

***Things that Liberate: an Australian Feminist Wunderkammer.* Eds. Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson. Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 223pp**

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Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson's collection of essays, *Things that Liberate* is a 'book of things,' specifically, feminist things, that signify the liberatory project of the Australian women's movement from the 1970s onward. *Things that Liberate* is informed by an earlier, 2009 project, *The Australian Feminist Memory Project: Cultures of Activism 1970—1990*, in which Bartlett and Henderson, in a consultancy with the National Museum of Australia, compiled a list of artefacts to represent the women's movement. Bartlett and Henderson describe the process of compiling feminist artefacts as an attempt to use objects to 'forge a new language of the feminist past' (4). The essays in *Things that Liberate* carry this intention and for Bartlett and Henderson, highlight 'the power of objects to evoke memories and emotions in ways quite different to other 'historical' narratives of the Australian women's movement' (4). Situating itself in the scholarly field of 'new materialism,' this collection engages with the ways that objects can 'be active in constituting feminist subjects both in the past and in the present' (5). Drawing on Walter Benjamin's historical materialist poetics of history based on 'rupture,' in which Benjamin suggests that the historical continuum be 'blown apart' (Bartlett and Henderson 7), the editors provide a montage of essays in which collision and juxtaposition are valued over historical continuity. This collection of essays creates a 'feminist memory' by providing biographies of objects that focus on the 'life' and symbolism of the object (Bartlett and Henderson 7).

Describing their collection as a 'wunderkammer' of the past, Bartlett and Henderson have linked the essays in a way that allows the project 'a random sort of inclusivity' (9). As a forerunner of the modern museum, the 'wunderkammer,' a 'cabinet of curiosities or room of wonders' dating from the early modern period, had an 'anarchic and encyclopaedic drive' which appeals to Bartlett and Henderson who are less concerned with drawing out a complete representation of the women's movement and more interested in how objects relate to memory (8). 'By using the 'wunderkammer' as trope and as practice,' Bartlett and Henderson write in their introduction, 'feminist times are not only made accessible but possibly 'liberated' from the conventions of more established narrative genres' (9). This collection then, in the tradition of the 'wunderkammer,' presents us with 'a theatre of memory' (9) in which the political is certainly personal.

The most interesting feature about *Things that Liberate* is the unique way in which its authors strive to engage with the feminist 'things' they write about. Feminist writers were invited to try to identify 'things' that they considered important to the Australian women's movement and were asked to think about how these objects can 'be made vibrant and meaningful to future generations of readers, researchers and thinkers' (6). What emerges out of this approach, for the most part, are engaging discussions on the objects described, which

highlight personal experiences and personal histories. *Things that Liberate* favours the autobiographical and the personal, which makes for juicy reading.

The structure of this collection is compelling because it does not follow a predictable route. Some of the objects chosen are overtly political and have long held associations with the feminist movement. For instance, Kay Lawrence's 'Suffrage Tapestries' discusses the symbolic significance of the suffrage tapestries and their placement in the House of Assembly chamber (167-181) and Silver Moon utilises 'Bolt cutters' as a symbol for the dismantling of the US nuclear missile base by the 'Women's Peace Camp' activism movement (61-62). But in other essays, symbols commonly associated with the movement are represented in a highly personal light, which imbues the objects with personal memory and new meaning. Bronwyn Winter's discussion of the political significance of the 'Placard' (127-133) quickly turns to her reflections on memories of her 'trailblazing' feminist older sister. In the book's final essay, writing about an object perhaps most obviously symbolic of the movement, 'The Women's Symbol' (213-216), Deni Fuller provides an unexpectedly intimate account of what the symbol means to her in the context of family trauma. In many of these essays, the political quickly becomes personal and the reader is brought into a time and place unique to each woman and her experiences of the movement. The objects, then, become open to interpretation and filled with personal meaning. Bartlett and Henderson describe this: 'While objects are capable of carrying historical narratives and processes, their meanings are neither fixed nor stable' (3).

Other objects chosen are less immediately obvious and provide pleasant surprises. As Bartlett and Henderson note: 'In this volume it's often the remaking of meaning and context that renders an object feminist.' (3). In Pearlie McNeil's essay, McNeil takes us on a trip down memory lane in her description of the 'Kombi' van which took her feminist publishing company 'Women write' on trips between Brisbane and Melbourne (99-102). The often overlooked 'Gestetner' printing machine, which enabled feminist collectives a way of producing and disseminating their own literature is discussed by Jean Taylor (91-96). In other moments, discussions of the political conjure memories of feminist share houses. In these essays, spaces and faces are conjured, and the reader is invited into the author's home. In Alexandra Winter's 'Tofu,' the author's discussion of the feminist politics of vegetarianism becomes an engaging recollection of her time in communal housing: '. . . eating together round the kitchen table, drinking herbal teas late into the night chatting (with the odd joint thrown in)' (199). Similarly, in 'Poster,' Anna Szorenyi reminisces about a communal women activist share house, in which the political poster which hung on their wall symbolised, 'not a particular moment in feminism,' but, 'discovering one another in our first house, surrounded by signifiers of our hope for a more just way of life' (147).

At times, personal objects become filled with feminist significance. As Bartlett and Henderson describe: 'In this collection, things become agentic in materialising feminist stories, subject and pasts, even when they are no longer extant' (5). For instance, 'Toys' (205-210) are chosen by Marguerite Johnson and Leni Johnson, who describe their childhood disappointments each Christmas when they would inevitably receive dolls: 'I watched in envy as my brothers opened big boxes covered with images of boys doing 'stuff'' (208). For Sara Dowse, it is her much loved 'Blouse' that represents the relationship between fashion and feminism (39-48). For Martha Ansara, it is the 'Clapperboard' which sparks memories on

her career as a cinematographer and the challenges she faced entering the film industry at a time when women cinematographers were rare (81-88). For other authors, it is books and publications which are symbolic of the movement. Suzanne Bellamy remembers the Sydney feminist publication, 'Newspaper: *MeJane*' and the community of feminists who were a crucial part of it (105-112). Kathleen Mary Fallon reflects on her books *Explosion, Implosion* and *The Sexuality of Illusion* in her essay, 'Books' (65-71). These essays are juxtaposed with a 'Poem' (141) by Ania Walwicz.

Some of the objects included, represent debates central to the women's movement. For instance, Leekie Hopkins discusses 'Overalls' (115-118), as a symbol of the radical feminist movement of the 1970s: 'We had commandeered the working man's garb, indicating that our bodies were our own, to be used for our own pleasures, not for sale nor for plunder' (117). Alison Bartlett's 'Bras' provides a recollection of her experience at a 'Reclaim the Night' march in which she recalls that women were, 'loud noisy exuberant protesting bare breasted and audacious. It was carnival, where social codes were overturned and authority inverted, and to be part of it was thrilling' (75). Megan Le Masurier's 'Photograph: Germaine Greer' looks at the 1972 front cover photograph of the magazine *Suck* in which Germaine Greer posed nude (121-125). Adrienne Sallay's 'Pocket Mirror' (135 – 140) recalls the introduction of women's centres in which for the first time, women were able to seek help from female doctors and to find out information about their own bodies. Susan Magarey's 'Tampon' (183-192) looks at the role of the tampon in feminist theory. In a funny and intimate essay, 'Sea Sponge,' Susanne Gannon recalls a 'sex show bag' (163) she received at her first day at university (163-165).

Throughout many of these essays, there is an overriding sense that the objects have become meaningful and filled with symbolism, only after years of reflection. When past and present collide in the author's contemplation, the work is at its best. In Enza Gandolfo's 'Body Hair' (51-57), it is Gandolfo's recent encounter with an elderly woman sporting a long beard that sparks a memory about a time when 'body hair was a feminist issue and, at least for some of us, letting the hair on our legs, our underarms, our lips, grow untamed, was a symbol of our commitment to the cause' (51).

Music is drawn on as a powerful source for women role models and songs of liberation. Margaret Henderson remembers Patti Smith's 1975 album 'Horses' (19-29) and provides an insightful discussion of the memorable album cover (photographed by Robert Mapplethorpe). However it is somewhat disappointing that she does not elaborate on how exactly Smith's music and lyrics were groundbreaking, beyond descriptions of 'female bravado' and the sound of 'ferocious guitars' (24) and one longs for her to engage with Smith's work in a more profound way. A particularly compelling use of music as feminist object is in Jane Armstrong's 'Radio' (151-160), which lovingly reflects on her time as a DJ on 'Drastic on Plastic' a feminist radio program that aired for the first time in 1983 on the Perth radio station RTRFM. Armstrong splices her essay with snippets of song lyrics and we are able to view the playlist of her first radio show at the end of the essay. The reader is invited to revisit the music that was such a part of the radio show, and this has a powerful effect. It is in moments like these, that Bartlett and Henderson's 'rupture,' works to great effect because it conjures times, places and songs so crucial to the movement and feminist memory.

At times the collection feels like a reunion of sorts between women who have been actively involved in the women's movement, and one wonders, for this reason, whether this collection will draw readers of a younger generation who may find it hard to relate to. In this sense, it is hard to say whether *Things that Liberate* does make its objects 'vibrant and meaningful to future generations of readers' (6), as Bartlett and Henderson have intended. The collection would have perhaps benefited from editor's notes at the beginning of each essay to place objects in historical context for readers who may not be privy to the political climate or events surrounding them. Given that objects are so central to this collection, the poor quality images of the objects prevents the book from delivering a completely 'vibrant' 'cabinet of curiosities' (9) in which objects play such a central role. For instance, one longs to see the vibrant wonder bra described as 'neon pink' in Bartlett's essay. Instead we must rely on a black and white image. And one longs to see 'A photograph of Levine and Lyon's *The Decade of Women*, 1980' (a beautiful shot, in which a woman, revealing her underarm hair, gazes confidently at the camera) in its full glory when we read Gandolfo's 'Body Hair'.

Nevertheless, the memories and images conjured by the feminist writers are vivid. And it is through exploring the life of the object, that the writers are able to bring the reader into their worlds. Bartlett and Henderson manage to, in this collection, use objects to 'forge a new language of the feminist past' (4). *Things that Liberate* does 'evoke memories and emotions in ways quite different to other 'historical' narratives of the Australian women's movement.' (4), as the editors have intended. By using the 'wunderkammer,' juxtaposition and 'rupture', this collection makes feminist times more accessible and does liberate the writers and their objects from more conventional narratives. *Things that Liberate* will make an important contribution to existing studies of 'new materialism,' museum studies and archival studies. In this book, personal objects and insights find their way in to a history of a movement all too commonly generalised and stereotyped by media representations. These essays provide 'a theatre of memory' (9) in which feminist memories are woven together to create a compelling read.

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