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Not at the beginning and not at the end: A conversation between Deidre Logue, Allyson Mitchell and Helena Reckitt

AM: Let's start with a question posed by the editors of this collection. (Quoting from an email by Erin Silver). 'We are keen to gain insight into how you base your practice in relation to or even in defiance of art historical discourse and the writing of histories of art be they queer, feminist or not'. Helena, do you want to begin by talking about your influences?

HR: When I put together the sourcebook *Art and Feminism* at the end of the 'nineties I realized that art history was not going to be very relevant for me, and that I was more inspired by writing that was published close to when the art first emerged. Writers like Lucy Lippard in the US and Rozsika Parker who was covering the women's art scene in *Spare Rib* in the UK were in the trenches working alongside artists, trying to figure out what was happening before it had congealed into a canon. I found this more useful than the work of academics who tend to wait until everything has quietened down and then tidy it up.

AM: Has this changed in the work of recent feminist art historians?

HR: Yes, some contemporary scholars are moving beyond a monographic or prescriptively theoretical approach in ways I find exciting. The queer feminist art historian Tirza True Latimer, who has an essay in this book, writes about the erotics of artistic collaboration between women (a relevant theme for you and Deidre!). I was looking at her chapter on Claude Cahun and her lifelong partner, the designer Marcel Moore, when I was writing about a film inspired by Cahun by Sarah Pucill.

DL: We know Sarah. I love her work. I've been a fan for years.

HR: Sarah's art develops in response and relation to Cahun's. Her late partner, the filmmaker Sandra Lahire, was also interested in posthumous collaboration; she made a film trilogy as a belated dialogue with Sylvia Plath. Artistic collaboration and reciprocity are key tropes for both Sandra and Sarah. They appeared in each other's films, including in scenes where one holds a mirror while the other films. At times their reflections almost blur. Their films explore what it means to live and work with another artist and the mutual mirroring and positive narcissism that are part of this: the desiring gaze of the other, which is very different from the oppressive so-called male gaze.

DL: bell hooks has developed themes that resonate with this. Her proposal of the oppositional gaze and her take down of academic jargon have been important for Allyson and me.

HR: What does it mean to be seen with the desiring, reciprocal gaze of another? That seems a crucial question for queer feminism. Sarah's film is inspired by Cahun but it also adds something to her work. It makes images from her writings and teases out the cinematic potential of her photographs. It treats Cahun's oeuvre as part of a feminist commons that can generate new creative energies. True Latimer discusses Cahun and Moore's art as something that grew out of, was nourished by, and was also *about* their relationship. Moore's designs for Cahun's book contain numerous tropes of intimacy, of intertwining, their names and their initials, images of one another; symbols of what sustains a creative and an erotic life.

AM: Art history that doesn't just regard art as something formal and solitary, but as part of a life.

HR: I like that about Julia Bryan Wilson's book *Art Workers*, which includes a discussion of Lippard as a single parent, an art worker, and an activist. Bryan Wilson brings a feminist understanding of the public and the private, and of the

political commitments and collective energies that sustain artistic work. But with Lippard there were also moments of retreat, including a period where she withdrew to write a novel. So it's also about ebbs and flows, of being very public and then finding a way to be private. Another scholar I like is Shannon Jackson who comes out of performance studies. Her book *Social Works: Performing Publics* considers the unrecognized work that supports art making, the backside of maintenance labour.

AM: That's a theme you developed in your essay 'Forgotten Relations'.

HR: That essay looked at the denial of feminist legacies in relational aesthetics (something Bryan Wilson also touches on) but also – and perhaps more interestingly, for me – the politics of under-valued or unrecognized work. It teased out the feminist politics of immaterial and affective labour in the art world.

AM: In planning for this discussion Deirdre and I compiled a list of readings that have influenced us. Catherine Lorde's essay in the *Queer Art and Culture* anthology offers a useful overview that helps queer artists locate themselves and to understand that the work that they love counts. That just feels good. Your book, *Art and Feminism*, has been important for us, too. In a similar way your overview and Peggy Phelan's survey helped us to find a place for what we do and what we value. We are talking about feminist art histories, and of course that book has contributed towards the canonization of feminist art. When you worked on the book were you scared? Excited?

HR: If I'd known that it would be in print fifteen years later, and translated into several languages, I probably would have been terrified. But I didn't realize the significance of what I had taken on, the appetite for a book on this theme – especially one with lots of big luscious pictures – or the depths of my former ignorance.

DL: One of the fears that I think holds many of us back from really *doing* feminist work or queer activism is that of ending up being incomplete.

HR: If I were to do it again I wouldn't do it alone. I would gather contributors from around the world to compensate for the gaps in my knowledge. I'd probably include 'men in feminism', too, as the omission of important male artists like Victor Burgin and Todd Haynes feels like a gap. And I'd exclude artists who have deliberately distanced themselves from feminism. So no more Tracey Emin!

DL: That's been an issue for us with the artwork we include in our Feminist Art Collection, which we'll discuss in more detail later. We might read a work as feminist, but the artist may disavow its feminist content in a different context.

HR: What other academic books have been important for you?

AM: Sara Marcus's *Girls to the Front* is an interesting historical account of the early stages of riot grrrrl. It talks about how riot grrrrl wasn't just about music and a response to sexism in the punk rock scene. The research in the book accounts for a feminist/queer art genealogy. For example, it reveals that Kathleen Hanna started doing music because Kathy Acker told her to.

HR: This resonates with your work with the Feminist Art Gallery, both because you, Allyson, came out of riot grrrrl and for you, Deirdre, because of your commitment to artist-run culture. Like riot grrrrl, you have built a platform from which to confront art world sexism head on.

AM: With FAG we have also drawn on Helen Molesworth's work around feminist curating. Her question 'can the work touch?' is one we have started exploring when we install work. In broad strokes, queer and feminist theorists like Anne Cvetkovich, Sara Ahmed, José Antonio Muñoz, and Jack Halberstam have become touchstones. These theorists are doing something similar to how you

describe Lucy Lippard writing alongside the artists. They are accounting for something in a discipline that's not art history. It's not just about big names in commercial or museum terms, but it creates a lineage of and analyzes the practices of lesser-known lesbian, feminist, trans and queer artists.

HR: I love those writers too. You sense their passionate investment in what they are writing about. It's not writing from on high.

AM: And they are taking risks in writing about things that are often dismissed as a flaky or unimportant

HR: Feelings

AM: They are risking it all in some senses by writing about what they love.

HR: About experiences, anecdotes, their own roads to feminism and queerness, and the transformative effect of these encounters.

DL: For us as artists our strongest engagement with art history has been through the work of other artists, rather than texts. The artists who have influenced us most don't necessarily come out and say 'this is about challenging art history or 'this is about infiltrating art historical discourse.' They are agitating the very question of art history by being an artist, by making work, by being present.

AM: They are doing something productive that is history-making. It's not necessarily an explicit response to feeling left out of art history.

DL: It's also when we make contact with each other. Like when I connected with Sarah Pucill at the Film Farm filmmaking retreat in rural Ontario. I had met her, seen and greatly admired her work, and then there we were, eating egg salad sandwiches and making work together for a week. It's that convergence that

becomes the lived, feminist, art history.

HR: A place like the Film Farm highlights the importance of hospitality, of finding a place where you feel welcome and supported and where you meet kindred spirits.

DL: Especially if it comes from someone who you respect as an artist or an art worker, that kind of validation can mean a lot. All three of us have all been looking at Anthony Huberman's article, 'Take Care', which reflects on moving from the 'I know' model of institutional curating to that of 'I care'.

AM: This idea of doing less and doing it well resonates with us.

DL: It's a beautiful idea. Drawing on this, Allyson and I have been thinking about transitioning from 'I care' to 'we feel', 'we see', and 'we know'. These deeper levels of validation are important.

HR: How does that play out practically at the FAG?

DL: Being able to take immediate, concrete action is crucial. Yesterday, for instance, we met with an artist about showing their work. For this artist, art historical discourse doesn't matter. What matters is that FAG could respond right away with an opportunity to present their work, on their terms, without barriers or bureaucracy in a meaningful, immediate and fair way.

HR: I suppose that's why I'm drawn to exhibition making, because of its potential to create a public and its immediacy.

AM: What queer feminist exhibitions have been important for you?

HR: A touchstone for me is the exhibition *In a Different Light*, which was organized by the curator Larry Rinder and the artist Nayland Blake at the

Berkeley Art Museum. I never actually got to see the show, but I was strongly affected by what I heard about it. It opened in 1995 during the height of queer as an aesthetic and activist sensibility. The curators staged a queer lineage that went back to Duchamp with his urinal presented as a perverse object. The exhibition was organized into categories, starting with void, self, then other, couple/family, and spanning out to orgy, world and utopia: a queer family and cosmology. That was such a smart show because it broke art historical rules and it fucked with gender and generation. It spoke to the voracious appetite of queer subjects to find images and ideas that sustain them, including those based on deliberate misreadings and misappropriations. The words 'lesbian', 'gay' or 'queer' were nowhere in the title.

Inside the Visible was another important exhibition from around that time, curated by Catherine de Zegher in 1996. While more formally muted than *In a Different Light*, it played with layered time and combined known and little-known female artists in groundbreaking ways. It focused on decades that had experienced traumatic episodes, the 1940s, the 1960s and the 1980s, with a sense of archival or archaeological digging. Connie Butler has spoken about that exhibition as a key influence on her show, *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*. It's intriguing that both exhibitions use tropes of visibility, of looking from a new angle, of bringing something to light, as well as what lies beyond representation.

AM: It's interesting that you say you didn't get to see *In a Different Light*, but that it affected you from afar. We had the same experience with the New York artist group LTTR when it emerged in the early 2000s. Their work was so funny and smart, it was one of those moments where you think, 'Really? We actually get to have this thing that's so exciting?'. Even though we didn't go to any of their events we learned about them through hearsay and reading their publication, which was always so inventive.

HR: I always felt LTTR were a bit like art historians themselves, with a great

sense of the queer feminist work they built on. That relates to the idea of invented lineages or, in the anti-gay parlance of late 1980s UK, 'pretended families'.

AM: The braveness and irreverence of LTTR recall the earlier work of the Kiss and Tell Collective. This was a sex positive queer feminist performance trope that travelled across Canada in the late 1980s/early 1990s at the height of the feminist sex wars. They talked about their ambivalence around those conflicts, even though they had made anti-porn activist work themselves. They went public about how some of the erotic images they had looked at during anti-porn meetings had actually turned them on. For their project *Drawing the Line* they exhibited erotic images of themselves under Plexiglas. Visitors to the exhibition could respond by writing right beside them or on them. They wrote trite things like 'ugly' or 'stupid', 'dumb'. Or, more productively, 'this looks like something that I'm into'. Kiss and Tell have been an inspiration for FAG. We have drawn on the experimental nature of their exhibitions, and the interactivity that they established with the audience that defies proper gallery behavior and resists the division between artist and audience. We love their bravery in going public with content that for some feminists was wildly unpopular or controversial.

DL: Their radical feminist projects happened at the height of and I think very much in response to the male-dominated photography scene known as 'the Vancouver Art scene'. They had to fight censorship in all their exhibitions as well as a lot of vile homophobia and misogyny.

AM: And criticism from feminists too.

HR: It's great when these 'other stories' start to emerge that counter dominant ideas about art scenes or movements.

DL: One reason why the question about feminist art history is so provocative for

us is because of the precarity to what we do. Rather than wait around for somebody to tell us it's OK, we plunge in. Sometimes this makes people uncomfortable. We are in the middle of something unsettled, not at the beginning and not at the end. This is a proposition that we received from the exhibition *Ecstatic Resistance*, organized by Emily Roysdon. The way artists in the exhibition dealt with archives brought home how malleable these histories are. In all that work there is tension with history and with an unknown future. FAG is a present tense project. It affects people's lives immediately. It's time sensitive.

AM: This sense of instability relates to the paradox that I see around forms of identity that we want to reclaim and those that we want to take down. In feminist and queer theory and activism today there is a push/pull around reclaiming/rejecting identities. On the one hand you have the push to reclaim maligned identities, be they female, queer, trans*, racialized, or around different terms of ability. On the other the move is towards the abolition of gender, the destruction of identity-based politics. Creating a politic around affinities rather than the binaries produced through identities is complex and critical. The paradox is that both those things require a subject. Through FAG we are trying to figure out how there can be a non-essentialized feminist and politicized art practice, and potentially, subject. We don't know the answer. But using some of the struggles written about in feminist and queer theory helps to feed us.

DL: It's almost too easy to critique 'art history', to see who is left out and who is made invisible. Instead of this approach, we find it more useful to situate ourselves within queer theory and practice rather than in art history.

HR: Yet there is an art historical consciousness to what you do. I remember for one of your first gatherings you asked people to wear a badge with their own name and that of another politicized queer/feminist cultural producer who inspired them. This request spoke to me of how we trawl the past to make our own subjective art histories. Some historical figures that we identify with become

ego ideals who we want to live up to. They occupy a space of hope and aspiration and maybe even heroism or heroine-ism. By identifying with these figures we individualize history. They speak to us as forebears, but as contemporaries, too. Sarah Pucill talks about forging a side-by-side relationship with Cahun: 'The things Cahun was trying to say, I wanted to say with her'.

AM: The problem is those people are not usually named in art history. I find out about them through informal webs like gossip, a mention in a 'zine or the alternative press.

DL: I think this is changing, slowly. Art students now learn about these histories, but perhaps less in art history programmes than in those for curating, video or performance.

HR: One thing that I like about curating courses, or at least the one I teach on, is the emphasis placed on the curator/researcher's subjectivity. Maybe this underscores the negative stereotype of the curator's raging ego. But on the positive side it opens up the role of subjectivity and curiosity that art history can deny. Catherine Grant, in her essay 'Fans of Feminism', talks about the active desire of the feminist artist, as well as the fan/scholar, which is how she characterizes herself. She discusses how for artists like LTTR and Ridykulous the space of feminism is at once very powerful while also falling short. As fans of feminism, artists occupy that space creatively and critically, turning feminism into something that more closely matches their desire.

DL: I love that idea.

HR: I think it's what you do with FAG.

DL: This approach helps us. Your idea of curating and desire makes me feel better about using the term. We struggle with whether or not to appropriate the

discourses of the curator and the gallery. On the one hand, as artists and 'professionals', this is the language of our world. On the other we always try to work from that position of desire or want or need. As a result we request that we aren't named as curators in gallery acknowledgements. People always ask, 'So what are you? Are you curators, programmers, organizers, facilitators?'. I prefer, instigators, lubricators or antagonists myself. The truth is we are all these things. Sometimes to get things done you have to play the curator, you have to sign a contract, to have authority and infiltrate. The key is to make this appropriation productive and make something else more fluid happen.

HR: FAG is about intimacy, too. The gallery has qualities that are immersive and domestic. It's based in your back garden and you often hold events in your house which is decorated with art, textiles and thrift store brick-a-brack. It's the opposite of the uber cool white cube. It's touchy-feely.

AM: Some people have been uncomfortable with that. At one point we had to bring visitors through our house, because we had problems accessing the street entrance. Some people found that hard, like they were intruding on our domestic space. These people have very particular notions of what constitutes private and public. In our day-to-day lives we have always broken down the boundary between the studio and the exhibition space, the home and the social. Like lots of feminist and queer artists, we have worked with the ideology and the materiality of the domestic and the intimate. We have shrunk away from this a bit recently with our satellite projects for museums.

DL: Even in a museum context our approach is similar to how we work at home. When we first got the idea to set up FAG we looked at storefront and commercial buildings, but nothing appealed to us. Then we realized we should just open the gallery at home and use our personal space as a conceptual locator. We built a 450 sf box in the backyard and designed it so that it could open wide on two of its four sides. This made the inside and the outside of the space less distinct and

more like a passage. It also created a 'gallery' that would include equal parts exhibition, natural and social space. A 'gallery' at 'home' meant that we could feed, house and connect people to each other and take care of other kinds of needs and experiences – ones that rely on the combination of personal, social, domestic, professional and cultural.

AM: Some people are hungry for an invitation to a place that is not clinical and is not perfectly prescribed in terms of what their experiences should be. When you come to FAG you're not being watched by someone from behind the gallery desk.

HR: Another thing that strikes me about FAG events is the diversity of your audience in terms of geopolitical background, age and gender. This is different to the feminist art events that I go to in the UK. While the inter-generational dialogue is in full throttle, few cis-gendered men attend. Perhaps these UK events seem gender-exclusive, or cis-gendered men don't want their masculinities critiqued.

DL: The shift away from a gendered feminism has been exciting for us.

HR: Is that linked to how you've framed the project?

AM: That's our hope. We are strategic in the way we work with artists as allies. For example, Elisha Lim, the artist that we slotted for our first FAG exhibition uses the gender-neutral pronoun 'they' in order to position (or unposition) themselves. So from the beginning that helped to identify the gallery as not being a women's art project.

DL: From the start we were explicit that FAG was both a sisterhood and a brotherhood. FAG is feminist, NOT a women's art project, and is equally engaged with gender, race, class and ability. FAG is not fixed. FAG is not success. We established our feminism as anti-oppression, and we were clear

from the outset that the gallery would activate our feminist critique of the art system, turning our gaze at what the art system excludes, deliberately ignores or is obviously afraid of. This idea pulls women-specific art spaces out of the equation, in favour of other feminist considerations and critical purposes.

HR: That's a real shift.

DL: But this is the thing: it's the difference between asking for people to be feminists, versus asking for politicized people to help us problematize, troubleshoot or figure out new strategies for being artists, activists and politicized subjects. That's the problem with women-only art spaces like the Women's Art Resource Centre in Toronto. They only work with cis-gendered female artists, who may or may not be feminist. Their criteria have nothing to do with whether artists make feminist art or identify as feminists.

AM: I would say, they actually actively discourage overtly political work.

DL: FAG is a reaction and a response to spaces that exclude.

HR: I'm sure this is why FAG has caught on with a wide public. FAG seems to operate on the twin poles of celebration and complaint. It's a space of fun, festivity and raucousness and also one that critiques both the art world status quo and the very notion of a feminist space. There is a braveness to your stance that makes people think something is going to happen.

DL: It's because we *took* a stance.

AM: Many people are afraid to or can't do that.

DL: Especially in the art community in Toronto.

HR: That's why I sent you the Huberman text. You are working from a similar place of personal and political feeling and investment, instead of art world careerism or fashion. I wonder how you reconcile those commitments with invitations for FAG to work with mainstream museums?

AM: In part we do that by working with them rather than against them. For example, in FAG projects with the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Windsor we have worked with the concept of the Feminist Art Collection. The FAC is a deterritorialized body of feminist art collected through an interactional network of artists and enablers in support of queer and feminist cultural production. Art that enters into the FAC is bought from the artists and exists in the care of an enabler. Institutions that borrow from the FAC – like Lethbridge and Windsor – enter into a declaration of participation, a social contract that acknowledges the value of the artwork and ensures that the artist will be paid for the exhibition of the work. The FAC does not contain, possess, or capitalize on artists.

DL: The economies of art institutions and the powers that dominate the art world do not champion or recognize artists working from the margins. It is this truth and injustice that prompted the creation of the FAC. FAC is as much an archive as it is an intervention into the economic hierarchies that fail to value feminist and queer artists (including artists of colour, women artists, Aboriginal artists, trans* artists and artists with disability/ies). Each time we work with an institution, we try to figure out what pressures FAG and/or the FAC can put on those systems. Even if the results of those pressures are temporary or aren't permanent, we can set precedents for others to build on.

AM: Currently, we are exploring the concept of feminist or queer description, of describing an object as feminist or queer. We are looking at Sara Ahmed's work around queer phenomenology and Robyn Wiegman's *Object Lessons* to figure out how to describe work that could be in FAG.

DL: One of our main modes is to do it first and figure it out later. Which is why half the time we are like, 'What the fuck is going on? All I know is that we have to leave at four o'clock'. We are always working at the threshold of not knowing, which is probably why the Huberman text had so much impact. It actually made me bawl my eyes out. Our guts tell us to do things without knowing, because if you're going to do this work you can't think too much about it. You can't sit around asking, do we have enough money? Because the answer would be, 'no'. Do we have enough time? Never. Do we have enough fortitude? Maybe. Are we smart enough? It depends.

Before we started FAG we consulted a large group of our peers and said, 'We're going to start a feminist art gallery, is that something that we all want?'. And everybody said 'Great, yes, let's do it'. So since then we have always seen the work of the gallery as a collective project. As soon as we began we knew that all we could really do at that moment was to initiate and obligate ourselves to at least try and see what the outcomes would be.

HR: So what's next?

DL: It's been 4 years and already we have done more than I ever thought was possible through FAG. We are currently planning the Feminist Art Fair International, or FAFI – as the last official FAG project to be spearheaded by us alone. Running concurrently with the Toronto International Art Fair, FAFI will be a 'collective' of exhibitions by queer and feminist artists and activists, with a commitment to works by emerging artists, artists of colour, trans* people, people with disabilities, and aboriginal artists. There will not be curators per se, there will not be dealers per se; it will be more like an uprising than an exhibition. Works will occupy the Art Gallery of Ontario and then the project will radiate out using the model of satellites.

HR: I like the way you respond to institutional invitations. The door is pried open and you stride in and take up space.

DL: For FAFI we will repurpose institutional money. We will also actualize our 'matronage programme' where we ask people to make financial contributions in the name of feminism to FAG, an artist's project or an event. Depending on interest FAFI could include 40,140, or 440 exhibitions. We don't know yet, but the plan is to take up as much space as we can with the possibilities of feminist cultural production.

HR: Why are you appropriating the commercial language of the art fair?

AM: We're attempting to flip the economy of the commercial art fair where dealers and collectors profit hugely, most artists are on the margins and a creepy art fair industrial complex is created. We are calling FAFI 'an art fair where nothing is for sale.' Of course the art could be for sale (we never interfere with an artist's ability to earn). But we will figure out how to work around that ideology. It's more that the politics aren't for sale, the cultural capital isn't for sale.

DL: As artists we have always been involved in advocacy, education and literacy. I have never had a solitary studio practice. I've been involved in artist-run culture for as long as I've been an artist and the same is true for Allyson with activism.

HR: You obviously believe in the need for the autonomy of artists and arts organisations and for fair conditions and pay for artistic labour. Yet while you are building on the values of artist-run culture it seems like FAG is doing something different. You aren't becoming a non-profit, getting a board, applying to the arts council for annual funding. FAG feels more personal.

DL: It's true. We are tired of the artist-run model in many of its current iterations. It worked as an alternative for 20 of its 35 years but during the last 15 years

organisations have experienced stasis. They are profoundly dependent, risk-averse and they lack spontaneity.

HR: Artist-run culture has become inward-looking.

DL: For women artists, artists of colour, queer and trans* people, people with disabilities, and aboriginal artists – if you are established enough, maybe at the end of your career, you might get invited to show at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Vancouver Art Gallery, or the Power Plant. But most likely you'll accumulate a handful of exhibition-specific, 64-page catalogues from smaller artist-run institutions. For me that's not right and it's not enough!

HR: Some institutions like nothing better than to bring the critique in-house. Is there a danger that you become the tamed voice of criticism?

DL: Yes, we are aware of this and that's why we often say 'no' to institutional invitations. We choose these collaborations carefully and if we can't show the work or the artists we want to make visible, or keep the anger, the edge or the core values that keep the FAG relevant, then we decline. Allyson and I also don't always take the place of the FAG representatives. Another practice of ours to *FAG things forward*. When a gallery or institution asks us to do something we accept the invitation and then we pass it on to someone else. We don't re-curate. We look around to see who could benefit from these resources most. The artists we invite do whatever they want. We say, 'Here's the money. Here's the window. Here's the contact.'

HR: And you don't ask for permission.

DL: When did feminists ever wait to be granted permission?

