

*Ursula Dutkiewicz*



**100  
YEARS OF WOMEN'S  
SUFFRAGE  
1908-2008**

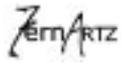


*Reflection and Celebration*





*Ursula Dutkiewicz*



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RMIT University Students from School of Architecture and Design  
& School of Global Studies, Social Science and Planning

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Facilitation: Liam Fennessy and Soumitri Varadarajan

Project Partners: Women's Electoral Lobby and League of Women Voters Victoria

Adjunct Professor Judith Smart background material on women's suffrage in Victoria

Shawn Callahan of anecdote for opening question techniques

Meg Minos for background material on bookbinding

Jackie Ralph for transcribing

Interviewee: Ursula Dutkiewicz

Interviewed by: Cara Jeffrey and Sarah Costanzo

Interview of Ursula Dutkiewicz edited by Cara Jeffrey

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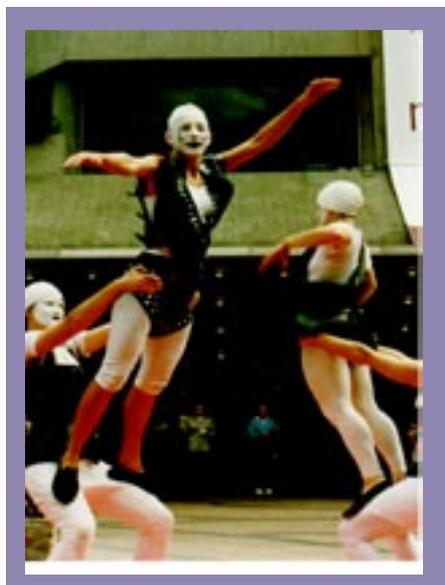
*I would like to dedicate this to all women fighting for equality*

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Sarah Costanzo



# Mementos



Women's Circus



A Plane without Wings is a Rocket  
Photo Lisa Williams

# Introduction



The 24th of November 1908 marks the day when the Legislative Council passed a suffrage bill enabling women for the first time to vote in state elections of Victoria, Australia. For the centenary celebration Liam Fennessy and Soumitri Varadarajan, RMIT Industrial Design Program, Kerry Lovering Women's Electoral Lobby, Sheila Byard Victoria League of Women Voters Victoria and artist Fern Smith worked in partnership; facilitating RMIT students to produce handmade limited edition books of twelve significant women in Victoria.

Four students Emma Brelsford, Sarah Costanzo, Cara Jeffery and Diana White conducted twelve two hour interviews with Gracia Baylor, Elleni Bereded-Samuel, Ellen Chandler, Angela Clarke, Ursula Dutkiewicz, Beatrice Faust, Pat Goble, Professor Patricia Grimshaw, Mary Owen, Marian Quartly, Associate Professor Jenny Strauss and Eleanor Sumner.

The students had never interviewed, edited nor produced handmade books it is a fantastic achievement with in a twelve-week semester. Their background work informed from in-kind assistance of historian Adjunct Professor Judith Smart; expert in narrative techniques and director of Anecdote, Shawn Callahan; writer, artist and bookbinder Meg Minos.

For all of us who have participated in the project it has given us time to reflect on the achievements and persistent struggle toward gender equality in Victoria. What shines through these twelve wonderful interviews is the strength, persuasive insistence for equality within our community and their huge generous hearts.

Fern Smith 2007



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### **Women's Circus...**

The circus was originally the idea of Donna Jackson the artistic director and it was based at Footscray Community Arts Centre; the Footscray Arts Centre was very much based around creating art that had social relevance. Donna Jackson met a woman in Adelaide that had this box of photo's and stuff - and she said "Oh, what's in there?" and the woman said "You'd be interested to have a look". It turned out that the photos were from a women's circus , or 'Wimin's' circus, which was a very radical kind of group of women in Melbourne back in the seventies, a time that saw the beginning of 'new circus' , or where traditional circus met new circus styles. Anyway, Donna looked at those circus photos and said, "Why isn't there a circus that I can join?" **She thought that circus would be a very empowering way for women to get in touch with their bodies**, and in particular thought that women who'd been sexually abused would benefit really well from it. So, originally, women who'd been sexually abused were invited to join the circus. And lots of women came. And lots of women just, you know, went through huge things and started to blossom. It was just hugely successful...

In actual fact, at the first show, Donna Jackson kind of realised it had become a bit bigger than she expected it to. She had about seventy women in the first show or something like that number. Then how I got to join was, at that point I had been in-

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volved in music and played in a band in Adelaide, a women's band called "Sticky Beat", and Donna was in the women's band called 'Nice Girls Don't Spit'. I got to meet Donna as her band came to Adelaide and then we came here to Melbourne and played and it went back and forward like that until I moved here. When Donna was calling all her technically minded people and saying "We need techies! Come and join the circus", I got on board in that capacity. So the first year was kind of stacked with her mates but it evolved so that it wasn't just women who'd come from abusive situations but a nice sort of mingle of people –women. And it grew from there, so instead of it being a target group of all those women have been sexually abused it was just a mob of women.

### **Reclaiming your body through physical skills...**

A lot of people who have been abused are very detached from their bodies... they become closed to things. In the circus, though, you're sort of climbing over each other's bodies, **there's a lot of trust involved** and there's exercise so it is reclaiming you're body and self esteem. It's building self esteem through circus skills and theatre and being involved in a group. The first year was quite kind of difficult in those terms, in that circus had to come to terms and deal with a lot of fears that people had. But it was incredibly supportive.

At the time it was an incredible community. Everyone belonged to support groups and



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you were encouraged to sit in support groups before the show and talk about your fears and everybody just supported each other. There were women like Linda Wilson who told the story of her sexual abuse and she became a voice in the media and she was happy to speak out and say what had happened to her and then how being in the circus changed her life and built her self esteem.

Also, we did a lot of work with masks. First, we used to paint our faces; you painted your face white and you made a black mark somehow, the idea being that using a mask made the women feel they weren't exposing themselves. For five years, we worked like that and it was a really good way for women to stand up and be proud and do their thing. Then at the end of the night everyone always stood in a row and took their caps off and did their bow, so it was like exposing yourself and it worked really well for a number of reasons.

**It was incredibly empowering to watch and to see women who when they came in they were so quiet, so mousey, so unphysical, so inside themselves and then they'd end up swinging from aerial gear.**

I can think of one woman who was quite suicidal and self-harming, it was shocking- it was really hard for her but she went through all those challenges and she went on to

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work as a technician / rigger. You know, in one circus show, 'The Island' which was a lot about water, she had to jump three meters from the roof in the dark, a spotlight would come on her and she would jump down to a crash matt. I would have to go down and stand with her and talk her through that process in the dark, waiting for that moment, because otherwise she would disassociate from her body, which is what a lot of women with a history of sexual abuse do- they go somewhere else to get away from that confronting situation. So I'd have to come down and talk her down, because if she did that, dissociated, she might come down and jar her neck or something. We'd talk about her cat I think. I'd always mention her cat's name, and I'd get it wrong every time and it would kind of make her laugh or break the moment for her. There were times like that, and I can't believe it, you know, she ended up going on to be a mother, it's incredibly... It's just incredible how people have led such hard lives- women who have led such hard lives- can come out and blossom and just grow and reach potentials they never could have believed they could.

The fantastic thing about the circus is there are **women of all shapes and sizes and you know there is no limit** to who can come and do something, anyone can come in and you'll find a spot for them.

One story that comes to mind; we never used to speak in the shows and then Sarah



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Cathcart, the director after Donna brought words to the show and she directed this show, 'Secrets'. It was a very difficult show, it's like we came of age with this show which was about sexual abuse; women spoke their stories - so every night there were three women who stood up and spoke. It was so hard for them and people would cry and you know you would see them go through this horrible thing. We had one woman who had a stutter, and she was one of the women who spoke her story and by telling her story her stutter went - her speech therapists had told her "You'll never get rid of your stutter, you'll have it for life" and now she doesn't, you know, it's fantastic.

I think that was our hardest show to do because it was really telling the stories of women and who were in the circus and that's how the circus comes about, it comes from women and their stories. Oh, or we might find a theme like when reconciliation was really on the agenda we did a show called 'Soles of Our Feet'. We collaborated a lot with Joy Murphy, the Wurunjeri elder. A song was written about the 'soles of our feet', you know, 'tread lightly on the land where we are'...Sarah was interested in convict women as well so we choose that theme and then we would build on it; the women would do research on it and come in and tell their different stories and then the director comes in and works out what would make the best show. That's the process that we go through in making our shows.

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The first year it was women in institutions, second year was women and work, the third year was women in sport, the fourth was 'Death, the Musical', that was pretty full on, but what a fantastic show- absolutely incredible; full on aerials and sprits and I think a daughter dies or a mother dies and they go into the underworld looking for her. All the sprites are there in these fantastic costumes and amazing, amazing music by our musical director, who has recently died of breast cancer. When you are involved with the circus for just so long... You know, that's what's happening. Women have killed themselves and women have died of ovarian cancer, breast cancer, all those kind of things. **In the time of the history of the circus we've got ancestors who went before us.** Anyway, 'Death, the Musical', it was just fantastic because you don't think about death in that way.

The next year after that came the Beijing and Amnesty show. The circus decided to go to Beijing. There was limited funding for it so they fund raised; all these women got together and we had this huge auction. I, myself, made a dinner set for it which was a big project and at the auction it went for a lot which was exciting. Twelve women got chosen to go off to Beijing and it was just an incredible experience. Women from around the world were just so amazed. So the Circus ran workshops, and told stories from Amnesty's "Women's Rights are Human Rights Campaign" pretty big when you think about it in terms of China's history on human rights.



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After Beijing we got Sarah, who was a fantastic director and she wanted to do the story of Pope Joan; women in the clergy was a big issue at the time, so that was quite challenging, a feminist organisation tackling religion. The story was of Pope Joan who supposedly was a woman who became Pope and got away with it until she became pregnant and aborted in the street during a street parade, a very colourful kind of story looking at the history of nuns. In the time of nunneries, they were places where women came together, they could do things they couldn't normally do, and they had to learn to protect themselves, learn archery or whatever it was because there were marauding men all over the place and such. So these places became places of safety, strength and creativity. When Andrea Lemon came in as the director we did a show called 'Ghost' which was to do with refugees. She introduced puppetry, which was kind of really exciting and interesting and you know the opening scene of that was a little puppet in a boat coming across the water and at some point the puppet falls into the water and then it becomes a ghost and then it's there so it's like children over board kind of thing. There were a few heavy years there with 'Secrets' and sexual abuse and refugees so then we did 'Odditorium' which was just basically a let go and relax show. Little kind of cabaret acts that the women did, funny things. We did a show called 'Sacred' that was about what's sacred to you, which could be things like having a cup of tea, that moment, you know moments in your life that were sacred to you and from there we did a show called 'Daddy' which was a lot to do with gender issues. It was

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kind of like doing a full circle coming from abuse through to alright now we are going to be our dads. I must say that was the first show we ever did where so many men came to see the show - so it was quite a different thing for us and maybe too a sign of the times, where women have gotten far more accepting of the male side of life.

When I was young, I was quite radical and did everything to kind of be different and stand out -like I wore a men's suit when I was seventeen and I smoked drum cause men smoked drum and was painting women's symbols everywhere in my house and my parents were just "Oh my god"...

So, over the time I've been a techie on every show. I've only missed 2 shows, so in sixteen years I've been there for nearly everything. It's just been so positive and incredibly supportive of my art. It's really allowed me to get where I am today be who I am which is someone who's free to explore what ever comes along, like this: talking about suffragettes... Then I'm making stuff for this and now I can see huge possibilities for the suffragettes and the circus possibly maybe doing something about it too and I can tie it all in together and we'll work together on it and it's just incredibly exciting you know. I'm now community rep. on the board; I've been on the board for 2 or 3 years - so you know I'm working on that kind of level - making sure that circus stays alive and she stays strong and that we can have a bright and shiny future.



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There is even a woman from circus setting up a women's circus in Dubai... It's just fantastic think of things like that. We were the first women's circus apart from the Wimmin's Circus and now there's one in Wollongong, there's the Performing Older Women's Circus and there's another few small ones up and running. The Womens Circus has definitely been a training ground. When we first started it was very hard to find technical people; women just weren't in the industry. Now there have been many women who have trained in the Womens Circus and have gone off and worked in the industry so **it has been a wonderful tool, giving people that first step and encouragement to move on.** It's fantastic

# Mementos



Women's Circus Ceramics artwork by Ursula



Suffragette Statues artwork by Ursula



# Final Notes

I would like to express my thanks to Ursula Dutkiewicz for sharing her stories with Sarah and myself. She is a masterful storyteller with a profound knack of putting one at ease with her easy going nature and yet, simultaneously, exciting you with passionate and engaging speech. It was indeed a privilege to have been able to meet her and have her relate her experiences both as an artist and a member of the Women's Circus.



