

# Embodying the archive

**Brown Council, Emma Fitts, Alex Martinis Roe, Newspaper Reading Club  
Curated by Anneke Jaspers & Melanie Oliver**

**5 September – 10 October 2015**

## **Embodying the archive**

*Embodying the archive* explores history mediated through the body. Rather than reproducing archival structures or trafficking in readymade historical traces, the artists work with performance, narration and tactile forms to approach questions of historicity and expose the fluidity of the archive. In dialogue with real and imagined figures, they draw out relations between past and present to address a range of themes, among them feminist genealogies, the knowledge economy and the afterlives of ephemeral practices.

In the wake of the so-called 'archival turn', and against a backdrop of proliferating re-enactments and renewed modes of appropriation, the logics at work here resist such straight alignments. Instead, the exhibition charts a spectrum of responses to the gaps and crossovers among these tendencies, from reflections on the dynamic between embodied subject and archival object, to experiments with embodying the archive and articulations of the body as an archive.

## **Alex Martinis Roe**

*It was an unusual way of doing politics: there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...*  
Super 8 transferred to digital and HD video (10:43), 2014

*It was an unusual way of doing politics: there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...* traces the legacy of a weeklong meeting of political groups in France in 1972. Among the participants were women from the French feminist 'current' Psychanalyse et Politique and others who later formed the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, which have been the subject of Martinis Roe's ongoing research into feminist genealogies. More than forty years later, Martinis Roe's two-channel film revisits the sites of the meeting at La Tranche-sur-Mer and of some of Psychanalyse et Politique's gatherings in Paris. The present realities of these contexts frame her reflection on the significance of the groups' encounter and its potential to inform future ways of 'doing politics'.

Martinis Roe's work is explicitly about relations: between subjects, ideologies, cultural contexts and generations. Building on her longstanding practice of using art to generate spaces for exchange, this work proceeds from dialogues with women who attended the 1972 event, as well as a group of contemporary Nantes-based interlocutors with a shared interest in feminist political practices. In the film, the latter take on the role of performers, embodying the story of the original gathering. A second group of collaborators narrates a script written by Martinis Roe, which weaves together different perspectives on the event. In the gallery, two further layers foreground trans-subjectivity: a library of texts that address key ideas explored in the film, and a workshop which invites practical experimentation by a local audience with the theories and practices advanced by Psychanalyse et Politique.

At its crux, *It was an unusual way of doing politics: there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...* is an exercise in storytelling, one that foregrounds layers of mediation and of authorship, and privileges multiple speaking positions. The temporal and vocal fragmentation that underscores the narrative is echoed in the accompanying footage, which splits across screens and also across

mediums. Martinis Roe's mimicry of archival documentation in the use of Super 8 points to the constructed nature of all historical accounts – including the one encompassed by the work – but it also renders the intergenerational dimension of her project in visual terms, aestheticising the imbrication of past and present, and the way events ramify across time.

### **Emma Fitts**

*Where did feeling come from?*, 2015, velvet, interfacing, ribbing, vinyl text, *Spinster* novel by Sylvia Ashton-Warner, silk scarf

Emma Fitts often uses literary figures, narrative and biography to expose the social dimension of archives. In this installation she channels New Zealand writer, artist and educator Sylvia Ashton-Warner (1908-1984), an unconventional and spirited personality, best known for the pioneering teaching scheme that she developed and wrote about. Through working in a succession of rural schools with Māori and Pakeha students, she established an alternative approach to pedagogy based on the idea that the difficult experiences and destructive energy of children could be redirected towards their learning through placing a strong emphasis on creativity in the classroom. In 1955-56, her teaching methods were published as *The Maori Infant Room – Organic Reading and the Key Vocabulary*, and she went on to have international success despite her personal peculiarities.

Ashton-Warner's first novel *Spinster* was highly acclaimed in literary and educational communities when it was published in 1958. The story focuses on Anna, an artist and innovative teacher who is attempting a radical bicultural education model at a small school in a remote New Zealand town. While *Spinster* is a work of fiction, the ideas on education that are presented here are Ashton-Warner's own, and many other details similarly express personal reflections, experiences or desires. Anna's immediate surroundings are described with great care and particular attention is paid to clothing, including an unusual artist's smock that she wears for her teaching duties.

In reference to both her biography and writing, *Where did feeling come from?*, features the garment pattern for an artist's smock, as worn by Ashton-Warner. With a darkly serious colour palette for the billowing shapes made of velvet and interfacing, the hanging materialises and accommodates the life of its subject. Fitts subtly invokes the aura that accrues to clothing based on contiguity with its wearer, as well as the muscle memory that derives from daily rituals and sensations. The idea that clothes house (and distinguish) bodies mirrors the classical notion of the archive as a form of architecture for social memory.

### **Brown Council**

Frances Barrett, Kate Blackmore, Kelly Doley, Diana Smith

*Remembering Barbara Cleveland*, 2011, single channel HD video, sound (10:33)

*This is Barbara Cleveland*, 2013, single channel HD video, sound (16:42)

*The History of Performance*, 2015, live participatory performance, 2-4pm Saturday 5 September

Brown Council's ongoing cycle of works about Barbara Cleveland pays tribute to the life and creative output of this mythic Australian artist. During a brief period from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Cleveland is said to have produced a series of provocative, implicitly feminist performances before disappearing under mysterious circumstances. Brown Council ostensibly reconstructs works from Cleveland's 'lost' oeuvre, based on archival fragments recently discovered by the artists. Doubly consigned to the margins of history, Cleveland's story becomes a cipher for exploring a series of broader themes: the legacies of ephemeral art and feminist histories, the complex status of the performance trace, and questions of authorship and authenticity.

The members of Brown Council adopt the figure of Cleveland interchangeably, their drag persona self-consciously referencing stereotypes about 1970s body art: its association with pain, nudity, ritual and a dogmatic spirit of intent. In addition, the aesthetic of performance documentation from the era is a key point of reference. By working across different registers of filmmaking (and speech), incorporating still photography and exploiting the evocative power of sound, the artists playfully deconstruct how the means by which we encounter the past shapes our present perspective. A further and crucial element is their consideration of the performativity of language, overtly addressed through the script for both works.

*The History of Performance* takes up related enquiries within the domain of live performance. Where the Barbara Cleveland works foreground historical distance through the mediating effects of documentation, *The History of Performance* explores the lingering presence of performances in embodied knowledge. Members of the audience are invited to join the artists in collectively authoring an account of art history based on personal recollections. By embracing the partial and idiosyncratic character of memory, this process highlights the complexities that haunt the writing of any history, but particularly one grounded in momentary actions and invisible affects.

### **Newspaper Reading Club**

Fiona Connor & Michala Paludan

Participatory performances and urban interventions, 2015

Established in 2011, Newspaper Reading Club is an ongoing collaborative project that takes form variously as performances, posters, radio broadcasts and publications. Operating in a different register to the works presented in The Physics Room galleries, the project considers how people access the news and engage with current affairs: perhaps the most immediate and pervasive means by which we encounter – and are implicated in – ‘history-making’ in daily life. With burgeoning online news forums (both official and grassroots platforms), and the decline of long-form investigative journalism in New Zealand, it is timely to consider the state of the news within our knowledge-based economy.

For this iteration of Newspaper Reading Club, Connor and Paludan will undertake a month long residency at The Physics Room (8 September – 8 October). Using this opportunity to respond to the specific environment of Christchurch, they will develop a project and invite participants to meet and read from the newspaper in order to articulate the familiar process of skimming, commenting and editing that occurs when reading the news. Like never before, reading the news in Christchurch is critically important for understanding the politics and power relationships shaping the rebuild, an undertaking which reflexively moderates between the past and potential future of the city, and which highlights the dominant role that written documents play in structuring knowledge and discourse.

Join the Newspaper Reading Club mailing list in The Physics Room library to receive details about how to participate in this project as it evolves.

## **Public programmes**

### **Saturday 5 September, 2-4pm**

Brown Council

*The History of Performance*, 2015

live participatory performance

### **Saturday 19 September, 4pm**

*Sylvia* (dir. Michael Firth) 1985

film screening

### **Saturday 26 September, 1-4pm**

In conjunction with Alex Martinis Roe's work *It was unusual way of doing politics...*

Our Future Network

workshop on trans-generational collective politics