

## ***Multiple processes to unpack the contemporary value of a grassroots feminist archive***

*Azza Zein, on behalf of the Women's Art Register, Naarm /Melbourne*

In 2021, the Women's Art Register undertook an initiative to revisit its archive through a diversity-oriented feminist lens. We were interested in answering the following question: how did the Women's Art Register artists engage in inclusive exhibitions and projects? Acknowledging that this archive developed in the surplus time of a homogeneous middle class, how was diversity approached? What are the possible methods and ways for the Women's Art Register to become more inclusive and accessible to artists from different backgrounds? In what ways should such methods rely on decolonial non-western ways of approaching archives? How can we link and intersect the anti-settler colonial practices of representation with the inclusion of migrant and First Nation artists without turning them into tokens?

### ***A reading group at the Yarra library***

We started a reading group on decolonising archives in collaboration with the City of Yarra libraries under their Art Text series to answer these questions.<sup>1</sup> Recognising the problematic exploitative marketability of the term "decolonising", we still used this keyword to expand our reading list in ways to resist traditional western debates on archival methods. We held two reading group events centred around translatability texts, practices in reclaiming the future, and ethical proximity (see the appendix list of discussed texts).

### ***An outreach event at SEVENTH Gallery, centred around play, through a participatory and collaborative game***

In the Women's Art Register's archives, a set of community-oriented projects drew our attention. *Common Thread* (1985) and *Evimiz* (1986) reminded me of safe female spaces, organised around embroidery in Middle Eastern countries and games such as Barjeez. It prompted us to ask how might we approach the Women's Art Register archives and avoid a repetitive re-presentation of photographs through an exhibition without questioning their context? In decolonial ways?

We chose to play.

SEVENTH Gallery invited the Women's Art Register to discuss notions of outside art and inclusivity through a one-day event that they supported financially.<sup>2</sup> We considered the invitation an opportunity to revisit our rich feminist archive through a critical lens as well as a future vision of inclusivity. In the morning session, multiple speakers presented informally about current inclusive and intergenerational projects drawn from the Women's Art Register archive and its community, followed by an afternoon workshop that took the form of a participatory game.

Amongst our speakers, we invited Gail Harradine from the Koorie Heritage Trust to share insights on their recent project exhibition *Seen and Unseen (2021)*.<sup>3</sup> This project restaged and updated the exhibition and educational Slide Kit *Can't See For Lookin, 12 Koorie Women Artists Educating* (1993), which was a joint project between the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association and the Women's Art Register, and was shown at the NGV Access Gallery. Another presenter, Irene Holub, discussed challenges and ways to include and voice members of the Deaf community in the art scene.

---

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Jacqueline Felstead for inviting us to take part in the Art Text series.

<sup>2</sup> Many thanks to Diego Ramirez for offering us the program at Seventh and making sure it happens in 2021 despite the multiple postponements due to lockdown.

<sup>3</sup> Please see this Koorie Heritage Trust's video, explaining the historical importance of *Can't See For Lookin* (1993). It was made for the exhibition *Seen and Unseen (2021)* <https://vimeo.com/589171953>

In addition, Women's Art Register artist-in-residence Claudia Pharès presented about her artistic practice on Motherhood and invisible labour, the latter being the theme of our most recent Women's Art Register (Issue #68, December 2021), that she guest-edited. Committee member and arts and community advocate Lea Alex presented about two recent Women's Art Register projects: *This is W.A.R!*, an ongoing mapping project that shares sites of women's art practice in and around Melbourne/Naarm; and *It comes in waves*, a conversation series curated by Katie Ryan. Committee member and artist Caroline Phillips presented about her ongoing hashtag online project #imawomanartist, which lists one new name of a woman artist every day.

In particular, we invited all artists identifying as women or gender-diverse and from diverse cultural backgrounds to join our one-day event on 12 December 2021, to hear from the speakers and then to take part in the participatory game *Common Threads*, conceived and developed by Azza Zein, Sophie Calalesina and Caroline Phillips. The title is inspired by the 1985 project *Common Thread*, which took place at Carringbush (now Richmond) Library, where our archive is located. Sophie Calalesina, Women's Art Register 2021 intern, designed the board game based on the Barjeez board game and materials from the Women's Art Register archives, in particular the Women's Art Forum logo designed by Women's Art Register co-founder and artist Erica McGilchrist, in the late 1970s. The game is cooperative and aims to have participants work together through a series of activities and questions, written on a set of cards. Each square on the board has a symbol attached; corresponding to the four sets of cards: 1. Writing 2. Drawing 3. Action 4. Making. Each card has a question to facilitate an interaction with the historic and inclusive exhibitions drawn from the archive, asking questions about creative ways to draw on and critically engage with their context and outcomes through this playful exploration.

We had a turnout of about twenty participants. Small groups were on each table, moving among the board, the set of questions, the accompanying slide projection and boxes of materials from the Women's Art Register archives. By creating a community-driven set-up to interact with the Collection, participants brought their life experiences to share as an entry point to think through the slides and archival materials. Through the sharing of ideas and cooperative play, participants discussed the importance of digitising the archive, open-access possibilities, and comparing how exhibitions became the seminal moment of change. The game seemed a fun entry point to the richness and depth of the slides and archival materials.

Given the nature of the game, we sought feedback around the card questions, and some participants advised that they could become less conceptual and more simplified. Brian Massumi states, "Play deploys to intensest effect in temporary autonomous zones. In addition to the multiplicity of affective intensities produced as it unfolds, participation in an improvisational interaction creates a global surplus-value of life that is lived qualitatively as a value, and comprises such sub-surplus-values as zest, beauty, wonder, and adventure."<sup>4</sup> Given that the game can constantly adapt to new ways of writing the questions, we think of it as less of a game and more in line with the play process.

### ***The bulletin around multiple notions of the commons***

I guest-edited the Women's Art Register Bulletin #69 (December 2021) on notions of the commons inviting multiverse works by Women's Art Register intern and artist Sophie Calalesina, and artists Kate Hill, Kerry Ann Lee, Priya Namana, Bea Rubio-Gabriel and Tina Stefanou. The issue explored "more-than-human" notions of the commons-becoming along with decolonial and queer approaches to library becomings, poetic interpretations of the commonplace, and artistic communal studio

---

<sup>4</sup> Brian Massumi, *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value: A Postcapitalist Manifesto*, Kindle edition, T94, loc. 1682 (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

sharing. As per the editorial, “in light of the embeddedness of the anthropologists and the distance of the economist, artists of this issue seem to propose a more radical paradigm, that one could call commons-becoming.”<sup>5</sup>

Through multi-modal ways and events including a reading group, the Bulletin publication on Commons, and the socially engaged event at Seventh Gallery, the Women’s Art Register has been able to forge an experimental grass-root multi-faceted methodology to revisit its archive, a way that is not static. Even if the play is repeated, it will always transform into a new sharing and collaborative event. By using multiple ways to discuss the archives through text, play and writing, our research carved a process that is not extractive of this historical feminist collection but rather built on its spirit of making the invisible visible, and giving voices in a non-selective way.

Azza Zein is a visual artist and writer who lives and works in Narm/Melbourne. Born to a Syrian mother and a Lebanese father, Zein grew up in Beirut, Lebanon. Her practice-led research examines concepts of value in art through the materiality of domestic space and personal experience as a migrant.

## Appendices

### 1) list of articles for Art Text reading group at Yarra Library

#### Session 1

Behrouz Boochani and Omid Tofighian (trans)., *No friend but the Mountains* or Omid Tofighian, 'A Translators Tale' in *Sydney Review of Books*

<https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/translators-tale-a-window-to-the-mountains/>

Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu* Broome, WA: Magabala Books, 2018. Chapter 3

Alice Gorman, *Dr Space Junk Vs. the Universe* Sydney, NSW: NewSouth Publishing, 2019. Chapter 7

Maddee Clark and Neika Lehman, 'The Unbearable Hotness of Decolonisation' in *Un Projects* 12.1

<https://unprojects.org.au/article/editorial-the-unbearable-hotness-of-decolonisation/>

Three articles about the recent touring exhibition *The image is not nothing (Concrete Archives)* curated by Lisa Radford and Yhonnie Scarce in *Art and Australia* which can be found here:

<https://www.artandaustralia.com/online/image-not-nothing-concrete-archives/august-editorial>

<https://www.artandaustralia.com/online/image-not-nothing-concrete-archives/october-editorial>

<https://www.artandaustralia.com/online/image-not-nothing-concrete-archives/editorial-may-day>

[S](#)

#### Session 2

Catherine E Walsh and Walter D Mignolo *On Decoloniality* (Chp. 1)

2018 [https://law.unimelb.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/3300284/3.1-Mignolo-and-Walsh,-Introduction-and-The-Decolonial-For-Resurgences,-Shifts,-and-Movements.pdf](https://law.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/3300284/3.1-Mignolo-and-Walsh,-Introduction-and-The-Decolonial-For-Resurgences,-Shifts,-and-Movements.pdf) (attached)

Deborah Bird Rose “On History, Trees, and Ethical Proximity” 2008 *Postcolonial Studies* 11, no. 2 (June 2008): 166 (attached)

---

<sup>5</sup> Azza Zein, *Threading the multiple commons-becoming*, Women’s Art Register Bulletin #69 (December 2021). pp 2-4. Available at the Women’s Art Register, and at State and Territory State libraries nationally and via National Library of Australia. <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-289638594>

Robert Duggan 'Larissa Sansour and the Palestinian ruins of the future' (2020) *Journal for Cultural Research*, 24(1), 69–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472336.2020.1767849> (attached)

Additional shorter articles:

<https://transnationaldecolonialinstitute.wordpress.com/decolonial-aesthetics/Rietveld, Colonialism and Art; an Interview with Dutch-Surinamese Artist, Remy Jungerman. – DutchReview>  
[Remy Jungerman - Where The River Runs - Idea Books](#)

- 2) Boxes used for the participatory game, Common Thread, with items from the archive of the Women's Art Register

<b>Boxes for the participatory game Common Threads</b>				
	Exhibition / Project title	Year	Involved agencies	Format
BOX 1	Aboriginal Women: The Artistic Experience 1983 - Dianne Bell & Penny Tweedie (K1)	1983	WAR Extension Project	slides
BOX 2	Evimiz 1986 and Common Thread (1985)	1986	Carringbush library	slides
BOX 3	Women's Murals Compiled by Anne Morris (1985)	1985	in the archives	slides
BOX 4	Can't See For Lookin (1993) Koori Women Artists Educating	1993	K.H.T. and W.A.R. exhibition at NGV	slides
BOX 5	Bias Binding (1995)	1995	W.A.R. Vic Health gallery and Coonwarr artspace	no slides