

Artist Collectives and Communities of Practice

Key Idea

A 'collective' describes a group of people who are motivated by a common issue, or who work together to achieve a common goal. Throughout art history, artists have chosen to work together, forming communities or artist collectives that range in size from just a few people to many thousands of people. Though not all artist collectives are politically motivated, in critical moments, groups of like-minded artists have formed feminist artist collectives, in an effort to address issues related to inequalities associated with age, sex, gender, class or race.

A number of different feminist artist collectives are represented in *Unfinished Business. Right Now!* 2017 by LEVEL – a group of four artists based in Brisbane – is a survey with questions linked to Australian legislative acts concerning human rights, age, race, disability and sex discrimination. This participatory artwork tackles one of the principles of contemporary feminism – to achieve equality for *all* people. By filling out the survey and reading through the information in the accompanying pamphlet, participants of this artwork gain an awareness of issues such as accessibility, safety, social mobility and cultural representation, as they relate to the experiences of minority groups; particularly women, queer, trans and gender non-binary people, asylum seekers, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and children. This artwork reminds us that, despite living in a relatively progressive country like Australia, many people continue to experience systemic discrimination.

Ali Gumillya Baker and Natalie Harkin are members of the Unbound Collective, a group of Indigenous artists which also includes Simone Ulalka Tur and Faye Rosas Blanch. Through art, performance, poetry, music and storytelling, members of the Unbound Collective seek to promote ancestral memory and stories and the passing of knowledge between generations, to question colonial histories and critique the 'colonial gaze', and to explore ideas of freedom and expressions of sovereignty as First Nations women and artists.¹

Eugenia Lim and Clare Rae both belong to a feminist artist collective called Art/Mums. This loosely formed collective of artists endeavour to reconcile the sometimes competing responsibilities of motherhood with a desire to maintain a creative art practice. Members of this group meet to discuss issues related an art world that is not always supportive of the realities associated with raising children.² The members of Art/Mums often exhibit together and support one another emotionally and artistically, with each artist also maintaining an independent practice.

Some independent artists engage with different groups of people, to create their artworks. The desire to engage with members of the wider community, highlight issues that affect members of these communities or illuminate untold stories, leads artists to conceptualise and facilitate artworks that take the form of social events, community arts projects or places where people gather, meet and talk. Foregrounding the importance of skill sharing, inclusivity, intergenerational exchange, dialogue and discussion is central to many feminist artists' practices.

Key Definitions

Community: The condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common.³

Collective: A cooperative enterprise.⁴

Participatory Art: Participatory art is a term that describes a form of art that directly engages the audience in the creative process so that they become participants in the event.⁵

Exhibition Case Studies

Vivienne Binns, *Mother's Memories, Others' Memories* 1980

Lauded as one of the most significant artists in the development of feminist and community arts within Australia, Vivienne Binns worked on her groundbreaking community arts project, *Mother's Memories, Others' Memories*, between 1979 and 1981, first at the University of New South Wales and later in the western Sydney suburb of Blacktown. For this project, Binns engaged with and encouraged local women to share stories, mementos, photographs and documents that related to their heritage.⁶ At the time this project took place, the personal histories of women were not widely recorded, nor were they taught in schools. Binns believed that it was important to make these histories available to the wider community, and the project culminated in a temporary large scale installation situated in a small building at the Blacktown Showgrounds, accessible to all.⁷

Displayed at ACCA, *Mother's Memories, Others' Memories* 1980 is a durable visual record, a souvenir or a memento, of Binns' community project. Using the technique of photographic silkscreen printing on enamel, each postcard in this artwork features an image from the participating women's photo albums with a postcard message on the back, providing an explanation of the image or a comment on the project more generally. Viewed collectively, these postcard artworks can be thought of as snippets of the lives of the individuals involved in Binns' community arts project – experiences and memories of community members brought together in the form of a lasting archive.

Emily Floyd and Mary Featherston, *Round Table* 2017

Created by artist Emily Floyd and designer Mary Featherston, the *Round Table* 2017 is comprised of a half-moon shaped table with eight round stools, opening out to a surrounding semi-circular bench-like structure – all painted a vibrant pea-green. Both Floyd and Featherston are interested in legacies of feminist design, the history of pedagogical play, and the creation of child centred learning environments, and so their paring to produce this work is significant. There is a connection between these two creatives that stretches back to when Floyd's mother and Featherston were at the forefront of the radical childcare movement in Melbourne in the 1970s. The colour, formal shape and arrangement of the objects that makes up the *Round Table* is informed by a cover of *Ripple / Community Child Care* newsletter, originally designed by Featherston in 1977.

Located at the very heart of the exhibition, Floyd and Featherston's *Round Table* provides a space for artists, educators and community groups to host discussions, workshops, performances, group meetings, readings and making sessions in the gallery. In this way, the sculptural installation references the historical use of the kitchen table; an object around which women, artists and activists have gathered to discuss, debate, create, form allegiances, and plan for a future where all people are regarded as equal. As different people gather together in the communal space that the *Round Table* provides, there is a very real possibility of like-minded individuals meeting one another, potentially leading to the creation of new groups or collectives.

Historical Touchpoints

- Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, *Womanhouse* 1972
- Suzanne Lacy, *The Crystal Quilt* 1985-7

Questions

- What kinds of conversations do you have around your kitchen table? List some of the key topics that are discussed.
- Working together can allow groups of people to achieve things that would be hard for an individual to achieve alone. Think of a time when you have worked with other people. Was it easy or were there challenges in working together? Why is this, do you think?
- Research different feminist artist collectives. What issues are these collectives primarily concerned with? If you had to create your own feminist artist collective with some of your peers, what issues might you try and address as a group? What form would the artworks you make in response these issues take?

- 1 'About Unbound', Flinders University. <http://www.flinders.edu.au/oise/unbound/>
- 2 'MUM' Exhibition Catalogue: "MUM" at Stockroom Gallery. <http://ninaross.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/MUM-essay-2016.pdf>
- 3 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/community>
- 4 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/collective>
- 5 'Participatory Art', Tate. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/participatory-art>
- 6 The Australian: Vivienne Binn's Kite-Like references her love and life: Review of Vivienne Binns artwork. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/vivienne-binns-kitelike-references-her-life-and-love/news-story/a7c9575b548c6589fddaa00ec3bc5004>
- 7 Journal article written by the artist about her community arts project. Vivienne Binns, 'Mother's memories, other's memories': A project combining creative expression, memorabilia and oral history. *The Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, No.3. 1980-1981; pp. 54-61.

Images

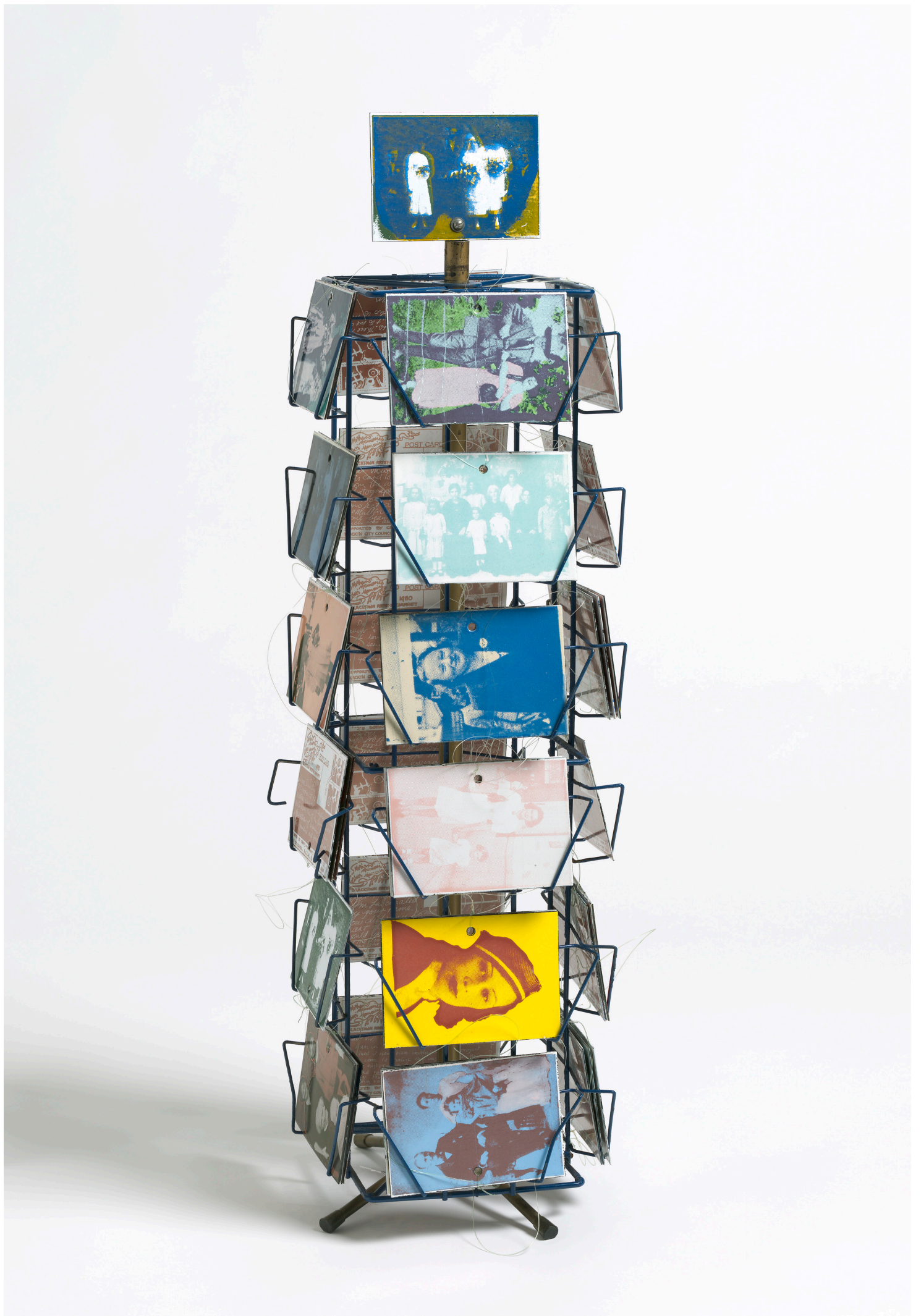
- a. Vivienne Binns, *Mothers' memories others' memories* 1980. Blacktown City Art Collection, Blacktown Arts Centre, Sydney.
- b. *Unfinished Business: Perspectives on art and feminism* 2017, installation view, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne. Photograph: Andrew Curtis
- c. Suzanne Lacy, *The Crystal Quilt* 1985-7. ©The artist. Photograph: Gus Gustafson
- d. Cover of *Womanhouse* catalogue 1972. From left: Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago. Photograph: Though the Flower Archives at Penn State University Archives.

Acknowledgements

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