

## **Future Feminist Archive Residency: Brown Council at the Art Gallery of New South Wales**

Brown Council's (BC) project for Future Feminist Archive began as a residency in the archives of the Art Gallery of NSW (AGNSW) and developed into an ongoing performance for the Biennale of Sydney, Making History. The residency and Making History have now given rise to a commission by the AGNSW's contemporary project space, set to open in November 2016. As the artists observe, the FFA residency has been very productive indeed.

Diving into the belly of one of Australia's most august art institutions, looking for traces of work by women performance artists as well as documents relating to the history of the Biennale of Sydney, is very much of a piece with BC's overall practice, although this is the first time the artist collective has engaged as a group in a traditional archive. A strong theme in their work has been the history of art by women, in particular in those media that specifically refused conventional forms of documentation. Through the cipher of 'forgotten' 1970s performance artist 'Barbara Cleveland', BC has for several years prodded the existing canon of Australian post-conceptual art to reveal its gaps and silences, and attempted to offer up alternative histories.

The residency began in 2015 and entailed BC's four members spending time in the archival rooms in the gallery's basement in the company of archivist extraordinaire, Eric Riddler. While these sessions were complemented by the artists looking at material off-site through copied and digital files, the physical inhabitation of the data storage spaces and extended contact with gallery staff gave the project a particularly immediate, intimate and collaborative quality. That physical presence also contributed to the artists' sense of connection with this institution in its complexity, and set the stage for their 2016 AGNSW commission that will feature a fictional archive as a centrepiece.

One of the things that most struck the artists while undertaking this archival sifting was the amount of material attesting to the controversy and contestation that has accompanied the Biennale since its inception. In light especially of the reaction to protests in 2014 provoked by the unethical investments of Transfield Holdings (a corporate sponsor with long ties to the Biennale) that tried to cast the artists considering a boycott as outliers, this discovery helped to put things in perspective. The archives revealed that artists had many times taken to the barricades to hold the Biennale to account, in particular for the poor representation of women and local artists. For BC, the 1976 Biennale protest was a stand out, its creative resonances captured beautifully in a photograph of women artists and theorists, their mouths taped shut, shoulder to shoulder on the steps of the AGNSW. The protestors of 2014 were part of a proud tradition that like most counter-discourses has moments of real cut-through and change followed by the re-calibration of the status quo.

Through the archival residency, BC hoped to hone and develop their feminist research methodology, which is informed by an inclusionary and collaborative approach to generating knowledge, and an emphasis on the always partial — both in the sense of incomplete and biased — nature of official histories. BC's experiments with archives have entailed valorizing different forms of 'document', including re-enactments (of performance, for example), and oral histories with their source in people's everyday memories and storytelling. They have also entailed the creation of consciously fictional data that allows us to imagine how different histories might be created, to very different social, cultural and political effect. Such fabrication serves to remind us of the caution we must all take with archives, given their combination of power and unreliability. More than one art world aficionado has been tripped up by BC's archival games!

BC's Biennale work Making History gathers all these threads together, offering opportunities for the informal, collective generation of new stories/histories of performance art through its recording of 'circles' of memories, open to all, over a three month period. In Making History, BC brings the critical drivers underpinning the Future Feminist Archive to life, or to use their phrase, they have created 'a living archive'.

Report by Jacqueline Millner

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