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## **"Volatile, feral *and* glamorous": Australia's Women's Warehouse<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** The Women's Warehouse (1979–1981) provided a short-lived and unofficial headquarters for the social and cultural activity of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) in Sydney, Australia. This paper writes an introductory history to the Women's Warehouse through the case study of the Women's Warehouse Screenprinters, one of the most significant collectives to operate in the space. This approach allows for a focused understanding of how feminist ideologies were interpreted and implemented by members of the house via, for example, collective ownership, group authorship, commitment to local community concerns and the non-sexist representation of women. The Women's Warehouse was an unproclaimed, yet undeniably, lesbian feminist space. This paper begins research into the feminist politics, presentation and perception of the house.

**Keywords:** Women's Warehouse, feminist separatism, lesbian feminism, feminist history, lesbian history, Australia

In 1992, the filmmaker Susan Charlton wrote: "I moved to Sydney in 1980, specially to take part in this [the local] film culture and in the wider scene associated with the Women's Warehouse in Ultimo. The talk, film, music and action of the time was volatile, feral *and* glamorous."<sup>2</sup> The Women's Warehouse (WW) (1979–1981) was a hotbed of feminist political and cultural activity. In its large wooden rooms, women gathered to socialize, learn and organize, re-purposing the five-storey building for multiple, over-lapping, collective and community pursuits. The list of classes and activities at the house runs to a full paragraph. It includes carpentry workshops, tai chi classes, lesbian mother's child care, protest headquarters, artist slide nights, creative writing groups and book launches.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the financial assistance of the Nancy Keesing Fellowship, State Library of New South Wales and warm ongoing support from Anne Sheridan.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Charlton in 1993 *UBU and the Sydney Filmmakers Co-Op Take 2 AFI*, program, <http://scanlines.net/>, ac. 09. 12. 2013.

Ten women signed the initial lease on Bay 9, no. 4, Ultimo Rd, Haymarket, a cavernous and dilapidated building in Sydney's inner-city. Photographs reveal broken windows, mis-matched curtains, exposed brick walls and wooden staircases throughout. With a vision of the building as a 'cultural and artistic centre for the wimmin's movement', women set to work, volunteering weeks of labour to transform the space: sanding wooden floors, painting walls and sparsely furnishing the rooms with eclectic second-hand furniture, posters and noticeboards.<sup>3</sup> Over 100 women attended the first meeting and, two days later, five collectives agreed to the division and rental of the space.

Ongoing use of the space was precarious and fraught. Legally, the women rented only the first two floors of the building, squatting in the expansive basement and upper floors. They may have additionally been in conflict with local zoning laws or lacking relevant council permits given their repeated instructions to one another to refer to the WW as a 'storage space'.<sup>4</sup> In turn, neighbours contested Bay 9, demanding use of some areas and a portion of fundraising profits as payment for the noise caused by band rehearsals and dances. Dances were moved to the ground level for fear of the floor collapsing, as indeed the floor above the newspapers' office had collapsed following heavy rains. Fire exits were non-existent and a second-floor toilet was out of order for over half a year. There was also the constant strain of paying the monthly rent, yet despite these hurdles collective activity flourished in the space.

One of the most significant collectives to form at the house was the Women's Warehouse Screenprinters.<sup>5</sup> Leftist screen-printing groups were prolific around Australia throughout the 1970s and 1980s, often running open access facilities on university campuses. This was the case for the influential Earthworks Poster Collective (1972–1980) (and its subsequent incarnations Lucifoil /1980–1983/ and Tin Sheds Posters /c. 1984/), which was based at Sydney University's Art Workshop (affectionately known as the Tin Sheds), a building in walking distance from the Women's Warehouse.

Earthworks is credited with establishing a number of collective working principles in Australia's poster collectives.<sup>6</sup> In addition to open access facilities these included group decision making, equal rates of pay for designers and printers, shared recognition through logos rather than signatures and a commitment to voicing the social, political and community concerns of local activist and minority groups. These principles aligned strongly with the ethics of the women's movement and this correlation had two important consequences. First, many women's groups commissioned poster collectives for their advertising needs, and second, feminist artists and activists formed women-only poster collectives in order to service these needs and practice these values themselves.

Like Super 8mm films, independent newspapers and community radio, poster-making signified a trend, as noted by experimental filmmaker Kate Richards, towards 'domestic media'.<sup>7</sup> These forms provided a means to bypass mainstream media, to voice alternative opinions and to challenge existing forms of representation – particularly sexist advertising. In light of this,

<sup>3</sup> "Meanwhile . . . back at the warehouse", *Girls' Own: Sydney Feminist Newspaper*, Sydney, 1981, 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>5</sup> The group was also known as the Women's Warehouse Screenprinters and Photography Collective.

<sup>6</sup> Recognition of Earthworks collective influence is made by: Therese Kenyon, *Under a Hot Tin Roof: Art, politics and passion at the Tin Sheds Art Workshop Sydney*, Sydney, State Library of New South Wales Press, 1995, 42; Olga Tsara, "The art of revolution: Political posters in the RedPlanet archive", *The La Trobe Journal*, 2005, LXXV, 94–95; and Anna Zagala, *Redback Graphix*, Canberra, National Gallery of Australia, 2008, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Bob Percival, "d/Lux and the super history of super 8 in Sydney", an interview by Bob Percival with Kate Richards & Mark Titmarsh, *Realtime*, <http://www.realtimearts.net/article/issue77/8361>, ac. 18 .06. 2012.

screen-printing was understood as a powerful political tool. Among those who learned to screen-print, in the context of feminist and political groups, there was a shared understanding of the responsibility to pass on this valuable tool. And so, in 1979, Jan Fieldsend – a young, anarchist feminist and a member of Earthworks – began screen-printing classes at the Women's Warehouse.

Delineations between poster collectives and other groups were often fluid; members, venues and causes frequently overlapped. Accordingly, posters produced at the Warehouse were sometimes for events at the Tin Sheds and, vice versa, Fieldsend continued to mark her posters as Earthworks, and then Lucifoil, even when printing for the WW. To confuse the matter further, a good portion of posters were not marked with any name or logo. This may indicate that they were printed before the screen-printing collective officially formed and determined a name or that they were printed by a woman who did not feel she had (yet) earned access, through time, skill or labour, to the collective's name.<sup>8</sup> The following discussion takes guidance from Anne Sheridan's collection of 12 posters credited to WW Screenprinters, held by the State Library of New South Wales. This collection includes all three types of posters mentioned above: posters printed under another logo for the WW yet by a member of the WW, posters printed under the WW Screenprinters name, and posters for the WW with no name. In addition to Sheridan's collection, this discussion also includes a small number of posters held by the anarchist bookshop Jura Books and the National Gallery of Australia.

One of the early, unmarked, posters shows a crowd of silhouetted women in soft purples and metallic silver. Thought bubbles emerge from their heads: "Whatever happened to the sisterhood???", "Is *this* the *truth* about feminist collectives???" and "My mother made me a leader... but will my collective unpick me?". Rounded, lower-case text heads these thoughts with the words "an extravagant one day conference... everything you ever wanted to know about collectives... but were too afraid to ask". The Collectivity Conference was one of the first major events at the house, providing an opportunity to learn about and reflect on the default organizing principle of the women's movement.

In addition to group discussions, decision-making and activity, at the warehouse, collectivism was applied to group ownership and shared, or diffuse, authorship. This was especially true of the music and newspaper collectives. The former pooled musical instruments, relinquishing individual ownership in favour of leaving instruments at the house, where others could play them. Ludo McFerran, a member of the WW band Stray Dags, explains, the collective believed access to instruments and lessons to be privileged.<sup>9</sup> Such a statement speaks to the social feminism of the group and their recognition of the impact of class and wealth. Meanwhile, the newspaper collective for *Girls' Own* developed the practice of publishing articles without author's names. Their reasoning was that author's names may influence the reception of an article and, over time, produce leaders or spokeswomen on certain topics. By removing author's names it was hoped that all articles might be judged exclusively on the quality of the writing and argument.<sup>10</sup> For the WW Screenprinters, shared resources took the form of a darkroom, light-boxes and a screen-printing studio, while the problem of individual authorship was already addressed by the convention of using logos in the place of signatures.

A striking black, pink and gold poster advertises a Women's Masked Ball with the words "Dance the night away to all your favourite mysterious tunes." A concealed face with brilliant

<sup>8</sup> The latter reason was informally cited by a number of women printers at the Tin Sheds in relation to their decision to not use the Earthworks logo.

<sup>9</sup> Ludo McFerran, "Ludo", 55 *Upitty*, <http://55upitty.com/2012/09/19/ludo/>, ac. 11. 12. 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Editorial, *Girls Own: Sydney Feminist Newspaper*, Sydney, 1981, I.

pink lips and thick golden eyelashes emerges from a checkerboard dance floor. Monthly discos, band nights and cabarets were a major feature at the house, doubling as enjoyable social activities and fundraising for rent. Sandra Mackay, an early participant in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), remembers women's dances as 'totally different to (gay and lesbian) bars', providing a space to 'act out' ideas of anti-fashion and non-objectification, to shed markings of femininity.<sup>11</sup> Tops were discarded and women danced in big circles.<sup>12</sup> Women's dances were cast as utopian spaces for joyous self-expression, female friendship and lesbian flirtations.

Women's dances provide an interesting entry point to discuss feminist economics. Written in the WW Collective minutes book is the text: "Next dance: Make wimmin pay [...] Will stamp people in future, but broke people can still get in cheap".<sup>13</sup> In these crude sentences, the collective repeats the understanding articulated by McFerran above, that money provides or limits access and that part of the feminist project was to counter this through flexible pricing schemes. Low entry costs, concession rates and further, informal, discounts accounted for the various financial circumstances of visitors to the house.

In an exasperated text, written for *Girls' Own* at the closing of the house, the WW Collective wrote in relation to the 'social activities' at the house, "they served as a relatively easy entry into feminist political activity [...] and nurtured a diverse range of women's creative talents."<sup>14</sup> The article continues: "How often these social activities were trivialized by the rest of the Movement who claimed that this was not 'real' political work and also claimed that we were the 'Milk-bar of the Movement'."<sup>15</sup> Such criticisms failed to register the importance of women's culture and community to the WLM while also ignoring the more obvious political and activist activity based at the house. Protests, boycotts and information sharing were each employed as strategies by the WW to address women's issues, particularly in relation to sexist and misleading marketing strategies.

One of the most haunting posters produced by the WW Screenprinters warns, in a horror-film inspired script, "Recall the Dalkon Shield". The Dalkon Shield was a US-invented intra-uterine contraceptive device. It was prone to deterioration, cracking and movement, causing infection, infertility, septicemia, miscarriage and death. Although the device was recalled in the US it continued to be distributed to other countries, partly in the form of US foreign aid. In the Dalkon Shield poster an outline of the device is overlaid with the image of a stark white skull. Large droplets of blood drip from either side of the device. A second version is lined with text, informing readers of the medical dangers of the device, advising its immediate removal from current wearers and calling for the international recall and removal of the contraceptive.

Women's health issues, especially those caused by products marketed to women for contraception and menstruation, were a common topic in the newspapers produced at the house. There is an urgency and desperation in these articles that suggests a lack of coverage in the mainstream media. This also explains the use of extensive text in the second Dalkon Shield poster. Their underlying message is that women's health and contraceptive needs should be

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Mackay, Interview of Sandra Mackay by Rebecca Jennings, 2 July 2007, Pride History Group, Sydney, *100 Voices oral history project*, audio recording.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Women's Warehouse Collective, minutes book, Women's Warehouse Collective – records, 1979–1981, State Library of New South Wales.

<sup>14</sup> The Wimmin's Warehouse Collective, "Wimmin's Warehouse 28<sup>th</sup> April 1979 – 25<sup>th</sup> Dec 1981", *Girls' Own: Sydney Feminist Newspaper*, Sydney, 1981, V.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

openly, plainly and knowledgeably discussed, that contraception and sanitary items must be, unequivocally, safe and affordable. There is a clear anti-capitalist sentiment in these articles indicating a will towards community, volunteer, non-profit and Government services.

The Women's Warehouse was an unproclaimed, yet undeniably, lesbian feminist space. By this I mean a space frequented by women who identified as lesbian and feminist, a space that catered to their needs in terms of socializing, discussion and political action (particularly around lesbian mothers) and a space that recognized the intersection of sexuality and gender in relation to privilege and discrimination. In Anne Sheridan and Digby Duncan's words, respectively, the house was a "hubbub of lesbian activity", "a very big social gathering place for lesbians".<sup>16</sup> Ludo McFerran adds, the house provided a place for women to identify as lesbians, "even if they only wanted to identify when they went to the warehouse"<sup>17</sup>.

Although the members and activities of the house were firmly embedded in the local WLM and a broader counter-culture of artists, activists and anarchists, there is also evidence of attempts to delineate and distance the WW by other women's groups. The remainder of this article is concerned with tracing these relationships, noting perceptions of the house and the women's un/conscious responses.

The house eschewed hierarchies and centralized decision-making; functioning as a loose assembly of autonomous collectives. The open Women's Warehouse Collective held weekly meetings to address the practicalities of running the house – paying the rent, liaising with the real estate agent, arranging repairs, etc. From their minutes we can deduce the very small number of expectations, or hopes, of the other collectives that occupied the space. These were contributing to rent, the cleaning roster and the weekly meetings. These same minutes indicate these expectations were frequently unmet, which I mention not as criticism, but as evidence of the overt independence, autonomy and looseness of collectives in the house. The only shared decision between collectives was the agreement that the WW was a women-only space; and even this was open to exclusions and contestation. An early meeting records the agreement as follows: "no men as a general rule but (there) can be exceptions when there are no women to do specific tasks (such as plumbing). Each case to be considered separately on its merits"<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, there seems to have been no definite position on male children.<sup>19</sup>

There were no requirements for participation, no manifesto, no stated aims, no explicit or communal attendance to one feminist ideology or another. In lieu of any shared feminist position, one must look to the politics of individual participants and activities at the house, and from this one can gather that the house was a conglomeration of socialist feminists, anarchist feminists, lesbian feminists and separatist feminists.

Nevertheless, women from both the WLM and the artworld perceived the house as a radical, separatist and lesbian-only space.<sup>20</sup> One particularly strong, though unintended and informal, example of this came in the form of a recent conversation between a member of *Earthworks* and myself. When I asked if she had ever printed at the warehouse she replied, curtly:

<sup>16</sup> Digby Duncan, Interview of Ludo McFerran by Digby Duncan, 19 October 2008, Pride History Group, Sydney, *100 Voices oral history project*, audio recording.

<sup>17</sup> Ludo McFerran, Interview of Ludo McFerran by Digby Duncan.

<sup>18</sup> Women's Warehouse Collective, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> Two circumstances raised debate: first, the teaching of self-defence to male children, and second, a visit by a pair of particularly boisterous and brash young boys.

<sup>20</sup> Many records make reference to this perception, including articles in *Girls' Own*, the Women's Warehouse Collective minutes book and more recent conversations with Anne Sheridan. Anne Sheridan, interview with the author, 22 November 2012.

“No, I wasn’t a lesbian.” The implication of her response was that only lesbians printed at the house and, furthermore, that my question implied her homosexuality. The exclusion of lesbians, and resistance towards discussing lesbian issues, was commonly justified by members of the WLM as a means to focus attention on gender equality and, simultaneously, as a necessary measure for preventing the women’s movement from being perceived as a lesbian movement.<sup>21</sup> In the case of the Women’s Warehouse, the exclusion of lesbian women operated by defining the Women’s Warehouse as a radical lesbian space and subsequently, critiquing the politics and culture of the house while simultaneously refusing to participate in either.

In the posters and the newspapers of the WW two strategies addressed these perceptions. Both, interestingly, downplayed the lesbianism of the WW. The first strategy was one of silence, erasure and non-depiction. In surviving posters made by the WW Screenprinters there are no textual or visual references to lesbians or lesbianism. Instead, women are pictured as mothers, workers, writers and friends. Additionally, no lesbian services are advertised. Given at least two of the three core members of the collective were lesbian *and* the proliferation of lesbian content among other women-only poster collectives, this seems unusual and perhaps deliberate.

The second strategy was to address criticism and perceptions directly through articles published in the warehouse newspapers. In one such article, the anonymous author/s write: “While some of the more vocal and visible womin are lesbian separatists, this denies the political position of many other warehouse womin.”<sup>22</sup> In these articles there is an almost constant call for participation, willing women to bring their diverse politics and backgrounds to the house, to address this criticism themselves by making it their own.

This article presents my brief findings from preliminary research into the WW Screenprinters and its location in Sydney’s artistic and activist landscape. In ongoing research I hope to further examine the questions of inclusion and exclusion, correlations and distinctions, politics and perception.

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<sup>21</sup> Sandra Mackay makes direct reference to these tactics in her interview with Rebecca Jennings, op. cit. Issue V of *Girls Own* was a special issue on lesbian feminism, providing a space for women to assess the role of gender and sexuality in their own politics and to document the perception of lesbian in the WLM.

<sup>22</sup> “Meanwhile... back at the warehouse: The warehouse and womin’s culture”, *Girls Own: Sydney Feminist Newspaper*, Sydney, 1981, II.