

It Comes *In Waves*

A Conversation Series

Katie

Welcome to 'It Comes in Waves' an intergenerational conversation series presented by the Women's Art Register and hosted by me, Katie Ryan. Developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this series will feature conversations between women and non-binary artists and arts professionals on themes of trauma, care, community and identity, among others. These conversations will facilitate knowledge sharing and support across generations by pairing emerging and early career artists and writers with some of the longest-standing members of the Women's Art Register.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that this conversation series has been produced on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri and Boonwuring people of the Kulin Nations. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I respectfully acknowledge that this land has been home to some of the oldest stories in human history, deep time stories that document the evolution of species and recall climatic shifts. These stories have been preserved and shared through Indigenous oral traditions that continue to this day. I extend this acknowledgment to the peoples of the lands you may be listening on and encourage you to reflect upon the stories of these lands.

Today I'll be speaking with Georgia Banks and Juliette Peers.

Georgia Banks' works begin with an invitation and a provocation. Sometimes they are met with an overwhelming response, sometimes no one answers at all. She does not value either of these outcomes over the other. In recent years she has been banned from Tinder, sued by the estate of Hannah Wilke, and awarded Miss Social Impact in a national beauty pageant. She

would like to go viral, become a reality TV star, and be inaugurated into the Guinness World Records Hall of Fame. She has never had a filling nor broken a bone (although she has been crucified) and once was convinced she had accidentally sliced away a part of her labia during a performance (she hadn't). Georgia Banks is a current studio artist at Gertrude Contemporary, in Melbourne and she completed a Masters of Fine Arts by Research at the Victoria College of the Arts in 2015.

Juliette Peers is a historian, curator, teacher and writer. Her interests span classical Art History, popular culture, feminism and politics. She taught global design history and design practice at RMIT for over twenty-five years. Her research favours unstable, outlying, queer and feminist narratives and engages with images and mythologies of the feminine. She has been involved with the Women's Art Register for over three decades including co-curating 'Completing the Picture: Women Artists and the Heidelberg Era'. As a freelance curator she has worked with public galleries in Australia, the United Kingdom, Europe and North America. Feminist art advocacy is central to her practice and includes writing, research and the growth and maintenance of archives and foundations such as the Women's Art Register and the Sheila Foundation for Women in the arts

To begin, I'd like to ask Georgia about some of your reenactment works. You've done a series of works in which you reenact performances by both feminist artists and prominent male artists. Could you talk about your intention behind these reenactments and whether there are different logics involved in reperforming feminist works, versus works by non-feminist artists?

Georgia

Yes, it's interesting because I started doing reenactments stuff during my masters. The interest that I had at that time, was the relationship between performance art and the wound. And how the wound operates as an archive in performance artworks. But as opposed to an archive that exists in a state of stasis like an image or a piece of audio or video material, it exists in a state of flux because it changes every day as the artist's body changes. It's a document of a performance artwork that exists and evolves as the artist lives and ages and dies and rots. And then I guess it's gone. [Laughter]

So I was choosing artworks to reenact based on my relationship and their relationship to the wound. And the works that I chose at that time were works by Chris Burden, by Abramovitch, Mike Parr, Valie Export. And it was through doing those works that I realized the more radical side of it was when I was engaging with works, like for example, I went to show it to you... It's an audio recording! When I reenacted Chris Burden's 'Shoot', for example, I noticed how much I feminised the work, how much slower my version is.

So obviously, Chris Burden got shot 'bang bang', whereas I had two parts of my arm removed with a biopsy punch. And if you watch the video of that, it's extremely slow. All up it took maybe, four, or five minutes to do as opposed to what milliseconds that it takes for a bullet to penetrate flesh. So slowing down that penetrative element and drawing out that abject...It felt very radically feminist. And so that's when I became interested more specifically in feminising preexisting works such as 'Fixed'. And I did the whole show at King's that was all Mike Parr works, called 'On Parr' because I love a pun. [Laughter]

Katie Yea, That show was really interesting. One of the works that stuck with me was the work of Mike Parr's that you re-performed, which was 'Have a branding iron made up with the word ARTIST. Brand this word on your body.' And you had that done by getting an inkless tattoo of the word 'ARTIST' on your lower back.

Georgia Yes. Yeah. And I called that work 'Brand' because we're all branding ourselves as artists, aren't we? And then I sat in the gallery for six-hour stints over the course of the month that the exhibition was up and waited for the words to scab and scar. And they didn't fade away in that month, although that had been my intention. But they're gone now.

Katie When you were reperforming these works and you change them, like taking the gunshot to a biopsy, taking the brand to an inkless tattoo. How do you decide how to augment them? And what does that mean? Because obviously with the 'ARTIST' one, it makes me think of a tramp stamp.

Georgia Oh! [laughing] I love that!

Katie Was that an association?

Georgia No. I'll pretend it was. [laughing]

Katie I thought of that right away. And I thought of, like, I don't know, that's something that I thought was so great about it because even to brand yourself with the word artist... I feel like being an artist is always this slippery category where you're like, 'oh, I haven't made work in a few months, am I still one, or not?' And also the way that a tramp stamp speaks about, like, an idea of what kind of woman you might be, or what your morals and stuff are. And the way that being an artist can be something that's shameful in a lot of ways as well.

Georgia Oh my God, I live for that! I feel like my reasoning is so much more boring now, after hearing yours. [laughter] I'm a big fan of 'In the Penal Colony' by

Franz Kafka. Where they have this penal... penal... Something. Oh, my God, penal policy? Let's say penal policy.

Katie Or like punitive something..?

Georgia Yeah, its alliterative – Punitive penal policies. [laughter] Where when you commit a crime or you break a law in this country, this imaginary country, you get it tattooed on your back until you die from blood loss. But they don't tell you what the law that you broke is. You're just supposed to intuit it through the process of dying, of having it tattooed on your back, but then the whole machine, over the course of the story breaks down. So it was more about the breaking down of systemic violence..? Does that make sense?

Katie Well, Kafka is definitely a more highbrow reference than a tramp stamp. But maybe they can exist together!

Georgia No, but I hate highbrow! I'm going to tell people that now.

Katie Go with the tramp stamp! [laughter]

Georgia One of my many ideas that I have for a work is to get a Playboy bunny tattoo on my pubis... on my vagina. Because I'm obsessed with the Playboy bunny and the iconography of it. Late last year, I just had this flashback of 2004 when literally everybody was wearing Playboy bunnies, all the time. I was like 14 and I had a Playboy bunny bikini, I had a Playboy watch, everybody did. And all of a sudden it was just so socially acceptable to have all these like young, young girls wandering around advertising Playboy. And that was just the norm for a hot minute in the early 2000s. I'm very interested in that moment in time. (laughter)

Katie Definitely.
Juliette, your research focuses on how women are represented in both art history and popular culture. Could you talk a bit about your interest in representations of women in both of these contexts? So Playboy and Kafka? [laughter]

Juliette Yes. I was trained at the very end of a very old school patriarchal style of art history. It was heavy upon 18th century, not much baroque. I was considered weird because I liked the Baroque and it was dismissed in about half a lecture. Also, lots of stuff about medieval iconography. While I'm not keen on medieval art, I love the decoding of it. And that sort of set me up in a very traditional sense to look at imagery. And then within a year, or a year and a half, things changed rapidly in art history, with the rise of things such as

cinema studies, media studies. And I suddenly realised that the content of works, which had interested me as much as the artists and the technique, that could port into popular culture.

There was this extraordinary burgeoning moment globally, as people began looking at art in very different ways. And I think Australia and Australian feminist writers were very central to that, particularly Barbara Creed and 'The monstrous-feminine' and the idea that you suddenly realise that concepts of women segued from popular culture to high culture. Going back to things also like John Berger, and why a nude woman in one context would be porn, but in another context is an old master, investment art, a global cultural treasure. And there's another lovely book by Anne Hollander called 'Seeing Through Clothes', which was a very, very early mash-up of fashion history and art history. The whole idea of what do clothes mean? What does a beautiful woman mean? And again, it was about reading beneath the surface and reading about the continuity of these messages. I'd always loved classical Hollywood cinema and suddenly you realize that the same ideas and messages are going through.

The birth of new Disney in the early 90s. You know, the revived Disney long-playing, those sort of large scale cartoons such as 'The Little Mermaid', 'Lion King' and that sort of thing. Although there's a lot you can say about Disney, he was a para-fascist, also a friend of Salvador Dali, which is almost sort of a tautology: para-fascist, friend of Salvador Dali. [Laughter] And they certainly did work, there's these amazing bits, sort of several minutes of film. Disney was going to do a complete Dali film, but you could never get it funded. But that sort of crossover between the popular culture and high culture, and particularly for me, I've always loved dolls. And suddenly I realized that dolls were a modality of preserving images of women, and again the whole idea of performing women. And for me, I suppose another breakthrough movement was an amazing tranche of French scholarship in the mid-1990s, which pointed out that all the lampooning and fears of Hillary Clinton were almost word for word, in translation, of the fears of Marie Antoinette expressed by the revolutionaries in the 1780s. Because there was a very strong driver of gender in the French Revolution. The whole idea of the revolutionary being the man, the independent man who could stand up and fight for himself. Whereas the feminine state was seen as subjecthood, you were subject to the church, subject to the King. And the royal rule was also seen as venal because you had Marie Antoinette, you had royal mistresses. All of these women.

Katie

I mean, even the way that Hillary was perceived in the 2016 American election was very gendered.

- Juliette** Yes.
- Katie** She was sold as a warmonger, but in reality, every single American president has been a warmonger and she was no more than any of the others.
- Juliette** Exactly. And also that she lies. That whole idea about male equals truth equals uprightness. Female equals duplicity, treachery, untrustworthiness, slithery-ness.
- Katie** So they chose the most lying president they could possibly get..!
- Juliette** Exactly! And that is a strange thing. I suppose often I feel I'm stuck in amber because people have moved on. People now see ideas as less mutable, it's a much more implacable nature of what identity is. But it is ironic that these ideas still talk. And I think we lose a certain degree of understanding if we don't look at the performative nature of reality. I think interest in popular culture reminds us about the performative nature of reality. I'm interested in the way the woman is always unstable, She's always untruthful. You see that certainly a lot in American culture. A lot of the far-right American culture is riven with a total fear of women, either good women or bad women. Good women are trivial and controlling, bad women are sexual and dangerous. They're all to be feared, they're all to be contained.
- Georgia** This is super prevalent in reality TV as well, which is obviously a big interest of mine. A show like 'The Bachelor' is basically just contemporary propaganda for this is how a 'good girl' behaves and these are the 'right reasons'... They were always talking about the 'right reasons' for being on The Bachelor. And the right reasons for being on 'The Bachelor' are getting married and having children. The winner of The Bachelor consistently, over my watching of many seasons, is very beautiful, but has had a bad relationship in the past and has given her low self-esteem so that the bachelor can come in and save her, lift her up. And consistently, the bad women on the show are sexually autonomous, often bi-sexual – Holla' [laughter] and attention-seeking. And this is something that Casey Jenkins and I have talked about a lot, the cutting down of women in society, that are considered to be seeking too much attention.
- Juliette** Yes.
- Georgia** Yeah, it's consistent and it's everywhere. And they're really difficult prejudices to get out of your own head. I mean, I still think these things sometimes when I watch these shows because we're literally being trained to think this way, by popcorn entertainment that we watch with our guards down.

- Juliette** Yes. And I suppose that gets back to old 90s feminism and some of that early cinematic studies discussion. There were real debates between scholars as to whether a lot of this imagery was controlling and educating, or was there always a degree of sort of camp and critical slippage and reading. Just as queer culture has always had to construct its own version of what it's given by mainstream culture. So too, that women have constantly played that double game and there's been a lot of arguments about to what degree people are consciously involved in that.
- Katie** Yeah. I mean, I think it depends on the context that you're situated in. Because if you are only exposed to normative narratives about how women should be, then you don't have the space for that irony or criticism. And that stuff doesn't seem strange until you have left it and come back. And I think that's what's really frightening. Like, if I think about some of the TV shows that I watched when I was a kid, now I'm just like, fuck, no wonder my parents were like, 'what are you watching?! That's horrendous.' But at the time, When I was like 14 or whatever, you just think it's normal, and you are indoctrinating yourself.
- Juliette** Yeah, I suppose that gets back to people looking at things like soap operas, telenovelas, some of that Douglas Sirk 50s, female films, a lot of that material discussed by early cultural studies. What degree are you imbibing it and to what degree are you resisting it? I can remember the first time I took my mum into a pub, although she used to work in a pub, but she wouldn't go and drink in a pub. There was some very...
- Katie** Well, I didn't realise that women were not allowed in pubs in Australia up until...
- Georgia** Yeah, I grew up in a mining town, Broken Hill. And well into the 90s women weren't allowed into certain parts of the bar.
- Juliette** That's right. Yep. Only to the parlour. You could go to the parlour or to the takeaway.
- Georgia** And then there was a family-friendly bit and the men's only bit. And the way it's sort of explained... Because this is where my family is from, like my grandmother's fucking grandmother is from Broken Hill. We're old, old, old Broken Hill families. The men were on the mines and they had so much trauma that they were experiencing. People were dying constantly on the mines. My dad lost so many friends, on the mines. Apparently, there's a rumour going around Broken Hill that he was cursed and if you were friends with him you would die on the mines. I'm sure he wouldn't mind me telling you that! [laughter]

Katie So, just due to workplace accidents or being exposed..?

Georgia Yea. So then the sort of culture in the place was very focused on this really heavy, masculine trauma. And so there was this really prevalent idea that men needed this space away from the wives and children to be fucked up... to be fucked up, because they've been watching people die on the reg'. Women would wait outside the bars and like, yell in to try and get their husbands to come out and stuff. And this is well into the nineties... Which just seems...

Katie Yeah. I mean, I think it's interesting to consider that this is the environment in which the Women's Art Register was set up.

Juliette Yes!

Katie Because I think coming to it now as a younger woman, I don't understand the full extent of how necessary it was. And how few spaces there were for women to be supported in. I wanted to ask you, Juliette, a bit about Erica McGilchrist, because she was one of the people who founded it, and what were the kind of ideals that she had in mind when setting up the Register?

Juliette Well, she was not the only person who founded it, it was a group of people. But she was the one who I think persisted with it longer. A lot of the groups splintered off, there was a lot of political argument and things splintered off. But how do we... it's so much of a story! Do we go the Erica thread? Do we go the WAR thread? Another reason I'm a historian and curator and a lot of my artwork is also very text-based too, is that it's often easier to sort and lay these thoughts out, not verbally. But perhaps thinking about WAR itself and then slotting Erica in later.

The Women's Art Register is particularly interesting, not only for its longevity but because we can still pinpoint its foundation and its foundation has also become somewhat mythologized within days of it happening. But we can actually point to the visit of Lucy Lippard, who was, of course, an American critic who had been first very much involved with conceptual and minimalist art. She was invited to deliver the John Powers annual lecture in Australia in 1975. Another theory is that she was invited because not only was she a major American art theorist to be worshipped, but she was also a woman and it was 1975 the International Year of Women. Which of one of the UN years, it really was quite transformative, globally. The Year of the Women made an impact across many cultures, many countries globally.

So she came out to Australia and they thought she was going to deliver lectures on contemporary American art. And she began talking about

women's art. In Sydney and Melbourne, she wanted to meet women artists, she only wanted to go to galleries where women's art was shown. She held women-only meetings, both in Sydney and in Melbourne. And that was seen as totally unprecedented. In Sydney, they didn't quite know how to cope with her. She rejected the round of studio visits and gallery visits that she was presented with by the University of Sydney staff. And she asked only to see women and speak to women. And that was considered strange... Almost like they had got one of the world's greatest art experts and now, she'd sort of turned insane on us. They just couldn't cope! [laughter]

Meanwhile, down in Melbourne at the Ewing and Paton Gallery, there was already a ferment of interest around rethinking curation, rethinking art practice, rethinking the relationship of discourse, pedagogy, the university and the art-making to each other, via the amazing Kiffy Rubbo and Meredith Rogers. I think you've spoken to Meredith. There was already an art discussion group, which included feminism, centred in the gallery. When she came to Melbourne to deliver her lecture. There already was a network set up. And in the morning the lecture Lippard was taken down to a number of studios by Lesley Dumbrell. She visited Erica McGilchrist's studio and saw Erica's work and said it was dripping with female imagery. Erica had already been invited to a talk that Lucy was going to give on Sunday evening and they tried to gather all the women artists in Melbourne.

Women didn't talk to each other very much artistically, they were very isolated. A woman could be the only woman in a group of male contemporary artists. She might be a partner of one, she didn't know of other women... Very few other women except, say, a direct personal friend who was also working in the arts. So there was very little cross-discussion amongst women. And they had this lecture, the George Paton Gallery invited people. But there was also a lot of others, there were signs put up in art schools, there were telephone trees. So there was a bunch of women together in one room, people didn't even know there were that many women artists in Melbourne! They included older women, some of the George Bell [School] and modernist, art deco modernist women had phoned up their friends. But there was such a cross section... There were people from 18 years old to 70-year-olds in the room. Lucy showed a large collection of slides about, some people say, about two or three hundred, which she just kept clicking over as she talked about how women's art was different, how women's art was overlooked, how there was, as believed in the seventies, sort of continuous threads of conceptual and visual concerns within women's art. Everyone was amazed, everyone was very engaged. And Lippard said, 'but you should actually be talking to each other, not talking to me. You should be looking at each other. You're all in the room together.'

And the slides had come from something called the West-East bag or East-West bag, I can never quite remember, Registry. Which was a collection of women's art slides. And the idea was that you collected imagery and material relating to women's art to create a resource, and to create an information exchange and a repository in the absence of women's art being bought extensively by galleries, being shown extensively by commercial galleries, being collected by collectors. So it was this idea that you created this informal structure like a museum, but cheaper and more porous and more accessible. To collate information and collate knowledge on women's art. And that would actually build a base from which a much more richer and a much more informed perception of women's art could evolve.

Katie So, that's how the slide collection idea began? Wow, that's so...

Juliette Yea. They talked about it at the meeting. And then Erica and Lesley, I think, met the week after and began putting together a list of people to talk to. And they held another meeting a few months later, which was the first meeting of the Women's Art Register. And even by the end of the year, there were about 100 women who had put in slides. I've heard people say it's not only that, they were sort of overwhelmed by what Lippard was saying about the fact that women were in the art world, women had to struggle, women were discriminated against. A lot of people had internalised these ideas and just thought it was their fault or just, you know, had tried to battle as best as they could. So the previous generation had already almost accepted that male artists were sexist and just were grateful for the little tiny space that they could knock out for themselves. But the idea was to have these slides to be able to see people's work, to see what people were doing then, to be able to have the face to face discussion about what people were doing. And it sounds strange to us that you just didn't act in that way. And I think the art career was you relied a lot more on your dealer. You relied on critics.

Katie But probably also the system was set up so that people weren't having those conversations because if a certain group is held down, no one ever wants them to be talking to one another. There's a quote from you that I read that really succinctly described something that I find so interesting about the register, which is its open-access structure. You said, 'within the unstructured vastness of the self-nominated and self-identified content, there is something waiting there for the user who does not know that s/he - and I will add they - wants or needs it.' This statement addresses the latent potential of the WAR archive, it's potential to collect works whose relevance is not yet understood or valued by institutions. Yeah, I think that just speaks to what a huge amount of work it can collect that would otherwise be totally lost.

Juliette

Exactly. I mean, I've also trained in postgraduate curatorial studies, and that's why I've always had massive, massive problems from the start, with the concept of curating, because what authority is granted to someone who's employed as a curator? Does it mean they know about art or is it that they're good at passing job interviews? What part does their personal taste inform what they're doing and where they're going as a curator? Because every artist knew that there were only certain galleries that the National Gallery of Victoria curators went to. If you were bought by a certain dealer or if were taken up by a certain dealer, your work would be winning competitions. You'd be in public collections everywhere. It's the sort of, the cookie-cutter practice of curation, that I find is also problematic. So I mean, WAR's not perfect, but to have something that is self-nominated, it just means that the catchment is greater.

Even if you're a classical art historian, you just need to look at, say, the emergence of Impressionism. If someone asked you in 1860 in Paris who was the most important artist, you'd say [Alexandre] Cabanel or [William-Adolphe] Bouguereau, you wouldn't say Manet. And then, of course, throughout most of the 20th century, Manet, Monet, the sort of revolutionary impressionists were more important, whereas once they were derided. And it's only later in the 20th century that people began looking at the academic artists and finding them as interesting. It just shows you that the art professionals of the day, the curators, the critics, would have backed the artists who were the ones that later art history, later art curating, didn't support. So, that's almost a cautionary tale. Is that what might be important about today's art might be happening somewhere else. I've always felt that a later generation might like rock videos more than all our high art. Rather than just looking at the superficial, the whole practice of what is a gallery, why the gallery is there? Is something that we don't actually sort of talk about. The whole idea of the keeping place, the repository. I always liked the idea that William Morris said, that the art gallery held things collectively for the public, that they couldn't afford themselves. That it was holding something on behalf of us. Curation is to take care of. Anyway, I've probably gone a little further off to where we weren't meant to be.

Katie

That's ok.

Juliette

But I suppose, I've always been almost childishly excited about the Register.

Katie

I think it has a utopian idea or structure, which doesn't necessarily eventuate. But I think it's really important to consider different structures so that we can have different outcomes. And I think there are problems with the self-nominating system, because it still begs the question, then, who does self-nominate? Who feels comfortable to self-nominate? Who's within the

community that knows about the option to self-nominate? But, the fact is that it is recording a different narrative from what other institutions are recording. And if it wasn't there, then certain information would be lost. And I think what you said about 'what they do not yet know they need.' I just think that there is something so important about that. You know, in our lives, we all look back on things and finally realize what they meant. And there could be things in the Register that the importance won't be known of until generations later or decades later.

Juliette

We've got the example, we had one of the few records of a 'Post-Partum Document' by Mary Kelly, which was a very major, as the 'Dinner Party' was a core American work, the 'Post-Partum Document' was a core British work. And it also was a work that marked the difference between third and second-wave feminism, as I understand it. There's a lot of conceptual artworks, very sort of minimalist artworks that involve nappy stains, words uttered by her young son. All sorts of things from burying of the female identity into the child's identity, the narrowing of a woman's world into caring for children. At the same time, she was looking at language, things like [Ferdinand de] Saussure and post-structuralism, the structure of language, how language determines community. So, she was looking at both conservative and radical things. And the story I've been told is that some of the works were lost, or she lost some of her documentation. But there were slides in WAR that documented, from an Australian showing, some of the lost or the damaged pieces. In this important... it was sort of like several hundred small serial artworks. It relates a little bit to what people like Parr and some of the other artists, the Imants Tillers and things were doing in Australia in the 70s. It was a very cutting edge work.

Katie

I think I might switch to Georgia for a minute.

Juliette

Yep, sorry!

Katie

No, no, That was really interesting to hear all that. While we're talking about these porous structures. I wanted to ask you, Georgia, about some of your works where you're engaging directly with the public. I think you've often set them up to expose the mistreatment of women in digital spaces or spaces where anonymity is maintained. Have there been any instances where these dialogues with the public have been reparative or productive from a feminist perspective?

Georgia

So I guess we're talking about like, 'Intercourse with the Artist', where I invited strangers to call me over 48 hours. 'Please Tell Me What My Work Is About', where I ask people to tell me what my work is about, but only if they

identify as straight, white and male, and 'Looking For Dick In All The Wrong Places', which was on Tinder. So, these sorts of works are I guess, questions that I have. That I don't really have an answer to or have an expectation of what's going to happen. I think what's really interesting about those works, particularly when I did 'Please Tell Me What My Work Is About', it was not well attended. I think I had maybe eight participants, but it was so talked about. It was in The Age. There were a bunch of podcasts about it. People always wanted to talk to me about it. And what was really interesting in the art world in particular was, I would talk to guys about the projects and they would be like, 'Yea, it's so cool that you're doing that because, you know, there are all these kinds of guys who do these things.' But were not including themselves in that. So it was really interesting to me because I felt like more of that project happened outside of the actual parameters of the project, but happened in talking with people about the project who didn't think that the project was about them. And then through that, made it very much about them.

Katie Yeah, because, I mean, it's a different set up in now in that project from some of the others because you're asking them to engage with your work rather than like you or whatever. So the topic is still the art. So it's interesting that when that is overt, there's less engagement.

Georgia Yes, well and that work was in part inspired by Lee Lozano, who stopped speaking to women. But also, just from my experiences in academia. Toward the end of my Masters, when I was like, almost every teacher that I've had has been a white guy. And I had some pretty non-amazing experiences in academia with some fairly predatory male academics. Who shaped my practice in ways that, you know, I wish they hadn't had the ability to do so. You know, I've had a lot of straight white men tell me what my work is about without being asked. But then when I did ask, everyone was like, 'oh, that's such a good point. But obviously, it's not about me'. When you're not being asked, you want to tell me what my work is about all the fucking time. And now that I'm asking you to do it, I'm making fun of men.

Katie It's so telling as well that as a feminist artist within institutions, you were still paired with mentors who were straight white men.

Juliette But yeah, the whole relationship of predatory white males to art schools in the last 50, 60 years is something that we really don't talk about.

Katie And unfortunately, it hasn't completely gone away. But maybe we'll head back and ask Georgia another question about your recent work, 'She's Beauty And She's Grace.' So this was a truly endurance performance work, in which you entered and competed in national beauty pageants. During this process,

you subjected your body to a range of potentially damaging treatments in order to conform to normative beauty standards. In the context of the pageant, this extended to getting a colonic and not eating on the day of the competition. In your video work, you state, "I can't stop thinking about how if I had died that day, I would have died with no shit in my body." This statement reveals so much about the extent to which form can overtake function in the pursuit of an idealised female body. The most perfect female body is one that cannot or does not perform in the most basic bodily functions. This speaks to an extreme instance of objectification, as in becoming an object, or almost becoming a doll, as you would say, Juliette. Could you tell us a bit about this experience and the effect of undertaking a performance work of this duration?

Georgia

Yes. So this performance was about a year long. It progressively got more and more intense as time went on. Yeah, I changed... I changed everything about myself over the course of a year. And I got to tell you, I did not think it through before I started the project. I mean, I had my sort of hypothesis, I suppose, of what was going to happen and how it would be for me. But so many things happened during that time that I did not anticipate. You know, I had never restricted my caloric intake to that degree before. I knew that it would be hard in theory, but there's theoretical understanding and there's lived experience. I really was not prepared for how much of an impact it would have on my mind and my capacity to think properly, to have coherent conversations with people. And also how much of my time was taken up thinking about food, and my appearance.

I was logging everything that I ate every day down to weighing my olive oil, so it was pretty intense. And when I wasn't thinking about what I could eat or thinking about my macros or thinking about how much weight I needed to lose or thinking about how I was going to fit into X dress for X pageant or thinking about how I needed to turn my hip up a quarter of a fucking centimetre more the next time I stopped at the end of the fucking stage. I was watching the British Bake Off because I became obsessed with cooking shows. All I wanted to do was watch cooking shows or every time I saw a person, I was like, 'What did you eat today? Tell me?' Total emotional masochism! I became obsessed with what other people were eating. I kept giving people food to watch them eat it. I would get people to eat food in front of me. It was sickening, not in a cute way. And my appearance. I never thought about my appearance so much.

It's interesting over the course of the year, I realized that I had developed a sort of addiction – and I already have, full disclosure, a pretty addictive personality – nearly four years sober. So yeah, you know, I'm predisposed to addiction. When I first started doing the project, I got my first spray tan, for

example, ever. And I remember looking at myself and being like, oh, I look so different! This is weird! But then as I regularly got a spray tan that became my new normal. And so in order to get that feeling of, 'ooh I look different', I went darker. And then that became my new normal. And then in order to get that feeling back again, I went darker. And makeup, I became so used to seeing my face with makeup on that I hated my own face. I went to the hair dresser's one day and, you know, people playing with your hair, talking, la la la. And all I could do is stare at myself in this fucking hairdresser's mirror and think 'you look so fucking ugly without your eyebrows on girl!'. That's horrible! And these aren't things that I haven't ever really spent a whole bunch of time thinking about. I'm not going to lie and say I've never thought about this shit. I'm fucking a woman who exists in the world. We're trained from birth to care about this stuff. Not to be thinking about it twenty-four hours a day. And, you know, I got Botox for this project. It was just such a strange point in the project because it was right towards the end of the project because obviously, that's when you want to get Botox, right before nationals, obviously! [laughter]

And I had nightmares. The day after I got it I had these nightmares that people were cutting open my face and putting weights and magnets inside of my face. For the first week that you get it, when you touch the area, you can kind of feel it... move around. And I hated it and it was horrendous and it made me feel physically ill to have this toxin inside of my body. But then at the exact same time, I'd be like, 'oh maybe I should get this line done as well. Maybe I should go back. Do you like it?' So toxic and dangerous.

Katie

That's so interesting, I think when you think about someone doing a project like this from a critical perspective, you imagine that they maintain that. But of course, you're just a human. And once you are engaging with all of this stuff, of course, it's going to get in your head and of course, it's going to affect your perception.

Georgia

Yeah. And I was really scared towards the end of the project. I was really worried about whether I had done irreparable damage to my psyche. I was like, 'Am I going to be able to stop doing these things? Am I going to be able to stop caring about my clothes and makeup? Have I forever altered my relationship with my own image?' And there are things that still aren't back to the way that they were before and may never go back to the way that they were before. For example, I eat really quickly now and I was a notoriously slow eater before the pageant performance. I used to drive all of my ex's crazy. And now I eat at the speed of light. And there's something deep down inside me where my brain is like 'Fucking eat bitch! She's letting you eat! Do it quickly before she realises! Get in, get out.' [laughter]

- Juliette** Can I ask a couple of questions? With that performance, did you go in cold and they assumed you were just a regular contestant? Did you do it in a parallel manner or were you in actual pageants? How far did you get or did they ban you? And also, does this make you also somewhat respect the other girls? Because this is also what they must be going through?
- Georgia** Yes, I was competing in actual beauty pageants. I was upfront. I didn't lie about my name or my career. I told them that I was an artist. I did lie about my age because I am too old to compete in beauty pageants. But, it's this thing where I said, 'my name's Georgia Banks. I'm an artist. I have an MFA.' I guess for them it's like, yeah, of course, you have an MFA and you want to be a beauty queen because who doesn't want to be a beauty queen? You know, I was really nervous about being dishonest about my age, but they never asked to see... you know, I was ready to doctor fucking birth certificates, and they never cared. They never asked.
- Katie** I guess if they still perceive you to be beautiful, then they assume that you must be within the age bracket.
- Georgia** Yeah as long as you look that age, that's all that really matters. I'm sure if you won and then that came out then yeah there would be some controversy. I did quite well. I won Miss Social Impact, which means that I posted about the pageant the most on social media.
- Katie** Oh my gosh, those posts! I remember seeing your Instagram for the first time during this pageant. And I was like, what is going on here?
- Georgia** Yes. Yeah, I had good friends reaching out to me and being like, 'Georgia is this an artwork? Are you? Is this real? Are you okay?'
- Katie** Because some of them were typed about mental health and stuff. So it was like this weird confessional imperfection, but always still to do with superficiality and 'looking how you feel' or whatever.
- Georgia** Yeah, so when I did the colonic post, I was talking about how I'd always had anxiety, which had given me 'tummy troubles'. And the colonic made me feel on the inside... Something something. But that's a very specific way in which women are allowed to post about something like that. This facade that we put up, you see when people do those sponsored posts, there is this sort of game and this tension of, these are the reasons that it's OK to post about something.
- Katie** Yeah, like mental health is OK to post about if you're also promoting your product.

- Georgia** Yeah. Or promoting a product is OK if you're pretending it's for the good of somebody's mental health.
- Katie** I think Juliette was asking earlier how you felt about the other contestants, after having been so involved in the process that they are dedicating their time to.
- Georgia** Yeah, I mean, I have nothing bad to say about any of the people that I did pageantry with. I think it's really shitty that we exist in a world where these people think that the most effective way to have a public platform is to look a certain way. That's what these people are being told all the time from the day that they're born. And then there are people who do the things that I did, all of their lives. I complain about how hungry I was and how tired I was and how dizzy I felt and how obsessed I became with my appearance. And I only did it for a year. And I talk about it like I went to war or something, you know, I'm so traumatized!
- Katie** Georgia, I also wanted to ask you about how you were received by the art world during the time that you were doing the performance because you were, on a daily basis... you had a very different aesthetic. And how was that aesthetic received when you were going to openings and whatnot?
- Georgia** Yeah, well, yeah, because this performance, it didn't just happen in my own mind and bedroom. I took it out into the real world every day for a year, as well. So, the way I got perceived in the world changed. And yeah, the way that I was perceived in the art world changed. It was another part of the project that I didn't really quite anticipate. It was almost like a flip because I went from wearing one shirt for a year that said 'Feminist' into this pageant performance. So that was two quite extreme versions of this sort of social experiment. And so, I would walk down the street and I would have people chasing me down to talk to me. People always wanted to talk to me on public transport. I got asked out on trams so much. It was horrendous, made me feel really uncomfortable. I would order coffees in cafes and people would give me cake, which I couldn't eat! [laughter]

And so all of a sudden I had all of these people assuming that I wanted their attention, that I was welcoming it, that I was inviting it. Men would try to talk to me in public all the time, all of a sudden. Which was not something that had happened to me a great deal for the year previous because I'd been wearing a dirty shirt that said Feminist for a whole year. [laughter] But then in the art world, it was the reverse. And I started thinking a lot about signalling and the ways that we signal with our appearance. Every community, every subculture has its own rules. I was sort of critiquing the

rules that mainstream society has on feminine beauty. I quickly learned that the art world has its own rules on how women should look. And it was not how I looked, that is for sure. Yeah, I would go to openings and it was pretty hostile. I lost a lot of my feminist art colleagues on Instagram. A lot of them unfollowed me. I got asked if I was lost once at an opening.

- Katie** I remember seeing you at an opening. I think it was the first time I'd seen you since you'd been doing the performance. And it was this shock, it was just this sense of someone being so out of place. But I think it's important to acknowledge that the art world requires a degree of conformity that the pageant also requires.
- Georgia** Yeah, yeah. It made me really confront my own prejudices because I thought, how would I react if I saw somebody that looks like me at an opening? And I probably would have been confused as well, and I wouldn't have assumed that they had a whole lot to contribute. Or that there would have been much of a point in me engaging with that person. And that's basically how I got treated in the art world for the better part of a year. It was pretty intense. It was pretty lonely.
- Juliette** I can imagine that. I think that's one of the things... I adore art, I adore creativity, but I've also feared – I mean the art world is very cruel and there's a conformity there. So, I think it's interesting that this project and the sort of reactions to people seeing you in this new persona, I think brings us back to the whole concept of paradigms, curating, selection; what is communicated? What we validate, what we don't validate. It's extraordinarily relevant.
- Katie** So Juliette, you've been involved with WAR for over three decades. Could you talk about how the archive has changed or evolved during this time and identify any challenges or shifts that are currently occurring?
- Juliette** I suppose it's gone through a number of phases. The very early phases were just, it was a contemporary collection. People donated slides to build the collection. Then two women, Anna Sande and Bonita Ely, received funding from the Schools Commission to then start adding a historical dimension to the Register, to actually proactively go into archives, into galleries, into libraries; and research both images and information about women artists. They were also responsible for the 'Profile of Australian Sculptors', which was a smaller version of that project, which was created in response to the lack of representation of women in the Mildura Sculpture Triennials, which were massive, massive key contemporary art expression, but very much a white, macho dick-fest too. That's where Ivan Durrant was quite famous, at those events. Adding that historical basis, that was the first chance of the

Register, and also one of its more distinctive factors, is that it began to collect historically, not just contemporary practice.

Katie I think those education kits seemed like a really important thing that the Register did, cause those went out to schools and whatnot?

Juliette That's right. And out of that, we moved from a gallery context to a library context; the material collected could be used as curriculum augmentation and curriculum enhancement. Slide kits and documentation we sent out via the library, to schools, to organisations, to universities, art schools, colleges across Australia and to other places as well. To community groups where you could use the slides to educate, to lecture communities.

Katie I mean these are the grassroots things about the way that the Register functions, that I think are really exciting, and can make real tangible change.

Juliette I mean, the Countess Project is now talking to education departments. But we – not me personally, but WAR, even in the 70s and 80s – were already engaged with ministries of education, particularly young feminist women, or young and old feminist women, based within those structures who were trying to change the curriculum. And that, of course, led to 'Can't See for Lookin', the first interaction with the Indigenous community. And it was a very important project because at the time when it was happening, while there were lots of, shall we say, urban Indigenous women artists, they were hardly looked at. It was assumed that the correct Indigenous female artist was Central Desert, older woman, based in northern South Australia or in the Northern Territory, way out. The extraordinary thing about 'Can't See for Lookin' was that it highlighted this very different group of women artists who were no less indigenous in their heritage but didn't conform to the market and the white market's expectation of what artists were.

To sort of backpedal a little bit, too, another way that images came into the Register – until say, the early/mid-eighties, we used to get funding from the Australia Council. We could actually fund a photographer to go out and 'document' exhibitions with, of course, the permission of the artist. And so we were proactively capturing, doing sort of like a core sampling, a time capsule of what was happening in contemporary art. I suppose the next challenge is, of course, now that everything's now moving, the huge amount of paper ephemera produced by the art world is gradually reducing. People are tending to send out e-catalogues, e-invitations, e-newsletters, so there's a lot of information there. But it's going into our inbox. As with other institutions, how do we capture all this? Do we have some vast server that...

- Katie** And archiving things digitally can be more complicated than analog in a lot of ways?
- Juliette** Exactly. You've got attrition in the archive materials, you've got attrition in the platform. There's going to be a time, when the platforms change so much, incrementally, that you're going to find, there's going to be data that's not going to be accessible. Someone said that most of the data around the Apollo moonwalks are not readable by computers now. Rather than digital making it easier for us to keep things, it's created a new set of problems. And this isn't a WAR problem. This is a whole GLAM – galleries, libraries, art museums – sector issue, and we're still not dealing with it.
- Katie** I'll pedal back slightly just to the discussions of funding, that WAR had over various different periods because I think the way things are looking is that funding is going to get harder and harder for the next while. We have a conservative government in and a recession happening. So I wanted to ask you both what has been sustaining you during the pandemic and also if you have any ideas of how we might sustain creative communities in the difficult years to come?
- Georgia** I mean, it's going to be fucked, isn't it? I mean, everyone's had their own struggles during COVID. I feel like I'm living in a constant, cheap vodka flashback with all the hand sanitiser going around. My mental health's been shocking, I'm sure lots of other peoples' has been as well. Financially, everybody's going to be suffering. We're looking at, as you've already said, an extremely conservative government that is becoming more conservative due to COVID. You know, I was commissioned to make a work for a public art project and the work that I made got rejected. And one of the things that they said to me specifically was, 'We were anticipating a higher level of complaint because people are in lockdown.' So this is where the government's coming from. This is how people are thinking. I guess, you know, getting together as a group and working out how to hold institutions accountable for stuff like this. And making sure that, you know when there is a lack of money, there is always the temptation to not rock the boat because we all need to eat. And I suppose finding a way that we can support each other, to hold up a mirror to this kind of stuff and continue to critique it and continue to shine a light on it, rather than us having to play a particular type of game in order to pay our rent. But you know, that's all pretty idealistic, and unrealistic.
- Katie** Yeah, I dunno, I guess we have to try. There's also, spaces are gonna open up from COVID – physical spaces and other kinds of spaces. And I think holding institutions to account is really important, but also building things within the gaps that have come.

- Juliette** In some ways, I think it affirms the importance of WAR because it affirms the need for artists to create their own support. And the importance of grassroots support. And I think we're going to have to rely a lot more upon this sort of 'Samizdat', sort of self-created institutions and self-created forms of validation. None of this could be possible without digitization. The whole idea – I'm fascinated by low entry, high impact art forms. So much of university funding goes up to the upper management, little of it goes down to the students and little of it goes down to the junior staff, the sessional staff, most of whom are women.
- Georgia** I think everyone should stop going to art school. I think that there's no reason for art and academia to be so interconnected. I don't know why people think a PhD makes somebody a better-qualified artist. I don't know why we're making all the artists in Australia learn how to write a citation in Chicago 15 style. It's never helped me as an artist.
- Katie** I mean, I love research, but I think doing...
- Georgia** Me too, my whole project performance was research, but I don't want to go write a fucking thesis about it, you know?
- Katie** I mean, I even enjoy the writing aspect but I also think doing a PhD in art, sometimes it works out, but a lot of the time it kind of kills the person's practise because it's...
- Georgia** Yeah and it is gatekeeping, as well. Deciding what is or isn't an appropriate form of information, where you can get your information from.
- Katie** And a lot of people just do it because it's one way to get some money.
- Georgia** And it's one of the main ways to sustain a career as an artist now as well. It's almost like you have to have a PhD if you want to get even sessional teaching work, you have to have a PhD. But these things are utopian again, it would be impossible to get everybody across Australia to all agree to stop going to art school and just be artists.
- Katie** Thanks so much for your time today. It was really great to get to chat to both of you and hopefully see you on the other side of the pandemic.
- Georgia** Thank you both so much, thank you Katie for organising it.

This project has been supported by the City of Yarra. Thanks to Andrew Bennett for the music and sound production on these episodes. You can find a full pdf transcript and relevant links on the 'It Comes in Waves' page on the Women's Art Register website. Thank you for listening.

Links

<https://www.georgiabanks.info>

Georgia's show 'On Parr' at KINGS Artist Run:

<https://www.kingsartistrun.org.au/program/on-parr/>

Erica McGilchrist talk by Linda Short:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5Qgun6oME0>

Mary Kelly's 'Post-Partum Document':

<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-1010/conceptual-and-performance-art/conceptual-performance/a/mary-kelly-post-partum-document>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kelly-post-partum-document-documentation-iii-analysed-markings-and-diary-perspective-t03925>