

Raunch, Feminism and Design

Niki Kalms

499 Abbotsford Street

North Melbourne 3051

nicole.kalms@rmit.edu.au

School of Architecture and Design

RMIT University

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Abstract

A confusing trend has developed whereby through a desire to emancipate the female body and its diverse modes of sexual expression, women have come perilously close to returning their bodies to the status of mere objects of desire. What is known as 'raunch culture', in which it is considered daring to foreground women's sexuality, quickly threatens to re-objectify the woman's body, and make nothing further of her powers than her sex. An architectural exemplar might be the uninhabitable, laser-cut perspex folly within which is trapped a go-go dancing figure, designed by Cassandra Fahey of Cassandra Complex for the 2005 *Pavilions for New Architecture* show hosted by the Monash University Museum of Art (September 1 – 29 October, 2005). How are we to read the sexy, gyrating body trapped and inaccessible in this glass-like enclosure? Similar ambiguities are much more readily available in the visual arts, where at the same time women practitioners appear more daring to explore the issues – for instance Tracey Moffat's video vignettes *Love*, which explore Hollywood desire, and Patricia Piccinini's *Big Mother* where a not human/not animal breastfeeds a human baby (both works were part of *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum). But why this focus on sex to define what woman can be or can do? Clearly this work is edgy, if not controversial. What does this work contribute to architecture and art-based research and feminism? And, further more, how can these ambiguous exemplars act as precedent for design research and teaching?

Conference theme: Gender

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Introduction

It is difficult to be a feminist nowadays. It is often referred to as a thing of the past and to many, feminism (let alone the coupling of *architecture* and feminism) may appear obsolete given the current socio-political juncture. Feminism is represented as a defunct double act in an era which has surely transcended the necessity to highlight 'women's issues' whether it is equality of pay or political representation and expression. Now we find, in the mixing pot of *the feminisms*, a recent and confusing trend. Through a desire to emancipate the female body and its diverse modes of sexual expression, women have come perilously close to returning their bodies to the status of mere objects of desire. What is known as 'Raunch Culture' - in which it is considered daring to foreground women's sexuality- quickly threatens to re-objectify the woman's body, and make nothing further of her powers than her sex.¹

This paper is interested in exploring two representations of space which evoke a feminist architecture. Both Priscilla Monge's and Cassandra Fahey's selected works are operating at the edges of both art and architecture. Monge approaches architecture from an artist's point of view with her work 'Room for Isolation and Restraint', 2000 (featured in the *Global Feminism* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum) and Fahey approaches art from the position of architect with her work 'Crowning Glory', 2005 (developed for the Monash University Museum of Art's *Pavilions for a New Architecture*). Both produce a pavilion (or folly or Marquette) which creates trajectories directly and indirectly to a typologically feminist architecture. Both these projects, from diametrically opposed directions, put forward different positions for a feminist pavilion as they consider space as a 'form of critical enquiry, research and formal experimentation'².

The Pavilion as a motif for exploration

The use of a Pavilion as a site for exploration and experimentation has a long tradition in Architecture and is an enduring motif in both practice and discourse. As the Artistic Director of Monash University Museum of Art, Max Delany states, there is an idea

about architecture as an exhibit as well as a mechanism for exhibition. From the Modern Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe to Dan Graham's conceptualised folly's which explore perception and exposure- the Pavilion is always 'both object and event'³.

My own research and practice is concerned with how to make legible feminist spaces (so few and far between) and how to develop a feminist language which can begin to harness the complexity of the feminist project today and offer insight into feminism's place in the world of design. This paper, therefore, addresses how contemporary examples of diverse spatial practices may act as precedent in design discourse, teaching and research and then returns these findings to my own reflective practice via project based research.

Feminism as a project forwards both socio-political issues as well as intellectual or cultural projects. The plurality of feminism can be historically traced, at least from the French revolutionary period onward, and make feminism seem a cacophonous area of practice and research. It must also be remembered that feminism is not necessarily just for women. And, also, that despite the insistence of the arrangement of it into 'waves' of action, Karen Burns (Monash University) recently pointed out at the RMIT Architecture and Feminism Roundtable that we have to be wary of framing these distinct periods as we risk forgetting the ongoing, if quiet, efforts of women and others to have their voices heard⁴. It is as important to recognise the continuities as well as the ruptures in the threads that constitute feminist histories. And PS- Lets not forget how far we haven't come.⁵

Monica Dux and Zora Simic nicely frame the contemporary dilemma of feminism when they state that their feminism is 'an umbrella term for a political, cultural and social philosophy that aims to eradicate sexism', they go on to say that 'by contrast, contemporary faux-feminism critics simply sniff out the symptoms of women's lives in crisis and then blame feminism.'⁶

Background

There has recently been a flux of events emerging out of the political woodwork which suggests that the feminist project is as continuous as ever.⁷ *Global Feminisms* (the Brooklyn Museum), *Feminism Never Happened* (Gertrude Contemporary Art

Space) and *Architecture and Feminism Roundtable* (RMIT University) gather together a broad selection of ideas from artists, architects and critical thinkers who are grappling with feminist issues (predominantly from the 1990's to the present day). These events are forums focussed solely on seeking out difference and ambiguity across the actioning of feminism.

In literary circles two books have been recently published with important clues to the current climate of feminism. *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* by Ariel Levy and *Princesses and Pornstars- Sex, Power, Identity*, by Emily Maguire both draw out the dilemma of Raunch Culture and Celebrity. Both suggest that Raunch Culture is failing women. There is a sense of forgetting recent feminist history, of laughing when the joke is on us. In *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, Levy argues that there is an increasing, almost prolific, engagement with notions of celebrity and sexuality and marked confusion about power emerging from sexual objectification and provocation. Advocates of Raunch cite it as evidence that the feminist project is achieved- that they have earned their place amongst the playboy bunnies. Levy argues that this is a poor surrogate for female empowerment.

Raunch Culture as a phenomenon is often shrouded in the contemporary feminist landscape by those who adhere to its mantra ('You could learn a thing or two off a stripper, sister')⁸. Raunch Culture rides a wave intent on claiming a new feminism where female 'uptightness' is obsolete, where there is a 'celebration' of one's sexuality. Ariel Levy in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs* says that the 'Raunch Woman' is 'post-feminist. She is funny. She gets it. She doesn't mind cartoonish stereotypes of female sexuality and she doesn't mind cartoonish macho responses to them. Why beat them when you can join them?'⁹ One has to ask: Is Raunch Culture *really* a signal for the end of Feminism? Are the so-called waves of feminism now to be in the historic past?

The rubric seems to pitch academic feminism in direct contrast to the sexually expressive and ambiguous methods espoused by Raunch Culture (which seems to fold back on itself in a performative spiral-down-the-go-go pole). Where Raunch is an emergent cultural phenomenon which positions itself in the centre of social relations, these recent exhibitions, forums and critiques seem to be fighting the ongoing feminist struggle for *any* presence of their otherness- in the margins or otherwise.

Speculative Project 1

The work of Melbourne architect Cassandra Fahey (Cassandra Complex) is situated on some sort of edge. As a prominent female architect it is arguable that Fahey uses aspects of Raunch and Celebrity culture to procure and enact her controversial architectures, and indeed, at times, herself. Several recent works focus on the iconic representation of women and implicate Fahey in a feminist discourse. The projects cited here contain elements of celebrity, aestheticism and popular culture and comment ambiguously on women's representation in the public realm.

Pavilions for New Architecture held by Monash University Museum of Art (September 1 – 29 October, 2005) gathered together a group of emergent architects to test the spatial problematic of the contemporary pavilion via 'small version' models. The works aimed to challenge traditional architectural language and thus speculate about the future of architecture. In this way, the exhibition is research based. For this exhibition Fahey produced an uninhabitable, laser-cut perspex folly entitled *Crowning Glory* which traps a go-go dancing figure. The two-dimensional image is repeated and arrayed to form a three-dimensional aura of the pole-dancer. How are we to read the sexy, gyrating body trapped and inaccessible in this glass-like enclosure? The (il)legibility of the 'pavilion' is problematic.

Pole-dancing has been critiqued in both the academic world and mass media as an emergent recreational activity. Classes at local gyms and pole dancing equipment aimed at tweenies indicate its mainstream-ness. There is a dialogue, here, between the pole as a serious workplace apparatus and the pole as a trivial exhibitionism which confuses sexual exhibitionism with empowerment. Exactly which pole dancer Fahey is referring to is unclear? Regardless of who is on the pole there is arguably an implication of a male gaze for whom the act is performed and whose associated power is played with.

The series of cross-sections of a dancing figure in suspended animation is quite literally what Levy might describe as 'cartoonish stereotypes of female sexuality'¹⁰. The generalised right-angled edges of the work and its iterative nature make it a representation of every pole dance and no pole dancer. It is sexy yet not sexual¹¹ and

in Levy's world this is the new language for the hip and powerful. This is a 'sexy' which is less about connection and more about consumption- with 'hotness' the new cultural currency¹².

Architect Norman Day reviews the exhibition¹³ and draws Fahey's Pole Dancer into dialogue with an earlier built work- the Newman House- suggesting that Fahey is in a *party mood*. In the exhibition catalogue the two projects are shown alongside each other and therefore bought into relationship by Fahey. The controversial house- a residence whose façade is a magnified two-dimensional image of Pamela Anderson's face- was famously commissioned by ex-footballer and bad-boy celebrity Sam Newman. Fahey argued that she wanted architecture to be 'opened up'¹⁴. She insists on architecture being 'taken out of its small world and brought into the public sphere'¹⁵. The language implies a kind of explicitness and a desire for recognition- both qualities which could also be claimed for Raunch Culture.

The media obliged and undeniably indulges Fahey's longing for Celebrity giving Pammy, Sammy and Cassy plenty of exposure (one article was titled 'More Bang for your Building'¹⁶).

Dux and Simic remind us that feminists have 'hardly been passive in their messy relationship with the media'¹⁷. In their recent book *The Great Feminist Denial* they discuss Germaine Greer's use of the media during the 70's and her reliance on her own sex appeal as a tactic that made her ideas accessible. And no doubt the media is a site for the politics of feminism (as is the art gallery or architecture, for that matter) and perhaps Fahey's project speaks of the post-feminist pop culture with fluid boundaries where the media, celebrities and fictitious heroines are the feminist stand-in for the old butch tropes?

Geraldine Barlow, in her catalogue essay, begins to unravel another puzzled trajectory for the piece hinting at its seduction. She lays out for us the male dominated world in which Fahey operates and draws us once more toward the Newman House as a way to unravel the mysteriously poled dancer. She goes on: 'Fahey revels in images of the sexualised female form, confusing any expectations of overt critique or political correctness. Her projects are marked by a sense of swirling and voluptuous delight in

form, texture and image. Within these spaces expectations are twisted, elaborate plays of ricochet and echo are created, the spectacular is caressed and purrs'¹⁸

Speculative Project 2

Costa Rican born Priscilla Monge (on the other hand) is interested in power- the timeless feminist trope- and its ordinary expression in the everyday world. In her work *Room for Isolation and Restraint* she plays with our expectations and is opportunistic with her palette of materials, which allows for reflection about social rules and expectations. We expect walls to be made of bricks, but how do we react if, in place of bricks, we find sanitary pads? Monge looks at the often harsh realities hidden beneath the surface of everyday life.

The work exploits a cliché of 'woman' and an overworked symbol of women-ness. The work is simply a 2-metre cubicle, upholstered with sanitary pads which are re-conceptualised from individual objects into a surface treatment. The room is an invitation to meditate on associations of women, madness, hysteria, dirtiness, and impurity. The repetition of the object/field takes on a precision which negates the (mis)conceptions of menstruation while the white pad is always with a chromatic potential towards blood-red. Monge seems to be offering a track between feminism and design through focusing on both conceptual and pragmatic practice. The materiality sets up a series of tensions between the poetic and political manifestations of feminism, dealing also with the relationship between form and content in art practice and architectural practice as well as, perhaps more subtly, beginning to unravel the complexity which lies between feminists and women and the feminine. In this work the architectural drawing is as vital as the finished piece because it describes the method between object and subject, and it is here where Monge's feminist space exists.

Monge draws upon the body as critical to a contemporary understanding of feminist thought- where the role of the body in social, political, cultural and sexual life has become more significant and valued in the last decade. This is an extension of works during the 1960's and 70's which advocated the reclaimed women's body and in doing so became a site for both art and politics.

Monge's position is readily available and leads me to wonder if the visual artist is better able to provide for a clearer reading of feminism's complexities than the architect. But why would this be so? Women art practitioners appear more daring to explore the issues – for instance Tracey Moffat's video vignettes *Love*, which explore Hollywood desire, and Patricia Piccinini's *Big Mother* where a not human/not animal breastfeeds a human baby (both works were part of Global Feminisms at the Brooklyn Museum). It is perhaps more professionally marginalising to work with such a critical aptitude in the architectural realm. But perhaps it is not so problematic if one wishes to be sexually provocative? It is the old chip on feminism's shoulder- Nobody wants to be the frump in the back of the room.¹⁹

Teaching at the Edge

As an architectural educator I am consistently working with precedent and methods which elaborate on a set of qualities or actions for architecture. Like most other cultural niches and their relationship to the public realm, Raunch Culture potentially impacts on the gendering of spaces in both public and private environments and therefore on the fabric of our cities through not only human relationships but the media of consumption and advertising.

An exploration of these current and equally contentious projects provide an opportunity to critique the everyday and at times, banal, inconsistencies of our gendered world. The selection of these two works bridge both feminism at the centre and at the margins of our cultural cringe. In doing so they can forcibly awaken and activate a deeper investment in how designers and artists mediate our world.

Endnotes

- ¹ This introduction is an excerpt from a collaborative article published in *Architecture Australia*, Vol 92, No.2, March/April, 2008, Arch Media.
- ² Max Delany, *Pavilions for New Architecture* held at Monash University Museum of Art (September 1 – 29 October, 2005), 5.
- ³ Max Delany, *Pavilions for New Architecture* held at Monash University Museum of Art (September 1 – 29 October, 2005), 5.
- ⁴ Kalms/Frichot, *Architecture Australia*, Vol 92, No.2, March/April, 2008, Arch Media
- ⁵ Ariel Levy *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, (Schwartz Publishing 2005), 76.
- ⁶ Monica Dux and Zore Simic *The Great Feminist Denial* (Melbourne University Press, 2008), 7.
- ⁷ "Global Feminisms" ran at [The Brooklyn Museum](#) through July 1, 2007, and "Pharaohs, Queens, and Goddesses" through September 16, in conjunction with the March opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. "Role Play: Feminist Art Revisited 1960-1980" ran at [Galerie Lelong](#) and Judy Chicago's preparatory work for "The Dinner Party" at [ACA Galleries](#), both through April 28. "The Feminine Mystique: Contemporary Artists Respond" ran at the [Jersey City Museum](#) through February 24, 2008.
- ⁸ Ariel Levy *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, (Schwartz Publishing 2005), 92
- ⁹ Ariel Levy *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, (Schwartz Publishing 2005), 93
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 93.
- ¹¹ As Paris Hilton has famously described herself
- ¹² "Sex appeal has become synecdoche for all appeal: People refer to a new restaurant or job as 'sexy' when they mean hip or powerful. Ariel Levy *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, (Schwartz Publishing 2005), 30.
- ¹³ *The Age*, 21 September, 2005.
- ¹⁴ *The Age*, April 22, 2006
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*.
- ¹⁶ Gabriella Coslovich, *The Age*, April 26, 2006.
- ¹⁷ Monica Dux and Zore Simic *The Great Feminist Denial*, (Melbourne University Press, 2008), 47.
- ¹⁸ Catalogue *Pavilions for New Architecture* held at Monash University Museum of Art (September 1 – 29 October, 2005), 46.
- ¹⁹ Ariel Levy *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, (Schwartz Publishing, 2005), 92.