the pam harris show

Video and Performance
Experimental Art Foundation
18 August - 11 September

Prints and Banners
Adelaide Festival Centre
30 August - 13 October

1994
from plaits to punk...

We keep coming back to words
And not just to words, but
to words set in visual
frameworks that are emotionally
as well as intellectually stimulating.¹

A description of the artist's work; but equally a description of the artist.

But it is not that I am making the historical/patriarchal mistake of fusing women with their work, seeing their art as a mere extension of their femininity; but rather referring to the staging of self, to Pam's performances of appearance.

Those essential components, the hair and the hats, were (to those of us who knew her) signifiers of Pam and of changes in her life.

Once, she had long dark plaits, worn squaw-like framing her face. Long hair, symbol of fetishism and female sexuality - but Pam's were always plaits, ordered, controlled.

Then came a stage of playing; looping and winding the plaits, sometimes wearing dangerous earrings! And like the Smirnoff advertisement she smiled and said, "I used to think Saturday nights were for working, until..."

So she did it - cut off those powerful plaits. But the effect was no less striking, with one side sweep of hair down to the jaw-line and the other side cropped closely behind the ear. She let her hair down - but always on her own terms!

This cut proved only to be an interim measure, for it was soon followed by short back and sides with a flat crew-cut! Very dramatic, very bold, very "don't-mess-with-me". (But worn with dark lipstick and a laugh.)

After her illness, the hair grew back, fine and curly (rather chic, I thought), but I knew she preferred a firmer, more purposeful look. Brave, strong, vibrant Pam.

But in the end it is the voice that remains. The voice that speaks through her works, the voice of shared exchanges and the voice that spoke out, that was always prepared to ask the difficult questions.

“Community, what community? Do you need free legal advice? Women need time to feel, think and breathe... you might want to talk to people, genius has no gender, one man's revolution is another's platitude, Hail Mary."

Evidence of the value she placed on the voice is found in Living Doll, Whores Part 1 and Hail Mary. It's there in the recognition she gave to the richness of voice in its connection to daily life. And finally of course, the voice comes into its own narrativity and performance.

In Pam's work, language addresses, demands, accuses, questions and subverts. It moves from stridency to speculation, to story-telling. Language is the obvious element, linking the different areas of her life and work - theatre, community arts, printmaking, performance and teaching.

This emphasis, however, (on voice/speaking/text) doesn't deny other connections. Pam's last poster Greetings from Tasmania, in its use of colour, humour and theatricality, clearly establishes visual links with her performances.

Pam belonged to the new breed of women artists, who provided a "radical image of feminine creativity".² She chose to work in the dissident, marginalised artforms of our time - posters (silk-screen printing, in the 70s was also possibly physically damaging) banners, performance, video - works that privileged dialogue, communication, accessibility.

She knew that "...power is invested and exercised through her who speaks: given the long history of the patriarchal silencing of women, it is crucial that women speak out for ourselves and occupy resistant subject positions"...and that's what she did.

Jude Adams, Lecturer, Visual Arts Theory, SA School of Art, University of South Australia

from posters to performance

A picture is supposed to be worth 1,000 words, but it turns out that a picture plus 10 or 100 words may be worthiest of all. With few exceptions, most effective socio/political art (propaganda) being done today consists of a combination of word and images.³

Traditionally, posters rely on image and caption, slogan and illustration, but increasingly the posters and prints of Pam Harris reveal that her intention was to
move beyond this format, in order to fully integrate the idea, word and image. Perhaps therefore, a more appropriate designation for the artist's work would be the use of the term word/image pieces.

Silk-screen posters emerged from the political, social and counter-cultural movements of the 60s and 70s. Within the art world, these anti-institutional movements rejected established art values in favour of social, cultural and political change, encouraging not only the development of alternative practices (eg video, conceptual art, silk-screen prints and murals) but also challenging the dominant ideology of the artist. The artist as creator of aesthetic commodities for an art market, was replaced by the artist as producer of information for new and diverse audiences. Likewise community arts, community access workshops and later, Art and Working Life projects were particularly important sites, not only in constructing new constituencies for art, but also in the promotion of more collaborative work processes.

It is this period of commitment and optimism, when questions of production, distribution and politics took precedence over those of aesthetics and style, that provides the context for Pam Harris' work.

From 1975-1980 Pam worked at Community Media Association where much of her work was produced in collaboration with community groups, creating posters of the self-help, consciousness-raising type.

Prior to this, the artist was associated with the Adelaide Progressive Art Movement, whose work was characterised by "a seriousness of political purpose" and the "didactic tone of their posters".

However, it is Pam's work that exhibits an engagement with specific feminist issues that is pivotal to this exhibition. The shifts in feminist discourse - from positive images of 'real women' to the construction of gender, to investigation of female desire - can be traced in the artist's oeuvre.

Strategies of visual communication were always important to Pam, thus her work can also be read in terms of a change in focus from art as a weapon in the battle against 'false consciousness' to art that makes reference to the politics of representation and visual pleasure.

The notion of 'positive imagery' derived from the common-sense idea that the media presents false, idealised images of women and that the replacement of these representations by more 'realistic' images as seen in Doll encourages identification and self-affirmation. The representation of women in non-traditional jobs was intended as both a corrective and an inspiration.

Often however, these images (combining the 'real' and the false) tended to co-exist rather than contradict. Other works, such as Whores Part I and Working Woman and Child, while also drawing, focusing instead on the signs or markers of sexual difference. Still other works such as Silk-screen posters emerged from the political, social and counter-cultural movements of the art world, these anti-institutional 60s and 70s. Within the context of a change in focus from art as a weapon in the battle against 'false consciousness' to art that makes reference to the politics of representation and visual pleasure.

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Language has always occupied an important place in Harris' work - as a method of propaganda, a device to convey information, a technique of collage and in constructing subject positions for the viewer (as in Who Does This Man Serve?, and the defiant but celebratory IWD poster). For the artist words were an integral part of the work, given equal value with visual imagery and perceived as essential in the making of meaning. Language is used to link ideas to facilitate entry into the work, and as a play on meaning (as in Print as Object with its theme of objectification and commodification).

But sometimes language fails. Referring to the work Unknown Photographer Part I & II Harris wrote, "something developed in these prints that was not present in the others...". With this phrase, the artist seems to recall the split subject of psychoanalysis, for the "something" that developed is unknown, unnamed.

The subject, who doesn't always know, is also a desiring subject. Consequently, these works can be read as the representation of the transgressive female desire to look.

This "seductive" image (of which much more could be said) thus illustrates the dilemma that the woman/artist finds herself in as both subject and object of the look (must it always be attack and recoil?). The artist and theorist Mary Kelly has stated that attempts to deal with this contradiction centre on the question: "How is a radical, critical and pleasurable positioning of the woman as spectator to be done?".

The gaze of the woman/photographer/mother in Unknown Photographer Part I and II disrupts and unsets. She is the deviant/bad mother that occurs elsewhere in the artist's work - the prostitute mother, the single mother, the mother who needs time for herself.

The mother who desires and refuses to be silent. Desire can also be read in The Single Ladies Race. Here desire for the phallic/baby (a patriarchal desire) is replaced by a desire that moves beyond constraints, that runs ahead of, and that may run somewhere else entirely "taking flight for the viewer's pleasure", as Picnic at Hanging Rock meets Thelma and Louise.

In her on-going regard for the viewer, Pam Harris continually sought to investigate the relationship between the text and the reading self, seeking different models of communication.

While making Working Woman and Child, the artist wrote: I was thinking a lot about alternative ways I could visually communicate and considered if I could develop imagery as rich as...a letter from my mother. Her letters...loaded with a history we shared were made of fragments: of statements, questions always open-ended and waiting for a response from the receiver.

This description echoes the idea of a "conversation between pluralisms", a technique that is "circular in form, cooperative in manner and constructive in intent." The works Memory Trace, Process and Unknown Photographer draw on the family snapshot tradition. Snapshots, like letters, like conversations, resist fixed meanings and closure; instead the scene is set for recollection and for the viewer to tell her own stories.

In this survey of Pam Harris' art, we can trace a journey from the moralism and didacticism of the political poster, to the word/image pieces that engage the viewer in conversation, "where the aim is comprehension, not agreement..., coherence in diversity and respect, rather than a unity of logical consistency".

Jude Adams, Lecturer, Visual Arts Theory, SA School of Art, University of South Australia

Footnotes to From Posters to Performance
1 Lucy R. Lippard, Manipulated Vol 9 1980 "Some Propaganda for Propaganda", p39
2 Evi p 39
4 S Bradon Committing Photography, Pluto Press p 87
5 J Lovell "Picture" in Plastics in Photography p 86
8 F Schriver "Pluralisms with Feminist Literary Criticism" cited in J King Mcfee Studies in Art Education 12 (2) 1993 "A Field of Discrimination or a Network of Mutual Support" p 76
10 Op cit, J King Mcfee p 76

stone the crows!

Pam Harris' metamorphosis from a political printmaker into Australian performance art's equivalent of Fanny Brice was nothing short of miraculous. It was a change as unexpected as a wabbit popping out of a hat, and twice as many laughs. You must understand, this woman was wired, always had been. She fairly
cracked with energy, loved life, laughed hugely. So performance was, somehow, a natural destination for her talents and for her prodigious energies. Performance insists on focus, on pulling any number of disparate elements together in one place for an infinitesimally brief moment, and holding them there by the force of desire in the face of scepticism. After that, it’s only memory, a whirling impression. That was Pam to a tee: firecracker force and certainty. All I can clearly remember from one performance in Perth in 1987 is Pam whizzing by on roller-skates wearing an insane grin.

It was a long way from the Progressive Art Movement, where Pam Harris first emerged as a mature artist in the mid-70s, with its emphasis on political commitment and correct imagery, to the highly personal vocabulary she developed in her performance work ten years later. Not that these works were entirely remote from the preoccupations of earlier times. In many respects the continuity of interests is striking: the conditions of Australian mythologies, the great issues confronting women, indifference to art as commodity. Australian Landscape is the direct descendant of earlier concerns with contemporary political issues, speaking about the role of education in indoctrination, nuclear testing at Maralinga and the treatment of Aboriginal peoples, the great ruling mythologies of Australian public life. But the wacky irreverence of Pam Harris’ performances deliberately walked away from the strict didactic tone and the orthodox politics of the Australian Independence Movement at its height. This was not a question of political difference but an artistic departure, the confidence to be herself. By the mid-1980s, Pam Harris was ready to try totally different tasks where serious matters were concerned, and seriously silly gambits wherever possible.

Why? I’d say it was basically a matter of audience. Long before, I had been struck by the Adelaide artistic Left’s cavalier disregard of audience, both actual and potential, in practice and in theory. The emphasis was squarely on the subject of each work, seen in the context of a developed political ideology and the campaign needs of the moment. Information was the greatest good, politically-motivated education the aim. I wish I could say I remember Pam telling me she wanted to try humour instead of hectoring, but my memories are woefully inexact. Yet that is exactly what she did. The urgency and the passion were still there, but in the performances realism is leavened by opening the floodgates of the imagination and letting all sorts of unexpected animals through, beastsies large, small and Speaking of birds, why did those dotty avian head-dresses become so important to Pam’s performance personae? Maybe it had to do with the fabulous showgirls of the 1950s, something about the beast in her, something about the sumptuous tackiness of wearing fake leopard-skin (something no ‘nice’ girl did in the childhood era we shared), just being ‘a bird’? The Surrealistic personae Pam adopted for her performances - the gloves, the metamorphic birdy-head-dresses, the black lipstick - were only slightly adapted from her regular party dress, much as the subjects of her dream-like performances were those which consumed her in her waking life, and many derived directly from the culture of women. For Pam Harris always took great pride in the company of women. Art Studies of Home Life speaks about fugitive memory, pointing to the daily experience of women’s domestic sphere, summoning up the key aesthetic roles women play in their households (I said key, I don’t mean trivial, I mean truly, deeply, generously affirming the enjoyment of pattern and colour and value in every corner of life.) To remember it, to hold it, to recall even some of it, as the camera tracks across the junction of floor and wall, to let in the inconsequential flashes of memory, the unbidden phrases as the cameras breathes heavily in the room: here Pam Harris works with the daily sense of time passing.

Every single videotape reiterates Pam’s loving curiosity about artefacts (and art and fun and fiction) but all have most to say about the love of life. When I first met Pam Harris at a women's shelter meeting in 1974 she was fresh from Broken Hill and had the best platform-sole sandals in Adelaide. Yesterday someone sage remarked that women become more eccentric as they age, men merely more conventional. I hope so. Speaking personally, I intend to follow Pam’s example.

Julie Ewing, Curator, Museum Education, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, July 1994
Pam Harris

1946 Born Broken Hill, NSW
1977 Diploma Fine Art, Experimental Art, SACE
1981 Post Graduate Diploma Fine Art, Experimental Art, SACE
1987 Master of Fine Arts candidate, University of Tasmania
1992 Died Adelaide, SA

awards/commissions

1978 Truth Rules II, Experimental Art, SA
1979 Traditions and Views, Multicultural Arts Trust, SA
1980 Australian Right Here Right Now, Adelaide Festival of Arts, SA

publications

1946 Born Broken Hill, NSW
1977 Diploma Fine Art, Experimental Art, SACE
1981 Post Graduate Diploma Fine Art, Experimental Art, SACE
1987 Master of Fine Arts candidate, University of Tasmania
1992 Died Adelaide, SA

selected exhibitions

1977-82 Various group exhibitions, Women's Art Movement, SA
1977 Progressive Art Movement, exhibition, Contemporary Art Society, SA
1983 The Lovely Motherhood Show, Experimental Art Foundation, SA
1984 Truth Rules - Okay?, Experimental Art Foundation, SA
1985 Supernatural Stories for Boys, printed and handout
1986 Truth Rules II, Experimental Art Foundation, SA
1987 Design of Rack Cards, Experimental Art Foundation, SA
1988 Traditions and Views, Multicultural Arts Trust, SA
1980 Australian Right Here Right Now, Adelaide Festival of Arts, SA
1982 Truth Rules II, Experimental Art Foundation, SA

video/performance

1983 ‘Truth Rules II’ performance, Adelaide Festival of Arts, SA
1985 Supernatural Stories for Boys, printed and handout
1991 Heptad Heresies, slide performance, National Gallery of Australia

collections

Chinese Painting Institute, Shanghai, People's Republic of China
University of Tasmania
Museum of Contemporary Art, Art Gallery of NSW
National Gallery of Australia

Regional galleries

selected bibliography

1983 After the Rage, SA Women's Art and Writing
1984 All Our Working Lives catalogue, Art and Working Life Project
1985 Artlink Image Issue, Dec
1986 The Body Show, Experimenter Prospect Gallery SA
1987 Australian Perspecta '85, catalogue, Art Gallery of NSW
1988 Artlink, double issue, June/July
1990 The Body Show, Curator: Media SA
1992 All Over the Shop, performance, Adelaide, SA

articles and reviews

Art and Technology Bulletin, Vol 2, No 1, Aug
1986 Anima Gallery, SA
1987 Art Network, Winter-Spring issue, Artlink, SA
1988 Art and Technology, National Summer School scholarship
1988 The Western Mail, Weekend, 56
1989 The Advertiser, Adelaide, SA
1990 Australian Network for Art and Technology
1991 From the Inside Out, Women's Art and Writing, National Summer School scholarship
1992 All Over the Shop, performance, Adelaide, SA
1993 Australian Landscape 1988, and Bird Dog videos (approx 24 mins), Experimental Art Foundation, SA
1989 The Lingerie Salesman performance, 5UV University of Tasmania
1990 Friendly Street Poets SA, book cover design
1991 Australia: Right Here Right Now by Susan Leggett, Artbank
1992 The Body Show, Curator: Media SA
1993 The Body Show, Curator: Media SA
1994 All Over the Shop, performance, Adelaide, SA
1995 The Advertiser, Adelaide, SA
1996 Australian Network for Art and Technology
1997 The Advertiser, 10 Mar, Adelaide, SA
1998 The Advertiser, 20 Apr, Adelaide, SA
1999 All Over the Shop, performance, Adelaide, SA
2000 Australian Right Here Right Now by Susan Leggett, Tasmania
### list of works

**Adelaide Festival Centre**

#### Prints and Banners

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#### Experimental Art Foundation

**Video/Performance**

- Supernatural Stories For Boys, slides/performance in collaboration with Michele Luke (approx 15 mins)
- Tripping the Light Fantastic, performance in collaboration with Michele Luke (approx 15 mins)
- Art Studies from Home Life, video (approx 10 mins)
- Bird Dog, video (approx 9 mins)
- Australian Landscape 1988, video (approx 15 mins)
- Exhibit A, performance (90 seconds)

A 30 minute composite of performances by Pam Harris on VHS, together with associated paraphernalia and photographic documentation exhibited at the Experimental Art Foundation 18 August to 11 September 1994.

VHS editing by Dean Farrow. Photographic printing by Toni Ellis and Alan Cudlitzhank. (All measurements in centimetres, height before width)