

Conversation

Dr Carolyn Barnes and Caroline Phillips

Carolyn Barnes: Aesthetic appreciation has long been recognised as a common human value, yet gender, as a primary driver of social differentiation, can slant the reception of an artist's work and influence who becomes an artist. Women have long been linked to specific aesthetic pursuits, sensibilities and statuses: craft not art, the decorative and the domestic, art as a pastime not a profession, aesthetic practices that require patience, manual dexterity and attention to detail, the role of the follower rather than the innovator. There's abundant evidence to challenge each assumption, but do you feel the general category of gender still affects women's participation in art?

Caroline Phillips: It seems to me that the recent recuperation of feminist art in terms of visibility and institutional interest across the world attests to the ongoing concerns of women artists in response to their current conditions, which of course are expressed through practice. The conditions at play in previous 'waves' of feminism required both political and aesthetic responses. Changes in those conditions in the '80s and '90s sought to submerge particular aspects of practice such as depth of feeling or emotion, personal narrative, vulnerability. Ultimately, I think the denial of these factors has resulted in the impetus for change over the last decade.

CB: You've got a point about postmodernism's rejection of depth models invalidating important avenues of critique and exploration for women artists. High profile artists like Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman made feminist critique visible in postmodern art, but postmodernism's focus on the seduction of the surface ignored the interplay between general structures of experience and individual lives, showing blindness towards the micro-politics of everyday life. You suggest that the artists included in THE f WORD have consciously rejected the axiomatic postmodern interest in depthlessness to explore the complexity of the gender dichotomy and the diverse, layered forms of subjectivity and experience it creates, using affective states, emotive orientations and sensory triggers as the primary basis for engaging their audience.

CP: I see many female artists today facing a double bind in needing to negotiate problematic gender stereotypes around hard/soft, emotional/rational, personal/political dualities while wishing to explore the affective dimensions of female consciousness, experience and agency. The research over the course of the project and the subsequent selection of artists for the two exhibitions shows that my contemporaries within a feminist art context—or perhaps just the artists that I am personally drawn to—are passionate about exploring interiority of the psyche, emotional affect and trauma, poetic narrative and political activism as did the major artists from the defining era of feminist art in the seventies. These interests respond to the problematic articulation of difference within the complexity of social life.

CB: The 'practice' turn in recent social theory nominates practices as the primary unit of sociality, acting as a material point of reference in gender differentiation. Andreas Reckwitz describes practices as routine behaviours composed of bodily and mental activities, material objects and their use, emotional states and tacit knowledge. Artistic agency is bound up in practices. The artists you have selected for The f Word project zone in on the symbolic orders that structure and organize activities, experiences and things, while exchanging fixed and singular ideas of subjectivity and identity for more plural and complex ones. Their work highlights the cultural and social politics circulating between the worlds of bodies, things and signs.

CP: It seems to me to be these relationships between art and social politics that are interwoven throughout each artist's work and are certainly inspiring and motivating for my own practice. I think the interconnectivity you mention is a big one. For me personally, it is becoming the foundation of my PhD research as it relates to sexual difference theory. Many of the artists in the show explore connections with others through their work—their families, their histories, their communities, their sense of place.

Reckwitz's criteria—in particular bodily activities—are also fundamental. It is through the body that the other things follow, the mental activities, the making and handling of things, the performance of identity, emotional content and knowledge. Perhaps the point where gender comes into play is the routinised behaviour. All artists' practices are specific routines in some way or another, but thinking now about Reckwitz's assessment, maybe it is gendered repetition in the way we approach this that makes the difference.

CB: To me, the work of the artists in THE fWORD draws its impact from working with and against the normative affordances of objects, materials and practices, revealing how aesthetic and affective associations intervene in tangible and specific ways in relations between the personal and the social, including in terms of gender.

CP: Yes. On one level, a number of the artists in the show are reworking the previously gendered, arguably less valued practices that relate to craft and community in a way that reconfigures those activities and creates new outcomes out in the world. For example, the artists in the Gippsland Art Gallery show demonstrate finely tuned and nuanced representations of women artists, community groups and larger social migrations. Through the specific materials and methods of their practice, they comment on the powerful ways that lives are affected by their relations with others. In the second exhibition at Ararat Regional Art Gallery, the artists' concerns appear more personal, but on closer inspection they are drawing on abstract and symbolic referents that go beyond a single author. Many of these artists are drawing on trauma, memory and loss to tap into much wider spectrums of history and human life.

CB: For both groups, the way their work is simultaneously individualistic and social does echo the interweaving of aesthetics, practices and micropolitics in 1970s feminist art. I also see a parallel in the strong alignment of means and ends in each artist's work. When 1970s artists rejected modernism's maxim of aesthetic autonomy to reengage with everyday experience and agitate for social change, it resulted in a major expansion, an explosion really, of artistic possibilities. The work in both THE fWORD exhibitions seems to share a common quality in the way form and content cohere around the issues at hand to generate a complex, nuanced and diffuse body of critique. Whether the artists are creating highly crafted artefacts, developing open-ended situations, or repurposing elements of mass culture and the decorative arts, they take a conceptual approach to working that harnesses aesthetics and practices to the exploration of material-symbolic relations within social life. It is often regarded as simplistic to see a link between artist critique and social change, but 1970s feminist art showed that previously marginalised and muted subjects could act and speak for themselves on all manner of issues. The artists in THE fWORD project continue this legacy of acting through art practice within a feminist paradigm to claim a voice and to advance meaningful critique, doing this alongside other groups in society using other practices. Otherwise, there would be only silence and invisibility.