

FANTASING

Stars Rocked

13 December 2014 – 15 February 2015

THE PHYSICS ROOM

CONTEMPORARY ART SPACE

The members of art collective FANTASING sing about wanting to go on “an instant fantasy”, which is exactly what the viewer is invited to experience in their show at The Physics Room, ‘Stars Rocked’. FANTASING’s collaborative art practice, the vehicle for this fantasy, spans music, video works, sculpture and even Instagram.

Collaborative practice remains popular in the contemporary art world, as it allows artists to resist artistic autonomy and engage socially with other artists as well as with the audience. Collaboration has its roots in the Dada and Surrealist movements, and was also especially important to 1970s and ‘80s feminist art practice, which hailed collaborative process as a key outlet for female and feminist creativity. The work of Bek Coogan, Claire Harris, Sarah Jane Parton and Gemma Syme as artist collective FANTASING is positioned within the history of feminist artist collectives, and yet responds to this kind of practice in a uniquely 21st century manner.

The group’s collaboration takes the form of what they call, with tongue firmly in cheek, an “internet potato” - an online rhizome that has no central point, but exists instead as a network of connections. Parton says their relationship is, “like the universe. You can’t say where it starts or where it ends, or what’s the most important bit. The central point is where you are at the moment, but it’s also where somebody else is at that moment, and we just kind of connect the dots. It’s the same with the way we work through ideas, it’s both informed and intuitive.”¹

The members of FANTASING met when they were invited to participate in an exhibition curated by Bryce Galloway for the NZ Film Archive in Wellington. Also, they all studied at Massey University at some point, and both Syme and Parton agree that they share a common view of what they want FANTASING to achieve. On the appeal of the collaborative aspect of their art practice, Parton says, “It’s so much easier. I always wanted to be in an art band ... with my own practice I’m the director of everything, whether it’s making a music video, or a performance, or an installation, and then when we’re together it’s our thing, and none of us are in charge, although we do all seem to have the right of veto, and we say ‘no! not that!’”

¹ In conversation with the artist, 11 February 2015.

In any collaboration, disagreements and dissent are inevitable, but this can also make the work stronger. With a base in dialogue, the work becomes more complex and nuanced, as a product of discussion and, sometimes, tension. Rather than reflecting one artist's vision, FANTASING's projects comprise four different voices, approaches and ideas. However, the artists themselves say that they usually agree on where they want the work to go, and there have been few instances of intense disagreement.

Due to geographical distance and numerous commitments outside of FANTASING, the artists are not always able to communicate and collaborate in the traditional sense, such as in a studio or gallery space. However, the ubiquity of the internet means that they are able to communicate remotely, in real time. Skype is a useful enabler for their collaborative practice, allowing the artists to overcome temporal and geographic separation. For example, it allowed Parton to be present at FANTASING's opening performance at The Physics Room, despite the fact that she was confined to her bed due to an injury.

This form of communication is indicative of new possibilities for artistic projects and speaks to a unique interconnectedness of the world via the internet which was not available to artists even a decade ago. This shift in artistic practice between generations sometimes manifests within their group as well. As Parton observes, "I think the fact that we span three decades (means) we've all had these different lived experiences."²

Not only is the internet an enabler for FANTASING's collaborative process, but it also forms a kind of aesthetic base for the group. In their music video for 'Instant Fantasy' on Youtube, technology and the internet make their mark visually through the use of screens, Skype or Facetime platforms, 'selfie' angles and Facebook notifications. The notion of an instant fantasy is a kind of embodiment of the internet itself – endless fantasies are available online with just one click. The artists also maintain a strong online presence – throughout the duration of their show at The Physics Room, they utilized the hashtag #artisttakeover to post images to the gallery's Instagram account, from Employee of the Month portraits (which also appeared in the gallery) to videos and live updates of their artistic process. Their music is released online through the platform Bandcamp, and their presence also comes through, of course, on their Facebook and Youtube accounts.

Syme adds that the performance and musical aspect of their collaboration is "a vehicle for the art... everything's so oblique, so music is a good solid base for things." Music has also been used as a vehicle for art by female collective Chicks on Speed, who combine performance, music, graphic design and fashion. Like Chicks on Speed, FANTASING's music goes hand in hand with their art, not simply as 'another way' of expressing ideas, but as a central creative outlet.

When they began to think about producing work in Christchurch, FANTASING were wary of taking a patronising attitude towards the quake-struck city.

² Ibid.

“We didn’t want to make a show about the earthquake, but we knew that we needed to acknowledge the changing environment of this area of Canterbury.” Parton says. “I think it was Claire and Gemma just working through motifs, like cranes and seagulls and mounds of rubble, and Shag Rock becoming Shag Pile.” Syme adds, “I wanted to be pretty careful not be the pity-party for Christchurch.”

However, they felt they could not ignore the devastation and ongoing construction that surrounds The Physics Room gallery, pervasive in its emptiness and explicit in its progress towards rebuilding. The motifs of this landscape were translated into the gallery space, with Shag Rock (now the collapsed ‘Shag Pile’ in Sumner), appearing as a textured carpet on the floor, and as mounds of grey-foam rocks, which also make an appearance in their music video. These mounds, Syme says, also have a feminine and sexual connotations, another way in which the context of second-wave feminist art continues to influence contemporary artists addressing issues of sexuality and gender.

Particularly pressing for these four female artists is the notion of work, and how this is so often measured by a male-devised standard. Parton says, “Sometimes we’re like oh my god, we haven’t made enough art, we’re so bad, we haven’t done enough! And then we go no, no, we worked really hard!”³ The artists seem to be caught between an awareness of the fact that they are working to patriarchal standards of production and measuring their value against this standard, and genuine concern over whether their work is “enough”.

Being a collective that juggles their work as FANTASING with other jobs and personal commitments such as family, a sense of “amateurism” seems to hover over the group. Here again, the concepts of success and failure comes into play, and these are often measured in very narrow terms such as financial success or critical praise. There is more to FANTASING’s work than this, however, and their success can be thought of in terms of the artists’ ability to continue to produce challenging, interesting and innovative work despite conflicting commitments.

The nature of work – and office work in particular – is referenced in the ‘Employee of the Month’ display in the gallery, which includes framed photos of each artist and idiosyncratic mugs on raised plinths. This serves as a reminder, perhaps to the artists as much to the audience, that the project which FANTASING undertook in the gallery was, in fact, work. There is also the presence of a whiteboard, a desk and chair, and post-it notes attached to the wall, creating a hybrid office/gallery space in which notions of work, particularly ‘traditional’ work, are subtly challenged.

The same self-doubt over whether they have produced enough work seems to pervade the artists’ feelings about the work they do produce. While discussing the show with me in the space, Parton questions whether things are too much, too silly, and whether she would remove things from the space if given more time. This is one of the successes of the show, that it does not show the work in a fixed state of

³ Ibid.

being 'finished.' Things have changed throughout FANTASING's presence in the gallery, and might have continued to change should the show be installed for longer. The flexible, fluid nature of the gallery space and of FANTASING's creative process resists finality, suggesting that a work is always in a process of becoming.

Particularly in an internet age, art and images are always transitive, leading to something else, creating a 'rhizome' network of images, hyperlinks and text. FANTASING's collaborative work in 'Stars Rocked' reflects this interconnectedness, with their music video, work in the gallery, music and online endeavours all forming an "internet potato" of creative production.

- Harriet Maher