

by Alex Martinis Roe and Helena Reckitt

## Relationality in Feminist Collective Practice

This conversation between artist Alex Martinis Roe and curator and researcher Helena Reckitt is based on a public talk that took place during Martinis Roe's exhibition *To Become Two* at The Showroom in London, on 18 May 2017. Following the invitation to revisit their talk in the context of *OnCurating's* special issue on Instituting Feminism, Martinis Roe and Reckitt offered some further reflections on and clarifications to the original dialogue. An audio recording of the talk, introduced by curator Eva Rawson and featuring some additional audience questions not included below, is available here: <https://www.theshowroom.org/events/alex-martinis-roe-an-introduction-to-to-become-two> (<https://www.theshowroom.org/events/alex-martinis-roe-an-introduction-to-to-become-two>).



Alex Martinis Roe, *To Become Two*, installation view, The Showroom, London, 2017. Exhibition design Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga. Photo: Daniel Brooke.

### Feminist Networks

**Helena Reckitt:** It's great to be back here at The Showroom, for the London opening of your exhibition *To Become Two*. I met you here a year and a half ago, and a lot has happened since then, including my taking part in the workshop for your film *Our Future Network*, which is a part of the show downstairs.

**Alex Martinis Roe:** Is it only a year and a half?

**HR:** I know! One of the interesting things about your work, that's central to your concerns, is how your projects have this generative effect. So, I'm looking around the room and I can see people who have been touched by your practice, by participating in a workshop or inviting you to make a work. Such as in Barcelona with our colleague over there, Veronica Valentini from Bar Project. There's Gabby Moser, who took your workshop here as part of *Now You Can Go*,<sup>[1]</sup> ([issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n1](https://www.on-curating.org/issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n1)) and went on to co-found the feminist working group Emilia-Amalia in Toronto, which is inspired by some practices of feminist citation and annotation that you work with. I see Sara Paiola, who some of you might recognise from the film *Our Future Network*, which is on the big screen downstairs. She workshopped a piece around mothers and caring for the carers. And I recognise some MFA Curating students from Goldsmiths who will be doing your workshop that starts here tomorrow. I find this generative effect of your work so inspiring. As you've consciously attempted to build a feminist network—can you start by talking about that?

**AMR:** I remain critical of the solo artist model that I was presented with as a young art student, and I wanted to find a way of doing art with a feminist politics that presents and creates a relational model of subjectivity, where subjects only come into being through relationships with others. So, I've tried to use my position as the artist as a link between the experiences that I've had of other people's work and among people who come into contact with mine. That's what I mean when I use the term "network": I use it to describe relationships among "influences," "artist," and "audience," which are usually considered separate positions. I attempt to turn those relationships into a social space for dialogue among all the people who take part.

**HR:** Let's start with the example of the project that I took part in, *Our Future Network*, which is part of your exhibition here. The way that you worked with myself and twenty-one other women who participated in the film was really interesting. When you first invited us, you were transparent about what the project entailed. We were going to stay at a rural university retreat in former East Germany for three days, you explained, out of which we would develop feminist propositions for the future. You asked each of us to think about a proposition that we could share. And then you met with each of us, in my case over Skype, to workshop our idea.

You then wrote up my proposition which you sent me and which I tweaked a bit. So, already you had taken on a mediating role, in which you reflected my ideas and helped to shape them into a publicly shareable form. During the workshop, we each presented our proposition to the rest of the group plus yourself, the camera crew, and the curatorial team, where it was discussed and experimented with. So, my proposition went from being something that might have stayed in my head for years, without finding public expression, to becoming collective property.

My proposition, which explored how refusal can be productive and generative, was somewhat contested during the workshop. Some people had problems with the idea of withdrawing labour and care, while others got excited about the prospect of making invisibilised activities visible and, hence, potentially more valued and less taken for granted. The process of sharing the proposition was exhilarating, as the idea took on new life amongst members of the group.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #7 - Productive Refusals*, developed with Helena Reckitt, 2016.

**AMR:** That was the idea, to try and pinpoint one proposition that was already in each of the contributor's practices. I think there are multiple propositions emerging every moment in whatever you're doing, but the task was to try and find one that linked the research I'd been doing to something that was important to you at that time. And to try and then turn it into something that could be done by more people as a catalyst for collective politics.

And, I guess, the impetus for that idea comes from the Italian feminist practice of Starting from One's Self—the practice of actively self-constructing a liberated female subjectivity by working through and valuing one's own experience and difference. Personal knowledge constitutes and shapes one's political practice, rather than, for example, the idea that there is knowledge out there about what it means to be a woman that you don't yet have and so you join the consciousness-raising group to get it. In Italian feminism, and specifically the Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative, the practice of Starting from One's Self is extended into a collective project through the Practice of Relations—constructing these differenced female subjectivities through relationships with other women. In particular, relationships of *affidamento* (entrustment), theorised and practiced by the Bookstore co-operative, are central to the way I structured the *Our Future Network* project. Relationships of *affidamento*—between two women as political partners—are characterised by commitment and mutual support, utilising their differing knowledge, competences and resources to affirm each other's political desire and facilitate each other's political work through symbolic recognition of each other. *Affidamento*, as an organised political practice that foregrounds the responsibility women should have to each other, thus fosters the creation of relational female subjectivities and female society and culture. With *Our Future Network*, I had done a lot of historical research and I wanted to bring that into dialogue with my interlocutors in order to develop ways to

make that knowledge useful to collective political practice. I structured the *Our Future Network* project using Starting from One's Self and *affidamento*: so, it was through affirmation of your differing knowledges in relation to mine, and through mutual entrustment that we developed the Propositions.



Alex Martinis Roe, *A story from Circolo della rosa*, film still of a photograph courtesy of the Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative archive, 2014.

## Practice of Authority

**HR:** Let's talk some more about Italian feminism, as it's been such a rich resource for you and, more recently, for me, too. In my case, having done quite a lot of research around feminism and art, I was blindsided to discover this rich collective culture emerging in Italy from the late '60s about which I knew hardly anything, as it had barely been disseminated within Anglophone circles, even feminist ones. I found the Italian feminist recognition and celebration of difference between women that you just highlighted particularly exciting. It wasn't about flattening difference under the banner of sameness or consensus, which has been a hallmark of Anglophone feminism, where the impetus to identify common conditions under patriarchy led to a denial of disparity and difference.

When did you first encounter Italian feminism?

**AMR:** I came into contact with the ideas a very long time ago. My first contact, I think, was when I was about twenty years old, and I happened to find a particular book in the library, sitting next to another book that I was looking for. It was an essay collection called *Engaging with Irigaray*,<sup>[2]</sup> ([issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n2](https://www.on-curating.org/issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n2)), a fantastic compendium from the early '90s, and I started reading it instead of the book I'd been after.

The Italian feminist contribution to that volume was written by the Bookstore co-operative's Luisa Muraro. What attracted me to it was its practical application of the philosophy of difference the collection was concerned with. All the other texts in the book had opened my mind in such an extraordinary way, and then when I read Muraro's text, "Female Genealogies," I thought, "so, that's how you do this." Everyone in the book talked about the importance of a politics of difference, but the Italians had some practical answers. They'd actually been trying it out. As an artist, I'm always looking for practical solutions. How do you go about putting theory into practice?



Alex Martinis Roe, *To Be Two / To Become Two*, Powder-coated steel, glass, MDF, *Libreria delle donne di Milano*, *Non credere di avere dei diritti: la generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne*, (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, first edition 1987, this edition 2005); The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990). Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art for NEW13, 2013. Photo: Andrew Curtis.

They refuse the consensus model where everyone has to agree and they're all in the same position as each other. They realised, through a range of experiences of different group meetings and also contact with the group *Psychanalyse et Politique* in France, that their consensus model was really holding them back. The problem was that in the horizontal group structures that were common at the time, there is no acknowledged disparity. Although horizontal political models aim to produce equality among participants, pre-existing power structures can remain dominant if there is no open negotiation of different social positions, competences, and desires.



Alex Martinis Roe, *It was an unusual way of doing politics; there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...*, film still of a photograph of a meeting of groups from Milan, Turin, and Paris at Varigotti, Liguria in 1973, courtesy of the Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative, 2014.



Alex Martinis Roe, *It was an unusual way of doing politics; there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...*, super 8 still transferred to digital, 2014.

There were a couple of meetings organised by *Psychanalyse et Politique*, which were attended by this group from Milan in 1972. There's a film about one of these meetings in my exhibition downstairs. The Milanese women hadn't yet formed the Bookshop group, they were part of a small *autocoscienza* group (similar to Anglophone consciousness-raising groups). Some of them went to these meetings, and they noticed that *Psychanalyse et Politique* actually had a leader, Antoinette Fouque, which horrified them: How could there be a leader in the women's movement? And the French women replied that Antoinette Fouque had a pre-eminence and qualities which drew other women to her and which there was no point denying. It was this idea that led them to develop their approach to collective politics, which acknowledges female authority and disparities among women. Their work on the difference among women is important, because it provides a model where sameness and identity are not the departure point for collective politics. Instead, it is the differences among women, including their different knowledges, social positions, competences, and desires which motivate their alliance and enable them to create a new social order. In what the Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative call the Practice of Authority, they draw on Hannah Arendt's differentiation of the concept from totalitarianism, with which it is often confused. What they mean by authority is the way someone is accepted in a role without question. The trust that others have in their position is an acknowledgement of their competence and trustworthiness. Diagnosing that a lack of distinction among women in patriarchy is what causes systematic rivalry and betrayal, their Practice of Authority is to support each other's desires to take on a role, acknowledging distinctive knowledge and achievement and trusting in each other's competence. That is how

they recognise their differences in their relations with each other and how they create value. It's also the way that they distribute decision-making powers. It's very much based on trust and, in a way, love. It's that commitment to supporting each other in an affirmative way that I think is so interesting.

**HR:** And it encompasses desire—

**AMR:** Yes, desire.

**HR:** ...which recognises the libidinal quality of education, as well. When you're a student you desire what the teacher has and knows. You desire them and you desire to be them. You then may want to overthrow the teacher to realise your own desire. But I think that's really powerful and maybe even a little bit taboo in an era where we understandably want to be careful about potentially abusive power relationships and dynamics.

**AMR:** Certainly, through this project of organising, so many meetings, and being in this kind of situation quite a bit, I've realised there is this really intense eroticism in gatherings of women who are trying to change the world and themselves and their relationships. It's quite extraordinary, and it's something that I hadn't 100% anticipated.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #11 – Writing as a Transformative Practice*, developed with Federica Buetti, 2016.

**HR:** There's a lovely moment in *Our Future Network* when one of the women, Lucia Farinati, says, "I feel very spontaneous. Maybe it's a reaction to being surrounded by so many women. The female energy—it's so exciting! I'm super energised by all this!" She's so alive, you can sense the excitement surging through her. But I don't want to romanticise your practice. Taking part in the workshop for *Our Future Network* was certainly very inspiring, but there were some points of friction as well, especially around the desire that some participants expressed for a safe space. How, in your experience, can we deal with friction within a feminist queer context?





Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #12 - The Practice of Listening*, developed with Lucia Farinati, 2016.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #10 - Theory in More Formats*, developed with Vasso Belia, 2016.

**AMR:** The friction during the meeting arose due to a need for more unstructured time and more explicit attention to making adaptations to exercises to accommodate different needs. I had planned the meeting a little

too tightly timewise, because the idea for the project was really ambitious and we had limited time and resources. As the organiser, I had the responsibility to make sure that there was enough time and energy to put into experimenting with each of the Propositions that had been developed in advance of the meeting. I had another competing responsibility to the fact that we were making a film, which had been co-commissioned by four institutional partners attached to planned exhibitions and with funding from other bodies.

The friction that occurred, I think that always happens in group situations. It's the group activating its agency and people deciding that they want or need something different than the current structure. My main priority at the time was to make space for that without betraying the other two major commitments that I had, i.e., seeing through the Propositions (my responsibility to each participant and their contribution) and the production of the film. So, it was very much a juggling act. I had, actually, anticipated and planned for some of the things that were asked for in that moment of friction to an extent that, I think, was actually not recognised, because people are often too critical of those in leadership positions. I have thought back on that quite a bit, and it was a very good lesson that you always have to make time for unplanned group process. So, whenever you're leading a meeting, you actually have to schedule time for the group's agency to take over. Because filmmaking is so much about time management and time costs so much, I hadn't factored in more unstructured time. So, that's a lesson learned—it's just necessary.

**Proposition #15 & #17**  
**The Practices of Taking Time**  
**and Taking Care**  
 developed by Svenja Engels  
 and Janneke Koers

During the *Our Future Network* meeting, two contributors, feminist scholars Svenja Engels and Janneke Koers, decided to change both of their prepared contributions that they had developed with me, merging into one they felt was urgent. Their proposition is that in a feminist meeting it is crucial to take the different positionalities that each participant brings into account, including their different needs, abilities, and desires, and that this is something that needs to be taken into consideration from the outset in the way events are structured and the kinds of expectations that are implicit. This is also the kind of planning that needs to be adapted and invented continuously, in response to arising needs during an event.

What Janneke and Svenja proposed is something that is relevant for many meetings and projects—that is, *time*. They proposed that as a group we take time to discuss our different experiences of the situation, so as to adapt it in order to accommodate and acknowledge the differences in the group. This proved to be an exceptionally valuable exercise and though this process we arrived at a number of useful starting points, which could be useful in other situations:

— Allocate time in the schedule for a group meeting to give space for each member's different experiences and positionalities, and to collectively adapt the group process and tasks to accommodate different needs and desires.

— Make all pre-planned activities inclusive, in order to make it comfortable and welcoming for everyone to decide for themselves if and how they will participate.

— This should include suggesting different options for participation, so that it is clear that different kinds of participation are welcome and will be facilitated by the group.

— That also means that pre-planned activities should be explained as much as possible in advance, so that everyone is supported in making informed choices about their participation.

— Of course, it is not possible to make sure in advance that no one will encounter discomfort or difficulties at some point, and indeed group work is usually not so easy. So in addition, it is really important to have support structures in place, like having allocated people to provide reassurance and support.

I think that the culture of making safer spaces is important in that it's trying to make sure that people with less power in a situation are accounted for and supported to have a voice. Alongside it, there is, however, also a culture of shaming on the rise, where structural social problems (like ableism in the context of low-budget filmmaking) are too often framed as individual responsibility. Certainly, dominant power structures are reproduced through the way we embody and enact them in minor ways every day, but solidarity is so important to political change, which means people need to feel able and encouraged to take the risk of participating.

So, I think some of it ends up being the wrong focus, it's not about controlling yourself and the way that you act, it's about committing to a project that you're all interested in. The emphasis falls in a slightly more individualistic place than I would put it. I think commitment is one of the most important factors in generating the kind of feminist group dynamic that safe space discourse is concerned with. Rather than saying "I'm not going to say this, I'm not going to say that," and go silent because you're worried you might say the wrong thing, I think it would be better to just be committed to the group and the project. Thinking instead, I'm not going to leave when it gets difficult. Or I'm not going to abandon somebody if I have made a mistake and hurt them, rather than constantly trying to prevent yourself from making mistakes. So, I guess, there's a kind of openness and a commitment that, I think, is probably more important for making safer spaces than self-policing.

**HR:** And I would say vulnerability is fundamental to that, because, to me, a safe space is one in which you can make mistakes. There's the whole notion of checking your privilege, which is something that I realise might be hard for me to do, as I have accrued privileges, even though it doesn't always feel that way to me. So, I'm going to either be there with my baggage, and be able to be vulnerable, or I'm not going to go, because it feels like a set-up in which I'm bound to fail.

**AMR:** That statement, "check your privilege," I respect the place that it comes from, but I think it appeals to objectivity in a way that, I think, feminism just can't afford to do. Of course, we need a language for describing oppressions, but I don't think that we should rely on "objectivity" to mediate political alliances, when it is the "objective" markers of "what" we are (gender, race, class, sexuality etc) that are oppressive. Liberation politics needs to acknowledge how imposed identities subjugate specific groups, but that should not override the solidarity process of creating bonds with one another based on common goals. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor says about the Combahee River Collective, a Black, feminist, lesbian, socialist collective that coined the term "identity politics" in the USA in the '70s (which originally meant something very different than it has come to mean in neoliberal politics): "An important idea for them [the Combahee River Collective] is a rejection of the idea of the exclusivity of the 'oppression Olympics' and instead they focussed on how to overcome the difference among people to defeat a system that works on the oppression of others." [3] ([\[3\]\\_ \(issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n3\)](https://www.on-curating.org/issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n3))

## Working in Alliance

**HR:** There's a concept of Working in Alliance that you're developing in workshops as part of this exhibition. That seems like a valuable response to some of the challenges of Call-Out Culture, as it recognises the fact that each of us starts from and is shaped by certain experiences, and we can't cover everything.

**AMR:** Yes, I guess, what interests me about working on alliances is that when you're thinking about solidarity, there's a pressure to think that it requires unity. I think that's a problem, because, as you say, you can't address everything at every moment. I think it's really important that different political movements and projects retain their specificity *within* alliances. I think the expectation that feminism be one thing, and that it has to account for everything, is an impossible ask, because feminist politics comes out of situated experiences. I was very inspired when I was working on *It Was About Opening The Very Notion That There Was A Particular Perspective* (2017). It looks at a particular history from the '70s in Sydney when a number of different social movements joined together. Not into one unified movement, but through strategic alliances different groups leveraged power in one place to change things in another. They used their activist networks to achieve their aims, but it wasn't out of a reduction of their differences or trying to subsume different projects into one thing.



Alex Martinis Roe, *It Was About Opening The Very Notion That There Was A Particular Perspective*, film still of a photograph of Sydney University students protesting in support of the Builders Labourers Federation by Meredith Burgmann, 2017.

## Limits of Friendship

**HR:** I am also interested in talking about the limits of friendship as a methodology, which links to our discussion about allyship. As part of the Feminist Duration Reading Group that I am part of, I have just read an interesting article by Sasha Roseneil about how female friendship was re-evaluated during second wave feminism. Nonetheless, Roseneil ends by cautioning that friendship is not a universal panacea that can be seen to solve all feminism's problems.

As a personal relationship which tends to bind together people who are socially similar, it cannot resolve all the political and ethical issues feminism faces, not least the problem of its constitutive outside—the enemy and the stranger. If we are to develop a politics that is not just concerned with those within the charmed circle of love, affection, and care, we have to consider our collective obligations to the lonely, the unloved, and the uncared

for. We have to recognize what we all know from personal experience: that friendship is not always easy, that it can struggle with difference, and that it sometimes flounders when friends misrecognize each other. Friendship can cause us pain, as well as offering us care and support.[4] ([issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n4](#)).

**AMR:** I'm glad you asked about the limits of friendship. I think that in the continued colonialism of Australia, for example, where I am now primarily based, it is difficult to start political collaboration among First Nations and non-Indigenous feminists with the assumption that friendship would be welcome, because there is so much rightful anger and distrust due to the long history of dispossession and violence against First Nations communities. I think building alliances comes first, which may include or result in friendship. But the emphasis is on the common project, to which mutual commitment can create the opportunity to establish trust. The Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative named the trust and commitment in political relationships between women *affidamento*, precisely because it was a new kind of relationship outside those bonds that were already part of the patriarchal system: family, work colleagues, and friendship. In the common understanding of friendship, its reason for being is located in a less focussed and more benign place than political comradeship, which is what is so important about alliances and *affidamento*.

**HR:** Can we return to the alliances in Sydney that you explore in your film downstairs. Can you remind us of the groups and the differences?

**AMR:** The key groupings in that story are the university students, the Builders Labourers Federation, a radical union of builders' labourers, the Aboriginal Rights movement, social housing activists, conservationists, and women's and gay liberation. So, it was a really broad spectrum of different movements that came together in these alliances.

The alliance that I focus on in the film is the Philosophy Strike in 1973. The students went on strike at Sydney University because a proposed course of feminist philosophy was vetoed by the academic board. It was the first course on feminist philosophy taught there, when it was eventually accepted as a result of the strike. Part of the reason for that strike's success was that the Builders Labourers Federation put what they call a "green ban" on all building works at Sydney University. So, none of the university's building projects could resume until the feminist philosophy course was reinstated. That's not the only thing that made the strike successful, but it just interested me, the idea of labourers in hardhats campaigning for women's philosophy![5] ([issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n5](#)). Actually, the Builders Labourers Federation had joined up with the women's movement already, and quite a few female builders' labourers were feminist activists. The question I'm departing from in the workshop that's starting here tomorrow is to think about how we can generate these kinds of alliances without reducing the specificity of the political projects of those who take part.



Alex Martinis Roe, *It Was About Opening The Very Notion That There Was A Particular Perspective*, film still of a photograph by Meredith Burgmann, 2017.

**HR:** Something that comes out of this for me is the idea that thinking, writing theory, or making art can also be activist activities. You don't separate working to rule or going on strike from teaching or writing a book of philosophy. These can all be forms of working towards liberation and challenging oppressive social forms.

**AMR:** Yes, they all produce futures, although in different temporalities.



## Genealogies

**HR:** Another strain of thought that you're interested in concerns genealogies. How do ideas spread, become contagious, bring in fellow travellers who then head off elsewhere, geographically, intellectually, politically, to develop something in new contexts?

**AMR:** Yes, my broad motivation with *To Become Two* has been to create a social history of certain related feminist concepts and practices, partly as an antidote to the normative effect of publishing conventions and the way theory is often not situated by detailed information about the context within which it has been developed. I have noticed that the transversality of feminist philosophy and its disciplinary framing has largely come at the price of a rich understanding of the way these ideas often arose through collective experience and dialogue in the women's movement. *To Become Two* explores my own feminist formation and the key ideas that shaped my politics through a direct engagement with the communities within which they came about. I have sought out the history of the relationships and practices that formed them. For subsequent generations, the name of the author is not often remembered alongside the names of many others who were in conversation with that author, who to some extent co-authored the ideas. It is not the pursuit of recognition of minor voices in and of itself that motivates me though, it is about pursuing a relational model of authorship and thus selfhood, appropriate to those feminist ideas and contributing to the futures they hope to bring about. Genealogies of those relationships and collaborations build momentum, collecting the transformative force of more and more feminist actions. This fosters transgenerational solidarity and greater social change, because knowledge of what has gone before enables us to inherit the futures they laid the foundations for.

## Feminist New Materialism

**HR:** One genealogy you've been exploring is feminist new materialism. Maybe that's not a concept or a critical framework that everybody here is familiar with. Can you tell us what you think it is and why it's a powerful and relevant body of thought?

**AMR:** First, we should problematize the term. I use "feminist new materialism," because it's a shorthand for a current that is gaining some visibility in feminist theory internationally. And it's not a new thing, it's been around since the '80s, basically.

**HR:** Where would you trace it back to?

**AMR:** I'm tracing it back to Elizabeth Grosz, of course, because I'm her big fan, but she doesn't like the term "new materialism," because it doesn't account for the importance of immaterial forces in thinking the universe. Rosi Braidotti also calls it "feminist posthumanism." It has quite a few different names, and it's not at all homogenous. And I think that's why the name is so difficult, because it encompasses a range of strategies and positions. One factor that joins them on some level is that they're all theories of difference. Another is that they combine discourses from the sciences and the humanities to examine, rework, and explode the nature-culture binary. So, they're looking at a range of different violences in our world and tracing them to this habit in Western philosophy and culture which separates nature from culture. So, racism, sexism, capitalism all stem

from this nature-culture split. Why do I think that's so interesting? Because it is a tool for alliance. Because it examines how so many different structures in our world are interconnected. Like how climate change is a political, environmental, and a feminist issue.

I also think it's useful in feminist discourse because it's a bridging discourse. The reason I focus on tracing its relationship to sexual difference feminism is because it is already a bridge into gender discourse and Trans theory and a range of other discourses. And it does that without betraying the key concepts or values of any of those discourses.

### **Mutability of Gender *and* Sex**

**HR:** Let's use the Trans example, because that's, obviously, such an area of current struggle and exploration. And it's also something that some parts of the feminist movement have struggled to deal with. How might the kind of approach you've outlined relate to the idea that gender is permeable or porous?

**AMR:** My favourite example of this is Elizabeth Grosz's work on Darwin. Most feminism is based on the premise that gender is socially constructed, and thus women should not be determined by sex. Commonly, there is a generalisation that sex is somehow fixed, that there's two options and that's it and it's always going to be like that. And, further, that it is possible for gender to be constructed differently, because it is social and not natural.

Grosz takes Darwin, who you would, potentially, think of as the enemy of feminism framed like this, because his work on biology has been used by biological determinists. Grosz explores how, actually, in Darwin's work, sex is understood as a process of differentiation. She uses the example of his extensive research on barnacles and how their sexes have evolved.<sup>[6]</sup> ([issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n6](https://www.on-curating.org/issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n6)).

He found specimens of barnacles that are hermaphroditic, as well as ones that are in transition between being hermaphroditic and being male and being female. And there are females with male parasites, and then there's male and female. And they coexist, they're the same species, but the barnacles have many sexes, which have evolved differently over time. Grosz explains how this research contributes to an understanding of sexual selection as, actually, the motor of natural selection: the process by which differences are proliferated, from which natural selection then selects.

The implications of that are quite phenomenal, because sexual selection, of course, is something that is intimately interconnected with cultural practices. However you choose to present yourself is designed to attract. So, a woman who wears her hair short, that's because she's trying to attract someone who desires that, and wearing her hair short produces a desire for that in other people. The effect of practices of sexual selection, which are usually deemed cultural, do impact upon the evolution of the species. Over time, as certain breast sizes or beard shapes are selected, they become more prevalent in the species. Surgical alterations, too, affect desire and thus impact the evolution of our species. It is not possible to understand human evolution separate from our technologies. They are inextricable from our survival story and thus no body can be rightly conceived of in a "natural" state apart from those technologies which have actually ensured the organism's survival and contributed to the way in which it attracts others with which to generate differences: the motor of evolution.



I think that opens up huge potential for understanding the agency of bodies, because you're no longer thinking about bodies as cultural constructions on top of natural, fixed givens, but rather it's like a flow. That gives the meat of our bodies a certain agency, doesn't it? And, I think that that is, certainly, a feminist project and also an anti-racist one that is in alliance with Trans politics and its fight for gender non-conformity to be recognised and respected as real, embodied difference.

## Spaces of Intimacy





Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film stills of *Proposition #3 – Architectures for Encounter*, developed with Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga, 2016.

**HR:** When viewing *Our Future Network* in advance of tonight's event, one thing that struck me was how much time the film gives to intimate, unspectacular activities, like women talking to each other, sitting outside, or writing in their notebooks. This attention to relational intimacy resonates with an aspect of the project that I particularly appreciated, which was your collaboration with Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga. Every time we visited the cafeteria during the workshop, Fotini had rearranged the tables and chairs to set up different social encounters. Sometimes you found yourself at a long table, sometimes you sat at a round table, sometimes you were only able to sit across from one other person. This everyday organisation of space and mise-en-scène really matters, although it's not usually foregrounded in politicised discussions.

**AMR:** That was an amazing collaboration with Fotini. *Our Future Network* started out with a seventeen-week workshop in my studio in Berlin, and for that workshop I wanted to generate a space that had as much care in it as the spaces that I was admiring. There's this great bit in the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective's book about their transition from the closed *autocoscienza* groups (where a small number of women met to talk in their private apartments) to having a public space.[7] ([\\_\(\[issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n7\]\)](https://www.on-curating.org/issue-52-reader/relationality-in-feminist-collective-practice.html#n7)).

**HR:** More of an institution.

**AMR:** Yes, the bookshop being a feminist institution in a way that the *autocoscienza* groups weren't. In that transition phase, they couldn't quite work out why they weren't able to practise their politics in the same way in this new public context. They had become so good at their specific relational practices in their intimate private groups and in their one-on-one relationships of *affidamento*, but it wasn't working in the larger more formal group setting. They found present in that space the same, destructive relational habits that had led them to quit the leftist groups they had been in and form their own separatist, feminist ones.

One of the reasons that they identified for that was a lack of care for the shared space. So, they would say, okay, in our apartments where we had met for the *autocoscienza* groups, they're loved and cared for spaces, and so we cared for each other and our language there. Whereas in these collective spaces, they were rundown, and nobody was really making them nice, because they didn't feel a particular responsibility for them. So, that was reflected in the speech that was spoken there.

In all of the long-lasting groups that I spent time with for the research, I noticed that they did take care of their common spaces. So, I thought, okay, I've got to generate one of these spaces, how am I going to design it? And I wanted, with not too much money, to adapt my studio into a space that would be conducive to the kinds of experiments that we would be doing there.

So, I asked Fotini if she would work on that for me, and we did that. So, then the initial *Our Future Network* workshop took place there, and when it came time, a year later, to make the film, Fotini and I worked on the props and the mise-en-scène and how to generate the film set/workshop space. What was it going to look like on camera, but then also, how does it feel to be in? It was therefore only natural that this was a Proposition in itself. And the exhibition, too. It was important that exhibition should be presented with the same care as another of these discursive spaces.

**HR:** I like the idea that some things that we might not take very seriously, like how we put effort to making our homes comfortable and pleasant for oneself and visitors, are valuable activities. This body of knowledge, and practice of creating environments, has political implications, and should be taken seriously and valued.



Alex Martinis Roe, *A story from Circolo della rosa*, film still of a photograph by P.H. Vanda-Vergna, courtesy of the Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative archive, 2014.

## Public Speaking



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #6 - The Practice of (Public) Speaking*, developed with Cécile Bally, 2016.

**HR:** I remember you talking about how the group that formed during the workshop in your Berlin studio developed a particular relationship to speech. Can you tell us about how you developed exercises that involved giving each other feedback following public talks and other discursive experiments?

**AMR:** Yes, our practical research into feminist public speaking that resulted in *Proposition #6 – The Practice of (Public) Speaking* was done over quite a long period of time. We agreed that public speaking was something through which you could diagnose a whole lot of things about your techniques of self, and also where the demands of patriarchal structures clearly manifest themselves. So, as a kind of feminist psychoanalytic tool, it was something we could really work on. And it is also a frequent task of self-formation and self-representation, like right now, I'm speaking publicly. So, the question we grappled with was how to practically work on the way that we talk so as to change the way that we listen to and see each other.

After a couple of months of this group research into public speaking, we undertook an observation experiment. One person from the group would attend another group member's public speaking engagement and observe her performance. So, in my case, Valerie Terwei came to observe the way that I contributed to an internal Universität der Künste Berlin Graduate School planning meeting, where I was a fellow at the time. At the beginning of the meeting, I had to explain the experiment to the everyone and ask their permission, which was weird, "Do you mind, my collaborator needs to analyse my public speaking in this situation." Of course, that then changed the dynamic. We did lots of experiments like that. We found these observational exercises an incredibly rich practice, because, first of all, this person was, immediately, a support. So, it gave you confidence, as soon as you were on stage or in the spotlight because you had an ally, someone who was there not to appease you, but to help you. And then the feedback itself was incredible, because it was very honest and we'd really committed to this process, so it wasn't congratulatory out of politeness. It also wasn't tips on how to make your public speaking better, it was more focussed on analysing how we each made space for ourselves publicly and what sense of selfhood we were forming and projecting through those habits. I must say that I think we all became way more confident at public speaking and more confident in general through this process, which had a really long-lasting impact, at least for me.

## Curatorial Collaboration

**HR:** It would be interesting to hear about the curatorial collaboration with the various curators and institutional partners who you worked with on the exhibition, and the implications of this support structure for feminist practice.

**AMR:** The curatorial collaboration with *If I Can't Dance I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution*, Casco Art Institute (then Casco - Office for Art, Design and Theory), The Showroom, and *ar/ge kunst* came about because I had multiple separate invitations, and as the project was so large and needed a lot of support, I proposed bringing them together. At first, there was the idea that each institution might support a separate part of the project and in reality, it did actually work that way, but the partners decided that it was better to jointly commission the whole thing. I had been working on the project for a couple of years before this, but it was incredibly transformative to have a network of feminists and feminist organisations behind it. The collaboration among the four institutions as well as Archive Books (who were involved from the very beginning of the research) was fantastic in that it presented a non-competitive and collaborative approach to curatorial support for art practice that went beyond just staging exhibitions. Casco and *If I Can't Dance* in particular were involved in sustaining the research and development of the work over a number of years. Rather than the usual short-term engagement artists have with institutions, I became an ongoing member of each workplace. It began when Casco facilitated the research and production of one of the films, initially through a performance work co-presented by *If I Can't Dance* in 2014 as part of *Performance Days*. The collaboration with those two

institutions only came to an end in 2018 when my book *To Become Two: Propositions for Feminist Collective Practice* (Berlin and Milan: Archive Books, 2018) was published and distributed, so we had worked together regularly for around four years. In particular, Susan Gibb from If I Can't Dance took on the role of producer of the *Our Future Network* film and, through the intensity of our collaboration, we forged a very close dialogue on all aspects of the project. She's an exceptionally talented and dedicated curator who played a really big role in the work's development. The real engagement of these curators (especially Binna Choi and Jason Waite at Casco; Susan Gibb and Frédérique Bergholz at If I Can't Dance; but also Staci Bu Shea at Casco; Emanuele Guidi at ar/ge kunst; Emily Pethick and Eva Rowson at The Showroom; and Chiara Figone and Paolo Caffoni at Archive Books) in the project itself and their commitment to its development over such a long period of time was a true enactment of the politics my project was concerned with and testament to the rigour with which they practise curatorship as feminist politics.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Their desire rang through the halls and into the tower*, film still of a VHS recording of Cris van der Hoek's "Playback Show" based on her thesis *Een bewuste paria. Hannah Arendt en de feministische filosofie* (2000), Courtesy of Cris van der Hoek and Rosemarie Buikema, 2016.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Their desire rang through the halls and into the tower*, 2016. Commissioned by Casco Art Institute in collaboration with If I Can't Dance I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution's *Performance Days*, 2014.

## Role of the Camera

**HR:** The workshop proposed the idea that objects have a contagious effect. In some exercises, we passed around objects that had meaning for us. Passing them by hand, there was a certain kind of molecular transmission.

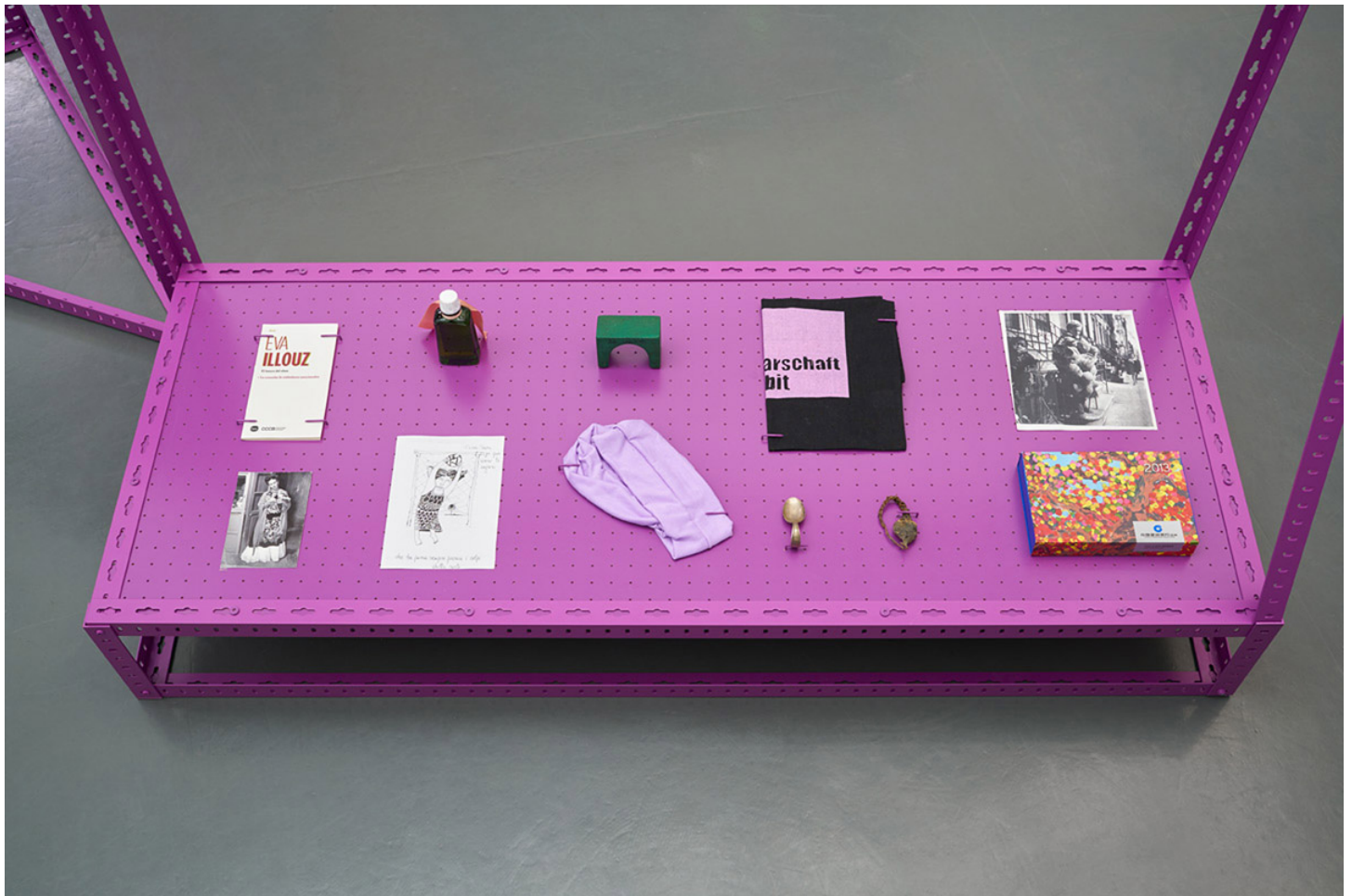
**AMR:** Yes, totally.

**HR:** So, maybe actor network theory is in there, how objects, be they human objects or ideas as objects, have agency.

**AMR:** Also the film itself.

**HR:** You talk about the potentiality of the past, the virtual and the potential.

**AMR:** Yes, at the moment that you tell a story, you are performing the virtualities in that story and making them actual to a certain degree. So, it's the fact that I was telling these stories about these groups has made some of their practices actually happen again. The method of telling the stories also becomes the method of doing the practices. We were doing it for ourselves, in our own way, while at the same time living the stories we were telling.



Alex Martinis Roe, *To Become Two*, installation detail, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, 2017. Exhibition design: Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga. Photo: Stephen Bauman, bild\_raum.

## Audience Questions

**Audience Member 1:** It seems that you're using a structure that challenges us to think about how we come together in what I would call structures of intimacy, and the way we might rethink a type of caring whose purposes are political or could be politicised. I'm thinking of those intimate moments where you get together for a reading group, or you have people over for dinner, or you look after kids together. I come from a rural background, so I keep relating it back to rural dynamics, where people came together out of necessity to help each other out and take care of each other.

**AMR:** Yes, totally. That's a great way of talking about it. It's so important that we see politics as something people can do in their everyday lives, rather than as this big insurmountable thing that they'd have to give up their day job to do. These feminist histories showed me how embedded politics is in everyday life. How easy it is. You don't need many resources to undertake a meaningful relationship with somebody else, that's really your decision.

**Audience Member 2:** You spoke you spoke about trust and love as a commitment of time. I'm trying to imagine how much time the projects reflected in the show downstairs actually all took, which seem to involve processes that are opposite of working fast.

**AMR:** Yes, the workshop in my studio in Berlin was seventeen weeks, and then the group continued working together for a year before the Our Future Network meeting. And that is only one of the six projects downstairs. I have been working on *To Become Two* for over four years, and the meaningful relationships that constitute it



took time to build. But then I've also been astounded at what can occur in a short period. It is amazing what can happen among strangers in just one afternoon. In our workshop here during Now You Can Go, a lot happened in just two days. But, certainly, for it to have a lasting effect it takes time. The bookshop co-operative in Milan that so inspires me has been going for over forty years. What I found so amazing was that it had lasted that long, and they were still doing their politics of relationships.

**Audience Member 3:** I was wondering about the editing process and how the film is cut and then, maybe also related to time, how you construct the time or the film in relation to the time of watching?

**AMR:** The editing process was already planned like narrative cinema. So, even though there was only ever one take of anything, which makes it a documentary in some respects, it was planned to a very tight degree. So, in four days, in which we must've been active for over twelve hours a day, we only had eleven hours of film footage. And I kind of knew that it would be roughly that much in advance. So, that was already a process of editing that happened in the design of the project at the beginning. There was a dialogue about when the camera would be on and off in each of the parts of each of these propositions and exercises. And also where the camera would be. We had rules for each proposition, like for example, that the camera can't be on faces, only on hands during this exercise. Or, in this part, we're going to be far away, so the camera can't hear what's being said. Cinematographer Smina Bluth and I also developed a "feminist gaze" for the camera, too. It started from Smina's own positionality along with the rest of the all-female film crew and their participation in it, rather than recording it from a position outside. Then it was also about dignity and finding ways to foreground the beauty and self-determination of each contributor, as well as the desire among them. There were a whole range of parameters in place, designed primarily for political reasons. And then when it came time for editing, I already knew beforehand that I wanted it to be structured as a toolbox. So, in a way, editing it into these little episodes meant that it's eighteen mini films.

All the contributors knew that I would be directing and editing, but that there would be an opportunity for consultation in the editing process. Once I had a rough cut, everyone got to watch that and make comments. There were a few changes here and there that came out of that process. I worked with Anne Jünemann on the edit. She's an incredible editor, and it was an amazing experience working with her. She and I totally fell in love with the contributors as we were editing the film every day for months afterwards. It was wonderful.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #20 – The Practice of Acknowledgement*, developed by all the contributors to *Our Future Network*. 2016.

**Alex Martinis Roe** is an artist and researcher working with film installation, events, and publications on feminist genealogies, seeking to foster relations between different generations and positions as a way of participating in the construction of feminist histories and futures. Her project *To Become Two* (2014-2018) was co-commissioned as a cycle of solo exhibitions by If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution, NL, Casco Art Institute, NL, The Showroom, UK, and ar/ge kunst, IT. It is currently on show at Samstag Museum, AU, and was also shown at Badischer Kunstverein, DE, and presented at the Centre Georges Pompidou, FR, as part of *Mai 68 – Assemblée Générale* (2018). She was the 2018 recipient of the Future of Europe Art Prize, and work from her current project *Alliances* (2018 - ongoing) has been exhibited at GfZK - Museum of Contemporary Art Leipzig (solo, 2018), Frac Lorraine, Metz (2018), and in *1 Million Roses for Angela Davis*, Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau, Dresden (2020-2021). She was a fellow at Graduiertenschule UdK Berlin (2013-2016) and is currently Head of Drawing and Printmaking at the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne.

Currently Reader in Curating in the Art Department at Goldsmiths, University of London, **Helena Reckitt** has worked as a curator, a public programmer, and an academic editor in the UK, Canada, and the US. She has developed exhibitions, public events, and discursive programmes for organisations including the ICA, London; the Atlanta Contemporary Art Centre, Georgia; and the Power Plant and Nuit Blanche in Toronto. With a longstanding interest in feminist art, writing, and collective practice, since 2015 she has coordinated the Feminist Duration Reading Group, which meets each month to explore under-recognised feminisms. She has recently completed an MA in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths, and is exploring how to apply

approaches from life writing to her academic and curatorial essays.

## Notes

[1] *Now You Can Go* was a programme developed by Angelica Bolletinari, Giulia Casalini, Diana Georgiou, Laura Guy, Helena Reckitt, Irene Revell and Amy Tobin across several London arts spaces, in 2015, exploring the contemporary resonance of second wave Italian feminisms. See Helena Reckitt “Generating Feminisms: Italian Feminisms and the ‘Now You Can Go’ Program, *Art Journal*, 2017, 76:3-4

[2] Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford, eds., *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

[3] [Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor](https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-recovering-identity-politics-from-neoliberalism/) (<https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-recovering-identity-politics-from-neoliberalism/>), (<https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-recovering-identity-politics-from-neoliberalism/>), “(<https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-recovering-identity-politics-from-neoliberalism/>)Recovering Identity Politics from Neoliberalism (<https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-recovering-identity-politics-from-neoliberalism/>),” interview with Daniel Denvir, *The Dig* podcast from *Jacobin Magazine*, 19 December 2017, last accessed 12 February 2021, <https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-recovering-identity-politics-from-neoliberalism/> (<https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-recovering-identity-politics-from-neoliberalism/>).

[4] Sasha Roseneil, “Foregrounding Friendship: Feminist Pasts, Feminist Futures,” in *Handbook of Gender and Women’s Studies*, eds. Kathy Davis, Mary Evans, Judith Lorber (London: Sage, 2006), 340

[5] “Green bans” were called so because the Builders Labourers Federation had put a halt to a number of major developments in Sydney because of their threat to green spaces. The strength of the union meant that the builders labourers’ refusal to work on projects that were environmentally or socially undesirable to the community were, for a time, largely successful strike actions.

[6] Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

[7] Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, trans. Patricia Cicogna, Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 83.