Disobedient Curation: SHErobots and the disruptive feminine

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Abstract

This chapter traces the development of a disobedient curatorial practice grounded in creative resistance, feminist relational leadership, and new media art. Framed through a personal reflection on gendered expectations, it examines how acts of resistance and strategic misbehaviour shaped the establishment of New Media Curation, followed by an academic career spanning interactive art, creative robotics, and curatorial research. The chapter follows a trajectory from early experiments in audience-centred exhibition making through UTS and Powerhouse Museum's Beta_space, to doctoral research at UNSW's Creative Robotics Lab, where criteria for curating interactive art were developed through a series of curatorial interventions.

Central to the discussion is SHErobots, a collaborative curatorium established to foreground women's leadership in robotics. Through three major exhibitions, SHErobots: Tool::Toy::Companion, SHErobots: Ecologies of Care, and FEM-Me: Feminine Mechanics and Other Kinetic Systems, the chapter explores how feminist curatorial strategies challenge patriarchal structures while building supportive, transdisciplinary communities of practice. Drawing on reflective practice, autoethnography, and case study analysis, it argues that curatorial disobedience functions as a productive methodology for knowledge creation, collaboration, and institutional change. Positioned within contemporary art and design education, the chapter demonstrates how creative resistance can generate new modes of curatorial practice, nurture emerging practitioners, and cultivate more inclusive technological futures through collective action, experimentation, and care.

Keywords: Curating, Feminism, Disobedience, Experimentation, Interactive Art

Introduction

"There's your mum, putting on her warpaint again…"

(Turnbull Tillman, childhood memory, 1989)

My father hated it when any of the women in our family wore makeup. I would sit on the edge of their bed, watching my mum humming while she applied her warpaint; only a signature pink lipstick, and only when we were going out. I was desperate to participate, to arm myself against the outside world with colour and performance. The fourth of seven children, I wasn't permitted to wear makeup until 14, though disobedient sisters aided me from the age of 12.

This disobedience served me well, in education, in feminism, in technology, and in curatorial

practice. After establishing New Media Curation in 2008 (NMC, 2008-26) and collecting over 30 experiential exhibitions, I was invited to the Creative Robotics Lab at UNSW Art & Design (Velonaki, 2012-26) to pursue a PhD on developing criteria for curating interactive art. This was published in 2018 (Turnbull Tillman, 2018), after which I was invited to the SHErobots curatorium in 2021. My colleagues and I sought to forefront the role of women leading robotic practices. We developed three exhibitions: 1) SHErobots: Tool::Toy::Companion; 2) SHErobots: Ecologies of Care; and, 3) FEM-Me: Feminine Mechanics and Other Kinetic Systems (BAC, 2024). Traditional outputs include editing and publishing two books, one an accompanying catalogue (Reinhardt, et al., 2022), the other a Springer book co-edited and written with artists, educators and academics in the broader disciplines of creative, social and industrial robotics (Dunstan, et al., 2023).

This chapter investigates the disruptive feminine in the establishment of New Media Curation as a platform for disobedient curating. It argues for disobedient practices being foundational to emergent curatorial practice across interdisciplinary fields. Focusing on key research projects and their environments within the New Media Curation archive, this chapter highlights SHErobots, its predecessors, and its sequential realisations. Case studies and methods captured are subsequently shared in university programs for curating, architecture and education, inviting staff and students to participate with creative reflective practice. This furthers the Art and Architecture practices of my colleagues, encouraging cross-institutional collaboration over competition.

Background

Disobedience as a curatorial tool is linked to the disruption of or resistance to traditional practice. If a traditional curator is understood as a carer of objects via an institution or collector, then a disobedient curator would move away from these affiliations (Smith and Flood, 2017). They tend to focus instead on new media or technological advancements linked to coding, engineering, and the display of digitally captured sound, movement or touch. Socially and politically, they may focus on communities of practice as opposed to individuals, inclusivity over privilege and multiple voices over top down patriarchal / colonial systems (Madoff, 2021). These curators, me included, collect experiences iteratively, publishing at various stages of a project to capture the progression of the social, creative and technological phases of an active experience over the passive consumption of artifacts (Wilson, 2025). Though there are many curators who engage this kind of resistance-based curation, this account introduces some of the practitioners in my immediate sphere of practice.

New Media Curation: a platform for disruption

Not all resistance can be neatly and successfully planned. Some phases are catalysts; others lay dormant until enacted upon reflection. Pivots become regular, until a cadence emerges from alliances built and projects that continue over months, and then years.

New Media Curation emerged from the relationship between the Creativity and Cognition

Studios (CCS) at University of Technology Sydney (UTS) (CCS, n.d.) and the Powerhouse Museum, Ultimo (PHM) (MAAS, n.d.). This relationship was centred around the PhD research of Professor Lizzie Muller (Muller, 2008), her then supervisor Professor Ernest Edmonds, and the want of principal curator Matthew Connell to extend the narrative of collection objects relating to science and technology. All agreed that dynamic audience engagement with emerging art systems would be useful data, if it could be captured, for the iterative design of experiences, rather than speculation on permanent objects and traditional passive didactic systems. They created Beta_space as a public, living laboratory in the Cyberworlds exhibition, mirroring the private, prototype laboratory at CCS-UTS (Muller, et al., 2006). Where Lizzie programmed the space during her PhD candidature, it passed to me when she graduated, making it my first curatorial project.

Due to the long lead time of a cultural institution's curatorial project, Beta_space became a subversive way for me, as an emerging curator, to learn relational leadership. Weaving in and out of workshops and gallery floors, watching Connell charismatically beg favours through handshakes, suggesting our small, unobtrusive builds happen around bigger exhibitions. We existed in the shadows of a larger system, infiltrating broader production schedules rather than earning permission through committee. We were met with some resistance, but also with admiration and appreciation for larrikin behaviour. I also learned there was a lot we could do with a re-purposed theatrette and a shared purpose. With a shoestring budget, volunteers were necessary and on-the-job training became experiential learning through reflection and publication (Turnbull Tillman and Connell, 2011).

Figure 1. Beta_space Gallery. Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. 2007 © Julien Phalip.

Out of these academic and institutional activities, it was suggested to me by colleagues that I should start my own curatorial practice. Having experience some challenges with institutional curating through Beta_space, I began to offer my services independent to the

artists in our own lab. CCS is an interdisciplinary studio with members in UTS' Design, Architecture and Building faculty, but also in Computer Science and Engineering. I was also introduced to many of Professor Edmonds colleagues from their previous laboratory in Loughborough UK, and to Dr. Linda Candy (Candy, n.d.), a social scientist who became instrumental to the way I recorded, analysed and published my work. Through Muller's own PhD, I was introduced to the work of Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, who managed the C.R.U.M.B. mailing list and website from Sunderland University [UK]. Graham and Cook's curatorial practice was rooted in resistance and C.R.U.M.B. itself was a resource for media arts 'upstarts.' (CRUMB, n.d.) With new media curating provided new and disruptive methods for producing experience, I began to explore Cook and Graham's modes of Embedded, Adjunct and Independent modes of curatorial practice, captured in their book *Rethinking Curating: Art After New Media* (2010).

New Media Curation launched in 2008 with the graduate show of Professor Ian Gwilt (Gwilt, n.d.) and the coding and technical skills of Aram Dulyan (Dulyan, n.d). Since then, I have largely utilised the Independent, producer-as-curator model, though sometimes weaving in and out of institutions or being contracted by galleries, artists and academics was also extremely useful. Eventually I was offered work as an Embedded curator at the Powerhouse Museum with Connell, making these traditional and disruptive roles come into sharp contrast. This is when my practice became more finely honed, when I could occupy all three modes of new media curating, with time to reflect, write and publish my findings from a position of expertise rather than wonder.

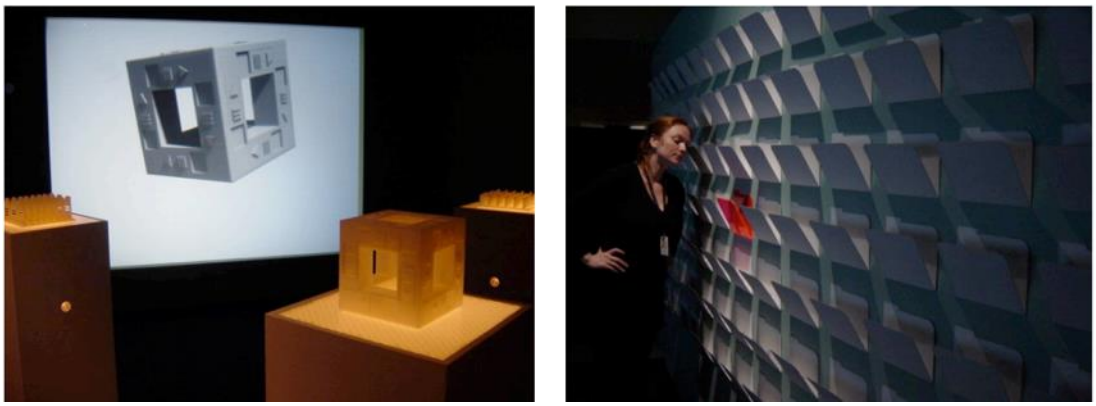

Figure 2. Ian Gwilt, *Mundane Traces*, 2007. Beta_space Gallery, Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. L: Screen view, image © Deborah Turnbull. R: Folder view, image © Ian Gwilt.

Figure 3. Ian Gwilt, *Mundane Traces*, 2008. PhD Exhibition for Ian Gwilt and launch of New Media Curation**.** Images © Aram Dulyan.

The Creative Robotics Lab: disruptive and distributed environments

This is when my practice became interesting to academic artist Petra Gemeinboeck (MML, 2015-), and I was recruited for a PhD Scholarship at UNSW Art & Design. Already familiar with the laboratory model of post graduate research, I happily accepted a post at the newly established Creative Robotics Lab (CRL, 2011-). The cross-disciplinarity of art and technology was familiar to me from CCS, but the leadership was female, directed by media artist Professor Mari Velonaki. With her own reputation as a disobedient female, Velonaki became a powerful mentor and guardian within the institution of UNSW. I was happy to become embedded in the prototype space with my fellow PhD candidates. This disruption of leadership came not only with gender, but with the distribution of power being shared amongst the consortium of members. I soon became embedded with well-known artists creating in multiple and varied fields of practice. With many voices shaping ideology and publication, I had much to observe, record, analyse and disseminate. And I did so; loudly.

As part of my PhD, I performed three subversive curatorial experiments. Because they were interventions in the otherwise normal flow of a given platform (in my case, arts festivals), I gained access through disobedient acts. In Musify/Gamify (curated by artists Ollie Bown and Lian Loke of Sydney University's DesignLab), I occupied the forecourt of the Seymour Theatre during their VIVIDMusic exhibition in 2015 (MusifyGamify, 2015). I interrupted the flow of audience members' entry over five nights, asking them to try prototype works of second year Media Arts students to ask if they believed them to be artworks. I collected 98 surveys and after analysing the data provided, came up with a rough set of preliminary criteria for disobedient curating.

Figure 4. Installation shot of *Denouement*, featuring Seunghyun Kim's *Apollo Vs/…(*2015) and Laren Wenham's *Puppet Boyfriend* (2015). Plinth and engagement mechanism also displayed. Images © New Media Curation, 2015.

From this intervention, I was offered an international producer position for ISEA2015 in Vancouver, BC, Canada. Titled 'Disturbance' this international electronic arts festival was ideal for testing an auto-ethnographical approach to curating (ISEA, 2015). In this mode, a practitioner follows their own appreciative system to realise a brief from the formal committee. The brief was challenging, with five pop-ups over five nights in five different setting, both formal and informal. From the Art Gallery of Vancouver to a repurposed fur factory, there was much to manage. Where this model incorporated an Adjunct model of experience curating, there were many challenges, from distance, to communications, to budgets, to the traditional expectations of the production team.

Figure 5. Install for FUSE 10th Anniversary, Vancouver Art Gallery, ISEA2015. Image © New Media Curation, 2015.

Figure 6. Tobias Klein, Slow Selfie 3.0. Museum of Vancouver, ISEA2015. Image © New Media Curation, 2015.

Not all were happy about the experimental nature of my approach, but the academics

running the conference were excited to see what would happen and gave me full access to everything except finances. This became tricky when we realised we hadn't planned for the return of the artworks, a common error in experiential exhibitions due to the digital nature of the medium and the transient nature of a festival. At this point I had to subvert permissions to the budget and book return transport through the host university's preferred courier. My post-deviance apology was accepted by the Co-Chairs, and all were relieved I'd had prior experience in this area (Turnbull Tillman and Velonaki, 2015).

The final exhibition was titled *Re/Pair* (2017) and hosted by the Big Anxiety Festival at UNSW Art & Design. What started as a crossed booking of a key space between the festival director and myself, became a collaborative closing event inviting interactive arts curators to campus to view my final exhibition. We traded resources and audiences, rather than following traditional channels of application and acceptance. With the help of fellow disobedient PhD curator Vanessa Bartlett, who's own experiment was featuring in the UNSW Galleries, I was able to submit a late brief, subverting the rules of the conference and working collaboratively rather than competitively with my colleagues. This final exhibition featured artists who were members of the Creative Robotics Lab, who had a prototype work to test; who were also investigating the broken communications and anxiety that came with iterating an interactive artwork (Turnbull Tillman, 2017). In gathering the feedback of the curators who visited the space, I used semi-structured interviews and conversation analysis to ground the preliminary criteria of my surveys and the reflective results of my ethnographic study. Out of these experiments emerged my key contribution to the PhD research, criteria for curating new media and interactive art. As I learned through CCS and Beta_space, relational leadership was the key to my success.

Figure 7. Curator Alessio Cavallaro experiencing *Re/Pair*, 2017. Big Anxiety Festival, UNSW Art & Design, November 2017. Image © New Media Curation. Artworks pictured by Petra Gemeinboeck, Rob Saunders and Patricia Flanagan.

Figure 8. Curator Alessio Cavallaro experiencing *Re/Pair*, 2017. Big Anxiety Festival, UNSW Art & Design, November 2017. Image © New Media Curation. Artworks pictured by Patricia Flanagan and Mari Velonaki.

During my candidature at the Creative Robotics Lab, I became more familiar with Velonaki's work and philosophy (Velonaki, 2026). Though I knew her by reputation, then as a research mentor, I came to know her as a curator does an artist. With access to her thoughts as well as her collection, I learned that she didn't see her robotic artworks as robots first, but rather as kinetic agents that could be programmed with human elements. Her key focus was to explore the way robotic materials could be programmed to mirror our actions back to us, teaching us more about ourselves in the process. As Velonaki supported her inaugural PhD students in their qualification, she also began to think about environments that could extend the nature of kinetics. She began conceiving a way to create an immersive environment that could track the effect the moment of engagement with robotic agents had on humans.

Figure 9. National Facility for Human-Robot Interaction Research, UNSW Art & Design, Image © Mari Velonaki, 2017. Image features the Fetch Robot and Velonaki's artwork, *Diamandini* (2009-14).

Supported by A/Prof David Rye of the Australian Centre for Field Robotics at the University of Sydney [ACFR], , Velonaki created The National Facility for Human-Robot Interaction Research (NatFacHRI, 2018). Here data could be captured and analysed on both sides of the human-robot engagement. With Velonaki and Rye moving forward faster than the University could understand, I began reviewing Velonaki and Rye's earlier works, interviewing Mari at various stages to try and situate the futurist act that was their construction of the NATFAC (cheekily dubbed thus by the techs programming it). It was around this time that A/Profs Lian Loke and Dagmar Reinhardt approached me with an idea about forming a curatorium around a series of exhibitions featuring the practice of women in robotics across our individual specialisms. My sense of mischievousness tingled and I agreed; readily.

SHErobots::Tool::Toy::Companion: a 'mischievous' and 'messy' curatorium

This inaugural exhibition was born out of a want to provide young female roboticists with a platform they felt excluded from. Listening to the participants of an Architecture conference workshop express their distrust and disappointment in the current patriarchal system, Reinhardt envisioned a simple solution offered by persecuted women past…a coven of women working together to disrupt and re-institute their place in the [male] order of things. With technology as a contemporary kind of magic, she wanted a project that mixed teams of women and girls, next gen 'roboticiennes', could learn, and then lead, a female approach within a typically male infrastructure (Turnbull Tillman and Reinhardt, 2026).

With Loke as her creative counterpart, that space, these environments became the point of interrogation. A contemporary dancer as well as a computer scientist, Loke recognised this need for disruption and occupation all too well. To her, it is a form of resistance to insert her body into a space that typically seeks to "sever the body from the mind." Her performances serve as a reminder that women are practicing in robotics, that though we may present differently, think differently, move differently, access power and inclusion differently; we are here. Loke thinks of the body as vulnerable, with the ability to "know more than the conscious [rational] mind can comprehend." (Turnbull Tillman and Loke, 2026)

Both women came to me with this idea that if the discipline's patriarchal structure can say it doesn't matter who's leading, then why not have women and girls lead? Reinhard's rationale is that if gender representation isn't currently sitting at 50:50, why not aim for 100% representation as an experiment to balance things out. If we accidentally topple, disrupt or 'forget' to ask permission to access this patriarchal space, then we can 'apologise graciously,' tongue in cheek, eyes sparkling.

We three each took a domain of practice, Reinhardt: architecture / 3D printing, Loke: performance / play, and Turnbull Tillman: companionship / human-computer interaction. We created a list of women we knew would be interested and began approaching them. For an exhibition space, Loke sat on the board for Tin Sheds Galleries, quietly infiltrating and garnering funding and real estate. Reinhardt approached international collaborators she

knew had research funds to spend, and I, once again, approached the women affiliated with the Creative Robotics Lab and the NatFacHRI. Our curatorium began to meet regularly to brainstorm a name and a visual identity. It was Reinhardt that came up with the banner SHErobots. An action phrase rather than a title; this banner served as a declarative reminder to the males dominating robotic research that women, too, can drive transdisciplinary teams to outputs such as exhibition, publication, and professional recognition.

On reflection of this first exhibition, there were many standout elements for my own curatorial practice. These included Velonaki's *Fish-Bird* (2003 and 2022), which was created at Sydney University's ACFR 20 years prior; along with Petra Gemeinboeck, Rob Saunders and Rochelle Haley's *Dancing with the Nonhuman [SYD-2-2-1]* (2022). Where both works were affiliated with the Creative Robotics Lab, and Gemeinboeck, et al.'s work an iteration of the mechanics tested in Re/Pair; the exhibition also featured Reinhardt's 'roboticiennes.' Early career academic Dr Belinda Dunstan exhibited a second iteration of *Still, Life* (2019, 2022), improving on the public tests she did at the Japan Foundation for her own PhD. There was also PhD student Charlotte Firth, who exhibited *TerraFab* (2022) alongside her mentor Dr. Kate Dunn (Rienhardt, et al., 2022).

Figure 10. Exhibition shots of *SHErobots: tool:toy:companion*, 2022. Tin Sheds Gallery, University of Sydney. Image © Maja Baska, 2022. Images feature the works of (L-R) Mari Velonaki; Kate Dunn and Charlotte Firth; Petra Gemeinboeck, Rob Saunders and Rochelle Haley; and Belinda Dunstan.

The Foreword to the catalogue was written by early career curator Emily Siddons, who would soon take the helm of the National Communications Museum in Melbourne. Her words in the catalogue remind us that women were the original computational systems in Australia, and regard SHErobots as a "ground-breaking exhibition." She articulates that the collective (21 projects) displayed prove what the curatorium suspected; that women think

differently, behave relationally, and infiltrate, sometimes messily, in the spaces that are led by patriarchal logic, rationality, and conceptual perfection. However, we are very capable (Ibid, p. 6).

SHErobots: Ecologies of Care: the curatorium expanded and re-located

With this first victory under our belts, we set about trying to formalise our operations. We applied for arts funding with the Australia Council and began planning our second exhibition. Key to the forward momentum was Reinhardt's relationship with Professor Henriette Bier (Bier, n.d.) at the University of Technology, Delft in the Netherlands [TU Delft]. With her reputation preceding her as the Director of the Robotic Building Lab at TU Delft (Robotic Building Lab, 2014-), Bier was able to garner $5000 from the Dutch Embassy to transport her work to the Tin Sheds exhibition in Sydney. A member from the Dutch Embassy spoke at the launch and logos were included in the archival materials for Tool::Toy::Companion, such as the catalogue, room brochures and websites.

Through her own subversive acts of relationality, Bier introduced us to Vincent Cellucci (Cellucci, n.d), the curator and programmer at the TU Delft Library. Itself an architectural wonder, the library was funded to run exhibitions related to research from the faculties in a way that faculty academics could not access (TU Delft Library, n.d.). Himself a poet and feminist, Cellucci became interested in the SHErobots exhibition through Bier, and both began to join the original curatorium's regular meetings. This pivot from gallery space to library space, an active and archival space, was one that interested all of us, especially as it would take our exhibition international and provide a platform for Bier's laboratory.

With architecture and robotic builds being a key focus of this iteration, the theme shifted from a survey of spaces that female roboticists activated to a focus on how these spaces were enacted with ecologies of care. For us, the only place to go was up, literally. Instead of the moveable walls of a white cube gallery, the exhibition infrastructure of the library was, quite rightly, shelving. A cavernous space lined with books, desks and sectioned off computer labs, Cellucci and his team cordoned off an open space for the build of three shelving units; our three core concepts expanded and relocated.

Figure 11. Install shots of SHErobots: Ecologies of Care, 2024. TU Delft Library, Delft, The Netherlands. Image © New Media Curation, 2024.

Though our peers at the Australia Council didn't fund our project proposal, we were again able to subvert funding opportunities from our labs and from the senior academics' research funding. Through the library, Cellucci was able to fund my flights and much of the transport of European and Australian artworks, as well as the build, the didactics and the room brochure associated with the exhibition. Velonaki funded our accommodation and Rye schooled art technician and architect Dr. Richard Kean (Kean, n.d.) on the operative side of Mari's work (*Circle E: Fragile Balances*, 2009) for inclusion. As such, the CRL also funded Kean's flights and accommodation, and he was able to act as our independent preparator. Kean and Cellucci managed the install first at a distance with much math, and then onsite through early mornings, coffee, rigour and grit. With Cellucci's own install staff used to much less dynamic installations, mostly involving books, Kean became instrumental in the transport not just of irregular artworks (on the plane, the train and in taxis), but to receiving and constructing all three shelving islands, our ecologies of care.

Figure 12. SHErobots: Ecologies of Care, 2024. TU Delft Library, The Netherlands. Image © Mischa Mannot.

Based on Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, I wrote a curatorial premise and pitched it first to this core group. Haraway talks much of the next generation of labour being taken up by robots, thus freeing humanity, mostly women, from distracting domestic labour; freeing us to think, to manage and to lead. The theme of 'worrying or troubling' an idea, of sticking with it and creating 'oddkin,' requiring 'unexpected collaborations', becoming 'with each other or not becoming at all' was key to the arrangement of the ecologies (Haraway, 1985). Curated under the categories of Strange Bodies, Systems Care, and Materialities Reset, prototypes, iterations, specimens and recollections of artworks were angled, tucked within or hung off the library's grid-like shelving unit (Reinhardt, et al., 2024). This creative messiness, these curatorial and exhibition hacks contrasted marvellously with the hushed discipline of the core audience; students.

Key to disrupting the stoicism of the shelving unit and the upward build of the projects within the exhibition space, was Loke's launch performance *Repeat After Me*. Dressed as an avatar with a balloon as prop, Loke danced with a Kuka robot learning to apply lipstick.

Figure 13. Lian Loke, *Repeat After Me*, 2024. Live performance for the opening, 12 February 2024. TU Delft Library, Delft, The Netherlands. Image © Mischa Mannot.

When asked to reflect on this performance, Loke commented:

> "I relish live performance and the performative presence of the artist in non-traditional performance contexts as a way to stir up the space and norms around conduct and protocols of audience-art-artist relationships. The identity and purpose of the space itself is also called into question.For SHErobots

> (TU Delft Library, The Netherlands), the expected hush of the library was disrupted by an unconventional performance between human and industrial robot in amongst students studying. The content of *Repeat After Me* explored dis/obedience in a robot learning how to draw lipstick on a human face."
>
> (Turnbull Tillman and Loke, 2026)

Afterward, Loke sat in full costume with Reinhardt, Cellucci and Turnbull Tillman to discuss the exhibition, stretching the absurd from stage to interview. This disobedience was unconscious on her part. In fact when we got the photos back, she laughed and exclaimed, "Oh my god, I was still in costume for the floor talk!" She had meant to change and abandoned it as the exploratory mind and performative body had remained merged in the transition from performative artist to reflective curatorial agent. Whatever the studious cohort of TU Delft were expecting of the library that day, I'm sure it wasn't this.

Figure 14. SHErobots: Ecologies of Care. *Curator's Panel* featuring (L-R): Dagmar Reinhardt, Deborah Tillman, Lian Loke and Vincent Cellucci. Opening Day, 12 February 2024. TU Delft Library, Delft, The Netherlands. Image © Mischa Mannot.

FEM-Me: nostalgia and the reinterpretation of the SHE-robots curatorium

With the close of the second exhibition and the return of the artworks, our meetings moved into discussions of a book. As a starting point, Loke and Reinhardt were interested in stepping back from curatorial work and exploring their own making again. After the success of showing Velonaki's *Circle E: Fragile Balances* (2009) at TU Delft, I had an overwhelming

urge to awaken more of her collection pieces. I was reminded of an invitation I had received from Bankstown Arts Centre Director (BAC), Rachael Kiang, to exhibit a version of SHErobots at her gallery space in Inner West Sydney (Turnbull Tillman and Kiang, 2024).

Part of Kiang's mandate is to platform artists from Western Sydney. Because we had been ruminating on a return to materials, the exhibition theme took on a nostalgic element. While I had long been officemates with Velonaki's *Current State of Affairs* (2009), I had never seen it operational; and I longed to. Kiang was able to fund the making of two new works for Reinhardt and Loke and paid curatorial work to me. We also toyed with doing a call out for female artists in the Canterbury/Bankstown area but landed on inviting two artists we knew fit the bill. I suggested Narjis Mirza (Mirza, 2026) and Rachael suggested Wendy Zhang (Zhang, n.d.). Both accepted, which was wonderful as the theme of established and emerging female practitioners carried through from the first two exhibitions. Though FEM-Me was scheduled for the same year as the international exhibition, this seemed our moment and we took it.

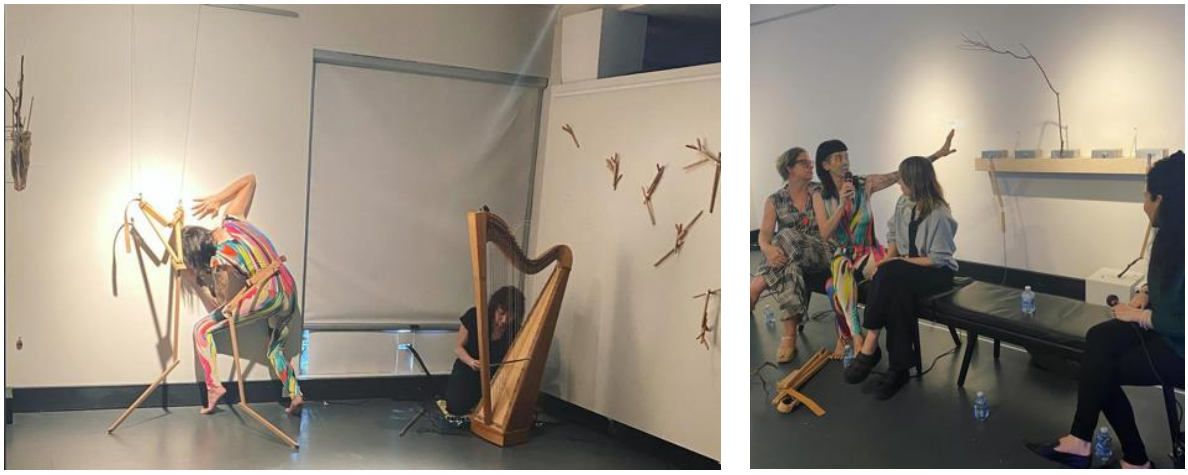

Figure 15. Lian Loke, *Kinetic Dreams*, 2024. Performance and artist's panel for FEM-Me: Feminine Mechanics and Other Kinetic Systems. Image © New Media Curation.

This exhibition, more so than the first two, focused on women's bodies and how the artworks extended and returned to notions of materiality. When all the works were installed, one notices a choreography between them. Where Reinhardt explored matriarchal histories through the re-fashioning of driftwood collected from her home on Dangar Island, Loke experimented with a designed wooden apparatus and live performance, as Reinhardt reflects "knotting and unknotting herself, becoming branch, letting the body sing in the context of fluid wood, of hardcore matriarchal systems with direct links to the neural networks that surround us…" (Turnbull Tillman and Reinhardt, 2026). This metaphor for the use of networked systems came alive in their collaborative commissioned work *Ripple Affect* (2024), which consisted of a stick marking the gallery wall, driven by mechatronics to elicit and represent "a kind of crone-ness in their movement and materiality," (Ibid). Though this was a revival of old knowledge, it was a contemporary revelation of female bodies in states of change.

Figure 16. Mari Velonaki. *Current State of Affairs*, 2009. Install shots of FEM-Me: Feminine Mechanics and Other Kinetic Systems. Bankstown Art Centre, October 2024.

This is hard to ignore in Velonaki's work, as *Current State of Affairs* is comprised of a full-length mirror set within a copper frame, complete with large light bulbs, running water and a soundscape. In our catalogue essay, Kiang and I mused:

> "A reflection caught in a floor length mirror is lit up
> from the top to both hide and reveal your current reflection. As
> you reach up to touch the light bulb, water runs over your limb,
> creating a danger in being drawn to adjusting your appearance,
> whilst also being fascinated by it; a soundscape simultaneously
> washes over you, disrupted by movement in space."
>
> (Turnbull Tillman and Kiang, 2024)

With multiple kinetic elements at play during this engagement with carefully engineered systems, one gets the feeling that the danger in the work is a key element to its experience. How can one get more disobedient than exhibiting water, light and electronics in one piece? Whilst feeling both powerful and vulnerable in one engagement, the broader reflection in the mirror captures a specific trajectory within the gallery. Linked to Mirza's *Al Afsar | Journey* (2024) which is a light and sound system that projects ancient Arabic calligraphy, to quite literally, physically and metaphorically signify the fact that humans "exist not as objects, but as gradated experiences, powerful in the light, (Mirza, 2026). This journey captured perfectly Mirza's recent transition to motherhood and the chaos and captivity it can elicit, as well as the emboldened kindship new mothers feel ripple through their relationships.

Figure 17. Narjis Mirza. *Al Afsar | Journey*, 2024. Image © Liam Black.

Figure 18. Wendy Zhang. Uncanny Splendour, 2024. Image © Liam Black.

Finally, Zhang's *Uncanny Splendour (2024)* are perhaps the only humanoid representations of the female. Arranged in a triptych of portrait LEDs draped in pink gauze display, three androgenous figures with feminoid features. Linked to *Digital Monuments* (2022-24) in the window gallery, digital flowers mark their transitions from desert seed to bloom, displaying a kind of becoming and leaving the audience wondering if these are the drawing board for a physical render.

Though it is difficult to be disobedient within a council gallery, this exhibition of women working in technology, unearthing matriarchal lineages and enacting them with the aid of tools typically honed by patriarchal systems is a quiet act of defiance tucked in a whitewashed space in a far-flung corner of Sydney. It had the feel of returning to our roots, returning to the drawing board and opening discussions via pathways and representation. It was a powerful and reflective conclusion to the SHErobots exhibition series.

Conclusion

Where environments like the Creativity and Cognition Studios, Beta_space, the Powerhouse Musuem, New Media Curation, the Creative Robotics Lab, the National Facility for HRI Research, the Tin Sheds Galleries, the TUDelft Library, the Robot Building Lab and the Bankstown Art Centre provide the infrastructure to question the patriarchal systems they participate in; it is the practitioners called to misbehave, to curate cheekily, to subvert and infiltrate the larger mechanism under the banners of Art, Culture and Technology that allow acts of curatorial and creative disobedience. It is always the human presence that we cultivate, reflect on, and archive; these moments of disruption to the accepted social hierarchy of male leadership and female obedience. If we started this chapter with the notion of warpaint being applied before battle, we close it with an invitation to continue to recruit, reinterpret, and develop the world around us.

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