

# Alex Martinis Roe



**Alex Martinis Roe: A Speculative Gathering**  
Maeve Connolly

The chairs are arranged in a circle on a carpet, allowing those seated to face one another as they listen, through headphones, to the succession of lone voices temporarily gathered together in Alex Martinis Roe's *The Practice of Doing*. These unidentified voices share a warm, even passionate, tone, but they seem to emanate from disparate acoustic environments. Unconcerned with their own surroundings, the speakers focus on interactions between others, often viewed or encountered from a distance. Each reflects on the specific form of a relationship between two or more women, with at least partial expression in public. It becomes possible, through the succession of accounts, to draw parallels between the evolving relationships within and across different fields at different moments, involving scientists, artists, curators, politicians, activists, pop stars, authors, filmmakers, journalists and editors. All display mutual support, enacted through collaborations, meetings or more fleeting communication, in settings such as recording studios, film sets, social-media platforms, exhibitions, laboratories and universities.

Some of these relationships, such as the complex bond between Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf, have attracted the attention of biographers and literary theorists. But these voices speak of a much broader range of practices that, if not overlooked entirely, are rarely considered together. They describe, for example, the fundraising and promotional activities of journalist Marie Maloney, which enabled Marie Curie to continue her costly research; the shared writing practice developed by three Portuguese feminists in the face of severe censorship; Lady Gaga's effusive expressions of admiration for the performances of Marina Abramović; and the rapport and respect established and demonstrated in meetings between Aung San Suu Kyi and Hillary Clinton.

Other voices are also heard in *The Practice of Doing*, encountered on the soundtrack to a video projection of excerpts being read in Italian from a book written by the *Milan Women's Bookstore Collective* in

1987, synchronised to a scrolling English translation. Copies of the Italian and English editions of the book are displayed nearby in a sculptural vitrine that loosely echoes aspects of the architecture of the Milan bookstore. If the vitrine emphasises the material outcome of a shared practice of writing, then other aspects of the installation highlight the activity and agency of reading. Even though her voice is not among those heard in the video, Alex Martinis Roe's friendships with with the collective members — established through reading their writings — is integral to the structure and form of *The Practice of Doing*.

The excerpts presented in the video relate primarily to the concept of *affidamento*, or 'entrustment', a name the collective has given to a relationship that exists between women for themselves. Several potential exemplars from myth and history are proposed, including Madame du Deffand and Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse, both of whom were initially active in the salon culture of 18th-century France. The physical and social space of the salon was an important site of power — and pleasure — for women at the time because 'even men's politics were based on personal relationships'. Yet, with the emergence of political parties, the forms of female thought that had flourished in the salon began to lose their authority.

By drawing together accounts of relationships between women, Martinis Roe contributes to the 'ancient search' for symbolic reference points invoked by the *Milan Women's Bookstore Collective*. Yet she does not simply seek to find new examples of entrustment; instead, through its particular form as a space of gathering, her installation engages directly with conflicting models of political thought brought to light by the rise and fall of the salon. Those seated in the circle of chairs are physically present to each other, closer to theatre-goers than to a spatially dispersed audience of radio listeners. But the bodies of those who speak are neither visible nor present to these listeners and, as they do not reveal their identities or follow the conventions of reportage, the speakers do not claim an authority based on name, reputation or journalistic convention.

As a consequence, *The Practice of Doing* differs from both the personal sphere favoured by Madame du Deffand and the ostensibly public assembly espoused by Enlightenment rationalists. Through the arrangement of seats in a public gallery, the installation invokes (however obliquely) spaces of public assembly that are founded on ideals of transparency and rationality. Yet those taking up the position of listener in this gathering of voices are drawn into a succession of other acoustic environments, in which they hear the self-consciously speculative analysis of relationships that do not include the speaker. Instead of being presented with solidly factual assertions, grounded in rational observation, listeners are invited to share in an ongoing, open-ended search for an elusive and yet vital form of political thought.

Maeve Connolly is a writer and researcher, currently based in Berlin and Dublin, and a lecturer on art and media at Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology, Dublin, Ireland.

ed and subtle maneuvers that Madame du Deffand used in order to get one of her brother's illegitimate daughters, Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse (whose intelligence and sensitivity had charmed her), to come to Paris to be her companion. The story is then told of their relationship, which lasted ten

years and finally broke up because the younger woman went against the wishes of her protectrix and met D'Alembert and others in the philosophers' party on her own.

Madame du Deffand was the perpetuator of a tradition of female knowledge and prestige

which had been formed over time, starting with such other great ladies as Madame de la Fayette and Madame de Sevigné. Mademoiselle de l'Espinasse breaks with the tradition, which she misunderstood rather than rejected. With her begins the long series — not yet ended — of intelligent, passionate women





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NON CREDERE DI AVERE DEI DIRITTI  
LIBRERIA DELLE DONNE DI MILANO

Sexual  
Difference  
The Milan Women's Bookstore Collection

16 March - 12 May 2013

Published 2013  
© Australian Centre for Contemporary Art  
Art  
Authors: Charlotte Day, Robert Cook, Maeve Connolly, Bridget Crone, Pia Ednie-Brown, Helen Hughes, Mark von Schlegell, Hannah Mathews

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Australian Centre for Contemporary Art  
111 Sturt Street, Southbank  
VIC 3006 Australia  
Telephone +61 3 9697 9999  
Facsimile +61 3 9686 8830  
Email [info@accaonline.org.au](mailto:info@accaonline.org.au)  
Website [www.accaonline.org.au](http://www.accaonline.org.au)

ISBN 978-0-9871732-7-0

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**Foreword**

Since its establishment in 2003, *NEW* has become widely recognised as a key event in the visual arts calendar. Each year *NEW* provides us with a fresh perspective on current arts practice in Australia through the eyes of a guest curator. And each year a group of young artists are given the opportunity to make and present a dream work with the support of the ACCA team. This much anticipated annual survey has entered the professional and public consciousness as an event that nominates individual artists of rising interest and plots the continual aesthetic shifts in the local contemporary art environment.

*NEW13* curator, Charlotte Day has selected seven artists from Melbourne, Sydney and Perth to make new commissions for ACCA's distinctive spaces. The mix of projects includes video and film, sculpture, architectural intervention, computer programming, sound works, and performance. At a time when an appetite for spectacle often drives the display of contemporary art in the gallery context, Charlotte has purposely sought out a much quieter and more reflective group of projects that find meaning and poetry in the interstices. Indeed reflection becomes a metaphor in several works that focus on light and technology. *NEW* continues to demonstrate the myriad ways that artists engage with ideas through materials and, at times, the immaterial. This is an elusive, sometimes fragile, and often playful set of projects.

Our congratulations to the artists: Benjamin Forster, Jess MacNeil, Alex Martinis Roe, Sanné Mestrom, Scott Mitchell, Joshua Petherick and Linda Tegg on their fabulous projects and to Charlotte Day who has so thoughtfully drawn together this year's *NEW*.

As well as nurturing the talents of outstanding younger artists and curators, *NEW* provides an opportunity for a range of arts writers. We hope you enjoy the new essays in this catalogue by those commissioned to respond to the *NEW13* artworks.

*NEW* is generously supported by the Balnaves Foundation, a visionary philanthropic organisation that has been ACCA's partner and presenter of *NEW* since 2009. Once again we thank Neil and Diane Balnaves, Hamish Balnaves and the other Foundation Trustees whose commitment to fostering young talent has enabled *NEW* to flourish over the last 5 years.

**Kay Campbell**  
Executive Director