



YES & NO:

THINGS

LEARN'T

ABOUT

FEMINISM

## Yes and No: Things Learnt About Feminism

~ A

The word-images on the fluorescent posters in Kelly Doley's exhibition *Yes & No: Things Learnt About Feminism* are traces from a series of exchanges the artist had with 16 people, two years ago. In 2012 she initiated a project called *The Learning Centre: Two Feminists* at West Space in Melbourne. Over three weeks, she invited 16 strangers to come and teach her about feminism, putting herself in a position of pupil and host. In return for the lessons, Doley painted portraits for each of her guest-teachers. Her recollections of the lessons – which are compiled online at [twofeminists.com](http://twofeminists.com) – indicate the breadth and eclecticism of the content that was covered. Topics include censorship and 'obscenity', vaginas, Julia Gillard (who was at that time PM) and misogyny, Christina Aguilera's lyrics, the politics of anonymity, the Guerrilla Girls, the (under-) representation of female artists in museums, mansplaining, Hélène Cixous, Heidi Fleiss, rape culture, victim blaming and the SlutWalk protest movement. And much more:

In Doley's recollections, many of her guests seek to revise and expand the scope of what feminism is or should be. Karen Green's lesson draws from the contents of her book *A History of Women's Political Thought in Europe, 1400–1700* (co-authored with Jacqueline Broad). The term 'first-wave feminism' refers to events in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, especially the struggles for women's suffrage – with Mary Wollstonecraft's late-18<sup>th</sup> century writing often cited as an important precursor. But Green emphasises histories of women's solidarity that date much further back. She reminds us, for example, of Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, where many women from former times (such as the Egyptian goddess Isis, the Greek poet Sappho, the Biblical figure of Mary Magdalene and medieval Christian saints) come together to build and inhabit a city / book that stands as testament to the virtues and achievements of women. This amazing text directly confronted the misogynistic culture of its time, and advocated women's rights to education. It was published, in France, *six hundred years ago*.

So we – as belated eavesdroppers on Doley's lessons – expand the historical scope that we are dealing with, because feminism evidently existed long before the word 'feminism' was coined. But we also need to acknowledge a broader cultural context, because this is so far still a Eurocentric narrative. A number of Doley's teachers remind us of this. Beth Muldoon, for instance, focuses her lesson on the under-documented history of the Australian Black Women's Action Group (BWA), who published the political monthly *Koori-Bina* for Redfern's Aboriginal community throughout the 1970s. While the women's liberation movement in Australia at this time remained overwhelmingly white and middle-class, the BWA maintained ties with the Black Power movement in the US, as well as the indigenous land rights movements of the day, and fought for liberation on their own terms.

When Odette Kelada comes to speak to Doley, she presents a feminism that necessarily challenges all naturalised hierarchies and inequalities, and therefore includes an intersectional critique of white racial privilege. She recommends Aileen Moreton-Robinson's book *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Aboriginal Women and Feminism*, as well as writing by Pat Parker, bell hooks and other African-American feminist authors and activists. Kelada also tells Doley about Peggy McIntosh's 1988 essay *White Privilege and Male Privilege*, in which she attempts to acknowledge the unearned and unrecognised advantages that she is granted as a white woman. A few examples from McIntosh's extensive list:

"When I am told about our national heritage or about 'civilization,' I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is," "I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection," "I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group," "I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race," "I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking," "I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me," and "I can choose blemish cover or bandages in 'flesh' colour and have them more or less match my skin."

White privilege is analogous with male privilege in McIntosh's analysis, in that those who have it do not have to look at it – and its invisibility allows it to be unconsciously perpetuated.

Introducing another perspective, Kate Rigby teaches Doley about ecofeminism – finding common ground between feminist and environmentalist movements. Here, parallels are drawn between the patriarchal oppression of women in families and society, and the human exploitation and degradation of the environment. A number of the poster paintings in Doley's exhibition carry feminist messages that remind us of the human abuse of other species: **PATRIARCHY IS ANTHROPARCHY**, says one – **COMBAT THE SAUSAGE FEST!** another exclaims; **GO VEGAN!** Referring to the work of Australian ecofeminist Val Plumwood, Rigby cautions that new membership within a dominant social group does not actually help to address structures of oppression. Rather than ensuring that some women have access to positions of power, the real challenge is in overcoming the conceptual binaries and ideological hierarchies that facilitate subordination in the first place.

There are more than 90 painted posters in this exhibition – with different colours and designs; different tones and modes of address; differences in impetus, ambition and viability. The messages are earnest / vague / poetic / urgent / naïve / ironic / controversial / poignant / clichéd – gleaned from many sources, and from the spaces in between them. They pay tribute to the image of the political placard, but they foreground the impossibility of reducing feminism to a series of slogans and catchphrases. The multiplicity of ideas and experiences here should remind us to not pin too much on any single icon-persona-messiah. When she initiated the *Two Feminists* project in 2012, Doley asked for a range of different voices, and each brought other voices along with them – they carried stacks of books to read passages from, passed on anecdotes, recommended blogs. Recall that at the turn of the fifteenth century, Christine de Pizan also drew on a range of seemingly incompatible contexts, bringing disparate figures together to build her anachronistic 'city of ladies.'

*Yes & No* is a portrait of feminism *as difference*; full of contradictions and at variance with itself, because part of itself is the knowledge that selves are only parts – always unfixed and unruly. The exhibition title presents a basic affront to logic; the affirmative-negative of the simultaneous *is + is not*. The first of the three 'laws of thought' in classical logic is the 'law of identity', which states that 'A is A and not ~A.' *Each thing is the same as itself and different from another* – this is a fundamental rule upon which rational discourse, since Aristotle, has established itself. But to make a difference, to *make difference* – in art or feminism or elsewhere – is to make *what is* out of *what is not* – and *what is not* out of *what is*. We need to draw on *illogical* premises here, where A is eventually ~A, and perhaps never was A. Or, as one of Doley's poster paintings announces: **A is neither B nor C and sometimes it's not A.**

### Amelia Groom

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Image: Kelly Doley *Yes and No: Things Learnt About Feminism*, 2014. Photo: Tara Shield.

Exhibition works: *Things Learnt About Feminism* #1- #95 ink on 220 gsm card, 50x65cm, 2014.

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