

# Play

BROWN COUNCIL

HIT&MISS

RACHEL FEERY + LISA STEWART

TIMOTHY P KERR

JANE KORMAN

ALANNA + MATTHEW LORENZON

RIKI-METISSE MARLOW

MS&MR

HANNAH RAISIN

SAFARI TEAM

SAM SMITH

LACHLAN TETLOW-STUART

MICHAEL VALE

JEMIMA WYMAN

## **How many feminists does it take to change a light bulb? Humour and 'play' in contemporary feminist performance**

LAURA CASTAGNINI

One night while writing this piece, I asked some friends to help me come up with 'a feminist joke' for the title. The responses ranged from: 'Q. What do you call a blonde who flies a plane? A. A pilot, you misogynist!' to the less positive: 'Third-wave feminism is funny enough in itself... no jokes required.' However, the most popular suggestion of the evening was: 'Q. How many feminists does it take to change a light bulb? A. That's not funny!' While the joke initially made me giggle, it also caused me to reflect upon the widespread belief that feminists are, indeed, not funny. Since the women's rights movement reared its head in the late 1960s, feminism, and in turn feminist art, continues to be understood as dull and authoritative. Spurred by the political urgency of the times, feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s used an authoritative voice to attack gender stereotypes and rectify the objectification and neglect of women throughout art history. Certainly much feminist art of this period is now considered aggressive, direct and confronting. **||** However, four of the videos presented in *Play* suggest contemporary feminist artists are now less concerned with imposing their views and more interested in 'playing' with gender, often exaggerating and staging femininity to highlight feminist concerns. In contrast to the targeted and serious nature of earlier movements, these works by Hannah Raisin, Jemima Wyman, Hit&Miss and Brown Council utilise humour and light-hearted experimentation to forward a feminist discourse. **||** Hannah Raisin, for example, presents herself in *Sugar Sweet* (2009–10) as a swimsuit-clad beauty frolicking in a clam, the ocean lapping quietly at her feet. It could be an image taken straight from a Botticelli painting. However, Raisin's clam is a blue kiddie pool, her swimsuit is made from fruit loops, and she splashes herself with cheap UHT milk. Her obliviousness to the

resulting soggy fruit loops only exaggerates her mockery of feminine stereotypes. *Sugar Sweet* echoes the parody of objectification presented in early work by the other beautiful Hannah (Wilke), who would affix vagina-shaped chewing gum to her naked body, or perform a striptease in front of Duchamp's *Large Glass*. This work, in which Wilke's beauty played a prominent role, provoked charges of narcissism; the artist was criticised for confusing 'her roles as beautiful woman and artist.'<sup>1</sup> Raisin's frolicking, on the other hand, could never be taken for narcissism. While Raisin draws attention to issues similar to those raised by Wilke, she pushes her parody to extremes of silliness; *Sugar Sweet* delivers the same feminist message but also makes the viewer laugh. ■ More subtle in both its humour and its feminist politic is Jemima Wyman's disorienting explosion of colour, *Trilogy* (2001). The main screen of Wyman's video collage begins with a woman (we presume the artist) stumbling blindly through a child's playroom with her head covered in tight fabric. Cutting and changing abruptly, the video captures several costume changes (including a large blue canvas and a pink-coloured sack), before suddenly cutting to a close-up of a woman's face distorted by simple Apple Mac software. Two small boxes that have been inserted into the main screen simultaneously present seemingly random imagery, including a close-up of the toys and a boy interpreting sign language. Wyman's use of 'colour, fast motion, humour and dizzying video effects'<sup>2</sup> creates a frenetic energy which is embodied for the viewer. The work therefore allows the viewer to empathise with the subject; it is a phenomenological embodiment of feminist concerns. ■ Spectatorial anxiety is also presented in *Killing Two Birds* (2004), a humorous one-liner with darker undertones by Melbourne collective Hit&Miss (Tai Snaith and Narinda Reeders). The video documentation of their work, first performed at Yarra Sculpture Gallery, depicts the duo playing dead inside a white Volkswagen Beetle with a red tube running from the exhaust pipe into the vehicle. Dressed in bridal dresses, wearing red lipstick and clutching white iPods, the artists perform a tableaux using only their signature red and white colours. We see audience members, both perplexed and amused, peer inside the car. About halfway through, one man, laughing, summarises the viewing experience: 'You might start to think they're really dead!' Indeed, this statement forms the underlying darkness in the piece: what if they are 'really dead'? Would *you*, a respected citizen / educated art audience member / concerned viewer, call the police or stop the performance? Exploration of such spectatorial anxiety dates back to pieces such as *Lips of Thomas* (1973), in which Marina Abramović, after cutting and whipping herself, resolved to lie naked

upon an ice cross until an audience member interrupted the piece by removing the ice blocks from underneath. In comparison, *Killing Two Birds* seems quite tame; Hit&Miss put themselves at a risk no more serious than a parking fine, yet they do so with a humour that is unprecedented in early feminist performance. **II** Of the *Play* collection, Brown Council's video *Runaway* (2008) perhaps best epitomises the playfulness and irony prevalent in contemporary feminist practice. Filmed against a black backdrop, a female figure (played by all four artists interchangeably) runs towards the camera in slow motion. The dramatic soundtrack builds tension, as lights flash onto her face and body until suddenly she is squirted with (very fake) blood and climactically rips off her singlet. Exposed underneath is a caricature of the glistening body we expect to see in such Hollywood scenes: a tan-coloured t-shirt with big breasts drawn in black marker. Brown Council's attack upon stereotypical images of women in the media is a typical practice in earlier feminist art, particularly of the 1980s. However, their appropriation does not contain the didacticism found in earlier feminist art. *Runaway's* emotive theatricality drips with sarcasm and, like Raisin's *Sugar Sweet*, its earnestness is too exaggerated to take seriously. **II** Brown Council and Hannah Raisin's artworks in *Play* mock stereotypical imagery of women in the media while resisting the authority of earlier feminisms. Presented alongside *Killing Two Birds* by Hit&Miss and *Trilogy* by Jemima Wyman, *Sugar Sweet* and *Runaway* offer a contemporary feminism which draws the viewer into performance through laughter and playfulness rather than direct politics. It is possible this technique is a conscious decision made by contemporary artists to avoid the singular label 'feminist art' — a term which many believe excludes all other subject matter. It is also possible this trend exemplifies the marginal position that women's rights hold in the larger sphere of contemporary politics. Certainly, it proves that the landscape of feminist art is shifting and changing along the tides of postmodernism towards something more ironic and self-referential. Most importantly, however, it proves that stupid joke wrong. Feminism *can* be funny.

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Q. *Why did the feminist cross the road?*

A. *To get away from you, arsehole!*

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1 LR Lippard, *From the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1976, pp. 126.

2 Jemima Wyman, Artist Statement, 2001.

# Short play.

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