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# WOMEN, VISIBILITY AND PLAYFUL ACTS USING PLAY TO EMPOWER, EDUCATE AND ACT IN PUBLIC SPACES

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# **KEYWORDS**

PLAY; FEMINISM; COLLABORATION; TRANSFORMATION; CARNIVAL, ART, ACTIVISM

# ABSTRACT

WOMEN VISIBILITY AND PLAYFUL ACTS IS AN ANNUAL EVENT ORGANISED BY THE FEMINIST RESEARCH GROUP F=, FOCUSING ON PLAYFUL APPROACHES TO CREATIVE PRACTICES IN PUBLIC SPACES. PLAY IS USED AS A CORE STRATEGY TO INVITE THE PUBLIC / PARTICIPANTS TO EXPRESS IDEAS, OPINIONS AND SELF AROUND THEMES CONNECTED TO FEMINISM USING INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY AS A PUBLIC PLATFORM FOR THESE EXPRESSIONS. IN CREATING SPACES OF NON-HIERARCHICAL ACTIVITY, PLAY, AS A METHOD OF ESTABLISHING TRUST, IS USED TO AID COMMUNICATION, TO MAKE NEW THINGS HAPPEN AND ENABLE TRANSFORMATION, EMPLOYING STRATEGIES OF HUMOUR AND THE SPECTACLE TO ENGAGE A DIVERSE, INTERGENERATIONAL AUDIENCE. IT IS PRIMARILY THROUGH PLAYFUL MEANS THAT WE EXTEND AN INVITATION TO TAKE PART.

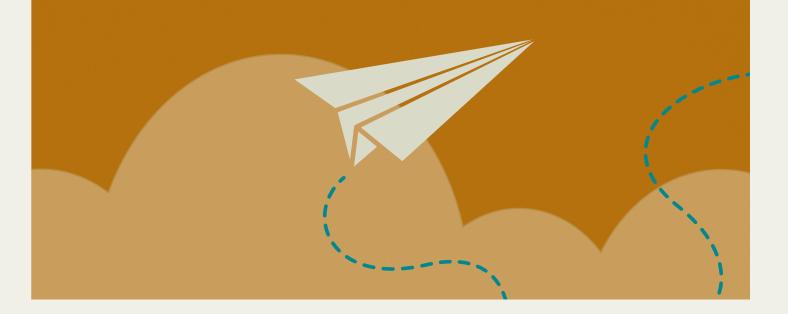
THIS PAPER VISUALLY DOCUMENTS WITH A TEXTUAL COMMENTARY THE PROCESS OF THE PROJECT AND THE WAYS WE USE PLAY TO EMPOWER, EDUCATE AND ACT IN PUBLIC SPACES.

# **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

DR LIZ STIRLING IS A FOUNDER MEMBER OF THE FEMINIST INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH GROUP F= AT LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY IN THE UK. SHE IS ALSO LECTURER ON GRAPHIC ARTS AND DESIGN UNDERGRADUATE COURSE AND A DIRECTOR OF STUDIES FOR PHD STUDENTS ACROSS THE SCHOOL OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN.

SINCE 2014 F= HAVE ORGANISED AN ANNUAL, PUBLIC ACTIVIST EVENT AND UNCONFERENCE TO CELEBRATE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY ON MARCH 8TH PROGRAMMING A FESTIVAL OF THE BODY FOR 2016 CELEBRATIONS.

LIZ STIRLING HAS A COLLABORATIVE CREATIVE PRACTICE WITH ARTIST LAURA ROBINSON CALLED ROBINSON STIRLING, WHICH USES PLAY TO EXPLORE DIFFERENT METHODS OF COMMUNICATION THROUGH PERFORMANCE, PARTICIPATORY EVENTS AND MIXED MEDIA PROJECTS. WE ARE CURRENTLY WORKING WITH WOMEN ASYLUM SEEKERS RAINBOW HEARTS ON A LONG TERM PROJECT EXPLORING AND SHARING CREATIVE ACTIVITY TOGETHER.



#### Introduction

Women Visibility and Playful Acts is an annual event organised by the feminist research group F=, focusing on playful approaches to creative practices in public spaces. The project originates within the art school as an educational brief engaging undergraduate graphic arts students in a live, issue-based, collaborative process that results in a public event to celebrate International Women's Day in the City of Leeds in the UK. The public events feature a range of live moments and an exhibition in which the public are invited to participate. As the process has evolved, the distinction between these two participant groups has become blurred, as the students are asked to consider and engage with the public, and specific interest community groups begin to be drawn into the process of production through various invitations to respond. The final event has been conceived as participatory and interactive in its form and structure, as the audience are invited to become part of the performances, join discussions, create responses within the exhibition and talks, and to take part in a public walk through the city.

This article discusses the core method of F= in designing and delivering this annual project using playful approaches to engage students and the public in current issues around feminism, open-ended enquiry in a higher educational context and in enabling connection and participation. As the project is complex, multi-layered and annual in occurrence, the text will move between the educational institution and public spaces and their users in the discussion of the varying roles and interrelationship between these two overlapping spheres.

Women, Visibility and Playful Acts was a project initiated in 2013 between Jo Hassall, Dr Liz Stirling and Dr Casey Orr, arts practitioners, academic researchers and senior lecturers on the Graphic Arts and Design Degree at Leeds Beckett University. The first event was held in March 2014 using the Burning Bra as its symbol, followed by the Freedom Bin in 2015, and in 2016 the event will be a one-month Festival of the Body through March, its symbol to be decided by the student group. The project came out of a convergence of interests around feminism and creative practices, activism and a desire to collaborate that all offered the potential of exploration together. It coincided with a growing undergraduate interest in feminism, and so it seemed a great opportunity to investigate these concerns together. We were also keen to engage students to employ playfulness to a greater extent in their approaches to tackling different subjects, and on the course we increasingly emphasise the significance of play in understanding and finding new ideas and possibilities in creative activities. Liz Stirling has a collaborative practice, Robinson Stirling, with artist Laura Robinson, where play has been the constant throughout their research, performances, projects and workshops into non-verbal ways of communicating with each other. Through image making and story-telling, Jo Hassall's current PhD uses playful means to activate critical enquiry and spaces of learning. Casey Orr is a documentary photographer. She teaches her students to take themselves outside, into our cities and towns, into communities where working becomes a collaboration between the student and the people, spaces and landscapes that hold our collective stories. F= sees the interweaving of these differing approaches to play in creativity and communication as the core ethos of the research methodology, process and production. Laura Robinson joined the project during the 2014 event and is a freelance member of the group. A number of academics, artists, designers, activists and researchers in the UK have also established an associate connection with F=, and we continue to extend the network.

### The educational project

The project is introduced to students as Design Activism, offered as one of a number of tutor-led briefs to 2nd year Graphic Arts and Design students. Basic parameters are laid out as follows: designing a public event that includes an exhibition, walk through the city and burning of a giant symbolic object to celebrate International Women's Day.

Play has been the central strategy throughout the project, engaging students in non-hierarchical, collaborative, learning environments, from using non-precious materials to making 'silly' visual responses to alternative spaces as pop-up studios often outside the university campus. The project starts with workshops that enable open-ended enquiry avoiding a preacher / preached binary, and so new voices and directions can emerge. The workshops, run within the university and in external public venues, are based on non-hierarchical, collaborative, discursive, making activities that aim to explore, share and acknowledge each person's own experience as an important factor in the act of learning together.

We ask students to take risks, much as a young child does in play, as it is only through risky endeavour that we can discover more about ourselves. Students will take risks particularly when they feel the lecturers are risking something too. The cliché of 'being in it together' is apt here. Being in it together also enables the process of collaboration and sharing ideas to be more effective, when we play together we move between our own ideas and actions and others involved, ideas can be taken up, changed and discarded. Taking part invites connection, and value is placed on collective and individual contributions.



Introducing the International Women's day project to students

- Drawing to Bridget Christie's Minding the Gap

Christie's Radio 4 Series challenges the continuing stereotyping of feminists in society, satirising the identities and behaviours peddled by the media. Campaigners and public figures associated with feminist issues have become the target of abusive comments and threatening behaviour across social media and particularly derided on sites like Twitter. Many students expressed their anxiety about appearing feminist or identifying with campaigns for improving conditions for women, locally and globally.

We drew in response to the radio content on the wall with felt-tips, overlapping and sharing pen lines, space and symbols to make visible and humorously represent misogynistic viewpoints, fixed images of women and surrounding taboos. Stuart Brown talks about the positive nature of play to produce a more flexible mind, which therefore offers more possibilities. Initially unsure of this unfamiliar format, the students gradually immersed themselves alongside us, and the resulting, surprising montage of material offered permission to laugh at an issue that many students initially felt they could only discuss if they were already historically and theoretically well-informed.



Objects of Imposition

## Making together and connecting together

The drawing freed up ideas of how students might engage with the subject and in 2015 the group made a 'What if we could burn things' list of objects of imposition we felt symbolised our personal and collective responses and experiences.

From engagement rings to gendered LEGO and Bic biros shaped for girls' hands, we played with Claes Oldenburg's absurdity through wrong scale and Piero Girardi's use of the carnivalesque to make outsize papier maché objects that could be publicly paraded. In David Graeber's essay "On the Phenomenology of Giant Puppets" he discusses the giant puppet as something monumental and ridiculous;

'A giant puppet is the mockery of the idea of a monument, and of everything monuments represent: the inapproachability, monochrome solemnity, above all, the implication of permanence, the state's (itself ultimately somewhat ridiculous) attempt to turn its principle and history into eternal verities. If one is meant to shatter the existing Spectacle, the other is, it seems to me, suggest the permanent capacity to create new ones.' Graeber.



Freedom Bin stickers in Lecture Theatre 222

Students and the public were invited to join the project, add their views and name their objects of imposition. Here the lecture theatre was turned into a participatory space in which to promote the Women's Day project through dialogue and invitation to act. Aware of our position of 'authority in this academic setting we were able to ask everyone to take part in an action and see the potential of subverting the assumed formal set-up, transforming it from a 'passive' learning environment into a moment of participation.

Butler says the "body is a field of interpretive possibilities". By requiring participation in differing forms and often unexpected situations we ask the participants and particularly the students to experience unexpected activities, to be open to unfixed moments in formal hierarchical spaces, a generosity of connection in order to discover new things. We encourage the idea that we can assume new identities, try out roles and embrace the unfamiliar, acknowledging we are together in our unknowingness, and so the possibility to transform exists.



Posters, Banners, Statements, Provocations - Workshop led by student Serena Comrie

At the 2015 event, we advertised the walk through various city-related social media sites and networks, by word of mouth and invited specific interest groups to join us in starting the walk with a party at the university. Combining painting placards and eating buns, dancers moving amongst giant objects, children running around, the university reception area, normally a space to pass through, changed into an unexpectedly busy making and socialising space to playfully create in.

The party atmosphere made up of students, lecturers, members of the public across generations and cultures, women asylum seekers, some wearing capes of power made in 2014, continued through the walk with messages on balloons filling the air above the procession of a Giant Freedom Bin and the Objects of Imposition. Stopping off at the Art

Gallery for talks on art by female members of the public we filled the gallery foyer with the placards, objects and balloons curating an unofficial occupation of the space.

The tone of each walk is carefully considered and discussed so that we can create an accessible public event with a playful atmosphere that people feel drawn to. The carnivalesque nature of giant objects, the humour in a huge bra carried through the streets and capes worn - these are all props to communicate a celebratory perspective. In 2014, students designed gifts for the public, which they handed out on the walk. This gesture referenced traditions in some East European cultures where men give women flowers on International Women's Day. The daffodils and handmade flowers were labelled 'Equality for women is progress for all' and students handed them to the pedestrians, people in cars waiting for the procession to cross the road, inviting them to join in or support the walk and thereby mediating the space between audience and participators.

Participation and play constitute the core ethos of the project and are interconnected. In the philosophy of F= participation happens through play and playful acts are designed and enacted in order to invite participation. Participation means the possibility for transformation by taking part. We are teachers instigating the project, but we are also learners, both within and outside the educational institution. As Dennis Atkinson says in reference to Jacques Ranciere; learning is a political act - and this is how we view the project.

With each event unforeseen aspects happen, new people take part and offer ideas to contribute. With each new cohort of students, a different dynamic forms from the diverse cultural and experiential backgrounds that come together. New questions emerge, differing positions are taken up, discussed and mediated.

We have to consider how each group of participants and individuals might take part. What do they have at stake? The students will be assessed by the lecturers -who are also participators - but the student chooses the project based on his or her interests and desires. Specific interest groups are invited to visit or work with the students and adapt elements of the project, so that these groups can take part in their own way. The events are designed to develop through open playful means, and the core ethos is to engage in the relational complexities of the different participants. The academic institution must reach out to the public, not expect the public to come to it.

"Is it possible or desirable to reconsider sites of learning to stretch our comprehension of what learning can become? Is it possible to do this in the light of the power of institutional formatting and norms? Is it possible or desirable today for educators to sacrifice their coefficient of pedagogic visibility in order to corrode current policing frameworks and establish more productive, equitable or emancipatory spaces for learning?" Atkinson.

"It is a radical intervention into traditional sites and economies of institutionalised knowledge and a redistribution of such economies. It also challenges us to consider the idea of community, communal knowledge and communal learning." Atkinson. 20 P201

Educator and philosopher Paolo Friere discussed the importance of respect acquired through dialogue, of listening to each other and working together.

As the project develops, the students take greater ownership of the direction and content that is relevant for them individually and as a group. If they respect each other and act accordingly, their work will always be successful in whatever form it takes. Midway through the project, the students begin to lead, confident in their ideas and production, and our roles become those of collaborators, advisors, technical facilitation and risk assessors. At this point F= focus on the content and administration of other related events to be held at the public institution, the state Central Library. The 'Unconference' is a set of talks, performances and acts of making that challenge the academic format of the conference by emphasising practice-based research methods, blurring the line between speaker and audience and exhibiting performances that establish a playful tone.





Jacky Fleming and the student group working together at Leeds Central Library



The library offers the project new aspects in the semiotics of communication for students to consider as a diverse public audience pass through the space. For many vulnerable people in Leeds, the library is one of the last places that offers a free, warm sanctuary while for the library staff, it is a working place with a precarious structure, as the austerity cuts affect the citizens and its public workers. For students it is an encounter with a world outside of the university, of

conditions they have minimal control over, and where politics and social policy are visibly affecting those using and needing a warm, free space to read, use computers and be amongst others. For the students it also offers uncertainty and new encounters that a private space might not.

The group co-curated an exhibition of work by artists, students, lecturers and asylum seekers, which simultaneously responded to the existing context of the library and created a new one for the Unconference to inhabit.



Casey Orr tapes up Liz Stirling as she i ntroduces the first Unconference in 2014

Play is used as a core strategy to invite the public to be participants, to express ideas, opinions and self around themes connected to feminism, using International Women's Day as a public platform for these expressions. In creating spaces of non-hierarchical activity, play, as a method of establishing trust, is used to facilitate communication, to make new things happen and enable transformation, employing strategies of humour and the spectacle to engage a diverse, intergenerational audience. It is primarily through playful means that we extend an invitation to take part.

Play continues through the project and is employed as a methodology when considering each element of the project. So how do we introduce an event organised by academics who are also artists and mothers? It seemed useful to immediately pose a question around the image of the female artist / academic that corresponds with the Unconference title. We wanted to have fun with it. At both events, collaborators from Robinson Stirling introduced the agenda for the day, while others were taping up, changing clothes and adding natural materials to the presenter, thereby establishing spaces of humorous uncertainty to facilitate open discussion and meaningful exchanges.

The Unconference, Women Visibility and Playful Acts, is an interdisciplinary, discursive and participatory event that places emphasis on practice-based research. We create a diverse programme featuring speakers, performers and film and it culminates in a workshop / performance where the audience and presenters make, talk and perform publicly in response to a theme. This structure reflects the overall ethos of the project, as a feminist space of equality and openness, to create a space for communication and connection that considers different needs, experiences and desires.



Poet Rommi Smith speaks at the Unconference 2015



Mexican student Malu Colorin in her customised cape as the Bougainvillea Jaguar 2014

Each 'Unconference' finished with a workshop where participants could then express and produce their own ideas and experiences in the creation of individualised superpower capes and balloons featuring admired women of the world.

To make is to be in it, and to fully understand and engage with something, we should not underestimate the power of physically being involved, of feeling our connections and understanding through embodied experiences in order to create a meaningful cultural act.

David Gauntlett quotes Ivan Illich in Making is Connecting

People need not only to obtain things, they need above all the freedom to make things among which they can live, to give shape to them according to their own tastes, and to put them to use in caring for and about others.'... Conviviality is therefore about having the power to shape one's own world. ... 'I consider conviviality to be individual freedom realised in personal interdependence and, as such, an intrinsic ethical value. I believe that, in any society, as conviviality is reduced below a certain level, no amount of industrial productivity can effectively satisfy the needs it creates among society's members.'



Performing adorned with balloons in Leeds Art Gallery Sculpture Galleries 2015



At the 2015 event, the participants, adorned with balloons paraded through the library, café and into the City Art Gallery to perform within the sculpture gallery. While women are represented in the gallery, as the Guerrilla Girls pointed out in New York, they are sadly not very well represented as artists, the makers of the works – they are there predominantly as subjects of male artists' work. By performing in this space, this statistic for the Leeds City Art Gallery was changed for ten minutes.

Students adopt a South American protest method laying half the faces of public women they admire onto their own in preparation for the International Women's Day Walk on 8 March 2014

The Public enter the academy; the students enter the public sphere.



Rainbow Hearts Women Asylum Seekers gather together before the Walk 2015

Gathering on the day of the Walk 2015 at the University, Rainbow Hearts Women Asylum Seekers Group joined the Walk and the preevent banner making and dance performance. Robinson Stirling have been working with the group since 2014 introducing creative activities in response to what the women are interested in. During the group work we made banners celebrating great women - women we admire from personal experience and wellknown figures - which were exhibited at the events. The project is an opportunity for young students with a transient connection to the city to become aware of a wider and more diverse population and consider new potential audiences. Colin Ward wrote in 1973 in Streetwork: The Exploding School, that the material for our education is around us, step outside of the school and the subject matter is immediately

evident in our everyday encounters. The women are also a transient group, and joining the project gives them a feeling of connection, support and friendship as well as extra material to use as evidence in their claims for asylum – a commitment to take part in the city. This is an invitation to engage in a celebratory act of solidarity made safe by the university and student group organising it. Wearing capes and customised t-shirts made while part of the group, the women proudly voice their love for Rainbow Hearts, the essential support it gives them and the vital friendships they have made with each other.



Standing on the Art Gallery steps en route to the Freedom Bin burning

Outside the Leeds City Art Gallery on the Walk holding balloons, banners and objects, the intergenerational and cross-cultural participants proudly stand on the steps of the public square where recent anti-austerity marches and strike actions have taken place.

Inspired by Palle Nielsen's illegal playgrounds and his 1968 "Model for a Qualitative Society" to take action in

public spaces, the route took us to the art gallery where we laid out our objects in the entrance hall bringing a carnivalesque spectacle into the formal gallery, claiming the space as part of the socio-political life of Leeds. As we carried the objects, handed out flowers or waved balloons and banners, which elicited laughter, the playful interactions on the street allowed the organisers, participants and the public to engage in varied dialogues, talking, shouting, clapping, laughing together. For every individual this group, this rabble, have created a new, impermanent but powerful identity based on trust, which is what fuels the action.





International Women's Day Walks 2014 featuring a Giant Bra & 2015 the Freedom Bin

In 2014 we carried a giant bra, in 2015 a giant Freedom Bin. Both of these objects refer to the 1968 Miss American Pageant protests, where women were reputedly burning bras in a trashcan. The burning bra became a symbol of feminism of the 1970s that then became used for different arguments in pro and anti feminist actions.

We decided to claim these symbols for contemporary action, while at the same time recognising their absurdity and their iconic inferences. This deliberate cartoonish approach created issues within the academy and revealed unexpected anxieties around aesthetics and art from other colleagues. It made visible continuing ideologies of high and low culture that perpetuate the separation of art and life, academy and public that hinders meaningful transdisciplinary activity.





The Burning of the Bra 2014

The Burning of the Freedom Bin 2015

Having walked through the centre of Leeds, each Walk finished at a derelict piece of land behind The Gallery, Munro House. Using iconic symbolism and ritual to complete the event through the burning of the objects, this allows for a transformative experience for all participants. This playful transformation embeds the experience in each of us and as a group, but also creates a feeling of renewal and of the future.

## How to evaluate this kind of participation?

Currently there are a number of debates around the effective evaluation of participatory projects that go beyond the quantitative but do not overframe the participants' responses by using survey forms and questions that depend on written responses. Meaningful evaluation for this project tends to have a more holistic overview that makes up a picture through visual documentation alongside observations made, through visual and textual reportage methods via observations, anecdotal comments, individual texts emailed to us or posted onto social media. We try to gather as much evidence as possible during the project without it feeling invasive or overtly directed. Students are required to document their involvement in the process and events and we also commision them to make films and publications. In addition to this, they are required to do an open and honest personal evaluation of the project and explain how they felt about it in terms of learning outcomes and the success of their ideas, communicated with an emphasis on reflection, understanding and critique as the criteria for assessment. We all describe our individual experiences and responses in an attempt to continue the non-hierarchical conditions, share thoughts on its successes and failures, discuss preconceptions and any changes to our views and feelings and then gather all material that documents the project, including incidental observations, emotional responses and what learning has taken place. While 'rational' methods of evaluation through numbers, social groupings and other demographic methods have a function in this, we are keen to expand our methods of gathering responses and how embodied knowledge can be visualised or gathered in various ways that reflect the feminist ethos that we attempt to instill in the structure of the project. Non-hierarchical, irreverent, inclusive, equal, transformative, considering a broader picture and environment, open, discursive, fun, empathetic, caring – these are many of the perameters we strive to adhere to and use in our self-evaluation, terms we use to check ourselves alongside.

In terms of the wider participation outside of the university, our immediate evaluation looks at the event and the way people have taken part. Laughter, joy, participation, commitment, conversations, new connections made and people who joined the project are evidence as to whether the project reaches a wider audience. The growing interest, networks and range of people taking part signify the project's success, and verbal feedback as well as feedback received through filmed and written comments, confirm that the playful methods engage a diverse range of people across generations.

The 2016 event is evidence of this growing success, as the newly revamped Library Artspace have agreed to host a Festival of the Body through the month of March featuring performances, public celebrations, exhibition, workshops and commissioned new works. The number of people and groups involved has increased significantly drawing in more organisations from asylum seekers, a women's health organisation to new women's groups in the city and teenagers, which will again widen and increase audience numbers and the diversity. The event is co-funded by the library and the university, and academically it is being recognised as an important research output and unique educational experience for our students. Success, perhaps, has many differing perspectives and criteria, but as Colin Ward said, the curriculum is at our doorstep.

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