

C 'mon move me now

A conversation around Feminism between A.B. 1974 and A.B. 2014

For Matt Gallery's 35th birthday I performed a duet with myself using a film of a performance of mine from 40 years before with my group Moody and the Menstruators. It felt like a long distance conversation between us, interspersing clear reception with interference and disruptions.



Dafydd Jones. Matts 2014

AB 1974

I'm excited reading Doris Lessing's 'Golden Notebooks' by the explicitness about female bodies: menstruation, orgasms, frigidity, eroticism, pleasure, provocation and desire. It is liberating. Yet, within the body, is the mind continually observing, aware of itself naked, residing in its own bony container, straining for an integrated consciousness that reconciles fleshy wildness with cerebral questing and beyond that, spiritual quietude. This sense of a fragmentary self is uncomfortably amplified, for me, by the frequently combative feminist discussions, which often feel restrictive, earnest and dogmatic, not dancing, not uplifting. I am startled to see feminist writers looking directly at these difficulties in statements like Simone de Beauvoir's from the *Second Sex* "Women's mutual understanding comes from the fact that they identify themselves with each other; but for the same reason each is against the others," or one of Lessing's characters commenting: "Sometimes I dislike women, I dislike us all, because of our capacity for not-thinking when it suits us; we choose not to think when we are reaching out for happiness."

AB 2014

Lessing was very aware of the damage to individual exploration and sense of honesty and the fracturing of truth within all the reconciliations and compromises women made—the closeness to breakdown that this juggling can impose. She felt that the only way forward was actually to embrace these several layers and only within that embrace lay wholeness. Maybe because she also came from Southern

Africa, I could identify with a book in which this layering is seen as authentic and sane and in which second-wave feminism is just one of many ways in which people struggle together, through complex intersections of sex, class, race and location; her personal as the political was much more inclusive than many feminist writers of the time. I think having come to England in the late 60's from the noxious system of Apartheid, I wanted to get away from labels, separation, difference, victim, victimized, perpetrator and the perpetrated-upon, after all I am white middle-class – part of the problem there, not the solution

AB 1974

I feel closer to the Tibetan Buddhist idea that freedom is within you, not something which you are looking for outside of yourself. I understand why several of my women artist friends have committed themselves to Buddhist communities either in monasteries in Britain or seeking out ashrams in India.

AB 2014

I remember that desire to free up from direct political positioning after engagement with apartheid - that constant guilt and impotent culpability, making tiny actions to throw dandelions at a giant. I started experiencing in England the headiness of art (and more especially life) less overwhelmed by issue-led sociopolitical concerns, whilst still shaken by much --The Kent State murders by the US national, nuclear threats. I didn't want to feel policed, (which sometimes it felt like), by current issues regarding gender and sexual orientation, (the 'you-are-either-with-us-or-against-us' brigade.) I think the group I formed Moody and the Menstruators with Rod Melvin was almost a send-up of the endless interrogation of self in terms of sexuality, --- taking a delight, as Anne Archy, in a free-for-all of cross-dressing and an absurdist parodying of pop culture. I was thrilled, particularly in Berlin, that young women perceived me as genuinely male in one section of the show and they tried to locate this man who seemed to have disappeared into thin air. The thrill was more to do with the successful conjuring tricks of projection and, in a larger sense, the awareness that our 'real' lives were dominated by the same strategies of artifice. I enjoyed that I could strongly manifest my many possibilities, but whilst all the ironic super-star posturing and media attention was invigorating, it started to feel emptier and emptier, the more successful it became.

AB 1974

I am asked to take part in several women-only shows but my dread of labeling made it impossible to take that up, although I am very aware of a kinship with women's work around me, especially Yoko Ono.

AB 2014

I feel differently now and less complex about identifying with a woman's sensibility and distinctive struggle. Initiating PAVES, as a woman's inter- generational, multi-cultural group from disparate countries allowed an intimacy, despite other differences, that was a base for powerful collaborative interactions across several years and many places which shared disturbed recent political upheavals. Similarly, making the performance MASS with local women in Iraq- Kurdistan. It was very important to me that it was women-only, to allow an understood familiarity and camaraderie to underlie the work.

Other women-only works of mine recognized this sensibility: in London, Belgium, Spain and Croatia with LONG TIME PASSING, a meditative transformative durational work and YEARNINGS, an ongoing work about memory, which embodies a distinct shared tenderness and fragility of recall. I could never have initiated all these women-only works in the 70's, as I found that making these gender distinctions was adding to the dichotomies, not healing anything and that they were, at best, superficial.

AB 1974

The first woman artist that really made an impact on me was actually a fictional one, whom I read about in my mid-teens. Her name was Lily Briscoe and she resided in Virginia Woolf's 'To the Lighthouse.' Woolf let Lily express her own feminist outrage in Lily's musings on the male assumption that "women can't paint, can't write" ... always consigned to footnotes.

Lily manages to escape this social repression with her innate passion for independence. It is established that her art is much more important than any husband and she sees marriage as a self-debasement—a dilution of self. She is an independent and free-thinking woman, a pioneering spirit with her intrinsic openness to the world that embodies a profound understanding of the dilemma de Beauvoir described: "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth." This is something huge to confront.

Lily's meditations on painting were a way for Woolf to explore her own creative process (and also that of her painter sister, Vanessa Bell), since Woolf thought of writing in the same way that Lily thought of painting. Viewing the canvas "with its uncompromising white stare," Lily felt the futility of her attempt, fearing she will be unable to produce anything of value but she forced herself on

AB 2014

Reading about Lily's exhilaration at the final stroke of the painting where she recognizes she has captured her vision, was arousing for me as a young artist. Lily's self-belief amidst all kinds of uncertainties, her inner life, her passion and her dedication were all inspirational. A little later, I recognised Lily and Woolf's quest, seeing the works of Frida Kahlo, Charlotte Soloman and Eva Hesse and being taught by Rita Donagh and Caroline Tisdale, This awareness of an underlying woman's consciousness of deep questioning of the world and how it has been shaped by maleness has been important to me. I felt that women's insights, despite the imposed restraints, were intrinsically part of what was most strong, exciting and uplifting about the DNA of our planet. In this sense Germaine Greer's 'The Female Eunuch' was closer to my sensibilities. She defined her goal as "women's liberation" as distinct from "equality with men". She asserted that women's liberation meant embracing gender differences in a positive fashion – a struggle for the freedom of women to define their own values, order their own priorities and determine their own fates. The equality struggle, for Greer, was actually seen, rightly, as settling for something less and more prosaic.

I was born only 5 years after World War 2 ended –our parents were prepared to be as hypocritical and inauthentic as the situation required in order to keep some sense of a lid on the huge scars and wounds and madness that had been unleashed. Books like Betty Friedan's 'The Feminine Mystique' conceptualised the "problem that has no name," the unhappy exploited housewife syndrome, despite material advantage. This seemed to me to be much more to do with my mother's generation. I didn't identify with these women, although since having a family I wryly acknowledge Marilyn French's statement "I hate discussions of feminism that end up with who does the dishes.....But at the end, there are always the damned dishes." By having a child I started to look back to the 70's at friends having babies and really struggling, often floundering, with art/life balance and to whom at the time I didn't have the understanding of the overwhelming adjustments and responsibilities they had to take on. It is interesting to hear, just yesterday on the radio, an extract from Marilyn French talking about the central task of society is to find a means to bring up our children in a balanced way for all.

AB 1974

I like Lessing's statement about education:

"Ideally, what should be said to every child, repeatedly, throughout his or her school life is something like this: 'You are in the process of being indoctrinated. We have not yet evolved a system of education that is not a system of indoctrination. We are sorry, but it is the best we can do. What you are being taught here is an amalgam of current prejudice and the choices of this particular culture. The slightest look at history will show how impermanent these must be. You are being taught by people who have been able to accommodate themselves to a regime of thought laid down by their predecessors. It is a self-perpetuating system. Those of you who are more robust and individual than others will be encouraged to leave and find ways of educating yourself — educating your own judgements. Those that stay must remember, always, and all the time, that they are being moulded and patterned to fit into the narrow and particular needs of this particular society.'"

AB 2014

I think this is a useful checking throughout life. It is so easy to perpetuate our own beliefs systems without ongoing re-assessment of why they were formed in the first place and where they are going currently.

The simplicity of Lessing's statement about human need that has an impact on me now:

"Do you know what people really want? Everyone, I mean. Everybody in the world is thinking: I wish there was just one other person I could really talk to, who could really understand me, who'd be kind to me. That's what people really want, if they're telling the truth."

Our grander probing is squeezed into a micro empathetic embrace, seemingly a blueprint for what is wished for on a macro scale.

AB 1974

Isn't that a bit prosaic after all the delving?

AB 2014

I feel now that a closeness and companionship, an uninhibited sharing, is an incredibly revelatory, potent space to leap off from.

AB 1974

Well, I want to be fully and intensely alive to myself and to those around me at any time ---dynamic, energized and buzzing. I want to be a fully creative untethered being, unanswerable to anyone.

Below top is a PAVES action with Poshya Kaki, her mother and young sister in Aram Gallery, Suleymana, Iraq-Kurdistan in 2008, in which we spoke for several hours about many thoughts that came up between us, including art, motherhood, women's lives, desires, growing old, restrictions and what liberty meant for us, whilst Mrs Kaki and her younger daughter united Poshya and my hair together in small and intricate plaits.

Below bottom is MASS, Erbil, Iraq- Kurdistan, an action with women who were directly affected by the genocide in Iraq Kurdistan



