

Missed Connections

*Images of the ongoing Missed
Connections project in New York
initiated by Holli McEntegart and
Rachel Jane Liebert.*



The hard workers that strangers make seem to influence me at times (Lina)



Some people do make me aware of them just by making about us (Lina)

Rachel Jane Liebert

Academic-activist-artist living in New York City

“Listen, fight, and dream.”

A 6th generation Pākehā raised on welfare with her brothers, in the white middle class suburb of Takapuna, Rachel is a descendant of gypsies and mathematicians. Her mother is an artist and her grandma is a biochemist. Rachel is involved and engaged in activism around sex, policing, and public education; through participatory installations, grass-roots exhibitions, zines, satirical video, radical archiving, knitting circles, and guerrilla theatre.



Rachel has been living in NYC since 2007, completing a PhD in critical psychology with a focus on madness, and teaching at the City University of New York in gender studies, disability studies and interdisciplinary studies. Rachel recently coedited a transnational collection of essays by and about young feminists from her home in New York. Her most recent project in Aotearoa was co-curating The Porn Project.

Are there any wāhine — women you see as role models?

Far too many to name. My life is woven with so many people who make me high. I'm most inspired by people who I know personally — when their soul pushes against their skin, when they take risks, desire, play, think. At the moment I'm really drawn to those older women in my life who continue to do this even after 70 years. They show me how stretchy life is...

What are the underlying themes to your work overall and what projects are you involved in?

I'm into making spaces of, and for, dissent, imagination, and connectedness.

My biggest thing at the moment is my PhD, which looks at the links between psychiatry and security, inspired in part when I was asked as a teacher to report any students with 'bizarre and unusual' behaviour for psychiatric investigation by campus police. I was struck by the assumptions and effects of this suspicious logic, especially given that being deemed 'threatening' intensifies when we are gender-non-conforming, white-non-conforming, and nation-non-conforming. So I started an academic/activist/art project that traces the circulation of paranoia within a culture and politics of terror.

In doing this I've encountered some really beautiful links between madness and mysticism and become especially interested in how and with what effects the border between these experiences is erected and patrolled — tracing it back to the imperialist exile of feelings, soul, spirit, and other fleshed insights in the name of 'progress' and 'civilisation'.

So my project is becoming a commitment to decolonisation and imagination. For example, at the end of last year (with the help of the delightful Holli McEntegart) I experimented with a small public art project using the 30 true/false items of a psychiatric scale called *Magical Ideation*, thought to be an early warning

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sign of paranoid psychosis. Wondering what might happen if these experiences were met within a space of desire not fear. For 30 days I pasted the items in a public romance/sex website called *Missed Connections* (see images on pages prior to this article) and then tethered them to physical places around NYC. I want to witness the magical in our crazy-making world.

I guess this is my love at the moment: collaborating with art (lists) to do social theory, analyses and 'what-if's' in public space. No doubt influenced by my living in NYC, I have this obsession with concrete and city lights. Both seem so violent to me. The concrete suffocates the land; the city lights erase the stars. It makes me think about what we don't see. I'm really into this idea of art being some kind of polishing cloth that reveals the hidden histories, relations, potentials all around us.

Also though: I have come to strongly believe through my research and activism that the 'war on terror' is a war on imagination — we are not only encouraged to be afraid of each other but also of what could be. So I think people and projects that respond, experiment and dream together are more important than ever.

Does being a wahine — woman inform your approach?

Being wahine — woman informs my approach because my body makes me attentive to difference. The word 'woman' is so coded with assumptions about whiteness, class, cis-gendered-ness, able-bodied-ness that I can't belcomel my body with seeing how it relates to categories that have been used to cast us into hierarchies of 'better' and 'worse' bodies, people, life-forms. So being a woman helps me to see both the politics

of difference as well as the limitations of my own perspective. It shows me that we need each other to think, feel, and imagine radical worlds.

Being wahine — woman also informs my approach because my body makes me feel connected to the universe. I love that my period is on a cycle that syncs up with the moon, the tides, and the shoreline. I love that I might have the physical capacity to grow creatures inside me that may carry across time and space. For me, this connectedness lifts up a sense of 'response-ability' and joyful curiosity in the work that I do.

Being wahine — woman also informs my approach because some sort of gender-based harassment or violence, or fear of gender-based harassment or violence, affects my movements every day and night. This lived awareness of the exclusivity and sacredness of public space tells me how much our feminist struggles intersect with other projects for social justice.

How did you first become aware of gender politics? Does this initial realisation inform your actions at all now?

My upbringing definitely made me sensitive to issues around class, sexuality, and power. However the seeds for more explicit politics of gender were planted at university. Stuff I read and conversations I had enabled me to reflect on my past experiences and go on to be more attentive to how gender affected my life and relationships. I especially learned a lot when I moved to NYC and got more involved in activism as these spaces tend to attract people and projects from a wide range of genders, sexualities, ethnicities, (dis)abilities, helping me to add nuance to my understandings of gender and to continually ground these analyses in the everyday, material circumstances of people's lives.

Can you please explain merging feminism with psychology and why this is so important?

Feminism is still such a heavy word. For me it is a craft, it is something I do, I learn, I practice. It can never be one thing, or an identity, or some sort of attainable end-goal. It's a sensibility to gender and a commitment to ending gender-based violence and oppression, including that which is done in the name of Feminism itself. Psychology has been equally contentious for me, as it also has a legacy of committing violence. So, for me, doing both Feminism and psychology means witnessing these histories, learning from them, and changing them.

When you first emailed me about The Porn Project I found a video of you dressed as a vulva walking through New York, and your work with the Vulva Knitting Project. There seems to be an educational angle to these projects, what is the motivation behind them? I always find it kind of funny that my sex activism has become my public persona in a way, as it's not really the biggest part of what I do. At the time of the interview that you saw (which I recall framed our feminist practice as a 'no boys allowed' little girls club...), I was just starting a really intense 10 week activist project with a whole lot of groups here against white supremacist policing.

In saying that: it's true I have donned a giant vulva costume in the streets of NYC a couple of times, and also cofounded the International *Vulva Knitting Circle*, which lead to the production of about 150 vulvas from 11 countries around the world, and contributed to three grassroots feminist exhibits. We did this to speak back to the mass production of sameness that was coming out of the cosmetogynecology industry. It was fun and effective, although in looking back now, there was not enough emphasis on trans bodies,

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and we risked further entrenching this problematic linking of gender to genitals. So I actually think it was a good example of how activism needs to be reflexive and iterative and participatory — moving in a trial and error kind of way. More broadly, all the work that I have done in relation to sex and vulvas relates to difference and desire, and how both of these are under threat (whether by industry, policing, academia), and this certainly carries through into my other projects.

What is it that makes wāhine — women, in and of, Aotearoa, New Zealand special?

As someone whose ancestors stole and abused it I feel uneasy saying this, but there really is something so powerful in the land. If open to this energy (and able to shake a colonial desire to own, control, dominate it), then being physically present in Aotearoa allows for a sense of connectedness across time and matter that is so important for the times we live in today. It’s definitely something (particularly living overseas) I ache for...

Also our recent legacy of colonisation and anti-colonial struggle offers a fertile space to critique and create gender. Not that I want to homogenise or romanticise tāhā Māori, but there was certainly a different system going on in precolonial Aotearoa. And I think a lot of violence we see today comes from the enforcement of colonial relations — submissive wife, nuclear family — that continue to disturb our wairua. You can see this in the really high, yet less talked about, rates of gender-based abuse in Pākehā culture. We can learn a lot from this present history, as more and more peoples come to share the land with us this potential to reimagine gender will only increase.

Any other comments or things you would like to say?

I always feel uneasy with anything that might suggest some kind of individual success. Everything I do is collective — both in terms of humans (either explicitly through collaborations, or implicitly through all the labour from people I’ve never met but whose work enables me to live ‘my’ life) and non-humans (the food that nourishes my body, the sky that helps me to imagine, the waves that connect me to other lands, the trees that connect me to other times). So I’d like that to be made explicit...

What would you like to say to wāhine - women?

Listen, fight, and dream.