

## **Freda At Monash**

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Freda and I met in 1973 but it was not until 1978, when Freda encouraged me to join the Lip Collective that I really started to get to know her, and we became friends as well as colleagues. In what follows, I would like to give you some idea of Freda's voice which is so clear and bracing in her writings for Lip.

Women's Liberation, this wave of feminist agitation, involved many different forms of political protest and action to transform Australian society. One was the commitment to recording women's history, recovering it from neglect and deliberate warping and overlooking, as well as using writing to contribute to political and cultural change. There were publications like Spare Rib, Hecate, Refractory Girl, Me Jane, and journals such as Filmnews, published out of the Sydney Filmmakers Co-op which contributed greatly to the promotion and support of women's filmmaking.

What was Lip? The Lip Collective – and this was the 1970s so it was a COLLECTIVE - was a gathering of women, initiated by Suzanne Spinner, Suzanne Davies, Janine Burke and the late Jeannette Fenelon (as she was then known; later reverting to her maiden name of Kavanagh) and then joined by artists such as Lyndall Jones, Isabel Davies, Lesley Dumbrell (an exhibition of whose work is opening at the Art Gallery of NSW on Friday) and Elizabeth Gower, to name a few, along with teachers, critics, academics and filmmakers such as Helen Grace and Meaghan Morris. Later, the film contingent was boosted when we encouraged young women such as Anna Grieve (now a documentary filmmaker), to join us. The membership of the Collective grew, changed and shrank, over a period of almost ten years. It was a heady ride. But what was it?

The aim of Lip was pretty simple really. We were there to create a journal of the visual and performing arts, and culture, that would be in some respects a work of art itself. In an editorial for the 1980 edition of Lip, there is a telling observation:

‘There can be no party-line in this collective, no one voice, because we diverge in our feminism.’

Lip began as a magazine that sought to uncover and document the work of women in the arts, across the centuries and into contemporary practice, and the representation of women, sexuality and gender. Many of the articles were short and punchy, others more contemplative,

analytical and in later editions, more theoretically informed. Many were written by artists about other artists. We covered Australian artists alongside the work of artists abroad.

I don't have time and nor is this the place to give an account of the journal and the way it changed but what I will say is that it provided a place of debate and coverage of women's work that is, in retrospect, I think is impressive in its scope.

Freda's role in Lip needs to be not only acknowledged but celebrated because she brought to it her deep literary, analytical and critical skills, her elegant writing, her forthright opinions, and her interest in everything, and I mean everything: film, photography, media, performance and drama, burgeoning film theory, film festivals and exhibitions whether they were in sheds and garages or in established galleries. She not only wrote about all of this work with great insight, she became friends with many of the artists such as performance artist Lyndal Jones and the photographer Janina Green.

My abiding memory of Freda at the meetings of the Collective was of her, sitting on the floor in the living room of her wonderful home in Kew, smoking, always smoking, and surrounded by paper – the making of the magazine was very much old school – because there was no other way. Cut and paste, literally. She made sure that all of us there were well fed and watered, which was important and very, very, generous of her, because our meetings were often lengthy, often heated and often hilarious. After a day of putting the latest edition together, we staggered, exhausted, out of her house and down the very, very steep bluestone steps, to make our way home.

Let's take a piece Freda wrote in the 1980 edition (The Tram, as we called it, Mirka Mora's tram). 'Heralding Women', is a typical Freda pun, because she selected the Herald Sun, a daily newspaper, for 'special study' collecting every article and photograph devoted to women and women's issues published in it over a period of 2 months. I can visualise Freda hunched over every edition of the paper, 'continuously cutting' with what she describes as her 'scrupulously indiscriminating scissors' revealing coverage that was 'remarkably consistent throughout'. She writes in her introduction:

'The greatest number of pictures in it have no news value: they are used to promote football, fashion, festivals, charities, the city, the country, the four seasons --- anything and everything. Their main function is to be decorative and/or titillate the male readership...Hence, one of the parts of the female form is fetishized --- the face, the legs, the bosom or the buttocks. The other (women) who receive attention --- albeit to a far lesser extent, are the victims (of rape, murder, alcoholism, drugs etc), the mothers (oh joy! oh sadness!), sportswomen...and two classes of professional women ---stars of stage and screen, and models. This was swelled...(if we exclude members of the Royal Family) by the prominence of Margaret Thatcher in the British election campaign...Occasionally a serious article on women's issues or female

achievements is published but (i) it usually appears under a sensationalized or trivializing heading; (ii) it is...undermined by placing blatantly sexist photographs or advertisements underneath or alongside it; and (iii) they are swamped by the exploitative and stereotypical treatment of women in the paper as a whole.' Lip, 1980, p 5

Freda was no conventional critic. She chose not to present her critique as an article but instead, she explains, she 'enlisted the services of two artists, Lesley Dumbrell and Elizabeth Gower, and together we cut, pasted and laid out the following pages', following i.e. her introduction. The pages consist of several collages of articles, headlines, and many, many photographs of women which depressingly and entertainingly illustrate her argument.

Later in the same edition, and in striking contrast, there's a three-page densely written article, titled 'Women's Film in the Post-Haskell era' in which she examines a number of films, promoted as women's films, that appeared in the late 70s. She acknowledges the importance of Molly Haskell's ground-breaking work, but criticises her, observing that, 'in her nostalgia' she proves herself 'to be a sucker for the star system' and fails to acknowledge the oppressive structures operating in the films of the 30s and 40s in Hollywood.

She goes on to quote Laura Mulvey and recent feminist criticism where 'the sign woman' in Hollywood films:

'...signified both erotic desire and castration, producing contradictory impulses in the male viewer (a come on and keep off)... Barbara Creed...has demonstrated that the narrative structure of Hollywood's woman's film was designed to keep women in their place in the patriarchal order. The over-reaching or transgressing woman must be punished...and taught a lesson. If she were not to suffer defeat and/or death, she would undergo a transformation...as a result of which she would become a more submissive woman. Thus the woman's film helped to perpetuate the traditional role of women as inferior and passive beings.'

Lip 1980, p122

I want to conclude with perhaps her most heart-felt and theoretically dense article which appears in the 1982/83 edition of Lip, 'The Post-Partum Document: Maternal Archeology', an analysis of this major work by the British artist Mary Kelly, which is now held by the Tate Modern in London but which had been exhibited in Melbourne in 1980 or 1981. Freda notes that while the Document is informed by Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Kelly subverts it from within. Freda argues that Lacan's theories are phallogocentric, defining woman as 'lack' and allowing little prospect for the transformation of women and the possibility of escaping our subordinate roles. She notes the absence of conventional representations of mother and child in Post-Partum Document. Instead there are words such as diet charts, domestic dialogue,

alphabet jingles. Then there are 'the barest traces of the visual arts, embryonic traces of arts practice – fecal stains, clay imprints of child's hand' and so on. Freda is particularly interested in the way the Post-Partum Document, which is divided into 5 sections, draws attention to 'the role of language in positioning women, socially and psychologically, as mothers.'

Freda argues that regarding both the conventional nuclear family and Kelly's own account of her communal progressive household, Kelly suggests that the 'mother' in both is substantially the same. Freda then goes on:

'This similarity could lead one to be pessimistic, defeatist even, about the prospects for change in the position of women, were it not for the emphasis on the crucial role of language and knowledge in the positioning of mother and child...we have to transform, reconstruct , language and knowledge, social and educational institutions and practices, because sexual difference and the oppression of women are embedded in all of these.'

Lip 1982/3, Issue No. 7, p.60

The definition of 'lip' that appeared on at least two covers of Lip Magazine, means, among other things, impudence, vociferousness, to be self-reliant, and to bear oneself courageously. It's an excellent description, I believe, of Freda's work, not only in Lip but taken as a whole.