsh for this third and final episode of our mini-series, looking at contemporary art, feminism, and disability, and focusing on the show *FEM-aFFINITY*. You can listen back to episode one with curator, artist and academic Catherine Bell, and episode two with artist Janelle Low. You can subscribe to the Art Guide podcast on iTunes and Spotify, or otherwise listen at Art Guide online, where you can also keep up to date with art related features, articles and interviews from across the country.