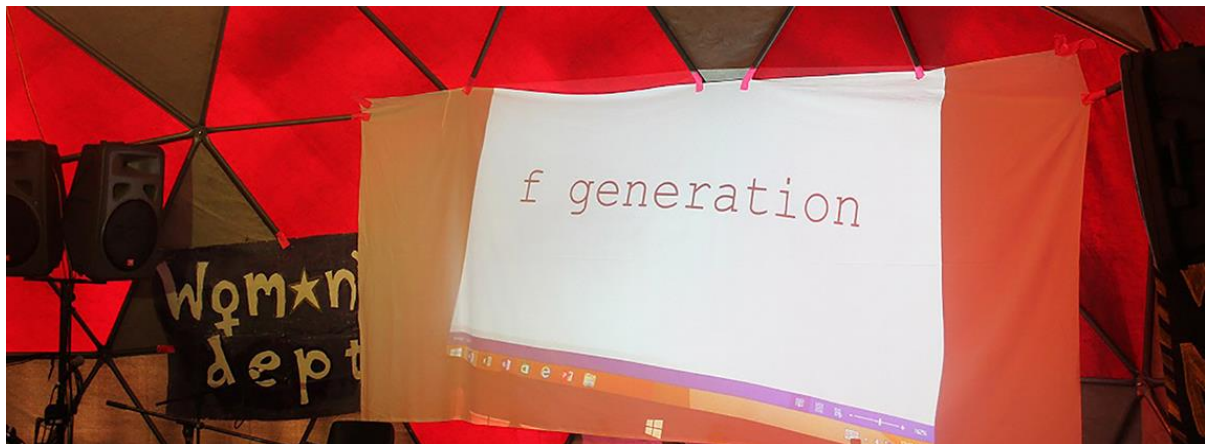


INTERVIEW | Caroline Phillips | Linking into the history of feminism at the GPG



Conversation between Caroline Phillips and Sandie Bridie, 5 May 2020

Sandie Bridie: We are really pleased to chat with you today Caroline, because you are an iconic contemporary artist in relation to the George Paton Gallery. You were the first recipient of the GPG/Proud award in 2009, you had your first exhibition in the George Paton Gallery, 'Holding Pattern' in 2010 as a result of the award, and then we have commissioned an artwork from you for the Union Art Collection. The other thing that you have been really active in is promoting, engaging in and extending the feminist history of the George Paton Gallery. Included in this focus on feminist activity is your current work at the Women's Art Register, but because that in itself is such a comprehensive history, we will have a dedicated conversation on the Women's Art Register another time.

Caroline Phillips: And, just on that, I've had a quick thought that maybe we could involve some other people in that conversation.

Yes, that would be great to involve others who work at the Women's Art Register today or have had a role in the history of the organisation.

I thought that we could go through your engagement with the GPG chronologically. The first phase was your artistic engagement with the gallery as an individual artist, in 2010 you exhibited 'Holding Pattern', in 2012 we commissioned your artwork Neck:Lace, and from 2012 you were also full speed ahead with these feminist projects in the GPG.

I remember that Susan Hewitt and I were judging the Proud exhibition in 2009, we were in the Margaret Lawrence Gallery where we saw a small sample of your work and we thought we would like to investigate your work a bit further before awarding you the prize. So, we went up to see if there was any of your work in the studio, to see if this would back up our hunch about your work. It was great because you were in your studio and what you were doing in there was really interesting. You were using a lot of industrial materials, using crafting techniques with these oversized materials. Would you like to talk about what you remember of that time and the impact that that first exhibition had on your practice and your sense of being an artist.

Thanks for the invitation for the interview. I think the main thing I remember from that whole year of being at the VCA was a really great time of experimentation, energy and trying new things. I had done my undergrad degree almost twenty years earlier and I had never really had any success as an artist as I felt like I didn't quite know what I was doing – I didn't know if I actually wanted to be an artist and I stopped being an artist for a long time. I had a family, and I was doing other things, so when my son was starting school, I thought this is my window of opportunity, I need to seize the day and get back into practice myself. I felt like I had a lot at stake, that it was my one chance to do something, so I was really

committed to getting the most out of every day, really. I was talking to all the lecturers, having lots of tutorial sessions, trying lots of new things, so that's probably why I went into the exhibition, it was an opportunity I could try. What I found was that through that process there was a whole new area of materials to work with. In the past I had been doing painting, some sculpture with wood and traditional materials, I suppose, but they never really felt right for me. I couldn't reconcile that craft aspect with sculpture, whereas once I realised that I could work with softer materials that had certain commonalities with the repetition of craft and the repetition of the assembly line, if you like, it was a synchronicity with the materials and also, I think my natural process of working with my hands. I am not necessarily doing anything at a high technical level. I really enjoy doing things by hand that are craft based. So, when you gave me the fantastic opportunity of having an exhibition, I took a risk, I suppose, I wanted to create something that was very ambitious – it was a very large project; I sewed these enormous tubes that were two metres long – from the floor to the ceiling.



Caroline Phillips, *Holding Pattern*. George Paton Gallery 2010

Yes, I decided to use the whole space, I mean, you gave me that opportunity as well, and we had a number of discussions about it. I spoke with my supervisors – Kate Just was my supervisor at the time – and her encouragement gave me permission to try something that was ambitious and experimental, and I loved it! It was a really great experience, and I was really happy with the work, fortunately, in the end. I think it was a very important work; looking back, it led me on to many other things.

It was an impressive looking work, and the industrial materials with the . supersized crafting was great. I remember we had just got this new

lighting system in the gallery and your 'Holding Pattern' framed or created this kind of curtain holding in the light. We decided to just use lighting along one wall in the gallery and the tubes were hung to hold in the light along that wall. So, it was very ambitious in scale, in fact scaled to the proportions of the gallery, it was simple and monumental – there were just two works in the gallery essentially. You showed confidence and maturity in this minimal choice, not fussing up the exhibition by adding any extraneous piece. You used the exhibition opportunity to really establish some ways of thinking about an exhibition, such as isolating a single idea, which in this case was so simple and architectonic. We were really impressed with that exhibition, it's beautiful work, for sure.

From this first solo exhibition, did you continue to work in that way? I know that you are still working with that idea of crafting, upscaled crafting with unlikely craft materials.

Do you know, I think I am still working with that. There are three ways I work at the same time; it's larger works like that, which are installations really, and then there are site-specific projects sometimes – I have done very large works outside – and then on the other hand, I continue to make quite small works and play with materials and different processes, like macramé or latch-hook, or using other craft aspects. So, I often make quite simple, self-contained work, that could fit on somebody's shelf.

More domestic scaled work that you can do at home, rather than in a studio.

As well, or it might be that I am testing a process in terms of materials or trying out how two materials connect. Often my work arrives out of how two different materials can fit together, or two different forms. It might be a circle and string and what could I do to get those things to work together?

And so, is the work a feminist critique? I know to what degree you have been involved in the feminist project, is the feminist project premising your thoughts while you are working on your individual work or

art practice, or do you put that aside and find yourself working without the feminism propelling you completely?

I think it is always there because as a general practice and to claim that 'I am an artist', well the next question is then 'What kind of artist do you want to be? What do you want to say?' So then my time in the studio becomes about how do you articulate being a feminist artist? Using abstraction or minimalism or industrial materials, they are not your typical areas of practice, I suppose, for feminist art works. Earlier on they used a lot of craft of course, but it was perhaps a lot more of a domestic aesthetic, or in reference to the body, in a representational way, or narrative work about politics or various things. I found that my natural aesthetic is minimalism, using industrial materials, or slightly alternative craft materials, but then I asked, how does this become a feminist work? What makes this work feminist?

It is flipping the paradigm a little bit, as you said, with the scale and the type of materials, but still using a technique that's identified with cottage crafts.

I think that question is always there, but it's not necessarily the motivation in every single work. I also just love picking up something and playing with it. I go to collect my materials; I get a lot of my materials from recycle outlets and I will just go there and be inspired by all the materials. I think the other thing too is, that it's been a progression about how to develop my own language of making. So, a work that I might be doing at home in my studio, I might just be working on that language and then when I have an opportunity to have a show, or make larger work, then perhaps I can focus it more on what those feminist ideas might be.

And I guess your work is thoroughly contextualised as feminist when you exhibit alongside other women who announce that their work is feminist, as well.

Could you talk about the work that Susan Hewitt commissioned from you in 2012 for the Union Art Collection, called 'Neck: Lace' and how you devised that?



Caroline Phillips, 'Neck: Lace', 2010. Cable collector and adhesive strip. UMSU Art Collection cat. #64

I think that is kind of what I was talking about – I suppose, trying different materials. That's when I was doing the MFA at the VCA. I was trying some different materials and I started to use some more flexible and synthetic materials; I had some electrical cables, stick-on tapes, and things like that. Because the exhibition I had done the year before was so huge, obviously you were not able to buy that installation, so I had to produce something quite small and manageable that would work for your requirements. That work was kind of a very small thought, just an idea. The material was curving and twisting – I have done quite a lot of work where the materials just twists by themselves, I also started to introduce a bit of colour for that work – it was black and red. The year before I had worked largely with black and white and grey felt, then quite a few works the following year had red. After that I started to introduce pink as a colour, whereas at the moment I am using a lot more colour.

Yeah, my sense is that you use quite a lot of bright colours, was that the gradual introduction of a colour at a time, or once you broke out into the pink you broke out into every colour.

I think it was. Like I said, I started with the red and the pink, mainly thinking about colours of energy and vibrancy and feminist or bodily related references and I use a lot of that builder's twine, which is often a fluoro colour.

Yeah, I love it!

Because they also make it in green and yellow. Another point to make is, a lot of the times when I find a material in the recycle place, it is often just masses of the one colour which will be repeated. So, it might just be a beautiful blue, or something that's there and there will be so many of the one item. That's generally how you find something there, as an offcut and there might be hundreds of them. I don't have a riot of colours at the same time; I do try to isolate the colours in each work.

Would you say that you often repeat the same gesture or unit to create a compound mass? That you find the larger form by entering into a process of repetition, and then from these repeated units you can create different forms, almost like Lego or Meccano.

Yeah, that is definitely true because it gives me a lot of scope in the sense of what the final work might be. It will depend on the amount of space I have or on the amount of materials that I can get hold of. Sometimes I really want to keep going but I am limited by the number of pieces of the one material that I have got. Also, conceptually, I like the idea of it being almost a network, which relates to ideas of connectivity and community, a community of components. When I was doing my PhD, I talked about how using the multiple of something and the way it is connected, and how that can be a relational practice. I think those discussions work well within feminist discourse, as well, talking about ideas of relationality and connection.

Would you always know what the final combination of units might be, or do you sometimes find that, or often find that through making it and then experimenting with different combinations of elements in different forms?

It's the latter, it's the experimenting and finding it as I am going along. If I am constructing it, I will decide which parts I like and I don't like and I will take something away or I will change something and then when I settle on a bit that I think is working, I will generally just reproduce that, according to the limits – the quantity – of the material that I have. With *Holding Pattern* at the George Paton, it was really tied to the space of the gallery. I could have purchased more – of that material – or I could have used less, but it was closely tied to the architecture in that space.

It was a huge amount of material that you used for that work, only it looked quite minimal and sparse because of the scale and the verticality of the units. They consumed the whole height of the gallery and then they draped onto the floor. There were ten of them were there?

There were actually about thirty! It doesn't seem like that in hindsight, but it went around the corner and some of them were tied together. There were thirty-two of them, from memory.

I am sure you would know! It would also have created an acoustic cushioning of sound, because it was made from industrial underfelt.

The smell, as well, it has got a strong smell.

Okay then, let's go to when your interest in feminism came about, where it began, took form and you began identifying with it, theorising about it and engaging in feminist art projects. I am sure your interest would have been slowly developing, but there might have been a stage when you had your first engagement, or you were ready to commit and identify as a feminist.

Personally, even as a child I recall an awareness of what was going on in terms of Women's Liberation and some sort of appreciation of that. When I did my undergrad in the late eighties, I didn't really connect it to my practice, feminism was having a bad moment in the eighties/early nineties. I was really frustrated by these really super large paintings by male artists, the whole patriarchal thing, it was part of the reason that I dropped out, I would say in hindsight.

Was that at the end of the International Transavantgarde movement with the huge paintings, just slapping on the paint.

There was a lot of big figurative painting, people like Peter Booth, Gareth Sansom, all of that crowd, there was the Roar studios, I remember going to some shows there. I think when I did go back, by that stage I had had a child and I had years of experience and it also coincided with a general resurgence in feminist

art. In 2007, 8 and 9, there were a lot of things happening internationally, which I wasn't necessarily aware of at the time, but as soon as I found out I thought it was great, I was really inspired. It felt like all of these people were converging at the right time for me to be expressing those ideas. It was making sense in a wider discourse and it was connected to what other women artists were doing, although it wasn't necessarily popular in Melbourne at that time.

So did you feel isolated at art school? Had you found that voice when you were at art school?

Do you mean in my undergrad?

You were continuous in your education, once you had started post grad, weren't you? You went more or less straight through over five years, was it?

It was probably more like seven years. I was awarded my PhD in 2017. I did have six months off in between my Masters and my PhD. I think that is why that progression happened because I started to connect with people. The year that I had the show at George Paton, I had started to seek out other feminist communities and to find other artists. I didn't necessarily connect with a lot of people in my course, but I found people in other parts of the university and other networks in Melbourne, and then when I did my Masters I started researching a lot of theory and philosophy. I was looking at Luce Irigaray, and that whole legacy of French feminism. It was just an expanding network of ideas and people, and I thought I should just keep going. And I kept going onto my PhD as well. Even in my Masters I had been working on collaborative projects with other people for a couple of years, or even longer, but it was hard to reconcile this collaborative/curatorial side, with my solo studio practice. It was not until my PhD, that I realised that it's all my practice.

Yes, they are not binaries exclusive to each other. And that would have made it a bit of a relief for you, I imagine, incorporating these components of your practice, rather than splitting your practice into different categories.

Definitely. And they feed off each other, inspire each other or have cross-connections to a project that links back to the studio. I am probably not the sort of artist that can remain in my studio all the time, I really enjoy having that community and it's led to lots of projects, and also gives me the opportunity to help other artists. I am grateful that people have mentored me, yourself included, and now I am able to help others as well. I quite like that aspect of feminism, it's not just about me, it's about our whole community and connecting the past and the present and the generations coming through. That happens through the whole history of feminism as well, it's a really strong component.

I have seen you working on those larger projects in the George Paton Gallery and the Union and you are amazingly helpful and patient with the women you are leading through these exhibitions and projects. You always have the time to assist, no matter how many are lining up for your support.

And of course, you have reconnected to that particular history of the gallery by bringing three feminist projects into the George Paton Gallery. These projects relate back to the 1970s and 1980s, when the directors of the gallery, and the women who gathered around them, created such a strong centre for feminism and art in Melbourne. Could you talk about the contribution of your projects to the gallery's own feminist history?

I think I was aware of that history in some small way when I did the *Holding Pattern* exhibition. But it wasn't until I was actually in the space for over a week to install my work, that I thought about it a lot. Then later when I was doing my other projects, I learnt more about that history. It really did feel like it was a great way to connect. What I was talking about before, it's part of the continuum of feminist practice. So certainly, I connect with that, but also it was a great location and context to hold those first exhibitions. In 2015, when we did the *f Generation* project, it was the fortieth anniversary of International Women's Year, which was 1975, and the exhibition was specifically about the events that took place at George Paton Gallery in 1975. We wrote a letter to many artists and feminists we knew and told them what had taken place at that time, and we asked a question 'how do you feel now about/what does feminism mean to you now? We had over 100 responses; we had letters, we had art works and audio-

visual material coming in. It was installed like an archive or a library, people came in and spent quite a long time looking at all the material that was there, but also engaging directly with the history as well.

And the GPG/Ewing Galleries in 1975, of course, was when Lucy Lippard visited and that was, in many senses, a catalyst for the feminist projects that came out of the gallery from then on. Projects such as the Women's Art Register was a literal response to Lucy Lippard's visit and talking about such projects in the USA. There was a very strong core of women engaged in the gallery already, and her coming just consolidated/gave momentum to this empowerment through art. The LIP Collective came about through this as well. So, harking back to this momentous event in 1975 was pivotal in Australian feminist history, I would think.

Yes, and I think the opportunity to do the *f Generation* project in the exact same space was quite rare, so that was an extra dimension. You could quite physically feel it, you know, a really palpable thing. Because you can mark lots of different anniversaries, there are different ways of doing that, but by being in the actual space was a really special way to do it. Another focus with that project too, it was definitely about engaging with younger students and younger artists. We took part in Mudfest a few months before, we had a forum in the tent on the lawn out the front of Union House. We found some of the *Wom*n's Department* banners in the cupboard of the *Wom*n's Room* and we hung them around on the inside of the tent. It was really great, it connected with the activist/student space that harked back to an era of a lot more protests and a student voice.

You invited women in from that 1970s generation, including Meredith Rogers, who was the assistant director of the George Paton Gallery, working alongside Kiffy Rubbo from 1974-1979. Meredith identified more as a feminist than Kiffy Rubbo. For example, I think that Meredith Rogers was much more enthusiastic about holding the LIP collective meetings in the gallery than Kiffy.



f generation, Mudfest, 2015



Crafternoon, *Wom*n's Room*, Union House



f generation, Mudfest, 2015



f generation, exhibition opening. October 2015, George Paton Gallery

We also invited Elizabeth Gower, she read an article she wrote for the second issue of LIP magazine. She had the copy in her hand, and she read her article in full, which was a direct personal account of her experience at that time, which was great. And we had a letter from Liz Coates, because she was interstate, but she was involved with that group, as well. We had a panel with the two women from the

Wom*n's Department and one woman from the People of Colour collective. The three of them were just so amazing, they were very confident and inspiring, and outspoken and articulate. Although they had different issues, there were strong links to the 1970s issues that concerned equality, representation, marginalisation – all of those issues that re-occur. It might be a different context now and they use different language, in some ways, but there is still a lot of unfinished business, so it is always worth repeating that.

Yes, to each generation.

Yes, they forget, or they just don't know the history so much and they think that they are experiencing this thing for the first time.

The word 'angry', I am interested in exploring the soft materials as a sort of 'soft feminism' as well, how you can have this soft power, and what that might look like.



Topologies of Sexual Difference, that was a symposium, or part of a symposium, wasn't it?

Yes, that was part of the Luce Irigaray conference. There is a group called the Luce Irigaray Circle, which started in New York State 15-20 years ago. They have an annual or biennial conference. I had been to one in Bergen in Norway a couple of years before and I presented a paper there. I was working a lot with Irigaray texts through my PhD. There is a small, but very keen crowd of Irigaray supporters in Australia, and a few of us had been in contact and we basically decided that we should have the conference in Melbourne, because there was so much support. The Luce Irigaray circle was looking to have a conference in the southern hemisphere, I don't think they had done that before, they had been held in the UK and North America a number of times. We were invited to do that conference and I worked with Louise Burchill, who was at VCA at the time and we worked with Rebecca Hill, who was at RMIT – she's a well-known Irigaray scholar – so the three of us organised this conference. Louise and I decided that we should have an exhibition of artworks. There were probably 10-12 artists at the VCA who were interested in Irigaray's work and some of them had come through the CFI (Centre for Ideas) at VCA, where you focus on Philosophy and art. There were about fifteen artists, I think. Because it was an international conference, we had work in the gallery from artists from the UK, someone from Cyprus, some Canadians who I had met at an International Feminist Art residency the year before, Americans and then interstate people, which was really great. There were people from all around Australia that came to the conference. So, the exhibition was a compliment to the panel sessions, which were at RMIT. We had a packed launch event at George Paton, as well, with some performances. That was a really great project.



Care Research Network, Round Table 1, Union House, March 16, 2019. Photo by Caroline Phillips

Could you now talk about the Care project?

The *Care Project* picks up on the global interest in the ethics of care. This project is run by Associate Professor Jacqueline Millner, who is part of the Contemporary Art and Feminism cluster that came out of Sydney. Now she is in Victoria working at Latrobe in Bendigo and is running a three-year research project about the ethics of care largely through art practice, although it is an interdisciplinary project. Again, there was a symposium, but a very different model, it was much smaller and a lot more participatory and more a grass roots project.

The project wasn't purely feminist, was it? There were men who were involved or participated as well.

Yes, but mostly women. We had people presenting papers, as well as performances and some workshops, and artworks in the gallery. We also ran a series of round-tables last year; there was one in Melbourne connected to the George Paton and then there were others in Bendigo, Canberra and Sydney. It was over a year of conversations and collecting people's ideas and giving everyone an opportunity to connect with the project. There were to be half a dozen exhibitions this year as the final year of the project, but because of the Coronavirus situation at the moment some of those got cancelled, some postponed. We have slated to have the show at the George Paton Gallery at the end of the year, fingers crossed that can proceed. Also, Jacqueline is producing a couple of publications, so there will be an anthology of writing and then she will do a monograph publication, as well.

I am going to be writing an essay about the international groups around the world doing projects with care and art to give our project some context in that international noise, I suppose. I guess the *Care Project* is not specifically related to the history of the George Paton – the project is meant to be a series of smaller based projects, it is not a centralised authority, if you like, but it was built out of a community of artists and the people in it. So, for me, it was a natural step to suggest the George Paton Gallery would be a good venue because it is connecting to the student community and it is a flexible space that we can be a little bit more experimental with that symposium model, which worked out really well. We had over 150 people coming through and it was great. We had performances, some dance, sculpture and all kinds of things.

And you occupied many of the rooms on the second floor of Union House, because it was at the end of the teaching year of 2019.

Yes, we had the full gallery space and we used one of the small meeting rooms and the two larger Joe Nap rooms, where we had some paper presentations in there. We had food, we cared for the participants as well, in that sense, feeding people. Because it was in the off time, we could occupy the whole area for a few days.

Would you say that the Care Project is less immediately attached to your identification as an artist, moving towards the role of research assistant, with you working in a professional role?

Yes, I think so, because since I finished my PhD, I have had two research assistant jobs as, basically you have to get some income from somewhere. It's a good way to have a part-time job, but also something that's meaningful rather than doing some less enjoyable job.

And you do link into the communities you know, so they can obviously get mileage out of you because of your network and your ethos.

It is a two-way street and also, from doing all of these big projects I have developed a lot of skills in project management – so I can contribute in that sense too. Also, I am able to appreciate some of the other research, doing some of the editing, working on literature reviews, that kind of thing. Before this project, I worked with Anne Marsh on her ARC project on Women, Art and Feminism, as a research assistant. Again, that was really great, it was compiling a larger network of artists and collecting work. That was specifically about feminist practice, but more of a survey, if you like, we were collecting material back to the late 1960s. Whereas the *Care Project* is really about contemporary work over the last five to ten years.

I feel like I am coming to the end of those research assistant projects and I would like to be able to spend more time in the studio, if that is possible for me.

Well, the last question I wanted to ask you was what is the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on your practice? I know that I was going to meet you in Paris in June this year, where you were going to have a residency there. So that little plan was foiled.

So, how are you going in lockdown, and how do you see things happening once the lockdown is finished. Are you going to try to move that residency in Paris to 2021 that you had planned for this year?

I was actually going to do two residencies; I had a four-week residency in Paris that was going to have an exhibition at the end, so I am really disappointed not to be having that exhibition, but you go through the stages of denial, now I am at the acceptance stage, so that is okay. I was also going to go to Florence for two weeks. There is a feminist art collective in Canada, based in Toronto. I have done a residency over there with them before and they were going to do an international feminist art residency in Florence for two weeks. That was cancelled as well. I am not sure if that is going to proceed next year or not, I hope they are still thinking about that. With my solo show that I was going to have, because it was a self-organised residency through Factory 49 gallery, it may or may not be happening again in the future, it might just be cancelled. I am definitely working towards going again, hopefully next year or whenever I can, really. I had started working on a body of work for that show, so now that can just continue. I have sort of changed directions with the proposed work, so in a way, it has given me an opportunity to work on those pieces a bit more and to develop the ideas.

I am happy to keep working in the studio for the rest of the year and hopefully get a chance to fly somewhere next year. I think we might all be going to New Zealand.

Have you got a studio at home?



Caroline's home-studio, 2020

Yes, I have had a studio at home for a couple of years now. Once I finished my PhD, I did try another studio space, but it didn't really work so well. I really enjoyed that idea of the cohort when you are studying, when you have got other people around you, but then I didn't feel I wanted to do that anymore. Once you have finished a PhD, it is such a big epic thing, you just want to retreat a little bit and have some time to yourself. We also moved to a new house, where I could set up a much better situation with my studio and storing all my work. I have got a study now, as well, so I think I am in a really good place to

keep working at home. In that sense, with the pandemic at the moment, it hasn't really altered what I am doing, as I was already working from home. But it has altered other aspects of my family life, and my work with the *Care Project* has slowed right down until we know what is happening.

It has been good to have a different space, it's a different environment and very different architecture, as well – it shifts the thinking of what you are making. But I do sometimes feel I need a bigger space, I feel like I have a big project coming through, and that I have been working small for a while. I am working on a collaborative group show with a couple of friends for next year and I am also working on a project that might be happening in Finland next year, so that would be really exciting. You know how it is with artists, there is always three or four things on the go. Hopefully we can still meet in Paris next year, or the year after!

Yes.

Thanks Caroline, and I look forward to catching up with you again to talk about the Women's Art Register.