Identity and recognition in the collecting based practices of Elvis Richardson

by

Elvis Richardson
BFA, MA, MFA

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Deakin University
August 2018
I am the author of the thesis entitled

Identity and recognition in the collecting based practices of Elvis Richardson

submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

This thesis may be made available for consultation, loan and limited copying in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968.

'Ve certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided in the form is correct'

Full Name: ................Elvis Richardson..............................................................

(Please Print)

Signed: ............................................

Date: ...........16 January 2013..............................................................
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
CANDIDATE DECLARATION

I certify the following about the thesis entitled (10 word maximum)

Identity and recognition in the collecting based practices of Elvis Richardson

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

a. I am the creator of all or part of the whole work(s) (including content and layout) and that every work is made to the work of others, due acknowledgement is given.

b. The work(s) are not in any way a violation or infringement of any copyright, trademark, patent, or other right whatsoever of any person.

c. That if the work(s) have been commissioned, sponsored or supported by any organisation, I have fulfilled all of the obligations required by such contract or agreement.

d. That any material in the thesis which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by any university or institution is identified in the text.

e. All research integrity requirements have been complied with.

I certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided in the form is correct

Full Name: ___________________ELVIS RICHARDSON______________________________

[Please Print]

Signed: ______________________________________________________________

Date: ___________27 August 2018 ______________________________

Signature Redacted by Library
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank SHEILA, formerly the Cruthers Art Foundation for funding the research that produced The Countess Report (2016) which is a prior publication included as part of this submission. I would like to thank my supervisors Dr. Patrick West and Dr. Anne Wilson for providing their valuable time and feedback assisting me to write this exegesis. I would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Pulie who expertly edited the exegesis document. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement to keep going, particularly Mark Hislop for his understanding of my deep resistance to conformity.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Illustrations and Tables 2  
Abstract 3  
Introduction 4  
Chapter 1  
The Collector Set 10  
Adopted and Abducted 14  
Based on a True Story 16  
*Found Paints Lane Chippendale* 18  
What is art today might not be art tomorrow 21  
Chapter 2  
Re-collecting 23  
Not all art will go down in history 29  
Considering pattern 30  
Chapter 3  
*Slide Show Land* 32  
*Settlement* 42  
*CoUNTess: Women Count in the Art-world* 56  
Chapter 4  
My Brilliant Art School Career 67  
High School Reunion 68  
Career Choices 73  
Art and Class 78  
Conclusion 79  
Bibliography 84  
**Appendix 1** *Slide Show Land* List of Exhibitions 91  
**Appendix 2** *Settlement* List of Exhibitions 92  
**Appendix 3** *CoUNTess* Citations and media references 93
List of Illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist’s Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 1 Elvis Richardson</td>
<td><em>Found Paints Lane Chippendale</em></td>
<td>1998</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 2 Elvis Richardson</td>
<td><em>Slide Show Land: Dorothy and Jack</em></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 3 Elvis Richardson</td>
<td><em>Slide Show Land: Dorothy and Jack</em></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 4 Elvis Richardson</td>
<td><em>Slide Show Land: Dorothy and Jack</em></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 5 Elvis Richardson</td>
<td><em>Slide Show Land: Dorothy and Jack</em></td>
<td>2018</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 6 Elvis Richardson</td>
<td><em>Settlement</em></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 7 Elvis Richardson</td>
<td><em>Settlement</em></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 8 Elvis Richardson</td>
<td><em>Settlement</em></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 9 Elvis Richardson</td>
<td><em>Settlement</em></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fig. 10 Elvis Richardson</td>
<td><em>Countess</em></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

List of Tables

Table 1
Artists in *MOVE: Video Art in Schools 2008-09 Resource Kaldor Projects* 70

Table 2 Students Enrolled in Public and Private Schools in *Top Arts NGV,* and *ARTEXPRESS AGNSW 2005 and 2017* 72

Table 3 Gender of Artists Included in VCE Examination Papers for Studio Arts 2001-2017 73
Abstract

This practice-led research project examines how my collecting-based art practices inform and respond to issues of identity and recognition. By focusing on the construction of personal identity and artistic recognition using a collecting methodology, this project suggests that personal narratives and lived experience can inform the creation and perception of artwork in ways that value authenticity and draw attention to my autobiographical and heuristic freedom as an artist.

This project takes a critical approach to deconstructing the artist’s career choices actually on offer. Further, it investigates the expectations and implications of these choices, economically and socially, for the sustainability of the artist’s future.

This exegesis revisits over two decades of art practice, focusing on works that have used found images, in addition to other works that have deepened the investigative themes of inequality and gender bias in my work. The thesis advocates for a new perspective connected to my investigative approach to collecting and applies it to the construction of identity and recognition in the artworld. It unpacks my past works adjacent to the present, forming an analysis of the aspects that have informed and confronted my practice as it progressed.

Introduction

By investigating my studio- and exhibition-based practice, this exegesis defines the connections between three previously exhibited and published works and articulates the context of collecting as creating identity narratives through visual art. These works were presented in exhibition format at True Estate gallery and online as websites. The paper will discuss artists and theorists whose work in relation to the fields of social science, philosophy and art theory has influenced the situating of my practice within an academic context and allowed me to construct it within this framework as different, original and contributing new knowledge.

I will examine how I came to know and recognise myself as an artist, and explore the conventions and frameworks that allow others to see me as an artist. The specific exegesis research question asks, ‘how does my collecting-based art practice inform and respond to issues of identity and recognition?’ I will shift my perspectives and analysis of this question through the interchangeable interpretations of three key words: ‘collecting’, ‘identity’ and ‘recognition’:

1. ‘Collecting’ both in terms of artists who collect and exhibit their collections as art, as well as the ways in which institutions and collectors collect art, focusing especially on the ways that gender and cultural identity inform whose art is collected and which identity narratives are favoured,
2. ‘Identity’ in terms of how the artist’s identity is constructed within the framework of the art world and mediated to the wider public,
3. ‘Recognition’ in terms of shared experiences and knowledge formed culturally and through community, creating the frameworks and conventions of recognisability and knowing.

A characteristic of my practice is the critique of our culture’s dominant power structures within the institutions that I encounter and observe as an artist – for example galleries, museums and universities. I will outline in this paper how my own practice relates to those of artists concerned with institutional critique, such as

---

the Guerilla Girls and Natalie Thomas, particularly in relation to questions concerning the basis for art world recognition or reward. This exegesis will utilise observations and experiences of my own career to examine the frameworks of success and explore the way they intersect with the social and economic realities of an artist’s career and therefore lifestyle choices.

Every artwork is a self-portrait in some way
Sarah Goffman, artist²

I am adopted, and the identity I have constructed as an artist is intrinsically tied to my story and the cultural practices of closed adoption³. In her book Journey of the Adopted Self: A Quest for Wholeness, psychologist, author and adoptee Betty Jean Lifton describes closed adoption as a psychological trauma:

...an experience that is sudden, unexpected, abnormal. It exceeds the individual's ability to meet its demands. It disrupts one's sense of self and identity; it threatens one’s psychological core. This is what happens when a child learns he is adopted. (Lifton,1995, 14)

Upon learning of my adopted status at the age of six I felt a rush of excitement, my brain registering this confusing truth for the first time. ‘In the closed adoption system, if you rear someone else's child, you tell him about how he entered your clan and very little about the clan from which he came. His identity is supposed to start from the moment he became part of your family, and he is expected to live as a child without a past.’ (Lifton,1995, 15) This truth instilled in me the feeling of an incompatible organ transplant, leading me to question the very construction of identity as determined by the institutions of state, family and gender.

Before I had even begun to form my identity or a sense of who I was, I felt on one hand like an imposter and on the other that something had been stolen from me. Every time I handled official documents showing my adopted name I felt a sting of hypocrisy, and at age eighteen I changed my first name to Elvis. I kept the

² Sarah Goffman is a Sydney based artist well known for her plastic interpretations of historical object making. www.sarahgoffman.com
³ ‘Closed adoption’ is a system wherein the identities of an adoptee’s parents are legally withheld by the state, a law that changed in Australia when I was twenty-nine. When I was able to view my original birth certificate it showed my mother’s name, however in line with closed adoption practice my father’s name was recorded as ‘unknown’. Since others involved knew of my father’s identity, this lie felt like a way to shame my mother and psychologically abuse me.
surname ‘Richardson’ from my adopted father Alan John Richardson (1939-2009) who I was very close to, and I enjoyed combining an over-the-top name with an ordinary one. My choice of ‘Elvis’ as a name raises questions concerning identity and recognition: on paper my identity may be assumed as male, contradicting the fact that I am female. I had always wanted a boy’s name due to my sense that identifying as a woman would not be an advantage in my life, especially considering the choices my mother had in the event of my birth. The name ‘Elvis’ leads others to wonder about my background, and I am often asked if my parents were Elvis fans. Appropriating the little-used but globally known name ‘Elvis’ over a more common one (I had been considering George) meant I was assuming another’s identity for the second time in my life; this time however I was playing with it and making it my own, inventing my own identity. I met my birth parents for the first time at the age of thirty-four in the years surrounding the birth of my son, Henry Elvis Hislop, in 1999.

On a core level, the fact of my adoption may be seen to inform the images and objects I collect. Many of these objects were once very personal but became dislocated from their owners, which allowed me to find them for sale online or in charity shops. The ongoing work Slide Show Land (Richardson, 2001- ) investigates my collections of 35mm slides of family and travel photographs, which I purchased on eBay over a period of twelve months during 2001. The work Settlement (Richardson, 2016) is an animated video constructed from screen shots of images from property listings I sourced from real-estate search engines over the past ten years.

The third previously published work included in my PhD submission is CoUNTess. This online blog, established in 2008, is a data-collection project that measures gender representation in the Australian visual art sector, providing evidence of gender inequity and influencing the situation for women artists. Collecting in the context of CoUNTess is the simple collection of data: counting the number of men and women present in exhibitions and museums both nationally and internationally. While I approached it artistically, at the outset of the CoUNTess project I didn’t consider it to be an artwork, despite the fact it has been included in
exhibitions\textsuperscript{4} and fits within definitions of the concept of institutional critique as typically described in this outline by Stephen Zepke in *Deleuze and Contemporary Art* (2010) as an art movement that developed internationally during the 1960’s and 1970’s: ‘The major focus of that movement [institutional critique] – the nerve centre of its poetics – was to problematise the power of the art system over the work’ (Zepke & Sullivan, 2010, 38).

In its early stages, I considered *CoUNTess* along the lines of other artist-initiated and run activities I had undertaken, such as the galleries *Elastic Projects, DEATH BE KIND* and *True Estate*\textsuperscript{5}. My identity as an artist meant I held a personal stake in impacting the inequality of gender representation in the field of visual art; however, the public attention generated by the *CoUNTess* project threatened to take over my identity as a studio artist, and I felt that greater recognition of my studio practice was required before I could be comfortable defining the project as an artwork.

A sense of humour can be a useful quality when attempting to live within the conditions inherent to the contradictions of life as an artist, such as real financial losses built into the frameworks of success based on reputation and status, collectableness and recognisability; *CoUNTess* allowed for a sense of mockery and satire behind its boring, accountant-like visuals, which tended to focus on numbers and facts in an unemotional way. By accentuating the word ‘cunt’ in its name, the *CoUNTess* project owned any anticipated criticism concerning stereotypes of the whingeing, nagging woman, while the word ‘countess’ embodied the inherited authority of a positively gendered aristocratic rank, signifying the reclaiming of entitlement and a privileged right to be heard. The word ‘cunt’, shouted in caps, showed a fierce commitment to the project, owning it and flaunting a ‘don’t fuck with me’ tone. The subtitle, ‘Women Count in the Art-world’, states what the blog does: women counting and gathering evidence of systematic gender bias in the art world. In addition, the notion that ‘women count’

\textsuperscript{4} Countess graphs and posters have been exhibited at Westspace, Melbourne 2014, The Bearded Tit, Sydney 2016.

\textsuperscript{5} I have been a director of First Draft Gallery, Sydney (1996-97); Elastic Projects, Sydney (2000); Ocular Lab, Melbourne (2008-10); DEATH BE KIND, Melbourne (2010-12); and True Estate, Melbourne (2018)
refers to the fact that since women make up most of the artists and workers in the field, they matter. Like *Slide Show Land* and *Settlement*, the *CoUNTess* project is directly related to my social and economic circumstances as an artist, woman and feminist; however, by publishing the collected data as *CoUNTess*, I was making public questions concerning merit, recognition and fairness in the art-world.

The exegesis begins with a focus on collecting in relation to my photographic-based works *Slide Show Land* and *Settlement*. This section references the most salient markers in the history of collecting and found photography and is shaped by a feminist focus. Relevant historical developments concerning public collections and museum practice are unpacked in relation to my own work. The collecting-based practices of the artists Patrick Pound, Tony Albert and Ydessa Hendeles are examined and critiqued, exploring the way both their personal identities and identities as artists inform the intention and reception of their work comparative to my own experience. While *Settlement* is, like *Slide Show Land*, a collection of images, in the context of the artists discussed – Gordon Matta-Clark, Miriam Charlie and film-maker Chris Marker – it focuses on revelations concerning social inequality and the aspirational contradictions inherent to the concept of ‘home’ and the built environment, especially in relation to their impact on artist’s lifestyle choices.

The next part focuses on gender equality via the project *CoUNTess: Women Count in the Art-world*. Education holds an increasing influence on the choices available to artists today; this section examines the eco-system of artist’s training using examples from my own experience attending art school in the historical moment of art education’s professionalisation in Australia under the Dawkins Reforms to Higher Education in 1988. National high school educational material, exam papers and graduating exhibitions are examined, and the fact that the majority of teaching and exam content concerns work by male artists – even as the majority of the enrolled students are women – is discussed. Next, details, data and assumptions concerning Australian visual art education methodology are identified and unpacked at all levels, revealing historical discriminations that fortify racist, sexist and class-based paradigms. The implications of the university-degree model – imposed on artist’s careers over the past twenty years – are discussed,
especially in relation to the creation of new career and therefore lifestyle choices that may threaten the sustainability of artist’s futures.

The historical background and impact of the project *CoUNTess: Women Count in the Art-world* is outlined and summarised, and its future outcomes projected. Referencing the ground-breaking work of art-activist group the Guerrilla Girls, established in New York in the 1980’s, this section further explores the way feminists have used statistical methodology to reveal the extent and depth of gender bias. This is epitomised by the Guerrilla Girls’ now infamous poster work which asked, ‘Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum? Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female’ (Guerrilla Girls, 1989). I will discuss influential art bloggers Andrew Frost of *The Art Life* and Natalie Thomas of *Natty Solo* and examine how they, similar to the Guerrilla Girls, have approached identity and anonymity in the art-world at a time when the recognition of one’s name favourably impacts an artist’s career.

I will use the experience of my own art career as a template signposting the professional opportunities or choices I have enjoyed or endured as I have developed as an artist. It is important to record my reflections on these experiences as the content of my work emerges directly from the events, circumstances and choices I have made, forming new knowledge to be contributed by this exegesis.

*We live in a society, not an economy*
Eva Cox AO – writer, feminist, social scientist

---

Chapter 1

The Collector Set

Anthropologist Leonard Woolley’s influential work, *Excavation at Ur: a Record of Twelve Year’s Work* (1954) is frequently cited for its claims concerning the first example of an annotated collection of antiquities. The collection included tablets and cylinders containing didactic information about each object’s appearance, use and history in three different languages: the first hallmarks of cataloguing. These labelled antiquities were the innovation of a woman, High Priestess Ennigaldi-Nanna, frequently qualified as the daughter of Nabonidus, the last king of Babylonia. One of her ongoing duties was as the administrator of a school for priestesses, and the collection was discovered within her living and working quarters.

In his influential study *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (1995), academic Richard Belk defines collecting as, ‘the process of actively selectively and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences’ (Belk, 1995, 67). Belk places collecting firmly in the realm of the marketplace in commodity-driven consumerist societies, claiming that, ‘collecting is consumption writ large since it involves the perpetual pursuit of inessential luxury goods’ (Belk, 1995, 13). For Belk, the collector is driven by the hope of transcendence from an ordinary life, possessing a desire to express oneself creatively, ‘to enlarge one’s sense of self’ (Belk, 1995, 90). Collecting can subvert consumerism by investing meaning and ritual into our lives, the things we collect embodying sacred experiences while being tangible evidence of success, status and value. Collections represent creative thinking and mastery of a subject by the collector, and when our possessions – including our collections – are damaged, lost or stolen, we experience ‘a partial annihilation of self’ according to Belk (Belk, 1988).

In *The System of Collecting* (1994), Jean Baudrillard writes more negatively on the subject of collecting, arguing that collections remove the original function from the objects collected and turn them into a ‘system’. Baudrillard asserts that collected
objects have two functions: in one, the object has a social status, however when divested of its function it takes on a subjective status: ‘now its destiny is to be collected’ (Baudrillard, 1994, 23). Where an object may once have been a carpet, a chair or a bronze sculpture, a collector may refer to it instead as a ‘piece’ – ‘once the object stops being defined by its function, its meaning is entirely up to the subject [the collector]’ (Baudrillard, 1994, 23). Baudrillard says that all objects in a collection are rendered equivalent through the process of possession. This process embodies a sense of the collector’s control over the world through organising, categorising and handling the objects, developing a deep passion for the ‘loved object’. The object loses its solitary status due to the notion of a potential set of objects, which provides a mission for the collector to aspire to.

The similarities and intersections between the act of making art, or being an artist, and collecting are numerous. For example, the way in which artists intentionally create sets of non-identical or reproducible things to be collected: editioned artworks, a series of paintings, a suite of photographs, a body of work. Museums may categorise artists within groups determined by features such as period, medium, theme, geographical location, age, career stage or cultural identity. State institutions collect objects including art, reaffirming how important collecting or possessing objects is to creating collective identity as a city or nation – the Sydney Harbour Bridge or Sydney Opera House in Australia are examples of this.

The role of the museum, as decreed by The International Council of Museums in partnership with UNESCO, is to look after the world’s cultural property and interpret it to the public (Boylan, 2004). On their website, The National Gallery of Australia defines their collections in sets of related objects, collected for the benefit of Australians and to create national identity:

The National Gallery of Australia's collections include more than 160,000 works of art across four main areas: Australian art, Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander art, Asian art and European and American art.

Works in the Gallery are part of Australia's national collection. They belong to the people of Australia and are preserved and presented for their enjoyment and education. It is the Gallery’s intention to
make the collection as widely appreciated as possible both in
Australia and overseas.  

While collecting is explored as an important facet of identity building in scholarly
texts from the fields of sociology (Belk) and philosophy (Baudrillard), how does it
operate within the context of contemporary visual art? Are collections art? Is
collecting an art? Can collectors be artists? How do Belk and Baudrillard’s ideas
concerning collections as subjective expression, or collections as an extension of
self, engage with dialogues and issues in contemporary art such as appropriation,
the ready-made, identity and authorship, and recognition?

Collecting is a process connecting all three works presented for this exegesis. In
my collecting-based practice I have focussed on collecting and displaying items
that I chose to preserve, items that talk to and construct my identity as an
individual and as an artist. I collect objects and items that embody social rituals,
informed by my personal narrative of adoption and loss, and the limitations of my
economic circumstances as an artist.

The images in the collecting-based works *Slide Show Land* and *Settlement*, while
personal, also constitute public signs serving to reinforce what a successful life
may look like to others and to ourselves. The travel and family slides in *Slide Show
Land* are evidence of the people we may love in our life and who we share
experiences with, along with places we have travelled, events we have attended
and the life we have lived. Family and travel snapshots present a moment for the
camera’s benefit over any notion of truth or reality; while we may recognise places,
behaviours, events, body language, fashion and décor and can piece together a
possible narrative, we can never have a full knowledge of the nature of the
relationships or connections between these subjects, places or things. The act of
endurance involved in watching relatives’ travel slides projected in darkened
lounge-rooms across suburbia is now a forgotten family ritual. I think of how this
tradition must have informed the intent of the slide film photographer to curate their
own narrative in anticipation of sharing it with family and friends through the slide
show, a tradition continued today when we share everyday images on social

---

media in a more immediate but certainly curated way. In *Settlement* we see that someone who owns a house is selling it, which can speak of success and the Australian dream of home ownership – but is it? The subject of these images may be selling their property due to divorce, ill health or old age. This disparity raises the question: what do these objects and images amount to? And further, how do these collections become art?

A large body of scholarship in the field of social sciences, including the work of Belk, has explored the way in which our relationships with our personal belongings extend beyond and signify more than their financial worth. Our possessions necessarily define and preserve our individual and collective identities: the BBC production *Antique Roadshow*, on air since 1979, invites members of the public to bring in treasured objects, convey their story and relationship with it, and gain advice from a historical expert. The object’s owner usually describes the object as ‘priceless’ and of great sentimental value, claiming they would never sell it, however the expert invariably ends their appraisal with an estimate of the object’s economic value – qualified with statements such as, ‘at the right auction’ or ‘in the right conditions’. While the owner has claimed they would never sell their object, who wouldn’t be pleased to know that what they value personally is also valued economically and therefore culturally?

Susan Kleine and Stacey Baker have defined the process of material possession attachment as the:

…multi-faceted property of the relationship between a specific individual or group of individuals and a specific, material object that an individual has psychologically appropriated, de-commodified, and singularized through person-object interaction’ (Kleine & Baker, 2004, 1).

Applying this definition to my practice of using found images as raw materials, by collecting these images I claim them as ‘mine’. This claim was particularly tangible when I purchased the 35mm slides, since they embody both the original and its means of reproduction; with *Settlement* however, I re-documented the images using screen captures. When I de-commodify the slide or image and make it personal my autobiography is woven into this singular collection, connecting it to
my personal history and meaning and rendering the artworks a self-extension of my identity. Here, it feels I am using found slides and images as a means of adopting other people’s stories, identities and completing or mending my own identity which feels fractured by the adoption process.

The terms ‘found photographs’ or ‘orphan photographs’ relate to film studies and archive preservation; the term ‘orphan film’ describes a film that has been found, discovered or come across by chance. Orphan films have frequently been neglected, unprotected, or lost, and are most likely to fit outside of commercial arenas and be unprofitable, like a discontinued model (Streible, 2007). Industry and scholarly interest has grown around orphan films however, due to the rich material examples they provide, helping expand understandings of the present and the past.

**Adopted and Abducted**

I was adopted at the age of 6 weeks old, and until Australian adoption laws changed in 1990, the identity of my mother and father were a state secret. To piece together this missing connection to my identity I searched public documents, visited graveyards, sent letters of introduction and met relatives for the first time.

In 2012, Australian prime minister Julia Gillard made a public apology to citizens affected by forced adoption practices, acknowledging the loss of identity, culture and family bonds that result from such practice. A public sculpture by artists Deb Jones and Christine Cholewa was commissioned to commemorate this historic apology. Titled *The Space Between* this sculpture – a giant block of granite split in two and set into the banks of the Torrens River in Adelaide – is accompanied by a plaque, with words that succinctly describe my own feelings concerning my adopted status:

>This artwork is for all those whose lives have been profoundly affected by adoption separation practices – for the loss suffered by many, for the ongoing grief and pain experienced by Mothers who lost their children, and for Adoptees who lost their identity, heritage and family.

---

I equate ‘adoption’ with ‘abduction’: at age eleven, I borrowed a book about unsolved murder cases from my local library, I borrowed that book many times, and when years later I found the same book in my art school library, it seemed a meaningful coincidence. This book chronicles many unsolved murder cases in Australia, with half dedicated to the abduction and murder of children. Infamous cases such as that of the Beaumont children – three siblings who went missing from Glenelg Beach in Adelaide in 1965 – and Wanda Beach – the sexual assault and murder of two teenage girls, also in 1965 – are catalogued here. Grainy, dot-screened, black and white photographs and illustrations document scenes of loss and destruction – a bush setting with dotted lines traces the steps to a shallow grave, the victims’ cropped and blurred faces accompanying monstrous identikit sketches of the perpetrator. Photos of ordinary domestic interiors are disrupted by the sight of a body on the bed or pool of blood on the floor. A picture shows a circle of men in suits on the dunes of a deserted beach – one holding a shovel, another with a police dog – surrounding the bodies of two murdered teenage girls, their limbs protruding from the sand.

My interest in these abducted and murdered children, combined with the fact of my adoption and a fixation on the aesthetics of forensic investigative processes, informed my interest as an undergraduate art student at College of Fine Art UNSW (1988 - 92). While I found it difficult to comprehend certain concepts – ‘postmodernism’ for example represented no more to me than an architectural style of pastiche, and I was equally sceptical about the idea of ‘the death of the author’ in the age of the ‘Young British Artists’9 – I was however inspired by many of the artists I was exposed to during this time. These artists include Sophie Calle, whose work The Detective (Calle, 1981) I find particularly interesting because of the way she turned herself into the subject of a secretive gaze as a method to produce a suite of images I personally found fascinating and I was drawn to her aesthetic use of black and white prints in the presentation:

---

9 ‘Young British Artists’ is a term coined by Michael Corris in Artforum International magazine in May 1992 to name a group of British artists supported and collected by Charles Saatchi. (Corris, 1992, 107)
…at my request, my mother went to a detective agency. She hired them to follow me, to report my daily activities and to provide photographic evidence of my existence’. (Calle, 2007, 32)

The work of Christian Boltanski was equally meaningful to me, in particular 10 Photographic Portraits of Christian Boltanski 1946-1964 (Boltanski, 1964). This work first seen in the form of a small artist’s book:

…shows according to handwritten captions portraits of Christian Boltanski at different ages, but this temporal frame is pure fiction: all the photographs have actually been taken on the same day. And on a closer look only one of them depicts Boltanski, the other nine are randomly picked boys that happen to be in the park on the same day, and on whom he bestows the personal pronoun ‘I’. (Tygstrup, 2008, 286)

I was struck by the tension both works hold between fact and fiction, as well as the important role the identity of the artist played in the reading of the work.

**Based on a True Story**

In these formative years as a student, at the outset of my becoming an artist, I began to formally acknowledge my interest in true crime via my work. While I was initially interested in the meticulous methodologies of homicide investigators or forensic scientists, whose work involved searching, collecting, examining and displaying the effects of transgressive human behaviour, I began to understand and recognise crime as an artistic genre, through the mediation of mass media, literature, film, music and art and a love of the transgressive. I was influenced by a combination of cultural movements of the time: 1990’s indie rock, the post-punk movement, ‘queer’ culture, the concept of ‘Gen X’ and ‘slacker’ culture. A popular style amongst young artists in Sydney at this time was ‘grunge art’ (Gibson,1993) – art that utilised found objects as it medium and which frequently resembled trash rather than sculpture, or ‘high art’. I was drawn to artist Hany Armanious’ cast ready-made and found-object assemblages; the mass-produced, shape-shifting, everyday materials manipulated by Mikala Dwyer; and the acidic drips of emotional intensity in Adam Cullen’s paintings. My awareness of these artist’s practices helped me understand my own work within the new and shifting
interpretations of installation as a medium via the use of found or mass-produced materials. Where I had previously believed the true-crime genre was too vulgar to constitute a valid subject for an art practice, the new aesthetic becoming apparent in both the popular and high culture of the time led me incorporate its features – its investigative methodology, its dark themes and its forensic aesthetic – into my work.

While I was gaining some theoretical understanding of the concepts of relational aesthetics and social context that were emerging in the contemporary art discourse of the time, I developed an interest in examining the patriarchal language and imagery typical of the true-crime genre. My previously personal interest in the concepts and dynamics of perpetrator and victim was sharpened by reading the book, *The Streetcleaner: The Yorkshire Ripper Case on Trial* (Jouve,1986), a critical analysis of the language, narratives, responsibilities and values placed on women during the case of a serial rapist and murderer who terrorised women in Northern England in the 1970s. The author, Nicole Jouve, makes observations from her own experience living in Yorkshire at the time of the murders. She analyses the conduct and attitudes of the police and media as well as the community’s responses to the crime, and she extends these analyses to reflect on the impact these elements had on her personally, as a woman. This feminist reading changed my perspective on my obsession with the true-crime genre, since it showed me that while my fear of sexual violence as a young woman was real, it was also a means of patriarchal conditioning normalising women’s being responsible for their own deaths by violent men.

As a young artist, the objects and images I used to create my first exhibitions and installations were raw materials I gathered on walks with my dog in Chippendale, Sydney. These walks often took us to areas of urban neglect or change: Darling Harbour, Pyrmont, Glebe, and Sydney University – areas that remained undeveloped in the late 1980s and early 1990s (before the demise of public housing and widespread renovation of factories and businesses into luxury apartments). While on these walks I took photographs and collected objects, observing the details, minutiae and ephemera of these empty, neglected spaces to find clues on how people inhabited them. My first major show was in 1995 as part
of an artist-curated\textsuperscript{10} exhibition with Jasmine Hirst and Linda Dement titled, \textit{I Really Want to Kill You but I Can’t Remember Why}, at Artspace in Sydney. I introduced transcribed interviews with a true crime collector Jodie into my work, discussing her collections of objects and favourite crimes, and extended the gallery space to include the loading dock, which I filled with a half-meter deep layer of soil. In another space a mattress I found on the street was leaning against a wall inside a large plastic forensic-evidence bag.

**Found Paints Lane, Chippendale**

![Image of a woman standing next to a car]

**Fig. 1** Elvis Richardson, \textit{Found Paints Lane, Chippendale} C-type Photograph, 100x70cm 1998.

On one of these walks in 1995 I found a 35mm slide transparency, which was to become my first exhibited found image, \textit{Found Paints Lane Chippendale} (Fig. 1). Although the slide was lying in a gutter and covered by damp leaves, its white plastic border was recognisable from the 35mm slide format used to document

\textsuperscript{10} Artspace was established as an artist-run gallery in 1983 to provide an alternative exhibition space for artists than museums or commercial galleries. Artists could propose exhibitions to Artspace in Sydney in 1994.
artist’s work at the time, drawing me to pick it up. The Kodachrome-branded slide revealed a closely cropped image, with a patch of dry grass foregrounding a pathway leading into the background, up a sloping verge and out of the edge of the frame. On the right stood a woman with her hands behind her back, weight on one leg and the other slightly bent. Wearing a white bikini and white rubber thongs, her large round sunglasses had slipped down her nose to reveal her impatient expression. The woman’s features read as Asian; she had toned skin and a visible abdominal scar, perhaps from a caesarean section. Parked immediately behind the woman, facing the camera, was a dark Mini Minor car, its front wheels at an angle as if it had circled to a halt. The sun reflects brilliantly from the car’s windscreen and the woman’s chest, both surfaces over-exposed and burning out into a hot white glare.

This image led me to consider the identities of the photographer and their subject, as well as the details of their location. I wondered if someone else would recognise this location or if the scene was indeed what I had assumed it to be – a snapshot taken at an Australian beachside location on a hot summer’s day. I printed the image as a large format photograph: at over a metre wide, it was large enough to ensure that the viewer’s body remained at a distance from the work if they were to see it in its entirety. By giving this work the title *Found Paints Lane Chippendale*, the image’s found status would be apparent whenever the work was publicly exhibited. Making and exhibiting this first found image revealed a method by which I could include my interest in the vernacular within my work and expand upon my attraction to investigative methodologies: searching for and collecting information, digging for clues in found objects, images and places, and uncovering stories and identities.

In 1998, this work was used as the invitation image for a group exhibition curated by Mark Hislop, *Mondo Cane*, at Herringbone Gallery in Sydney. In his review of the exhibition, Bruce James questioned my work’s validity as ‘art’ due to the image’s ‘found’ status and its (in his view) ‘unspectacular aesthetic qualities’ (James, 1998). James found my work to be, ‘a piece of reality’ (James, 1998) rather than art. While he admitted that the work lent authenticity to the idea of ‘the

---

11 Herringbone Gallery was an artist-run gallery located in Surry Hills, Sydney in the late 1990s.
bower bird artist' (James, 1998) and vernacular subject matter, and he acknowledged the agency of exhibiting mundane or everyday images in a gallery context, James nonetheless questioned the work’s validity.

“If the show has an emblem, it’s Elvis Richardson’s nagging photograph of a woman in a tight-fitting, white bikini posed so ambivalently beside a Mini Minor that it’s hard to tell which is the trophy, and whose. Is the woman boasting the possession of a car, or her own compact body? Is the person behind the camera boasting of both? Richardson found this image as a colour transparency a few months ago. It was simply lying in the street, though maybe “simply” is too innocent a word. In Choosing to introduce it into her practice, then to exhibit it here in enlarged, editioned form, she’s taken the risk that the original subject of the snapshot, or the one who snapped it, might come forward to reclaim it from the public sphere.

In their position I would. Reproduced on the postcard invitation, Found Paints Lane, Chippendale, 30/4/98 3.30pm gained wide currency around town this month. Curiously, part of its artistic attraction is that we know it not to be art at all. It’s a piece of reality, a none too redeeming piece at that, dislodged from the parent block and repositioned in a gallery. In that regard, it’s representative of a magpie tendency shared by the other exhibits in Mondo Cane, and by much contemporary art.”

James’ argument raised questions concerning art’s definition, the role of the collector, and the relationship between art and the everyday – questions that were concurrently informing influential international exhibitions during that decade. On the cover of the catalogue for the 8th Biennale of Sydney, The Readymade Boomerang: Certain Relations in 20th Century Art (1990), curator René Block printed Fluxus artist and architect Giuseppe Chiari’s declarative statement that ‘Art is Easy’; the exhibition’s theme concerned the ‘past, present and future of the readymade in visual art’ (Block, 1990, 14). Block described Chiari’s quotes as, statements ‘not meant as provocations but as invitations to break down the barriers between people who work in different fields of everyday endeavour and artists who work like scientists in developing the future’ (Block, 1990, 14). In the catalogue for the 9th Biennale of Sydney, The Boundary Rider (1992-3), curator Anthony Bond described the artist as a bricoleur who wanders the perimeters, foraging, collecting and telling stories through objects, images, text and performance such as English artist Rachel Whiteread’s cast used mattresses Untitled (Amber mattress), (1992) and the work of Doris Salcedo Atrabiliarios (1992-97) an installation where shoes once belonging to missing persons are
encased behind stretched cows bladder. Columbian artist Salcedo’s work responded to the dangerous but relatively common situation Columbians experience where relatives just disappear: ‘They may be held hostage by drug barons but as likely by government-backed militia in an effort to contain popular resistance. Salcedo has lost members of her own family in this way’ (AGNSW Contemporary Collection Handbook, 2006). Bond states that he, ‘decided to work as much as possible with artists who use found materials or other forms of cultural bricolage’ (Bond, 1992, 17). For the 11th Biennale of Sydney, Every Day (1998) curator Jonathan Watkins asserted the legitimacy of the quotidian and the vernacular as serious subjects for contemporary art. In his catalogue essay he declares, ‘I wanted to consider work that not only depicted the everyday – or represented everyday activity – but also work that actually embodied the everyday.’ (Watkins, 1998, 3) For the first time in the Biennale’s history, Watkins’ exhibition included works installed outside the gallery space in public places – for example on billboards or in parks – which were participatory and accessible both physically and socially. Bruce James’ conclusion that my own work held no claim to the category ‘art’ stands in stark contrast with these more interesting responses by curators to questions raised by vernacular, approachable work and readymade imagery.

What is art today might not be art tomorrow

In 2017, Los Angeles-based curator Sohrab Mohebbi in a public lecture titled Topics in Global Art at Emily Carr University in Vancouver described, ‘what is art today might not be art tomorrow and vice versa’ (Mohebbi, 2017), characterising contemporary art as a process of validation that takes place between interconnected institutional, financial and social sectors. Definitions of art are constantly shifting, and the sense of impermanence lent by the term ‘temporary’ in ‘contemporary art’ represents the field’s dominating condition. Contemporary art’s impermanence is equally apparent on a material level: large installations are frequently destroyed post their exhibition in a museum, while ten-year-old art magazines reveal how many artists from their time are now forgotten and unfamiliar.
Author William Fowkes describes twentieth century discourse as having re-imagined and re-embodied the role of the artist, who was no longer a manipulator of materials or creator of ideal beauty, but a curator and editor of pre-existing objects or images (Fowkes, 1978). Marcel Duchamp (1887 - 1968) is frequently cited as the first artist to have placed a mass-produced object – a male urinal – into a gallery space, to make *Fountain* in 1917. For Fowkes and a chorus of art writers since, the influence of *Fountain*, the intention of the artist and the way the work was received has changed how we view ordinary objects as art today. We now recognise art in the endless stream of once-functional objects that became collectable, either when the artist declared the object an artwork, a museum or gallery exhibited the artwork, or a collector purchased the artwork, aligning its economic value.

Although Duchamp produced *Fountain* in 1917, it wasn’t until the 1960s that the work made it into the gallery proper. Prior to this, the work’s existence was known of through an article written by Louise Norton in the eclectic art journal *The Blind Man* in 1917. Here, Norton claims that *Fountain* could be valued as art because it was submitted into and rejected by the committee for *The Independents*, a salon exhibition that claimed it accepted *all* nominations (Norton, 1917, 4-5). Duchamp’s submission of the urinal to this exhibition subverted the establishment’s own criteria and exposed the complexities of who defines art, however it was Norton’s article that created the public space this work required, recording and broadcasting its existence.

Art historian Amelia Jones positions authorship as central to a reading of Duchamp’s work, stating that, ‘for art history, authorship is a prerequisite of determining the “meaning” of an object and placing it within a field of intention’ (Jones, 1991, 3). Jones points out the selective hypocrisy that lies behind art historians’ insistence on Duchamp’s father-like status as the original postmodern artist, when as she claims, ‘the author is supposed to be dead in postmodernism’ (Jones,1991, 3). Postmodernism comes after and is different to modernism; it is understood to be ‘anti’-modernism, however just as modernism signalled ‘the new’ and represented a break with tradition, postmodernism represents an anti-‘grand narrative’ or monolithic stance. Jones concludes that Duchamp’s being
retroactively situated as the ‘disseminating father’ of ready-made art – along with the universal agreement concerning this perception – has set in motion, ‘a male dominated tradition of Neo-Dada, minimalistic, conceptualist and pop practice and continued the myths of genius male artists to this day’ (Jones, 1991, 12).

Themes concerning feminism, the denigration of the vernacular versus its veneration in contemporary art, a critique of institutions of art, and using an investigative methodology have characterised the approach I take to the objects, images and data I collect.

Chapter 2
Re-collecting

My material approach to the mediums employed in my art practice align with postmodern aesthetics and values. Here, in order to define and describe my own practice, I will relate it to the field of contemporary art more broadly by analysing and discussing general receptions to the genre of work I produce.

The objects I collect are ‘ready-mades’, mass produced and reproducible, but they are equally materials and mediums imprinted upon by an individual before I collected them. I receive these objects pre-stamped with another person’s history – for example, slide film has been exposed and developed, trophies engraved and dated, and houses occupied and documented. What do other collecting-based artists produce, and how is their work received or understood through didactic museum texts or media release reviews? What do the artists say about their work?

Melbourne-based artist and academic Patrick Pound is one of the more visible collecting-based artists working in Australia today, and his work has featured in major group and solo exhibitions in both Australia and New Zealand. Pound’s collections predominantly feature black and white photographic prints presented in the format of mass-produced snapshots with white borders common to the mid-20th century. This medium is familiar only to a dwindling number of living
memories, representing the past and technology such as Kodak’s ‘Box Brownie’ camera. Like myself, Pound uses the internet to source his collections, and describes his computer mouse as his ‘camera’ (Finch, 2017, 28). When Pound ‘clicks’ his mouse he takes a picture, possessing the image as an object and consuming the photograph by inserting it into his ever-expanding lexicon of whimsical categories. These categories are described by Pound as ‘museums of’ – for example – ‘wind’, ‘holes’, ‘there and not there’, ‘tears’, ‘people who look dead but probably aren’t’.

Pound’s collecting-based practice appears to celebrate collecting, giving an impression that it is possible to make the world coherent through the organisation of things, whether logical or whimsical. Pound as collector values all his pieces on the same level, recalling Baudrillard’s assertion that:

…once the object is collected this results in all objects in the collection becoming equivalent, as a single object can never be enough; invariably there will be a whole succession of objects, and, at the extreme, a total set marking the accomplishment of a mission' (Baudrillard, 1994, 24).

Pound’s practice epitomises this description of the collector. Is the narrative of Pound’s own identity expressed through his limitless enthusiasm for his subjects? Pound invites us in to look at his work and make associations, or puzzle and wonder why, but in the end only Pound can do the organising, his named categories determining the work’s meaning.

In his solo exhibition, *The Great Exhibition* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2017, Pound combined the museum’s collection with his own, creating all-encompassing displays that seamlessly intersected with the museum’s archive and its social-political function of collecting. Via this process, Pound extended the patterns and pieces of the possible set, blurring the distinctions between the varying roles of artist, curator and museum. Pound claims: ‘my work is not what has come to be called institutional critique, where artists are principally motivated to undermine the museum’s power and privilege’ (Finch, 2017, 17). He explains that his work deals with collecting in a way that utilises the associations embedded in objects and images to cut through conventional classifications, creating new
groupings and new associations. Pound describes this process as, ‘to collect is to gather your thoughts through things’ (Finch, 2017, IX). Rather than cut through, this process appears to skim over the top of the objects, Pound’s categories and amassing somehow levelling and erasing individual histories and meanings with an array of visual and textual translations and surface connections. In this sense, *The Great Exhibition* reinforced rather than questioned traditional patriarchal narratives and associations: Pound’s own authorship and identity are not revealed, which can result in reinforcing assumptions concerning the neutrality of the artist’s position, the impression that he is simply an expert ‘selector of things’.

Of the many amazing groupings on display, one group of objects in *The Great Exhibition* drew my attention as it opened alternative readings that may not have been intended by the artist or the museum. This group consisted of a collection of books called *The Collector*, a novel by the English author John Fowles, published in 1963. *The Collector* is a work of fiction that tells a story from two points of view, one from a character who held ultimate power, and one who had none. Frederick Clegg, a lonely young man who collects butterflies, is obsessed with and stalks a young woman, Miranda, who lives in the same village. When Frederick wins the lottery, he quits his job and buys an isolated farm house, in which he builds a basement prison. He keeps Miranda – an intelligent and thoughtful art student – captive in this prison after kidnapping her, with the intention of owning her and hoping to make her fall in love with him. The second half of the story is relayed via Miranda’s diary entries, written while kept captive; these entries move from her expressing fear to expressing pity and then hatred, and describe her attempt to murder Frederick. Miranda is devastated to be in this situation, and draws on making art to survive, she remembers her art teacher’s lectures and critiques and spends disciplined hours painting and drawing while formulating her own ideas and theories, during which time she fully commits to always being an artist. Miranda’s unsuccessful escape is relayed, as is her finally becoming ill and begging for medical attention – at which point her entries end.

In part three we learn that Miranda has died, the reader figuratively peering over Frederick’s shoulder as he reads and responds to her diary entries. Rather than guilt or remorse, Frederick feels anger toward Miranda for not having loved him as
he imagined; the story ends with Frederick burying Miranda’s body in his back yard, and planning his next abduction. I had read *The Collector* when I was an art student, attracted initially by its title but in the end overwhelmed by its story. Like Pound, I also have collected several copies of this book, as well as curated an exhibition at 1997 at First Draft in Sydney titled *The Collector*. My reading of this story is at odds with Pound’s display of *The Collector* in *The Great Exhibition*. In an interview with the exhibition’s curator, Maggie Finch, Pound describes *The Collector* as, ‘a novel about a photographer, a pervert and a collector rolled into one’ (Finch, 2017, 17) – and makes no mention at all of the character Miranda - the artist.

This story resonated with my intersecting interests in crime, art and gender narratives and is a significant example where two realities or discourses are presented. Miranda’s educated language, sarcastic intelligence, thoughtful observations and arguments, her creativity and talented making are in contrast to Frederick’s restricted structured ideas borrowed from a dominant patriarchal discourse, one that traditionally imposes collecting like an ownership.

The significance of other objects included in Pound’s exhibition have undergone a similar fate as Miranda, he states that while he is interested in the agreed meanings objects have accumulated through museum collecting practices, ‘These reasons have little or nothing to do with mine. So, when I combine them with my things or assemble them according to my ideas, they are given a sabbatical from their original meaning and task.” (Finch, 2017, 12). Pound’s work provides museums with a way to de-problematise their collections by reinvesting interest and love in the disparate, iconic and overlooked objects from their archives without really disrupting or challenging them on a social or political level.

*For tragedy to have its effects of arousing pity and fear, its objects cannot be fictions.* (Townsend, 2001, 51)

Former gallery director Ydessa Hendeles is a philanthropist, curator and artist. At the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation (1988-2012) in Toronto, Canada, she regularly presented selections from her steadily growing contemporary art collection, and is credited with introducing and establishing such major Canadian
artists as Jeff Wall, Jana Sterbak, Ken Lum and Rodney Graham (Hendeles, 2016, 13). Hendeles’ experience as gallery director, art historian and philanthropist informed her skills as a curator and collector, leading her to form a hybrid art practice that encompassed and expressed her varying histories. While she was exhibiting her collection of contemporary art in her museum, she began to include her other personal collections in the shows she curated: her most celebrated exhibition of this kind was titled Partners, which included the artists Jeff Wall, Walker Evans, Paul McCartney, Bruce Nauman, On Kawara, Maurizio Cattelan, John Swartz, Giulo Paolini, Diane Arbus and Hendeles herself. Hendeles’ own contribution to this exhibition was her collection of vintage photographs, all depicting scenes that included a teddy bear, which she had purchased on eBay between 1999 and 2001. The work, Partners (The Teddy Bear Project) (2002) has since been exhibited internationally and is one of her most well-known works.

Partners (the Teddy Bear Project) is a collection of more than three thousand photographs exhibited alongside actual teddy bears. On exhibition at the New Museum in New York in 2016, the work filled an entire two floors of the building. The installation resembled a ‘museum inside a museum’ since it utilised the methods of display normally found in a library or natural history museum, such as framed photographs stacked salon-style, spiral staircases leading to mezzanine-level verandas, and aisles of assorted cabinets and pedestals for the display of objects.

In the sense of amassing or collecting, Hendeles’ methodology is comparable to that of Pounds’; her focus on the singular category of teddy bears however strikes a more emotional register with the viewer, eliciting a sense of childhood security, playfulness and innocence of unknown futures. Hendeles, a holocaust survivor, has a personal story of early suffering and tragedy, which can be seen to inform her work. Upon becoming informed of her personal historic circumstances, Hendeles’ audience can imagine the artist’s motivations in creating and exhibiting her collection. In relation to her exhibition, From her Wooden Sleep, installed at London’s Institute of Contemporary Art in 2015, Hendeles stated that:
My worry... is that a disproportionate focus on my back-story leads to an ‘Ah-ha’ moment that short-circuits the work. After all, the work is not about me, it is about everyone. We are wired both to generalise and discriminate. Human beings need to relate. No one can be isolated from the crowd (Searle, 2015).

An Australian artist who works with collections is Tony Albert. Albert is indigenous, and holds family connections to the Girramay and Kuku Yalanji people of the rainforest region near his birthplace in Townsville (Pinchbeck, 2014, 61). Albert has made numerous works that utilise mass produced or hand-crafted objects that feature stereotypically white Australian portrayals of Aboriginal people, mostly for souvenir markets, including objects such as ashtrays, plates, platters or framed pictures. Albert’s work harnesses the economic and social hypocrisy that has been endured by Aboriginal people since European invasion, highlighting the commodification of indigenous culture and bringing these historical associations into dialogue with art and the dynamics of the museum. Albert talks about his changing relationship to these objects and how he came to use them in his practice:

My collection of Aboriginalia started as a young child and initially stemmed from something very innocent. I genuinely loved the iconography and imagery, particularly the faces, which reminded me of my family. When I was in high school I became much more aware of Indigenous issues – economically, socially and politically speaking – and found myself studying our history and leaders wherever possible. It was through this that I discovered the work of contemporary Aboriginal artists such as Tracey Moffatt and Gordon Bennett. I think being confronted by their work really forced me to look at these objects in a new light. It was towards the end of high school that I really began to see these faces as problematic representations of my identity (Albert, 2015, 208).

Albert often arranges these objects in the shape of the words that make up the work’s title, for example SORRY; HUNTER; hopeless ROMANTIC; WAKE UP; ASH on me; exotic OTHER. The juxtaposition between language and image in Albert’s work exploits the viewer’s recognition of these objects’ collectability and undermines the dehumanising effect that a collection of related objects can have on the stereotyped individual. Where these works literally state the complicated
relationships that exist between collector, collection and the collected, they directly question power relationships. Albert’s indigenous identity authorises and authenticates his voice, allowing recognition – particularly from those in power – for what he says.

**Not All Art will go Down in History**

As an artist who collects, I find the field of gallery and museum studies useful in providing methodologies relevant to collecting-artist’s exhibition practices. Art museum display methods have their origins in the private collecting and display practices of European Medieval times (500-1500), of classical antiquity, where natural and human-made objects intermingled, displayed either in a 'studiolo' – an Italian word describing a small room for private study – or in public displays such as the *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities. In the European Renaissance era, the de Medici family had the means by which to amass large collections, commissioning the first *Kunstkammer*: an octagonal room in Florence, Italy, the *Tribuna*, designed to exhibit art works rather than objects of natural history – for example carvings, paintings or drawings – which went on to become the Uffizi Museum. The building that became this museum – originally housing government offices, magistrates and the state archive alongside the *Tribuna* – was completed 1581 and was designed by architect Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574). Vasari was also the author of *Lives of the Artists* (Vasari, 1991): originally published between 1550 and 1568, this book – a collection of biographies concerning the artists of Vasari’s time – is considered a foundational text of Western art history. It is interesting that these two beginnings in western art history – that of the art museum and that of the artist’s biography – are connected at such a foundational level. Vasari’s somewhat over-embellished stories concerning the artist’s lives and characters, intended to enlighten readers about the nature of artistic genius, embedded the stereotype of the artist as bohemian, someone who lived on the fringes and moved between social strata, that endures to this today.

In *Companion to Museum Studies*, Sharon MacDonald writes that museums are of utmost importance to art history, since they form the ‘primary institutional locus

---

12 This title text is from a work by Maria Anweder http://www.maria-anwander.net/work.php?id=27
where “art worth” is proclaimed and the history of art materialized into public view’ (Macdonald, 2008, 14). In the same book, Rhiannon Mason explains that the act of display in the museum defines and attributes value and legitimacy to its objects. An artwork in a museum is by definition ‘art’, it is ‘culture’ (Mason, 2008, 18). This legitimacy is further afforded through what theorist Stuart Hall describes as ‘cultural maps’, wherein groups and communities are created to share and reinforce judgements about cultural value, status and legitimacy; a process that in turn confers or denies value and status to the artwork’s producers, owners and consumers (Hall, 1997, 27). Museums are public spaces that create the conditions for further debate and contestation. Marcel Duchamp’s submission of Fountain to The Independents art salon in 1917 illustrates the way artworks engage with galleries or institutions to determine its status as ‘art’. In the case of Fountain, it was only through the revisiting of these histories and events in the 1960s – ironically the end of modernism in America – that the significance of Duchamp’s Fountain was elevated to the iconic status it enjoys today. In the current moment, public art museums accept and exhibit all manner of materials, images and mediums; what hasn’t changed is the fact that museums still determine the outcome of art history.

**Considering pattern**

The 7 Up Series is a series of documentary films directed by Michael Apted and produced by Granada Television in the United Kingdom. The films are based on the premise of investigating the effects of the British class system on its members by documenting the lives of fourteen British children, starting in 1964 at age seven. Apted returns to re-interview the participants every seven years, and there have been eight instalments to date, with the ninth instalment, 63 Up! due for release in 2019. I remember this series having a big impact on me when I first saw it, since it featured a sense of real time and duration, revealing the children’s unfolding self-reflection over time via their real lives and stories.

The concepts of longevity and revisiting are important to all three of my works discussed in this exegesis, connected via the longevity of the period over which I created different outcomes from the same collections. Slide Show Land, first
exhibited in 2002 as the full set, was followed by other exhibitions that focussed on a subset or on more singular collections such as *Slide Show Land: Ten Collections* was shown at The University of Alabama Museum, Birmingham, Alabama USA in 2005 for example and *Slide Show Land Dorothy and Jack*, first exhibited in 2005\(^{13}\).

The real-estate images from my collection attract a large audience on my Facebook feed, where I have been posting them since 2010\(^{14}\). I also used these images in a series of videos\(^{15}\) prior to making *Settlement* in 2016, such as *A Room of One’s Own (Part of Growth! Growth! Growth!)* a video work that only used images of bedrooms and in *National Housing Search >$250K* the images were categorised into groups based on similar visual elements, for example ‘hallways’, ‘open doors’, ‘televisions’ etc. The *CoUNTess* project, started in 2008, is still active and ongoing. In all these cases, the works have grown and adapted alongside my changing life circumstances, allowing for self-reflexive assessment and adjustments in display and context and intent.

In her essay, *Remembering Exhibitions: From Point to Line to Web*, Reesa Greenberg asks, ‘How do we remember exhibitions and how do exhibitions remember themselves?’ (Greenberg, 2012, 160) She identifies a genre of exhibition that has gained popularity over recent decades as ‘remembering exhibitions’, or, ‘exhibitions that remember past exhibitions’ (Greenberg, 2012, 160). Greenberg identifies three different approaches – the replica, the riff and the reprise – which parallel my own approach to archiving, curating and displaying my collections. She describes the ‘replica’ as the re-creation of a historical exhibition in part or in full; the ‘riff’ as using a historical exhibition as a take-off point and the ‘reprise’ as remembering exhibitions through the multi-media of archival references. ‘Remembering exhibitions’ memorialise and further historicise past exhibitions, highlighting the way that exhibitions reveal the source of historical perspectives and narratives that have been continued and become culturally entrenched. Greenberg describes memory as a fascination of western culture used as, ‘a modality for constructing individual or collective identities,’ and explains

---

\(^{13}\) See a full list of *Slide Show Land* exhibitions in Appendix 1.


\(^{15}\) See a full list of *Settlement* exhibition in Appendix 2.
that exhibitions, ‘spatialize memory making it concrete, tangible, actual and interactive’ (Greenberg, 2012, 13).

Presenting my selected works in exhibition format for my exegesis, I created a situation wherein distinctive works could meet, although they were never intended for exhibition together. I approached this task as one of restaging, combining all three of the approaches outlined by Greenberg – replica, riff and reprise. I refined the works’ technical aspects and presentation and introduced new elements, for example the wrought iron gate and printed lap blankets. The exhibition felt and looked staged due to the lighting and sightlines, its distinct zones, the interactive books, and the timing of action and sound. This exhibition was remembering ‘me’, and the title – An Autobiography of Elvis Richardson – was a signal to the viewer to read the collected works as a self-portrait.

Chapter 3

Slide Show Land

Slide Show Land is an ongoing project I began in 2001 when I purchased more than twenty thousand 35mm slides, dating from the 1930s to the 1990s, on eBay. I spent a year collecting these slides, which depicted family and travel shots, at a time when 35mm slide technology was being made obsolete by the rise of digital technologies.

In 2000, living in New York while undertaking a Master of Fine Arts degree16, I bought two boxes of slides from a street vendor which I later viewed on a borrowed slide projector. The projections revealed tourist snapshots taken by a middle-aged white couple at recognisable locations in Paris: a boat on the Seine, the Palace of Versailles, The Louvre, Montmartre, the Eiffel Tower, Monet’s garden and various cafes, some showing the woman in the scene and others the man. I assembled the slides in the carousel according to the numbers on their

---

16 I had been awarded an Anne and Gordon Samstag International Visual Art Travelling Scholarship in 2000 and completed my MFA at Columbia University in 2002.
mounts, allowing the sequence of events in this couple’s tour to unfold chronologically. The slides were dated ‘1995’, five years before I bought them.

Unlike my first found image work, *Found Paints Lane*, this collection gave me access to a whole roll of film, allowing the potential for a narrative. I began to look for more slide collections: eBay was thriving in 2000 when I lived in New York, having been in operation in the United States since 1995, and it was here that I discovered an endless source of 35mm slides for sale. Buying these slides was an activity I could easily budget for since I only paid around fifteen dollars per purchase, to receive anything from a full carousel of eighty slides to boxes containing hundreds. Over twelve months I amassed over twenty thousand slides, which made up 145 collections.

I considered each package I purchased a ‘collection’. I had to let the slides – as objects and images – reveal their information to me, so my methodology resembled that of an investigator over an archivist. The packages arrived by post, and I sorted the slides into their numbered sequences or rolls of film. The studio-based degree I was engaged in at Columbia University involved studio visits from established artists, critics and historians, and it was during these visits that I discussed and gained a greater understanding of the slide’s contents, visitors sharing recognised places and customs with me. The slides became a means by which I could investigate representations of the home and family via the conventions of family photography, while the ‘snapshot aesthetic’ – frequently employed by contemporary artists such as Nan Goldin, Wolfgang Tillmans or Tracey Moffatt – lent the work a sense of the authenticity of the everyday.

The use of family photographs in art can be viewed through the lens of feminist theory, since, 'engagement in the reworking of gendered and class notions of identity are tested' (Cross, 2015, 44). In the field of snapshot or vernacular photography, with its focus on the family and domesticity, women frequently take the role of photographer and curator of the family album – an association that may contribute to the genre’s humble status or relative absence in the history of photography or its institutional representation.
The fact of my having found and collected these objects can inform a reading of the final artwork, and it is therefore important to their presentation. Each carousel of slides I acquired had an original label attached, a descriptive sentence that allowed for the image’s identification, for example: Honeymoon, Hawaii, 1986, 36 slides $5.00 posted from Milwaukee. I included as much of this information as I could as a part of the work, thinking of this information as a ‘wall label’, similar to the labels that accompany artworks in museums. Although these images were anonymous and ‘found’, it felt important that I provide their purchase information as a part of the work, both to focus on the collection’s individuality and ensure it was not lost, as well as to address ethical questions concerning the manner in which the material was obtained. I included the quantity of the slides within this information in order to indicate what was potentially available, leaving the viewer with the voyeuristic experience of viewing other people’s lives. The method of installation I used invited the viewer to interact with the three slide projectors since they were able to choose which carousel they would watch.

One of my motivations in making Slide Show Land involved a sense of ‘rescuing’ these family photos. I was conscious that my actions could be read as an effort to keep families together by saving their images from acquisition by image banks, other collectors or historians, or a fate wherein they became merely generic examples, edited and detached from their original history. The fact that these slide collections were available on via eBay made it seem as though a major event had taken place in the family’s life – a breakdown, a death, a divorce or a move due to downsizing – there had to be a reason that these images were for sale, and it felt as though I was holding onto the last possible thread that could connect these people to their past. A family album is easily handled and stored, while slides are more complicated, demanding time in a different way and requiring specialist equipment for viewing. These limiting factors may lead to the fact that 35mm slides frequently reside in their owner’s closet or drawer for many years, unseen and somehow obsolete.

As technology developed and slides could be transferred to digital formats, some owners may have been led to discard their originals once they had been scanned. I followed the digital route myself for the next iteration of Slide Show Land, a solo
exhibition at the University of Alabama Museum in Birmingham, USA in 2005, curated by Brett Levine. This exhibition was organised when I was planning my return to Australia, my funds depleted having spent four years in New York. To physically exhibit this work back in the United States when I had just left was outside my physical and financial capabilities: as a solution, I digitised ten of the collections and used Apple’s iMovie software to create a series of slide shows for projection. I selected what I considered my best collections – the ones that had layered, quirky aspects and clues, either aesthetically or in their subject matter, or that had strong narratives apparent over time and place. It was satisfying to utilise the software’s image transitions and effects, especially the zooming and panning that had been made popular by Ken Burns in his documentary mini-series *The Civil War (1990)*, where these effects were used to animate still images and give a sense of movement and action.

In 2005 I developed *Slide Show Land* for inclusion in the exhibition *If You Leave Me Can I Come Too?* curated by Bec Dean at Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney. For this iteration, I focussed on one single slide collection, depicting a middle-aged couple and their life together, riding horses in what appeared to be a rural Californian setting sometime during the 1950s - 70s. I titled this work *Slide Show Land: Dorothy and Jack*. While slides or photographs hold the most meaning for those who created them or the people who loved them, they can still be important to others not personally connected to the images: beyond representing a connection to another person, slides and photographs document a space, time, lifestyle and social status. In this collection, Dorothy – the photographer – had annotated almost all the slides, labelling them with names, addresses, dates and locations. She even gave some of the slides titles, and all this information gave me an opportunity to learn more about who she was, and where she lived.

The script I wrote for the video’s soundtrack narrates the story of the work’s background, relays the methodology I used to make it, and discusses its relationship to issues concerning identity and recognition. I have included the script here, both to explain this work and to elucidate the way these issues impact my practice more broadly:
This slideshow is titled *Dorothy and Jack*, edited from a collection of about six hundred slides that date from the early 1950s until the late 70s, by American photographer Dorothy Elizabeth Elsberry. I purchased the slides on eBay in 2001. I can tell you that Dorothy Elizabeth Elsberry was born in 1906 and that her birthday was March 17th (St. Patrick’s Day), and that Hays Barnett Elsberry (Jack) was born on January 21st, 1901. The collection dates start with 1951 when Dorothy was forty-seven years old and end in 1978, when she would have been seventy-two.

I edited the collection into two carousels and ordered them chronologically by date and exposure-number, which had been stamped on the slide’s cardboard borders when they were processed. Spanning almost thirty years, we see Dorothy’s distinctive style of staging emerge, characterising her artistic focus on the classical genres of landscape, interiors, still lives, as well as documentation of her life with husband Jack. (Fig. 2)
For the first carousel I selected the interior shots. At the heart of these are photos Dorothy had taken of dinner tables she meticulously decorated for special meals – birthdays or Christmas – which she created with care and detail, intimate and abundant with multiple courses and always accompanied by frosted glasses of iced water. Alongside these were tables set for two – Dorothy and Jack. In a few of these shots Dorothy references her cook book *French Cooking for Americans*, epitomising the ideal of a 1950s or 60s housewife.

The interiors of the house appear comfortable, with an orderly, ‘lived-in’ quality. In the beginning the couple live in Sacramento City, in what is labelled as ‘the house that Jack built’. They then appear to retire to a rural property outside of Sacramento called Fair Oaks, where they kept horses. The second carousel of slides features Dorothy’s husband, who she tends to refer to formally as ‘H.B. Elsberry’. Jack is most often pictured outdoors in action-cowboy mode with his rope-bridled horse, bravely fording rivers on horseback and surveying the wilderness from rocky ravines. (Fig. 3)

These images, along with those depicting dinner tables and still lives, remind us that Jack is safe in the knowledge that the home fires are always burning. Dorothy’s photographs appear to idealise Jack as a hero – all the while belying the fact that she would also have been with him on her own horse, camera in hand. In the whole collection there are only three images of Dorothy: two were labelled ‘self-portraits’, one dedicated ‘For Jack’. On the third slide she has noted, ‘taken by Jack’ – the image shows a pet bird perched on Dorothy’s finger and absorbing her attention; Dorothy is elusively present and simultaneously absent.
A story emerges here of a relationship not quite in the fresh flush of youth, but touching upon the deep romantic ideal of an old age spent together with the one you love. The years pass; we see Jack age, becoming heavier and looking less flexible, but always active and working hard outdoors. Dorothy photographs him sometimes from a distance away, and I imagine standing on their back porch, watching him.

Dorothy’s extensive descriptions and her use of full names in her handwritten annotations were the key to searching deeper into her identity and history. It felt both ominous and compelling to take this step and break through the collection’s anonymity, but Dorothy’s detailed records seemed to insist upon it.

Dorothy was a photographer and an archivist. When I first purchased the slides in 2001 I was 36, a student in New York City. I am adopted, and at that time had just reunited with my birth mother and father, as well as married and started my own family. For me, adoption was an experience that directly
informed the way I related to my collections; it made me want to keep the remnants of these families together. I remember looking at the slide captioned, ‘Dorothy E. Elsberry Self Portrait “for Jack” 48 years’ in 2001 when I first bought the collection. I am myself now aged 48, and find I am looking at her photographs differently. As I get to know Dorothy better, my life feels connected to her story.

I joined an online ancestry service and constructed a family tree for Dorothy and Jack. As I discovered more details about their lives – for example the dates of a parent’s death – I would cross-reference it to the slides to see if any indication of these events could be found there. When I purchased the slides, the seller’s description on eBay stated they were from a ‘deceased estate’. My research uncovered the fact that Dorothy and Jack did not have children; that Jack was an only child, and that while Dorothy had one sister Alice, she also had no children. In terms of ancestry, Dorothy and Jack were the end of their family line.

It was me, rather than a family member or child, who inherited Dorothy’s slides. In recognition of the deep human need to be held in the memories of others, I have been moved to retell the story of Dorothy and Jack with this slideshow. Jack died on 26th July 1974, and only twenty-four of the slides in the collection were taken after this date. It seemed as though Dorothy had lost interest in photography – or perhaps she had lost her muse. In the end Dorothy must have lost her memory, before dying of Alzheimer’s disease on January 21st, 1994 – the anniversary of Jack’s birthday.

(Elvis Richardson, *Slide Show Land: Dorothy and Jack* script for 11 min video 2013)

For the presentation of *Slide Show Land* at True Estate Gallery I wanted to create a comfortable environment that allowed the viewer to spend time with the work. I sourced furniture and lighting from the period arranged around an island of light coloured carpet contrasting with the galleries dark floors. The room was light sealed for the best screen viewing conditions and this amplified the distinction of the gallery space to the outside world. Images of Dorothy and Jack were printed
onto plush velour lap blankets draped over a pair of wing backed arm chairs. The video plays with the narrated sound track over the synchronised sound of a slide projector. A portrait of Dorothy referenced in the video is hung on the wall opposite the screens and she watches silently over the proceedings. (Fig. 4 and Fig. 5)

![Image of installation view](image_url)

**Fig. 4** Elvis Richardson, *Slide Show Land - Dorothy and Jack*, 2018, Installation view at True Estate Gallery 2018.

---

17 You can view *Slide Show Land* video work in full here [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkeQb09-HAE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vkeQb09-HAE)
Fig. 5 Elvis Richardson, *Slide Show Land - Dorothy and Jack*, 2018, Installation view with viewers at True Estate Gallery 2018.
Settlement

Settlement (2016) is a nine minute screen-based work made up of still images – photographs of the interiors of homes for sale that I collected from popular Australian real estate websites\textsuperscript{18} are animated to a sound track composed by musician James Hayes\textsuperscript{19}. This work was first shown at Hugo Michell Gallery in Adelaide in 2016; since then it has been included in the group prize exhibition for the Coffs Harbour Art Award - Still Life (2017) at Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery, and the 2018 Kyneton Contemporary Art Triennial in Victoria\textsuperscript{20}. Settlement forms part of my exegesis since it illustrates the methods I use to identify and respond to the systems of categorisation that are unavoidable as a collector unless you want one big mess, declaring and weaving my own narrative and circumstances into the story.

The images chosen for Settlement elicited an emotional response from me. While they depicted other people’s homes – their safe place, the place they belong to and from which they draw their identity – in the context of real estate advertising, these same homes seemed unstable, giving a sense of transition, shifting, moving or uprooting. On the surface the homes feel anonymous; on closer inspection however, clues as to the nature of the occupant’s personal life are evident in the photograph’s details, such as the way they’ve arranged their objects, made particular decoration choices or combined patterns and colours. Even more can be revealed by details such as the presence of a single chair that faces the television, beds that are covered but have clearly been occupied, remnants of past conversations that have taken place around the dinner table, arranged clocks, paused televisions, family photographs, or the still view out of a window over the kitchen sink.\textsuperscript{(Fig. 6)}

\textsuperscript{18} Such as www.domain.com.au and www.realestate.com.au
\textsuperscript{19} you can view the work in full here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jrhriF4MotI
\textsuperscript{20} A full list of Settlement exhibitions can be found in Appendix 1
The genesis of *Settlement* lay within my own personal situation at the time, wherein I was trying to find a way to buy a home for my family on my very minimal income. My choice to work as an artist means that I have always had to work part time in order to conduct the unpaid work this role requires – not only making art in the studio, but remaining active in the art world by running galleries, organising and writing blogs, curating my own and others' exhibitions, and completing administrative tasks – in a sense, I pay for the privilege to be an artist with the income from my part time job. A sense of economic and social insecurity accompanies the choice to be an artist; for women especially, and the choice to have a family significantly adds to this insecurity.

*Settlement* (2016) was selected as the title for this work due to the multiplicity of the word's meanings. On one level, ‘settlement’ refers to a locality or a populated place, a term used in archaeology or geography to denote a place where a
community lives or has lived. ‘Settlement’ can also signify new occupation, such as colonisation, exposing an intention to ‘make permanent’. Further in connection to permanence and land, ‘settlement’ also refers to the moment that title deeds and finance for a property are exchanged between parties. For civil engineers, ‘settlement’ is the way a building may impress upon the earth, the impact of its weight, shrinkage and compression on its foundations. ‘Settlement’ can also refer to a private agreement made between parties before a dispute reaches the public domain. Finally, there is the definition of ‘settlement’ as a compromise; when we ‘settle’ for something, we are reminded that our choices, while not perfect, are often near enough when we take into consideration matters known and unknown.

Within the exhibition of Settlement at True Estate Gallery I created a new work to further tease out these related meanings, also title Settlement the work adapted a wrought iron garden gate by welding the word ‘SETTLEMENT’ into the gates vertical bars. Each bar extends to the height of the gate on which is attached a flat elongated hexagon which creates a sombre decorative element reminiscent of flickering flames and creating a bit of a ‘gates of hell’ atmosphere with the direct lighting and shadow effects is less an impenetrable barrier and more so a threat announcing ‘private property’, ‘keep out’. To further the works references to inclusion and exclusion the non-functioning gate is propped on two concrete bricks designed specifically for use in landscaping building retaining walls whose purpose it is to hold back movement and further settlement. (Fig. 7)
Fig. 7 Elvis Richardson, *Settlement*, 2018, Modified wrought iron garden gate, retaining wall concrete bricks. 190x120cm. Installation view at True Estate Gallery 2018
In the context of a real estate website the authenticity of images seems unstable – we question the ‘truth’ of the image, since the use of wide-angle lenses and lighting means the photos are staged, displaying the property in its best possible light. These images rarely have captions, and much of the information about the property must be absorbed visually. When I view these sites, I can imagine potential buyers scanning the photographs, mentally sizing up the space to understand its flow in cross-reference with the floor plan. The viewer must mentally erase the contents of the space in order to fill it with their own effects and furnishings, projecting their potential everyday selves into this new scene.

The aesthetics and style of these images are unique: even in the context of real estate listings, their visual and anthropological qualities suggest wider readings. I view them in the context of a ‘living archive’, documentation of a property and its owner’s lives captured in a state of transition. In contrast with the sense of aspiration normally associated with real estate exchanges, Settlement is not about kitchen countertops, European appliances, hardwood floors, ‘worst house on the best street’, or ‘location, location, location’. These images represent ordinary people: members of the elderly, low-income or regional communities whose lives are repackaged for consumption by a growing number of ‘rentvestors’\textsuperscript{21}, superannuation funds and investment schemes. Today, the acquisition of domestic properties in Australia is less about putting a roof over people’s heads, building and growing families, fostering feelings of belonging or feeling invested in the local, metropolitan or national: instead it’s about individual wealth building, future securing, tax exemption, mortgage redrawing or value building. (Fig. 8)

\textsuperscript{21} Rentvestor is a term that gained popularity in the last decade in real estate and investing parlance meaning someone who rents where they live but buys one or more investment properties.
While I wanted the viewer to bring their own experiences and recognition to this work, I also hoped to guide them and imprint my own experiences of the past and my own political concerns without the use of captions or explanatory texts. To this end, I aimed to transform the slide show of otherwise static images into a film-like experience. I had worked with sound artist James Hayes on previous projects, and we’d discussed the idea of creating leitmotifs and theme songs to accompany the subjects of my work. James has an extensive and esoteric knowledge of music, and I trusted his ability to compose a sound track that would respond to discussions we’d had previously concerning the real estate images and the moods they embodied. My initial goal as we met over a number of months was to create a selection of images that James could refer to as he worked, and I collated some images, printed on A3 paper, into a sequence as a book. This activity resulted in a process and a storyboard, allowing me to experiment with different layouts of
images and juxtapositions of scale which I transferred to the video’s edit, along with a sense of time unfolding as the book page’s are turned. In the exhibition presentation of Settlement at True Estate Gallery I presented the book on a shelf, above which hung a souvenir portrait of Elvis Presley from my personal collection, a standing lamp bends forward and illuminates the book. (Fig. 7)

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 9** Elvis Richardson, *Settlement*, 2018, A3 Colour Book, framed image of Elvis Presley, floor lamp, shelf. Installation view at True Estate Gallery 2018

James compiled three tracks, or ‘loops’, each between two and four minutes long. I arranged the loops in my chosen order, extending some and repeating others, and animated the images to coincide with the sound track. The animating process felt like choreography, as I responded to the music by amplifying differences or similarities in the images’ composition or degree of abstraction, or their cultural and personal contexts. James’ soundscape is rich in texture and layered with references: for example, doorbell chimes echo the sounds of computer games, then shuffle through a New Year’s Eve conga line to a bossa nova beat and
escalated synthesiser. It then transforms into memories of children practicing scales on the piano, subsequently folding into a rhythm that is discordant and skipping then driving and repetitive, drumming like a beating heart throughout the work’s duration.

_Settlement_ was informed by conceptual works that both investigate ‘home’ as a concept as well as broader housing issues, from architectural structures through to socio-political conceptions of home as emblematic of security. Some key works I returned to when conceiving of _Settlement_ are Gordon Matta-Clark’s work _Fake Estates (1972)_ (Diserens, 2003, 47); Martha Rosler’s three-cycle exhibition _If You Lived Here_ (1989, DIA Art Foundation New York); and works by Hans Haacke, such as _Shapolsky, et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1 1971_ (1971). While such works are now recognised as seminal contributions to the development of institutional critique, using the archive-style of presentation typical of conceptual art’s aesthetic, the drive and methodology behind each of these works have also laid a foundation for understanding how to view investigative work today.

Matta-Clark’s _Fake Estates (1972)_ is an archive of information concerning the deeds for fifteen micro plots of untenable but ownable space in New York city that the artist purchased in 1972 – for example, thin gaps between buildings or sidewalk corners. Matta-Clark took viewers on tours of these sites; only one piece of documentation of these tours remains today, made by New York-based community radio and tv presenter, Jaime Davidovich. In the 1990s, twenty years post the artist’s death, his archive was reassembled to represent _Fake Estates_, which is how we know the work today. Matta-Clark referred to his practice as ‘anarchitecture’ – a term describing the use of architecture, both as medium and subject matter, to critically expose its formal and social structures (Diserens, 2003, 36). This project by Matta-Clark inspired an idea for a future work, wherein I purchase a burial grave plot to house the cremated remains or serve as a memorial of dead artists. Such a work would make visceral the artist’s conundrum of inhabiting a culture wherein their economic imperatives exist outside the mainstream. In addition, the owning of a burial plot – perhaps some of Australia’s most affordable real estate – represents a comment on the cultural investment that
is made in artists' deaths as events that mark the completion of their oeuvre and establish their work's future worth.

I took a more codified approach with Settlement because I wanted it to be a work embodying an distinctive visual style, conceptually inviting closer inspection of the conditions it investigates. I was inspired by film makers such as Chris Marker – particularly his short film La Jetée (1962). This twenty-five-minute film is distinctive; a series of images edited to a soundtrack with voice-over and ambient music. Chris Marker is an elusive character, and he resisted classification of his work as being either documentary, narrative, essay or art work, stating instead that, 'it is everything' (Gester & Kaganski, 2009). Marker's obituary in the New York Times July 30, 2012 describes him as ‘the enigmatic writer, photographer, filmmaker and multimedia artist who pioneered the flexible hybrid form known as the essay film’. (Lim, 1992) Marker committed to creating low-cost films using still images, inventive editing, existing documentary and found footage. He initiated the film collective S.L.O.N ('Society for Launching New Works' 1967-74), a group that made documentary films and encouraged industrial workers and other disenfranchised groups to make their own films and organise their own collectives. Marker's work is endlessly fascinating, due to the variety of his subjects, the innovative approach he took to making films and his commitment to his own interests, to make work that existed outside of and thus challenged the otherwise market-driven creative economy.

Settlement relates to other works I produced that also referenced the home, especially in relation to the domestic, to the idea of home as a 'safe place', and to the everyday. Youth Refuge (1997) was the first of several works I made while working as a youth worker in a residential-care service that provided medium-term housing to homeless youth. When the service’s main house – a five-bedroom terrace in Sydney's inner west – was to be recarpeted, I imagined displaying the old carpet as an art work, laid out in the shape of the original house on a 1:1 floor plan. Through The Performance Space in Sydney I was invited to install work in glass window boxes in the Sydney District Magistrate’s Court, housed in the former Mark Foy’s department store in Sydney’s CBD. This location – a courthouse – was a charged context for the carpet’s display. I wanted the carpet to
represent public housing for homeless youth rather than aspirational wealth-building via house renovation, and hoped the viewer would see the work’s value in its layered social and economic qualities. This synthetic carpet was made for the hardwearing context of a public institution; it wasn’t soft or luxurious, it had slight variations of dark speckles and was called ‘trophy grey’. The carpet was worn and stained by cigarette burns and spills, it was ripped and frayed and discoloured by exposure to the sun, indented by furniture and worn with pathways from foot traffic. These carpets were only replaced once they had reached this extreme state of disrepair, which I wanted to display. In order that viewers could see the evidence of its use, I displayed the carpet by hanging each ‘room’ in a window – five bedrooms and a hallway, lounge room, dining room and office.

I kept the carpet once the exhibition was over and showed it again in 1999 in the New South Wales Travelling Art Scholarship at Artspace, Sydney. It was difficult for the exhibition’s curators to accommodate the full carpet in the context of a group exhibition, and we settled on installing the carpet from the house’s hallway from the footpath through the foyer and into the gallery space as a ‘red carpet’ style entrance. Inside, it was attached to one of the bedroom carpets, while carpets from the remaining rooms were left rolled up, installed in the gallery’s entrance vestibule. This work felt somehow excluded from the exhibition proper, metaphorically recalling the way that people with no family support and on low incomes are excluded from society. At the opening and throughout the duration of the exhibition, I noted that people tended to gather on the carpet rather than stand on the gallery’s concrete floor. The carpet muffled the gallery’s sound and cushioned viewer’s steps, bringing comfort and a sense of the homely to the otherwise sterile space. In the process however, the work felt ignored when it was stood upon – trampled and invisible. I revisited this work in 2003, again at Artspace, with carpet from the recently refurbished offices of the Biennale of Sydney which I paired with a video of my sleeping son. In 2009, I retrieved carpet from a public housing estate in Melbourne and exhibited it at the Margaret Lawrence Gallery at the University of Melbourne, curated by Vikki McInnes, the
The exhibition was part of the Melbourne Festival 2009 program and its visual art exhibition theme of ‘dwelling’

How have other Australian artists dealt with issues concerning land, real estate, home ownership, dwelling, life style and gentrification? Indigenous artists provide the most appropriate starting point in relation to the lie of ‘terra nullius’ – the legal justification by English colonisers who refused to acknowledge the land’s original inhabitants. For indigenous artists, their own concepts of land, property and ownership have always informed the important issues about which to make art including responses to Western colonial and capitalist control around private property. Traditional dot paintings were born from mapping and telling stories about country and place. A number of Australian indigenous languages employ particular expressions to indicate direction, not originating from the speaker’s body as the orienting factor but referencing the direction of travel, or cardinal directions that relate to the concepts of north, south, east and west, even when describing the location of an object in an enclosed space (Haviland, 1998, 28). This method of speaking and understanding locates the speaker in relation to the world or the landscape they inhabit, rather than to themselves as the centre of the universe as we do in Western culture.

Miriam Charlie, a Yanyuwa/Garrwa woman, uses photography to document people’s living conditions in Borroloola in the Gulf of Carpentaria in the Northern Territory, where she lives and works as an arts liaison officer at the Waralungku Arts Centre (Zillman, 2016). Charlie and I both had work included in The Social Contract (2016) at the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Victoria, curated by Pippa Milne. Charlie’s series of twenty medium- to large-scale colour photographs titled My Country, No Home (2016) document the dwellings and occupants of the only available housing in Borroloola, all of which are owned by the Queensland Department of Housing. In Charlie’s formally staged photographs, each dwelling’s occupant is placed in the centre of the frame, sitting or standing in front of their house, symbolically interconnecting them with it. In these photographs, it is clear that the houses are of poor quality and in a

---

state of disrepair (Charlie, 2016). While public housing properties are usually easily identified by their uniformity of quality and workmanship and materials or methods of construction, the dwellings Charlie displayed to the educated, well-heeled audience viewing them at the Centre for Contemporary Photography – and subsequently Alcaston Gallery in Melbourne – would seem inconceivable as homes. Charlie titled her work *My Country, No Home* – a direct comment on the housing department’s neglect of this small indigenous community. Here, residents live in overcrowded tin shacks with leaking roofs, white ants and structural problems; many dwellings are not connected to water, electricity or sewerage. In the captions that accompany her photographs, Charlie explains that many people – sometimes over a dozen – live in each dwelling. She makes it clear that her intent in showing the photographs is not to shame the homes’ inhabitants but to highlight the problem and make work that is activist in nature. It could be argued that art is not the most effective context in which to draw attention to this problem or change the situation but it certainly puts the issue in the public domain and the work has received deserved media attention in both art and mass media.

Cities are places where artists traditionally congregate: where they socialise with other artists, attend art school, live and make and exhibit their work. But how do artists, on what are usually very low incomes, survive and thrive in cities? When we look at larger international cities to which artists have historically been drawn – for example influential commercial centres like New York City – a history exists wherein the presence of artists in urban areas can be identified as a catalyst for the area’s growth and revitalisation. In this process, artists displace poorer residents as the demand for – and hence costs of – accommodation rises; artists also tend to occupy spaces in which businesses once operated, providing employment to local residents. Artists however are in turn themselves displaced by the gentrification process, as developers attracted to the area build luxury

---

23 Miriam Charlie also talks about her photographs and her community housing situation at [https://vimeo.com/158590440](https://vimeo.com/158590440)
apartments, advertised as being ‘close to galleries and coffee shops’. Over the past few years, residents in certain neighbourhoods of Los Angeles and New York have protested against – and even forced the closure of – artist-run and commercial galleries that have opened in their working-class neighbourhoods. These protests are instigated in the belief that the presence of artists in such areas can create the catalyst for their gentrification, and that they should be banished before this process takes hold and alters the area to the resident’s detriment. (Remenchick, 2018)

Historical accounts of the role artists played in the gentrification of areas in Manhattan by David Cole found that artists themselves feel trapped in the controversy concerning changes in zoning and land use – over which they have little control, but may in fact have some influence. Cole identifies the influence of artists as originating in their ‘visibility’ in an area; when artists occupy mixed-use properties in decentralised locations, transforming them into studios or galleries, it signals to developers and other interested parties that the area is now ‘safe’ (Cole, 1987, 396). Artists who couldn’t afford to buy property in the area prior to its development will be in the same situation as the local residents also renting there, and are eventually priced out of the neighbourhood once its development is established. Australian charity Anglicare’s annual Rental Affordability Snapshot in 2018 found that for a person on New Start allowance there were exactly 0% of rental properties available in Melbourne with sufficient rooms to prevent overcrowding, and for those on an aged pension (as I imagine many artists from my generation will be) there were only 62 properties (Anglicare Australia, 2018).

In The Rise of the Creative Class (Florida, 2004), Richard Florida outlines how data showing that the urban areas of most economic growth were also the areas where people from the gay community and IT industry lived. He invented the terms ‘cultural industries’ and ‘creative class’ to describe workers that innovated and provided content for the internet, or ‘information superhighway’. The presence of such groups came to be seen as a panacea for the revitalisation of post-industrial urban neighbourhoods across America and the world. A neo-liberal enthusiasm existed at the end of the millennium for emerging online economies, in their potential to revitalise cities via the non-traditional life style choices typified by
artists. But while artists may have been included under the umbrella of the creative class, because of their non-traditional life style choices, artists incomes do not reflect the implied luxury this free wheeling status might suggest.

While my economic circumstances informed my search parameters my property searches became more of an obsession when I began to immerse myself in the details and nuances of real estate photography. The principles of real estate photography are founded on an understanding of home as a product for sale, represented via its best aspects. De-cluttering is essential to this process, and the property should only be photographed in the parts of the day that it is ‘sun drenched’ and most well-lit. Real estate ‘speak’ is crafted to turn doubts into assets, using clichés such as, ‘old world charm’, ‘motivated seller’, ‘lovingly maintained’, ‘potential for second bedroom’, ‘Council-approved for four townhouses’. The photographs I collected for Settlement however didn’t always subscribe to this formula, which drew me to this substratum of the housing market’s topography. Even when these images did look staged, the authenticity of their ‘real life’ status could not be disguised, and is revealed through the idiosyncratic way the pictures were framed, the way the house’s selection of objects were arranged, the angles the shots were taken from and the scenes they depicted.
CoUNTess: Women Count in the Art-world

I want just a little bit more than I’m ever going to get
David McDiarmid – artist

This chapter explains the third work presented for the PhD, CoUNTess: Women Count in the Art-world. As previously discussed, this collecting-based work collected data concerning gender representation in Australia’s visual art sector. This work has two parts: the first part was a blog, started in 2008, with posts that visually presented via graphs the number of male and female artists that were represented in specific art exhibitions, magazines, books or collections nationally. These graphs were accompanied by a brief analysis of the data collected, and the posts allowed for anonymous comments by readers. The second part of the work is a report: a data collection surveying the gender representation of art exhibitions, magazines, books, prizes, and collections nationally over twelve months during 2014, titled The Countess Report and published online. The data collection survey was designed as a benchmarking tool, to allow for future data to be collected and any change measured.

Both the blog and the benchmarking report make public independent evidence of the lack of fairness inherent to the system in which women artists like myself try to succeed, at a time when assumptions tend to be made concerning feminist agendas as historical and assimilated. When I first heard the term ‘post-feminism’, it sounded to me like an implausible claim that the project of feminism was successful and over. In fact, the term refers instead to the new and necessary ways this project is changing, by questioning its own monolithic prejudices and recognizing intersectional discrimination as integral to its moving forward. The first use of the term in the 1980s by Susan Bolton in a New York Times article titled Voices from the post-feminist generation (Bolton 1982) was the beginning of a backlash against second-wave feminism, where it became characterised as aggressive, unpalatable, uncool and passé (McRobbie, 2009, 131).
For decades, all-women shows have been championed by artist-run galleries, universities and independent contemporary art organisations. The CoUNTess blog was launched on the back cover of the catalogue for an all-women show, *Girls, Girls, Girls*, curated by artists Nat Thomas and Lyndal Walker at the Carlton Hotel in Melbourne in 2008. *Frames of Reference: Aspects of Feminism and Art* (1991) curated by Sally Couacaud at Artspace, was one such exhibition, which I saw while still a student. This exhibition formed part of a larger event with the umbrella title *Dissonance*. Organised by Artspace, Sydney, this large event included over seventy independent and varied projects that took place in universities, museums, commercial galleries and artist-run spaces throughout Sydney. Around this time, the influential group *Guerrilla Girls* exploded into the artworld. This anonymous group of feminist female artists formed in New York, initially in response to the Museum of Modern Art’s 1984 exhibition *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*, which included only thirteen women – and no women of colour – in an exhibition of 165 artists from seventeen countries. The *Guerrilla Girls* posted highly visible street posters throughout the city and raised money to buy advertisements on public transport on which they displayed their iconic graphics and statements, many using statistics to drive home their message of gender inequality. There was still the need to qualify their satirical approach however, as is evident by their statement that, ‘we use humour to convey information, provoke discussion, and show that feminists can be funny’ on their website. I did find their work funny, and it – in combination with the event *Dissonance* – made me feel it was an art world I wanted to be a part of, one that was leading change.

Two decades later, in 2005, large banners produced by the *Guerrilla Girls* were installed at the entrance of the *51st Venice Biennale: The Experience of Art*, stating the number of works made by women that were on display in Venice’s museums. On one of these banners was written, “Where are the women artists of Venice? Underneath the men”, followed in smaller type by a list of numbers proving this fact. The view of feminism as ‘unpalatable’, formed in the 1980s and 90s, had changed little by 2005, and these feminist art works were viewed by the

25 https://www.guerrillagirls.com/
art media as passé and out of favour. These *Guerilla Girls* suite of banners were significantly placed as the first works the viewer encounters when entering the Arsenale galleries making a bold curatorial statement championing feminist art and suggesting potential readings in the show.

The 51st Venice Biennale was the first to be curated by a woman, in this case two women Rosa Martinez and Maria de Corral. In one review of the exhibition Guardian journalist Deyan Sudjic quipped “Who cares if they [Martinez and de Corral] are introduced as the Spanish girls at press conferences?” (Sudjic, 2005) in response to the *Guerilla Girls* banner declaring “Women directors at last”. Who cares?! This comment was followed by: “And they remind us, not very helpfully, that ‘of the 1,238 artists on exhibition in major museums in Venice, fewer than 40 are women’ it’s a bit late for gender balance in the 14th Century” (Sudjic, 2005) referring to the banner that includes data on artworks by women owned by Venice’s historical museums. Sudjic’s comment conveniently overlooks the point the work was making - museums do own work by women but do not display them. Another banner reinforces the point declaring “Free the Women Artists! Museums all over the world keep them locked up in storage, out of sight. Demand that museums show more art by women now!”

English art critic Adrian Searle’s feature Guardian review begins with reference to artist Tino Sehgal’s trained gallery attendants who wave their arms and musically chant “Ohhh! This is so contemporary, contemporary, contemporary” amongst the installation of sculptures by Thomas Scheibitz in the German pavilion. Searle adopts Sehgal’s work as the article’s touchstone and a sign of joy, irony and insolence greeting Biennale visitors’ and their expectations of the next exciting/big thing/artist. The article continues:

“It is always all so contemporary. Except when its passé, like the vast, classically designed chandelier hung not with Murano glass baubles but with unused tampons at the entrance to the Arsenale. (how many student

---

26 Images of these works can be seen on the Guerilla Girls website [https://www.guerrillagirls.com/exhibitions/](https://www.guerrillagirls.com/exhibitions/)
works, though not quite so well done, has one seen like this?" (Searle, 2005)

Searle did not name the Portuguese artist Joana Vasconcelos who created the tampon chandelier nor the title of her work *A Novia (The Bride)* that he criticised for being passé in his article. While the work was acknowledged for being well crafted it was not enough to be considered good art. Everyone would be of the same mind, he scoffs with his bracketed question. Searle reveals exactly the mechanicians of influence and gender bias his opinions perpetuate with his authority to decide what is and isn't important art. His reason for the critical failure of *A Novia (The Bride)* being that it reminds him of underdeveloped students with immature ideas and obvious concepts. *A Novia (The Bride)* is a work that in 2005 managed to push through into an international male dominated exhibition and is made from tampons. The Tampon embodies a very clear reference to women and the value of women’s bodies and in the case of *A Novia (The Bride)* the value of women’s art and work. Searle’s comparison to student work should have conjured images of the ignored and sidelined critical mass of female art students making work by and about themselves, their bodies and their stories and history. Contrast this to how Searle qualifies Thomas Shutte’s figurative reclining sculptures as able to twist old fashioned into a clever artistic trope: “Shuttes room of his recent iron female figures on their huge tables are coupled with a large suite of etched portraits, and rightly won a Golden Lion. His show might even be seen as an old-fashioned demonstration of sculptural mass, volume and line, but being old-fashioned and conservative is a sort of disguise for Shutte.” (Searle, 2005)

In 2007, two important international feminist exhibitions were staged: *WACK: Art and the Feminist Revolution* curated by Connie Butler at Geffen Contemporary Galleries at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and *Global Feminisms* curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, an exhibition that launched the new Elizabeth Sackler Centre for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. Both exhibitions surveyed the legacies of feminist art in the late 20th century,

---

27 Joana Vasconcelos today is an artist working internationally and celebrated for her iconic work *A Novia (The Bride)* and her feminist and flamboyant practice that has included installations at the Chateau de Versailles in 2012. Artist website: [http://joanavasconcelos.com/menu_en.aspx](http://joanavasconcelos.com/menu_en.aspx)
establishing the value of its contribution to the key features and understanding of art today, including: identity-based art, performance, multi-disciplinary, craft-based mediums and materials, textiles, ceramics, activist art, institutional critique, collecting-based practices and more.

Elles@centrepompidou: Women Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of Modern Art at the Centre Pompidou (2009) represented a new approach to all-women shows. In this ambitious project, curator Camille Morineau staged a year-long exhibition of women artists from the modernist period with works taken from the Pompidou’s collection. The project was the result of many years of research, and many works had to be located and acquired into the collection – demonstrating the museum’s commitment to readdressing the contribution of women artists to the story of 20th and 21st century art. With one gesture, Morineau’s elles@centrepompidou exposed and changed the museum’s exhibiting and collecting practices.

More recently in 2016, the director of Tate Modern, Frances Morris, declared her intention to focus on women and other under-represented artists in the museum’s exhibition programming (Fairly, 2016). Morris’ use of her position to address this historical imbalance has distinguished the Tate Modern amongst the Tate’s suite of museums. During this same period in Australia, only two state museums have staged surveys of feminist art or all-women exhibitions – Contemporary Australia: Women (2012) curated by Julie Ewington at Queensland Art Gallery & Gallery of Modern Art as part of their Australian survey series, and more recently Who’s Afraid of Colour? (2016) at the National Gallery of Victoria. In her opening sentence to this exhibition’s catalogue essay, Judith Ryan makes one of the most compelling justifications for all-women and gender non-conforming exhibitions: ‘In 1981 the National Gallery of Victoria staged Aboriginal Australia, a major exhibition of 328 works that did not include a single exhibit by a named woman artist’.

_I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman._ (Woolf, 1929, 51)
In 2004 *The Art Life* (Frost, 2004) a blog initiated by Sydney-based writer and art critic Andrew Frost, began posting anonymously written reviews and commentary concerning current exhibitions, publications, news and artists in Australia. The posts, honest and engaging in style, were made more stimulating by the fact of the author and editor’s anonymity. At that time, blogs also allowed for anonymous responses to be posted, creating a lively stream of comments from readers that opened the doors of discussion and debate in an uninhibited way. *CoUNTess* was one of several blogs that surfaced in the following years and operated under the cloak of anonymity. The *Guerrilla Girls* also work anonymously by appropriating the names of dead women artists as pseudonyms, and wearing gorilla masks in public. ‘We could be anyone; we are everywhere’ is the group’s response to the mystery that surrounds their artistic identities, their anonymity allowing for greater focus on issues over personalities. My anonymity with the *CoUNTess* blog was a mask that uninhibited me, giving me the confidence to start the blog at a time when it seemed unfashionable to address the issue of gender representation. As with the Guerrilla Girls, anonymity allowed the blog to focus on data as evidence of the systemic gender bias that hinders success for all women.

I had been running the blog for one year when I was preparing a lunch time artists talk at Victorian College of the Arts and decided it was more important to share the Countess research in this forum, when the audience would of course be a majority female students. I think from that point on while I did not make an official announcement revealing my identity as the author, or display my name anywhere on the blog, I decided I would no longer keep my identity a secret. This was also due to the fact organisations and individuals had started contacting me to write or give a talk about the project. I was not interested in playing a charade off line, although I could see the costume and performative potential in a character named CoUNTess, which I had already instilled in the writing on the blog with a somewhat outraged and self important authority and tone and I always used the pronoun ‘we’, like royalty. I situate my authenticity as the author of CoUNTess as embedded in the fact I am an artist and am writing from my own experience and

---

28 The ArtSwipe was another: http://artswipe.blogspot.com/
29 A full historical chronology and archive of the Guerrilla Girls can be found on their website https://www.guerrillagirls.com
observation as a form of activism and protest. I always felt I was just pointing out the obvious. A thought I have returned to many times was; what if mediocre female artists had the same opportunities as mediocre male artists? As a way to question the quality of the male art we are continually being presented with by institutions as the most influential, innovative and best quality.

While publishing the blog, I often wrote a short analysis of the data I was collecting, and at times I provided some wider contexts, histories and arguments, but I felt most comfortable with the focus being on providing the data as a resource for others to reference and cite than as a platform to broadcast my personal opinions (or grievances). While I certainly wished the blog to be influential and stir the pot, and my writing had a hint of outrage mixed with sarcasm, only when necessary did I name individual curators, as I endeavoured to keep the overall focus on the institutions and not make it personal. I did elect when appropriate to list the women artists I counted in a blog post and include links to their websites or further information, like an article or review, where possible. In doing this, I was making a conscious effort to look routinely at women’s art, as a deliberate exercise to un-condition myself from all the men’s art I was (am) constantly being exposed to.

My attempts to collect data concerning gender representation were assisted by the fact that galleries and artists provide archives of information on their websites, in keeping with the museum and archival practices they seek to become a part of. At a gallery website I can compile data on the names of the artists they represent, or have included in exhibitions, images of their works and a professional curriculum vitae. From an artist’s CV it is possible to find an artist’s date and place of birth, their current city of residence, the name of the gallery that represents them, a history of their exhibitions, when and where they studied and the degrees they earned; there are few other professions where people display their resume in the way that visual artists do. We often encounter artist’s names like a brand, a fact made evident by looking at art magazines; here, where there are surprisingly few pictures of art, there are conversely many artist’s names listed in all fonts and sizes. Gallery names are also brands that eponymously take on the director’s name, such as: Roslyn Oxley9 or Anna Schwartz, Darren Knight, Sutton, Sarah
Cottier, and so on, in Australia. When collecting data on artist’s representation, I generally used my prior knowledge of a name’s associated gender to identify the artist’s gender. If I came across a gender-neutral or culturally unfamiliar name, I would research the artist until I found an article, interview or review that mentioned their gender. If in this secondary search the artist was male, this fact was typically mentioned in the first paragraph of an article; however if the artist was female, it was often hidden or at times not mentioned at all, necessitating further searches. This revealed to me that artists tend to automatically be gendered ‘male’, their true gender hidden, in an effort to avoid their exclusion and unconscious gender.

During the first seven years I ran the blog I attempted to keep relevant and respond to current survey shows, books, magazines and events. During this time I invited fellow artists to collect the data and submit an article to which I edited and generated the graphs, with contributions by the following artists; Jessica Johnson, Sadie Chandler as The Auditor, Raquel Ormella as The Handmaiden and Louise Mayhew.

In 2015, after running the CoUNTess blog for seven years, I received a research grant from the Cruthers Art Foundation with which I elected to conduct a year-long data collection and collation project I titled The Countess Report (Richardson, 2016). The primary purpose of the report was to determine the gender balance of the artists who exhibited in public and commercial galleries during the year 2014, to provide a significant data sample that could be used to benchmark any future change. Data was collected for this report from an extensive range of galleries nationally, including national and state museums, public galleries, regional, council and university galleries, commercial galleries, private museums, art fairs, and artist-run and contemporary art spaces.

I designed this project with the outcome of a freely available public resource in mind, in the form of a website presenting both the base collated data and summarised in a report. My argument for the project was based on the fact that more visual arts degree graduates (74%) and art professionals (67%) identified as women than men in the tax and census data of the Australia Council report commissioned by David Throsby and Katya Petetskaya (Throsby, 2003, 18). Yet
The Countess Report found that women only achieved greater than 50% representation in two categories: university galleries and art prizes – which requires the qualifier that although women won 56% of the prizes, they only received 47% of the total prize pool. Translated, this means that the mean prize monies women received was $14K while for men the mean was $23K, which constitutes a very real pay gap. In 2014, the period in which this data was collected, women won three of Australia’s five richest art prizes, the Moran Portrait Prize ($150K), Moran Contemporary Photography Prize ($50K) and the Archibald ($75K), which significantly increased the amount of women artist’s total prize pool.

While quality and artistic merit are considered the basis for an artist’s selection for a prize, grant round or museum exhibition, findings by The Countess Report bring these assumptions into question by providing evidence that gender bias greatly impacts women’s chances for success in the visual arts. Although previous Australian and international studies have collected and commented on data concerning gender representation in visual art, The Countess Report makes a significant and extensive contribution to this work, expanding the field to include data on art education, art prizes, art media and exhibitions in one study. The impact and response to the study from the general and arts media as well as they museum, gallery and education sector was overwhelmingly enthusiastic for the opportunity to reflect and drive great diversity in the professional sector.30

In 2017, one year after launching The Countess Report, I began a fundraising campaign and recruited a small group of women who had previously offered to assist the CoUNTess Project. Miranda Samuels and Amy Prcevich helped me formulate a strategy to enable them to take the project over, and through the Australian Cultural Fund we raised $15,000, transforming the project into a Not-For-Profit Incorporated Association run by a management committee of which I am secretary. Miranda and Amy both artists who also work in the museum education sector independently devised a plan to produce educational materials for high schools and have initiated numerous community counting sessions to engage artists and generate new data. They plan to re-visit the original Countess Report and collect data to update the benchmark categories established by The Countess

30 A selection of citations and references to the CoUNTess projects can be found in Appendix 3
Report in 2016. The CoUNTess project therefore continues, and still focuses on providing data on issues of diversity in the visual arts on its new website.

For the purposes of this exegesis CoUNTess outcomes are presented as live websites so I have included an image of a metal badge I had produced in 2016 as an effort to produce merchandise. I designed the badge based on the CoUNTess logo but updated its shape to imitate a royal crown, drawn with a line graph that peaks in like a mountain range, which to me represented common ambitions of a successful career and recognition. (Fig. 10)

![CoUNTess Badge](image)

**Fig. 10** Elvis Richardson, *Countess Badge*, Enamel on metal pin, 4cmx1.5cm 2016

There are many other women who have influenced and championed the success of the Countess project and with whom I have worked alongside in our efforts to effect change. In Sydney, these include Jo Holder, curator, writer and director of Cross Art Projects, and writer and educator Dr Jacqueline Millner, who has published widely on the history and theory of contemporary art. In 2013, Millner and Holder along with Dr Catriona Moore established *Contemporary Art and*
Feminism\textsuperscript{31}, a group that harnesses the energy generated by tertiary art students who wanted to form an activist project, ‘a community of artists, writers, researchers with the common interest in the generative relationship between contemporary art and feminism’. They have created an online blog and social media presence as well as hosted influential conferences, symposia and exhibitions. Equally influential is the Women’s Art Register, ‘Australia’s living archive of women’s art practice (non-binary and trans inclusive) and a National, Artist-Run and Not-for-Profit community and resource’, which was, ‘established in 1975 by women artists including Lesley Dumbrell and Erica McGilchrist, and then directors of the Ewing and George Paton Galleries at Melbourne University, Kiffy Rubbo and Meredith Rogers’\textsuperscript{32}. Also in Sydney the staff of Artspace lead by Alexi Glass have championed CoUNTess through hosting a residency within the Ideas Platform space and facilitating an public education program.

In Brisbane, academic Courtney Pederson has almost single-handedly maintained the issue of feminism via her work as an educator, in the process influencing new generations of knowledgeable, determined and confident feminist artists. Courtney Pederson was part of the influential feminist collective LEVEL\textsuperscript{33} with Courtney Coombs, Caitlin Franzmann, Rachel Haynes and Anita Holtsclaw, and the gallery BoxCopy. In Adelaide, artist, curator and educator Brigid Noone negotiated with local councils to secure the sustainable studio and exhibition space for artists called Fontanelle Gallery\textsuperscript{34}, mentoring emerging artists in gallery management\textsuperscript{35} all while maintaining her own practice. In Melbourne, artist Natalie Thomas defines her own artistic identity, championing feminist narratives with posts on her infamous and influential blog, Natty Solo\textsuperscript{36}.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{31} https://contemporaryartandfeminism.com/
\textsuperscript{32} http://www.womensartregister.org/about-the-register.php
\textsuperscript{33} https://levelari.wordpress.com/about/
\textsuperscript{34} https://www.fontanelle.com.au/
\textsuperscript{35} https://www.sistergallery.com.au/
\textsuperscript{36} http://www.nattysolo.com
\end{flushleft}
Chapter 4

My Brilliant Art School Career

While gender is certainly the single biggest influence on achieving success in the art world to date, what other frameworks inform success, and what role does the education system play? In this chapter, I use examples to examine urgent gender equity issues still present in studio arts education at a high school level, and look at some of the ways that educating artists has become an end in itself. In the influential study Don’t give up your day job: An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia (Throsby, 2003) commissioned by Australia’s funding and government advisory body, the Australia Council, data was collected from individuals who had been identified as professional artists by organisations in their fields of creative practice: music, dance, writing, film, tv, poetry and the visual arts. When respondents identified the type of training most important in preparing them for their professional career, 67% of visual artists identified formal training at a tertiary institution, while only 35-50% of all other categories – including musicians, writers and actors – agreed with this statement.

Why is formal training so important in becoming a professional visual artist? The educational histories of well-known Australian artists born before World War II, such as John Olsen (1928-) or Brett Whiteley (1929-92), are typical of successful artists from that time. For this generation, training often involved attending classes on a casual basis at institutions such as the private Julian Ashton school or public East Sydney Technical College (now The National Art School) in Sydney, or further afield at schools in London and Paris, while other artists from this time, such as Margaret Olley (1923-2001), who obtained a diploma from East Sydney Technical College in 1945, or Geoffrey Smart (1921-2013) who was awarded a teaching qualification, engaged in more formal education. When considering the way universities have professionalised the art student in Australia today it is timely that the report Don’t Give Up Your Day Job (Throsby, 2003) was commissioned around a decade after the Dawkins reforms to higher education in 1988. The Dawkins-led Higher Education Funding Act 1988 (Australian Government, 1988) implemented the conversion of the Colleges of Advanced Education, from which
art schools had traditionally operated, into faculties and schools within larger universities. This institutional shift marked the beginning of the current trend for visual art education to operate within traditional university structures, where art practice is (in most but not all institutions) recognised as a form of research. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean outline this development in their book *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in the Creative Arts*: ‘Terms such as practice-led research have been developed by creative practitioners, partly for political purposes within higher education, research and other environments, to explain, justify and promote their activities, and to argue – as forcefully as possible in an often unreceptive environment – that they are as important to the generation of knowledge as more theoretically, critically or empirically based research methods’ (Smith and Dean, 2009, 2).

**High School Reunion**

The first blog post that launched the *CoUNTess* project in 2008 was made in response to a high school educational resource titled *MOVE: Video Art in High School* (Kaldor Projects, 2018), produced by the private art foundation Kaldor Projects. When it was first published in 2008, the resource contained video works by four Australian artists, all of them men and all under forty years old at the time. One year later, the resource was extended to include the work of four women artists – however four men were also added, meaning that in total, the work of eight men and only four women was represented; half of the women however were over a decade older than the men. This one small sample of gender representation in art reflects the relationships and interests that inform the art world’s ecosystem. Funding partners for this production were the New South Wales Government Department of Education and Communities, The Balnaves Foundation and Sidney Myer Fund, private philanthropic organisations, and the Yulgilbar Foundation, a winery and horse stud farm owned by the Myer family.

That fact that less than half the artists included in *MOVE* were women represents an astonishing case of neglect concerning gender representation in the visual arts, especially considering the student body enrolled in studio art in New South Wales and Victoria consists of 68% female students, reflected by the students involved in
the graduating high school exhibitions *ARTEXPRESS* in New South Wales and *Top Arts* in Victoria each year (New South Wales Government, 2018). The introduction to the *MOVE* resource described the artists represented as, ‘some of Australia’s best-known artists’ (Kaldor Projects, 2018). All twelve were represented by Australia’s leading commercial galleries, and all had work represented collected into at least one of the three largest public art collections in Australia. Four of the male artists involved, also had work held in John Kaldor’s personal collection at that time (he donated this collection to the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2011). The profiles of these artists would have increased enormously as a result of schools purchasing the *MOVE* resource; in addition, the artists should have been paid royalties from its sale, receiving an income from participating. This resource is only one example of the scale on which women artists are disadvantaged both economically and culturally, and it reveals the way in which this disadvantage is systemically perpetuated and compounded (Table 1).

**Table 1: Artists in *MOVE*: Video Art in Schools 2008-09 Resource by Kaldor Projects**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ARTIST</th>
<th>DOB</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
<th>Rep Gallery 2008-09</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>NGA Collection</th>
<th>NGV Collection</th>
<th>AGNSW Collection</th>
<th>KALDOR Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Crooks</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Anna Schwartz</td>
<td>BA, RMIT</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaun Gladwell</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Anna Schwartz</td>
<td>MFA UNSW</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Kingpins</td>
<td>1973/74</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Kaliman Gallery, BFA, SCA, UNSW</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracey Moffatt</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Roslyn Oxley</td>
<td>BA QUT</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV Moore</td>
<td>1974</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Roslyn Oxley</td>
<td>MFA CalArts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia Piccinini</td>
<td>1965</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Tolano Gallery</td>
<td>BFA VCA</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David Rosetzky</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Sutton Gallery</td>
<td>PhD Monash</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Stevens</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>(2018 Sullivan + Strumpf)</td>
<td>PhD QUT</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Tonkin</td>
<td>1963</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Sally Breen</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Von Sturmer</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Anna Schwartz</td>
<td>MFA RMIT</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jess MacNeil</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Artereal Gallery, Syd</td>
<td>MVA, SCA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd McMillian</td>
<td>1979</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Sarah Cottier Gallery</td>
<td>MFA</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Top Arts and ARTEXPRESS are held annually to exhibit the work of students who have gained exceptional results in their studio arts exams at the end of high school. In New South Wales, the ARTEXPRESS website hosted on the NSW Government portal explains the selection process for students' works from their final exam submissions (New South Wales Government, 2018):

The selection of artworks for each of the ten ARTEXPRESS exhibitions reflects the candidature for the Visual Arts examination including gender, regional and metropolitan representation, and the inclusion of all expressive forms. Other considerations also include the size of galleries, and the relationship between different bodies of work and a body of work's suitability to withstand exhibition conditions.

For Top Arts, VCE students in Victoria need to apply themselves to fulfil the criteria; the National Gallery of Victoria website explains some of the process (National Gallery of Victoria, 2018):

The National Gallery of Victoria education team organise and facilitate panels of teachers from metropolitan and regional Government, Catholic and Independent Schools to view and shortlist Top Arts applications. The State Reviewer for each subject oversees each panel, ensuring all work is considered fairly and represents best practice according to curriculum. The VCE Season of Excellence team have no input into which works are selected. After all applications have been viewed and shortlisted, the selection panel meets one final time to select the final collection.

According to Victorian Department Education and Training, Summary of Statistics for Victorian Schools April 2018, almost half (44.5%) of Victorian VCE students, are enrolled in private schools, while 55.5% are enrolled in public schools. From all works selected for the Top Arts exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2005 however, work by private school students represented 60%. In the most recent Top Arts exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2017, 70% of students were from private schools, and I believe questions should be asked concerning equal access and due process in light of this statistic. This situation represents a seed that grows to form the state of inequity and lack of social mobility in the creative industries common to our local, regional and national
cultures. This is amplified when we compare *Top Arts* to *ARTEXPRESS* where there is a significant increase in the representation of public school students from 38% in 2005 to 52.5% in 2017 and the explanation can be found in the guidelines for selection quoted above, where *ARTEXPRESS* clearly says the selection of exhibiting artists “reflects the candidature for the Visual Arts examination including gender, regional and metropolitan representation, and the inclusion of all expressive forms” and the *Top Arts* selection criteria is vaguely described as representing “best practice according to the curriculum” with no other criteria.

The data I have collated for both *ARTEXPRESS* and *Top Arts* for the years 2005 and 2017 (Table 2) suggests that income and class may significantly influence the degree of students’ success in becoming and making a living as artists in Australia. While selection for one of these exhibitions doesn’t guarantee that a student will study visual art at a tertiary level, the statistics concerning students that are selected reveal the strong cultural and socio-economic links that exist between middle-class and wealthy students and those whom are chosen for representation in art museums and universities.

**Table 2: Students Enrolled in Public and Private Schools in *Top Arts NGV, and ARTEXPRESS AGNSW* 2005 and 2017**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibition</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Private Schools</th>
<th>Public Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>ARTEXPRESS</em></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>33 (62%)</td>
<td>20 (38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Top Arts</em></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>36 (58%)</td>
<td>26 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Top Arts</em></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>33 (70%)</td>
<td>14 (30%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>ARTEXPRESS</em></td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>19 (47.5%)</td>
<td>21 (52.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the 2017 VCE high school certificate exam for Studio Arts, students were asked to analyse two artists’ work from a selection provided by the Victorian Curriculum Authority; only one of these artists was a woman. I collated data counting the number of male and female artists that were represented in these exam selections over a period of seventeen years from information available on the Victorian
Table 3: Gender of Artists Included in VCE Examination Papers for Studio Arts 2001-2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exam Year</th>
<th>Number of Male artists</th>
<th>Number of Female artists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This data showed that forty female artists (21%) and 146 male artists (79%) were included on the exam paper during this time, and that twelve artists were indigenous Australians (6.5%). Representation by women artists in the exam was lowest in 2006, when there were no female artists, while the best year was in 2013, where there were six female artists out of a total of thirteen. This is an insensitive and unacceptable approach to education, since students are still being instructed in the history of male art, endowing such art with a sense of importance and excluding other identities and narratives. This exposes an unacceptable situation that requires urgent review and fundamental change. While teachers can
do their own research individually to present a more representative variety of artists to students, the fact that the final exam – which contributes significantly towards university entrance scores – is skewered this way could serve as an indication of what students can expect upon graduation.

Career Choices

The university sector tends to take a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach; in *The Australian Idea of a University* (Davis, 2017), Melbourne University Vice Chancellor Glyn Davis describes Australia as being, ‘host to just one university with 220 campuses’. Davis claims that while the Dawkins reforms were designed to create a unified national higher education system, they have instead entrenched a university culture of sameness, an attempt to make one approach fit all disciplines. He acknowledges, ‘the loss of small specialist colleges that accentuated similarities and conformity. Henceforth, Australian higher education would operate within a single set of funding rates and a preference for three-year undergraduate degrees using the programs, titles, nomenclature and operating procedures of the nation’s founding institutions’ – a system with which all Australian art school students from the past twenty five years are very familiar.

Today’s universities are based on a vocational training model, wherein, ‘70% of students enrol in a degree with a clear professional outcome’ (Davis, 2012, 22). This situates visual art degrees on shifting grounds, subject to the university’s assessment as to their economic viability: of low vocational outcomes, these degrees typically have high technical requirements, demand a lot of space, and have high student-teacher ratios. The downsizing and threat to the future of Sydney College of the Arts by The University of Sydney in 2016 was described by Provost and Deputy Vice Chancellor Professor Steven Garton as having been instigated, ‘in response to a declining market for visual arts education’ (Taylor, 2017). A student enrolling in an undergraduate bachelor’s degree in Visual Art today would graduate with a student loan of around $19,683 AUD (Deakin University Bachelor of Arts? in Creative Arts fees for 2018). I graduated with my own Bachelor of Arts? in 1992 and Master’s degree in 1995 and am still paying off
my student loan (‘HECs debt’) twenty-six years later due to my low income working as an artist\(^{37}\).

David Throsby’s most recent report, *Making Art Work* (Throsby, 2017), states that the median income for visual artists from their creative work per annum is just $5,200; he adds that arts related income, such as teaching and arts administration jobs, increased their ‘arts related’ income to $12,000. Throsby found that the median gross total income for artists, including non-arts related employment, was $34,400. These figures are disheartening, and are confirmed from my experience when, in every year that I work as an artist, I spend more money producing and exhibiting work than I earn from it, a fact that frequently makes me question whether I am overinvested in, or overcommitted to, my career.

In today’s economy it is almost impossible for artists to live exclusively from the income they earn from their creative activity, and only a few artists can maintain sustainable profit margins. This means that the ability to work full time as an artist demands significant in-kind or financial support from a third party, such as a family member. Discussion of economic impact is important to those on a low income or who work in casual jobs, such as artists and women. *W.A.G.E* (‘Working Artists and Greater Economy’) are a New York-based activist group who work to both draw attention to economic inequalities that exist in the arts and to resolve them. Like CoUNTess, *W.A.G.E* was initially established as a website in 2008 to respond to the realities of living in an ‘exposure economy’; on this website, in their ‘Womanifesto’, the group describes the ‘promise’ of exposure as, ‘a liability in a system that denies the value of our (artist’s) labour’. They also call for, ‘an address of the economic inequalities that are prevalent and proactively preventing the art worker’s ability to survive within the greater economy’ (*W.A.G.E*, 2018).

*Creative Independent*, another New York-based group, have a website that houses, ‘a resource of emotional and practical guidance for artists of all types’ (*Creative Independent*, 2018). The group released a report on the general state of

artists’ financial situations based on a survey of over one thousand participants, which they instigated in response to the ‘lack of accessible information on how visual artists can expect to sustain themselves financially’, which results in artists’ inability to, ‘make informed decisions and plan for the future’. The survey’s responses established a sense of financial security as, ‘reliably having enough money to cover basic expenses, plus reliably saving money’ (Creative Independent, 2018). When asked, ‘how financially stable do you feel now?’ the survey found that over 80% of respondents rated their ‘stability level’ below six, in a scale where level ten meant they felt ‘financially stable’. When respondents were asked which factors most affected their ability to become financially stable, the survey found that, ‘artists were most likely to credit their relationships and support network as top factors contributing to their financial stability’ (Creative Independent, 2018). Regarding education, respondents felt that, ‘attending art school is mostly helpful as a way to develop their practice. However, earning an art degree does not set artists up for financial stability’ (Creative Independent, 2018).

If we measure the degree of artist’s education by the total number of years they spend studying art, Australia must have the most educated artists in the world. If artists are engaged in part time or casual employment while they study, they will mostly likely earn very little superannuation, and the burden of having to support themselves while studying can place great stress on students. Higher research degrees in visual art have been a rapidly growing business since the early 1990s: ‘In 1990 there were very few enrolments or completions in creative arts doctorates in Australia; by 2003, 20 out of the 30 universities in the country offered creative arts doctorates, and well over 400 doctorates had been examined and completed nationally’ (Webb & Brien, 2015, 1321); now, over a decade later, that number has no doubt increased38. Do artists aspire to vocational outcomes from their study, or is the study a vocation in itself? Universities also form the source of the only vocational outcomes available for PhD-qualified, practice-led researchers, and it’s

---

38 A Trove search at the National Library of Australia (June 6th, 2018) revealed that 2,577 Australian university PhD theses available online have abstracts that include the phrase ‘practice led research’.
adequately renumerated: academic teaching and research jobs. Given the limited employment prospects available for highly qualified, university-trained artists, it could be asked whether the university is responding to a demand by artists for more academic training in the visual arts, or creating it. In addition, we could question how does the university benefit from this situation where artists are over-qualified with little job prospects, and who is really paying for that? In an education themed 2007 issue of Art in America an article titled ‘Ten Reasons to Mistrust the New PhD in Studio Art’, art historian and critic James Elkins critiqued the concept of PhD qualifications for artists beginning to be introduced in the USA. Here, Elkins lists a series of questions that attempt to understand studio art practice not in terms of how it fits into the academic model of possessing a methodology and generating ‘new knowledge’ but in terms of how does engaging in a PhD contribute to art making. Elkins also points out how this exacerbation of the academicization of art ‘could unnecessarily be extending artists’ student life where they are not out in the world’ (Elkins, 2007, 108). Elkins also points out that “to some extent, reflexivity is a general goal of advanced education or at the least an inevitable by-product. But is self-reflection always a good thing for art? And who can measure it? Or teach it?’ (Elkins, 2007, 109) Plus, in countries such as the UK, Netherlands and Australia, where the proliferation of PhDs and DCAs started, university departments get more money if they have PhD programs: ‘It’s been difficult for the degree to escape the suspicion that it is a transparent, even cynical, engine for academic solvency?’ (Elkins, 2007, 109). Elkins, Professor in Art History and Criticism at the School of Art Institute of Chicago, further analysed the impacts of the increasing popularity of the PhD in the United States in his 2014 book, Artists With PhDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Arts (Elkins, 2014). In her review of Elkins’ argument, Gabrielle Moser makes the point that, ‘the question most often posed in Elkins’ book is, “how do we respond to the development of these degrees?” when the more critical question is, “to what does the success of these degrees respond?”’ (Moser, 2009, 53), commenting further

---

39 On June 6th, 2018, a search for visual art lecturer or post-doc positions available at Australian universities located only two academic three-year contracts in the field of visual art, both at Australian National University. The same search, made in each of the previous two months, produced no results.
that, ‘many of the arguments about the art PhD actually reflect disagreements about the cohesion and function of the university as a whole’ (Moser, 2009, 53).

In 1994, six years after the Dawkins reforms were implemented, the Australia Council introduced a new category of funding for visual artists, that of the ‘emerging artist’. Ten years later, when artists previously classified ‘emerging’ had increased in experience and therefore expectations, the category, ‘mid-career’ was introduced as a classification. By 2004, the Australia Council had created a hierarchy of the three stages of an artist’s career: ‘emerging’, ‘mid-career’ and ‘established’ – terms which became applied across the arts sector. The Australia Council originally operated on a peer assessment model for the awarding of grant money, however data shows that the panel’s makeup has shifted: where visual artists once formed the largest cohort, representing 60% or more of Visual Art Board peers in 2004, since 2013 that percentage has reduced to around 25% (Countess, 2016). The remaining three quarters of the panel now consists of waged art professionals occupying influential positions in the industry – curators, writers and gallery directors (ironically, such workers are sometimes also artists, working in another capacity in order to earn a living). While these ‘gate keepers’ of the industry may sympathise with my position an artist, they are equally opportunity-givers, both inside and outside their role on the peer assessment panel. While, on their website, the Australia Council claims that: ‘peer assessment and arm’s length funding have been the guiding principles of how the Australia Council allocates funding for more than 40 years’⁴⁰, they go on to state: ‘the Australia Council awards funds based on merit against the published assessment criteria’.

How do we define and therefore recognise artistic merit? In the Cambridge dictionary, ‘merit’ is identified as, ‘the quality of being good and deserving praise’⁴¹. To determine whether an applicant’s work to date is ‘good’ or ‘deserving praise’ these qualities must already be evident – that is, the work must already have been praised, awarded or declared ‘good’. It follows then that what has been praised before will be praised again, which begs the question whether merit can be judged

⁴¹ https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/merit
without bias in this system. Recent changes on the Australia Council’s website have introduced greater transparency in their selection criteria, and current applicants are required to address three distinct assessment categories, and while creating more work for the artists, it does allow for a fairer system.

Art and Class

The Australia Council commissioned reports lead by David Throsby found that the ability to sustain an economic future as an artist is almost impossible (Throsby, 2017) – a fact which is perhaps not emphasised enough in tertiary arts curricula. Considering the economic risk taken by students graduating from visual or creative arts degrees, it is unsurprising that art schools tend to attract students from the somewhat homogenous socio-economic groups of the upper and middle classes. As a result, artists that graduate from these institutions are mainly white and represent low social, cultural or economic diversity.

It can be concluded that factors such as an artist’s socio-economic group or ethnic identity can greatly impact their chances at success. A recent study titled Panic! Social Class, Taste and Inequalities in the Creative Industries was made by Create London, a community art organisation based in East London (Brook, O’Brien & Taylor, 2018). This ground-breaking study casts doubt upon questions concerning fairness and diversity in the creative industry by presenting data collected from a survey of over 2,487 respondents from the creative industries, as well as follow-up interviews with 237. The report began by establishing the factors that create a successful artist: where the artist was from, who they knew, and how much they wanted success. The report asked the question, ‘how do artists “get in and get on” in your industry?’ (Brook, O’Brien & Taylor, 2018). The majority of respondents believed that the creative arts operate as a meritocracy, classifying, ‘coming from a wealthy family and class as fairly important, ambition and talent as very important and hard work as essential’ (Brook, O’Brien & Taylor, 2018). This question also revealed that it was only highly paid respondents, or:

…those in the most influential positions, who believed most strongly in meritocracy, and are also the most sceptical of the impact of social
factors, such as gender, class or ethnicity, on explanations for success in the sector’ (Brook, O’Brien & Taylor, 2018).

The next question showed how those working in the creative industries tend to form a closed network (which probably gives rise to the term, ‘the art world’) in part due to the freelance nature of its labour force. Knowing other creative people, or ‘networking’, is essential for finding work in the field. The report’s data reveals that 90% of respondents knew people such as university lecturers or architects in person, while only 20% of respondents knew bus drivers or factory workers (Brook, O’Brien & Taylor, 2018). The report concludes with the question, ‘to what extent is the cultural sector delivering on representing individuals, communities and the nation if Panic! data suggests its social networks are relatively homogenous and coherent, and its workers share a belief it is a meritocracy?’ (Brook, O’Brien & Taylor, 2018). It would seem that the creative sector is not the meritocracy its participants believe it to be.

Conclusion

The three collecting-based projects discussed in this exegesis all use an ‘investigative’ approach to collecting, and are connected by interpretations of identity and recognition taken from my own experience working as an artist. The process of exhibiting these works and researching this exegesis concurrently has allowed me to critically and reflectively curate and recompose the works themselves around understandings of identity and recognition through collecting-based practices. Both my research and experience have shown that an artist’s background, class, gender, ethnicity and connections are the most influential factors determining their success, as measured by the degree of their work’s exposure in galleries, museums, collections, and art media. This is evidenced by the data collection work of CoUNTess. As mentioned above, I have witnessed evidence of this both in my own life and in those of female friends and colleagues. These people have suffered due to not having their work taken seriously at critical junctures in their careers, despite their demonstrable talent, ambition and work ethic.
To me, it seems clear that the best method to allow for equal access to and participation in the art world is a quota system. First however it is important to acknowledge that, in Australia, there are more professional female artists than male, as proven by CoUNTess’ data showing that 75% of visual art degree graduates are women, as well as the data published in Making Art Work: An Economic Study of Professional Artists in Australia (Throsby, 2017) which shows 54% of professional artists are women. Given this data, even to reach a representation rate of 50% for women in all areas of the art world does not seem acceptable. The drop in the numbers of female professional artists as compared to female art graduates may equally reflect the attrition rate due to women’s economic disadvantage, wherein they are both paid lower wages than men and undertake the majority of society’s unpaid work.

The artists and writers referenced and critiqued in this exegesis are selected as examples to show a variety of approaches that could frame each of the works presented. To contextualise Slide Show Land, I chose works by artists where the grouping and classifying of collected ready-mades or orphaned photographs allowed me to consider how identity informed the artists’ intentions. I drew my examples from certain works of Patrick Pound, Tony Albert and Ydessa Hendeles. When unpacking Settlement, I chose works by artists that explored ‘the home’ as a concept from architectural structures—Gordon Matta-Clark—through to socio-political conceptions of home as emblematic of security—Miriam Charlie. Film essayist Chris Marker is also referenced for his distinctive contribution to storytelling using a sequence of still images with sound and voice over that I employed in various ways in this PhD exhibition. To contextualise CoUNTess I reference The Guerrilla Girls as well as a number of international data collection studies that investigate gender, class and success in the creative industries, including Panic! by Creative Independent in London and the Australia Council commissioned study artists’ economic circumstances Throsby and Hollister (2003) and Throsby and Petetskaya (2017).

When reminded of the reasons for my own desire to be an artist: art held the promise of freedom, representing a field wherein I could express myself, be myself and make my own rules. It seemed to me that feeling different to other people
might be commensurate with the freedom represented by the vocation of artist. In 9.5 *Theses on Art and Class* (Davis, 2013), Ben Davis describes the contemporary artist as ‘the representative of middle-class creative labour par excellence’. Davis defines class as concerning more than the kind of labour performed, income level, education or social background, or the struggle for a greater claim on the products of one’s labour, but also for the ‘dignity of working conditions, guarantees of steady employment, the right to grievance, and the intensity of the working day.’ (Davis, 2013, 12) Davis further clarifies the point adding ‘The working class as distinguished from the middle class not by how its members have more modest houses or watch different TV shows but by the level of authority they have over the conditions of their own work.’ (David, 2013, 14) An artist’s right to continue have a say over the products of their labour and retain the autonomy to say no, is at the heart of distinguishing artists as middle class.

To me, freedom to do what I want is the most precious part of being an artist and why, like many of my colleagues, I put up with the poor economic returns in under-regulated markets, limited career choices, and opportunities that will cost me to participate. Logic and experience tell me that unless an artist sells work, exhibition and commission fees and the odd grant alone cannot sustain an art practice, but I would also lose artistic freedom and agency if I was to make art for profit only; like a capitalist. And when an artist is awarded a PhD and officially recognised as an expert in their own art practice, why do other institutions in the wider professional arena like the museum, gallery and art media, many of which are also associated with universities in some way, still routinely ignore this significant achievement in their advertising, online archives, captions, reviews when naming artists? Perhaps it is because, again, an artist needs to be seen and understood as independent, free from routine, duty or constraints, which recognised titles like Dr evoke. From my observation artists don’t seem to feel comfortable when their day job title dominates their identity as an artist, even if your day job is really interesting, well paid, and you work full time.

Through my personal story, this exegesis explains how and why my work examines and critiques the power structures that recognise and award merit for artists: the market, the government and the university. By participating in the
culture I critique in relation to my personal story, I hope to give voice to the conditions that limit the sense of freedom represented by art as vocation and practice today.
Bibliography


Moser, Gabrielle. ‘*James Elkins’ Artists with PhDs: On the New Doctoral Degree in Studio Art,’* C Magazine 102 (Fall 2009): 53


Remenchick, Jennifer. Demonstrators Splash Red Paint inside La Gallery in Apparent Protest of Gentrification. Hyperallergic, April 20, 2018


Appendix 1 - Slide Show Land

A list of exhibitions *Slide Show Land* has previously been presented.

**Solo Shows**
*Slide Show Land*, The Physics Room, Christchurch, 2002
*Slide Show Land Ten Collections*, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Visual Arts Gallery 2005
*Because I did it first*, Hugo Michell Gallery, Adelaide, 2012
*Slide Show Land*, Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne 2014
*An Autobiography of Elvis Richardson*, True Estate Gallery, Melbourne 2018

**Group Shows**
*Master of Fine Art Graduation Show*, Columbia University in New York, 2002
*If you leave me can I come too*, curated by Bec Dean, Australian Centre for Photograph, Sydney 2005
*Dream Home* curated by Mary Pridmore, Plimsol Gallery, Hobart 2008
*Photographer Unknown*, curated by Kyla MacFarlane, Monash University Museum of Art, 2009
Appendix 2 - Settlement

A list of exhibitions where *Settlment* has previously been presented.

Solo Shows
*Settlement*, Hugo Michell Gallery, Adelaide, 2016
*An Autobiography of Elvis Richardson*, True Estate Gallery, Melbourne 2018

Group Shows
*Still Life Award*, Coffs Harbour Regional Gallery, 2017
*Kyneton Contemporary Triennial 2018: Force Fields*, Kyneton, Victoria 2018
*Remain in Light*, Gallerie Pompom, Sydney 2018
Appendix 3 - CoUNTess

Selection of citations and media references to The Countess Report and CoUNTess blog

PUBLICATIONS


ART MEDIA AND ASSOCIATIONS


*Statistics about women artists in the art world.* n.paradoxa, https://www.ktpress.co.uk/feminist-art-statistics.asp.


**PRESS**


