



The 'Full Flight' Archive Project

artist Fiona MacDonald in conversation with Catriona Moore

2016

Future Feminist Archive

Fiona MacDonald

Working with Vivienne Binns' Central Western NSW community arts project *Full Flight* (1981-83), Arts OutWest archives, Bathurst Regional Art Gallery

Exhibition Text

Bathurst Regional Library

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Artist/researcher Fiona MacDonald worked with Bathurst Regional Art Gallery and Arts OutWest on an investigation of Arts OutWest archives with the idea of re-framing the *Full Flight* Project into a contemporary feminist framework as part of the Future Feminist Archive.

Project description - Full Flight: a participatory art project initiated by Margaret Smith, community arts field officer at Bathurst as an arts development project in Central Western NSW. An exploratory public meeting was held in 1980. Convenor, Margaret Smith subsequently suggested, a "craftsman-in-a-caravan" concept from Vivienne Binns to the Crafts Board Director, David Williamson, asking for funds to acquire a caravan with self-contained living and workshop areas. (Arts OutWest archives, 1 January 1981) A caravan with self-contained living and workshop areas was acquired and the project concluded in 1983.

Vivienne Binns was engaged as the "core artist" to create a series of workshops from September 1981 for six months, to conclude in an exhibition in March 1981. Binns had worked for several years as a community artist and was a pioneer of this area of practice in Australia. She was playing a major role in feminist art, having been a founding member of the Sydney Women's Art Movement in 1974. Under the influence of feminism, Binns made a sustained exploration of collaborative and collective work, contributing to the development of community arts as a valid form of practice. Some of the work from her first solo exhibition in 1967 provoked both critical outrage and celebration, for both the sexual content and the rough, anti-aesthetic of the work

Binns was an ideal choice having successfully conceived and conducted the artist-in-community project, *Mothers memories others memories*, at the General Studies Dept., University of New South Wales (1979) and in Blacktown (1979-81). She created two 'postcard racks', comprising 54 silkscreened postcards, enamel and steel: one is in the National Gallery Collection, the other was gifted to Blacktown City Council and presented to the People of Blacktown.

The *Full Flight* project reached a wide audience when New York-based feminist art writer Lucy Lippard stayed with Binns to participate in one of the workshops and wrote on the project from her "outback" caravan at Lake Cargelligo and subsequently included the project in an article for her anthology *Get the Message* (1984).

Full Flight is archived at Arts OutWest at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, and documented in Vivienne Binns, ed., *Community and the arts: history, theory, practice*, 1991, a collection of papers describing the history and development of community arts in Australia and in a slide kit at the University of Tasmania Library.

The 'Full Flight' Archive Project: artist Fiona MacDonald in conversation

Catriona Moore (CM): Could you briefly describe your FFA archive-based project to us, Fiona?

Fiona MacDonald (FMcD): I live at Ilford, near Mudgee, in New South Wales' Central West. I approached the FFA project as an opportunity to see if and how my local community was affected by the first 'second wave' International Women's Day, which was back in March 1975.

CM: So it seems that you used Viv Binns' community-based 'Full Flight' project as a point of connection with memories of 'second wave' regional feminism – is that why you were initially drawn to *Full Flight*?

FMcD: I remember hearing about *Full Flight* when it was happening, and had subsequently seen it referred to in the press and through later exhibitions by Vivienne Binns.

CM: What was its impact on Australian contemporary art back then? How did it connect with the Biennale of Sydney art politics, for instance?

FMcD: In the later 1970s Vivienne was a leading Sydney-based artist whose innovative and community-based, 'social practice' style work was showcased in the BoS. *Full Flight* was a valiant attempt by Vivienne to ignite discussion about contemporary art through the Central West regional communities. Viv understood the need to be hands on, and to use practical workshop environments within which to start conversations about art practices in the everyday.

CM: Yes, that to me is part of the genius of *Full Flight* – and was a guiding exploratory principle that Viv and others started thinking through in her related community-based project, *Mothers' Memories, Others' Memories* (1989-81). *Full Flight* extended this connective aesthetic and social adventure in the more culturally unpredictable rural arena.

How do you think *Full Flight* intersected with international feminist thinking around art processes, materials, producers and audiences for art in the 1970s and 80s?

FMcD: *Full Flight* was at the cutting edge of international feminist thinking and

art practice, to my mind. For instance, the *Full Flight* initiative of Viv and Margaret Smith seems to have been a direct response to (then radical) feminist idea that 'the personal is political'. Both seem to have been very conscious that they were taking this concept and attempting to make it work within the relatively conservative social and cultural rural-regional spaces of the Central West. That idea was 'in the air', and both Viv and Margaret showed they were capable of giving the proposition a real workout.

CM: The story goes that the New York-based feminist art critic Lucy Lippard dropped in to be part of the *Full Flight* project for a weekend workshop at Lake Carjelligo, is that right? I wonder whether this visit also fed into Lippard's thinking on possibilities and limitations of progressive, community-based arts projects, which she subsequently wrote about.¹

FMcD: Yes, Lippard visited Viv in Lake Carjellico and saw the potential of Viv's grass roots approach. It was an experience for the visiting feminist art historian at the coal face of community practice with a strong clear thinking protagonist and enthusiastic local participants.

CM: What *Full Flight* ideas resonated with your own practical history of working in community settings?

FMcD: Working in community settings brings opportunities to examine your own practice against specific local conditions and to sharpen the expressive power of artwork.

CM: In a broader, institutional sense, how would you characterize the local and regional arts networks that were developed through the *Full Flight* project? Were they useful? Have they survived, and in what form?

FMcD: It is interesting to track in the Arts Outwest archive the emergence of the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council – and the creation of specific positions for community art facilitators, like Margaret Smith, who was a strong early proponent of the Council in the Central West.

The changes in policy and funding strategies over the interceding decades have affected conditions in the region, rather like the weather – dry spells followed by wet – strengthening some community group activities and starving others

¹ See in this context Lucy Lippard, 'Hot Potatos: Art & Politics in 1980', *Block* No 4, 19801 and 'Out of Control: Australian Art on the Left', written response to her brief stay in Australia in 1982(?) in *Village Voice*, October 1982 and subsequent books on public and community based art such as xxxx cat to check texts eg Overlay.

which fell outside of the guidelines. Now with renewed interest by contemporary art practice in community engagement it is tempting to see a return of *La Nina*, and potential for extending local participation and experience of contemporary art.

CM: The whole idea of ‘community arts’ has changed since the 1970s and 1980s. For a start, there is no longer a discrete funding entity called the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council.

In the later 1970s and early 1980s these bodies supported and promoted artists developing innovative and democratic models of social engagement and community-based art practice. I recall that not all community arts projects assumed some pre-existing entity, ‘community’, as defined by any *a priori* geographical location, class or gender identity or ethnic heritage. That posed the radical challenge for artists and audiences: how to invent new communal, cultural actions with and build more creative community identifications? This challenge was partly filtered through an aesthetic investigation of the slogan ‘the personal is political’, through expressing the relation between everyday ‘personal’ life and the broader social and political picture (such as child care, violence against women, workplace safety, the experience of migration). Like *Full Flight*, many of these projects took place in non-art spaces.

In some ways, the Art & Working Life programmes sponsored by the Australia Council and progressive elements within the Trade Union movement focused the issue-based and politically radical character of these community arts projects. In this sense, I think *Full Flight* holds lessons for us today as a model for artists working in community.

Do you think community-based projects (now commonly considered as ‘social practice’ or ‘relational work’ or ‘social sculpture’) recognize their debt to these earlier feminist community-arts experiments? In what sense do you think that the *FFA* is attempting to document and publicise this feminist legacy in contemporary art?

FMcD: No I don’t think memory is maintained that really does justice to earlier experiments and lessons. The wheel seems to be continually being reinvented. Projects like *FFA* play an important role in moving the processes of development on to new stages, by short circuiting this default position - that the wheel needs reinventing in ignorance of earlier lessons. Besides which it is such a joy to be reminded or learn of the experiences of earlier artists.