

Day + Gluckman introduction. Ambitions and research questions for A Woman's Place

"Women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics."
Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Welcome and thanks for coming. Firstly to say a huge thank you to The Arts Council, the National Trust and Bexley Heritage Trust for supporting and funding the research for A Woman's Place. Thanks to Nicola Coleby and her team at the Royal Pavilion for all of their support, also to all of the speakers for contributing to the symposium and to Kerri Jefferis who has been in the background keeping our heads together over the past month or so...

Lucy and I are feminists and we advocate equal rights across gender. We are interested in the lives of women historically and of the inequalities still found in our society today. We are also contemporary art curators and we work with and spend a lot of time talking to artists and about arts practice. In a Woman's Place project we are looking to mash this up and we thought we'd start with a quote from the end of the book written by Ruth Adam in 1975 that inspired this project:

The demand for women to change their colour, like chameleons, to fit the background of their period, was one of the penalties of the speed at which their emancipation had been accomplished. Major changes in their state had taken place within the span of each generation, so that every twentieth century mother, in turn, was amazed at the difference between her daughters life and her own.

A woman born at the turn of the century could have lived through two periods when it was her moral duty to devote herself, obsessively, to her children; three when it was her duty to society to neglect them; two when it was right to be seductively feminine and three when it was a pressing social obligation to be the reverse; three separate periods in which she was a bad wife, mother and citizen, for wanting to go out and earn her own living, and three others when she was an even worse wife, mother and citizen for not being eager to do so.

Ruth Adam, A Woman's Place 1910-75

As curators we are used to presenting contemporary art within the spaces of heritage buildings. We understand the weight of historical residue to a site and the force with which it can collide with contemporary thought. In 2012 we presented a four-venue contemporary art project and worked with the National Trust. The project, *Sinopticon*, dealt with the style or term *chinoiserie* and presented its own concerns, explored through works sited across Plymouth's City Museum and Art Gallery, Plymouth Arts Centre, the Art College gallery and National Trust's Saltram House. With *Chinoiserie*, a historical style that literally means *chinese-esque*, you can be lyrical – you can indulge fantasy, explore notions of excess whilst elegantly referencing social and political history, trade and issues of identity. There is an aesthetic that lingers in the work and it's a seductive one.

With A Woman's Place we are tackling a different subject; the position of women in society. The core ideal of female equality from which this project is propelled and the diverse and complex ramifications of the word 'feminism' are really underpinned with some key facts and stats. Comedian, Bridget Christie, presented the award winning show 'A Bic for Her' in 2013 at the Edinburgh festival, working through nearly an hour of hysterical material only to pause, stop smiling and repeat the statistics that always make us gasp. Something like this:

- About 44 per cent of all UK women have experienced either physical or sexual violence since they were 15-years-old. Britain ranks among the worst countries in Europe when it comes to women being violently abused.
- On average, 30% of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical or sexual violence by their partner.
- In the UK, the gender pay gap stands at 15%, with women on average earning £5,000 less a year than their male colleagues. The disparity is even greater in part time jobs, going up to 35 per cent.
- In 10 countries around the world women are legally bound to obey their husbands
- Only 76 countries have legislation that specifically addresses domestic violence – and just 57 of them include sexual abuse.
(source: The Independent, March 2014)

Interestingly some of the most popular campaigns of the current 4th wave of feminism, propelled by social media, are concerned, not with these larger statistics but with the everyday sexism that is entrenched in our visual culture and advertising from selling salad – look at women laughing at salads website – to the gendering of kids toys and all their possessions; also the normalising of porn and sexual imagery... the reaction manifests in campaigns such as 'everyday sexism' and 'no more page three'.

So how do you commission works from artists, from such a black and white starting point. The nuance, the exploration, the very creative process seems at odds with the aching urgency that such figures evoke.

Having been in early meetings around a project about art and the environment we encountered similar problems. Those artists who tend to make statement works or even embrace a label 'environmental art' are already outside of the established contemporary art arena, often activists, and their urgency and focus can translate in to action that lacks the space for thought; uncomfortable to some it is translated as a kind of extremism or simply labelled, horror of horrors, 'bad art'. Works that provoke this response shut down conversation and the space in which a work of art can be at its most enigmatic and profound. The label 'feminist artist' often provokes similar reactions. An interrogation of this reveals a complex web of denial and counter-denial, which seems to render any such term defunct. But as a feminist, which seems to be the rational position, and a curator or artist how do we hold our beliefs dear whilst negotiating the production or exhibiting of contemporary art?

now I don't know about you but feminism and subtlety have never seemed very happy bedfellows to us!

And to really complicate things Lucy and I have added the historic angle to this project. How also do we articulate the project and provoke thought in an audience who have signed up to be transported back in time at a heritage site? How do we make works relevant when presented alongside a carefully constructed, often chronological visitor route (and to an audience which may prefer to buy in to Downton Abbey's bizarre representation of a rose-tinted benevolent class system?). It is not enough to simply dress a house with beautiful works; we need to dig a little deeper.

The historic resonance of any place will inevitably be seeped in women's inequality, of this we can be sure! We have all encountered the histories of a woman, mother or grandmother, great –grandmother , an aunt or even sister unable to go on to secondary education let alone higher education, because of status or economics, race or sexuality..

....and so it was a shock to hear the female BBC radio producer in charge of Bridget Christie's Mind the Gap series describe feminism as 'zeitgeisty' in 2013; as if it were another passing fad. But we are old enough to know it is probably true.... that it probably is 'Zeitgeisty' in respect to arts programming and funding but, nonetheless, we shall continue our march forward with this so-called 'timely' project, A Woman's Place.

We are very conscious that there are many, many issues to unravel in the complex world that is feminism, many of which will come up in today's discussions. We also know that there are many other forums and platforms currently operating that provide more in depth discussion than we are likely to be able to cover with enough critical analysis today.

Questions such as:

Why are women artists still so massively underrepresented in the art world despite the huge ratio of women to men graduating and despite the increasing number of women now in senior positions?

Why does the percentage of black women and women of colour starting out and successfully practicing as artists continue to be such tiny percentage of the art world ?

Why are issues of personal sexuality still barriers to progression?

What practical, sustainable measures can keep a female artist participating in the art world, taking on residencies, or simply producing work through the perceived barriers of being a parent or carer?

How are these being addressed and how can we actively participate? – maybe we should be redefining our terms of engagement?

These are BIG questions . In our follow-up proposal to this research and the project proper, we hope to have an arm of the project to look at them in depth. In the meantime , and as part of the on-going research and action, we would like to hear from you and will be putting a series of questions on our facebook page over the next few weeks to gather your responses.

What we'd like to look at today is the mixture of heritage, feminism and contemporary art and our over arching questions are...

How can we develop an audience that will actively engage with contemporary art AND heritage AND female equality? What's the narrative?

How can we successfully communicate these sometimes conflicting concerns?

What is it to be labelled a feminist artist and why does it matter?

What might the art world and the heritage sector look like in ten years time and how can women artists ensure a place at the table ? Is it a 'table' that we/they want to be aspiring to? Is there a woman's place?

#awomansplaceproject

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