

# Ways of Loving

## A Conversation between Ann Shelton and Cassandra Barnett, 20 May 2016

1 **Oestrogen Rising**, Artspace, Auckland, 1996; **Laying it on Thick**, Artspace, Auckland, 1996; Ann Shelton, **Redeye**, Rim Publishing, Auckland, 1997, Dewi Lewis Publishing, Stockport, 1997.

**Cassandra Barnett:** One of the things we have decided to discuss is the feminist angle and the role of women within your practice. There might be a few nods to queer theory and queer aesthetics too. Perhaps we could trace the evolution of these threads, which are still visible in your work, from your early practice in the 1990s? In my memory, the Auckland art scene back then was quite dazzled by fetish, trash, glam and grit – with group shows like *Oestrogen Rising* and *Laying it on Thick* and of course the photographs in your pivotal book *Redeye*<sup>1</sup> – but also politically liberatory and celebratory. As an artist, how did you respond to the feminism of the 1990s?

**Ann Shelton:** I think it's good to step back from the individual events of the 1990s to think about the larger cultural and social contexts and the changing discussions that were occurring. In the 1980s we saw new feminisms emerge. One strain was anti-pornography. I remember as a young press photographer documenting various anti-porn demonstrations in Wellington when I worked for the *Dominion* and the *Dominion Sunday Times*. That group had a voice, and the position of the artistic circle that I later became part of in Auckland was in stark contrast with theirs. We wanted instead to advocate for the representation of sexuality within a multifaceted context that we might then have called 'queer' (now, over 20 years on, the inclusivity of that term has been problematised, especially by the trans movement, by indigenous queer positions – and rightly so). So in the 1990s my particular brand of Karangahape Road feminism responded to these debates and was therefore quite sexualised in that response.

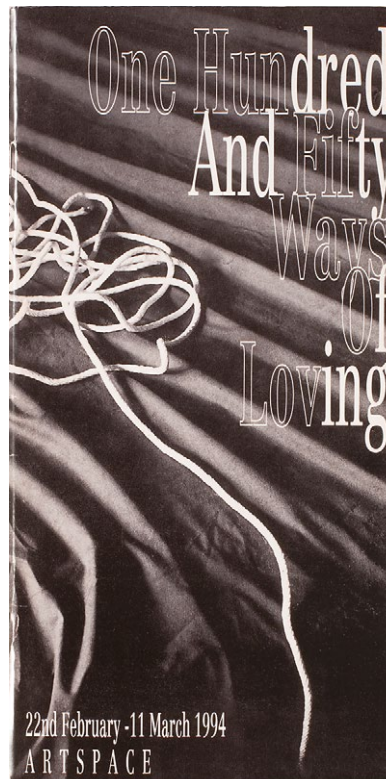
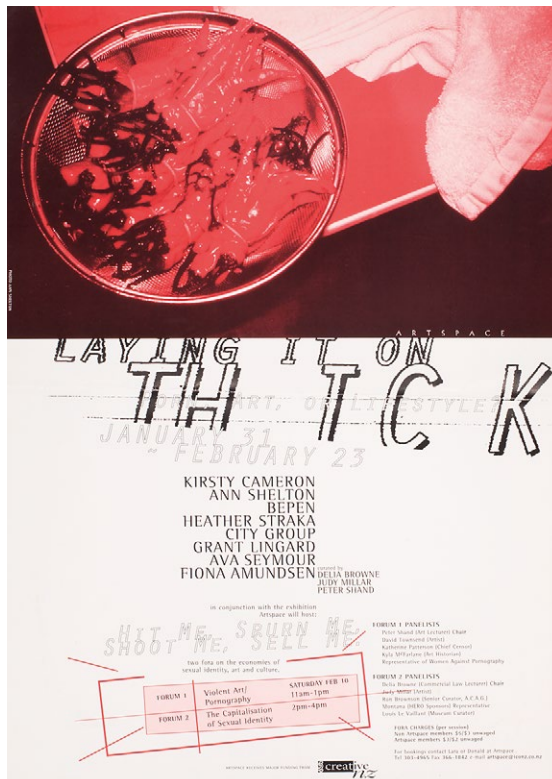
2 Artspace, Auckland, 1994.

In the mid-1990s, while studying at Elam, I was involved in curating *150 Ways of Loving*<sup>2</sup> with Kirsty Cameron and Paul Booth. The show had four components: a film screening, *Little Blue Peep*; an evening of performances, *150 Ways of Loving Live*; *The Seduction of Boundaries* forum on censorship in New Zealand, and the exhibition itself, which dealt with a broad range of responses to the question of censorship in Aotearoa. Jane Wrightson, the then chief censor, presented as well as artists on their ideas. We tried to make the event representative of a broad number of positions. That exhibition set the stage for much of what I did later in terms of wanting to articulate a complex identity position within my work at that time, particularly in *Redeye*. Certain aspects also reach into my current practice, particularly perhaps the idea of a surface/depth paradigm. There was an incredible amount going on in the mid-1990s – a real energy and a sense of purpose, almost a kind of over-articulation that fed into the performative. For example, my social group was obsessed with dressing up but nonetheless was aware of the performance of gender and sexuality as a set of constructs enacted in that process and informing it.

**Why isn't Mapplethorpe coming to Auckland?**, still from colour video, 1 minute, circa 1993, produced and directed by Kirsty Cameron, Ann Shelton, Jodi Smith. Art Director, Kirsty Cameron. Director of Photography, Ann Shelton. Editor, Jodi Smith.



Around that time I made a 'public service announcement' with Kirsty Cameron and Jodi Smith: an advertorial parody about why Mapplethorpe's big retrospective – including the *X Portfolio* – which had just shown in Wellington, wasn't coming to Auckland Art Gallery. Word on the street was that Auckland's conservative mayor Les Mills prevented it from happening. So we made this little video in which we re-staged images like *Man in a Polyester Suit*, 1980, some of Mapplethorpe's rubber-clad folk and the Patti Smith portrait with the doves.



**Laying it on Thick** (poster), 1996, published by Artspace, designed by Kevin Helas. Exhibition curated by Delia Browne, Judy Millar and Peter Shand.

**One Hundred and Fifty Ways of Loving** (catalogue), 1994, published by Artspace. Cover photo, Anne Noble. Exhibition curated by Kirsty Cameron, Paul Booth and Ann Shelton.

I was also photographing a lot of events and performances: the Hero Parade and party, Cheap Sex parties, fetish balls, Hell for Leather parties, Steven Ball's fashion shows. I did several Safe IV drug campaigns for ADIO,<sup>3</sup> including a series of postcards. Around this time I also made a documentary about gender performativity called *The Him Ratings*, which explores drag and gender performativity from fluid gender positions. *Oestrogen Rising*, which you mentioned earlier, also represented a point of departure because it was for women only. Other exhibitions from around that time included *The Powder Room*, *Laying it on Thick*, *Identikit*, *From the Waist Down*, *Pink Bits*, *Golden Breed* and then *Redeye*.<sup>4</sup>

These artworks and curatorial events fed into a set of shared concerns within the context of 1990s feminism. As I mentioned, it was a period when feminism was more sexualised; a claim was being articulated to represent multiple interstitial gender positions and sexualities beyond the hetero-normative – although bisexuality, which is how I identify, still had a very bad rep. We were working towards an intersectional feminism or a transfeminism, one containing more multifaceted positions within it, but we weren't quite there yet.

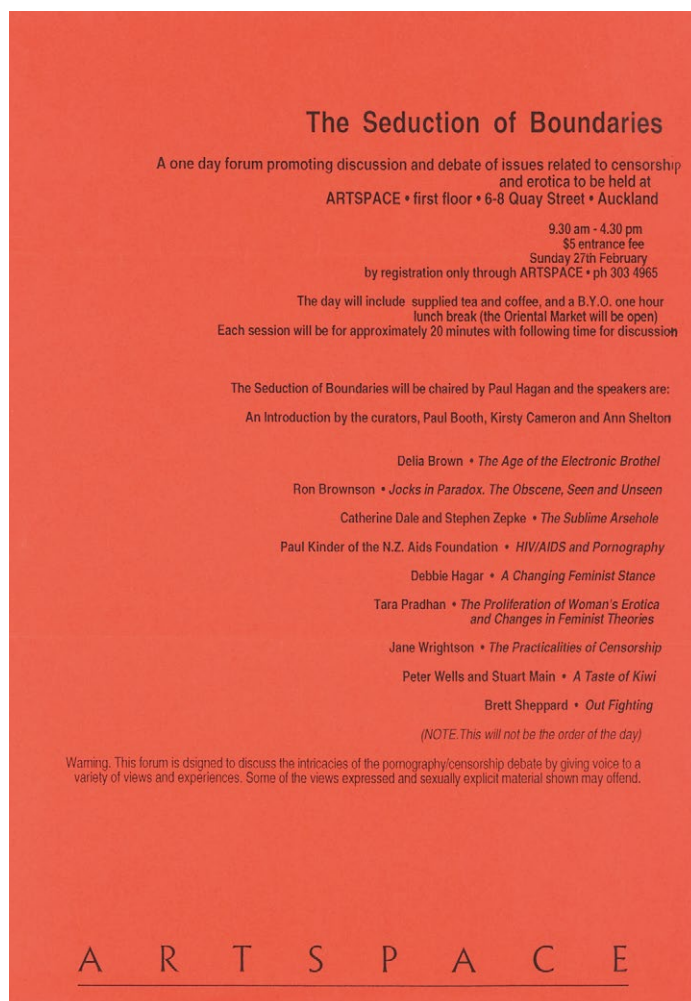
**CB:** Yeah, it was germinal. The 'unabashed feminist separatism' of *Oestrogen Rising*, however lighthearted – sitting happily on its flyer alongside the Holy Whores and Bandy Candy and the Cocksuckers! – seems to date the show a bit. As the trans movement has gained traction and we've moved farther along the continuum of identity fluidity, it seems less likely that a simple, essentialist identity like 'female' would be the sole conceptual locus for an art event interrogating gender and sexualities today. Feminisms have become more culturally intersected too. I imagine such a show today mixing Māori (mana wahine), Pasifika, Asian and hopefully – I live in hope – many more references, in with the Pākehā histories of phrases (also on the flyer) like 'girl next door' and 'ladies a plate'.

**AS:** Yes. The separatism in this instance was perhaps, as it sometimes is, about the notion of safety. But ultimately you would need to ask the organiser Tessa Laird. Those cultural intersections were percolating through society too. You had the Pacific Sisters collective, *Planet* magazine and events like Steven Ball's fashion shows all happening in Auckland.

3 Auckland Drug Information Outreach.

4 **The Powder Room**, Escalante Gallery, Auckland, 1994; **Laying it on Thick**, Artspace, Auckland, 1996; **Identikit**, Lopdell House Gallery, Auckland, 1996; **From the Waist Down**, George Fraser Gallery, University of Auckland, Auckland, 1995; **Pink Bits**, The High Street Project, Christchurch, 1996; **Golden Breed**, 23A Gallery, Auckland, 1996, and **Redeye**, which was shown at: Teststrip, Auckland, 1996; Fotofeis, The Arches, Glasgow, 1997; Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North, 1997; Artspace, Auckland, 1997; The Contemporary Art Annex, Christchurch, 1997; Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin, 1997, and Dowse Art Gallery, Lower Hutt, 1998.

**The Seduction of Boundaries** (forum flyer), 1994, published by Artspace. Exhibition curated by Kirsty Cameron, Paul Booth and Ann Shelton.



Steven wanted to make visible the Pasifika cultures that make up large parts of Auckland and he used many Pasifika models. He also did things like use pregnant models and newborn babies on the cat walk, he painted everyone with monobrows – there is a fantastic image from one of Steven’s shows of Lisa Reihana with a feather mohawk and a monobrow in my archive. Steven and I were talking recently about how the performances taking place in the 1990s on K Road were trying to create a space that broke with normative gender roles. You see that strongly articulated in *Redeye*. For instance, there are a number of photographs of my partner at the time, Fiona Amundsen, who is in various guises, ranging from suits to

pyjamas to a drag look to ultra femme – here you can see those moments of slippage in terms of gender. Some critiques of *Redeye* within the gay press included a sort of put-down of girly feminism, or ‘lipstick’ feminism, which it was felt that the book represented, insinuating that the identity that I was depicting was not fully evolved. But I wanted to create a sense of both sexuality – in terms of identity – and gender as fluid. That was the point of *Redeye*.

**CB:** It’s interesting that you mention lipstick feminism. It and its companion term ‘lipstick lesbianism’ were tedious catch-phrases of the 1990s – and yet even now we see femme, as well as many other things, often being excluded from the gamut of ‘acceptable’ queer identities. We’ve been striving for so long towards a really inclusive identity ‘spectrum’, and meanwhile things are getting more and more atomised. We have an ever-extending acronym, LGBTQIA2+, which I recently saw on Facebook extended to this: LGGGBBBNTTHHQIAAFFFSRMMNN2+. <sup>5</sup> That actually excited me because it was heading towards such a proliferation of singular and indigenous differences – a total multiplicity.

**AS:** Yes that is a huge shift. Thinking back to the beginning of that fracturing that we can now see so clearly expressed, I was influenced by Judith Butler and her book *Gender Trouble*,<sup>6</sup> which allowed for this flux of gender and identity, and also Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her axioms.<sup>7</sup> Feminism in 1990s Auckland was responding to these debates we have been discussing around the gender continuum and a heightened examination of identity.

5 Lesbian / Gay / Genderfluid / Genderqueer / Bakla / Bisexual / Brothaboy / Non-Binary / Trans / Takatāpui / Hijra / Hemaneh / Queer / Intersex / Asexual / Akavaine / Fa’afafine / Fa’atama / Fakaleiti / Sistagirl / Raerae / Māhū / Muxe / Nādleehi / Niizh Manidoowag / Two-Spirit / +. Thanks to Léuli Eshraghi for this acronym update.

6 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York, 1990.

7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Introduction: Axiomatic’ in *Epistemology of the Closet*, Penguin Books, London, England, 1994, pp 1–63.

8 Teststrip was an artist-run space operating in Auckland between 1992 and 1997.

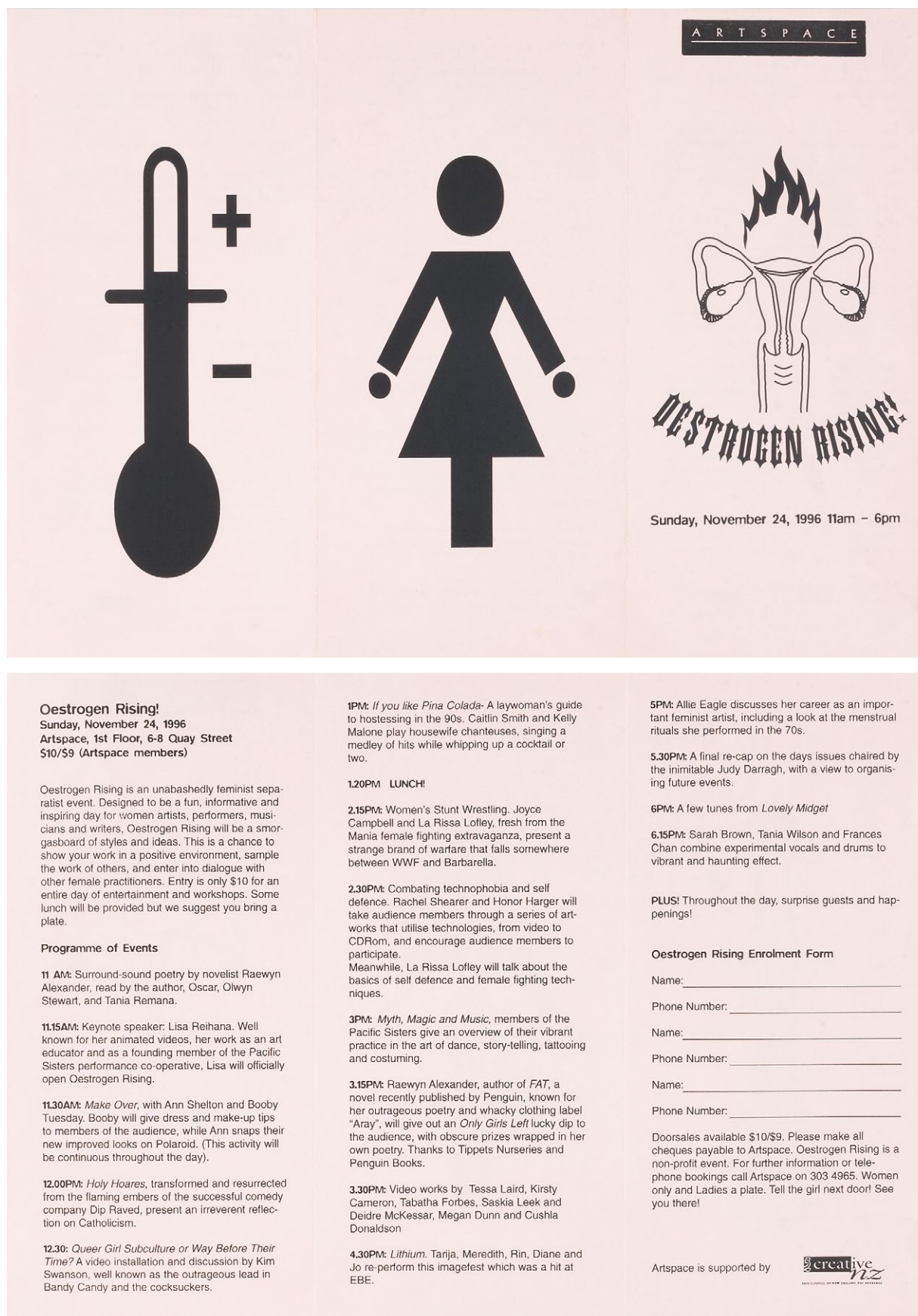
**CB:** And yet in the Auckland art scene (which *Redeye* also depicted), including Teststrip,<sup>8</sup> there was an extreme flippancy or cynicism that seemed to go along with much that happened in the 1990s. ‘We’re gonna do this but we don’t necessarily mean it.’ The *Oestrogen Rising* flyer couples a kind of Death Metal Gothic typeface with a drawing of a uterus and flames rising above! There’s deep irony – although less so in your own work. What’s your view on that now?

**AS:** This is an interesting question. I think perhaps that tone was more about an attempt not to be too highfalutin or too academic, coupled with the arrogance of youth. This parody likely has its history in something like Dada or Fluxus. An irreverent surrealist impulse that was influential for some of the Teststrippers – all those tongue-in-cheek surrealist dinner parties and performative fry-ups.

**CB:** A paradoxical nihilism: we *care but we don’t care*. But your work has always been bound up with social concerns. Could we reach back a little farther and talk about the transition you made from press photographer to artist?



**Oestrogen Rising!** (flyer), 1996, published by Artspace. Event coordinated by Tessa Laird.





Ann Shelton, **Cabin Fever**, digitally printed adhesive vinyl on glass, installation view, Fiat Lux gallery, 1998.

**AS:** Giovanni Intra was a big influence at this point. I met him when I was working on newspapers here in Wellington. He was a young artist and an intern at Wellington City Gallery. By then I was disillusioned with press photography and with the situations it put me in – being forced to chase ambulances and photograph people in extremely traumatised situations.

**CB:** The invasiveness ...

**AS:** Yes. And also the manipulation of my images through the editorial process of the newspaper. I'd already started making my own work and was photographing for *Don't Push Me/Kaua au e Puhinga*, a project about street kids or as they prefer to be called street life in Wellington. These images later comprised my first show that was exhibited at The Dowse Art Museum in 1993.

Giovanni and I were having an extended conversation about photography and these questions, and I was reading Susan Sontag's *On Photography*<sup>9</sup> and feeling challenged about being a press photographer. I decided to move to Auckland and go to art school. Giovanni introduced me to

9 Published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1977.

Auckland and to the people and artists who became friends and part of my work going forward. Through reading Sontag, and Abigail Solomon-Godeau's response to Sontag,<sup>10</sup> I carved out a new position for myself where I photographed the people I knew, the people who were my friends, in my environment. Instead of turning the camera on the 'other', I turned it on my own world and developed a set of aesthetic strategies that came with that approach. Part of that world was this incredible moment of the 1990s in Karangahape Road, where we all lived in repurposed warehouses or, as was the case with Fiona and I, above the butcher, or later, I lived with my partner Mel, opposite Artspace. We hung out at The Las Vegas Club – well, sometimes at least – and I photographed the things we did and the places we went.

10 Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Inside/Out, Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1995, pp 49–61.

Just before I got to Auckland, Teststrip opened in Vulcan Lane. I photographed many a show there and was around the gallery a lot, exhibiting there several times. A little bit later Megan Dunn and David Townsend started Fiat Lux. The gallery was a kind of antidote to the ubiquitous white cube. It was painted electric blue inside. I had a show there called *Cabin Fever* in 1998 where I transformed the space into a subterranean almost sadomasochistic den/nightclub. I took an image that I'd made of a blue-padded wall, had it printed on vinyl and adhered it to the inside of the window. So, as an intervention, it almost blended into the gallery completely. At this point, I was starting to get interested in sites as repositories of meaning.

**CB:** Although your practice has shifted since those days, the focus on social and feminist issues remains, for instance in *Public Places* and *room room*.<sup>11</sup> There is a concern for *who* (or *what*) the camera is exposing and how, and a desire to subvert photography's representational impulses by composing for multiple possibilities. What aspects of 1990s feminism have been relevant to your practice in the intervening years?

11 *Public Places*, 2001–03, and *room room*, 2008.

**AS:** Those debates around the control of the body are still in play now. Only recently a student of mine shared a story about her use of her own body in an image she made and her partner was not happy about it – in a sense, he wanted to exert some control over her representation. In response to his questioning, she had to set about negotiating her position. These issues are also invoked in my new work *jane says*,<sup>12</sup> which looks at histories connecting plants and their roles in female narratives around trauma and reproduction through a group of highly controlled still-life photographs and a performance. These longstanding interests are also present in other projects, such as the journal that I've recently co-edited for Enjoy Gallery, *Love Feminisms*,<sup>13</sup> and in my role as an educator.

12 *jane says*, 2015–16.

13 [www.enjoy.org.nz/publishing/the-occasional-journal/love-feminisms/](http://www.enjoy.org.nz/publishing/the-occasional-journal/love-feminisms/).

**CB:** This affect of control which often emanates from your photographs, perhaps reflecting the controls imposed on certain members of society, feels like a key quality of your practice. A practice of exclusions, including the shift towards excluding people from your imagery.

**AS:** Yes, that was a big shift at the end of the 1990s – the decision to remove people, figuratively speaking. They are still very much present but through absence. That lack of a figurative element has endured. However, now I am about to bring the physical body back into my work via a performance component.

Much contemporary photography produced in the last 20 years privileges the subjectivity of the viewer, my work included. That evolution was one reason for the displacement of people from my work. I focused instead on photographing the environments that people lived in, starting with the series *Abigail's Party* and the installation *K Hole*,<sup>14</sup> and then I moved on to photographing sites associated with known or fictional accounts of crime and violence in *Public Places*. I made the decision to rely on absence as a presence. These works and the images from *Redeye* are often seen as being in stark contrast to each other. However, they share common elements: they all narrate and explore displaced or sidelined cultural histories, in the case of *Redeye* what you might call a subculture.

14 *Abigail's Party*, 1999, and *K Hole*, 2000.

**CB:** It's clear that people *are* still the subjects of your subsequent works. But their visual absence stalls the viewer's judgements. The objects indexed in the photographs do not tell the whole story, leaving the viewer suspended.





Bandy Candy performing  
at Artspace, Quay Street,  
Auckland, 1995. Photo: Ann Shelton.









## Ann Shelton Cabin Fever

The 1st of October until the 11th  
opening: Thursday the 1st at 6pm.

Fiat Lux: 160 Hobson Street, Auckland. Tel (09) 3777893 Fax (09) 33776117  
email: fiatlux@iprolink.co.nz. Hours: Fri-Sat 12-4 or by appointment.  
Supported by Creative New Zealand.



FIAT LUX

160 Hobson St, Auckland, New Zealand.  
Ph. (09) 3777 893 Fax. (09) 3377 6117 Email: fiatlux@iprolink.co.nz

Blame it on the Boogie,

Ann Shelton turns Fiat Lux outside in this Thursday with "Cabin Fever". Shelton's aesthetic fits Fiat Lux like a sequined glove with an expert exercise in window dressing that proves she's no showroom dummy. Focusing the sights on site-specific art this installation shimmies with the seamless synergy of seventies chic as smooth and syrupy as a flaming cocktail. Metro retro is like a record stuck in the groove (the disc keeps spinning but the song remains the same) and the aesthetic parallels between the Lux abode and Shelton's palatial penthouse are proof that if it ain't broke don't try to fix it.

The monumental image of blue vinyl upholstery conjures associations of padded detention cells and the claustrophobic confines of the coffin so all those with fears of human bondage and restricted quarters be forewarned this won't be a walk in the park. Shelton has created an almost tactile tension between the rigidity and transparency of the glass and the opacity and illusion of cushioned volumes that seemingly extend beyond the photographic picture plane. The undeniable strength of the scale and formal medium and the evocative nature of the image combine to form an indelible artistic statement of enduring merit.

"Cabin Fever" accentuates Fiat Lux's position in the art scene with the art unseen. A note for all our art window shoppers this show is no goldfish in a bowl so let it be known here and now that we are open on Friday and Saturday 12-4 if you wish to demystify this art experience in the darkened recesses of Fiat Lux (an intimidating platos cave at the best of times). Overground, underground, wombingly free, the best art gallery, bar none, are we (hubris unbound like the heraldic lion rampant).

Often licked, never beaten... **Fiat Lux.**

Ann Shelton, *Cabin Fever* (flyer),  
1998, Fiat Lux Gallery.

15 *wastelands*, 2007, and *once  
more from the street*, 2004.

**AS:** My background in journalism is critical here. Journalism hankers for that decisive moment in which all the narrative components are aligned. My projects are committed, rather, to representing obscured histories or alienated narratives through absence. Those concerns can be seen in works like *wastelands* and *Public Places* and *once more from the street*.<sup>15</sup> There I introduced devices to engage the medium of photography as part of the content of the work. Visuality came into play – it was there in *Redeye* in the use of the vernacular snapshot and the repetition of portraits, but it started to manifest as fragmented and duplicated mirrored images at the end of the 1990s.

**CB:** How was your mirroring or doubling strategy an extension of these concerns with constructions of woman-ness, with removing the over-defined subject (and our objectifying gaze upon that subject) and exposing the invisible layers behind the scenes?

**AS:** Well, you can look at the doubling in several ways. For me, in one sense, it was a way to draw attention to the form of the photograph, through a device that also conceptually engaged the content. I made the works in the series *Public Places* when I was in Vancouver doing my Masters at the University of British Columbia and I was looking back at narratives that were exported to the world about New Zealand, those dark and violent narratives that have been characterised as 'New Zealand Gothic'. I was interested in the female subjects of some of these narratives: how they shattered codes of femininity, how femininity is constructed in the cultures that produced those events and filmic and novelistic representations of them. For instance, Minnie Dean the 'baby farmer'; society included illegitimate children and she made a place where they could go.

With regard to the doubling, I was reading and thinking about binary hierarchies – one element in the pair always being elevated above the other, gay-straight, man-woman, et cetera, and I was looking at the works of Felix Gonzales-Torres and Roni Horn and their uses of doubling, for instance Gonzales-Torres's *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*<sup>16</sup> – two clocks ticking in time. And in

16 *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1987–90.

relation to this ruptured construction of femininity that was one subject in the work, I thought, well, what happens if there's an inversion in the second image in the pair, if it's doubled and also reversed/inverted? How does this bring in this element, this construction of a feminine pathology or a forensic aesthetic into the format of the work?

When people are discussing those works often they will say something like 'which one is the right way round?' This twoness asserts a fundamental rupture, confounding one of the primary axioms of photography and challenging the singular image and all those photographic clichés – the single perfect image that says it all. I continue to be committed to the idea of making the image mobile through the use of doubling or some other device, making the format of the work do some actual *work*, if you like.

**CB:** We have been trained to have a need for there to be only one, monolithic entity occupying the centre position – and of course for there to be only one centre.

**AS:** In the progression from *Redeye* and the interest in fluid identity (represented through multiple images of the same person), through to the subsequent device of the doubled and inverted image, I was interested in problematising the notion of closed-circuit oneness or wholeness. I was also intending to foreground the gap between the two images, this void or schism where the twoness physically collapses and allows a space for all those other positions in between. In this instance in particular, I was also looking at how inversion and mirroring related to the content of the work. If you think, for example, about the way that 'evil' women are represented in literature through mirrors – *Snow White* – and the construction of pathology that is evoked through the relationship between femininity and mirrors, you can start to see why I have used that formal device for the series *Public Places*. The motif of the double has also been developed and used in different ways in other projects. Finally, here at least, the presence of two images also brings us back to the idea of attempting to force recognition of the physicality of the photographic object.

**CB:** So accentuating the materiality of the photograph itself is a reminder that there's a mediation happening there?

**AS:** Yes, very much so – what Hal Foster refers to as a 'thickening'<sup>17</sup> of vision: making that mediation obvious. I want the work to be about two things: the way that photography as a complex and problematic medium works in the world and wields its power over us; and the content of the work. I have consistently questioned the relationship between these two things and how that can be borne out in my work.

**CB:** I wonder whether you have also been influenced by postcolonial critiques of the gaze? They're not so far from other critiques of the gaze – the feminist critiques, institutional critiques – as manifested in your shift away from pointing the camera at people, and in your care to keep the protagonists or subjects of social histories hidden, obscured or protected. Is your practice also a response to your experience of being from a country that's always struggling with biculturalism?

**AS:** I grew up in Timaru. It's incredibly 'middle' New Zealand and also incredibly significant to Ngāi Tahu and to Māori, as this wider area is home of the Arowhenua marae. The hīkoi from there to Te Ao Mārama went right through Timaru. I had no knowledge of that history as a child or young person, but I swam in the river that runs from the Arowhenua marae to the sea and to the mountains behind, and holidayed near Omarama – those are the places where I spent my childhood. And after reading Harry Evison's book *Te Wai Pounamu*,<sup>18</sup> I was deeply affected. It gave me new insights into the specific historical narratives of this area and into the deliberate and duplicitous methods used to economically alienate Ngāi Tahu from their land.

**CB:** Is this context another version of a sense of displacement? So many New Zealanders grow up in places whose history they know nothing about, and some come to realise their childhood innocence was not so innocent. It might give you a sense of having been strangely in the wrong

17 Hal Foster, Preface, in *Vision and Visuality*, Dia Art Foundation. Bay Press, Seattle, 1998, p. ix.

18 Harry Evison, *Te Wai Pounamu, the Greenstone Island: A History of the Southern Māori during the European Colonisation of New Zealand*, Aoraki Press in association with the Ngāi Tahu Māori Trust Board and Te Runanganui o Tahu, Christchurch, 1993.



place. In light of those realisations about your childhood, in your practice you've explored displacement on a more aesthetic level – the displacement of the subject.

**AS:** The fact I grew up not knowing has, I guess, created an appetite for understanding. I am interested in those intersectional histories between Māori and Pākehā, for instance in works like *Arena, Te Ngutu o te Manu, Beak of the Bird, South Taranaki*,<sup>19</sup> part of the series *a kind of sleep*, which was made in response to the story of Ngātau Omahuru, a boy who was kidnapped during a battle at this site between Titokowaru and von Tempsky. Omahuru was later adopted by the then premier of New Zealand, William Fox. There is a fantastic book, *The Fox Boy*,<sup>20</sup> by Peter Walker which tells the story of Omahuru's life, using fiction to fill any factual gaps, and which made up part of my research for the photograph.

19 *Arena, Te Ngutu o te Manu, Beak of the Bird, South Taranaki*, 2004.

20 Peter Walker, *The Fox Boy: The Story of an Abducted Child*, Bloomsbury, London, 2002.

**CB:** More secret stories. You've touched on the way that research has been a big dimension of your practice. There are enormous stories that are withheld from the images – a practice that accords with my Māori understanding that some knowledge is tapu and not meant for everyone. But then you do find other ways to deposit all the research and information. Maybe this is a good time to talk about the role of your books and your decisions around what gets shown in an image and what gets placed in a book or other format.

**AS:** I see books as a kind of expanded field for the photograph. It's part of the assessment that photography is an incredibly slippery thing. So some of that slippery 'life' has been deposited into publications as an attempt to give the image context and complexity, to present the viewer with alternating perspectives through historical and contemporary material that allows a richer array of positions or jumping-off points to be articulated. Some publications editorialise the material, such as *wastelands* and *a new skin*, some lean more towards just representing it, such as *metadata*, and others add fictional components as in *a spoonful of sugar*.<sup>21</sup> A dimension related to that same impulse of the performative dimension is re-emerging in my recent work, *jane says*, where aspects of my research process will be activated by a performer who narrates a text in the space with the photographs.

21 *wastelands*, 2010, *a new skin*, 2006, *metadata*, 2011, and *a spoonful of sugar*, 2015.

**CB:** So all of that data gets carefully preserved and presented, but in the slightly hidden format of a book that opens and closes. You have a profound understanding of the dangers of naming and showing and fixing and identifying, but an equally profound understanding of the danger of singular details or facts or histories getting lost. So there's this constant balancing act: not showing, but preserving. Atomising, but then thickly materialising. Bringing all the information and free-floating data back to a site, a material place in time. How do you make the decisions about what the image is actually of?

**AS:** The sites in the photographs often make particular reference to the research. There is never the luxury of much time on site, so decisions are made then and there and affected by weather, et cetera. But I usually frame the image with some reference to the research subject. The material in the books is what helps hinge the context to the photograph: it is a kind of nexus for contextual material which, as you say, atomises in the images themselves. There is this sense of dark matter, something that is not directly visible but can be detected through its influence on things that are.

**CB:** Can we come back to talking about aesthetics, focusing on your photographs rather than the expanded field of information? We've been slowly identifying a 'Shelton aesthetic' that includes doublings and multiples; decenterings, exclusions and displacements; stories buried or undone; surface visibility and dark depths; control and the uncontrollable. What are your new photographs in *jane says*, which are so luscious and seductive, doing aesthetically?

**AS:** I like your term atomising. You can draw a direct line from *jane says* back to *Redeye* in terms of the content (the agential female body) and aesthetically via huge fields of colour or over-defined surfaces (tiles, painted walls). I am editing *jane says* as we speak and I also have these massive *Redeye* images from the 1990s in my lounge (to check their condition 20 years on). The intense colours in *Redeye* are coming back into play in the new work. But perhaps the

surface holds and focuses the attention – through colour and through its mirror-like qualities – needed to engage with the expanded field of information that circulates around the images and across time in relation to them. In *jane says* that depth comes from autopsy reports, Margaret Sparrow's books on the history of abortion in Aotearoa, volumes on plant medicine and other historical and contemporary materials about the conditions, conventions and controls around gender and reproduction.<sup>22</sup>

**CB:** Yes, the controlled seductiveness of the flower arrangements and their backgrounds seems to be telling us that there's something more, something hidden. It holds open this tension between revealing and concealing – revealing one thing to defer the revelation of another? – and circles back to those earlier aesthetics linked with camp. The idea of an artifice, a glamorousness, a theatricality, that at the same time speaks completely of the fact that there's more going on, that it is a *necessary* fabrication to make everything okay, to make good of what society has cast out, neglected. The floral still-lives background, but make good, the abortifacient and contraceptive potencies of the plants and their uses. I'm leaping here from things like Sontag on camp to Eve Sedgwick's reparative knowing, an ameliorative aesthetics, and how they shift us from critiques of identity/representation towards affective bonds. There's something about that kind of double layering which I find at play in these singular images that is very beautiful, seductive and 'surface' on the one hand, but profound at the same time. A paradox. Maybe doublethink<sup>23</sup> is the word for it. And the fact that you've come full circle to performativity seems to clinch it.

**AS:** I think this idea of ameliorative aesthetics is a beautiful one. I guess my new works have their doubles and their affective bonds with my research images in *Ikebana International* volumes. And, yes – the literal surface of the photograph does operate in covert ways. Early on I was interested in that overstated surface of 'camp', but also in the aesthetic surface of the image, its pool-like seductive qualities. I think that's still there in the almost over-articulated gloss of *jane says* and in my obsession with detail and sharpness. This quality is also a direct effect of the large-format cameras I chose to use throughout the 2000s until recently. Now, as digital photography finally catches up quality-wise with large format photography, I am migrating to this format likely once and for all. My boxes of 8×10 film sit languishing in my fridge like unloved chutney.

Essentially both technological approaches to image-making are corruptible, mutable and potentially ameliorative. Although I do like to think of my still-lives as having ameliorative qualities, layered over their traumatic interiors. These images live and move in the world as well as operating within the closed system of the framed photograph. This surface question is an ontological one, a part of the *being* of the photograph. A viewer has to reckon with that surface and give it meaning. In that sense its meaning relates, at a glance, to the hyper-perfect surface of consumer culture – again, drawing a viewer in via that spectacular mechanism only to rupture that sense of perfection and easy consumption with bruising content: the very real, visceral and bodily content that begins to unfold. It's a ruse, a system, a kind of pact that I hope the viewer will make with me. ■

22 Margaret Sparrow, *Abortion Then and Now: New Zealand Abortion Stories from 1940 to 1980*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2010; and *Rough on Women: Abortion in 19th-Century New Zealand*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2014; John M Riddle, *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1997.

23 Title of an off-site project by Shelton with the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2013–14.

Maria Sibylla Merian, 'Caribbean abortifacient, the peacock flower, flos pavonis', illuminated copper engraving from *Metamorphosis insectorum Surinamensium*, Plate XLV. 1705, CC BY 3.0

