

Our Unending Heritage

A critical biography based on the life of

Ella Osborn Fry CBE

(née Robinson)

1916 – 1997



by

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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PREFACE

The title of the thesis, *Our Unending Heritage*, is taken from the poem *Nightfall* by Gwen Harwood¹, which was written in memory of Vera Cottew². Gwen Harwood was, like Ella Fry, an alumna of Brisbane Girls Grammar School where Vera Cottew taught art and where I am now the Principal; Cottew was a friend to both Harwood and Fry. The format of my writing is somewhat unconventional as I have endeavoured to structure the research questions more creatively; a “top down” approach to prose has been replaced by section headings phrased as introductory questions, playing on words, but fulfilling the role of guiding the reader as to the key concepts at the outset.

I have used the heading ‘Part’ instead of ‘Chapter’ throughout the thesis to reinforce my purposeful selection of language to suit the subject and to reflect a postmodern play on words. The word ‘part’ has many definitions depending upon the context or ‘reading’, but here it is specifically chosen to delineate chapters, not only because of its literary use to define divisions, but because of its musical application.

Each Part commences and concludes with quotations, either by Fry, or by other women. In particular, I have selected a number of quotations from two of Margaret Atwood’s novels, *The Robber Bride* and *The Penelopiad*, and I feel this is worth a brief explanation. I enjoy Atwood’s novels generally (*Alias Grace*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, etc.), and relate particularly to her clever way of weaving historical content with feminist issues, often using a postmodernist approach. While not wishing to labour the point, her insights seemed most relevant to my own style and writing on Fry; I believe the selected quotations add to the richness and poignancy of how and why I am undertaking this research.

¹ Gwen Harwood (1920-1995) was born in Brisbane. Educated at Brisbane Girls Grammar School, she took piano lessons, hoping to become a musician; Harwood subsequently became a music teacher. She learned German and read German poetry and philosophy widely, especially the philosophical writings of Wittgenstein. She married William Harwood in 1945 and moved to Tasmania, where she raised four children. She used the pseudonyms Walter Lehmann and Miriam Stone when she first began to publish poetry. Her first book was *Poems* (1963), after which she published six more books of verse. She was awarded the Robert Frost award (1977) and the Patrick White (1978). Her fourth book *Bone Scan* (1989) won the Victorian Premier’s Literary Prize for poetry.

² Vera Cottew is discussed in more depth in Part II.

In relation to formal quotations used throughout the thesis, I have indented some either for emphasis, or because of their complexity or length, and others I have left embedded within the text to ensure an uninterrupted reading and flow of ideas.

References to artists and their works play an important role throughout, so I have endeavoured to provide brief biographical details for those mentioned and include examples of their paintings where appropriate for comparison and explanation - in this context the adage “a picture paints a thousand words” is most apt! I have used the method of footnotes to facilitate immediate access for the reader, in preference to endnotes. This occurs when I am elucidating points, explaining personal connections, providing additional information not easily included as part of the text, to cross-reference, or to cite a minor reference. A complete bibliography is included at the end of the thesis, along with a chronology and a list of Fry’s works I have referred to in the body of the research.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a critical biography researching the life of Ella Osborn Fry, focusing on her work as a musician and artist, her philanthropy, her contributions to education and public life, and her accomplishments and recognition as a woman. It is written from my position as a woman, an educator and an art historian. My research includes a consideration of biography as genre, feminism and feminist issues in Australian art and education. It also notes the similarities, intersections and coincidences that underpin both our lives, and uses a postmodern approach to create the architecture of the thesis. Fry's own words and artworks provide invaluable source material upon which the research explores the various milestones in her life. The conclusion places her in an Australian context of women in art, governance and public life.

PART I

THE ENCOUNTER³

The intention here is to tell enough of the artist's biographical history to create an impression of a real person, whose art and life experience together bring about the artistic achievement.

(Ella Fry, 1984)



Ella Fry, 1984

³ *Encounter* was the title of one of Fry's paintings in her 1994 exhibition at Gomboc Gallery, Perth (catalogue number 38).

Why write this story?

While working as an art history advisor for the Western Australian Ministry of Education in 1994, I purchased two small, delightfully whimsical paintings by Ella Fry from one of her last solo exhibitions held at Gomboc Gallery before she died in 1997. I also bought a book Fry wrote on the Art Gallery of Western Australia's collection. Some eight years later I walked into my office as the new Principal of Brisbane Girls Grammar School and there on the wall were two paintings by Fry (signed Robinson), completed in the late 1930s. I searched the school's archives (she was an alumna) and consulted various art history references looking for information about her and any connections between her beginnings in Brisbane and her later life in Perth. It became very clear very quickly that there was no detailed or comprehensive account of her life, her work, her talent, her contributions or her accomplishments – anywhere. Rather there were bits and pieces, paragraphs and notations, snippets really – a totally inadequate body of referenced information about a woman so seemingly prolific and successful in the arts over such a long time. The serendipitous way in which Fry was brought to the forefront of my attention again in 2002 and the desire I subsequently felt to address the lack of information about her - let alone recognition - was too compelling, and so I began to research her life and prepare to write this critical biography.

It is an arrogance and a bore to begin with oneself. But I do not know where else to begin, where else to find the same, where else to find the different. (Denning in McGrath, 1999 p.186)

Unlike many biographers, I am writing of Fry's life without the benefit of being able to meet her, speak with her and obtain an understanding of her first hand.

A biography written after its subject's death can function in one of two ways: as a discovery of a little-known life, or as a way of getting the facts straight about a personality who achieved fame, or notoriety, in their own lifetime. (Edwards, 2006)

Either way - and both of Edwards' reasons have credence in Fry's case - a biography is a story. Telling the story of someone's life, be it hero, ancestor or noteworthy person, is a genre representing one of the oldest signifiers of a culture, traditional lore and

historical recording. Biography, as a genre for recording the lives of people, is not dissimilar for example, to the great manuscripts, stained glass windows, altar pieces and narrative paintings depicting biblical characters and their lives which have been created since the Dark Ages through to contemporary works by Australian artists such as Arthur Boyd⁴ and Justin O'Brien⁵. Art after all is the visual medium through which many stories are told and art making is important in the telling of Fry's biography. Like composing a painting, a biographical story can be written as a literary composition - created at a point in time with a chosen subject surrounded by facts (objects) and informed by historical referencing, social markers and memory. The subtext of this biography resembles what Virginia Woolf wrote about George Eliot: "I can see already that no one else has ever known her as I know her ... and I only wish she had lived nowadays..." (Kimber 2002, p.126).

Kimber criticises some feminist biographers for utilising a case study, or a life narrative, as an effective tool to change the subject of the historical record from male to female – a method she sees as undermining the genre or manipulating the story to suit the biographer's purpose: "biographers of talented women have traditionally portrayed them as 'abnormal' for their gender or have downplayed their achievements to demonstrate that they fulfilled expected feminine societal roles." She further cites Booth, "feminist biography is sometimes a story generated in the gap between the female characters' potential and their achievement" and likewise Looser's 'rules' for feminist biography, "measuring the degree of rebellion inherent in a woman's achievement" (2002, p.114). It is not my intention or motive to prove Fry's voice was silenced by men, but rather address what I perceive is missing from the canon of documentation. For me to write of Fry "as a feminist, is to reinvent her – with her collaboration and the aid of historical hindsight" (Perry in Kimber 2002, p.125).

Usher takes an uneasy view of a marriage between research and the story:

⁴ Arthur Boyd (1920-1999) was raised in a family where art and religion were fostered. He had no formal artistic training and for some years after 1945 religious themes occupied a prominent place in his work, e.g. *The Mourners*, *The Mockers* and *David and Saul*.

⁵ Justin O'Brien (1917-1996) studied and taught painting in Sydney. He was inspired by Byzantine art while a prisoner of war in Greece. He led a revival of religious painting in Sydney during the 1950s, winning the Blake Prize for Religious Art in 1953 for his work *The Evangelist St Mark*.

...it's not easy to accept the notion of research as story-telling. We think of story-telling as 'unserious', as fictional, whereas our image of research is that it is about 'truth' and is therefore an altogether more serious business. Equally, it's not easy to accept that an account of research is an example of telling a story. To attempt to explicate the 'nature' of research through a story does not somehow seem appropriate. (1997, p.1)

While Usher is writing about our perceptions of the words (research, truth, story) and assumes we agree with his interpretation of their associated connotations, he has in my view, dismissed any plausible connection or interdependency between research and story-telling. It is also a shame there is no acknowledgment by him of the different ways of writing, painting, recording and reading a story that can allow for serious 'truth' or multiple 'truths' to be revealed. Kimber summarises the relationships more sympathetically:

If feminist biography and women's history as a whole are to have any validity, they must not abandon a historical method that believes in evidence and replace it with fiction. This commitment sometimes means telling a story we wish was different. (2002, p.126)

I have not found evidence in my research that Fry was substantially discriminated against or felt discriminated against because of her sex. As a feminist writer, this conclusion may perhaps be disconcerting for some. According to Temple, I am a "feminist biographer working in an era hungry for heroines' voices" (2001, p.3), however, I am *not* writing this story with Fry as the 'heroine'; rather I am writing her biography because I care about her being remembered for who she was and what she did.

The narrative context – the individual's life's story – is considered a relevant factor. An awareness of the moral identity of the 'concrete other' engenders a caring ethic⁶ rooted in a relational sense of responsibility. (Donovan, 2001 p.210)

Research is not necessarily about truth if we only read truth as proven fact; that is in scientific or epistemological terms, whether it can be replicated. In this case, we cannot

⁶ I discuss the ethics of care further in Part IV.

replicate the life, nor can we ‘prove’ the biography because its location is situated in the past. Lyotard observes that:

...scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge; it has always existed in addition to, and in competition and conflict with, another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative in the interests of simplicity. (1984, p7)

Research may be quantitative and/or qualitative – both of which methodologies can look for facts and discovery to inform knowledge:

...as a qualitative researcher...the direction you will travel comes after you have been collecting the data, after you have spent some time with your subjects. You are not putting together a puzzle whose picture you already know. You are constructing a picture that takes shape as you collect and examine the parts.
(Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.5)

Alpern has written: “As a feminist, there were times when I wanted the story to come out differently. As an historian I had to tell what I found”. Kimber uses this quotation from Alpern to illustrate that a biographer must be as true to the facts as possible, while acknowledging that all biography will be, to varying degrees, subjective, but that a biographer is ultimately “an artist under oath” (2002, p.126). The picture, the story, this biography, evolves from the careful weaving of chronological facts with source material, memories and interpretation – a qualitative approach, where the narrative informed by “[the] theory will look more like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues than one woven in a single colour” (Donovan 2001, p.213). Whilst there are many modes for the *telling* of a story, there are also different ways of *reading* a story and this critical biography will reference particular theoretical perspectives and approaches I consider best suited to distilling the crucial threads of why Edwards believes “a biography fleshes out the picture” (2006, p.27).

Is the personal position important?

Manen states that the “starting point of phenomenological research is largely a matter of identifying what it is that deeply interests you ... and identifying this interest ... as some experience that human beings live through” (1990, p.7). I am a female art

historian, administrator and educator who has lived and worked in three Australian states (New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland) – the same three as Fry. My interests, my experience, my life, the similarities between subject and author, the need to address what has been overlooked in the historical records and being a woman, are all factors which drive my desire to undertake this research project. Lerner observes, “women’s history is indispensable and essential to the emancipation of women” (1986, p.1). However, as Manen elucidates, it is not enough to simply recall experiences; as a researcher we must recognise *possible* experience and construct *possible* interpretation. In this vein, Manen’s phenomenological question here may be: “What was it like to be Fry?”, and Lerner’s aim would be to liberate Fry’s life story from the ‘unknown’ to the ‘known’. Kimber would ask “how does one devise a ‘plot’ for a woman” and then envision a “what if” episode, writing an alternative ending to the story (2002, p.120, 123). These questions all presuppose an inextricable bond between the biographer and the subject, suggesting the possibility of exchanging places, of viewing experience, circumstance and culture from the other’s perspective.

Beauvoir observed: “It is impossible to shed light on one’s own life without at some point illuminating the life of others” (Beauvoir in Moi, 1999 p.121). Given the circumstances underpinning the genesis of this research project, I cannot divorce my own interests from Fry’s situation. According to Moi, while many critics believe that the personal has been undervalued in academia and that it is now time for it to be privileged, others see the personal and the theoretical inextricably linked together. Garrison recognises that “all scholars to some degree choose their topics in order to enact the main themes of their own lives” and Kendall notes that “any biography uneasily shelters an autobiography within it” (Garrison & Kendall in Kimber, 2002 p.125). Further, Kimber comments that while there is great value in the biographer connecting with the subject in a personal way, it can have its problems and cites Garrison: “the only trouble lies in a self-identification with one’s subject that is unexamined and, hence, uncritical of itself; biographers may project their own desires on their subjects” (Kimber 2002, p.126). McGrath acknowledges the scrutiny that biography and autobiography have suffered at the hands of literary critics, philosophers and theorists, who have mused on plotlines, narrative structure, identity and the fiction of the “I” (1999, p.185). My motive in writing Fry’s biography is not to illuminate my own aspirations, but rather to use the connections I feel with stages and interests in her

life to address the oversight about her in the literature. While in some ways I am rescuing her from being lost or insufficiently recognised in the historical record, I am not rescuing her from obscurity, as she still lives in current memory and her work exists. There is an observation that we all read (theory in particular) with an eye to what we can use and what we need in our own situation. Jane Tompkins concedes that:

What is personal is completely a function of what is perceived as personal ... For what we are really talking about is what is important, answers one's needs, strikes one as immediately *interesting*. For women the personal is such a category. (Tompkins in Moi 1999, p.130)

While I will discuss this research topic and its relation to feminist theory later, here I specially want to throw into high relief the importance of the personal connections in this biography - not only as being causal, but also influential in its construction and valid as a position from which to write Fry's biography.

I have, like others I am sure, found the task of reading theorists, reading theorists critiquing other theorists, reading about different theoretical perspectives and trying to find relevance, understanding and empathy with my own situation, to be simultaneously invigorating, confusing and frustrating. Wittgenstein calls it a "fog". "New situations and new confusions will always arise ... This means that in the very act of asking a new question we risk succumbing to new confusions ..." (Wittgenstein in Moi 1999, p.119). As a result of exactly this, I have determined to keep Wittgenstein's 'philosophical therapy' limited to an investigation of two approaches: feminism and postmodernism. That is not to say that I have not considered alternative perspectives (structuralist, poststructuralist, deconstructionist, postcolonial etc), but after much thought and reflection I have decided to concentrate on the two I find most relevant to firstly, the subject of this critical biography: Fry; secondly, to me: the woman and art historian/educator at heart; and thirdly for the purpose for which I wish to write – addressing an oversight in the public historical record. It is not to save Fry from her "historical situation and cultural context" (Kimber 2002, p.126).

Kimber talks about the act of "rescue" in feminist critical biography for the purpose of providing role models for living women and she cites O'Brien's observance that: "Biography can give us stories of other women's lives that can help us to invent or

reinvent our own”. Kimber also observes that “many biographers, including feminist biographers, have acknowledged their deep personal identification with their subject (2002, p.125). According to Booth, any “recovery” of a woman’s story infers that she was “lost” in the first place and that scholars have built:

...a collective history for women ... upon a founding fiction of their past obliteration, adhering to the same gender ideology that dictates women’s historical marginalization in the first place. (Booth in Kimber, 2002 p.123)

These views also imply a state of heroism – not just the writing of a hero’s (or heroine’s) life because he or she was important and elevated from the ordinary, but that of the feminist biographer cast as the heroine rediscovering and rescuing the subject. It is important to state that I neither see Fry nor myself in this context.

Obviously feminism?

It is important initially to establish that there is a research bias based on my sex (as a female researcher and writer), the sex of my subject, the early influence of a particular educational construct on the subject (a single-sex girls’ school led by a female principal) and a patriarchal society dominant for fifty years of the subject’s life prior to the Australian feminist movement in the 1970s. McGrath notes that:

...many women understand ‘feminist’ as a crucial part of their personal identity, something which ‘unifies’ their being. (1999, p.178)

In other words, there are a number of very good reasons why a distinction between female and other predominantly male-orientated perspectives needs to be made. Mohanty asks a similar question of “why feminism” in the context of her critical work on women in Third World countries, as she believes we need to “understand how women in different sociocultural and historical locations formulate their relation to feminism” (2003, p.49). She develops an argument for investigating a “feminism without borders” through the stories of other women and writers in Third World situations. Mohanty observes that: “one of the tasks of feminist analysis is uncovering alternative, nonidentical histories that challenge” (2003, p.116).

Feminism, in everyday vernacular, may be simply defined as relating to women's rights. That is, it relates to political, social and economic equality. Donovan outlines a history of feminism which she cites as commencing as early as the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries ("pre-first wave"). This was followed by the first wave in the late eighteenth through to the early twentieth centuries (suffragettes), then the second wave (women's liberation⁷) and now, at the turn of the twenty first century, we are at the height of the second wave⁸. She makes the distinction that feminism has moved from one of theorising to one where feminists "institutionalise" as well, such as in global feminist organisations, rape crisis centres and tertiary faculties in women's studies. Donovan hopes that "the tide continues to keep alive feminism's historical identity and its historic promise" (2001, pp.11-12). She also notes that current feminists focus more on specifics and are about difference, characteristics encouraged by postmodernist theory and multicultural theory. There is, therefore a fundamental divergence between feminists who assert that women form a separate cultural group paying attention to the particularities of women's shared experience, as opposed to postmodernist feminists who reject the assertion of any coherent political agenda. Donovan, as do I, sees postmodernism as an ally of a particularised feminism based in the individual and a condition where feminist theory has also been strengthened by postmodernism (2001, p.199, 213, 216).

Therefore, for the purposes of this research, it is not the feminism of the political arena, such as advocated by de Lauretis:

Feminism defines itself as a political instance, not merely a sexual politics but a politics of everyday life, which later ... enters the public sphere of expression and creative practice, displacing aesthetic hierarchies and generic categories...
(Mohanty, 2003 p.109)

It is more the feminism of situation and feminist history that I am interested in to form connections. Lerner outlines the relationship of women to men in terms of recorded history, what is recorded and what is omitted. Lerner states that "no man has been

⁷ Germaine Greer opened her book, *The Female Eunuch*, in 1970 by describing it as part of the second feminist wave (McGrath, 1999 p.183).

⁸ Some writers on feminism refer to this post 21st century globalised or institutionalised movement as "third wave", whereas Donovan sees it as an on-going 'tide'.

excluded from the historical record because of his sex, yet all women were”, and that “women have made history and yet they have been kept from knowing their history and from interpreting history, either their own or that of men” (1986, p.3). It is certainly apparent that in Fry’s case her achievements in art, music and governance appear to have been consistently overlooked in the historical records and in wider public recognition⁹ – the details of which will be addressed later in this biography.

What we need today more than ever is a feminism committed to seeking justice and equality for women, in the most ordinary sense of the word. Only such a feminism will be able adequately to grasp the complexity of women’s concrete, everyday concerns. (Moi 1999, p.9)

Lerner unfortunately fails to acknowledge that if men and women are by ‘nature’ exclusive, then the *only* history that man *could have* written is a patriarchal one. Kimber also supports this view in her critique on writing supporting a “suppression” of Fanny Hensel (née Mendelssohn) (2002). She notes that Hensel was “as much a product of her time and her culture as her famous brother; any degree of frustration specifically with being female and confined to a domestic sphere is difficult to document.” Further Kimber states that “the suppressed artistic genius and Hensel’s lack of a public career places her in the same narrative with male artists who suffered from misunderstanding and neglect during their lifetime, only to receive widespread acclaim after their deaths” (2002, p.124, 121).

The question of difference between men and women, that is their biology or sex, as opposed to their gender, or cultural conditioning, is a vexed one. To decide on ‘which feminism’ is to understand what it means to be a woman (in this context as first and third person) and to do this we need to review the descriptors: sex and gender – the definitions of which form the basis of most feminist theory. Perhaps one of the best theoretical discussions I have read on this conundrum is a collection of essays written by Toril Moi titled *What is a Woman?* The work is based primarily on a reading of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. Moi begins with a review of historical scientific investigations supporting male dominance (Brooks, Geddes, Thomson) where ‘sex’ is

⁹ With the exception of her CBE award in 1982, discussed in Part III.

biological (i.e. physical and rational) as opposed to 'gender' which is a masculine or feminine condition (i.e. cultural and intuitive). She then looks at sex and gender in the 1960s and '70s, citing Stoller: "Gender identity is the sense of knowing to which sex one belongs" and Rubin, who hopes for a society where women will no longer be the Other (1999, p.22-3). What Moi returns to again and again is the idea of gender as personal identity and that the more theorists (particularly poststructuralists) try to limit sex and gender to a binary discourse, the more unsatisfactory and unhelpful the exercise becomes in explaining and applying the terms. McGrath, in her reflective critique on *The Female Eunuch* believes Greer argued bluntly and successfully "that the sexes deform themselves to fit sex expectations" and that "difference was inconsequential" (1999, p.183-4).

Judith Butler argues that there is no distinction between them:

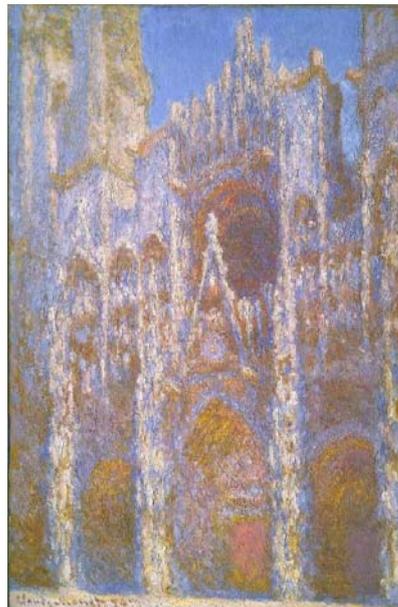
If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called sex is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. (Butler in Moi 1999, p.30)

Likewise, Moi takes great delight in exposing the inadequacies of the poststructuralists in dealing with binary constructs and concludes that the two words (sex and gender) and their confusion are peculiar to the English speaking world and that in other languages, such as French, they take on a different meaning. She concludes that sex and gender represent two different ways of thinking about sexual difference and they do not begin to explain conditions of class, race, nationality etc. Therefore, they are "woefully inadequate" terms upon which to base a discussion of feminist theory. Moi's view of the inadequacy of terminology and biology is also supported by Barthes' neat point about a woman becoming "desexualised the minute she is stripped naked" – in other words, it is not the physical body that determines a woman's sexuality but rather her personal identity and presentation in situ (2000, p.84). Mohanty also supports the view that it is impossible to define feminism in gendered terms because there is an assumption that being a 'woman' has nothing to do with race, class, nation or sexuality; she also quotes Beauvoir's sense that no-one becomes a woman purely because she is female (2003, p.55).

If we introduce specific descriptors for sex/gender such as female/feminine, it only serves to thicken Wittgenstein's fog because being *female* will define a certain group of people and being *feminine* will not necessarily define the same group. So, to quote Wittgenstein again:

Is an indistinct photograph a picture of a person at all? Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn't the indistinct one often exactly what we need? (Wittgenstein in Moi 1999, p.39)

In other words, do we really need to lock down the terminology and the language, or are we better off allowing for divergent views to provide for deeper and/or more interesting meaning? We can illustrate such a view by considering the impressionist paintings by Claude Monet¹⁰, for example, where his blurred subjects' texture, atmosphere and tension of a moment in life caught in colour, tells far more about the subject than a sharp photograph ever could.



Claude Monet *Rouen Cathedral*, 1894

If these binary views of sex/gender, female/feminine, etc. rely on a biological/psychological difference, then how do we discriminate our individual physical existence from the next person? Beauvoir claims that: “The body is not a

¹⁰ Claude Monet (1840-1926) is one of the most famous of the French Impressionists who exemplified the ‘plein air’ painting method. He painted many subjects as a series at different times of the day in order to capture the changing effects of light, such as on Rouen Cathedral, the waterlilies and the haystacks.

thing, it is a *situation*: it is our grasp on the world and a sketch of our projects” (Moi 1999, p.59). Moi likes this concept of the “body as a situation”, as I do. It supports her view of the poststructuralists’ inadequate assumptions about the definition of ‘woman’ i.e. equating to heterosexual, feminine and female. Rather, if the body is a situation, it opens the definitions up to include transgender, racial, language and political conditions – something that a binary discourse does not and cannot address. Sartre also claims that all human beings are situated; Moi acknowledges that for Sartre a situation is a relationship between our projects (the personal freedom to live a life) and the world (the physical objects we interact with, including our bodies); from this she concludes that to claim the body as a situation is to acknowledge that the meaning of a woman is bound up with the way she uses her freedom (1999, p.65).

It is appropriate at this point to relate some of these key ideas to an art context, given my background and Fry’s life-long involvement with art, especially bearing in mind Friedrich Schiller’s observation that “art is the daughter of freedom”¹¹. In an essay on the photographic artist Cindy Sherman¹², Amelia Jones “flaunts her partiality to feminism”, draws on phenomenology and attempts to stress the “situatedness of her [Sherman’s] work”. She observes that the body, through which we experience ourselves and the world, is an “historical idea”, along with the ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty: “my body ... is what opens me out upon the world and places me in a situation there” (1997 pp.33-37). Jones unpacks the gaze, the performance and the visual codes of feminism as presented through Sherman’s work – in particular her untitled film stills and history pictures¹³. Not only does Jones’ essay dove-tail in many ways with Moi’s essay relating to the body, feminism, and gender performance, but Sherman’s work exemplifies their theorising. Sherman also employs the postmodernist markers of quotation, ambiguity, personal identity and media appropriation – features of the postmodern condition which I will discuss further in the next section.

¹¹ Quoted from *The Weekend Australian*, April 29-30 2006 ‘Review’ p.16.

¹² Cindy Sherman (b.1945) studied photography in Buffalo, before moving to New York in 1977. She has undertaken considerable explorations into cinema, performance and film. A retrospective of her work was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney in 1999.

¹³ Sherman’s work in this context is discussed further in Part III.



Cindy Sherman *Untitled #50*, 1979

According to Moi, Beauvoir considers that:

...only the study of concrete cases – of lived experience – will tell us exactly what it means to be a woman in a given context ... just as it is impossible to derive the definition of a woman from an account of biological facts alone. (1999, p.76)

In the case of this critical biography on Fry, it is therefore not the facts of her existence that tell us about the woman, it is the situations she lived. The link between situation and personal freedom then introduces the feminist debate about power. Butler, for example, sees the domination of men and the oppression of women as the critical feminist point – that is, determining who holds the power and what that does to a woman's situation and freedom. In this context the way power operates in a situation creates meaning or knowledge. Stronach and McLure (1997) suggest that power and knowledge 'lean' on each other, implying a mutual dependency. Mohanty argues that the problem with a definition of power is that it can become locked into a binary structure between those possessing power versus those who are powerless (and less educated), and in her review of women in Third World communities they can be therefore typecast in this scenario as groups unified by their powerless struggles (2003, p.39).

Next we need to consider what is ‘true’ knowledge and whether a dependency on power immediately corrupts the truth or in fact actually allows for multiple truths. Kimber cites Quilligan on the matter of truth:

Feminist biography does not expect to learn the ‘truth’ of a character in the old sense of the term, because the ‘truth’ of the individual belongs to a different ideology – an ideology situated in the past.

She then cites Epstein on the issue of power:

...the discursive practices of biographical recognition are powerful agencies of cultural coercion historically aligned with dominant structures of authority. They cannot be simply and harmlessly appropriated. (2002, p.125, 127)

Mohanty separates the collective truth (history) from the singular, stressing “the individual voice of a woman ... as a truth-teller, with an emphasis on reality as opposed to rhetoric” (2003, p.112). This then poses the question of validity or ‘truth’ in knowledge or in the extraction of meaning. Knowledge is constructed, not uncovered; therefore it cannot be objective and cannot merely rely on collecting empirical data – whether collective or individual. I will refer to knowledge and power later in my discussion of postmodernism, but for now in this context of feminist theories, the situation – the body as situation – becomes crucial to the discovery of knowledge and forming understanding.

Women writing in a contemporary context from a feminist perspective, such as Mohanty and Moi (as opposed to others cited earlier), openly acknowledge the patriarchal view, along with many others, to arrive at a collage of understandings. What needs to be remarked upon is that men have elected not to acknowledge a feminist perspective as a necessary or valid lens to re-assess historical evidence until recently. The question remains though as to whether gender-bias will allow either sex to objectively view history through the ‘other’ lens. My answer would be “does it matter?” Aren’t all contributions to the recording of history valuable and enriching, and why would an objective view (if such a thing is possible) be any better or more edifying than a subjective view, providing the individual stances are acknowledged?¹⁴

¹⁴ The ‘condition’ of history is discussed in Part III.

In this section, I have purposely limited my commentary primarily to a detailed review of Moi's phenomenologically based essay *What is a Woman?*, her challenge of the poststructuralist theorists and her endeavour to "elaborate a concrete, historically grounded and socially situated understanding of what it means to have a human body" (1999, p.113). I have not attempted a wide ranging summary of the history of feminist theory or the intricate details of various approaches – radical or otherwise. For me, the only thing *obvious* about identifying a feminist viewpoint for this critical biography is that I am a woman writing about another woman's life. What is clear from Moi's work, and that of others cited, is that there is nothing obvious or clear about the definition of a woman, a female, a feminine perspective or a feminist approach. Rather, what I have endeavoured to highlight for the purposes of setting the context for this piece of research, are the inadequacies of employing a sex/gender or biological/psychological binary opposition, in favour of an eclectic interpretation of how a woman is defined by her situation and her lived experiences.

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female acquires in society; it is civilisation as a whole that develops this product... (Moi 1999, p.77)

Similarly, Mohanty observes that "feminist discourse must be self conscious in its production of notions of experience and difference" (2003, p.119).

To aptly conclude this section quoting Moi:

Wittgenstein sees the role of philosophy is to be therapeutic, to produce a diagnosis of the theoretical pictures that hold us captive, not in order to refute them, but in order to make us aware of other options.

Her summary speaks volumes for clearing the feminist fog:

It would be nice if 'feminist theory' could eventually come to mean a kind of thought that seeks to dispel confusions ... not to get lost in meaningless questions and pointless arguments, and enable us instead to raise genuine questions about things that really matter. (1999, p.119-120)

In this case, I believe the story of Fry's life matters and contributes to the wider historical record through the experiences of the individual; in Mohanty's words:

...narratives of historical experience are crucial ... not because they present an unmediated version of the 'truth' but because they can destabilise received truths and locate debate in the complexities and contradictions of historical life. (2003, p.244)

Appropriating postmodernism?

Postmodernism, while a now familiar term, is somewhat problematic to define within the context of applying it as a perspective for research. In the context of this critical biography on Fry, where I am acting as a feminist historian, McGrath notes that "many historians have been reluctant to take up the stylistic challenges of postmodernist theory, especially regarding issues of voice and reflexivity" (1999, p.185). However, this is not the case with this research, or the way I wish to view postmodernism's relevance to it.

Postmodern scholarship goes a step further in challenging the idea that the past is real and that the truth of it can be recovered through storytelling. (Kimber, 2002 p.126)

I have chosen it specifically for this reason; for its generalisations, ambiguity, appropriation, quotation, pastiche, and experimentation – also particularly because of its close association with the art world.

In this section I wish to give a brief overview of what postmodernism represents, especially in an art context, and elucidate why I have chosen it as a form to explain *how* I am preparing and constructing this critical biography; in other words the format or composition – as if it were an artwork illustrating my research. Bullock and Trombley (1999) would argue that postmodernism implies that modernism is over and that the post 1945 artist has been given an unprecedentedly wide, pluricultural range of styles, techniques and scope of reference, along with a paradoxical uncertainty as to their use and/or authority. Lyotard (1984) calls it the postmodern 'condition' – a global collection

of many viewpoints representing an end of the Enlightenment and totalistic explanations. In other words, postindustrial with a dependency on commodified knowledge and technology. Donovan sees postmodernism as a condition rejecting all theory and all generalisation indiscriminately, resulting in a state where only individual particulars have legitimacy (2001, p.214). Either way, there is frequent evidence of an intentional play on terms, language, ideology and styles – appropriation with both serious and cynical purpose.

Postmodernism is therefore a ‘catch-all’ term. It allows for fluidity and selectivity of interpretation, historical referencing and derivation of meaning. It values the individual as opposed to the group. Mohanty investigates this idea through the value of a woman as opposed to women as a collective and women as historical subjects when reviewing new trends for feminist methodologies, in particular “special interest” thinking. She looks back on her previous feminist writings from the mid 1980s where she drew on Foucault’s analysis of power/knowledge and now revisits a postmodernist view of difference over commonality to validate ‘local’ over ‘universal’ when considering new feminist interpretations of Third World women’s stories (2003, pp.19, 231, 225).

In the art world, where my particular experiences and interests lie, this profiling of the individual as important is exemplified by the collapse of formal art movements where groups of like-minded artists followed a particular manifesto and/or style (for example, surrealism, abstract expressionism, minimalism, etc.). Fry was trained by Modernists practising in Sydney during the late 1930s and as such her early work reflects the hallmark traits of the time; her later paintings moved away from the modernist style and became much more individual, introspective and fanciful. While her work of the 1990s could not be classified as postmodern in an art theory sense, it was certainly unlike anything else being exhibited in Perth at that time and was deeply personal.¹⁵

¹⁵ Fry’s art is discussed in depth in Parts II and III.



Lindy Lee *Lily-Amah*, 2001



Fiona Hall *When my boat comes in (detail)*, 2002

So to generalise, rather than the artists who worked in stylistically sympathetic groups, postmodernist artists tend to work alone, drawing on their own life experiences, searching for spiritual meaning or relevance and developing their own unique style, for example Lindy Lee¹⁶ and Fiona Hall¹⁷. Usher (1997) confirms this postmodernist distinction between group and individual when he comments on communities and their ability to limit ‘truth’. Collective ideological engagement encourages shared sets of understandings, which can quickly effect a dilution of extreme views and reflect only mainstream values or outcomes, rather than the unique, experimental or challenging¹⁸. Many of the postmodernist artists found great personal revelation and satisfaction in the pursuit of expression and understanding through their art making without the constraints of following a particular (limiting) doctrine or technique. Tompkins supports this view

¹⁶ Lindy Lee (b.1954) completed her initial art training in Brisbane, continued in Canada and London and completed a post graduate painting degree in Sydney. Lee works with a variety of media, including wax, pigment, computer imagery, photocopies and sgraffito. Her work *The Silence of the Painters* epitomises her allegiance to postmodernism and historical referencing.

¹⁷ Fiona Hall (b.1953) originally trained as a painter, but uses a variety of media to express her views on women and the environment. She currently lives and works in Adelaide. Her photographic work *The Marriage of Arnolfini, after van Eyck* reflects her interest in historical referencing, women’s issues and her versatility with different media types.

¹⁸ This idea of collective understandings also relates to women’s philanthropic histories and is discussed in Part IV.

and actually perceives all types of theory as alienating. For her the goal is to reach her own true humanity, to let her own emotions and feelings shine forth unfettered by theoretical obstruction (Tompkins in Moi 1999, p.164). Lyotard takes the comparison between the needs and hopes of the individual or group one step further, and cynically expands it to encompass the system:

The true goal of the system, the reason it programs itself like a computer¹⁹, is the optimisation of the global relationship between input and output ... Even when ... innovations are occurring, even when its dysfunctions inspire hope and lead to a belief in an alternative ... its result can be no more than an increase in the system's *viability*. (1984, pp.11-12)

Mohanty believes globalisation is an overused and misunderstood concept²⁰, which characterises real shifts and consolidation of power around the world. She relates it to her work on 'borderlessness' as applied to women, and within the context of globalisation, as applied to technology, financial capital, modes of governance etc. In other words, the power systems of globalisation work against freedom of the individual, truth, knowledge and, for the purposes of feminist activism, women (2003, pp171-2).

Williams and Simpson (1996) summarise postmodernism in art as being based on a loss of faith in modernism's continuous march forward with technology and thematic progression. Modernist artistic optimism and arrogance gave way to postmodernist characteristics of a broader, more introspective and emotional condition with an interest in revisiting, recycling and reinterpreting forms and notions from the past. Postmodernist artists preferred social commentary based on individual experiences, stories and reactions, often blurring the lines between historical referencing and current practice. Many searched for a pastiche of ideas and styles that could be employed to represent contemporary life and comment on the human condition. Postmodernism, therefore, is not a clear-cut philosophical ideology, but rather a matrix of individual expressions and cultural quotations.

¹⁹ Refer to the discussion of *The Matrix* later in this section.

²⁰ Mohanty cites her next challenge as tracking the discourse on global feminism to better understand the processes of corporate globalisation and to know the real, concrete effects on women (2003, p.237).

It seems appropriate, given the emphasis in the previous section on feminism, to include Moi's view of this 'condition' and in particular, the concept of appropriation:

By appropriation I understand a critical assessment of a given theory formation with a view to taking it over and using it for feminist purposes. Appropriation, then, is theoretically somewhat more modest than a full-scale critique, and has a relatively well-defined concrete purpose. (1999, p.265)

It is the postmodern condition of the individual approach, the appropriation of ideas and the creative play on words that I wish to apply to this critical biography.

Earlier, I described postmodernism as a matrix of individual expressions and cultural quotations. The word 'matrix' is appropriated in this context from the perspective of semiotics – the systems of signs and symbols. In one definition, or 'reading', a matrix may be a template: a format, a pattern or a mould, a set of variables used for programming an outcome; in another 'reading' it may be a medium: prevailing conditions, an atmosphere, an environment or a milieu. Of special significance is the derivation of the word from the Latin meaning 'womb' – a reference to the feminine which here is entirely intentional. To exemplify this multiple reading I have chosen *The Matrix* film – itself a postmodern creative phenomenon. In *The Matrix*, reality is not what it seems. The 'real' world is a computer programmed replica and the inhabitants exist in limbo within artificial 'wombs' living their lives cerebrally through simulated vision and experience. The main character, Neo, is the chosen 'One' (anagram no doubt intentional) to liberate mankind. The play on characters' names: biblical (Trinity and Zion), mythological (Morpheus and The Oracle), technological (Cypher and Switch) and the play on writing (*Alice in Wonderland* and *Simulacra and Simulation*) all reinforce the different 'realities' operating on each other within *The Matrix* world. Other issues posed are about personal freedom, political freedom, fate and control. For example, The Oracle controls knowledge, Neo controls the fate of the 'true' world, and the ability to act is controlled by the matrix's reality – the computer game.

While references to Baudrillard's book *Simulacra and Simulation* appear prominently in the movie, the author reportedly announced that its 'use' was misunderstood – a modernist versus postmodernist error. Hanley (2003) unpacks the philosophical

platforms underpinning the book's referencing in the movie and simultaneously defends and denies the film's faithful interpretation of Baudrillard's use of language and ideas:

Philosophy becomes after all an art-form, where presentation is as important (maybe more so) than representation. The point becomes to be playful, to fill one's writings with double-meanings, puns, scare-quotes, irony, metaphors, capitalizations, and so on.

I have explored the connections between the multiple definitions of a 'matrix' with the complexities of 'realities' and references constructed in the film. In other words, I profile the meanings within meanings, dependent upon textual codes and technology as simultaneously superior and inferior with suppositions built upon *and within* layers of understanding.

Earlier I touched on the concept of 'knowledge' and how we separate it from what is fact and what is constructed meaning. The attainment of knowledge is linked to power. We need only look at contemporary western society and its preoccupation with the 'knowledge economy' and the pursuit of supremacy in politics and finance by driving 'knowledge' as a commodity and a priority. Lyotard notes that "knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorised in a new production" (1984, p.4). This can be seen in the current Australian environment with Queensland branding itself the *Smart State*²¹ and the federal government's vigorous preoccupation with improving literacy and numeracy standards through national testing mechanisms, as well as overhauling the skilled labour shortage through the technical training system. By controlling the educational curriculum a government can then control the labour market and the health of the economy. There is also an international preoccupation with science and technology, often to the detriment of the humanities²²; Lyotard forewarned that:

²¹ In 2005 the Queensland Government released its *Smart Queensland: Smart State Strategy 2005-2015*, which outlines an extensive program of investment to foster innovation, new technologies and industries, research investment, improved education and training, as well as undertaking a record program of infrastructure spending. The Government is providing businesses with the opportunity and competitive advantage to turn innovative ideas and technologies into commercial successes. Reference: <http://www.smartstate.qld.gov.au/strategy/index.shtm>

²² This has been seen recently (2006-7) in Australian universities, where media has focused on the downsizing of humanities departments (e.g. Queensland University of Technology and Melbourne University) in part owing to funding based on student enrolments, rather than research.

...in the postindustrial and postmodern age, science will maintain and no doubt strengthen its pre-eminence in the arsenal of productive capacities of the nation-states. (1984, p.5)

These government preoccupations are in direct contrast to people such as Richard Florida²³ and Ken Robinson²⁴ who predict the important role creativity and divergent thinking will play in future planning for how we deliver and ensure worthwhile education. Robinson believes that we are all born to think creatively and while most countries are reforming education systems for economic reasons, he believes we should also be overhauling our current basic assumptions about what constitutes 'an education' with a focus on the creative process. For him, capability, creativity and confidence are core attributes to develop our thinking and enhance our problem solving in order to achieve a truly enlightened system for education and a progressive world with a social conscience. Compare this view to Lyotard's prophecy (seeming to be fulfilling itself) that progress in science and technology seem to naturally complement economic growth and the expansion of socio-political power.

Foucault's ideas on power, knowledge and fabrication are cited variously in both Lee (1992) and Usher (1997). Power implies authority and authority is informed and activated by knowledge, seeking universal compliance and obedience. Lyotard discusses authority as 'legitimation' and arrives at the conclusion that:

...knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? (1984, p.8-9)

Usher points out that knowledge, in the form of predictive generalisations (or conformity), requires 'closure' and that closure involves power. I concur with his view that postmodernism challenges the notion that knowledge is founded in disciplines; Foucault would argue that true knowledge lies in the Other - that is, not in the power bases of authority and government, but rather in the unofficial activities (the anecdotes) dwelling in the worlds between or outside the systems. It can therefore be extrapolated

²³ Richard Florida (b.1957) is an American economist who is perhaps best known for his 2002 book *The Rise of the Creative Class*.

²⁴ Sir Ken Robinson (b.1950) led the UK commission on creativity, *All Our Futures*, and is currently senior advisor to the John Paul Getty Trust in the USA. He delivered the closing keynote address at the Australian Government's (AEI) International Education Forum held in Brisbane 4-5 April, 2006.

that the more platforms we can launch enquiry from (rather than just using an existing authoritative or official stance), then the more likely we are to arrive at a meaningful basis for knowledge or ‘truth/s’. Lyotard recognises two kinds of knowledge. Firstly, the positivist kind with a direct application to technologies and their bearing on men and materials, thereby lending itself to operating as an indispensable productive force within the system. The other kind is the critical, reflexive or hermeneutic kind which reflects directly or indirectly on values and thereby resists the system. Therefore in this piece of (hermeneutic) research, I prefer to use Fry’s own words, her writing, her art and accounts from those who knew her to tell the story of her life – and in this way enrich our knowledge of the woman.

It is fully intentional that the titles and opening citations chosen throughout this biography quote aspects of Fry’s life, her work, her milieu and her accomplishments; it is appropriate that the connections between the art world, her world and my world find credence and create a framework for recording and ‘seeing’ this woman. Wittgenstein calls these “language games” and Lyotard expands this idea into the relevance of “the efficiency of a question, a promise, a literary description, a narration etc” (1984, p.10). This concept of language games can be linked back to the example of *The Matrix* and its games with reality, technology, mythology, religion, science, power, knowledge and literary references. In the context of this critical biography, appropriating words and phrases from Fry’s world assists me to situate the knowledge, for once again Lyotard observes that: “it is impossible to know what the state of knowledge is ... without knowing something of the society within which it is situated” (1984, p13).

Moi states that “postmodernist theory declares that all knowledge is situated or located, tied to specific subject positions, imbricated in particular contexts of power, subversion and resistance” (1999, p.122). My role in this research, ‘the personal’, is to situate and locate Fry’s life and release it from obscurity.

The postmodern quest for the personal is a theory-generated attempt to escape from the bad effects of theory... (Moi 1999, p.164)

In effect, I too am escaping from the clutches of any theory which implies a restrictive set of definitions which may limit the scope for the telling and reading of this story. It

could also not be grounded in an epistemological method, where it would require definition, identification, justification or established limits. This is a story, not unlike Lather's approach, which lends itself to "tales" and to exploring different voices, texts and spaces (1991).

Moi recommends a postmodern analysis of the concrete phenomena that interests us and to recognise that subsequent derivation of knowledge is always situated.

If we always claim to be speaking as the singular individuals we are, then this must make our texts less arrogant, less universalising, less domineering, more properly situated, and perhaps more capable of reaching out to others. (1999, pp.166-7)

In true postmodernist fashion I will appropriate Moi's words further on the writing of theory as relevant and reflective of the way I wish to conduct this critical biography:

I have no wish to write in a way that is falsely universalising, exclusionary, arrogant, and domineering. Yet the fact remains that it is impossible to write without generalising or universalising. Is it possible to write in a way that overcomes the apparent conflict between the general and the particular, the third person and the first person? How do I write in a personal voice? How do I write without losing myself...? (1999, p.123)

"Isn't the whole point to have a voice?"²⁵ McGrath, in her chapter "Writing History, Writing Selves", discusses the difficulties of women writing women's history and the issues of finding a voice that is not trivialised:

...women's personal narratives are counter-hegemonic because they explain how women negotiate power relations ... Scholarship still privileges the third person, and the overt subjectivity of the first-person voices still continues to be more closely scrutinised.

She goes further to state that:

²⁵ The last sentence of an essay by Marnia Lazreg on writing as a woman on women in Algeria, 1988 (cited in Mohanty, 2003 p.192).

The authenticity of the 'I' appeals ... As a stylistic device the author's self-disclosure can facilitate a more personal, direct and powerful voice. (1999, p.185-6)

Where to from here?

This *Encounter* with personal purpose and theoretical investigation serves to outline the subject and position my work within a research framework by referencing selective methodologies and perspectives, and identifying the preferred approaches and concepts that best suit both the biographical writing in the context of Fry's particular life and me - with my particular strengths and biases - as author. Kimber advises the feminist biographer to be as true as possible to the historical record, but to rethink the 'model' that Foucault and Barthes fight against; they assert that there is no way to write biography using predetermined paradigms, models into which an individual's life is poured, without doing some fundamental violence to one's subject (2002, p.126). I do not intend to pour Fry's life into any predetermined model in order to satisfy a personal unrealised ambition, or to justify a claim to a collective feminist profile of women in need of rescue. Nor do I subscribe to Weldon's view: "better if the biographer has a glimmer of the single thin consistent thread that runs through a life, [than] to give up fact and take to fiction" (Kimber, 2002 p.126). Rather, I intend to use the primary sources available (written, oral, visual) and construct a story around the facts. "The lives of women are connected and interdependent, albeit not the same, no matter which geographical area we happen to live in" (Mohanty 2003, p.241). I would expand this idea to include, no matter what era we live in.

Parts II-V of this biography are arranged to highlight significant aspects of Fry's existence: influences, talents, catalysts and contributions; pivotal developments underpinned by relevant chronological detail. Throughout the writing, I have endeavoured to keep top of mind her art and ensure its peculiar creative form colours the language and structure of the biography's narrative. In this introduction I have established the subject, the reason, the medium and the approaches for this research. I

proceed now to write the story of Fry – a critical biography profiling her contributions as a woman to aspects of artistic development in Australia.

Now that all the others have run out of air, it's my turn to do a little story-making. I owe it to myself. I've had to work myself up to it: it's a low art, tale-telling. Old women go in for it ... there's nothing more preposterous than ... fumbling around with the arts – but who cares about public opinion now? So I'll spin a thread of my own.

(Margaret Atwood, 2005)

PART II

THE DUET

I formed a two piano duo [with Hilda Woolmer]... It is exacting because it has to be so absolutely precise and you have to think together and feel together, and we did this to such an extent that even after I left Brisbane for quite a long while we would both write to each other at exactly the same time and our letters would cross. We had a very close rapport.

(Ella Fry, 1986)



Hilda Woolmer and Ella Fry, 1940

In *The Duet* I will investigate the conditions which led to the development and actioning of Fry's dual interests in music and art – interests that played such a significant role in her life's work. Owing to her two considerable talents, this Part is divided into two sections dedicated to music and art: one hand plays the piano and the other hand holds the brush. Before that however, I will briefly look at two constructs that relate to the concept of a 'duo' or 'duet' and which can be made relative to this woman and her biography – *dualism* and *duality of structure*.

Dualism refers to any theory that distinguishes between two things (Bullock & Trombey, 1999). Plato identified a dualism of eternal objects, where some forms or objects are concrete and can have true knowledge and others are temporal objects, accessible to the senses and of which we have opinions. Descartes identifies a "mind-body dualism" where the mind is the conscious self (infallible) and the body occupies physical space (fallible). The notion of explanatory dualism holds that while natural events have causes, human action requires motives or reasons. Therefore, we could generally distinguish the two aspects of dualism by placing the tangible, factual, perfunctory and scientific on one hand, and the intangible, abstract, emotional and thought induced actions on the other hand. To relate this to Fry's context, dualism could then refer to the physical world she moved within: the cities, the people, the education; and to the subject as a conscious being, with talents, ambitions and choices. The position of Fry as a woman is also important. Mohanty discusses an "uprooting" of dualistic thinking as defined through the individual versus collective consciousness and where power and authority is based on knowledges that are often contradictory. This forms part of her investigation on women's struggles in Third World states where she argues their agency is born of history and geography, rather than the postmodern agency of multiple perspectives (2003, pp.80-1). Kerber discusses the dualism of male and female 'spheres', where the male sphere is concrete, public and all encompassing and the female's is private, dominated by the male sphere and restricted. A women's sphere implies oppression and to go beyond it implies transgression, trespassing in a man's world²⁶ (1997, p.7). For the purposes of this Part I will discuss dualism in the context of Fry's physical location coupled with her personal interests.

²⁶ I will discuss the implications of Fry's transgression into the male domain of governance in Part IV.

Duality of structure is sometimes referred to as double articulation and originally relates to linguistics where language is seen to contain two fundamental levels of structure. The first is where sounds or phonics, themselves meaningless, are combined in such a way as to create meaning; the second is related to semiotics, where these organised combinations are studied at a level where they are arranged to express a particular meaning or reading. This could also be related to music, where individual notes do not of themselves create a melody; it is the subsequent arrangement of the notes, or the sequence, that creates the music. It can also be applied to painting – an individual mark or brushstroke is generally incapable of expressing meaning, unless combined with other marks or brushstrokes in a particular arrangement. Therefore, if we combine dualism with a reading of duality of structure, the conscious and purposeful condition creates the meaning, as opposed to the natural or temporal condition which merely provides the space in which to exist.

The concept of the ‘duet’ can therefore be applied on two levels to Fry in this Part and the two sections which follow; firstly, to her two marked and active talents in music and art, and secondly, referring to her actual relationship with another pianist playing as a duo. The theme of pairs and the significance of ‘two’, runs throughout this critical biography by design and has its conceptual origin in Fry’s two equal talents. For example, only two approaches were selected for profiling in Part I: feminism and postmodernism. The relationship of coincidence and connection between myself (first person) and Fry’s voice (third person) was identified as important and privileged. The existence of two women: one present, one past, is then what enables the creation of this story.

I really kept that duo interest all through.
(Ella Fry, 1986)

On one hand ... the Musician

I was born in Brisbane in 1916, which is an admission. My interests of course had been in both art and music. My parents were musical.

(Ella Fry, 1986)



Guy Grey-Smith *Grieg Concerto, Ella Fry, c.1957*

Do people and places influence a life?

What is it that causes us to choose particular paths of interest in life? What caused Fry to travel the paths that she did? Jo-Ann Deak (2005) would argue that because our brain is hard-wired from birth a nature/nurture debate is fruitless when considering how our minds and subsequent interests develop. From this she extrapolates that we are therefore predisposed towards certain strengths and talents. Deak believes that the genetic disposition of the parents and a good education grounded in teaching that stimulates,

challenges and is tailored specially to the different ways girls and boys learn, is crucial to the optimum progress and future intellectual success of young people. In this section then, I will look at the influences on Fry's life particularly during the 1930s and '40s: her family background, her schooling, Brisbane, and her subsequent involvement in music. In the following section, I will focus on her artistic development.

In a radio interview Anne Reid²⁷ conducted with Fry, she was asked the question "Where were you born?" to which Fry not only responded with the fact of Brisbane in 1916, but immediately added that her interests were in art and music and that her parents were musical. Importantly, in Fry's mind, her birth, her heritage and her life's passion and work are interconnected, inseparable. Fry's mother reportedly had a lovely singing voice and had received some training, and her father conducted choirs and arranged concerts. The Robinson family often performed as a quartet with Fry as soprano, her mother contralto, father as tenor and uncle singing bass. Fry recalls listening to early recordings at home of Caruso²⁸ and Galli-Curci²⁹, which they evidently all loved; she developed an early passion for the piano and began taking lessons. The first famous pianist she recalls hearing was Moiseiwitsch³⁰: "I was completely enthralled and excited about this marvellous sound" (1986, p.1). Perhaps because Fry was an only child and therefore the focus of her parents' attention³¹, combined with this early exposure to a variety of classical music and the opportunity to confidently perform with adults, ensured the advancement of her naturally inherent musical talent.

²⁷ The interview conducted by Reid was held in the studios of 6UVS FM in Perth on 22 July, 1986.

²⁸ Enrico Caruso (1873-1921) was an Italian tenor, enjoying a renowned operatic career.

²⁹ Amelita Galli-Curci (1882-1963) was an Italian singer hailed as one of the world's finest coloratura sopranos.

³⁰ Benno Moiseiwitsch (1890-1963) was born in the Ukraine and is particularly known for his interpretations of late Romantic repertoire, especially the works of Rachmaninoff. As a pianist he was noted for his elegance, lyrical phrasing and virtuosity.

³¹ According to Janette Fox (née Thompson), who was a class-mate of Fry's at Brisbane Girls Grammar School, Fry's mother was quite ambitious for her daughter.



Ella Fry at the piano, date unknown

Throughout the evidence we have to reconstruct Fry's world, there are few written or recorded references of her home or family. Certainly in the photographic ephemera³² there are numerous pictures of her with family and friends and various houses, but she doesn't seem to have painted either the houses she lived in or their interiors, preferring portraits and real or imagined landscapes, including flora and fauna. Perhaps because she moved from the family home in Brisbane, to Sydney, back to Brisbane briefly, on to Tamworth and then various locations in Perth, she didn't have an affinity with one place as home. Mohanty asks:

What is home? The place I was born? Where I grew up? Where my parents live?
Where I live and work as an adult? ... is home a geographical space, a historical space, an emotional sensory space?³³ (2003, p.126)

Increasingly, while writing this biography, aspects of Fry's life and personality do not situate her within a domestic space, but rather her interests external to the home define her as a woman; this may explain her lack of reference to her 'homes' because as

³² Over two hundred personal and professional photographs and negatives are stored in the Battye Library, Western Australia – many of which were lodged by Helen Henderson after Fry's death.

³³ I refer to this concept again when discussing nostalgia in relation to Fry's art in Part II.

tangible sites they were not as important in her life as the places in which they were located.

To return to the second aspect of Deak's thinking, which emphasises the role of a stimulating educational environment on intellectual development, it is relevant here to provide a brief overview of schooling in Brisbane generally, and Fry's specifically, during the 1930s. Reforms in the Queensland education sector during this time notably resulted in an additional two grades being added to the primary years and Grade 8 becoming the year of the secondary level 'scholarship' (Marland 1998, p.2). Success in the public scholarship examination meant a student could progress to secondary school without paying tuition fees. Syllabus reform was also a feature of the 1930s with the introduction of a new state schools' syllabus by the Chief Inspector, L.D. Edwards, which was more broadly based than before and proceeded to underpin the Queensland academic curriculum for many years. Subjects newly introduced included music, history, geography, algebra, geometry and arithmetic.³⁴

Fry passed the scholarship examination and then enrolled at Brisbane Girls Grammar School in 1931 at 15 years of age. Brisbane Girls Grammar School was founded in 1875 under the Queensland Grammar Schools Act³⁵. Its foundation was initiated by Sir Charles Lilley³⁶, who believed the sisters of the young men enrolled at the boys' school (Brisbane Grammar School) deserved the same educational opportunities as their brothers – quite an enlightened view for the times. In preparation for her acceptance to Girls Grammar, Fry had attended a small private girls' school run by Miss McKenzie on

³⁴ These subjects, plus many others, have been included in the Brisbane Girls Grammar School curriculum since 1875.

³⁵ In 1860, the newly established colonial parliament of Queensland, keen to provide free secular education for its constituents, passed both the *Education Act* and the *Grammar Schools Act*. Whilst the former ensured the provision of primary school education for the children of settlers, the latter conferred ...on all classes and denominations of Her Majesty's subjects resident in the said colony without any distinction whatsoever, the advantages of a regular and liberal course of education ... To ensure that a secondary education at a public grammar school was available to a broad cross-section of society, the government also conferred State funded scholarships, a practice which was exclusive to the grammar schools until 1899. Under the arrangements of the *Grammar Schools Act*, the initiative for the establishment of a grammar school came from the community through the raising of 1000 pounds in donations or subscriptions. The government in turn provided twice the amount raised for buildings and permanent land endowments. In recognition of this partnership the Board of Trustees for each school was to be made up of three local community members elected by the subscribers and four appointed by the Governor in Council. This is still the case in 2007, despite a review of the Act in 1975.

³⁶ Sir Charles Lilley (1830-1897) was a former Premier (1868-70) and Chief Justice of Queensland (1879-93). He had a significant influence on the form and spirit of state education in colonial Queensland which lasted well into the twentieth century.

the corner of Sydney Street and Merthyr Road in New Farm. There were many of these private establishments scattered throughout Brisbane and scant records remain about their enrolments, curriculum or endowment. A fellow student with Fry at Miss McKenzie's, Janette Fox, recalls the school being run by two English ladies, with most instruction achieved through rote learning. In particular, she noted that "the two teachers were excellent, wore neck to knee dresses and taught poetry". Interestingly, Fox also recalls Fry's mother reciting poetry regularly.

Fry's class-mates, who are now in their eighties, often reminisce about the Girls Grammar School during the early 1930s. Comments by two of these women³⁷ reflect a general view held by many who attended the school during the indefatigable reign of Kathleen Lilley³⁸, headmistress from 1925 to 1952. They recall Lilley's dominating personality, her constant lectures to girls that "they can do anything they wish to in this world", and a reference to a curriculum where the cohorts were divided into 'A' and 'B' groups, with 'A' studying a different set of electives to 'B', but importantly where all girls studied art. It is no surprise that Fry elected the 'B' group, which also studied music.³⁹ According to Williams, Lilley had strong views on what constituted an educated person; it was certainly not someone who became a "walking encyclopedia", but one who could appreciate literature, history and classics (Williams 1995, p.75). Lilley, herself a teacher of English and French, had a fine voice, was well read and had a flair for the dramatic. It is reported that Lilley placed relentless emphasis upon hard work, application to task and academic pursuits (as opposed to commercial or vocational subjects). Her educational philosophy was one which:

...demanded maximum effort in academic pursuits for, although she thought women the superior 'sex', she knew from experience just how important academic qualifications were. (Williams 1995, p.92)

Fry, along with her class-mates, was subject to Lilley's regular speeches at assemblies on such topics as behaviour, recognition of outstanding achievements, hard work and

³⁷ Anne Wyche and Janette Fox.

³⁸ Kathleen Mitford Lilley (1888-1975) was a granddaughter of Sir Charles Lilley and was educated at Brisbane Girls Grammar School and Sydney University. She taught English and French, and was Headmistress of Brisbane Girls Grammar from 1925-1952. She had a significant impact on the school's development and extended the Lilley association with Girls Grammar to over a century of influence.

³⁹ Fry valued the disciplines of art history and music appreciation throughout her life.

community responsibility – occasionally punctuated by Lilley’s reportedly hot temper. The influence on Fry (and others) of a formidable woman and authoritative role model such as Lilley cannot be underestimated. To illustrate the influence Lilley may well have had on Fry’s character development, Fry has since been described by Ray Sampson⁴⁰ as someone who “got on and got things done”, who “didn’t suffer fools gladly” and who was “honest as the day is long, capable and artistic in the best sense.” Similarly, in her obituary, she was described as:

...relatively short in stature and penetrating in her gaze, Fry undoubtedly appeared to be a slightly formidable figure to some of Perth’s cultural butterflies ... she could hold her own in any serious conversation with a wide range of people of all ages, but bore shallowness and flippancy with little patience. (O’Ferrall, 1997)

Whether Lilley, as an influential role model, was directly or indirectly responsible or not for the development of Fry’s reserved but decisive character and strong work ethic, the similarities between the two women are noteworthy and lead into the matter of the often life-long influence teachers can have on their students.

Much of the psychology we understand now about the development of girls’ character, intellect and interests in the adolescent years can be related to key role models (teachers, parents, mentors) and their peers (Deak, 2005). It is useful then to put these human influences in context for the purposes of understanding the early developments in Fry’s life. Firstly, the young Fry had her parents, with their musical and poetic interests. Secondly, there was Lilley; and while Lilley did not subscribe to radical ideology, she did believe in equal opportunity and access, and as such held liberal ‘feminist’ views. Fry also had her school art teacher, Vera Cottew⁴¹, whom Fry recalls as being very encouraging; and finally her school friends who shared her love of the arts⁴². It is by acknowledging these important conditions that this biography gains a deeper credibility. Kimber notes the difference between a traditional male biography, where the dramatic narrative of the “great man” is situated in his struggles and success in public life, versus

⁴⁰ Ray Sampson was a board member at the Art Gallery of Western Australia when Fry became Chairman and later became Vice Chairman. His background was in the Education Department of Western Australia. He and his wife Betty became good friends with Fry. These comments were recorded in an interview he had with Phoebe Scott in Perth in 2005.

⁴¹ Cottew’s influence is discussed further in the next Part focussing on Fry’s art.

⁴² Of her classmates, Bonnie Bell became a noted actor and went to England to work on the stage; Laurel Martyn became a successful ballet dancer.

her citing of Garrison where “the feminist biographer realises that the private life is no less real or important than the public one” (2002, p.120).

These conditions and early evidence of a slightly eccentric upbringing were not unique to Fry; remarkable similarities can be seen with the artistic development of a contemporary of Fry’s, artist Joy Hester⁴³. In Hart’s monograph on Hester (2001, pp.11-12) she makes particular mention of her schooling at St. Michael’s Church of England Grammar in St Kilda when Hester’s “artistic aptitude began to emerge”. The influence from family came not from her parents as in Fry’s case, but rather from an aunt, Rhoda Hester, who was an art teacher at the Methodist Ladies’ College and who encouraged her drawing skills. The aunt, along with an uncle, George Bracher, was instrumental in effecting Hester’s attendance at the National Gallery Art School in 1937. This, according to Hart, marked the turning point in Hester’s artistic life – so similar to Fry’s experience at the East Sydney Technical College. There are other remarkable parallels and contrasts that can be drawn between these two women, Fry and Hester, which I will note as relevant throughout this biography.

And what of Brisbane in her formative years?

To discuss Fry’s home town of Brisbane I intend to specifically concentrate on the 1930s, when she was finishing her secondary education, and the early 1940s, when she returned home after completing post secondary studies in Sydney⁴⁴ and established herself as a pianist and painter. When Fry completed her secondary schooling at Brisbane Girls Grammar in 1932 it was “the year that changed a nation” according to Abjorensen in his review of Stone’s book *1932: A Hell of a Year* (2005). If we are to believe the book, it was a year dominated by men (of course) who were larger than life, like Jack Lang⁴⁵ and Charles Kingsford Smith⁴⁶; it was a year wretched with poverty

⁴³ Joy Hester (1920–1960) was part of the Contemporary Art Society and Angry Penguins in Melbourne during the 1940s. She was married to artist Albert Tucker and later became the partner of Gray Smith; she formed close friendships with Sunday Reed and Barbara Blackman. Her art features mostly ink drawings, focused on emotive portrayals of women and children.

⁴⁴ The Sydney context is discussed in the next section on Fry’s art.

⁴⁵ John (Jack) Lang (1876-1975) was Premier and Treasurer of New South Wales twice. He was a member of the Australian Labor Party and was also involved in federal politics.

⁴⁶ Charles Kingsford Smith (1837-1935) was born in Brisbane and educated as an electrical engineer. He became a famous aviator completing a round-the-world flight in 1934.

and national debt, but punctuated by humanity with the introduction of widows' pensions and child endowment. It was also Queensland's worst year of unemployment. Despite this unhappy economic context, the 1930s in Australia was a period of intense cultural activity and amateur theatre groups flourished – including in Brisbane. However, there was certainly a view that creative people who had the misfortune of living in Brisbane needed to seek inspiration, education and like minds elsewhere (which Fry did). Brisbane in the 1930s was Thea Astley's⁴⁷ “shabby town, a sprawling timber settlement on a lazy river” and, as a consequence of the war in the 1940s, was radically altered into “the American Village”. If we are to believe David Malouf⁴⁸ speaking through his character *Johnno*, in the '40s:

Brisbane was nothing; a city that blew neither hot nor cold, a place where nothing happened, and where nothing ever would happen, because it had no soul. People suffered here without significance. It was too mediocre even to be a province of hell. It would have defeated even Baudelaire! A place where poetry could never occur. (1975, p.118)

This view of Brisbane as a cultural desert was most probably an exaggeration because by 1944 the *Barjai* group of “cultural radicals” were meeting fortnightly at the Lyceum Club. *Barjai*, an Aboriginal word for meeting place, originated at Brisbane State High School and seems to have modelled itself in part on the *Angry Penguins*⁴⁹ in Melbourne. The school's headmaster actually banned the *Barjai* publication and stripped Barbara Blackman⁵⁰ (a member of the group) of her ‘head girl’ title because of the publication's challenge to authority and dissident flavour. *Barjai* was in essence

⁴⁷ Thea Astley (1925-2004) was born and educated in Brisbane, becoming a teacher in both Queensland and New South Wales. She won the *Miles Franklin Award* four times and the *Patrick White Award* in 1989 for services to Australian literature.

⁴⁸ David Malouf (b.1932) was educated at Brisbane Grammar School and became a writer and teacher. He has won many literary awards for novels including *An Imaginary Life* and *Fly Away Peter*. He maintains a connection with both Brisbane Grammar School and Brisbane Girls Grammar School.

⁴⁹ The *Angry Penguins* was the name of a journal supported by Max Harris and John Reed in the 1940s; it is also a term sometimes used to describe a group of Melbourne artists including Nolan, Tucker, Boyd and Perceval, who came into prominence exhibiting with the Contemporary Art Society. They rejected academic training, believing that spontaneity and creative activity should be prominent in the education process. They also developed a strong anti-nationalistic sentiment. However, they did believe that Australian art could achieve its own distinctive character.

⁵⁰ Barbara Blackman, née Patterson (b.1928) grew up in Brisbane and married the artist Charles Blackman. She is a writer and essayist who became enmeshed in the modernist art movement after moving to Melbourne. She was involved in the establishment of the Contemporary Arts Society - a central force in bringing the work of the *Angry Penguins* into the public eye.

critical of an archaic education system with a narrow curriculum and army-like discipline (Evans, Ferrier, Rickert, 2004). It is worth noting then, that the cultural scene active in Brisbane during the 1940s was the environment Fry returned to after her four year absence in Sydney and where she began to establish a name for herself in the arts.

And the part played by music and timing?

After leaving Girls Grammar, Fry continued to pursue her passions in both piano and art. In Brisbane Fry had received her AMusA in 1935; she went on to be awarded the LSRM in 1937⁵¹ following her move to Sydney in 1936. In Sydney Fry studied piano part-time (owing to her full-time concurrent study at East Sydney Technical College) at the Conservatorium⁵² with the well-known composer and pianist Frank Hutchens⁵³. This is of particular interest in this context of uncovering possible influences on Fry, because Hutchens had formed a piano duo with Lindley Evans in 1924 – a partnership which lasted for forty years, encompassing tours of Australia and New Zealand, broadcast performances, recordings, and the premiere performance of Francis Poulenc's Concerto for Two Pianos. The two pianists established a scholarship for young musicians, which was funded by their piano duo concerts. This could well have made an impression on Fry and her subsequent decision to pursue the same mode of performance when she later returned to Brisbane.

Fry's first solo piano recital was in 1939 at the Forum Club in Elizabeth Street, Sydney, and thereafter she played in concerts at the Conservatorium and in music clubs. Fry went home to Brisbane just after the beginning of World War II in 1940 and began to perform live piano broadcasts for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), both locally and nationally. These included solo recitals and concertos with the orchestra.

⁵¹ AMusA is the first diploma issued by the Australian Music Examinations Board (AMEB) called *Associate*. LSRM is the second level diploma issued by the London Royal Schools of Music called *Licentiate*. It is the equivalent of the AMEB's award of LMusA.

⁵² The Sydney Conservatorium of Music, at that time known as the NSW State Conservatorium of Music, opened to students in 1916. Its stated aims were "providing tuition of a standard at least equal to that of the leading European Conservatoriums" and to "protect amateurs against the frequent waste of time and money arising from unsystematic tuition".

⁵³ Frank Hutchens (1892-1965) was born in New Zealand and attended the Royal Academy of Music in London. In 1915 he accepted the offer of a Professorship in Piano at the newly-established NSW Conservatorium of Music. He taught at the Conservatorium for fifty years and was the only remaining member of the original staff at the time of his death.

Hilda Woolmer⁵⁴ was the official accompanist for the ABC in Brisbane and, with Fry, formed a duo where they would jointly perform two piano duets live to air. Fry recalled that this was “stressful ... exacting because it has to be so absolutely precise and you have to think together and feel together” (1986). In other words, the intellectual, creative and emotional connectedness between the two women (as a duo) allowed for and ensured the success of the performance. Of special note to this story is her joint performance in October, 1940, with Woolmer at a Brisbane Girls Grammar School Old Girls Association war work group in the Lord Mayor’s Reception Room in Brisbane. This illustrates the traditional and still active role alumni play in the on-going co-curricular and philanthropic life of the school.

During this time, Fry also played classical piano at many of the military camps around Brisbane. Up until Fry’s interview with Reid in 1986, there is no record of Fry’s views regarding the war. There were many alerts during this time and students of the Brisbane schools, including Girls Grammar, were sent to board at other country schools in Warwick and Toowoomba to be safe. Despite the real threat of war in Brisbane, Fry volunteered for air raid duty in 1940-1 and in hindsight certainly viewed the entire exercise with some embarrassment:

...we thought we were very close to the desperate areas and I was ... called in and rushing about with a helmet and gas mask ... and having the temerity to ask people to move into safe places and different directions. (1986, p.5)

She alludes to “very great difficulties” between the servicemen with riots, ugly situations and killings. Her observations were not dissimilar to Albert Tucker’s⁵⁵ recollections of clashes between the Americans and Australians in Melbourne during this time, which he so graphically and contemptuously portrayed in his paintings of the

⁵⁴ Hilda Woolmer (1901-1984), née Lamb, had no formal music instruction until her early teenage years and within four years had topped the LTCL examination and been awarded the coveted Broadwood gold medal. She appeared as a soloist with the Brisbane Symphony Orchestra and the Queensland Symphony Orchestra and toured Australian capital cities for the ABC. The Queensland Performing Arts Centre Museum Collection holds 25 programmes in which Woolmer appears. The first is for a Richard Tauber concert on 30 July 1938 at the City Hall, the last – of particular interest – is for the *Brisbane Girls’ Grammar School Centenary Project; An evening of Vocal and Instrumental Music* given on 16 October, 1970 at the Brisbane Grammar School Centenary Hall.

⁵⁵ Albert Tucker (1914-1999) was a self-trained Melbourne artist, who wrote for the *Angry Penguins* and married fellow artist Joy Hester. He developed a personal set of symbols to represent the darker sides of human nature in his paintings and is perhaps best known for his 1940s works based on his views about the ‘immoral’ side of Melbourne.

early 1940s, such as *The Victory Girls*. Nor do Fry's observations depart from Astley's view of Brisbane as "the American Village" referenced earlier.



Albert Tucker *Victory girls*, 1943

Despite the anxieties created by the war, in 1941 Fry helped to form the Brisbane Concert Society. Along with this she was also a member of the then called Orchestra Ladies Committee, which supported the local orchestra and had previously always been run by the ABC. These would be the first of many arts community and support groups to which Fry devoted her time, ideas and patronage. Even at this early stage, she was combining her passions – music and art – evidenced by her arrangement of two recitals in conjunction with exhibitions of paintings⁵⁶. It was probable that Fry's public profile, established through her many recitals and community groups, led to her meeting with the headmistress of the Tamworth Church of England Girls School⁵⁷ in 1942. The headmistress was apparently desperate for a teacher of music and art, so Fry agreed to go there in 1943 as a temporary measure to assist and subsequently stayed on until mid 1945.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ This foreshadows a similar initiative Fry instigated in the mid 1970s when she convinced the Art Gallery of Western Australia to purchase a grand piano and hold 'allied functions' in the exhibition spaces with the assistance of the Music Board of the Australia Council and the Fellowship of Australian Composers.

⁵⁷ The school is now called *Calrossy* and apart from a note of her appointment in their archives, there are no references to her teaching practice or contributions to the school during this time.

⁵⁸ Fry did return to teaching in 1949 when she became a part-time lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Australia. I discuss her contributions to teaching in Part IV.

While in Tamworth Fry continued to play the piano for the war effort and be involved in the local community. It was through these activities and her teaching that Fry formed a friendship with Susie Fry, with whom she used to paint. Susie was married to Melville (Mel) Fry⁵⁹, the local manager of the Bank of New South Wales in Tamworth. Unfortunately, Susie died following an operation in 1944, but Mel and Ella's friendship continued; they married in November, 1945 in Brisbane. Following her marriage, Fry maintained her independent career, her maiden name of Robinson and continued travelling to Sydney for broadcast recitals. While professionally it was no doubt sensible for Fry to maintain her 'stage' name of Robinson in Queensland and New South Wales, a convenient opportunity presented itself to keep with convention and change it to Fry when she moved to Western Australia with her husband in 1947. Fry did acknowledge a problem with this though:

It was then that I changed because I wanted to be more identified with my husband in this new place ... which was perhaps not altogether wise because I suppose I had done a lot of national relays [piano recitals] as Robinson and all of a sudden Ella Robinson disappeared and Ella Fry occurred, but however, it seemed right to me and I think it pleased him. (1986, p.7)

One wonders what Lilley, who never married, would have thought of this given her views on such subjects. According to Williams (1995, p.95), Lilley never advocated marriage or motherhood as the noblest realm of female existence and expressed that "there is a difference between a single woman and an old maid!" However, Perth's social milieu during the 1940s and 1950s would not have been that different to elsewhere and one can understand the pressure of convention underpinning Fry's decision.

⁵⁹ Melville Leonard Fry (1896-1975) was born in Broken Hill and joined the 1st AIF in 1917, serving in France until 1920. He married Agnes (Susie) Brown in Glasgow in 1919. Fry remembered Susie as a "very fine, very sweet person, but had very poor health". Melville had family in Perth, which may have been a factor in his subsequent transfer there and appointment as Assistant Inspector for the Bank. In 1949 he was appointed Manager of Head Office in Perth. He retired from the bank in 1958, but remained a Director of several companies, including 12 years as Chairman of TVW Channel 7 until 1973. Fry always referred to him affectionately as 'Mel'.



Marriage of Melville and Ella Fry, 1945

The catalyst of change for Fry, based on marriage and relocation in 1947, heralded a change in not only her identity, but her artistic maturity, career developments and personal growth. It is interesting to again note the similarities with Hester, when she too experienced life changes in 1947 as she left her marriage to Albert Tucker and left her son Sweeney with long time friend Sunday Reed, to live with Gray Smith in Sydney; it was also the year she was diagnosed with Hodgkins disease. Hart comments that from that point Hester's work developed a "courageous capacity to expose the intensity and strange nature of life's journey" (2001, p.47). In essence, much of Hester's work became emotive and surreal – and while Fry's and Hester's choice of subjects was unlike, their individual capacity to create haunting images with a surreal quality is uncanny.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Compare Hester's *Child of the High Seas* with Fry's *Gnomus (Gnome)* and *Wanderer* reproduced in the next section.



Joy Hester *Child of the high seas* c.1948

To summarise the contexts (locations, people and timing) impacting on Fry's early adulthood and her subsequent career choices and involvement with music, it would appear that her parents' interests and the educational climate in the early 1930s ensured Fry's independence as a woman and that her love of the arts was nourished. While necessary and timely to remove to Sydney for further education and stimulation, it would also seem that Brisbane did provide a cultural environment in the 1940s for Fry to make a mark with her career as both a pianist and a painter. The words of Barbara Blackman echo this conclusion:

We were young and charged with vision. We loved our city ... we believed in one another ... encouraged one another ...we were high on the prospects of a new world being made. (Evans, Ferrier & Rickertt, 2004 p.223)

It therefore must have been quite difficult for Fry to leave this familiar context and move with her husband across the continent to Perth in 1947. In her words:

...it seemed a long way away. It was a very isolated place then. In fact friends looked at me with tears rolling down their faces and saying 'What will you do? There won't even be an orchestra'. There was, but just of sorts at that time. (1986, p.6)

Music in Western Australia?

This section will address the continuing involvement in and contributions by Fry to music after her move to Perth. Unfortunately, when the Frys first arrived in Perth, it was difficult for them to find accommodation and the very small flat they eventually moved into had no room for a piano. In spite of this, and of her friends' concerns about the musical environment of Western Australia, Fry in fact did continue to play in Perth and re-established her broadcasting recitals with the ABC. These were numerous and varied, including solo recitals, chamber music performances and concertos with the orchestra⁶¹. They were performed in acoustically good, but physically appalling conditions in a building located next to the Supreme Court Gardens and this no doubt led to Fry's later role in supporting the building of a new Concert Hall, through her committee work⁶². In 1958 Fry represented Australia by playing the music of Frank Hutchens at the Festival of Perth's *Music and Literature of the Commonwealth* and in the 1959 Festival, played a solo forty five minute programme. Perhaps stemming from her early teaching by Hutchens, in addition to a love of classical music, Fry seemed particularly interested in contemporary music:

[With] the first Australian performance of the Honegger⁶³ Concertino and the first performance of the Philip Cannon⁶⁴, which was a new work, and I realised that I had done a lot of contemporary work and Australian work, which was not played a great deal, not as much as it should be because musicians need to have their work performed and heard as much as artists need to have their paintings seen and appreciated, otherwise we don't have a climate in which creative artists can work. (1986, p.15)

If we consider the range of Fry's own performance repertoire and her knowledge of music generally, she certainly contributed significantly to the development of music in

⁶¹ It was one of these recitals that inspired Guy Grey-Smith's painting of Fry playing a Grieg Concerto (reproduced at the commencement of this section). Fry developed a "firm professional and personal friendship" with Grey-Smith, according to O'Ferrall (1997).

⁶² Fry's volunteer work and committee involvement are discussed in Part IV.

⁶³ Oscar-Arthur Honegger (1892-1955) was a Swiss composer who was born in France and lived much of his life in Paris. Far from reacting against German romanticism, his mature works show evidence of a distinct romantic influence.

⁶⁴ Jack Philip Cannon (b.1929) while born in France, Cannon is considered a British composer. In addition to his own work, he had a long involvement with music education, being appointed Professor of Composition at the University of Sydney and later to the Royal College of Music.

Perth's public arena. Fry continued to perform publicly until about 1964 or 1965, after which she told Reid:

I gave up playing then because of doing so much nocturnal work with the animals and so much drawing all day and it really wasn't fair to my husband to be practising as well, but there weren't enough hours in the day I suppose really. (1986, p.18)

Fry, privately, continued to play the piano throughout her life, reportedly only (and regretfully) ceasing late in life because she could no longer own a piano once she entered retirement accommodation.⁶⁵

After Fry's retirement from public performance, and probably as a result of her active committee work and reputation as both a music performer and teacher, she was invited to write an issue for a new review called *Music in Western Australia* in 1969⁶⁶. In the foreword by Charles Court⁶⁷, he likens the musical development in Western Australia at that time to the "sensational progress" of the mineral resources boom, metropolitan and industrial development, and scientific discoveries increasing primary production; importantly, he congratulated Fry on her compilation. It is a comprehensive review of music-making between 1966 and 1967, concluding with the Festival of Perth in February-March of 1968. In Fry's words it was a "general survey", including entries about the orchestras, music education, local music makers, composers' workshops, indigenous music, music competitions and music libraries. Fry summarises the music climate of the time:

While the highlights of music may be those special performances given by visiting world-famous orchestras, ensembles and soloists, there can be no artistic climate to meet their musicianship unless local music-making is vigorous and creative. (p.5)

Fry's musicianship and the part she played in fostering music in the cities in which she lived, reinforces her upbringing and early education as key contributors in promoting

⁶⁵ St Ives Retirement Village.

⁶⁶ Ruth Allen, 'New Review Laments Lack of Music Hall', *The West Australian*, 24 April, 1969.

⁶⁷ Sir Charles Court (b.1911) was an accountant, served in the armed forces and became a member of the Western Australian parliament in 1959 and Premier in 1974. At the time of writing this *Foreword*, he was Minister for Industrial Development and the North West.

her interest in music and developing her talent in playing the piano. I have also considered the impact of timing and the relevance of two locations in particular, Brisbane and Tamworth, on her life and their roles as a catalyst for Fry's future directions in Western Australia. In addition, specific developments and circumstances relating to Fry as a woman, have been highlighted where relevant, in her early years.

Still, there are definitive moments, moments we use as references, because they break our sense of continuity, they change the direction of time. We can look at those events and we can say that after them things were never the same again. They provide beginnings for us, and endings too.

(Margaret Atwood, 1994)

On the other hand ... The Artist

There was not much interest in art at home, but I was very fortunate in that when I went to Brisbane Girls Grammar School there was an extremely good art teacher, Vera Cottew, who had developed a very fine curriculum, teaching history of painting, sculpture and architecture, as well as doing object drawing and design, and that was a wonderful foundation. She became a very close friend after I left school and was a wonderful teacher and a great help.

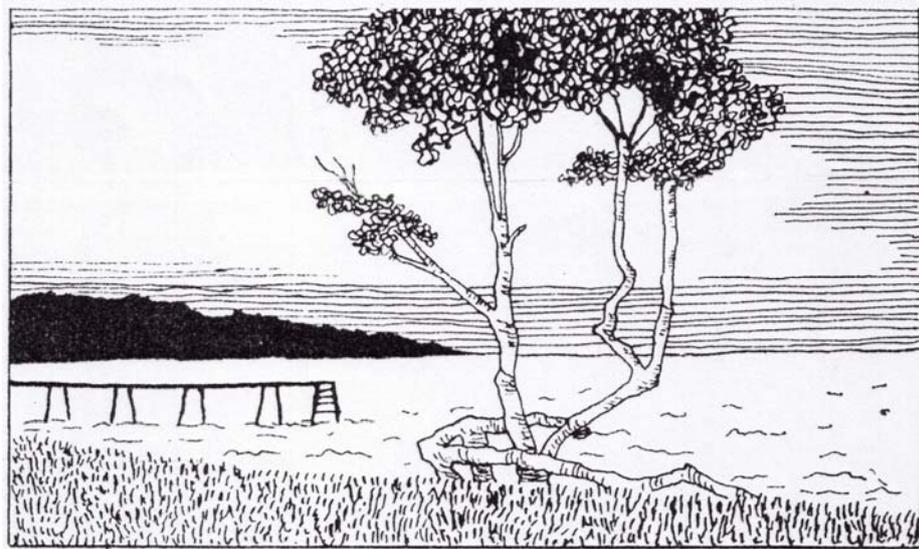
(Ella Fry, 1986)



Ella Fry with paint palette, date unknown

The influence of more people and places?

As with the previous section devoted primarily to Fry's musical progress, the influence of people and places also needs profiling here when discussing her artistic development. But while the format is similar, the players are different. I have also taken a broad brush approach to reviewing the six decades of Fry's art making, using specific examples to punctuate key changes and circumstances in her life. As already observed, it is often the influence of a teacher that sets one on a course for life. Fry's love of painting and art stemmed from her early experiences at school gained through her teacher Vera Cottew⁶⁸. Cottew imparted her own artistic strengths to Fry - a love of design, line and composition. Fry was also very appreciative of Cottew's wider art curriculum where she taught the history of painting, sculpture and architecture as well as object drawing and design. No doubt in view of Fry's talent, enthusiasm for the discipline and interest in learning, Cottew readily gave her additional art lessons outside the normal school day and the two developed a close friendship after Fry left Brisbane Girls Grammar.



Ella Fry *Victoria Point*, c.1933

⁶⁸ Vera Mable Cottew (1902-1949) was the eldest and only daughter in a family of four children born to Arthur Cottew, a foreman fitter, and his wife Harriet (née Simpson). She was educated at Milton State School but her interest in art as a career was discouraged by her father. She worked in an office and studied at the Central Technical College at night from 1919. Cottew taught art part-time at Brisbane Girls Grammar School from 1925, becoming the first full-time art teacher in 1931. She held the position until 1947. Cottew exhibited oils, watercolours and craftworks with the Royal Queensland Art Society 1930-42. She shared an exhibition with Muriel Foote and Fry in the Old Courier Building, Queen Street in 1940. Cottew never married and her early death was the result of cancer.

Fry's first known drawing, *Victoria Point*, was published in the 1933 Brisbane Girls Grammar School Magazine⁶⁹, and whilst tentative and slightly self-conscious, is rendered with care and already shows a regard for design with the deliberate use of contrasting devices in the visual balancing of the cloud, which is thrown into an unusual negative relief with the headland. Such design features work well in wood and lino cuts and Cottew certainly had a reputation for superior design work which no doubt influenced Fry's own sense of composition and spatial organisation. Fry's later and almost trademark painterly technique of short brush strokes in cross hatched colours – a technique which pays homage to the post impressionists - is pre-empted in this piece through the gentle flecked line work in the foreground of the drawing.



Ella Fry with her father and mother, date unknown

⁶⁹ The school's archives list Fry's final year of attendance at Brisbane Girls Grammar in Form IVB in 1932, however the line drawing of *Victoria Point* by Fry published in the 1933 Brisbane Girls Grammar School Magazine, is signed 'V' inferring Form V. There is no explanation for this anomaly and Fry may have remained on briefly into the following year before gaining her apprenticeship.

After leaving school, Fry was apprenticed in 1933 to a commercial art firm, Morden and Bentley, as there was no fine arts school for her to attend in Brisbane at the time. Fry was fortunate in that John Santry⁷⁰, an artist from Sydney, was also working for an advertising agency in the same building. He employed models on Saturday afternoons and Fry went there to draw; it was here that she began to develop an understanding about the type of art in which she was interested. Fry had quickly become dissatisfied with the tedious nature of commercial art where she was engaged to do endless letter illuminations and decorative embellishments. So, with her father having business interests in Sydney, it was considered ‘acceptable’ by him that she should leave Brisbane in order to attend art school.

Fry sought enrolment at East Sydney Technical College⁷¹ while being simultaneously enrolled at the Conservatorium (“an early sign of her precocious talents” according to O’Ferrall⁷²), and sat the entrance examination for the five year diploma course through the art department. She was subsequently granted advanced entry to third year. Fry was impressed with the department owing to the variety of teachers, styles and opinions from which she could learn. She studied illustration, but also varied her tuition by attending painting and modelling classes. Fry particularly enjoyed the instruction of Roy Davies⁷³ for composition and wood cuts, and recalls the comprehensive teaching delivered by Arthur Murch⁷⁴ and Douglas Dundas⁷⁵ for painting, and Lyndon Dadswell⁷⁶ for modelling and sculpture. They were all prominent artists and while Fry commented that the workload at the College prevented her engaging much with the

⁷⁰ John and Marie Santry had attended East Sydney Technical College and may well have influenced Fry’s decision to study there herself.

⁷¹ In 1921 the Old Darlinghurst Gaol was converted into the East Sydney Technical College. In the same year the National Art School took up residence and has operated within the vast sandstone walls ever since. From 1921 the Art Department offered diplomas in painting, sculpture, ceramics, design and commercial art.

⁷² Michael O’Ferrall was curator of Aboriginal and Asian Art at the Art Gallery of Western Australia. He wrote Fry’s obituary in 1997.

⁷³ Roy Davies (1897-1979) began wood engraving in 1921 and through this medium enjoyed a professional synergy with Lionel Lindsay. In 1948 he became Principal of the National Art School, Sydney.

⁷⁴ Arthur Murch (1902-1989) began his career as an engineering draftsman, but abandoned this in 1924 to become an artist. He won the NSW Travelling Art Scholarship in 1925. He experimented with modernist approaches to colour and form, greatly admiring the French Impressionists and Cezanne. He was an official war artist during WWII.

⁷⁵ Douglas Dundas (1900-1981) was a landscape painter in the modernist style and became head teacher of painting at National Art School.

⁷⁶ Lyndon Dadswell (1908-1986) was an accomplished sculptor and the first to be appointed as an official war artist. He won the Wynne Prize for sculpture in 1933 and taught intermittently at the National Art School between 1938 and 1967.

wider Sydney art world, it is evident that her own art draws substantially upon this early training and contact with these practising artists. The one significant public exhibition Fry does recall seeing with enthusiasm in 1939 was the first showing of French and British modern art at the David Jones Gallery in Sydney⁷⁷:

...[it] was a tremendous experience because it was the first time we'd seen Cezanne or van Gogh in actuality ... it was a great exhilaration and excitement for the artists in Sydney as well as for us students at that time. (1986, p.2)

The place of women?



Mrs Robinson, Ella Fry and her grandmother, date unknown

Friendships between women are special, often based in mutual experiences and interests. Cook states that:

⁷⁷ The Daily Telegraph Exhibition of French and British Modern Art held under the patronage of the Trustees of the Art Gallery of NSW and the Society of Artists which opened at the Exhibition Gallery, David Jones' Sydney on 20 November, 1939. The collection was brought to Australia by the Melbourne Herald.

...women are sustained by complex and powerful friendships with other women [and] that such friendships were part of the history historians ... should address frankly. (cited in Kerber, 1997 p.5)

The same exhibition Fry saw at David Jones was also shown at the Melbourne Town Hall and was seen by artist Joy Hester. It provided Hester, as for Fry, with the opportunity to see modernist works by Picasso, Braque and Rouault, that became inspiring sources of imagery for her (Hart 2001, p.17). However, perhaps of greater importance for Hester was her meeting with Sunday Reed⁷⁸, which was the beginning of a complex, interdependent and lasting friendship for the two women – not dissimilar to Fry and Woolmer. This phenomenon of the mutually supportive relationships developed between women is frequently demonstrated by the references and attributions often acknowledged through letters, as in both Fry's and Hester's cases. Hester also developed an important friendship later with Barbara Blackman, as Fry did with Helen Henderson⁷⁹. Their relationships were enjoyable and sustaining, cited by them as such, and provide assistance to us in understanding the psychology underpinning their professional and personal lives. There was a "pattern of reliance on female friendships for emotional expression and security" (Cott cited in Kerber, 1997 p.5).

The evidence of this can be heard in Fry's memories of her friendship⁸⁰ and work with Woolmer:

...on the terrible occasion when perhaps one of us turned a sheet too fast and the music flew onto the floor the other one had to carry on until we could get together again ... very odd experiences. (1986, p.4)

However, perhaps this deep felt connection between Fry and Woolmer is best illustrated in the photograph of them taken in 1940⁸¹. The two women look out towards a fixed point beyond the picture plane in unison. They are dressed formally, as if for a recital, and yet are totally relaxed in their pose and with each other; Woolmer seated, with her body slightly twisted towards Fry and Fry leaning towards Woolmer against a prop –

⁷⁸ Sunday Reed (1905–1981) was born Lelda Sunday Baillieu and had a privileged upbringing. She married John Reed, her second husband, and went on with him to contribute as significant patrons to the Australian art scene while based at their Heide property, purchased in 1934.

⁷⁹ Fry's friendship with Henderson is discussed later in this Part.

⁸⁰ Refer to the opening quotation for this Part in *The Duet*.

⁸¹ Photograph reproduced at the beginning of Part II, *The Duet*.

her arm draped casually, their knees almost touching and a softness of light betraying their slight amusement at the situation in which they find themselves. No need to glance at each other to connect, they are portrayed simultaneously as individuals and as a duo – comfortable in either capacity. Rather than being self-conscious during such a formal camera shoot, they appear unperturbed as the consummate performers and friends that they are.

It is no wonder Fry and Hester fostered their female friendships when the art worlds they moved within early in their professions remained patriarchal and condescending:

John Reed⁸², who edited the journal [*Angry Penguins*] ... wrote of the potential he saw in Hester's art, appreciating her natural drawing style, although he also referred to her somewhat dismissively at the time as a 'peroxide blonde'. Another artist, John Yule⁸³, recalls the environment 'was essentially male-oriented – girls were prey to be stalked, conquests to be boasted about ... assumed to adore not so much art as artists, not so much original ideas as intense feelings – especially feelings of unbridled enthusiasm for us marvellous males and our creative products'. (Hart 2001, p.29)

Sydney was home to a number of noteworthy women pursuing art careers at the time Fry was enrolled at the College and Hester was spreading her wings in Melbourne; they included Grace Crowley⁸⁴, Grace Cossington Smith⁸⁵, Margaret Preston⁸⁶ and Thea Proctor⁸⁷ – the latter two being highly adept in the wood cut medium. Interestingly,

⁸² John Reed (1901-1981) was an art editor and patron notable for supporting Australian artists and collecting their work, along with his wife Sunday Reed.

⁸³ John Yule (1923 – 1998) developed a passion for art and attended the National Gallery Art School under William Rowell. He held his first exhibition in 1946 with David Boyd.

⁸⁴ Grace Crowley (1890-1979) studied at Julian Ashton's Art School, where she worked as a head teacher; she travelled to Paris briefly where she was influenced by the late cubist work of Picasso and Braque. While Crowley intrinsically remained a modernist, she did experiment with geometric abstraction and later, more informal styles.

⁸⁵ Grace Cossington Smith (1892-1984) was born in Sydney and was a prolific painter throughout her lifetime. Her subject matter was wide-ranging, including interiors, portraits, still lifes and most notably the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

⁸⁶ Margaret Preston (1875-1963), née McPherson, was born in Adelaide and received formal art training, including at the Government Art School for Women in Munich. She was a skilful wood engraver and lino cutter using flowers and still lifes as the preferred subject. She was one of the first Australian artists to incorporate indigenous motifs into her painting.

⁸⁷ Thea Proctor (1879-1966) studied under Julian Ashton in Sydney and was a pupil of George Lambert for a short time. She had a decorative style and a love of colour and form, particularly evident in her woodcuts.

Crowley's portraits are not dissimilar in composition to Fry's, but that is where the resemblance ends owing to Crowley's interest in a simplified cubist approach to the picture plane. There is no doubt that Fry's paintings from the late 1930s and early '40s exhibit a choice of subject matter and composition consistent with her art training, and a technique reminiscent of Cossington Smith's post-impressionist style⁸⁸; her printmaking reflects her teaching by Davies and exposure to Preston and Proctor.



Grace Crowley *Portrait study*, 1929

And the influence of modernism?

Fry's earliest known paintings are portraits; portraiture was a popular genre during the 1930s and was favoured by many of Fry's teachers, who utilised the human form as a vehicle to express their new enthusiasm for the modernist style⁸⁹. Duhig⁹⁰ referred to Fry's technique as:

⁸⁸ These observations are discussed later in this Part.

⁸⁹ This emphasis on portraiture was exemplified in the exhibition curated by Therese Kenyon in 2001 called *The Studio Tradition : National Art School 1883-2001*, where Una Foster's *Seated Female Nude Front View* 1934-6 echoes the composition of Fry's *Self Portrait* and Harry Memmot's pointilistic technique in his *Reclining Female Nude with Two Other Nudes* reinforces how readily Fry had embraced the weightiness of form, composition, colour and style of her contemporaries.

⁹⁰ James Vincent Duhig (1889-1963) was president of the Royal Queensland Art Society at this time. Duhig, born and educated in Brisbane, was a medical practitioner who formed a strong connection with

...modernist, but it is subordinated to a beautifully balanced colourful whole. Her portraits are striking in pose and treatment and are bound to create a profound impression on the trend of Queensland art. (1941)

Owing to the significance of modernism in gaining an understanding of Fry's artistic development, it is appropriate to digress at this point and provide an overview of modernism in the Australian context.



Ella Fry outside the Art Gallery of New South Wales, date unknown

At the turn of the last century, landscape painting was used to represent our national identity. Works by the Australian Impressionists⁹¹ helped to reinforce the colonial view of the nation prospering on its pioneering spirit, our pastoral empathy and to build public optimism about our new sense of independence that led to Federation in 1901. The first part of the new century saw international politics encroach on the Australian context, not least of which in the form of two world wars. This led to artists facing political issues with a new sense of social justice expressed through their art practice.

Christopher Allen summarises the dilemmas facing Australian artists responding to European modernist movements (such as post impressionism, fauvism, cubism,

the University of Queensland, leaving his personal art collection to the university. He owned a work by Fry, which is discussed later in this Part.

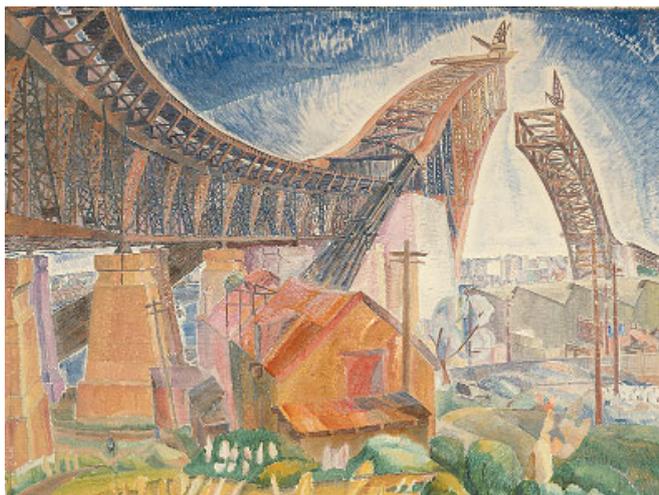
⁹¹ Tom Roberts (1856-1931), Arthur Streeton (1867-1943), Frederick McCubbin (1855-1917) and Charles Conder (1868-1909) are perhaps the most renowned of the Australian Impressionists.

futurism, surrealism etc.) as owing to their inadequate understanding of the long history and succession of philosophic trends informing their stylistic evolution and conception. This meant that modernism arrived in Australia in the form of ‘style’, rather than as a substantial intellectual and content driven phenomenon. The new ‘style’ became synonymous with “youth, smartness, [and] wealth”. Allen further suggests that the most practised style was varieties of post impressionism⁹²; this was true of both artists who had the opportunity to study abroad and for those studying in Australia under so-called modernist teachers. “Artistic language is meaning, not just technique, but technique or ‘style’ is what can be taught directly” (1997, p.98). While modernism arrived in Australia as a fashionably new ‘style’, it took the social pressure cooker of the second world war to provide the motivation to develop a uniquely Australian modernist response – and the *Angry Penguins* took the lead in this regard in Melbourne. Therefore, the artistic compositions, techniques and styles associated with European modernist movements were what were appropriated and learned in art schools – not the theory, history and social constructs underpinning their formation.

According to Allen, it was the women (Cossington Smith, Preston, Proctor and others) who epitomised the modern style in Sydney between the wars. Not only did they have an interest in illustration, graphics, design and decorative stylisation but they embraced the work of industrial technology and production – subject matter which he emphasises was rarely embraced by male artists who dominated the landscape tradition:

...there is a suggestive symmetry between the female interest in a male subject (like the construction of the Sydney Harbour Bridge) and the contemporary interest of the male artist in the feminised land of the pastoral genre. (1997, p.84)

⁹² Post Impressionism as a style refers to a number of French artists’ work, including the pointillist experiments of Georges Seurat (1859-1891) and Paul Signac (1863-1935), and the independent styles of Paul Cezanne (1839-1906), Vincent van Gogh ((1853-1890).



Grace Cossington Smith *The bridge in-curve*, c.1930

Subject as gender specific, or gender privileged, is worth a short digression at this point. While certainly not fixed or permanently polarised, there were certainly identifiable trends running through Australian art history post colonisation that suggests male-preferred versus female-preferred subjects and situations⁹³. In Fry's case, early portraits gave way to landscape as her preferred subject. The human interaction with the landscape is mostly absent; the surreal, sparse vistas are strangely empty, yet the warmth of rendering and colour charges them with optimism and a unique sensuality. Traditional 'female' subjects, typical of many of her female contemporaries, such as still lifes, interiors, women and children are missing, possibly because Fry was childless⁹⁴ and was outwardly focussed away from domestic pursuits, and possibly because her real emotive interests lay in her love of natural surroundings and Australia's native flora and fauna.⁹⁵

While I have been engaged in writing about Fry's art work, Australia has been treated to four significant exhibitions relevant to this discussion; the first two: *Margaret Preston: Art and Life*, curated by Deborah Edwards at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and *Grace Cossington Smith: A Retrospective Exhibition*, curated by Deborah Hart at the National Gallery of Australia, are notably curated by women profiling women modernists, or according to McDonald, "rivalling women modernists" (2005). On one

⁹³ Discussed further in Part V.

⁹⁴ Fry was not unique in this regard amongst female artists, a number of whom either didn't marry and if they did remained childless.

⁹⁵ Helen Henderson noted that while Fry related quite well to teenagers, she was not particularly comfortable around very young children; she also notes that Fry's real passion and spiritual connection, particularly after moving to WA, was centred on the flora and fauna of the bush.

hand McDonald has, tongue-in-cheek, the “strident self-promoting Preston” and on the other “the shy, retiring Cossington Smith”. The third was an exhibition of Proctor’s work, *The World of Thea Proctor*, which opened at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. All three shows, comprehensive in their artistic survey of each woman, were running simultaneously across Australia in 2005 and attracting large audiences – testimony to their individual artistic prowess and to their timeless contributions to Australian art.

In 2007 Elena Taylor curated *Grace Crowley: Being Modern*. Crowley spent a period in Paris and assumed some of the cubist techniques of breaking the picture surface into planes of shapes and colour. When she returned from Paris, she went back to the family property in Tamworth (coincidentally where Fry not long after went to teach briefly) and destroyed much of her Paris work. In reviewing her retrospective, McDonald was disappointed by her lack of sustained enthusiasm:

Looking at her legacy she comes across as a wasted talent. She railed against the expectations of a ‘woman’s role’ but she also seems to have sought refuge in domestic occupations ... an artist who had the ability but not the will to succeed. It would be easy to portray her as a victim of a male dominated age ... we have caught only a glimpse of the woman behind the work. (2007, p.17)

To McDonald she achieved her best work abroad and perhaps unfairly judges her conflicting interests in art and home during her later years.

Certainly the post impressionist style in Australian art owed as much to women as it did to European travel, influence and exhibitions. Surprisingly then, any reference or acknowledgement of the influence of women on art during the war years is conceded either reluctantly by historians, dismissed, or overlooked completely (Allen, Hughes, McDonald, Smith). Smith goes so far as to say:

...indeed, the contribution of women to post-impressionism in Australia appears to have been greater than that of men; and in individual achievement in every way comparable. This is unusual, for women do not normally figure as prominently in the visual arts as do men. They have not found painting, it seems, as congenial a

form of expression as the novel. In the visual arts they have achieved distinction more as patrons than as practitioners.⁹⁶ (Smith, 1991 p.198)

Fry's modern art?

In 1938, at the conclusion of her three years of study, Fry was awarded her Diploma (ASTC) and the College's bronze medal for highest honours. She returned to East Sydney in 1939 to concentrate on further study in painting, sculpture and modelling (she also continued with concurrent further studies in piano). On reflection, Lilley's words to the students at Brisbane Girls Grammar about the importance of gaining an excellent education with qualifications certainly held true as prophecy for Fry – both in her high level of pianoforte qualifications and her success with art awards and credentialing. When Fry eventually returned to Brisbane in 1940 she quickly re-established her connections with friends and joined the Royal Art Society, holding an exhibition of paintings with Vera Cottew and Muriel Foote⁹⁷ within a short time. It was from this show that the Queensland Art Gallery purchased her *Self portrait*.



Ella Fry painting by the McDonald River NSW, date unknown

⁹⁶ In Fry's case this has some credence, as she did become a patron of the arts, which I will discuss further in Part IV. However, she also maintained her practice – both in painting and piano, thereby becoming an exception to Bernard Smith's observation.

⁹⁷ Muriel Florence Snell Foote (1911-1990), married James Shae in 1945 and became known as "Mim" Shaw. Born in Ipswich, Queensland and travelled to the UK and Europe 1938-9. She was a painter, potter, weaver, printmaker and teacher.

Of interest at this stage of Fry's progress as an artist, is what three of her early portraits might tell us about her. The *Study of a girl reading* (1938) and *Portrait of a woman in black* (c.1939-40) were completed in her final years at art school in Sydney; *Girl peeling apples* (1941)⁹⁸ was completed after her return to Brisbane. The two earlier works were donated to Brisbane Girls Grammar by Jean Ashton in 1984, a member of the school's general staff. Very little is known about either Ashton or how she came to be the owner of the two works. One could indulge in speculation that she may have been somehow related to Julian Ashton⁹⁹, who ran the famous Sydney Art School (now the Julian Ashton School of Art) and this may provide a possible provenance for the works. It is more likely however, that Ashton acquired the paintings either directly from the Royal Art Society exhibition in 1940, or via the 'hire sales system' then operating at the Queensland Art Gallery. As there were no commercial galleries operating in Brisbane at that time, the Queensland Art Gallery permitted artists to show three works for three months, charging 10% commission on sales. Works were chosen by a selection panel and Fry sold a number of works through this system. Fry was impressed at the support this sales system provided, not only personally, but to practising artists and the concept may well have influenced her later philanthropic decisions in the arts¹⁰⁰.



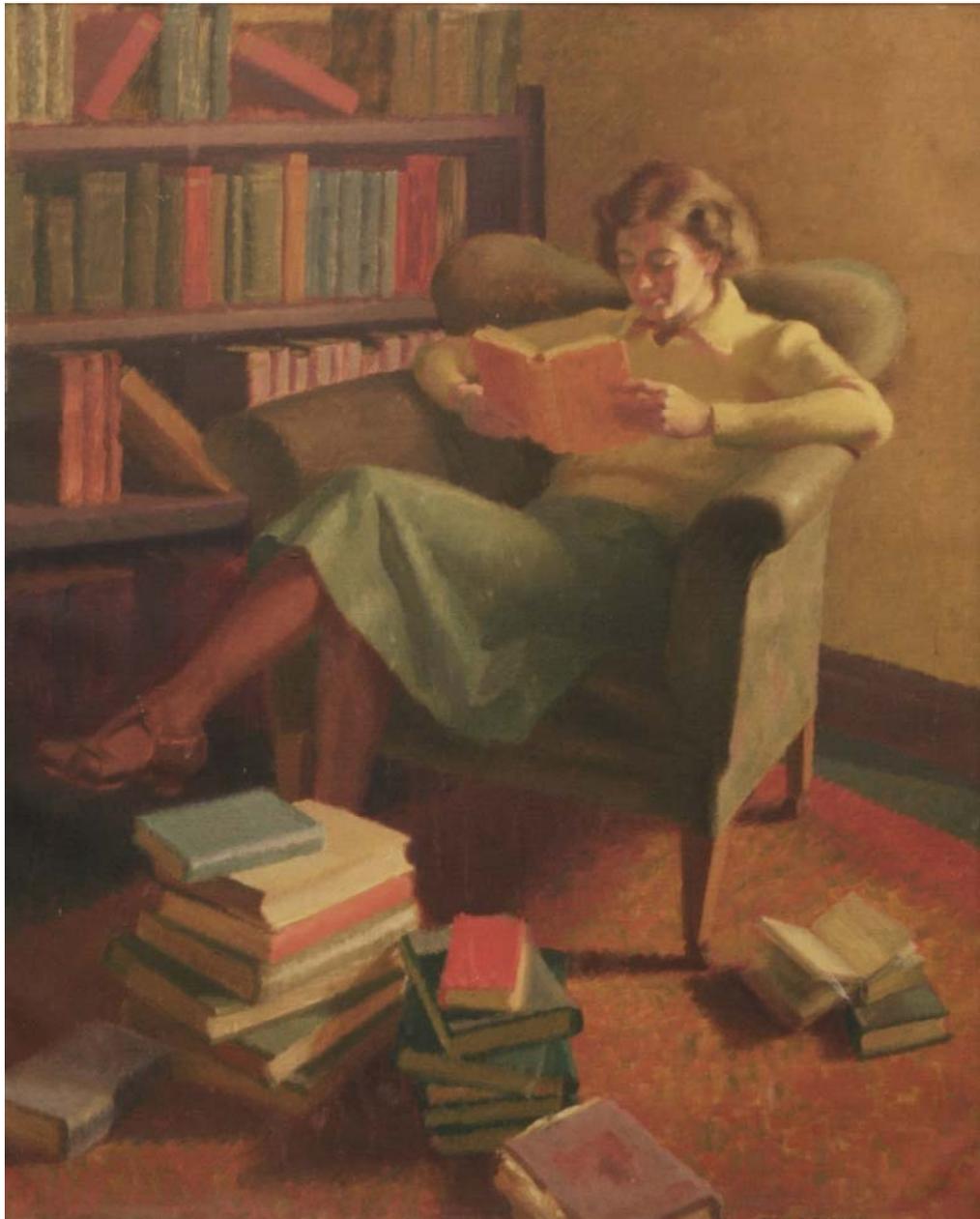
Ella Fry as a young girl, seated and reading, date unknown

⁹⁸ This painting was gifted to the University of Queensland by Dr J Duhig in 1945 and probably acquired by him during his presidency of the Royal Art Society of Queensland, a position he held for ten years.

⁹⁹ Julian Ashton (1851-1942) was born in England, studied in Europe and arrived in Melbourne in 1878. A follower of the impressionist style, he pioneered en-plein air painting in Australia. In 1890 he opened the Sydney Art School where many renowned artists studied. His influence on Australian art was considerable. Ashton was also a trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

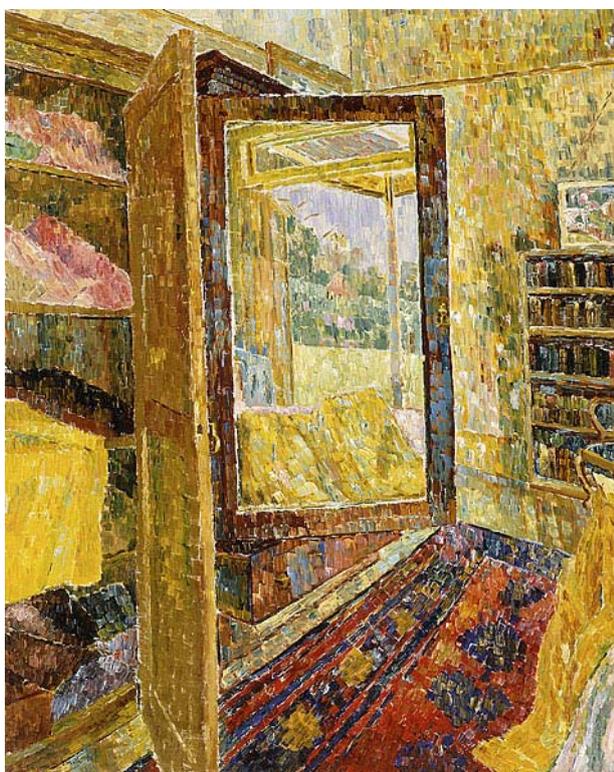
¹⁰⁰ Fry's philanthropic interests are discussed in Part IV.

The two aforementioned portraits show the same woman subject¹⁰¹, confident, contemplative and thoughtful. As noted earlier, portraiture was a preferred subject during the 1930s and the modernist style, often based loosely on post impressionism, was the preferred technique. The earlier example, *Study of a girl reading*, has the hallmark ‘Cossington Smith style’ brushwork in the foreground, albeit a far more restrained version.



Study of a girl reading, 1938

¹⁰¹ It appears from photographic similarities, that the woman is Fry’s friend Aldyth Deer.



Grace Cossington Smith *Interior with wardrobe mirror*, 1955

While Cossington Smith was concerned with expressing form through the energetic juxtaposition of colour, Fry's effect is more textural and she used the technique to solve the effects of light defining the space. The 1938 study reveals a competent handling of composition and light, without a self-conscious need for detail. The library is well used, the books plentiful, with an air of studious indulgence apparent. The light source is from outside the frame, focussed and suggestive of late afternoon with warmth and growing shadow. The woman is confident, educated and at ease. Women reading stands historically as a favourite subject amongst Australian women artists; for example Alice Bale¹⁰², Emma Minnie Boyd¹⁰³, Josephine Muntz Adams¹⁰⁴, Jane Sutherland¹⁰⁵ and

¹⁰² Alice Marian Ellen Bale (1875-1955) lived and worked in Victoria and attended the National Gallery School, studying under McCubbin. Prior to this she took private art lessons from Mary Vale. She was also a gifted musician and writer. Her works *Leisure Moments* 1902, *Interior* 1906, *Supper time* 1909, and *Interior (morning papers)* c1913, all illustrate the subject of reading.

¹⁰³ Emma Minnie Boyd (1858-1936) was born into a cultured family in Victoria and studied at the National Gallery School. She married Arthur Merric Boyd and together purchased estates at Heidelberg. Her self portrait *Portrait of Emma Mills a'Beckett* 1874, depicts her reclined on a chaise lounge with open book, light flooding in through a richly draped window.

Mary Vale¹⁰⁶ all painted pictures of women seated or reclined, relaxed with an open book either reading or deep in thought, content in their own company. Fry's work, while stylistically different, is comfortably placed in this historical context and fits well amongst these works in terms of artistic competence and merit.

It is of interest to digress at this point and again reflect upon the uncanny similarities with Hester and her artistic development, which highlights the fact that in many ways Fry was not unique. Hester's instruction at the National Gallery School in Melbourne was also traditional and her abilities as a draughtswoman were recognised early on when she was awarded first prize in the annual exhibition of 1938, coincidentally for her work entitled *Study of a woman*. Hart's description of this conventional portrait, a profile in charcoal, is not dissimilar to my own observations about Fry's 1938 study: "...her capacity to convey a meditative presence and her interplay of dark and light" (2001, p.12). While this could perhaps be said of many works by male or female artists from this time, it is perhaps the sensitivity of approach, the stillness of the emotions, the selection of the subject that belies a particularly female approach and female interpretation, where the mood is as important as the subject. Hart endorses this with her view that Hester "drew and painted from a personal point of view, with empathy for girls and women" (2001, p.30). It is also interesting to compare Hester's later work showing a young girl, somewhat petulantly and self consciously situated with a book on her head, to the photograph of Fry as a young girl, demurely, studiously and quietly reading on a chair, and with Fry's *Study of a girl reading*. While the subjects are congruous, the differences in treatment by the two women are worlds apart – Hester on the one hand increasingly emotional and expressive; Fry on the other hand, ever controlled and at ease.

¹⁰⁴ Josephine Muntz Adams (1862-1949) was born in Victoria and studied at the National Gallery School. The Streeton and Muntz families were long standing friends. Her painting *Lady in White* c1910 shows a woman seated, reading, back to the viewer; her face is reflected back to us in a mirror.

¹⁰⁵ Jane Sutherland (1855-1928) was born in Scotland, settling later in Melbourne in 1870. She became the pre-eminent female artist with the Heidelberg School. Her painting *Daydream* c1895 shows a woman reclined on an easy chair in the garden, turned away from the viewer dozing, book in her lap.

¹⁰⁶ Mary Vale (1862-1945) was born in Victoria and began her art studies at South Kensington Art School, later transferring to the National Gallery School. Her work *Faith Learning her Lesson* 1898 depicts a seated girl in profile, book raised in direct view, face intent on the contents.



Joy Hester *Study of a woman (student head)*, c.1938



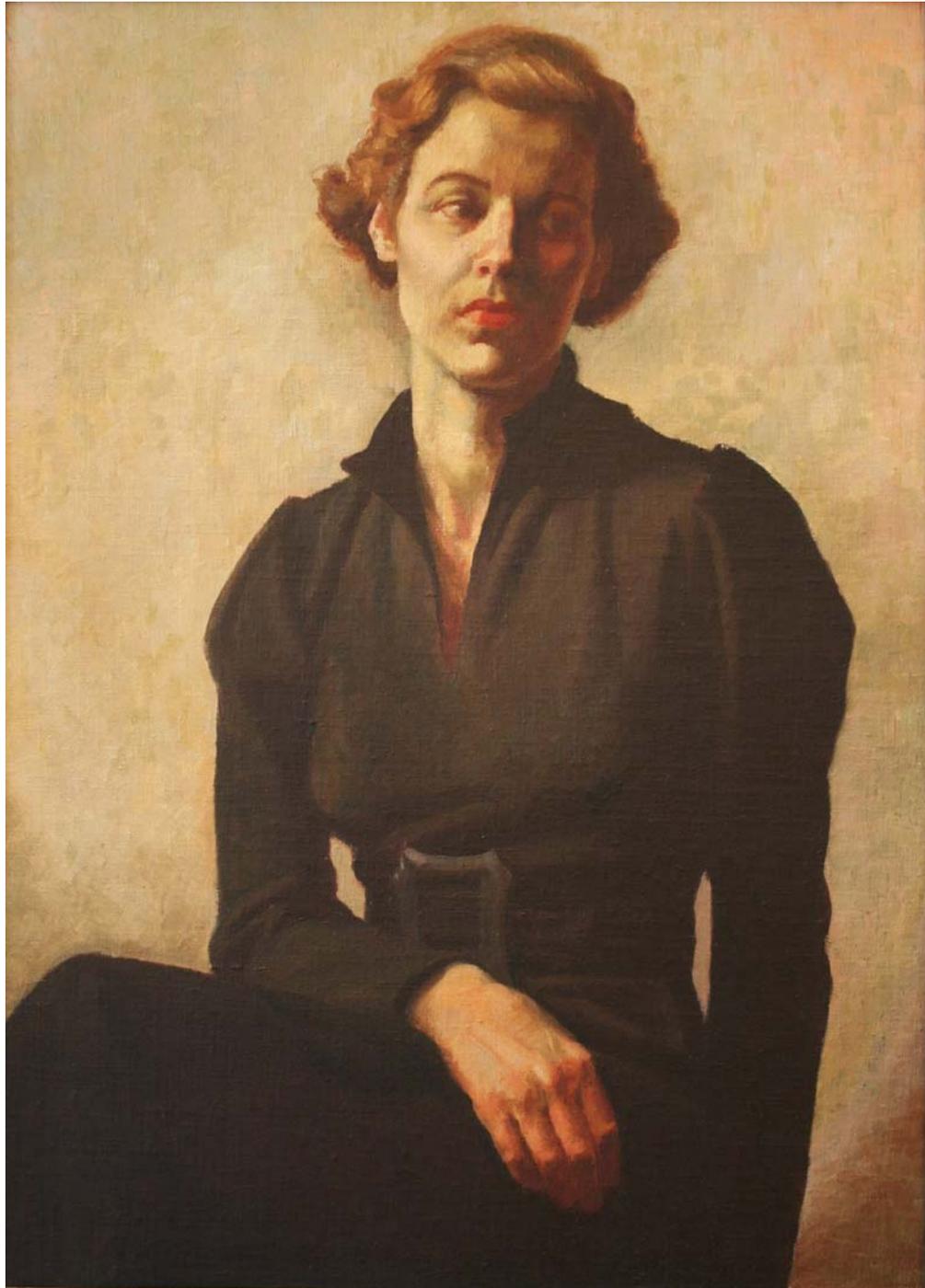
Joy Hester *Little girl with book on head*, 1957

Fry's *Portrait of a woman in black* continues in this vein and like Hester's study we are given no setting to locate the subject, as the woman portrayed is all important. The light bathes the face in high relief as in both previous studies, but while painted with self-assurance there is a disquieting expression – one of subtle longing, sadness, nostalgia, mystery or even mourning – all echoed through the dominance of the subject's tailored black dress. The background contains the signature textured brushwork, but the purpose is to accentuate the figure through contrast, rather than envelop it in any sympathetic manner. Despite its sombre mood, the work has an elegance and a sophistication which stems from its restraint and is reinforced by the 'contraposto'¹⁰⁷ pose – the slight twist of the figure, off-set by the inclined position of her head. I have specifically appropriated a reference to contraposto in this context because of the tension it creates. The subject's apparent relaxed pose, with her head turned away from the light and from meeting the viewer's gaze, and the softly draped arm across her lap, contrasts with the tension created by the twisted torso and rigid left shoulder¹⁰⁸. This conflict between

¹⁰⁷ The Doryphoros (Spear Bearer) by Polykleitos, who flourished between c450 and c420BC, was one of the earliest Greek statues to show in the fully developed contraposto position. Earlier Greek artisans came up with the idea of contraposto where the weight of the figure appears to be placed onto one leg. This technique makes the Doryphoros appear to be relaxed, but a tension is created and he appears ready to spring into action at a moment's notice. Polykleitos also combined this with a system called chiasitic balance or cross balance where there is an active-passive sense of balance.

¹⁰⁸ This style of pose is not dissimilar to that found in the studio photograph of Hilda Woolmer and Fry reproduced at the beginning of Part II, *The Duet*.

what appears and what is, reinforces the contrast between the high and low key effects of light. This is not just a portrait of a moment in time, as we saw in the *Study of a girl reading*, but rather a carefully contrived juxtaposition of light and demeanour to create a pensive mood.



Portrait of a woman in black, c.1939-40



Girl peeling apples, 1941

Girl peeling apples shows a departure from the formal portrait, to one of the captured domestic moment. In fact, the subject appears to be more womanly than girl-like, concentrating on the task at hand, head slightly tilted to catch the light. The characteristic 'Fry' brushwork softens the entire painting so that all edges blur slightly into each other creating a softness and inner glow. The colour combinations are rich and, in spite of the light blue dress and green apples, give a warmth and vitality to the work. It is reminiscent of not only her female modernist contemporaries, but once again hearkens back to the female Australian Impressionists, such as Emma Minnie Boyd¹⁰⁹,

¹⁰⁹ *Interior with figures: The Grange* 1875.

Jane Sutherland¹¹⁰, Josephine Muntz Adams¹¹¹, Clara Southern¹¹² and Mary Vale¹¹³, who portrayed women in domestic situations sewing, tending vegetable patches and orchards, or gathering mushrooms and honey. Simple daily tasks painted with care, sensitivity and understanding. The same palette used by Fry in *Girl peeling apples*, obviously a favourite suite of hues, can be seen in her later work *Fantasy 4*, discussed later in this Part. Fry displays both competence and confidence in the composition and execution. She has found and formed her own personal style which underpins her paintings from this point on and throughout her artistic career.

These works do tell us about Fry as a young woman; a love of learning, an understanding of form, an empathy with women and their worlds. The portraits are at ease in their solitude, a feature of her own life to date and which hints at an inner reserve and later loneliness¹¹⁴ seen in Fry's mature paintings of the mid 1990s – a quality O'Ferrall described as “haunting” (1997). Fry's school friends remember her as old for her age, a loner who didn't mix, didn't make ripples, had no animation and was very controlled and very correct. During 1939 Fry lived with a friend from art school, Aldyth Deer¹¹⁵ and her family. Fry recalls that they were “marvellous to her” and, being an only child, how wonderful it was to be part of a family with five children. In her final days, almost completing the circle of staunch independence, Fry died alone from cancer in a retirement home, with no family around her. The two early portraits represent not only her current stage of life, but perhaps foreshadow her mature character and life to be.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ *Numb fingers working while the eye of morn is yet bedimmed with tears* 1888, *A cabbage garden* c1896 and *The mushroom gatherers* c1895.

¹¹¹ *A stitch in time* c.1915.

¹¹² Clara Southern (1861-1940) was born in Victoria and began her art training privately, later enrolling in the National Gallery School. Her painting *An old bee farm* c1900 illustrates the point made in this Part about preferred subject matter showing women undertaking daily domestic chores.

¹¹³ *The orchard (spring at Mayfield)* c.1903.

¹¹⁴ Helen Henderson notes that although Fry was drawn to paint landscapes because of her love of the natural environment, “in her latter years it seemed, through her paintings, that feelings of loneliness dominated her emotions” (2007).

¹¹⁵ Fry remained friends with the Deer family throughout her life and photographs held in the Battye Library in Western Australia show images taken with Fry and Deer family members in Perth into the 1980s.

¹¹⁶ Interestingly, during her married life both Henderson and Sampson describe her as socially animated, one who enjoyed amusing company and was an excellent hostess (2007). Perhaps it was the happiness of being settled with Mel that gave her this personal confidence not seen in her early adulthood or old age.



Ella Fry and Alydth Deer in Sydney, date unknown

The point of indulging a nostalgic mood of reflection?



Alydth Deer and Ella Fry with swans in Perth, 1981

In uncovering Fry's life in this research, a pastiche of past contributions, influences and legacies, it evokes nostalgic sentiments for me as the writer; the similarities between her experiences, interests, and accomplishments, and mine. It also evokes a sadness that at the end of such an important life of public contributions as a woman, there was no

appropriate recognition, record or respect afforded to Fry. This biography – a portrait of the woman - her story, is meant to bring the past to the present and rectify these omissions. I ponder what was it like to be Fry? Perhaps here at this point in the tale it is appropriate to pause again and reflect upon the past and *indulge* a nostalgic mood – especially in view of the last paragraph.

I like this definition of the condition: “Nostalgia in the right hands is a gift not an affliction” (Slattery, 2005). *Nostos*, in Greek denotes a journey home, while the suffix *algos* suggests pain; therefore *homesickness*. Mohanty cites the “power and appeal of ‘home’ as a concept and desire [and] its occurrence as a metaphor in feminist writings” and therefore its distinct ability to conjure emotion in memory and personal identity (2003, p.85-6). In a contemporary cultural context of endless revivals and retrospectives based on a postmodern yen for pastiche, to indulge in nostalgia one can be accused of sentimental melancholia: to lament, to search for the mythic ‘golden age’, to pine for better days. Slattery argues that nostalgia requires urgent legitimisation:

There is good nostalgia and bad: a nostalgia that revives the past and is nourished by it; and a necrophiliac nostalgia that prefers the tomb to the present. We cannot imagine the future without summoning the past...

I propose that for me (first person) this biography profiling Fry’s life draws on the nostalgia that revives and nourishes the past, thereby legitimising it as a positive action or motive (part of the dualism) with which to write and read the story. Likewise, Fry’s own voice¹¹⁷ (third person) and her paintings from the final few years of her life give us a clue to the nostalgia *she* felt and how that connects with our understanding of her life. In fact, the titles from her 1994 solo exhibition can be assembled in such a way as to nostalgically trace her life: *City aspect 1, Study, Return, City aspect 2, Contrast, Encounter, Flight, Whither, Unknown region, Directions, Fantasy, Solitude* and *Ruin*.

¹¹⁷ Fry’s ‘voice’ as revealed in her travel diary of 1947 and her radio interview of 1986 will be discussed in Part III.

The modernist imprint?



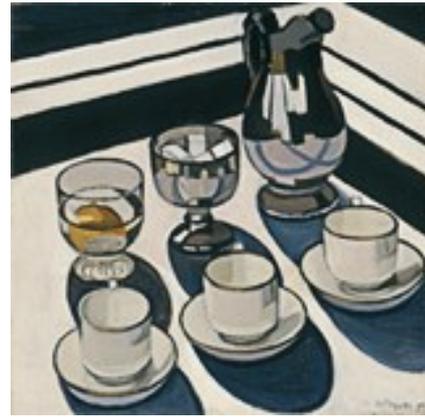
Gnomus (gnome), 1941

The cliché “art is a reflection of life” is perhaps worthy of a more serious application in the context of Fry’s art and life. As previously referenced, Fry created a series of lino prints to illustrate Moussorgsky’s musical suite ‘Pictures at an Exhibition’. Moussorgsky¹¹⁸ composed the work in 1874 after seeing an exhibition of paintings by an artist friend, Hartman. Similarly, after Fry played his music she “saw paintings or pictures herself”. Two examples of lino prints from her Moussorgsky series are *Gnomus (gnome)* 1941 and *Ballet of the un-hatched chickens* 1942. Both are highly stylised, stark in the contrast between black and white (negative and positive forms), and with little regard for perspective. These devices allow Fry to intentionally focus on the prints’ designs and create the mini dramas through the purposeful diagonal lines and arcs, and repetition of elements and forms. This highly designed aspect of the prints exemplifies her modernist approach, and pays homage to the work of Preston and Proctor. Both Preston and Proctor utilised formal devices, such as strong linear definitions, formal compositions which maintained a decorative quality and a devotion to contrast through both the choice of media and in the treatment of shortened perspective.

¹¹⁸ Modest Moussorgsky (1839-1881) was a Russian nationalist composer, interested in operas and patriotic compositions.



Thea Proctor *Women with fans*, c.1930



Margaret Preston *Implement blue*, 1927

It is also particularly interesting to compare the remarkable similarities between Fry's *Ballet of the Un-hatched Chickens* and Olive Cotton's¹¹⁹ *Teacup ballet* 1935. While Cotton's work is a photographic study, both contain the tilted picture plane, the stark contrasts between black and white, angles and curves, and the repetitive composition (right down to the foregrounded objects in the bottom right corner of both prints) epitomising the stylisation Allen referred to as being distinctly employed by the Australian women modernists.



Ballet of the unhatched chickens, 1942



Olive Cotton, *Teacup ballet*, 1935

¹¹⁹ Olive Cotton (1911-2003) is of interest in the context of this research on Fry, as her parents, like the Robinsons, provided Cotton with a musical background and she played the piano. Her first husband was Max Dupain and with him, pioneered modernism in the photographic medium. She is recognised as one of Australia's leading twentieth century photographers.

In this example and at this point in time, Fry's art does reflect her life. The *Paintings at an Exhibition* prints relate directly to her dual passion for and engagement with music and art. They exemplify her modernist training and they reflect her love of the performance – both her own performance and her representation of it through her art. Just as Fry enjoyed enacting the public piano recital throughout her life, she also enjoyed the static public display of her art. The two, the duo, are both intrinsic and extrinsic to her identity as a creative being and a woman.

A change of scene?



Ella Fry, Claude Hotchins and Ethel Sanders with *Morning prelude*, 1951

One of Fry's first artistic endeavours after arriving in Western Australia in 1947 with her new husband was to hold an exhibition of paintings and drawings at a small gallery space called Newspaper House on St Georges Terrace, in 1948. It attracted media coverage¹²⁰ and her lino cuts were specifically praised. This foray into the Perth art scene was followed by Fry's inclusion in a number of other exhibitions such as in the Western Australian Jubilee Exhibition in 1951 and with the Perth Society of Artists, of

¹²⁰ C.G. Hamilton, 'Ella Fry's Art: Newcomer's Exhibition Notable', *The West Australian*, 11 May, 1948.

which she was a member from 1948-52. Her painting *Morning prelude* took the attention of Ron Gomboc, owner of Gomboc Galleries where Fry held her last two solo exhibitions in 1994 and 1997. This was obviously the first time Gomboc had seen the work and he wrote her quite a lengthy, forthright critique on the painting¹²¹, including observations like: “I have never seen any colouration quite like that except through a gin-haze – yet the overall effect ... is amazingly arresting”, and “I cannot take to the dappled type of brushwork – one has to retreat too many miles to get the overall effect of clear outline”, further he “craves the privilege of a master lesson” on the painting in order to understand it. Not an especially complimentary hand written note to receive, but his afterthought perhaps salvages the relationship which they sustained for over forty five years:

I have come to the conclusion that it [the painting] can be classified in the realm of ‘unusual’ and ‘unique’ – its most striking feature being the decidedly unusual colour symphony.

Given her title pays homage to music, it is I am sure intentional (knowing Ron Gomboc¹²²) that he finished his sentence with “symphony”.

Fry had a show alongside Ethel Sanders, a watercolourist, in 1951 at a new commercial gallery which Claude Hotchin¹²³ established in Hay Street. Once again, Fry’s work attracted media commentary where she was praised for her composition, light and colour in the small landscapes, but where the reviewer felt her abstracts had not quite succeeded¹²⁴.

¹²¹ The annotated catalogue and handwritten note, merely signed “Ron”, are undated and amongst Fry’s papers lodged at the Batty Library. I am concluding that the writer was Ron Gomboc.

¹²² I met Ron Gomboc a number of times while living in Western Australia in the early 1990s.

¹²³ Sir Claude Hotchin (1898-1977) was born in South Australia, grew up in Broken Hill and upon marrying in 1925 moved to Perth. He managed a hardware store, upon which he based his successful business. He retired in 1950 and devoted himself to acquiring art. He had also opened two galleries. Hotchin’s later philanthropic contributions to the Art Gallery of Western Australia while Fry was Chairman of the Board, were probably forthcoming owing to this important early connection through this new gallery. He was a great benefactor, donating many paintings to public galleries and to the Royal Perth Hospital. His bequest to the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1972 established the Sir Claude Hotchin Art Foundation.

¹²⁴ C.G. Hamilton, ‘Exhibition of Work by Two Women Artists’, *The West Australian*, 22 August, 1951.



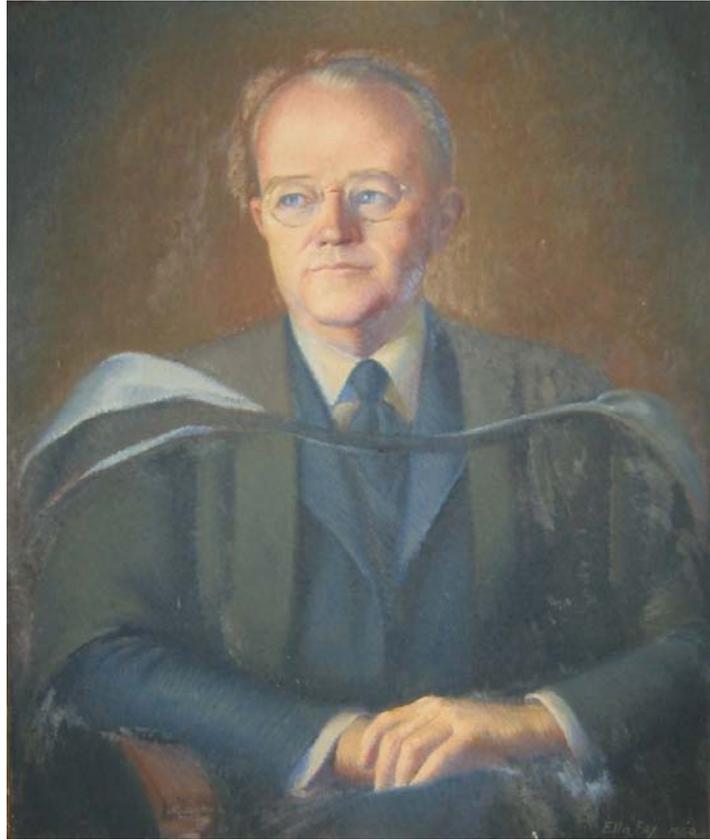
Ella Fry at her easel, 1956

In 1954 Fry co-arranged an exhibition called *Ten Perth Artists*¹²⁵ with David Lawrence, who was Assistant Director of the Art Gallery. It was one of the first exhibitions to profile contemporary art in Perth. O’Ferrall reflects upon Perth’s growth as a city from this time and Fry’s place in it:

Though many of her contemporaries are no longer alive, her active contribution and manifest artistic talent is still remembered by many in both the art and music scenes, as a significant contribution to expanding the cultural quality of the city of Perth as it transformed itself from its 1950s sleepy country town character into the more vibrant and outward looking 1970s national mineral boom capital. (1997)

What this brief summary serves to reinforce is that for Fry, regardless of her location, she was drawn to the local art scene, joined groups of like-minded practitioners, actively engaged in both creating and exhibiting her art work and looked to advance the profile and quality of the arts generally in the community.

¹²⁵ The exhibiting artists were Margaret Dunn, Sam Fulbrook, Guy Grey-Smith, Robert Juniper, David Lawrence, John Lunghi, Mary Nunn, Ernest Philpot, Margaret Priest and Ella Fry.



Portrait of Professor Robert George Cameron, 1950

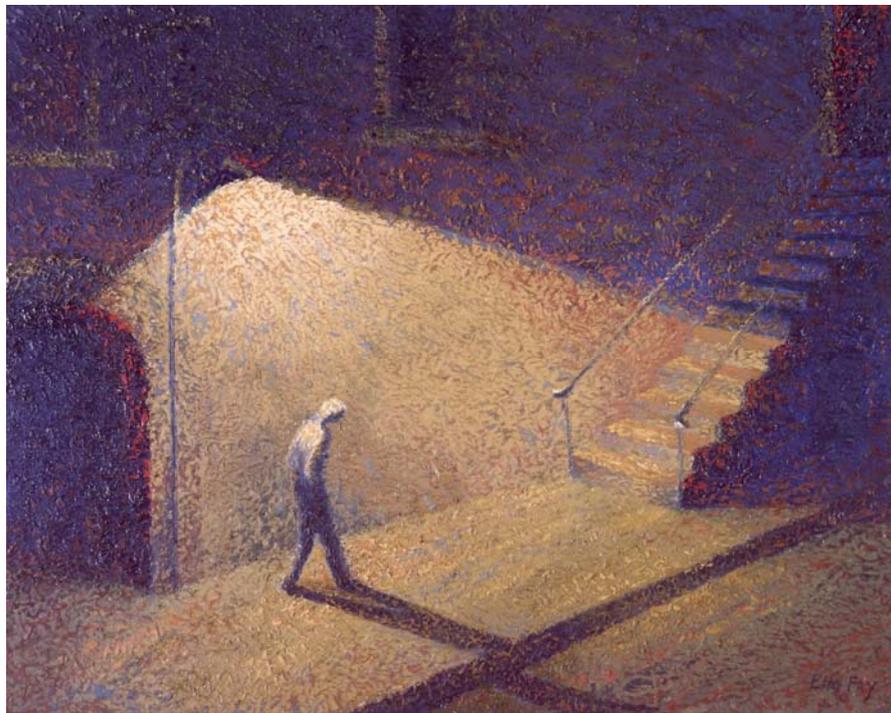
In 1950 Fry painted a portrait of Professor Cameron¹²⁶, which he later donated to the University of Western Australia. While the portrait assumes the traditional pose of a learned professor seated in academic dress with hands neatly clasped, it is impossible not to feel the relaxed warmth of the picture. Fry owed much to Cameron, who she had met socially through her husband's involvement with the Bank of New South Wales, and who offered her the opportunity to give some art lectures in the Education Faculty at the University of Western Australia. Fry described him as:

...a man of very wide interests and he had the vision to realise that there was need for the arts in true education ... He was a person with a most inquiring mind, with an intense desire for knowledge in all fields, full of enthusiasm, he was a very loyal friend. He did not suffer fools gladly, but he had an immense respect for anyone

¹²⁶ Robert George Cameron (1927-1954) was the first Professor of Education at the University of Western Australia. Cameron's initial training was under Alexander Mackie, Professor of Education at the University of Sydney and Principal of the Sydney Teachers' College, where Cameron later became a lecturer. Cameron was appointed as Professor of Education at UWA and Principal of Claremont Teachers' College in 1927. He employed Fry as a lecturer and proposed her for the trusteeship of the Art Gallery of Western Australia. His role in Fry's career is discussed in Part IV.

who was willing to learn ... was able to respond to people very easily and he had, of course, a great love of art and music and literature. (1986, p.8)

It is therefore no surprise that Fry's portrait shows great empathy with the man she admired. The brushwork is characteristically textured and loose, with the background providing a warm contrast to the blues of his suit, tie and eyes. Light floods the face and hands, drawing the viewer to study the attitude of the professor – an attitude Fry has rendered with obvious affinity and affection. While Cameron's portrait is stylistically similar to her earlier *Portrait of a woman in black*, competent, engaging and full of contrast and emotion, it has more maturity and confidence in its execution.



Wanderer, 1960

Wanderer, painted ten years after Cameron's portrait in 1960, is in the Art Gallery of Western Australia's collection. It is altogether different from her earlier works. The lone anonymous figure, no longer a portrait, is now very much overwhelmed by the surreal urban, nocturnal landscape. It was most likely exhibited in a show at Skinner Galleries Fry had with Jacqueline Hick in 1960 and her paintings attracted positive comment in a review by Hamilton¹²⁷:

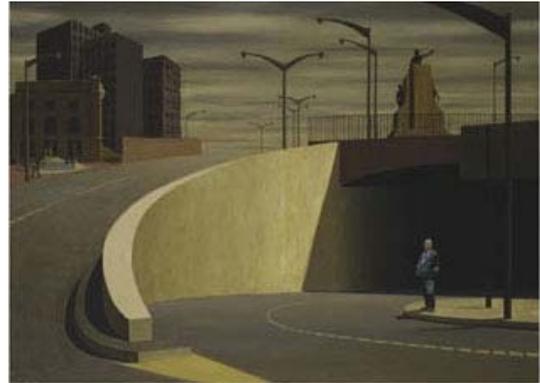
¹²⁷ C.G. Hamilton, 'Emotion, Intellect in Art Displays', *The West Australian*, 12 August, 1960 p.14.

Fry's work shows an intellectual approach ... she looks at rather than into her subjects and interests herself in structural rather than emotional relations.

Fry noted in her interview with Reid that Skinner Galleries was bringing a lot of contemporary works to Perth in 1960. The works of Albert Tucker, Russell Drysdale¹²⁸ and Jeffrey Smart¹²⁹ spring to mind when looking at this painting.



Russell Drysdale *Man feeding his dogs*, 1941



Jeffrey Smart (title and date unidentified)

The light source is artificial, provided by the single street lamp, the figure is lean, stooped and dejected and while the paint work is characteristically lively and cross-hatched, the overall colours are subdued and low key, contributing to the pensive, depressing mood. Both this work and the Cameron portrait are masculine subjects in a masculine world. At this time Fry was establishing herself as a trustee on the newly separated Museum and Art Gallery Board, and was the only woman amongst a board of fourteen. While there is no direct evidence suggesting a deliberate attempt on her part to 'fit in' with a male dominated world, *Wanderer* certainly shows a departure from her earlier subjects and shows her confidence in transferring her painterly style to a more challenging and perhaps more contemporary composition. The hint of the surreal certainly underpins her paintings from this point onwards until her death.

¹²⁸ George Russell Drysdale (1912-1981) studied art in Melbourne with George Bell. He worked as a jackeroo and in the Queensland sugar mills; he went to Sydney in the 1940s, meeting Dobell and Friend. Drysdale's signature subjects became the outback towns and landscapes of Australia featuring low horizons and elongated figures.

¹²⁹ Jeffrey Smart (b.1921) studied in Paris with Léger and has lived and worked in Italy since 1964. He paints the constructed environment, forming disquieting atmospheres of isolation in the contemporary urban experience.

To illustrate the genre?

Previously I outlined in this section Fry's solid training in design, drawing and her brief experience working as an illustrator in the commercial art world. This was to become very useful at a stage in her career and life when she least expected to draw on these skills. As a result of Fry's appointment to the Museum and Art Gallery Board in 1956, she subsequently met Dr W.D.L. Ride, the Director of the Western Australian Museum, and in 1964 undertook a large drawing assignment for him. The Museum separated from the Art Gallery in 1960 and it was about that time that Dr Ride became familiar with Fry's drawings and black & white lino prints. Her commission was to produce illustrations to accompany his book entitled *A Guide to the Native Mammals of Australia* which was published in 1970. In Ride's introduction to the book the only note he makes of Fry's illustrations is that she:

...tried throughout to introduce some characteristic natural elements into each picture in order to convey what she feels about the habitat of her subject. (1970, p.xi)

Given Fry's huge time commitment and dedication to the project, this is a particularly mean-spirited and inadequate acknowledgement by Ride of her contributions to his book.

At that time Harry Butler¹³⁰ was collecting for the Western Australian Museum and for the Museum of Natural History in New York, and the animals he found in the field went to Fry at her home in Boya to draw. Not only did Fry have to make meticulous drawings of these mammals and marsupials, but she had to look after them; their care was quite difficult for her because often very little was known about their habits other than merely classifying them as herbivores or carnivores. So what appeared to be a straightforward assignment, became quite time consuming and problematic. Fry also needed to undertake field trips to their native habitats to authenticate the settings she would place them in. Given that many of the animals were nocturnal, she would draw them during the night while active. Fry obviously loved the creatures she had in her care, evidenced by remarks in her interview with Reid:

¹³⁰ Harry Butler (b.1930) trained as a teacher, but in 1963 became an environmental consultant and undertook a major study of Western Australian animals. He was named Australian of the Year in 1979.

Some of the little ones we were able to let out for exercise, to run about in our rooms ... one very special scaly tailed possum, which had come down from the very far north, had been thought to be extinct, I had for 7½ years ... it was a beautiful animal and became very tame and became a great friend. (1986, p.17)

Fry had cared for the possum's mother, who had been injured and finally died, leaving the young one in her care. In the drawing *Scaly-tailed possum* (Ride 1970, Plate 3) we see the dual depiction of the mother alert on the tree branch, with almost human characteristics as one paw rests on the limb for balance. The second pose is as the mother, curled up with her baby. Fry has used a very soft lead to achieve a velvet texture for the fur and has captured the possum's personality as well as its scientific qualities.



Scaly-tailed possum, c.1960s

The drawings in the book were mostly executed from life, however if the animals were too rare or quick, Fry would photograph them for reference and at least to confirm their posture. She mostly found this unsatisfactory:

It was necessary from there on to study them more closely and get the exact shape of an ear or the shape of a foot or length of a tail and all those small details that are needed to identify the animals. (1986, p.17)

She took the responsibility of authenticity and accuracy very seriously and remarked that: “at least the drawings of the animals are true to life absolutely” (1986, p.18).



Banded hare-wallaby, c.1960s

The *Banded hare-wallaby* (Ride 1970, Plate 1) is another beautiful example of Fry’s delightful illustrations generously distributed throughout Ride’s publication. The composition sensitively depicts the timid animals in the bushland, without imbuing them with sentimentality. Fry has achieved the texture of the fur, the markings and the

personality of the wallabies through careful observation and a competent handling of line to achieve texture and solidity. The depth of the picture plane is neatly suggested by positioning the scrub in the foreground and beyond the subjects. In comparison to her early line drawing of *Victoria Point*, her maturity as an illustrator is evident in this, and the accompanying drawings.



Ella Fry at the microscope drawing skulls, c.1960s

It was at the Museum that she met Helen Henderson¹³¹, who was to become a long time friend. Henderson, who at that time was a research assistant, would carefully prepare the delicate skulls and bones of animals for Fry to draw. There was another book planned by Clarendon Press which required these scientific drawings, many of which needed close microscopic work, but the publication did not eventuate. Fry's clinical drawings of the bones show once again a careful attention to line, form and detail exemplifying her methodical perseverance during the seven years it took to complete the project. When the assignment was finally finished, she had completed 126 black and white drawings ready for the publication and donated a further 100 pencil drawings to the

¹³¹ Dr Margaret Helen Henderson (née Williams) was a researcher at the Western Australian Museum between 1957 and 1967. She is an anthropologist who has worked in indigenous communities and in health. Henderson is also an active historian living in Perth.

Museum. The sheer volume of work pays homage to her determination and commitment to authenticity and to her art. Apparently Fry did not receive any royalties from the publication, nor was she adequately acknowledged for her illustrations. In 1964 she exhibited some of her drawings at the Australian Naturalists' Club and in a letter thanking Fry, her work is likened to the best examples of nineteenth century naturalist drawing.¹³² I suspect that Ride may well have considered Fry's artistic contributions to be part of her philanthropic character, or as a favour based on trustee connections; hopefully not as an exploitation of her because she was a woman and an artist. Fry had hoped to give her drawings for the book away to friends, as neither the publisher nor the museum had purchased them. But to add insult to injury, Oxford University Press refused Fry's request to return the sixty two original drawings for the plates, even after the book was out of print!



Ella Fry drawing a small marsupial, c.1960s

¹³² Letter from D L Serventy dated 12 August, 1964.

Despite this, Fry recalls her work with affection after spending hours happily observing and drawing the specimens and live animals; it was here that she further developed a real love of Australian fauna and over the ensuing years took many trips to the outback areas of Western Australia enjoying nature and capturing the terrain in her work. Fry's 1947 diary of her journey across Australia pre-empted this new interest in the landscape, and reflects her joy in describing the moment specific to the time of day and the mood of the panorama:

Coming on it [Gundagai] over a hill, it was an entrancing picture, spilling down a hillside and into the valley with all the surrounding slopes thick with green and autumn trees scattered all among the buildings. The river winding through brought our first crossing of the Murrumbidgee and it became like an old friend before we moved away from it in South Australia. (1947, p.4)

There is a sense of the romantic vista in Fry's description and in her landscape paintings of later years. Ørjasæter, in her critique of Camilla Collett's diary¹³³, notes how women use romanticised rhetoric to develop a female position and the world of beauty as revealed through art (2004, p.123, 126). The evidence available to us about Fry does not readily position her within the conventional feminine traits of domesticity or a romanticised life. This is not to say she was not capable of deep emotive responses, but rather they shone through most likely in her music and most definitely in her landscapes.

And what of the final landscape in solitude?

Apart from the portrait of Professor Cameron (1950), *Wanderer* (1960) and the book illustrations for the Museum, I have not been able to locate any other examples of Fry's art work created between 1947 and her solo exhibition at Gomboc Gallery in 1994, except for two undated works described as "surreal farming landscapes" by McKenzie's auction house.¹³⁴ These two works do have an affinity with another painting titled *Contrast (View of Perth)* held in the Lawrence Wilson Collection at the University of

¹³³ Jacobine Camilla Collett (1813-1895), née Wergeland, is often referred to as the first Norwegian feminist.

¹³⁴ McKenzie's Catalogue, 2005 <http://www.mckenziegallery.com.au/auctioncataloguewithimages.htm>

Western Australia, so they could be ascribed a similar date of c1994, although they do not appear in the 1994 Gomboc Gallery catalogue under these titles and may perhaps have been exhibited in her last exhibition in 1997. These three later paintings hearken back to the landscapes of Dundas and Drysdale. They emphasise the curve, the warmth and the sensuality of the landscape – in other words, Fry has taken back the modernist male domain of the landscape as subject matter and has made it a demonstrably and convincingly a feminine one. The two so-called farming compositions emphasise the vastness of the Australian landscape, as Drysdale did with his outback scenes. The images are devoid of figures, although their presence is evidenced by fallows and fences. The burnt oranges and golds of the pasture and fields are contrasted by the blues and greens in the sky, distant hills and shadows. The landscapes have a stillness, which contributes to their surreal quality.

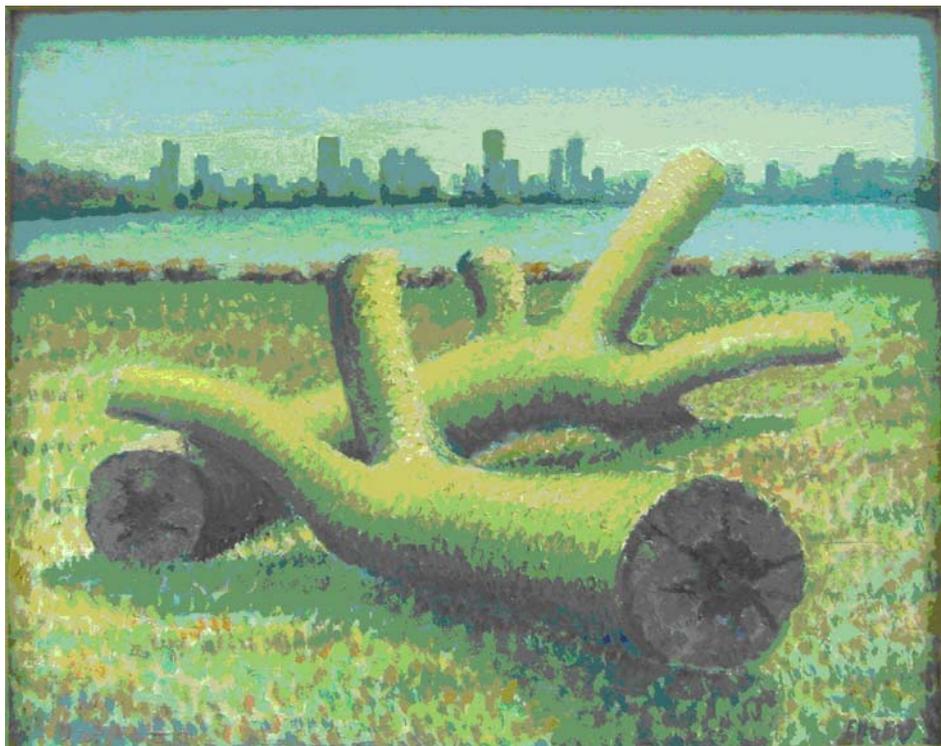


Surreal farming landscape WA I, c.1994-7



Surreal farming landscape WA II, c.1994-7

Fry's inference about and statement of man's impact on the landscape is particularly clear in her work *Contrast (view of Perth)*.



Contrast (view of Perth), 1994

The sawn logs in the foreground representing felled trees and the cleared bushland dwarf the city skyline of Perth in the distance. Fry loved the Australian bush and held strong views about conservation, so there is no doubt that this painting, with its barren river foreshore, is admonishing the urban creep upon the natural environment. The colours here are cooler and perhaps more reminiscent of twilight – an eerie and symbolic reminder of man’s ability to impact and irreversibly change his world. Also ominous in its title is *Coming storm* (1994)¹³⁵ where Fry displays her versatility in rendering the many different guises of a landscape. With a threatening subject, the menace is somewhat mitigated by the rounded rolling hills and the serpentine river winding towards the distant ranges. The colours are beautifully chosen to accentuate the storm’s uncanny light and its effect on the topography. Shades of blue, purple, yellow and green blend seamlessly as the eye is drawn deftly to the imposing storm clouds on the horizon, optimistically capped in white light. The cliché proverb “every cloud has a silver lining” and some of the sublimely uplifting works by nineteenth century landscape artists such as von Guérard¹³⁶, are evoked by this painting, thereby ameliorating some of the tension.



Eugene von Guérard, *North-east view from the northern top of Mount Kosciusko*, 1863

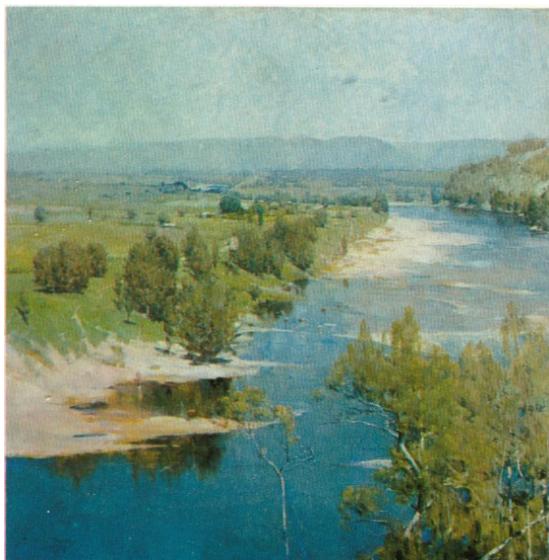
In *Fantasy 4* (1994)¹³⁷, Fry displays a degree of whimsy in the title, which prevents the viewer establishing more surreal and haunting impressions. The scale of the figures is

¹³⁵ Reproduced at the beginning of Part IV.

¹³⁶ Eugene von Guérard (1811-1901) was born in Vienna, studied landscape painting at the Düsseldorf Academy and travelled widely. He moved to Australia in 1852 to try his luck in the Victorian goldfields. In 1870 he was appointed the first Master of Painting at the National Gallery of Victoria. He is best known for his wilderness paintings depicting the sublime and the picturesque.

¹³⁷ Reproduced at the beginning of Part V.

disproportionate to their setting, where the perspective swoops from a hilltop in the foreground, across meandering streams and pools to the open sea. One is reminded of Streeton's landscapes, such as *Still glides the stream* and *The purple noon's transparent might*, where the viewer's eyrie-like perspective on the unfolding landscape below creates a romantic and somewhat nostalgic sense of lazy summer days, carefree and timeless.



Arthur Streeton *The purple noon's transparent might*, 1896

Both 1994 works cited here from Fry's solo exhibition held after a gap of many years, display real courage given O'Ferrall's comments that: "she approached this first showing of her work with much trepidation and self doubt" (1997). It was the success of the exhibition that encouraged her to undertake a second show in 1997 – her eighty first year! Noakes reviewed the show titled *Light, Figures and Landscapes* and wrote positively of the works' timeless qualities, evocative of the French Impressionists and Post Impressionists. She uses phrases such as "brilliant light effects", "colours [which] fuse and vibrate", "figures ... still, featureless and blurred", "spiritual quality" and finally an "impressive exhibition".¹³⁸ Considering Fry's age and the energy required to complete a volume work to such a notable standard which warranted a solo exhibition is indeed tribute in itself to her talent, commitment and imagination. Fry died shortly after her friends Betty and Ray Sampson took her to Gomboc Galleries to see the show - her final exhibition.

¹³⁸ Regina Noakes, 'Pleasantly Impressive', *The Western Review*, June 1997.



Ella Fry with Betty and Ray Sampson outside Gomboc Galleries, 1997

O’Ferrall perhaps best describes Fry’s personal artistic renaissance after her retirement from the Art Gallery Board:

It would be expected, after a lifetime of such active engagement and involvement in a broad range of artistic activities that Fry, as she entered her seventies, would seek a quiet retirement. As is, however, often the case – artists do not retire, and in Fry’s case, having made finally the painful decision to dispose of her beloved piano, she recommenced a full time commitment to her painting. Perhaps, returning to her student habit days, this included regular outdoor sketch sessions around Perth and in the surrounding countryside for which she had an endearing profound love. Her 1994 exhibition ... owed much to these sketching excursions, though her emphasis on enigmatic figures in de Chiricoesque settings revealed an intense and hauntingly psychological dimension and a side to her artistic vision which few people had sense. (1997)

It is in these later works we see Fry’s full life revealed. The landscape important, the figures absent, isolated or alone, the moods reserved and the palette chosen with controlled deliberation. There is little spontaneity or expressionist application; the works are carefully crafted, the trademark painterly technique stylised and refined. The subjects are conventional without confrontation. The works are successful; they are composed to achieve just the right amount of visual tension through balancing

harmonies and contrasting elements. Was this Fry's life? She was a loner in her early years and lonely in her later life. She was passionate about the open spaces. She loved the beauty and expressive quality of art and music. She sought structure and conducted her life with determination, restraint, purpose and resolve.

We live in a culture that overvalues relationship and undervalues solitude ... the capacity to be alone with ourselves is a great, indeed possibly greater mark of maturity, of intimate human success.

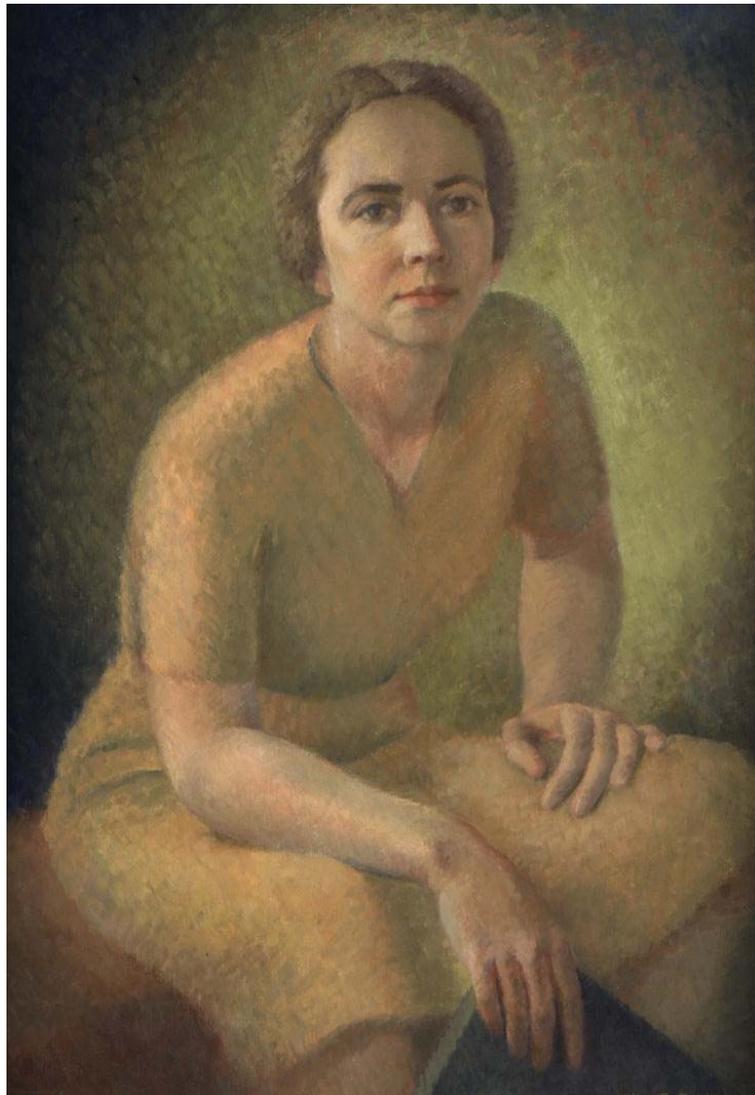
(Drusilla Modjeska, 2003)

PART III

THE SELF-PORTRAIT

We found afterwards, that it is most unusual for women to be allowed to go underground so I was very lucky. I must confess I wondered what it would be like and made a fierce resolution that whatever happened, I would not make a fuss ... Altogether this was a most interesting experience and I was so glad I hadn't had to miss it because of my sex.

(Ella Fry, 1947)



Self portrait, 1940

Why profile a self portrait?

In this Part I intend looking at *who* Fry was; what was she like as a woman, as an artist, as an administrator, and as both a public and private figure. To do this, I have chosen to look at how she perceived herself, and how I have interpreted her, through her art, her writing and her voice. In other words, through her *selves*; and in this section I will specifically look at the portrait of herself. What is a self portrait? The *self* refers to the whole of the person or to the symbolized, consciously reflective parts. It is differentiated from the *ego* in psychoanalytical terms because of its closer relationship to experience. Ørjasæter identifies the self as first defined in the eighteenth century after which it became an important theme for romantic literature (2004, p.134). In British object relations theory the self has been used to particularly communicate a sense of human integrity (Bullock & Trombley, 1999). An image created of oneself and a view of one's own identity may differ from the one perceived, or impression received, by others. In a postmodern sense, the self becomes splintered, reactive and dependent upon context. Lyotard observes that "a *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island" (1984, p15). The *self portrait* then becomes dependent upon the interaction between the sitter, the gaze and voyeur. The complexities of this interactive *matrix of self* are perhaps well illustrated once again by the work of Cindy Sherman.



Cindy Sherman *Untitled #210*, 1990

Sherman is a photographic artist who dresses-up and disguises herself as another: the *self as other*. Cruz cites Peter Schjeldahl, who interpreted Sherman's 1982 series as "the most revealing of 'the real Cindy' betraying a desire to find her true identity within the myriad disguises she assumes." He has assumed that her intent was one of self exploration, rather than disparate views of all women. Sherman says of this postmodern fractured identity: "I divide myself into many different parts. My self in the country ...my professional self ... my work self in the studio" (Cruz, 1997 p.7).

Douglas goes further to describing not only the impossibility of being a true self, but actually stating the impossibility of being a *unified* self:

Along with our parents, the mass media ... played a key role in turning each of us into not only one woman, but many women – a pastiche of all the good women and all the bad women ... This has been one of the legacies for female consciousness: the erosion of anything resembling a unified self. (1994 p.13)

If we revisit the metaphor of the matrix and draw on feminist theory as well as phenomenology the subject of self is *enacted* through representation rather than *veiled*. This is reliant on the relationship between the artist and viewer, or the narrator and listener. In Renaissance times a self portrait was often hidden or veiled within mythological subject matter, and in a female artist's case this was essential for professional success and personal survival in a patriarchal society; this is seen in Artemesia Gentileschi's *Self-portrait as allegory of painting*, 1630.



Artemesia Gentileschi *Self-portrait as allegory of painting*, 1630

Sherman also explores this notion of the history painting as disguise and its allegiance to the male as *active* in the engagement and the female masked as *passive* or *observer*.

It is important to recognise the genre of autobiography in the context of this critical biography and this Part on the self portrait. Claycomb notes that:

Feminist artists (along with a host of other marginalised populations) have spent much of their politicised energy on a process of combating the myths and filling the silences of history, and autobiographical narrative fulfils these goals in a couple of ways. First, its emphasis on the constructability of the self immediately destabilises the history that is being narrated. ... The second ... involves the interaction of self-representation and collectivity. (2003, p.61)

Claycomb raises the paradox of autobiography as “remedy for the univocal history” and questions whether the object of the autobiography situated in the present can simultaneously represent a self situated in the past. McGrath looks at how the “reader as self interacts with texts” and she looks at the problems of engagement between past and present “selves” (1999, pp182-3). Claycomb’s writing looks at performance as evidence and McGrath looks reflectively at her own adolescent diary, whereas I wish to look at painting, writing and oral history. While I am interested in the facts provided in these examples ‘of’ Fry, I am more interested in what they tell us *about* Fry, the woman, and how they act as a portrait of herself – whether intentional or unintentional. Not Fry constructing her own history in the context of lived experience.

How does this exploration of *self* in the context of this critical biography contribute to our understanding of Fry, the woman? I have selected five primary sources to illuminate aspects of her personality, character and life: Fry’s painted *Self portrait*, 1940, held in the Queensland Art Gallery Collection; the diary-letter Fry wrote in 1947 on her journey across the continent; the interview she gave to Anne Reid in 1986; her book, *Gallery Images*, published in 1984; and the confidential record Fry wrote about the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1987. In addition there are two photographs taken of Fry in 1940 and 1984. While these two photographic portraits¹³⁹ are not self portraits, they

¹³⁹ The 1940 photograph is reproduced on the thesis cover page and the 1984 photograph appears at the beginning of Part I.

provide us with additional evidence to enrich our understanding of both the young woman with her career ahead and the mature woman confident in her domain; they coincidentally show Fry's head turned to reveal the same profile, her stare beyond the viewer and the hint of 'knowing' in her look. They fill the frame, steady and resolved; remarkably similar for two images taken by different photographers forty four years and worlds apart. They are also strikingly alike in pose and gaze to her painted self portrait.

In the previous section on Fry's art, I surmised that her paintings do in fact reflect her personality and her life's journey. The 1940 *Self portrait* is an important part of this artistic story and indeed, this critical biography. The richness of the colour and texture of the paintwork well suit the subject; Fry is seated, slightly twisted, legs apart and leaning forward towards the viewer. She looks directly out of the picture to a point just beyond – not quite engaging us. Her hair is pulled back, a little untidily, not dissimilar to how she appears in the 1940 photographs and she rests her left hand in support on her knee, and the right hand loosely holds a book – no random choice and hearkens back to the Renaissance symbol of learning which she would well have understood from her art history training. The work is distinctly 'female', all curves and plumpness; Fry has created an almost halo effect as a background circling herself in contrast to the light source illuminating her profile. The application of paint in short staccato brushstrokes confirms her preferred post-impressionist technique of juxtaposing colours to successfully create a sense of tonal solidity. The overall effect gives the work life and a shimmer, which contrasts with the smooth paintwork of the face. Fry has designed the work to be confident in its solitude, technically proficient and sensual in its feminine preference for curves and rounded forms, yet ironically distinctly unfeminine in its pose. All features characteristically reflective of her personality and outlook, referred to earlier in *The Duet*.

How words written contribute to the self portrait?

McGrath states that: "It is not usual historical practice to present someone else's diary or a piece of what we call "primary evidence" as the centrepiece of an article" (1999, p.187). In this section, that is exactly what I intend to do. Writing about one's own

experiences, thoughts and interpretations of life are a form of recorded history. Kerber states that:

...by 1980 historians had devised a prism through which to view the diaries, letters and organisation records that have been freshly discovered and whose analytical potential was freshly appreciated. (1997, p.6)

Memory as the authenticator of factual history becomes privileged in this genre (diary, letter, interview); recording and editing are distinctly personal; time is annotated through formal note by dates, rather than necessarily verified by the immediacy of action. Ricoeur has much to say about memory, its relationship with history, and its enactment through writing as archive (perceived as subjective) and through speaking as witness, or providing a testimony (perceived as objective). He foregrounds the duality of time in such histories: the moment of experience versus the moment of actioning the memory of the experience. Thereby we must only be able to gain an understanding of the past through the present interpretative state.

The moment of the archive is the moment of entry into writing the history (historiographical operation). Testimony is by origin oral. It is listened to, heard. The archive is written. It is read, consulted. (2004, p.166)

The point is made that the written memory as archive becomes “abandoned by the owner” and silent, just as a painting on a wall, until the historian, or “reader” animates the object and when works present themselves as a type of reality, as alive (Nietzsche, Barthes in Ricoeur, 2004 p.142).

The diary, or journal, denotes a daily or regular entry, usually private, to archive the writer’s own experiences, events, feelings, attitudes or observations. Artists often keep an annotated visual diary to create a rich register of images from which to draw inspiration for major works. Historically, the earliest personal records were in visual form, however preserving personal records through writing a diary, letter or journal has become the more prevalent medium over time and certainly popularised since Samuel Pepys’ famous seventeenth century diary¹⁴⁰. Ørjasæter believes that the diary is an

¹⁴⁰ Samuel Pepys (1633-1703) was born in London and received a grammar school education and attended university. His famous diary spans 1660-9 and covers significant political and social events,

“acknowledged female genre” and cites Sjöblad, who opens her 1997 study of eighteenth century female diaries claiming that “the diary is a genre in which women get to speak in their own voices” (2004, p.132-3). In McGrath’s reflexive critique of her own diary, she is conscious of reflecting back to ask questions about origins and beginnings, “a quest for causal links to the past or continuities that can co-exist with ruptures ... a strange discourse between self of old and self now” (1999, p.183).

Fry’s 1947 twenty page travel diary¹⁴¹ is not a direct reflection of herself and therefore not an intentional account of ‘self’; nor is it private. Rather, it is a story and recounts in her own words her trip by car and train with her husband from Tamworth to Perth via Goulburn, Canberra, Wagga, Narrandera, Leeton, Hay, Balranald, Mildura, Wentworth, Truro, Adelaide, Port Pirie, Kalgoorlie, Coolgardie, Merredin and Northam. However, the descriptive detail, the personal insights and the enthusiasm for the landscape, our heritage and our societal errors (according to Fry) betrays a young woman eager to experience and explore her world and perhaps find comfort against her apprehension about the relocation in the recording process.

Stories are important. They keep us alive. ... the story teller snatches us back from the edge to hear the next chapter ... Our lives preserved. How it was, how it be. Passing it along in the relay. (Bambara in Mohanty, 2003 p.204-5)

The diary-letter, or story, does provide us with insights to Fry’s ‘self’, even though we are *reading* her subconsciously enacted character traits. Nin¹⁴² remarked of her own diary: “I feel as if all the adventures which succeed one another were unfolding themselves like a play in a theatre – and I, miles and miles away, watching” (cited in Stewart, 2005 p.359). In some respects, Fry may well have felt similarly about the surreal experience she found herself part of on this journey.

Fry begins her 1947 reflections the following way:

This is a kind of diary to give a picture of our travelling across the Continent and for it, I crave your indulgence. I’m only too well aware that I am not a writer and

including, notably, his own roles in them. It is widely believed that he wrote the diary out of vanity, liking to record his own part played in events and being able to re-read his work.

¹⁴¹ Battye Library, Alexander Collection, private archives Accession no. 5874A/38.

¹⁴² Anaïs Nin (1903-1977) was a French-born author who became famous for her published journals which spanned more than sixty years of her life.

yet I couldn't resist the desire to tell my friends all about it, so I chose this way of writing a long letter to every one of you. (p.1)

Fry is apologetic and under-confident with the written medium, in comparison to her confidence in expression through art and music. Temple, in her article on two women's historical journals notes this fact of the under-confidence in the amateur writer:

Nonliterary women's journals were seen primarily as artefacts that added a personal voice to historical narrative or, at the extreme, as protoautobiographical efforts, but certainly not as art. (2001, p.5)

While personal in content, its audience is multiple (friends), not dissimilar to a performance or placing a work on a gallery wall. Stewart writes on how Nin's diary's emphasis was on the "present moment" suggesting an attempt to appropriate the immediacy of drama: "all I had done during the week was like a perfect play" (2005, p.359). Fry certainly maintains a steady personal voice throughout her travel diary, not alluding to any fluctuating inner emotions influencing her experiences – or at least she wasn't communicating them. Perhaps Fry was creating the perfect scenario, a bit detached, because the action of writing was what was really important for her. Ørjasæter cites Kaplan who suggests that "the mere act of communication is far more important than the story itself" (2004, p.132). For Fry, this travel diary was her link to her friends, her home, her past. It must have provided her with a daily comfort to feel she was in fact in touch with them, if only through the action of writing to them. Nussbaum argues that:

...the diary is written for the moment only about life at present. But the telling of this life suggests the need for an audience, indeed the intensity of the narrative voice demonstrates the urgency of the need to be heard. (cited in Ørjasæter, 2004, p.132)

As the diary was not a singular private communication between two people, nor a record only for her own reflection or pleasure, Fry's observations are no doubt carefully considered and it reads as if it was transcribed from handwriting to typewriter – corrected, polished and with hand drawn accents, additions and underlining for emphasis. Temple unpacks at length examples of how editing can sanitise, change,

correct and embellish the facts with an audience in mind, resulting in “textual tidying” (2001, p.8). An example of post-editing by Fry is seen in lines such as: “We went first to Government House, where we did not sign the Visitors’ Book” (p.2) – no doubt a reason well understood by her friends and requiring no explanation, but nevertheless important to her to emphasise the word “not”. Fry’s attention to detail in the epistle, especially of selected places, people and events, confirm her interests and preoccupations. We know of her love of music and of art, but we rarely see glimpses of her spirituality, except here in observations like:

The Donatello, a Virgin and Child of exquisite simplicity is imbued with that mystic religious quality Renaissance Italians had which seems to have left art of today. I don’t mean that mysticism has gone, but that we cannot recapture that early attitude of awe-filled belief. (1947, p.3)

Fry gives a hint of a nostalgia for lost devotion, but she was perhaps too cynical or practical to indulge in “awe-filled belief” and was obviously more engaged with “vitality and life” (p.3).¹⁴³

The travel diary is not unlike a short story, musical work or a suite of lino prints. It is carefully planned with detailed description, changes in mood, timing and accentuated by personal expression. Fothergill suggests that there is also a contract of trust between the diarist and the reader that the text is authentic (cited in Temple, 2001 p.13). Dominant for Fry is the observation of the changing scenery as she travels east to west, from coast to coast through cities, pasturelands and desert. She becomes emotionally engrossed in the altered terrain and its impact on life:

I can’t imagine – the loneliness must be intense and to think of conditions ... makes me shudder. (p.6)

Here we connect with her early life as an only child and the final years of her life alone, sparse open landscapes dotted with solitary figures or bereft of people – the subject of much of her artwork. Fry’s writing is often matter-of-fact and rather than being dated by day, is chronicled by townships and distance – again her preoccupation with place. There is little evidence of spontaneous excitement in the composition, not unlike her art.

¹⁴³ Henderson and Sampson confirm that Fry was “not religious” and “not a believer”. (2007)

It is flecked with words suggesting vibrant visual images, but lacks the raw expression one might expect of a young woman on an amazing adventure. The twenty page chronicle is merely signed “Ella” with a flourish – the diary as self portrait, familiar to her friends, but also marking no-man’s-land, her transition from Robinson to Fry. It is during Fry’s changeover from ‘Robinson to wife’ and from ‘east coast to west’ through this epistle that we gain a real insight into her ‘voice’. The journey becomes a metaphor for the change process and the commencement of the trip becomes the end of one life and heralds the beginning of the next.

How words spoken contribute to the self portrait?

Speaking about one’s experiences equally provides a version of history remembered and in Fry’s case, in her interview with Reid in 1986, from the perspective of a life lived. On the front cover sheet of the thirty-two page transcript these words appear:

Readers of this oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, and reflects the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources ... the factual accuracy of the memoir ... [is] for the reader to judge.

Ricoeur would question the credibility of the oral memory as truth or testimony, as it is often what is not said that is as *telling* as what is said. As with the written archive, it is selective and I will discuss this further in the conclusion to this Part. McGrath comments on the debate surrounding concerns over the collection and use of oral history where “discussion has moved from a concern that the interviewer may be shaping the evidence, to a concern to recognise the interviewee’s role as active historian, participating in shaping the story.” She further notes that self revelation is a construction where the present is closely linked and intertwined with the past, but which cannot be separated because the present historian-self operates as the shaper of the narrative (1999, p.186-7). These observations will become more meaningful once we look at aspects of the Reid interview more closely.

Unlike a single testimonial, the interview method is a dual record, a dialogue, created by the interviewer and the subject. Fry is not randomly recalling events past experienced as

a self indulgence, but rather guided by a framework devised by Reid, which in this case is designed for a radio broadcast to review the subject's life chronologically and to punctuate specific milestones and accomplishments. To achieve the conversational style, Reid becomes an active part of the discourse rather than being just the conductor, and frequently supplies commentary and additional details to enhance understanding and meaning. For example, when Fry is asked about her piano duo, Reid says as an aside "Two piano work must be very, very stressful work", thereby prompting Fry to correct her somewhat with the reply, "Well stressful. It is exacting because it has to be so absolutely precise..." (p.3). While, once again, Fry is not giving us an intentional self portrait, the construction of her thoughts and the particular choice of words does show us her willingness to profile herself with intent.

Claycomb claims that "autobiographical performance depends as much upon a performance of self as a presence as it does upon a narration of past experience of the self" and goes further to cite Smith's notion that "the narrator is both the same and not the same as the autobiographer, and the narrator is both the same and not the same as the subject of narration" (2003, p.64). The act of the auto-performance becomes history-making in itself, relying on testimony and therefore the inherent claim of truth "because I am telling it" and because "I was there". Claycomb endeavours to unpack the relationship between staged oral history and feminism, or more accurately the politicisation of documentary theatre. His argument falls short of convincingly drawing a specific connection between the genre and feminist theory owing to its sole basis in revealing hidden truth through giving voice to that which has been hidden (pp.159-163).

Mohanty discusses life stories as written narratives, testimonials and oral histories as being significant modes of remembering and recording experience, but importantly notes they are not recalled in a vacuum. She observes that:

...feminist analysis has always recognised the centrality of rewriting and remembering history, a process that is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of a politicised consciousness and self-identity. (2003, pp.77-8)

In the case of Reid's radio interview with Fry, it is not about a staged performance of *revelation* between two women and the listeners – or perhaps more accurately a staged conversation *overheard* by listeners. It is, in part, an autobiographical statement which adds to the historical record as an individual account of oneself; perhaps Reid saw it as adding to the collective archive of women's achievements, but I doubt that was Fry's intention.

Fry, like in parts of her travel diary, is often reserved and at times self deprecating in the interview. She acknowledges an instance that “seems rather silly now” and then accuses herself of “having the temerity to ask people to move” (p.5); perhaps most telling was her comment of changing her surname (cited fully in Part II): “because I wanted to be more identified with my husband ... it seemed right to me and I think it pleased him.” This was not Fry being “virtuous and rewarded with marriage”, nor was she “deliberately rebellious as a biographical model for women who deliberately and rebelliously defy the social prescriptions for their gender through their artistic pursuits” (Kimber, 2002 p.120). She was a woman of her time, context and culture. Fry justifies the name change hesitantly, perhaps expecting a comment from Reid, but while Reid appears not to engage, her pithy response, poignant in its decisive simplicity and probable disappointment, was merely “yes” (p.7).

Fry notes in both her travel diary and this interview that she never felt unable to achieve things she wanted to because of her sex. With Reid she says in hindsight:

I didn't realise it at the time, only later when women's lib became so active I realised that they [the Art Gallery Trustees] had been extremely tolerant in accepting a woman, a fairly young woman at that, at that time. (1986, p.12)

Fry was the only trustee with formal training in art and, despite her observation of their supposed tolerance, she underrates her qualifications for the position, even in retrospect!



Ella Fry receiving her CBE, 1982

Reid reveals that Fry would probably have been the first woman to be appointed as a trustee to a state gallery and museum in Australia, let alone a chairman¹⁴⁴, a belief that Fry confirms matter of factly and without fanfare or self congratulation. Either she doesn't consider this a significant personal achievement or an important milestone for women in public life, or she is quietly modest about the accomplishment. A newspaper announcement of her appointment as the first woman to be on the Art Gallery Board is accompanied by a photograph of her drawing a possum she is holding in her hand¹⁴⁵. While this reinforces her artistic emphasis, it does nothing to support her governance capacity and I wonder, when announcements of other similar appointments of men have been made, that the accompanying photographs show them in a pose with a cute marsupial. Fry comes across as quite modest about her achievements throughout the interview, for example when she actually apologises for “self-aggrandisement” when discussing a reference to her teaching at the University (p.8) and again later when Reid

¹⁴⁴ This important achievement will be discussed further in Part IV.

¹⁴⁵ *The Independent Newspaper*, Sunday 7 June, 1970.

raises her 1982 CBE¹⁴⁶ award for services to the arts in Western Australia, she replies: “as you are well aware it’s something I forget very often” (p.26). Fry may have chosen, consciously or subconsciously, to “forget” the accolade as it was awarded at a time when she was somewhat under siege as Chairman¹⁴⁷; in a letter of congratulation from Ron Ewing he notes “her excellent Chairmanship under difficult circumstances”¹⁴⁸ (1982).

As discussed in Part I, Fry certainly doesn’t see herself as a trail blazer of women’s causes, rights or achievements. She is not portraying herself as an unsung heroine waiting for acclamation. However, others were lauding her achievements, or so it seems; she was featured in a newspaper article headed “Women at the Top”¹⁴⁹. The piece, in spite of profiling a woman who had achieved a prominent position, unfortunately concentrates for the better part on “Mrs Fry”, who “lives alone in the hills with her two dogs for company” and who, when she is not busy, “relaxes by reading, sewing, bush walking and cooking for her friends.” No mention of her achievements in bringing the opening of a new state Gallery to fruition a year earlier!

Fry comments on her fellow trustees and their attitudes towards her as a woman:

In fact when the discussion came up that there should be equal pay for women in Art Gallery positions, which wasn’t general then, this was agreed to and I remember one of the other Trustees saying ‘Well that was quite a triumph for you as a woman that this has been accepted.’ And they were extremely good. (1986, p.13)

At no stage does she indicate that she proactively worked towards better conditions or entitlements for women and the phrasing of this statement leads us to believe that this equality of pay occurred in spite of her being a woman on the board and without her active promotion of it as a cause. In fact she insisted on being called ‘chairman’ and would not be called ‘chairlady’ (Sampson, 2005).

¹⁴⁶ Order of the British Empire – Commander (Civil), first awarded to an Australian woman in 1918 and last awarded in 1989.

¹⁴⁷ These difficulties are discussed further in Part IV.

¹⁴⁸ Personal Letter dated 17 June, 1982 from J.R. Ewing to Fry held in the Alexander Collection, State Library of WA. Ewing served as a Trustee on the Board of AGWA while Fry was Chairman.

¹⁴⁹ ‘Woman at the Top: Ella Fry’, *Weekend News*, 16 August, 1980.



Ella Fry and Ray Sampson, 1987

This view of men who held important roles in business, government and society is in direct contrast to Fry's 1947 travel diary, in which she speaks scathingly of the bored, disengaged men she observed in Parliament:

There was a member speaking to rows of empty seats and a half dozen bored or chatting men. It was such a disgusting display of the disinterested party-run politics of this country that we could only become thoroughly disgusted and walked out before our feelings bubbled over and we created a disturbance. At least, I should have done so with little more provocation. (1947, p.1)

The adage applied to Fry by those who knew her both at school and as a chairman about her "not suffering fools gladly", is demonstrably born out in this personal insight and probably says as much about her opinion of the system of government as it does about her opinion of male politicians. Fry obviously took a fairly black and white view of people; those whose company she enjoyed and who she respected, and those for whom she had no time at all. Sampson (2005) described her as someone who "didn't like a fuss", and who "got on and got things done". O'Ferrall described her as someone who "at heart bore shallowness and flippancy with little patience" (1997).

Fry openly viewed her marriage as a partnership, a duo, and while she lived her adult life in a time when women progressed from being predominantly seen as homemakers to being active in the quest for equality, Fry seems to sit outside this norm. Henderson observed that they had:

... a wonderful marriage. Although their avocations were very different, they were rarely apart for more than a working day. They enjoyed each other's company immensely and supported each other's endeavours both in their private and public spheres – in practical and emotional ways. Their home was their haven. They were friends in every sense of the word – they cared for each other deeply. Mel was Ella's rock but their relationship was definitely not one in which she was the subservient wife; while she sought Mel's advice at times, she did not follow it blindly – her decisions were her own. (2007)

Perhaps Fry was removed from the impact of inequality or discrimination owing to the professional worlds she moved within, possibly because she chose to be unaware of the full extent of the inequity, or maybe she worked around it, still mostly managing to achieve her goals¹⁵⁰. She speaks in her interview of the long periods spent on Ride's book illustrations and the support she received from her husband:

It would not have been possible without the support of my husband. It's always said that behind any man there's a good woman or a woman standing. Behind any married woman there has to be a husband with understanding. It would not have been possible without that help and interest and appreciation. (p.16)

¹⁵⁰ This was notably not the case when she assumed the Chairmanship, which is discussed later in this Part.



The Frys in the bush at Boya, date unknown

Throughout the interview Fry stresses the good working relationship she experienced on the Art Gallery Board, where she remained the only woman until 1981. It is interesting to note that under her vice chairmanship and subsequent chairmanship it still took ten years to appoint another woman to the board. The idea that Fry was a ‘queen bee’ and thereby ensured she was the only successful and important woman on the board is unlikely.¹⁵¹ While she may have preferred working with men and, being a woman with few female friends, whether this enabled her to achieve what she did in many respects ahead of her time, is also only conjecture. What is likely is that there was a lack of women available and qualified to fill board positions (an unfortunate phenomenon that, while improved, is still the case today) and, as all positions were appointed by the Minister they “usually appointed people they knew and trusted, or were appointed for political reasons” and by default these would have been men. (Henderson & Sampson, 2007) Fry recalls:

I must say that I have always had good relations with men on the Board. I hadn’t found any problem of them being male chauvinist pigs or difficult...

¹⁵¹ Fellow board member, Ray Sampson, noted that it is unlikely Fry was ever consulted by the Minister about appointments and that given the board terms and timing, she would not have had an opportunity to influence early appointments under her Chairmanship. Henderson and Sampson hold the firm position that if she had had any influence, she would have recommended those who she felt would serve the Gallery best, regardless of sex.

Reid replied somewhat incredulously:

So as you say you never felt that you were a token woman, you were really there from the word go, accepted and had no problems, either as a Board member or as Chairman. (1986, p.25)

Fry's response implies that her male colleagues in fact did not treat her as an equal in governance, but rather as a special member, who required care and attention – an approach Fry seemed accepting of:

The original Board members were very kind, I suppose I should say, in accepting me and I certainly had splendid support always... (1986, p.25)

I would suggest that it was her sex, rather than her skill set, which may have led to this chivalric approach – an approach Fry appreciated.

It is worth a comment on Reid here as interviewer and biographer. She exhibits an implied note of frustration that Fry does not exhibit evidence of feeling oppressed as a woman, does not appear aggrieved with her lack of recognition and cannot confirm instances of discrimination or inequality. Kimber summarised this state neatly in her critique on Hensel's biographers:

It is possible to interpret these comments as stemming from the not untypical defensiveness, the covering of one's tracks common among women of achievement who in some way challenge social mores, but in general the tragic frustration that biographers attribute ... is largely their own construction. (2002, p.124)

Mohanty also writes of:

...my preferred history: what I hope and struggle for, I garner as my knowledge, create it as the place from which I seek to know... (2003, p.123)

Similarly McGrath notes that:

...contemporary culture always influences the authorial voice, and a history finding a place for the authorial self would have to be located into a present culture where self-disclosure fulfils varied and specific functions. (1999, p.186)

Fry is not a vulnerable woman trapped in a patriarchal world in need of rescue and Reid is unsuccessful in creating her preferred construction of events, of drawing Fry out to admit to a conclusion that her “abilities and talents were restricted due to the beliefs and practices of the times” (Kimber, 2002 p.127). Perhaps in Reid’s eyes Fry fails as a feminist role model. Unlike Reid perhaps, I am far more interested in an account that balances an understanding of cultural constraints while recognising Fry’s individual agency. If the emphasis in a feminist biography is on the state of repression, then the outcome risks focussing on failure rather than effecting a restitution of a woman’s achievements. Mohanty cites Morgan who also looks at the idea of whether women are actually “more likely to elicit more trust and ... more honest responses from female respondents”. In other words, women’s testimonies told to other women have more validity and have privileged access to the ‘real’ purely based on trust between them. Mohanty, while not disagreeing with the concept, does see a problem as it bases its theory in women not being male, “women are collapsed into the ‘suppressed feminine’ and men into the dominant ideology” (2003, pp.112-3).

I am going to digress at this point and compare Reid’s interview with one screened on the ABC in 2007 between Virginia Trioli and Betty Churcher¹⁵² which occurred twenty years after Reid’s with Fry. There are so many similarities and connections to highlight between Fry and Churcher at the outset. Fry was 70 years old at the time of interview and Churcher 76; they were both born in Brisbane and both excelled at their respective art schools, winning awards. Both women taught art in schools and at university. Fry was the first woman chairman of an Australian state gallery and Churcher became the first woman director of that same state gallery, commencing at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1987¹⁵³, immediately following Fry’s retirement as Chairman. In their leadership positions they both experienced difficulties between governance and management, although the roles were reversed. Churcher described her Chairman, Robert Holmes à Court as “terrible to work with” and “a control freak”, while he described her as “wilful” (not dissimilar to O’Ferrall’s description of Fry as “formidable”).

¹⁵² I will cite aspects of this interview on exhibitions and bequests in Part IV.

¹⁵³ Churcher also became the first woman to be appointed Director of the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra in 1990. She retired the year Fry died, in 1997.

Unlike Fry, Churcher's responses in the interview are emotive and reflect her love of art, teaching and life. This comes in part from a more relaxed 'chat-style' approach, which does not attempt to record a full biography, but rather capture some key aspects of her life. Trioli structures her questions to guide, but also responds encouragingly, to Churcher, using affirmative language to reinforce the engaged, conversational style. This is quite unlike Reid's more formal approach, which given Fry's personality was probably preferable. Churcher's answers are punctuated with colloquialisms and adjectives, for example: "One thing that I most love to do"; "that I'm passionate about"; "like running a three-ring circus"; "it was a brilliant success"; "I was able to curtsy gracefully and bow out". Churcher is also far from modest about her achievements: "Well, I did brilliantly right through art school ... won every prize there was to win...".

Probably the most notable difference between the two female interviewers is the way they conclude the session. In both instances, the final topic under discussion is difficult for the two subjects; Fry is drawn out on the difficulties at the Art Gallery on her retirement and Churcher is led into a discussion about her failing eyesight. Unlike Fry, Churcher is still quite relaxed in spite of the distressing prospect of losing her vision. This provides Trioli with the opportunity to pay due homage to Churcher's achievements and steer the interview to a conclusion:

Betty Churcher, thank you for your sight and your eyes over these years in Australia and for the work that you've done for those of us in the community who love art and paintings and thanks for being with us on Sunday Arts.

Churcher's final response is equally warm: "It's been great, Virginia, thanks".

Reid's interview is much longer and travels Fry's life, mapped by important dates, accolades and achievements, turning back on itself and lurching ahead as the memories are triggered. It is interesting in terms of understanding the interview process as insight to an aspect of this portrait of Fry in that, unlike Churcher, she controls the finish. It is Fry who initiates the conclusion to discussions by abruptly complimenting Reid on her skills as an interviewer:

I do want to pay tribute to your skills as an interviewer because without your skilful questioning this record would certainly not have been made.

This then compelled Reid to finish the ‘performance’ somewhat taken unawares and unprepared to fully acknowledge what had been achieved through the process:

Well I want to thank you now for all the information you’ve given us and for your contribution to art here and in Australia generally. (1986, p.31)

Given Reid’s preparedness for the interview, I have no doubt she would have had a more comprehensive conclusion in mind to deliver as the final words in the interview, especially in view of the length of the dialogue, the volume of content and the extent of Fry’s contributions across many areas over a significant time span. To be caught off guard and provide such an inadequate summation confirms it was Fry’s spontaneous decision to close the conversation, possibly because she no longer wished to discuss her final days as Chairman. Fry therefore remained determined and in control of the situation, characteristics shown in her perseverance throughout the interview and her life’s work. This illustrates McGrath’s point about oral history as a genre being able to effect a more equitable power balance between the historian, who can exercise control and speak the last word and the subject, who controls the exposure of her own life (1999, p.186).

How writing about others profiles oneself?

Fry had been working on her book *Gallery Images* for about two or three years prior to its publication. It was originally an undertaking by the Gallery’s curator, Lou Klepac¹⁵⁴, but when he resigned and left Western Australia the publishers wished to continue with the project and approached Fry. Initially she offered to do some of the research because she didn’t feel she was a writer (1986, p.28). The book was previously envisaged as a review of art in Western Australia, however by the time Fry became involved, other similar publications were being developed so the project was revised to focus on the Art Gallery of Western Australia’s collection. Sampson described it as a “mammoth

¹⁵⁴ Lou Klepac (b.1936) was born in Croatia and spent his early life in Italy. He is an art historian and publisher. After a career as a curator in state galleries, he established The Beagle Press in Sydney which has been publishing books on Australian art for over twenty-five years. Klepac has been a member of the National Trust’s S.H. Ervin Gallery Advisory Committee since 1984.

undertaking” throughout which she had help from the curatorial staff, but where “the delicate sensitivities of the curators had to be taken into account” (2005).

Therefore, it became a collaborative work, which is so typical of female working practices. A recent study on women’s leadership characteristics found that women were seen to bring a strong collaborative focus to organisations they lead, highlighting the importance of consultation, communication and developing and maintaining relationships. Women were also found to view the welfare of an organisation through the process of looking after the welfare of people first, and that the foremost skill possessed by female leaders is their ability to read situations accurately, take in information from all sides and incorporate that into the grander scheme of things. There was little evidence in the research that female leaders devise long-term career planning or undertake conscious decisions aimed at arriving in a peak position (Fitzsimmons, 2006). Fry seems to have exemplified many of these qualities during her chairmanship and various projects she undertook, endorsed by her own words:

...[I] had the most wonderful co-operation from the staff because naturally I wanted them to be involved, and they, the Curators, made selections from their particular sphere of works ... which they felt showed a good cross-section of their particular collection. (1986, p.28)

Despite Fry’s lack of confidence as a writer, expressed both in her 1947 diary-letter and in relation to preparing this book for publication, she showed enough courage to undertake the project after some persuasive comment from the publisher:

It was decided that instead of having a number of people write about their section, it was better to have it written by one person and I was asked to do it, with much trepidation at first, but fortunately the publisher said that what I was writing was just what he wanted, so that was encouragement to continue. (1986, p.28)

I have commented in a number of instances on Fry’s ‘comfort’ with working in predominantly male dominated contexts and on her belief she was not discriminated against because of her sex, but she still exhibits the insecurities and lack of confidence characteristic of so many women who find themselves in these disproportionate gender circumstances. It is a fact that women often do require mentoring and encouragement to

overcome their reticence to be adventurous and take on challenges outside their comfort zone. They may need to be actively motivated and feel supported before they find the confidence to proceed. In many instances this endorsement of their capabilities is further legitimised if it comes from a man, in spite of the fact women understand the emotional context experienced by other women far better (Hale, 1995 p.328-9). In Fry's case, it was almost always a man who offered her opportunities and encouraged her to accept challenges, but of course at those times, women in positions of influence were scarce.

Fry intended the publication to be a guide to the collection, rather than a comprehensive art historical overview. She hoped it would educate a wide audience on the works held in the state gallery and encourage them to visit and view those profiled works and the many that were not able to be included. In particular, Fry wished to provide the readers with some background on each artist and some ideas on the actual works reproduced. Her writing style is therefore quite accessible, straightforward and generalised. There is no evidence of 'artspeak', a curatorial condition prevalent post 1970, which was criticised widely as being jargon and based in European philosophy that alienated the general public from understanding art and positioned it as an academic art pursuit relevant only to the initiated few. In reality artspeak has a legitimate place in art discourse and provides contemporary artists with a framework in which to position their ideas, however as a method utilised in public programmes it is unhelpful in educating the public. Rosalie Gascoigne¹⁵⁵ sums it up from an artist's perspective:

I really don't like in 'artspeak', people who put the words before the art. Art is a seeing thing, you take it in with your eyes, a very good instrument, the eyes, you see. And 'artspeak' clouds the issue, it makes it an industry itself and the art is the industry.¹⁵⁶

Fry would almost certainly not have had any interest in positioning her book within a post-structuralist or postmodern art theory framework. She told Sadka quite emphatically when asked about current trends in written art material:

¹⁵⁵ Rosalie Gascoigne (1917-1999) had no formal training and her art making starting by collecting found objects for inspiration. She is best known for synthesising found objects from the environment to create visually abstract sculptural works.

¹⁵⁶ <http://www.abc.net.au/arts/headspace/tv/express/gascoigne/truth.htm>

It's written by the pundits to impress each other and most people simply don't understand it. You've got to get your ideas across – and that doesn't mean writing down to people: It simply means being clear. (1984)

From Fry's chronological and media-based approach to the cataloguing, she most certainly maintained the familiar format of the art history textbook canons popularised by art historians such as Helen Gardner¹⁵⁷ last century. In fact Fry commented to Reid that the contemporary works were a "bit hard to understand", but rather than ignore them, she persevered: "it's good for me and makes me think and sharpens the wits" (1986, p.29).

The book's Introduction contains a good history of the Gallery from its inception in 1895, including significant bequests, purchases, influential staff, initiatives and government involvement. As with the majority of institutional historical overviews, it is selective and no doubt favours some of those figures who impacted upon Fry during her thirty year tenure on the Board. She would equally have had some choice in the selected artists and works. Sadka observed that:

...the diverse nature of the collection is both reflected and exploited in Mrs Fry's book. The aim ... is to show readers the breadth of styles ... with something to suit every taste from the most progressive to the most conservative.

Sadka goes on to push the populist positioning by taking it out of the category of serious art text and calling it:

...a book directed at 'people' rather than the art specialist or connoisseur and the terminology used has been carefully tailored to suit the layman. (1984)

This slightly condescending opinion does not equate with Fry's own intent *not* to talk down to the reader, but rather to be *clear* – an intent I believe she achieves without compromising the detail or content.

Interestingly, approximately thirty percent of the Western Australian artists represented in the Gallery's collection at that time were women, but a similar percentage gender

¹⁵⁷ Helen Gardner (1878-1946) was an American art historian. Her book, *Art Through the Ages*, was first published in 1926 and has enjoyed twelve editions since. It was used as the main art history text book in schools throughout the twentieth century.

representation does not appear in her book. Even though the publication selects artists from across Australia and includes works by non-Australians, unfortunately there are only ten women profiled as opposed to eighty five male artists, and of those ten, six are in the 'Craft' section. Fry did not use the opportunity to actively highlight work by women, but notably did include the Western Australian modernist Kathleen O'Connor¹⁵⁸, the sole female representative amongst the nineteen works in the 'Paintings by Australians' section. I would suspect she was not only guided by the Gallery's all-male curatorial staff, but also wished to be conservative in approach to ensure the publication's wide appeal and financial success¹⁵⁹.

It is interesting to compare Fry's writing style in the O'Connor entry with the Guy Grey-Smith¹⁶⁰ review (1984, p.32, p.46-7). In spite of knowing Grey-Smith personally (they had exhibited together and he painted her portrait¹⁶¹) the text remains quite formal; she uses superlative description such as "outstanding" and utilises quotations from the artist. Fry describes his work *Skull springs country*, 1966 as by an artist who "revelled in the application of paint which is stroked on with emotion and fervour ... a painting full of strong feeling and response...". In comparison, Fry starts by describing O'Connor as the daughter of a significant Western Australian engineer, thereby positioning her father as important at the outset. She uses O'Connor's familiar name of "Kate", describes much of her art other than painting as "activities" and decries O'Connor's published art notes as being "beyond the limited understanding of prevailing art appreciation". Fry critiques her distinctly 'female' featured work, *The tea table* c.1928 as a picture which "holds together ... a happy picture full of love of life and delight in the simple things ... an artist revelling in the play of light and free brushwork".

¹⁵⁸ Kathleen O'Connor (1876-1968), studied in Perth and London before settling in Paris in 1910. While classified a modernist, her still lifes and portraits were more expressionistic in approach, reminiscent of the French Post Impressionists.

¹⁵⁹ Fry had intended that the royalties start an Ella Fry Foundation for the Gallery for the acquisition of art works and she presented the first royalty cheque to the Board on 2 February, 1985. In a media release from the Art Gallery of Western Australia on Fry's death, it notes the Gallery recently made its first acquisition from this fund of a painting by Western Australian artist George Haynes.

¹⁶⁰ Guy Grey-Smith (1916-1981), after serving in WWII he studied in London, returning to Australia in 1947. His journeys across the Nullarbor and Pilbara influenced his bold, abstracted desert landscapes.

¹⁶¹ His painting *Concerto, Ella Fry* is reproduced at the beginning of the section titled *On one hand ... The Musician* in Part II *The Duet*.



Guy Grey-Smith *Skull springs country*, 1966



Kathleen O'Connor *The tea table*, c.1928

These entries by Fry, in their selection and their telling, illustrate generalisations that are discussed in this biography about the recording of men's and women's history and the preferred male and female subject matter. The fact that Fry has also, probably unintentionally, gendered the language to describe the two works, where Grey-Smith's is sexual and aggressive as opposed to O'Connor, where the words are less confronting and more trivial, gives us a very clear indication of Fry's position on women and herself as a woman in the post 1970 women's liberation era. She seems indifferent to the need to actively promote and profile women, no doubt because for so many years she had moved within a male dominated public life without feeling slighted or discriminated against; in other words, a feminist stance was irrelevant to her own circumstances and experiences. In this book Fry had the perfect opportunity and vehicle to rectify the absence of women artists in the record and to educate the readership about their place in art; but she chose to repeat the safe path of historical writing and follow the advice of her curators. Not just because she was a reluctant, under confident writer, but because she had no reason, or personal conviction to do otherwise. Fry was certainly not of Joan Kerr's mind – one so actively opposite just ten years later¹⁶².

How words embargoed reveal oneself?

What do documents written by Fry, as Chairman of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, tell us about her in the context of a self portrait? In the Reid interview she reveals that:

¹⁶² Joan Kerr's writing is discussed in Part V.

I have actually written a full record of these and subsequent problems of the Gallery, which has been verified by another Board member and I think the best thing to do is to make it available at my death because I feel a record should exist... (1986, p.20)

Why embargo the record and why did she stipulate that:

During my lifetime no use of the material may be made unless I am consulted and give permission, but after my death it should be available to any researchers. (p.31)

The documents¹⁶³ in question comprise four parts: two serve as personal accounts signed and dated by Fry, the first in 1986 and the second in the following year. There is also a memo from Fry to all Board members signalling her retirement as Chairman¹⁶⁴ and a copy of correspondence from the Chairman of the Public Service Board to the Hon. Minister for the Arts, both dated 1986¹⁶⁵. While Fry obviously did not intend these documents to be a revelation of her ‘self’, from the perspective of this Part in the critical biography, they do provide us with a window on Fry’s behaviour and feelings within a professional leadership context. Ørjasæter observes that what is gained through writing, regardless of whether it is public or private, is authority over one’s life through the text (2004, p.132). As I discuss in the next Part, this was Fry’s way of legitimising action and thereby achieving control and closure over a difficult and sensitive time in her chairmanship.

In summary, Fry has recorded a history of problematic relationships between the Gallery’s governing body and the Directors¹⁶⁶ and curatorial management¹⁶⁷ dating back to 1974. When asked to assume the appointment as Chairman in 1976, Fry told the Minister that “some action would need to be taken” about the Director (1986, p.1). Fry

¹⁶³ Literature accompanying UWA archives OH56 titled *The Art Gallery of Western Australia*.

¹⁶⁴ Fry was succeeded by Robert Holmes à Court, who the Minister for the Arts, David Parker MLA, chose for “his business acumen, active interest in visual arts and potential to contribute to the advancement of the Art Gallery’s corporate management and support.” (Recommendation to the Premier dated 4 May, 1986). Holmes à Court appointed Betty Churcher as Director of the Gallery in 1987 – the first woman to hold a state gallery directorship in Australia.

¹⁶⁵ As many of the individuals mentioned in Fry’s account are still working in public galleries, I have not referred to them by name.

¹⁶⁶ The incumbent Director, Frank Norton, showed signs of deteriorating health in 1974 so Albert (Bert) Whittle, the Deputy Director, was in an acting capacity. W F (Frank) Ellis was appointed Director in 1978.

¹⁶⁷ Lou Klepac was senior curator and key spokesperson for the curators at that time, who included Barry Pearce, Hendrick Kolenberg and Anna Gray.

was noting in an emphatic way her immediate willingness to take action and lead the Gallery out of a difficult period of directorship. This would have been a personally challenging time for Fry; having lost her husband in the previous year, “alone without the one person in whom she could confide and on whom she could depend for emotional and practical support” (Henderson, 2007), she took on a demanding and serious governance appointment requiring immediate action to address management issues. Fry is quite blunt in her accounts about those who to her appeared incompetent or ineffective. One individual, whom Fry had a long and friendly relationship with, was described as “unable to concentrate, suffering loss of memory, not even able to write a letter and leaving all the running of the Gallery to [others]” (1986, p.1). A subsequently appointed Acting Director “proved inadequate and as pressure increased resorted to arrogance and displays of temper...” (1986, p.2); further, she felt two curators “took advantage” of the new Board resolution to permit appointments being made by management rather than by the Trustees, and engaged new curators “as supporters”. Fry goes on to accuse one of harassing staff to the point of a senior officer resigning because of a nervous breakdown and charging the curators with forming “an elitist group... working from a desire to elevate the obscure to enhance personal reputations” (1986, p.2). From indicating at the outset of her Chairmanship a desire to achieve greater efficiency and collaboration, she obviously found quite quickly that she had a militant management group eager for a power struggle.

Was there a struggle because she was a female chairman? The subsequent Director also proved to be a grave disappointment, creating more issues between staff and government to the extent that Fry recommended in her 1986 memo to Board members:

It seems unlikely in the light of previous performance that the Director will change his ways and extension of his contract in 1988 seems likely to perpetuate the present unhappy situation and progressively deteriorate into further mediocrity ... In view of the Minister’s concern and my own retirement I find it necessary to make this categorical statement.

Perhaps Fry was only able to write her version of events instead of speaking openly of them, just as Felman “questions woman’s possibility of speaking with a voice of her own in any patriarchal society” (cited in Ørjasæter, 2004 p.134). Fry was certainly in the middle of a patriarchal institution in 1986 and even though she was the Chairman,

her authority does not seem to have been afforded appropriate respect by key managerial staff.

The question arises as to whether the embargoed documents were a type of confessional. While Nussbaum notes the advantage of a diary (and the fact that these documents were embargoed sets them in a personal, diary-like context), as something written in the moment for the moment, means that the writer “has a tendency to let go some of her rational control in the process of text production” (cited in Ørjasæter, 2004 p.134). Schlegel says that confessions of an author, the profits of [his] experience, or true stories, belong to the essence of romantic prose. Ørjasæter draws a somewhat unusual conclusion then by stating: “Since true history is the foundation of diaries, confessional diaries must be the essence of romantic writing” (2004, p.135). In some respects, the confessional can also be the testimonial, but the former carries guilt associations and the latter righteous endorsement. I believe the documents were only confessional to the extent that Fry probably felt guilty at not being able to resolve the issues more effectively.

Justification for actions and outcomes is often a catalyst for records such as this, but in Fry’s case there is more at stake. I believe as revealed in her interview with Reid and in these documents that she wanted to make the Gallery a great success, she wished to maintain an enduring friendly and effective Board membership, but she also wished to have a degree of control over management. As a woman she had not experienced significant male/female power issues in her professional and philanthropic life until she assumed the Chairmanship and needed to control curatorial staff determined to ensure management was distinct from governance. By Fry’s actions in taking the trouble to write and archive her version of events, and embargoing them, it suggests residual concern on her behalf as to how the events may be recalled and/or referred to in the future, and no doubt personal concern for the way her role in them may be seen retrospectively.¹⁶⁸ To quote Sidonie Smith from McGrath’s writing:

¹⁶⁸ Henderson also believes that she was concerned about litigation and wanted to avoid exposing the Gallery to a “media stoush” (2007).

For women ... rebellious pursuit is potentially catastrophic. To call attention to her distinctiveness is to become 'unfeminine'. To take voice and authorise a public life are to risk loss of reputation. (1999, p.185)

Fry believes she is recording the truth (according to her memory), and an accurate account to correct the record of these critical staffing issues impacting a government institution. She takes her position of authority seriously, but still there is a lack of confidence betrayed in her actions. Why not write and register them in such a way as to make them accessible as public record? Why feel the need to write them with personal invective and subjective opinion? I believe it was because she did feel unhappy in the end and the emotion of the events informed her own dissatisfaction with her chairmanship¹⁶⁹ and perhaps played no small part in her decision to retire.

A life, one's self, imagined through memory?

A common problematic flows through the phenomenology of memory, the epistemology of history and the hermeneutics of the historical condition: the problematic of the representation of the past. To unpack the condition of memory – reflection and/or recognition – is the link between imagination and perception plus the connection with the visual, auditory and olfactory. Memory according to Spinoza and Descartes is distinct from time or accessing the past methodically or chronologically (Ricoeur, 2004). It can be argued that because memory is *imagined* it is therefore unreliable or unempirical – a fabrication. Ricoeur warns that the binary of imagination:memory is in constant danger of confusion between remembering and imagining and therefore affects the goal of faithfulness which corresponds to truth. “To memory is tied an ambition, a claim – that of being faithful to the past” (2004, p.21).

There is also the importance of 'place' to memory. The location or situation of the evocation. The trigger. “One does not simply remember oneself, seeing, experiencing, learning; rather one recalls the situations in the world in which one has seen,

¹⁶⁹ This is not the view held by Ray Sampson, a board member for most of Fry's chairmanship. He notes that the board greatly respected the way Fry performed her role, “she was an excellent chairperson and leader who had strong support from the other board members; there was not always agreement but board decisions were arrived at democratically” (2007).

experienced, learned” (Ricoeur, 2004 p.36). Aristotle noted that all memory is of the past and knowledge is simply perception. So with place, we include time. To Fry, and throughout this critical biography, these states inform the understanding of perspectives taken. In Part I, I posited that “the touchstones of the matrix in Fry’s case are four-dimensional. It is a puzzle of places, people, memory and time.” Ricoeur describes memory as an image, a picture, a moment in time, an attitude and a visualisation, and Aristotle observed that a painting could be read as a present image or an image designating something unreal or absent. Memory as ‘the other’, or in other words the alternative to concrete, empirical fact or power, is firstly reminiscent of Foucault’s version of the value of the ‘negative’ - where it is what happens in the ‘spaces’ between public organisations and policy (that is, the shadows and cracks of society) that truly defines reality; or secondly, as in Sherman’s disguises, where we struggle to accurately define or recall the painting, person or condition she is dressed to represent, because of what we bring to the new image through memory and experience. Finally, to further illustrate the point, there is Eco’s pendulum¹⁷⁰ – exploring the extremes of physical and psychological power.

The collective memory results in a history. An agreed recollection and account of events. Mohanty would argue that autobiographical narratives create a space for individuals (in this case women) to speak from *within* the collective and thereby act as testimonials to foreground historical ‘truth’ (2003, p.81). A truth dependent and ratified by agreement. Another binary where the personal is set against the community and where the ‘collective’ distils the evidence and recollection acquires meaning. “Memory is the womb of history” (Ricoeur, 2004 p.87). Here we yet again link back to the matrix, its origins, its incubation of viewpoints and complexity of truths. In remembering something, one remembers oneself. Ricoeur cites John Locke, who equates identity, self and memory (2004, p.97). He also cites Foucault (2004, p.204), who in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, arbitrates between the original and the interpretive – the irregularities, differences, deviations, differences, disparities; that is, who speaks and from where? These views are important to acknowledge in the context of writing Fry’s story from my perspective – I am writing without the luxury of a speaking directly with Fry, but rather composing the picture of Fry’s history from disparate clues and comparisons, including

¹⁷⁰ Reference to Umberto Eco’s 1988 novel *Foucault’s Pendulum*, a detective story about the search for a group of men who seek power not only over the world, but over the psyche.

her memories. Ricoeur argues that faithfulness of memory precedes truth by history (2004, p.229). A contrast is then created between the genetic memory of habit and the social marker of memory as souvenir. I have Fry's memories and interpretations of people, places and events, through her words and art – it is my role here to compose her history. Because memory is selective, it is therefore valuable at this point to reflect on what is missing from the examples of Fry as *self* in this Part, as this can also tell us something of the woman.

In Fry's painted self portrait, there is no background - no landscape, no interior - other than the impression from the light that she is indoors. She wears no jewellery, nothing that appears distinctly personal. The dress is plain, neither the garb of the artist nor formal as appropriate for a 'sitter'. There are no clues she is a pianist or a painter. By what she has not included in the painting, she has emphasised herself as an unremarkable, but educated (the book) woman, who importantly dominates the frame. She is at ease with herself.

Interestingly in her travel diary, Mel, her new husband and fellow traveller, is missing. While she uses the plural pronouns, she rarely names him; his impressions of the journey are strangely absent or referred to obliquely through her own explanations. This reinforces the validity of using this example by her as a type of self portrait – it is definitely not a piece of writing recording joint experiences. To me this glaring omission reflects her singularity – Fry still sees herself as an independent entity, operating separately and distinctly, despite being relatively newly married. Kerber cites Tocqueville's observation that when aristocratic governments disappeared in favour of elected parliaments, there were important implications for family life in that patriarchal authority was impaired, leaving women with a high degree of independence, which encouraged a high degree of self-confidence, yet when the same young woman married "the inexorable opinion of the public carefully circumscribes [her] within the narrow circle of domestic interests..." (1997, p.1). Mel Fry features more in the Reid interview, but perhaps this is owing to the nature of the medium and the directed dialogue, and because by this time he had lived out his life with her.

Notably missing from every primary source are references to finances. Married women's work, particularly in the professional classes, was frequently unpaid, and

rather than seek salaried employment they tended to “connect purposefully to the community” (Kerber, 1997 p.5). Even early on when Fry went to Sydney there is no mention of her need to work or support herself. Apart from accepting occasional teaching positions or piano recital broadcasts, which was offered rather than sought, it seems she was either supported by her parents or later by her husband and may possibly have secured an inheritance from her family having been an only child, thereby freeing up her time to undertake volunteer work on arts committees and pursue her interests independently. Fry was not ‘employed’ but rather she remained ‘usefully employed’ throughout her life. Favourable financial circumstances, of course, gave Fry and women like her, a greater degree of autonomy and independence with their career and interests. Interestingly Fry did not have a career as such. She was a successful pianist at one time, an artist – although not solely an artist and not a practitioner who achieved notoriety or fame – and a teacher when convenient. Was her inability to realise a single, focussed career because of her multiple interests, because of her gender, or because of her social status? The latter proposition also fits with Fry enjoying financial security, as well as being the wife of a successful and well-connected businessman¹⁷¹. Receiving remuneration for her many activities would not have enhanced her social position as much as designating them to philanthropic motives.¹⁷²



The Fry’s lounge room at Boya, date unknown

¹⁷¹ Mel Fry had retired from the bank in 1958 and became a director of several companies, including the inaugural board of TVW Channel 7, of which he was Chairman for twelve years.

¹⁷² Philanthropy is discussed in Part IV.

Perhaps the multiple interests were possible to sustain because she was childless. Kerber writes at length about the differences and intersections of women's and men's 'spheres' and certainly the traditional women's sphere was one of domesticity, nurture and education (1997, p.3). Fry had no reason to occupy herself as a full-time housewife as she wasn't a mother. This is not to say that she didn't take her role as wife and homemaker seriously, acquitting the responsibilities as efficiently and expertly as she did her governance responsibilities, for example. Both her close friends Helen Henderson and Ray Sampson commented on her being renowned as an excellent hostess and great cook, and who was "fastidious and kept a beautiful house and garden" (Henderson, 2005). Motherhood is often viewed as an integral part of women's perception of 'womanhood' and Fry did not satisfy this key ingredient to belong to traditional expectations of married behaviour. Did this then enable her to move more easily within the male boardroom domain and was this why she seemed so comfortable within it? I believe that not being a mother most certainly would have created circumstances where she would have had more in common with the men she encountered in Perth, than with their wives who at that time would have been raising families. Fry's position supports Welter's 'cult of true womanhood' which Lerner interpreted as the vehicle by which middle-class women elevated their own status (cited in Kerber, 1997 p.3).

In Fry's book *Gallery Images*, I have already discussed the 'missing' women in the survey and in the embargoed documents, the most striking omissions relate to significant Gallery achievements and accomplishments. Rather, they are focussed on the negative impact of unhappy circumstances and yet many excellent exhibitions and acquisitions were effected during this time. There are also no real references to proactive strategies and procedures to produce the collective and positive changes Fry wished to secure. Instead, the negative aspects of attaining progress through confrontation are documented. Perhaps Fry felt under siege at the time, unsupported and out of her depth politically and managerially, betrayed by the art world she had devoted her life to and at odds with the institution she so loved. This reinforces observations made by friends and employees that by the time she wrote these accounts, Fry was

jaded by the whole place and unhappy in her role. In fact, it is reported that at this time she sadly changed her intention to make a bequest to the Gallery.¹⁷³

This exercise of looking for what is missing in the *self* evidence does confirm aspects of Fry's personality and character that have been derived from other sources, and responds to my earlier reference to Ricoeur's point about how history and archiving reflects an institution's or an individual's choice in what to keep and what to ignore, overlook or discard. I have always loved the analogy of lace-making¹⁷⁴, which is seen as a women's pastime, when discussing history in this context - where the threads and knots create an intricate, repetitive web, but where the beauty of the design is not apparent until the holes between the tating are created and the pattern is revealed. However, the tating is delicate and easily warped or broken, creating tears in the fabric with enlarged voids. History is a little like that and if you take a feminist view, the threads and knots represent the recorded events of man's endeavours and the myriad spaces between the matrix are the untold histories of women. While ever the original is cared for, the design is regular and undisturbed; women are telling new stories, challenging the history, the webbing is breaking and the pattern is changing.

History is a construct ... Any point of entry is possible and all choices are arbitrary. Still, there are definitive moments, moments we use as references, because they break our sense of continuity, they change the direction of time. We can look at these events and we can say that after them things were never the same again.

(Margaret Atwood, 1994)

¹⁷³ Fry in fact made a bequest to the Western Australian Ballet, most likely instead of the Art Gallery.

¹⁷⁴ Mohanty coincidentally looks at the condition of women lace-makers within patriarchal third world societies and its definition as akin to housework (rather than a craft) and as part of the labour market as "homework" (2003, pp.32, 149).

PART IV

THE COMING STORM

The Gallery doesn't exist unless there are people in it. It's there to show the ideas and the aspirations of people through artists' work and it needs people there also to understand and appreciate it.

(Ella Fry, 1986)



Coming storm, 1994

Pursuits other than art and music?

Previously I have noted that Fry appeared to be financially independent and this allowed her a degree of freedom in her interests and pursuits. In addition to her piano performance work and art making, she taught, both at secondary and tertiary level, and worked on a number of different arts committees throughout her life; she also sat on the board of the Art Gallery of Western Australia for thirty years. In this Part I wish to look at her various community and public roles and the contributions to the arts and society

that she made through this work – her time, efforts, ideas and initiatives and how they enriched cultural aspects of Perth in particular.

Women and philanthropy?

Philanthropy, for the purposes of this critical biography is defined as the altruistic concern for human welfare and advancement, usually manifested by donations or bequests of funds or time. The former represents the financial endowment of institutions of worth, such as in education, arts, medicine and charities, and by generosity to other socially useful purposes. The latter donation of time refers to the volunteer work given for needy persons, causes or to non-profit organisations. Tomson cites Payton's pithy definition of philanthropy as "voluntary action for the public good" (2005, p.1). She notes that women have traditionally been volunteers, but not until recently have they been recognised as philanthropic donors. Similarly Steinberg and Cain note that:

...definitions of women and philanthropy most commonly discuss philanthropy *for* women, occasionally funded *by* women, usually in a collective sense rather than crediting an individual donor. (2003, p.67)

This point on women being recognised as a collective rather than as individuals¹⁷⁵, relates neatly to Caine's article on feminism and feminist biographies, where she argues that a distinction is needed in writing individual accounts of feminists' lives to determine a collective history of feminism, or indeed women's history (1994).

It is worthwhile summarising an historical overview of women and philanthropy in Australia before placing Fry in this context. Not surprisingly, there is very little in the literature on the history of women and philanthropy (Steinberg & Cain, 2003; Capek, 2001; Swain, 1996 & 1998). While there is much written on women's roles during times of conflict and hardship, such as their support of social crises like the war effort, orphans, hunger during the depression etc., these situations do not relate to social enhancement for the common good, but rather they are a response to needs in the community that were neglected by government. For example, in Australia the colony

¹⁷⁵ The feminist interests in the 'collective' versus the 'individual' are discussed in Part I.

had no Poor Laws and women gave their time and energy primarily to providing relief. Women are predominantly absent in the donor records prior to about 1960, with a few notable exceptions like Mary Roberts¹⁷⁶ (1804-85), Sydney evangelical widows like Helen Hunter Baillie (1817-97), spinster Eadith Walker (?-1937) and Eliza Hall (1847-1916) who donated a million pounds to philanthropic and educational causes in 1912 (Godden, 1986 p.43). The widespread omission of women in the records, however, was because the credit was given to husbands or fathers regardless of who initiated the gift. This is understandable as it was the men who ran the finances and would have arranged for the funds to be made available to the nominated organisations. The incoming colonists brought with them notions of a woman's place within philanthropic systems already existing in Britain, but without the advantages of social connections and neighbourhoods, which were underdeveloped in the colony (Godden, 1986, Swain, 1996 & 1998; Capek, 2001). Godden notes that "late nineteenth century women philanthropists are popularly dismissed as merely part of the anonymous horde of Victorian 'do-gooders'" (1986, p.40).

Philanthropy was gendered; Swain cites Perry's assumptions that blend the "three interconnected discourses of class, gender and religion, in order to construct a public role for women which complemented rather than threatened existing ideas of gender." Swain goes on to note that "men represented reason, law, morality and action, leaving women to embody emotion, love, virtue and care" (1998, p.30). Walkowitz argues however, that philanthropic women were not victims and:

...did not simply fit themselves into an imaginary landscape of male public space, but were active in re-imagining that space as a place appropriate for women. (cited in Swain, 1998 p.1)

Motivation for volunteering in colonial and post colonial times was directly related to social status, networking and access to independence. Godden (1986, p.41) asks: "how can leisured women be assessed as relatively unimportant to philanthropy when philanthropy was so very important to them?". By working for good causes women could exercise skills and power not afforded to them through employment in a

¹⁷⁶ According to Godden (1986, p.43) Roberts' money was considered 'tainted' as she was illegitimate and her donations met with little recognition even after her death when she left over one hundred thousand pounds to charities. She was omitted from social acceptance through her philanthropic generosity because of her heritage – as much by her fellow 'sisters' as by the men.

conventional workplace. It gave them a degree of freedom and an opportunity to control funds, even if not their own. There was also a view that any benefit given to others was of benefit to oneself and that “good works” do not go “unpaid” (Swain, 1998 p.31).

The primary beneficiary of philanthropy was the philanthropic woman herself, with women able to build a career based on their philanthropic activity, thereby enhancing their freedom and power. (Swain, 1998 p34)

Churches provided an excellent opportunity for women to combine volunteerism with a justifiable and socially acceptable context – it validated a woman’s opportunity to extend her social sphere – even though it represented an extension of a woman’s function in the home (Godden p.40). Donovan, in her discussion of twenty-first century feminism, reflects on the caring ethic allocated to women and its relationship to law and ethical standards. The salient point is that women were allocated the responsibility of caring, not just domestically but socially, and therefore legitimised or formalised institutions, like churches, could “engender a caring ethic rooted in a relational sense of responsibility” (2001, p.209-10). Women acting out the ethics of care through philanthropic endeavours were recipients of a degree of power, albeit restricted, within the sphere in which they moved. Steinberg & Cain (2003) quote Swain’s view that philanthropy through social connections unfortunately became an essential element of “gentility”, thereby becoming divorced from social activism, such as the suffrage movement, and allied to more conservative forces.

Any study of leading suffragists quickly identifies the importance of philanthropy in their political development ...[however] for most women ... it had the opposite function, providing a non-political diagnosis of the social problems they confronted in their charity work, and suggesting that amelioration was the best they could achieve. (Swain, 1998 p.33)

Following Federation in 1901, women winning the right to vote in all states by 1908 and the first celebration of International Women’s Day in 1928, organisations such as the Young Women’s Christian Association¹⁷⁷ and the Country Women’s Association¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ The Young Women’s Christian Association was established in 1855 during the industrial revolution in Great Britain. In Australia, various cities formed affiliations, such as Adelaide and Sydney in 1880,

in Australia provided women with national and international connections linked by common philanthropic goals and objectives, which universally advanced the conditions for women and children, as well as giving them a public voice. While somewhat conservative in their defence of traditional gender roles during the first half of the twentieth century, they were still proactive in the support of equal opportunities for all women. The point here, however, is that despite the increasing prominence of individual women in public life, women's philanthropy remained primarily a collective and socially based welfare concern.

In the second half of the twentieth century the situation began to change and there was a gradual levelling of donor acts between men and women, with the perceived difference being in the areas that attracted their benefaction. Capek in fact found in her research that "gender [is] not a reliable predictor of philanthropic behaviour, nor does it account for significant difference among givers". Of interest to this critical biography on Fry is Capek's finding that men are twice as likely to create or contribute to foundations and leave slightly more to the arts and humanities, compared to women who marginally favour education and social endeavours (2001, pp.3,6). In this regard then, Fry has gone against this minor trend – not unusual given her interest and talent in music and art. However, she certainly substantiates Schervish's view that the greatest proportion of giving and volunteering takes place locally, for wherever she found herself living, Fry became involved in societies, committees and voluntary activities (Capek, 2001 p.7). Kofi Annan said that:

...when women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately; families are healthier ... and what is true of families is true of communities, and eventually of whole countries. (Pease, 2004 p.6)

This holds true for Fry's full involvement in the life of Perth and her realisation of so many improvements to cultural facilities and enhancement of public artistic wealth.

Melbourne 1883, Canberra 1929 and Darwin 1969. The national office was formed in 1907. YWCA's purpose is to develop the leadership of women and girls around the world to achieve human rights, health, security, dignity, freedom, justice and peace for all people.

¹⁷⁸ The Country Women's Association was first formed in New South Wales and Queensland in 1922, but was not nationally affiliated until 1945. The CWA is a member of the Association of Country Women of the World which has its roots in the rural women's associations of the late nineteenth century; the first International Conference of Rural Women was held in London in 1929.

Fry did in fact contribute in philanthropic ways other than through the giving of time and expertise. In a letter to Fry in 1951 from James Cook, curator at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, he thanks her for her “generous gesture” of donating paintings by George Duncan and Frank Hinder for consideration by the Art Committee for the collection. In 1988 she donated Guy Grey-Smith’s *Life Study* to the Gallery. She also made gifts of her own lino print series, *Interpretations of music by Moussorgsky*, to three state gallery collections¹⁷⁹. In 1975, records in the Battye Library also show Fry donated “material” to the Central Music Library. Her decision to bequeath her estate to arts and wildlife causes indicates her commitment to the value of giving financial support as well as time. In 1996 Louise Howden-Smith¹⁸⁰, General Manager of the Western Australian Ballet Company, noted that Fry was the first person to ever make a bequest to the Company – something Fry obviously made Howden-Smith aware of prior to her own death, which occurred a year later.

The gift of time?

Fry gave her time to many community and artistic organisations throughout her life. In summary, she helped to form the Brisbane Concert Society in 1941, which was set up to support and encourage local musicians. At that time, Fry was also a member of the Symphony Orchestra Ladies Committee, which supported the local orchestra in Brisbane that was run by the Australian Broadcasting Commission. She also gave time and support to the Royal Queensland Arts Society, which would have been a mutually beneficial arrangement as she exhibited her own work through their exhibition programme. She was a volunteer air raid warden and was also listed to volunteer to do camouflage work, which didn’t eventuate, but while waiting she played recitals for the servicemen camps around Brisbane and then Tamworth - in other words, various voluntary pursuits for the war effort.

¹⁷⁹ The Queensland Art Gallery, The Art Gallery of Western Australia and the National Gallery of Australia.

¹⁸⁰ Prior to taking up the General Manager’s position at the Western Australian Ballet Company in 1996, Howden-Smith was CEO of the Craft Council of WA, which was located adjacent to the Perth Cultural Precinct and The Art Gallery of Western Australia. Fry may well have developed a relationship with Howden-Smith during this time, possibly facilitating the bequest.

After moving to Western Australia in 1947 Fry joined the Perth Society of Artists and assisted with and participated in exhibitions. However, much of her time was spent travelling to country centres while her husband was Assistant Inspector for the bank. While she enjoyed learning about the rural communities and their conditions, she comments that during these times she was “purely a bank manager’s wife” (p.7). She then notes how busy she was by 1949 when her husband was appointed Manager of Perth Head Office of the Bank of New South Wales:

...so the entertaining duties of a bank manager’s wife were added to playing, painting and giving talks to various societies and that was extremely busy. (1986, p.7)

Fry appears to fit the philanthropic woman’s profile described earlier in this Part, where social status and voluntary work were interrelated, but did allow for a freedom independent of domestic duties.

In 1950-1 the Art Gallery Society, of which Fry was one of the original committee members, was formed to “try and bring people to the Art Gallery by means of lectures or functions ... an attempt to attract people and to let them know what was there and interest them...” (1986, p.11). Fry gave a number of voluntary talks on various exhibitions as part of her Society work. Interestingly the Society lapsed at some point and was then reformed in 1973 when “it became obvious there would be a new [Gallery] building and there was something to work for” (1986, p.23). Fry always saw its role and the subsequent creation of a volunteer gallery guides programme, that began as a research group in 1976 and formed into a guiding group in 1977, as terribly important to the life of the Gallery. She notes in her interview with Reid that:

...they are just people who are interested and who give their services voluntarily and do all this work for the sheer enjoyment that they get from it... (1986, p.23)

Fry could be talking about herself!

In 1954 the Perth Prize for Contemporary Art was inaugurated and managed by the Society. Fry recalls:

...the Society was responsible for purchasing at one of these Perth Prize exhibitions a painting by Frank Hinder¹⁸¹ ... which had not been approved by the trustees at all. But we very happily purchased it and presented it, so that it just had to be accepted and go into the collection. (1986, p.11)

Also in 1954, Fry helped the Assistant Director organise the 'Ten Perth Artists' contemporary art exhibition¹⁸² and she became a member of the Western Australian Symphony Orchestral Subscribers' Committee. She became President of the latter organisation twice (1956-7 and 1963-5) and interestingly one part of the Committee's role was to entertain the artists: "we organised supper parties at our homes, so that we could give the artists something substantial to eat after their performance and give them some entertainment and appreciation of their work" (p.12). Fry obviously enjoyed this aspect of private conversations and friendships with the visiting performers. Her commitment to supporting local, young and experienced musicians and artists at this time was not unlike her work with the Brisbane Concert Society over a decade earlier, but had expanded into a full-time occupation.

Fry's statement for the WASO Subscribers' Committee annual report in 1963 indicates that she oversaw the growth of the orchestra by a further five players and a broadening of its repertoire. In 1964 she notes that the WASO had 2,094 subscribers and an attendance of 20,565 that year, and in 1965 her report shows that a massive subscription drive averted threatened closure of the WASO recital series. Fry mentions expansion of the programme to include a new youth series, free 'pop' concerts, school visits and country tours. The Committee under her presidency also assisted in organising tours by the London Symphony Orchestra and the Israeli Philharmonic Orchestra. She lobbied for more players so that the orchestra could be "closer to true artistic and musical balance". Fry certainly involved herself fully in any voluntary leadership role she undertook, always looking to improve conditions, broaden the outlook and engage the wider public more fully.

Fry sought to combine her different roles to advantage organisations she believed in and committed to. For example, in 1973 she investigated purchasing a grand piano for the

¹⁸¹ In Fry's opinion, the trustees were conservative and the purchase of a Hinder would have been considered quite challenging as it was an early abstract painting.

¹⁸² The artists in this show were referred to in Part II.

Art Gallery and in 1974 negotiated “allied functions” with the Music Board of the Australia Council for the Arts to support musical programmes at the Gallery. Fry arranged for the Gallery to host a function in that year in conjunction with the Fellowship of Australian Composers. Then, in 1979, Fry chaired an ad hoc committee to establish a programme of music recitals in the Gallery and investigated sponsorship for them through the ABC. By this stage, Fry would have been extremely well networked within the arts and business communities in Perth, thereby being uniquely positioned to bring together people, talent and funds to implement her ideas to increase visitation and enhance public programmes. Fry told Reid “the music recitals ... were very successful ... we had chamber music and poetry reading, Gilbert and Sullivan, even some ballet on one occasion” (1984, p.24). Despite the fact they were discontinued for a while because “other people caught on to the idea and there wasn’t a need”, her legacy continued well after her retirement. In the Art Gallery of Western Australia’s media release on her death it says: “Continuing one of the initiatives encouraged by Ella Fry, the Australian Piano Quartet will present the third in a series of concerts at the Gallery on 25 June”.

From 1965-8 Fry was a member of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust¹⁸³ Advisory Panel on the Arts: “we judged or selected applicants who made applications through visual arts, music, literature, drama and then those recommendations went to the central committee, who then made the decision on the actual awarding of scholarships” (1986, p.18). During this time she was also busy with the illustrations for the Ride book, which wasn’t published until 1970. Owing to the invasion of her evenings by nocturnal animals in need of sketching, she gave up her own performance work. Following that highly absorbing and labour intensive period, her husband became ill:

...after that for the next five years there was a gap because I devoted all my time to my husband who was not well ... he retired in 1973 and died in 1975 after having a wonderful two years enjoying his garden and home and I had spent that time driving him to meetings and you know generally looking after him. (1986, p.19)

¹⁸³ The Churchill Trust is an Australian Trust established in 1965, the year in which Sir Winston Churchill died. The principal object of the Trust is to perpetuate and honour the memory of Sir Winston Churchill by the award of Travelling Fellowships known as Churchill Fellowships.

If she was not devoting her time and energy to arts causes, she was assisting her husband in his work or caring for him at the expense of her own interests, thereby aptly fitting the traditional philanthropic role women had played, were obliged to play and were pleased to play since colonial times.

Fry's dedication and innovation as a trustee and chairman of the Art Gallery will be addressed at the end of this Part because much of what she instigated through her membership of the board crossed the borders of philanthropy, education, changes in governance practice and her own career opportunities. Just prior to her retirement as Chairman of the Gallery Fry was appointed the Patron of the Weavers, Spinners and Dyers Guild of Western Australia in 1985, then re-appointed in 1991. Such an unusual role would most likely have been the result of her support of craft and decorative arts as being an important part of the visual arts, evidenced by her endorsement to employ a specific curator in this area at the Gallery, where hitherto it had been viewed as a 'low' art.

It would be reasonable to say in conclusion that Fry benefited personally from her engagement with all of the committees outlined earlier through an enhanced artistic profile, the opportunity to further her own recital and exhibition participation, and a sustained positive public/society image, thereby giving credence to Swain's views cited earlier in this Part, of the affirming interdependency between a woman's philanthropy is the philanthropic woman herself.

Teaching as community contribution?

Having been an educator for a good part of my adult life, either in schools or with public programmes, and now as a principal, I constantly seem to be defending the profession's status. Anecdotally teachers are often spoken about in the same breath as nurses, highly valued in the context of providing necessary services to the community and for the betterment and improvement of society. A recent study in New Zealand on the perceptions of the status of teachers and teaching¹⁸⁴ found that teaching is seen as an

¹⁸⁴ Dr Peter Lind "Perceptions of the Status of Teachers and Teaching", International Confederation of Principals Convention, Auckland 2-5 April, 2007.

inadequately remunerated but respected profession, but not necessarily one of great influence in the wider society (such as that afforded to lawyers, doctors and bankers). There was evidence that teachers have a great influence on people's lives – with emphasis on individual connections rather than on society as a collective. Teaching is also both historically and currently predominantly undertaken by women and much could be said about the relationship of salaries and conditions when applied to female-dominated professions which provide a service to the community, such as nursing and teaching, but that debate is not for this thesis.

In retrospect, from the position of the 1986 interview with Reid, Fry certainly seems to have viewed her first teaching post in 1943 as a favour, if not almost as an act of community service: "I met the headmistress of the Church of England Girls' School in Tamworth, who was desperate for a teacher of music and a teacher of art, and she asked if I would go there, just as a temporary measure, which I agreed to do..." (p.5). Prior to Tamworth, she had lectured to the Queensland Authors and Artists Association on "Recent Trends in Australian Art" in 1941, but there is no evidence of formal teaching on a regular basis. On reflection, Fry doesn't comment on her love of teaching, the students or school life. She certainly doesn't volunteer comments about teaching, such as McCourt¹⁸⁵ has: "Going into a classroom is like going into a garden ...you are going into where there are young growing things, they're fresh and enthusiastic, and you have got to match them". Rather, Fry passes over the occupation and profiles the opportune meeting with her future husband's then wife, with whom she formed a friendship. Fry exhibits a similar attitude to her first part-time lecturing opportunity in Perth a few years later in 1949:

Professor Cameron, who was Dean of the Faculty of Education in the University, had always had a close association with the people in the Bank of New South Wales and he and his wife were very hospitable and very kind to us and he of course found out about my background of music and art, and because of that he asked me if I would give some lectures on art for the students in the Faculty. (1986, p.7)

¹⁸⁵ Frank McCourt in an interview with Geoff Elliott 'Out of the Ashes', *The Weekend Australian*, 'Review' November 12-13, 2005 pp.4-6.

Fry displays no excitement at the prospect of teaching, no passion for enhancing knowledge or working with young people, and in fact assigns all altruistic motives to Cameron: “he had the vision to realise that there was need for the arts in true education. That education shouldn’t be just a narrow field, that it should be as broad as possible and should contain these extra humanities” (pp.7-8). Fry continues to quote Cameron, rather than talking about herself, and reads to Reid an excerpt of an article¹⁸⁶ he wrote about Fry’s positive contributions to the Faculty.

In hindsight her recollections give the impression of frustration. The facilities and equipment at the university were poor and the students’ prior knowledge of art seemed non-existent:

...there was difficulty because the teaching of art in the schools at that time was very restricted. The students had very little knowledge. I had worked terribly hard thinking ‘this is a university, I really must get the highest standard I possible can and I found that they didn’t know of artists’ names. (1986, p.9)

Fry would have found this lack of understanding and prior knowledge quite out of character given her own secondary experience studying art under Cottew. To help the art appreciation students understand better, Fry ran some painting classes for them so they could actually experience what it was like to be an artist. In 1952 Fry commenced lectures on the history and development of music and included a demonstration recital. She also took Adult Education classes on art and music in 1949, ’50 and ’57. At the 22nd Annual Adult Education Summer School she was quoted as making two quite profound observations about society and education, which are still relevant almost sixty years later:

In considering the contribution [of art] to Australian life we are faced with realisation of apathy and material values ... Better education is required for the attainment of a cultured community.¹⁸⁷

Again, in her interview recollections, Fry’s emphasis was on the other lecturers (in the latter case, Doran and James) rather than on the actual practice of teaching or a passion for the profession. This attitude could be attributed to an approach which avoids self-

¹⁸⁶ The Educand, Vol.1 No.3.

¹⁸⁷ ‘Australian Art, Music and Literature’, *The West Australian*, 13 January, 1950.

aggrandisement or self-promotion (a frequent trait of women) and it does not necessarily equate with a lack of interest in education. In fact, I believe Fry saw education as immensely important, but personally she may have lacked a calling for the vocation. While she would no doubt have been remunerated for her teaching, this also is never mentioned and doesn't ever seem to be a reason to either continue to lecture or cease¹⁸⁸.

Fry wasn't employed again in her life as a teacher or lecturer, however she did continue with a personal commitment to education programmes through her involvement with the Art Gallery Society giving public lectures and indirectly through the support and development of Gallery initiatives while she was Chairman, including expansion of Gallery staff from one assistant Education Officer to a Senior Education Officer and two Education Officers by 1980. Fry also wrote her book *Gallery Images* during the end of her term as a trustee about the Gallery's collection, thereby fulfilling one of her long standing preoccupations to make the Gallery and its collection more accessible for people: "hopefully to encourage people to get more ideas themselves about what they are looking at" (1986, p.29). Evidently the guides found it so useful that they asked Fry to stay on after her retirement as an Honorary Research Officer, which she noted: "will be a tremendous interest to me of course" (1986, p.29). An important personal innovation for the Gallery was Fry's 'box scheme' which was an attempt to interest people in the country by sending groups of prints out in boxes with descriptions and little lectures which people could use in groups as at that time there were very few country areas involved in the arts¹⁸⁹. This scheme was a forerunner of the now commonplace touring exhibitions.

This concept of making art (and music) readily accessible to as many people as possible is a specific example of the fundamental objective of 'equitable access' in educational philosophy which pervades developed countries. So while Fry does not appear to have an enthusiastic passion for the act of teaching, she certainly exhibited a life-long commitment to the worth of education and the important place it holds in developing an aesthetically rich, tolerant and sophisticated society.

¹⁸⁸ When Professor Sanders took over from Professor Cameron, he discontinued the art lectures.

¹⁸⁹ The first state regional gallery in Geraldton wasn't opened until 1984.

Governance as a philanthropic profession?

In July 1986, Fry states in her interview with Reid that:

The royalties from the book [*Gallery Images*] I'm making over to the Art Gallery for acquisitions and that is the start of what I hope will be in future a significant Ella Fry Foundation, because I will leave anything I can leave to the Gallery and this building up of the royalties is the beginning of that foundation. (1986, p.29)

Just six months later, in January 1987, Fry writes her embargoed account of difficulties associated with her chairmanship, discussed previously in Part III. Whatever happened during that six months resulted in Fry's intended bequest being withdrawn from the Art Gallery and made over to the Western Australian Ballet¹⁹⁰ and a wildlife conservation fund¹⁹¹. Whatever happened to sour the relationship between herself and her beloved Gallery fits the observation that donors do not give to organisations because organisations have needs; they give because organisations meet needs (Sprinkel Grace, 1997). It is of interest that Fry seemingly chose an arts organisation she had no prior active association with other than as a subscriber¹⁹², and the Ballet was not mentioned in her interview or any other sources; maybe it was because of this lack of direct association that she did favour them, as she had a love of ballet and an admiration for the WA Ballet Company (Henderson, 2007). One could speculate that she had donated significant time and energy to music and arts organisations throughout her life and had neglected dance as an art form. Her love of the natural landscape and its flora and fauna comes through in her writing, her artwork and her collection of personal photographs in the Battye Library, so her bequest to a conservation organisation is not such an unusual or unexpected outcome.

Board governance is a hot topic in management and leadership literature of recent times, however it was not as regulated, scrutinised or seen as a professional career at the time Fry sat on the Board of the Art Gallery of Western Australia. There were certainly more

¹⁹⁰ Despite a number of requests through various channels I have been unable to obtain any information from the WA Ballet about her bequest, other than the fact it is acknowledged on their programmes.

¹⁹¹ Helen Henderson believes Fry left something to a wildlife conservation fund in addition to the Ballet. Fry certainly had an ongoing love for Australian flora and fauna; in 1966 she gave an address at the WA Liberal Party's State Women's Council entitled "Animals in our Country and their Right to Live".

¹⁹² Henderson, 2005.

blurred lines between management's responsibilities and those of the trustees, evidenced by the role the Board played in appointing staff to the Gallery. However, I do not wish here to investigate governance as a condition, but rather look at how Fry approached this voluntary role and the part it played in facilitating her contributions to the arts in Western Australia. It is important to also bear in mind that Fry, as a woman, was alone in this situation and in a man's world. Kerber notes that historically men have never had a proper sphere, since their sphere has been the world and all its activities, with the specific allocation of the public sector to men and the private sector (still under men's control) to women. She also cites the force of opposition that women met when they sought public influence, with some meeting unprecedented hostility and resistance that seemed disproportionate to the circumstances (1997, pp.3,7,13). Traditional male power constructs were inverted in this scenario and as such may well have created additional unrest and tension. Fry certainly had her laudable successes as Chairman, but the lack of respect afforded to her by senior management was unprofessional and indicative of their attitude to a woman in an important leadership position in a male sphere.¹⁹³

In 1977 Fry, as Chairman of the Board, signed the contract to build a new art gallery. From that moment there were problems with the gallery staff owing to the Director's inaction and lack of direction. To supervise the transition and to effect the move of staff to the reconstituted Administration Centre in James Street, an Acting Administrator was appointed from the Public Service Board. The Building had been beautifully restored and provided for new offices, library, theatre and a new Board Room. With the appointment of a new Director, Frank Ellis, in 1978, there was also a growth in staff generally, reflecting the renewed energy and activity of the Gallery. The Board also increased from five members to seven. Fry comments that:

...it was a good balance of talents ... art knowledge and interests, financial expertise and experience of Government departmental procedures ... they really all were wonderfully supportive and devoted and dedicated to the Art Gallery and working for it. (1986, pp.20-1)

¹⁹³ Sampson and Henderson note that this disrespect shown to Fry by key senior managerial staff also extended to the entire board and in their view would not support an exclusively chauvinistic reason for the approach taken by management (2007). However, my own experience of chauvinistic behaviour exhibited on occasion by some curators in question is at odds with their view.

With the staff happily relocated, work continued on the new Gallery. O’Ferrall notes that: “Fry’s role was pivotal in successfully seeing this project to fruition through its various development stages and 1979 opening” (1997). The architect was Charles Sierakowski¹⁹⁴, who Fry described as a “very sensitive and artistic man who we were very, very fortunate to have because he had worked in galleries and understood the needs” (1986, p.22-3). She found it important to appoint an architect who was sensitive to the needs of a public cultural environment, who had worked with similar spaces previously and who was prepared to listen and work with stakeholders to achieve the best outcomes. Fry commented on the new Art Gallery of Western Australia when it opened: “the building is a splendid building. It’s a warm, welcoming building and it also works very well ... and it’s a comfortable building” (1986, p.21). The emphasis here is that she wanted the public or *social* spaces of the building to be just as important as the building’s functionality.

The new Art Gallery of Western Australia opened in 1979 and was the state government’s 150th anniversary contribution to the people of Perth. It received numerous awards¹⁹⁵ and celebrations went on for a week with ten different exhibitions launched as part of the festivities. At the official opening Fry announced that:

With this building Perth need not be excluded in future from any major or precious exhibitions which come to Australia, as had to happen in the past.

This would have been a major accomplishment and development, not only for art in Western Australia, but also for the profile of Perth and the state both nationally and internationally. In conjunction with the wonderful new spaces created, increased staff and exhibition potential, Fry formed subcommittees to involve staff more in acquisitions, buildings, finance, human resources and extension services. Each was chaired by a Board member, with Fry as ex-officio on each one. She saw this as a way of maintaining contact with an expanded enterprise, but also the beginning of a better

¹⁹⁴ The Main Gallery Building was designed by Public Works Architect K. Charles Sierakowski, structural engineer Philip Nadebaum and private architectural firm, Summerhayes and Associates.

¹⁹⁵ The WA Engineering Award for Structural Engineering 1979; The Engineering Award for Electrical and Associated Building Services 1980; Award for the use of Concrete and Masonry 1980; BRMA Award for Excellence of Structure 1982; Bronze Medal Award for Total Architectural Excellence 1983.

relationship with management. Fry was keen not to lose touch with all aspects of the Gallery's work, but also wanted to restore harmonious relationships.

Friends of Fry have commented on how well she engaged with people and to achieve what she did, through so many committees and activities, this must have been the case. In a media tribute to Fry¹⁹⁶, Sampson is quoted saying:

She was Chairman at a critical time in the Gallery's transfer to its new building and she was concerned for the welfare of everybody who worked there. Her interest was in people as much as it was in art.

Further improvements were planned for the Gallery in 1982 when the Police Court Building in Beaufort Street was made available. Fry was quite excited about the next expansion to enable more exhibition spaces and a sculpture court "for recreation and general enjoyment of people" and she attributes the success of the planning to the staff on her new building committee (1986, p.26). Unfortunately, these plans weren't realised during her time on the Board.



The Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth

Fry was also focussed on the philanthropic potential created by the general public's enthusiasm for the new Gallery. Previously, the Gallery had received a number of

¹⁹⁶ 'WA arts loses great supporter', *The West Australian*, 21 May, 1997 p.5.

bequests and gifts¹⁹⁷ and she was astute enough to realise the distinction between levels of gifts and noted: “there were certainly more important ones then because there is an honour board in the foyer so that people who make substantial gifts can see that they are recorded and they are given recognition” (1986, p.22). Churcher noted that Australian galleries did not enjoy the great philanthropic attention that international institutions did from benefactors such as the Hapsburgs, Romanovs, Rockefellers or Mellons, so there were no significant collections at their core (other than perhaps the Felton Bequest in Victoria) and there was very little buying power (Trioli, 2007).

Fry endeavoured to address these issues and oversaw the establishment of the Great Australian Paintings Appeal in 1977 with a representative committee from business and professional interests in Perth. Fry would have been well positioned at this time, owing to her own reputation and people she knew through her husband’s interests, to assemble a committee of highly influential and effective fundraisers. The committee raised \$620,000 to fill gaps in the collection to make it more representative of Australian painting¹⁹⁸. It was white Australian painting, especially colonial and impressionist works, which were targeted, rather than indigenous art – a decision not uncommon for institutions’ acquisition policies that time. While the Board may not have been actively fundraising to collect indigenous art yet, it was certainly exhibiting it and on 4 October, 1979 Fry opened the exhibition *Art of the Western Desert*. In her speech she said:

This building is a culmination of many dreams and plans ... it would not be appropriate to open this state gallery without due reference to the first people of Australia.

She also significantly announced that the new building was to have a permanent indigenous exhibition. This was in keeping with her views expressed nearly thirty years earlier on the need to explore aboriginal art as a distinctive type¹⁹⁹.

¹⁹⁷ An original bequest was from Annie Barker of £3,000, then many years later one from J.F. Hardy and the Hotchin Foundation in 1972, which became a large bequest in 1978. The Zinc Foundation assisted the sculpture collection from 1980.

¹⁹⁸ Board minutes show works proposed for acquisition in 1978 include McCubbin’s *Moyes Bay*, *Beaumaris*, Glover’s *Patterdale Farm*, *Van Diemen’s Land*, Davies’ *Afterglow*, Roberts’ *Dewy eve*, and Ashton’s *George Street*.

¹⁹⁹ Article on the 22nd Annual Adult Education Summer School, ‘Australian Art, Music and Literature’, *The West Australian*, 13 January, 1950.

It is worth focussing on the collection and Fry's view of it at this point. In 1950 she made a very brave statement to *The West Australian* that "too many pictures in Australian galleries today were the 'pathetic' works of the 19th century". In 1984 she is quoted by the same newspaper talking about the Art Gallery of Western Australia: "It's a good collection, she says with some satisfaction". Sadka goes on to report that:

She is justifiably proud ... They have taken the collection from its brave beginnings in 1895, through years of financial drought to the comparative prosperity of the last few decades.

Fry's reign as Chairman saw her develop the Gallery into a competitive and enviable public exhibition space, supported with an equally impressive complementary collection. Major international acquisitions included Rodin's sculpture of *Adam*, Spencer's *Christ in the Wilderness* series, Kirchner's *Woman in Hat* and Maillol's *Marie*. Generally, Fry's personal collection strategy was to ensure the works represented the broadest range possible within the budget available. This meant that prints and drawings of the great masters were preferable to leaving gaps in the chronology. Galleries today tend to specialise more²⁰⁰ rather than spread their collection funds too thinly, but Fry was of an era when it was still possible to achieve her vision "to show the development of art generally in Australia and throughout the world" (Sadka, 1984). There had evidently been some complaints that the Gallery was not supporting Western Australian artists perhaps as enthusiastically as the artists thought it should be and so the Gallery implemented a support programme for younger, or emerging, artists whose work was not of a calibre to go into the permanent collection, but would form a special 'extension' collection. When Guy Grey-Smith died in 1981 it became known as the 'Guy Grey-Smith Memorial Collection'.²⁰¹

In 1983 the Board employed a management consultant to undertake a review of the administration of the Gallery. Sampson recalls that in conjunction with the big changes in the growth of the Gallery, the Board was also trying to define what the Gallery was and its relationship to the rest of Australia and the world. Its location in Perth made it

²⁰⁰ For example, the Queensland Art Gallery has now for some years concentrated on actively collecting the art of South East Asia through the Asia Pacific Triennials.

²⁰¹ Fry responded to a criticism made by Richard Japas at a public forum, that there had been no exhibitions by Western Australian artists in the Gallery for ten years, by personally going through the records to confirm that in fact forty shows by local artists had been staged.

closer to Jakarta than Sydney, for example. Sampson also confirms that the Board was not telling the curatorial staff what to do, nor was it making curatorial decisions, but rather sought a responsible collection policy (2005). Fry notes that:

...the consultant advised and we agreed entirely that there should be more staff involvement in decision making and committees were formed of just the staff, instead of having the other ones which were joint Board and staff. (1986, p.27)

Fry was obviously receptive to the advice and comfortable to make the change to move the Board's role to one more associated with today's governance structures (for example to oversee policy) and allowing management the responsibility for the daily operations of the organisation. She goes on to confirm this:

What was advised and what was wanted was a more democratic form of administration ... a very great need for better communication ... we wanted to see it implemented, we hoped [it] would improve all the conditions generally.

It was also at this time that the Board began to consolidate the objectives of the Gallery through what would amount to 'strategic planning' in today's jargon. For a woman with no female counterparts in the country, no formal governance experience other than with the Gallery and leading a public institution experiencing substantial expansion, Fry was receptive to change, keen for staff involvement in the process and eager to articulate a shared vision with key stakeholders for what the Gallery could and should be in the future.



Ella Fry and Christine Deer outside the Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1984

At this time, as had been the case in other parts of Australia, regional galleries were considered for the major cities in the state. To begin with, these fell under the state gallery's administration; Geraldton opened in 1984, followed later by Bunbury, Kalgoorlie and Albany. As Chairman of a Board busy developing the state gallery, Fry's own leadership and administrative capabilities were proven with many of these adjunct projects occurring simultaneously. The troubles began when three trustees' terms expired in 1984 and there was no government decision made on either appointments or reappointments for eleven months. In what would be an untenable situation in today's governance practice, the three trustees in question continued to attend meetings to provide expertise and support, but without voting rights. If an appointed trustee was absent, there was no quorum. This would have been an extremely difficult period of chairmanship.

Fry specifically wants to state her own view about what a gallery should be in her interview with Reid, rather than leave the corporatised Gallery objectives to stand alone:

I do want to record my very strong feeling that the Gallery is something which must be part of the community. The Gallery is not an ivory tower. (1986, p.30)

The accessibility of art by the people is what had underpinned her own committee work, publishing projects and participation in music recitals and art exhibitions; the philanthropist and educator at heart, who worked to achieve cultural enhancement and equity of availability for as many as possible. While there had been criticisms of the Gallery for not exhibiting enough work by local artists, in general the actual exhibition programme disproved this; there was also criticism from curators who objected to 'blockbusters', a feature of all state gallery programmes in more recent times. In 1981 the Premier²⁰² wrote to Fry congratulating her on the opening of the Pompeii AD79 exhibition and went on to comment:

I am very conscious of the burden that you and your colleagues, and some of your senior staff, such as the Director, have been carrying in recent months. Let us hope that is all behind us now. Maybe Pompeii AD79 was what was needed to divert attention away from the controversy that some ill-advised people have been

²⁰² Sir Charles Court, 31 October 1981.

generating and remind the community what a wonderful art gallery we have. It should also remind them that we are now on the international circuit and are no longer a backwater so far as exhibitions of this nature are concerned.

Obviously there were still some difficulties about showing these blockbusters some three years later, mainly owing to the prohibitive costs associated with transportation across the Nullarbor. Fry proudly notes that while the problem didn't lie in visitation – she told Sadka in 1984 that on a per capita basis audiences were “way ahead” of other states – the issue was one of time coupled with mammoth transport costs and “no-one could hate it – or resent it – as much as I do”.

Fry showed tremendous courage in maintaining a steady and even-handed approach to the Gallery's exhibition calendar by acknowledging that the blockbuster (such as the *Entombed Warriors, Pompeii AD79* and the *Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection*) “brought people to the Gallery who would not normally come, which can only be a good thing because they may see other exhibitions and return again” (1986). Fry exclaimed:

There's a feeling among some of the more precious that the blockbusters are not good because they are just popular. But, for heavens sake, what's the good of having a building if you don't have people coming into it. (Sadka, 1984)

Churcher, similarly, commenced her directorship at the National Gallery of Australia with a blockbuster: *Rubens and the Italian Renaissance*; she subsequently became known as “Betty Blockbuster” for her commitment to this type of exhibition. Like Fry, she saw the blockbuster as an opportunity to bring the very best of the world's art to as wide an audience as possible. Churcher also had to respond to criticism that by placing time and expertise into large international shows, the institution was neglecting its own collections. Her response was not unlike Fry's:

My aim with those exhibitions was that the exhibition money [would be] put into an exhibition development fund, and that was to fund those very exhibitions, or exhibitions that weren't going to make money ... but they were worth doing. (Trioli, 2007)

Fry agreed that while blockbusters encourage wide attendance and engagement, focussed exhibitions that are esoteric in nature, which value new research and scholarship, and which are penetrating in their artistic investigations are also necessary:

It should be remembered that even the smallest beginning of awareness may lead to better understanding and the knowledge that art can meet a deeply felt human need.
(Reid, 1986 p.32)

It must have been extremely painful for Fry to reach a situation where her chairmanship was unable to lead a Board which effectively managed key senior staff. Throughout her interview with Reid she maintained a positive stance on her relationship with trustees and their success as a governing body. However, right at the end she comments, seemingly dispassionately:

Difficult times or not, they were all quite excellent until recently. In spite of the willingness of some members to take action to remedy an unsatisfactory situation the Board, as constituted, became a weak one. (1986, p 25, 32)

In her embargoed documents, Fry outlines a number of unsettling incidents, such as discrepancies in the financial reports and occurrences of overspending. A decision was taken to suspend expenditure until the accounts had been checked, which infuriated the senior staff and led to a hostile atmosphere between management and the Board. Management also became hostile with the government and, according to Fry, the Director refused to take instruction from the Minister. Throughout her chairmanship, Fry had on-going issues with her Directors (Norton, Whittle and Ellis) in one way or another. While she most certainly was keen to create an environment to allow staff to work collaboratively with each other and with the Board, the Directors were less than co-operative, according to her embargoed account.

Of interest are comments made by Ellis about Fry in a letter written to the Order of Australia Honours Secretariat in October, 1986. He endorses her nomination in a most positive and appreciative way:

Mrs Fry devoted almost all her time and energy to the Art Gallery. Her training in both art and music ... encouraged a broader range of activities ... placing it well ahead amid changing social and educational roles of cultural institutions.

Ellis continues to list specific accomplishments, no doubt realising that as Director during this time, he would also fall within this limelight. His choice of words in conclusion perhaps go some way towards ameliorating what must have been a difficult ending to their relationship, particularly as we have seen from Fry's perspective. Ellis ends his letter:

The proposed award ... would be widely endorsed by the community in Perth and appropriately confirm to Mrs Fry our appreciation of her services.

This was written from Ellis's new position as Director of the Burnie Art Gallery in Tasmania and certainly seems to be an attempt on his part at recognising Fry's significant contributions to the cultural life of Perth from the vantage point of distance and a new appointment.

It was during the final fiasco with Frank Ellis in 1986 that Fry reveals for the first time diminished confidence in her own ability to resolve the problem:

To avoid causing further harm to the Gallery by arousing another controversy and perhaps seeming to be carrying out a personal vendetta, I felt my statement to the Board of 5 February, 1986 ... was the only responsible procedure I could adopt.
(24 April, 1986)

Fry takes the matter personally and takes sole responsibility, rather than taking it as a Board resolution. She protects the institution she loves, rather than protecting herself. With no improvement in the circumstances, or progress, coupled with her decision to resign from the Board, she despairs at the unfortunate timing of the Minister's announcement of the Director's resignation (finally):

This premature announcement unfortunately allowed the Director to claim victimisation and led to unpleasant publicity ... after making unfounded accusations that there had always been a fight between us ... (14 January, 1987)

Reading the full transcripts, it appears she personally shouldered much of the load and responsibility to improve the directorships of the Gallery and wore the brunt of the vitriol from the directors and some curators as a result.

Ellis composed an interesting short paragraph in his 1986 letter regarding Fry's life and her emotional state at the time. His inclusion of subjective comments in a document intended to support an award nomination²⁰³ give us an insight into how he viewed his Chairman:

Mrs Fry's dedication to the Art Gallery left little scope for alternative interests. We did not discuss this but I believe she suffered increasing dread as the end of her term approached.

This is an unnecessary addition to correspondence intended to confirm Fry's status as an important Australian, who made significant and successful contributions to public life. Ellis's words are unfortunate and are irrelevant when citing thirty years of committed service to a major cultural institution. Perhaps it tells us more about Ellis's character and his personal opinion of Fry. Therefore, it is likely that the difficult relationship Fry had with Ellis, combined with the ineffectiveness and inaction of the government, that resulted in a situation at the end of her term that was so protracted, unhappy and unsatisfactory. Fry was hurt, exhausted, despondent and angry. Her transcripts are written purposely to set the record straight and to avenge her actions and reputation. In the May 1986 Art Gallery of Western Australia News Brochure, Fry announced her retirement in a quite philosophical way by quoting an anecdote:

...the great naturalist painter Tunnicliffe²⁰⁴, who, at the age of 78, with failing eyesight and after a life of enormous output, one day laid aside his pens and brushes and said 'Ah've done me whack'. I haven't yet reached that advanced age but the sentiment is the same.

Fry remains at the time of writing, the only woman to chair the board of a state gallery in Australia for a full term, let alone for ten years²⁰⁵. Another coincidence which has

²⁰³ The letter, dated 16 October, 1986, was written to the Honours Secretariat in Canberra to support a proposed award in the Order of Australia; Ellis was not the nominator and Fry did not receive an award.

²⁰⁴ Charles Frederick Tunnicliffe (1901-1979) British painter.

²⁰⁵ My enquiries directed to all Australian state galleries revealed that many records regarding trustees and annual reports prior to 1950 are often incomplete. The only other woman Chair I could confirm was

occurred recently, reflecting the uncanny similarities between Fry's life and my own path, is that I have also been appointed as a trustee of a state art gallery²⁰⁶.

Perhaps the thirty years over which Fry volunteered her time, energy, ideas and expertise to the Art Gallery of Western Australia, moving it forward, creating a new building, increasing its profile and staff expertise, improving the collection and its reputation, provided her with a 'career' in a socially acceptable manner in an historical sense as discussed at the outset of this Part. The observation that: "Human beings need institutions – they make use of them as much as they serve them" (Revel in Ricoeur, 2004 p.220) perhaps holds true for Fry. The Gallery became her main focus, especially after the death of her husband, and no doubt provided a substantial vehicle through which she lived out a great many of her life interests. Perhaps it was the length of Fry's tenure which created the condition for her personal growth to be linked to the development of the institution, and that the betrayal of trust at the end was so impossible to bear and total excommunication was the only bearable outcome.

All history is written backwards ... We choose a significant event and examine its causes and its consequences, but who decides whether the event is significant? We do, and we are here; and it and its participants are there. They are long gone; at the same time they are in our hands.

(Margaret Atwood, 1994)

the appointment of Lady Jane Edwards to the Queensland Art Gallery board for one year, 1998-9, when Mr Ian Callinan QC resigned. Lady Edwards was replaced by Mr Wayne Goss, a previous Premier.

²⁰⁶ I was appointed to the Art Gallery of Queensland board in February, 2008.

PART V

THE INHERITANCE

As we approached Perth darkness was falling so I saw little of it ... The Swan River here is much more like a series of lakes and gives Perth a delightful setting with its clear expanses of water. Now we must settle down to work, but I have a feeling that the urge to wander will return...

(Ella Fry, 1947)



Fantasy 4, 1994

Heritage not history?

This final Part is about positioning Fry in the wider context of the art world in Australia, and particularly as a woman. I will discuss the role of the curator/writer, art institutions, the retrospective exhibition and suggest some ideas about what we have, as contemporary women (and men), inherited as a result of the drive, determination and success of women, such as Fry.

In 1995 Joan Kerr²⁰⁷ edited the National Women's Art Book *Heritage*. Kerr's deliberate choice of title was intentionally set in direct gender opposition to the 'masculine' word *history* and her unashamed intention to invert the traditional male/female ratio. Perhaps most poignantly she states in the *Introduction*:

... the result – the sense of a community of women actively working throughout Australia to create an artistic heritage which interacted with all facets of artistic life ... gives the book a value that is unique.

Further, Kerr asserted that despite there being no denial of the existence of the “creative woman” in history, whether in 1890 or 1990 she was transformed into a footnote when her day was past (pp.vi-ix).

In 1999 Helen Henderson and Michael O'Ferrall nominated Fry for a St George's Terrace Bronze Commemorative Plaque as part of the City of Perth's initiative to recognise significant citizens. Their nomination was for the decade 1980-89 and their submission outlined that it would be fitting recognition of “Fry's tremendous contribution to music and the arts in Western Australia that spanned a period of 50 years”. They cited the major year of contribution being 1980, following the opening of the new Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1979, when under her “dynamic leadership and guidance the board and staff developed and implemented an ambitious programme to bring the Art Gallery to the forefront of Australian cultural life”. Needless to say, the nomination was unsuccessful - perhaps it was the lethal combination of being a *woman* in *the arts* that made Fry's significant public contributions unworthy and invisible – or at best a footnote.

In art circles, regardless of the fact that there has been a vast increase in women curators, writers, administrators and lecturers in public institutions in recent times, there have been only selective achievements in retrieving and celebrating the contributions of women active in the art world from the past. Kerr raged: “are women artists always to be the pilgrims who never progress” and, most significantly for the purposes of this

²⁰⁷ Joan Kerr (1938-2004) was an art historian and writer on Australian art, architecture and culture. Her primary contribution was as the editor of two biographical art dictionaries, the *Dictionary of Australian Artists, Painters, Sketchers, Photographers and Engravers to 1870* (Melbourne, 1992) and *Heritage: The National Women's Art Book* (Sydney, 1995).

critical biography on Fry, who of course does merit an entry in *Heritage*, “the moral is clear: past women artists have to be retrieved and reinstated to give their descendants a future.” Kerr is not about a rescue mission or the heroic model, but rather about righting the oversights and bringing the missing noteworthy women to recognition in the art canon. In response to Kerr’s impassioned plea, there has been an increase in retrospectives rediscovering Australian women artists since her 1995 book including: Kathleen O’Connor²⁰⁸, Clarice Beckett²⁰⁹, Hilda Rix Nicholas²¹⁰, Nora Heysen²¹¹, Joy Hester²¹², Alison Rehfisch²¹³, Stella Bowen²¹⁴, Margo Lewers²¹⁵, Thea Proctor²¹⁶, Margaret Preston²¹⁷, Grace Cossington Smith²¹⁸, Jean Bellette²¹⁹ and most recently Grace Crowley²²⁰.

The retrospective, the reflection, the history, the heritage, ‘herstory’. Mohanty cites Morgan’s view of history as a male construction:

...what women need is herstory, separate and outside of his-story ... the fact that women are representationally absent from history does not mean that they were not significant social actors in history. (2003, p.113)

Women artists are and were actively part of the art historical canon, just not always visible in its record. The curated retrospective is similar to a written critical biography. It tells the story of an artist’s life reflectively, subjectively and predominantly through

²⁰⁸ *Chasing Shadows: The Art of Kathleen O’Connor Exhibition*, Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1996; Curator Janda Gooding.

²⁰⁹ *Politically Incorrect* Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne, 6 August – 19 September, 1999; Curator Rosalind Hollinrake.

²¹⁰ *Hilda Rix Nicholas: Her Life and Art 1884-1961*, Savill Galleries, Sydney, 1-31 August, 2000.

²¹¹ *Nora Heysen Exhibition*, National Library of Australia, 25 October 2000- 28 January, 2001; Curator Lou Klepac.

²¹² *Joy Hester and Friends*, National Gallery of Australia, 1 September – 28 October, 2001; Curator Deborah Hart.

²¹³ *Alison Rehfisch 1900-1975 An Artist’s Life*, S.H. Ervin Gallery 20 April – 26 May, 2002; Curator Jane Watters.

²¹⁴ *Stella Bowen: Art, Love and War*, Art Gallery of South Australia 9 July – 29 September, 2002; Curator Lola Wilkins.

²¹⁵ *Margot Lewers Retrospective*, S.H. Ervin Gallery August – 15 September, 2002.

²¹⁶ *The World of Thea Proctor*, Old Parliament House, Canberra, 8 April – 31 July, 2005; Curator Andrew Sayers.

²¹⁷ *Margaret Preston: Art and Life*, Art Gallery of NSW, 29 July – 23 October, 2005; Curator Deborah Edwards.

²¹⁸ *Cossington Smith: A Retrospective Exhibition*, National Gallery of Australia, 4 March – 13 June 2005; Curator Deborah Edwards.

²¹⁹ *Jean Bellette Retrospective* Bathurst Regional Gallery, 10 December, 2004 – 16 January, 2005; Curator Christine France.

²²⁰ *Grace Crowley: Being Modern* National Gallery of Australia 23 December, 2006 – 6 May, 2007; Curator Elena Taylor.

pictures, rather than words. While I will discuss later in this Part how two women artists' retrospectives relate and compare to my research on Fry, it is worth making the point here about the value of an art retrospective, with the accompanying catalogue essay or monograph, as a restorative genre when considering women's lives as part of our heritage.

No-one consults an archive apart from some project of explanation, without some hypothesis of understanding. And no-one undertakes to explain a course of events without making use of some express form of narrative, rhetorical or imaginative character. (Ricoeur 2004, p.135)

The personal connections enriching herstory?

Perhaps in bringing this critical biography to a climax it is relevant and necessary to revisit the personal connections between women: particularly the similarities between my own career and interests with those of Fry, and to review other similar recent revelations by women in the arts. It seems that the revival of scholarly and artistic interest in the lives and careers of women has been, not surprisingly, predominantly undertaken by women, about women they feel have been overlooked, ignored and/or forgotten, or who perhaps need reviewing by fresh, usually female eyes. For the purposes of this comparison – between the intent of this critical biography and the phenomenon of an art retrospective – it is also first necessary to look at the role an institution plays in supporting the curatorship and the exhibition of a woman's art.

The funding for an exhibition frequently relies on the initiating institution attracting corporate sponsorship and government grant monies; corporate sponsors are invariably interested in the impact the proposed exhibition will have on gallery attendances through its predicted popularity; the success of accompanying public programmes and likely media interest - in other words, a 'value for dollar' resulting in a desirable profile for the company and reinforced brand awareness. Government grant monies are frequently aimed at supporting the arts worker, rather than providing assistance to enhance scholarship and research. These critical factors impact on whether the applicant institution will actually elect to support an exhibition proposal which may seek to reveal

a little-known woman and her art, in preference to, for example, mounting a show about an established, well-known artist or a group show with a catchy, popular theme.

An arts institution which has played a pivotal role over the past thirty years as a renowned supporter of Australian women artists is the National Trust's S.H. Ervin Gallery²²¹ in Sydney. The Gallery's eclectic collection includes the S.H. Ervin Bequest, the Alan Renshaw Bequest and the Mavis E. Cope Bequest, as well as many other gifts and acquisitions. The full collection comprises over four hundred items which provide a unique insight to the social and cultural mores of early and modern Sydney. Works by women artists such as Thea Proctor, Margaret Preston, Nora Heysen, Adelaide Perry, Gladys Gibbons, Ailsa Lee Brown, Ethel Carrick Fox and Portia Geach are represented and the Gallery hosts the notable Portia Geach Memorial Award²²² for portraits by women artists each year. The S.H. Ervin Gallery has a reputation for holding exhibitions profiling not only Australian art, but the work of Australian women artists; these have included Clarice Beckett, Violet Teague, Kathleen O'Connor, Margot Lewers, Jean Bellette, Alison Rehfisch and more recently Margaret Olley. The Gallery has also enjoyed a continuous administration by women directors and curators (no doubt influencing this focus on women), including Dinah Dysart, Anne Loxley, Sarah Thomas, Katrina Rumley, Jo Holder, Jane Watters and myself.

²²¹ The S.H. Ervin Gallery is operated by the National Trust (NSW) and its historic building situated on Observatory Hill dates from 1856, when it was designed by Henry Robertson as additional classroom accommodation for the expanding Fort Street School (which later became Fort Street Girl's School in 1916). The school operated on the site until the early 1970s. Around this time, philanthropist and collector, Samuel Henry Ervin offered a bequest for the establishment of a public art gallery committed to the display of Australian art. The National Trust secured the lease of the former Fort Street Girls' School buildings from the NSW Department of Public Works. Following restoration of the buildings, the S. H. Ervin Gallery was officially opened in May 1978.

²²² Portia Geach (1873-1959) was born in Melbourne and studied at the National Gallery School. She worked tirelessly for women's causes while establishing herself primarily as a portrait painter. The Award, initiated by her sister, Florence Kate Geach, has not only provided financial assistance to women artists over the years, but has greatly raised the profile of women's art in Australia.



The National Trust (NSW) S.H. Ervin Gallery, Observatory Hill, Sydney

My introduction to the S.H. Ervin Gallery²²³ was the exhibition celebrating the twentieth anniversary of International Women’s Year: *Trust the Women: Works by Women in National Trust Collections*. In Kerr’s preface to the exhibition catalogue she notes that ever since the National Trust of Australia began showing properties to the public, the contents have included an unusually high proportion by women. Kerr believed that this was no accident, but part of the Trust’s commitment to historical authenticity:

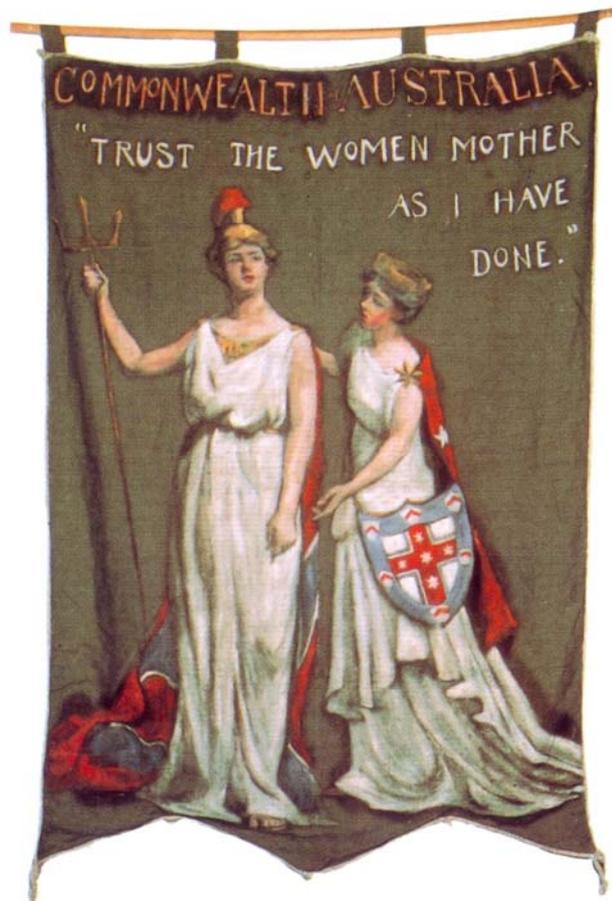
Women’s artistic practice never at any time ceased. Yet because feminine art was produced mainly in and for a domestic context, it remained unknown and invisible within the public world of art. Invisibility, however, is as often the fate of grand oil paintings by women as of their ceramics, curtains or doilies... (1995, p.7)

What the National Trust and the S.H. Ervin Gallery did was to breathe life back into Dora Meeson’s banner²²⁴ and ignite interest around Kerr’s argument that “women’s art was publicly appreciated only when it was seen as identical to men’s and then was typically judged emulative and inferior.” She also saw the exhibition as critical to encouraging the idea of the:

²²³ I was appointed as the Public Programmes Co-ordinator in 1995 and later that year appointed the Director, a position I held until May, 1997.

²²⁴ Dora Meeson (1869-1955) painted a banner with the slogan “Trust the Women Mother As I Have Done” which was carried by women of the Commonwealth of Australia in the June 1908 Suffrage Procession in London. Dale Spender recovered the banner from England and it is now on loan to Parliament House, Canberra. Brisbane Girls Grammar School owns Spender’s commemorative reproduction poster of the banner.

...potential for a history of women's art practice where *all* surviving evidence is eligible for inclusion, as opposed to the conventional art history where a few women's names are squeezed into an alien and uncomfortable institutional mould. (1995, p.10)



Dora Meeson *Trust the women mother as I have done*, 1908

The curator of the exhibition, Sarah Thomas, raised an important point about women which still resonates with currency today: “women in Australia have had a profound impact on their domestic environment in their traditional and often denigrated role as homemakers” (1995, p.15). Many women artists, and notably the ones relevant to this section (Beckett and Rehfisch), have through necessity juggled their domestic responsibilities with their art practice, unlike their male counterparts who *worked* and *lived* as artists.

Artists need a space to exhibit and, as previously noted, the S.H. Ervin Gallery has been especially supportive of women. Therefore it is no surprise that my professional, philosophical and personal links to this Gallery are so profound and important to this Part. It is appropriate to contextualise my research of Fry's life and work within the world of Australian women's art²²⁵ and the swelling tide of interest and documentation which is bringing similar women's stories to the public record. To illustrate this, I have chosen the endeavours by two contemporary women, Rosalind Hollinrake²²⁶ (curator) and Rachel Power²²⁷ (writer), who have rekindled the interest of the art world and general public in two women modernist painters, Clarice Beckett and Alison Rehfisch, both of whose retrospectives were exhibited at the S.H. Ervin Gallery.

Politically incorrect?

The connections between Hollinrake's interest in Beckett reflect similar sentiments to those I experienced with Fry: being attracted to the paintings in the first instance; recognising that the art couldn't be described as 'major' albeit worthy of note; and that the artist had been virtually forgotten. Hollinrake reminisces:

In 1965 I saw my first Clarice Beckett paintings. Their allure was instant even though they were two small works competing for attention ... I relished these powerful, contemporary looking little paintings. (1999, p.5)

Unlike Fry, Clarice Beckett (1887-1935) died at a young age, and was a prolific painter during those short years. Her works unintentionally heralded the urban subject matter of later women artists like Cossington Smith, and yet in some ways they also echo the Australian women impressionists before her. Beckett's style was unique and perhaps evolved this way as a result of her alienation from the art establishment. Beckett, like Fry, seems to have approached her work individually and the art world modestly - without fanfare - intent on her personal dedication to image-making, rather than self-aggrandisement. But, as Hollinrake points out (1999, p.6), "is a whisper less than a

²²⁵ I have intentionally excluded Australian Indigenous women artists from debates about the exclusion of women from art history in my thesis. There is a different story – one which is more pronounced in its exclusion and more political in its intent.

²²⁶ Rosalind Hollinrake curated the retrospective touring exhibition of Clarice Beckett's paintings *Politically Incorrect* which was held at the S.H. Ervin Gallery in Sydney, 24 April – 13 June, 1999.

²²⁷ Rachel Power (b.1973) is a freelance writer and artist living in Melbourne.

shout?”. While the reasons for Beckett’s slump into obscurity are more complex and absolute than Fry’s fate, Hollinrake nominates the key factor in her exile as her gender. Firstly, Beckett’s male contemporaries could have tolerated her talent and “prodigious output” were it contained to “flower pieces and indoor scenes”, however she chose to paint and miraculously transform the suburban landscape – subject matter reserved at that time for her male counterparts. Secondly, her association with the art teacher Max Meldrum, who was widely known to be difficult, meant the critics saw her as a “new and dangerous variety of Meldrumite” and was duly dropped from recorded art history until 1971 (1999, pp.8-9). Meldrum, in fact, admired Beckett’s work very much, but justified her success by rationalising that it was because she “worked like a man”. In general he claimed the commonly held view of his peers that “there would never be a great woman artist and there never had been ... women had not the capacity to be alone” (1999, p.14).



Clarice Beckett *Across the Yarra*, c.1931

Beckett’s upbringing had similarities with Fry’s; her family sang in a church choir and worked on committees; her mother, a hobbyist painter, went to great lengths to encourage her daughter by providing access to fine literature and music, which included piano lessons and a female drawing teacher; Beckett attended Melbourne Girls Grammar, where she was musically proficient and wrote poetry. Her later formal art training, like Fry’s, did not include the usual overseas pilgrimage to Paris to see ‘great’ art and learn from the masters. They both had the capacity to be alone and work alone – roundly dispelling Meldrum’s ridiculous blanket observation about women artists. They

both saw an affinity between music and art, with a notable observation by Beckett: “My pictures like music should speak for themselves” (1999, p.19). She, like Fry, titled works based in favourite musical compositions, such as her 1931 night pieces influenced by Chopin’s Nocturnes. In 1995, the art critic, Bruce James, wrote in *The Age* that Beckett’s paintings “are little evocations that build like musical phrases towards a greater and more compelling whole” (cited in Hollinrake, 1999 p.20). With the level of contentious critical review that Beckett’s work attracted during her lifetime, it is astounding that her impact, originality and productivity was so comprehensively forgotten after her death.

There are further comparisons in subject matter and technique that could be made between Fry and Beckett’s work – perhaps not least of which the appearance of solitary figures and winding empty roads or rivers – but the purpose here is not to compare and contrast, but rather to illustrate the tremendous service Hollinrake did to art history by rediscovering and researching Beckett’s life and work in order to enrich our understanding of not only the beauty of her artistic talent, but the impact her contemporary male artists, teachers and critics had on suppressing her existence. While Fry did not suffer negative critical scrutiny of her painting, she did attract criticism from some quarters of curatorial management at the Art Gallery of Western Australia – perhaps enough to ensure her work did not warrant remembering in the art history books.

A life for art?

As with Hollinrake and Beckett, there are connections with elements of Power’s discoveries about Alison Rehfisch, and coincidences with that of Fry’s circumstances and my own life, hearkening back to the quotation cited in Part I, that: “...many biographers, including feminist biographers, have acknowledged their deep personal identification with their subject” (Kimber, 2002 p.125). Alison Rehfisch, née Green (1900-1975), was an artist devoted to Australian Modernism, but largely overlooked except as one of a formidable group of women artists who flourished between the wars, instead of an artist with a “highly imaginative and industrious career spanning five decades” (Power, 2002). Barry Pearce notes in his *Foreword* that she had been

“conveniently packaged by art historians ... between the two world wars” and her later three decades of practice ignored (2002, p.7). Pearce also makes the point that unless an artist’s cause is taken up by a curator, they can remain lost – something true of many artists and certainly true for Beckett and Fry.

Power opens her monograph, subtitled *A Life for Art*, with the announcement that Rehfisch was a “thoroughly modern woman” with a heritage that ensured conditions were optimal for her to pursue a career in whatever field she chose. Her grandfather was a reformer who publicly proclaimed in 1880:

Make woman the equal of man, as nature has made her, with the same liberty to employ her faculties in whatever calling she likes, and for which they fit her, instead of closing up all avenues of life against her, except what are open due to the accident of sex and making her alternately the plaything and slave of men, and you will lay the foundation for a social emancipation, greater than any the world has yet seen. (2002, p.8)

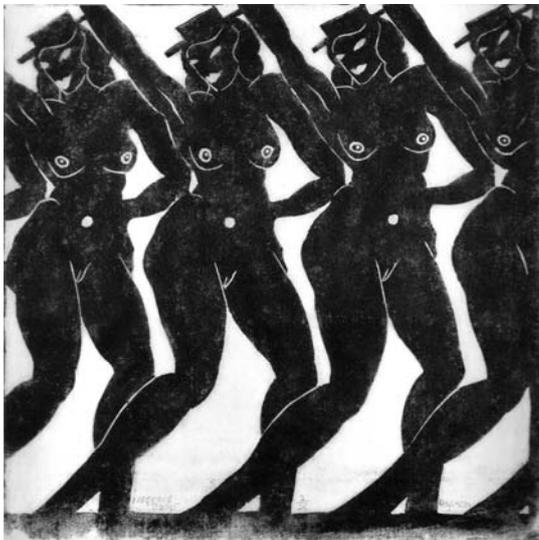
As with Fry and Beckett, Rehfisch’s mother reportedly exerted considerable influence over her daughter. Her mother was a talented painter, musician and well recognised for her feminist activities and intellectual interests. Both parents maintained an active interest in the arts and encouraged the young Rehfisch to take singing lessons and play the piano, write stories, and paint and draw. Again, the familiar story of developing her latent artistic interest and talent came from her school tuition at SCEGGS Redlands²²⁸, where she studied under the successful landscape painter, Albert Collins²²⁹. After completing her secondary education, she then went on to study at Julian Ashton’s Art School. Her parents had in mind an art career for Rehfisch, but she remained uncommitted as a young art student, marrying in 1919 and delivering a daughter the next year. However, the domestic life soon stifled her spirit and she returned to art school, where she met her second husband, painter George Duncan²³⁰.

²²⁸ Sydney Church of England Girls School, Redlands is now SCEGGS Redlands, a co-educational school in Neutral Bay, where I was an art history teacher and Deputy Headmistress 1997-2001.

²²⁹ Albert Collins (1883-1951) was born in New Zealand and taught applied arts in a number of schools and colleges. He was a member of the Society of Artists and a close friend of Lloyd Rees.

²³⁰ George Duncan (1904 - 1974) was born in New Zealand to Australian parents. He, like Rehfisch, studied under Dattilo-Rubbo and won the Royal Art Society’s student exhibition prize. He travelled abroad, later becoming Director of the David Jones Gallery and President of the Watercolour Institute.

While Rehfisch was primarily a painter who fitted the female artist stereotype by painting floral scenes and still lifes, her repertoire was far broader. It is interesting to compare her 1934 linocuts *Negroid ballet* and *Park bench* with Fry's *Ballet of the unhatched chickens* and *Gnomus (Gnome)*, reproduced earlier in Part II, Section II; Fry was studying at the National Art School when Rehfisch created these works and the modernist characteristics seen in both women's works of repetition, tonal reversal, diagonal emphasis and strong design qualities are unmistakable.



Alison Rehfisch *Negroid ballet*, c.1934



Alison Rehfisch *Park bench*, 1934

Power's research serves to provide a thorough survey of the influences on Rehfisch's life and development of as an artist, as well as break the mould which had her bound to the period between the wars. Power has liberated Rehfisch's entire artistic profile and placed her in the larger art historical context. She notes that "Alison's disillusionment with what she saw as the increasing vagaries of prevailing artistic trends in the 1950s and '60s and her associated lack of public recognition in no way reflected the highly creative and industrious period of her later years" (1999, p.11). Power and Hollinrake have effectively addressed the shortcomings of previous histories and ensured a full and rich account of Beckett's and Rehfisch's lives and work is recorded and celebrated. It is in this vein that I intend this research on Fry, albeit broader than a retrospective focussed on only her art practice, to enhance the public record and restore her rightful place in it.

Completing the picture?

One of the key components explored in my research is the dual talents Fry enjoyed and it is difficult to say whether she favoured her interest in art over music or vice versa. However, I do believe that while her talent for piano performance may have been first class, her diversity of skill, enterprise, contributions and achievements in the art world lead me to see her as a woman whose life was for art. She was an advocate for artists and as early as 1950 was lobbying for a government subsidy for artists, arguing that few could make a decent living from art alone and an artist couldn't produce art part time²³¹. In 1984 Fry spoke at the opening of the exhibition: *An Australian Accent – Mike Parr, Imants Tillers and Ken Unsworth*. In her speech she summarised so eloquently much of what she had sought in her own life's work:

I was asked the other day that impossible question – what is art. I think the first thought that came into my mind was that it is an extension of experience or perhaps it was enrichment of experience. It comes to the same idea – that art extends the boundaries of our experience in some way – whether emotionally, intellectually or aesthetically ... above all it is alive and not static – it pulsates with the living and feeling of the people in the age from which it evolves. This art belongs to the present and must reflect its spirit. We are caught up in an age of technology and mechanisation and violence – these artists rebel against finite rules and rebel against conformity. They insist on the individuality of the human personality and the paramount importance of individual human understanding.

Fry writes and speaks emotionally about the need for society to engage with creativity, to learn tolerance and to think, as much as to feel.

“Completing the picture” is an apt analogy to bring this critical biography to a conclusion. It was the title of an exhibition curated by Victoria Hammond and Juliet Peers in 1992 which profiled women artists of the Heidelberg Era. It began the wave of exhibitions to come, challenging old myths by acknowledging the part women artists played and re-writing much of this country's artistic history. The absence of the women

²³¹ An article, 'Varied Discussions by Brains Trust', *The West Australian*, 18 January, 1950, recognised Fry as part of a brains trust in the Adult Education Summer School at the University of Western Australia.

profiled created an unbalanced view of history and we well know that women were not silent observers of society or of change. The curators asked the important questions of why was the work by these women neglected, why were their lives forgotten, why didn't their works achieve the recognition they deserved, why did they begin so promisingly and then slip into obscurity? They believed it was linked not only to the times and cultural mores, but that the answers lay in the women's lives and circumstances, their personal expectations and a social construct undergoing change which was ill-defined (1992, p.9). I believe this is a generous explanation, which underestimates the active exclusion by men of women and their art from exhibitions, reviews, auctions and art circles.

While women were able to enrol in art schools and access training, the career of the artist remained elusive until recent times. In 1907 *The New Idea* ran a series of articles entitled "Careers for Australasian Girls" and in it William Moore discussed what women could reasonably expect from art as a profession:

The woman who takes up art as a career must be prepared to go through years of training and practice ... after all these years she may find that the rewards for all this toil, as far as the monetary side is concerned, are despicably small.

He advised the impossibility of women earning a living from landscape painting (the male domain) and stated that they would need to supplement their income with (the acceptable female career) of teaching (Hammond & Peers, 1992 p.14). One wonders whether Moore would have given the same advice to young men aspiring to become artists. The notion of legitimate subjects for male and female artists was not new. The feminist art historian, Griselda Pollock, noted that women artists generally tended to paint the spaces mapped out by society as their preserve, often equating to interiors, children, family and their immediate environment (Hammond & Peers, 1992 p.16). Men, on the other hand, often sought the grand narratives surrounding matters of national and human importance, as so frequently evidenced by the Australian Impressionists. Luckily, with the help of the late modernists and a subsequent postmodernist re-assessment, subject matter became less genderised and more individualised – as evidenced by Fry's paintings completed after 1960. Fry was born and lived the majority of her life in times before the impact of the socio-political gender revolution of the 1970s. O'Ferrall wrote that:

Ella Fry represented one of many other talented women artists from an age when artistic commitment and engagement frequently spanned a broad range of cultural activities – an historical side of Australian cultural life that has yet to be fully explored and adequately recognised ... Ella Fry remained, however, at all stages of her life a woman of her time. (1997)

In 2002, Geoff Maslen wrote an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* entitled *Women push through the canvas ceiling*. I only came across the piece after much of this thesis was complete, but it resonated with me in a couple of ways. Firstly, it opened up an area I had not explored regarding the possibility that there was active exclusion of women artists from the Australian art history because of financial imperatives. That despite artists like Beckett and Rehfisch receiving considerable critical acclaim in their time, they were virtually removed from the recorded history and thereby removed as key names in the sales rooms. The value and dominance of male artists in the auctions then need not be diluted by buyers who may also have found themselves attracted to women artists of similar periods and styles. While Maslen notes that many artists languish in obscurity and are only discovered after their death – at least in the case of male artists they were discovered! He coincidentally, for the purposes of this research, uses the example of Beckett whose work unsurprisingly only rose significantly in value and desirability following the national touring retrospective in 1999. He perhaps rightly observes that “Beckett's history highlights the fact that women painters rarely achieve the fame or notoriety of pushier male artists” and goes on to cite Hester's case in relation to Albert Tucker's fame and Rehfisch's rise to collectable status; subsequent to their artistic reassessment and curatorial attention, their work has enjoyed healthy sales and demand.

The second area that arose for consideration raised in the article was the observation by art dealer Chris Deutscher about the nature of the collector/buyer: "... you have the husband and wife combinations where the husband may go for a king-hit acquisition while the wife chooses her own lesser-known artists ... I know half a dozen collectors in Sydney whose wives are building collections of women artists and the husband buys major 20th century works". In particular, Deutscher refers to the Beckett example where after her retrospective “every woman collector [there] seemed to suddenly want a

Beckett". Interestingly, Deutscher differentiates between collecting either women artists (who are "lesser-known") or major 20th century works, as if the two are mutually exclusive! His point, however, about women collectors seeking out women's art is an interesting one and perhaps resonates with the history and types of philanthropy that women engage in that were discussed in Part IV. While Deutscher's inference is that men collect for financial appreciation and choose works for status, women may well be actively looking to support women and may have more affinity with the styles and subjects depicted by women artists, while simultaneously building their investment portfolio. In my case, eighty per cent of the works in my modest collection are by women; they were not chosen because they were more affordable, or because the artists were highly collectable, or that if purchased below market the financial appreciation may be greater, but because I liked the objects and I connected with the artists' philosophies. To admit that I have supported women's practice through collecting their work seems patronising in this context and implies that they are somehow different from their male counterparts, who by this logic, do not need support. I would somewhat cynically suggest, though, that women artists probably reflect the national statistics²³² and earn less than male artists (as they do in most professions) and while one may be able to purchase a work by a woman cheaper than a similar work by a man, its value may well remain proportionally less over time, unless the current male-dominated art establishment changes, or deigns to lift their profile to 'high art' status!

My hope would be that if not by me, then by another curator, a retrospective of Fry's art can be mounted in the near future. While it may not amount to a collection containing key or major works of Australian twentieth century art or instigate an interest in her output in the auction houses, it would be a show that surveys six decades of a woman's artistic endeavour, covering painting, printmaking and drawing, and one that commences with a modernist approach and concludes with a unique style, not insensitive to the technical and artistic tensions that make for 'good' art. By realising a retrospective, albeit posthumously, the flow-on effect should result in a wider public awareness of Fry's life with all her achievements: musical talent, teaching, philanthropy and her tremendous contribution to the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

²³² Andrew West published a report in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in January 2008 citing that women working full-time generally earn 84 per cent of the male wage. Similarly, Anne Summers quotes similar historical wage disparity in her 2003 book *The End of Equality*.

I trust that through this research I have addressed Fry's omission from the historical records and particularly from the art canon, at least in academia. I have placed her within theoretical contexts that I believe are sympathetic to my position as writer and to her position as subject, punctuating the ideas throughout with links to other artists for pictorial comparison. I hope I have drawn together a colourful image of her, rich in detail, texture and form: the accomplished musician, the prevailing artist, the somewhat reluctant but effective teacher, the passionate environmentalist, the dedicated philanthropist, the successful arts leader, the considerate and devoted wife, and the independent woman. In Tillard's words (cited in Kimber, 2002 p.126): "There is much ground to make up here, yet I am proud to have pointed the way, and it is my hope that I have made people love her".

She drank in life, every offered glass of it, and took strength from it. Her imagination burst out at every tangent and curve of human contact ... What we have left are a few jewels crystallised, a few drops of her uttermost being that condensed in the form of line or word ... faces of love, of loss and longing.
(Barbara Blackman, 1997)²³³

²³³ Cited in Hart, 2001 (back cover).

Chronology

- 1916 Born Ella Osborn Robinson, 13 May 1916, Brisbane
- pre1931 Educated at Miss McKenzie's, New Farm, Brisbane
- 1931 – 1932 Brisbane Girls Grammar School
- c.1934 Commenced an apprenticeship with a commercial art firm, Morden and Bentley, Brisbane
- 1935 AMusA, Piano
- 1936-9 Studied art at East Sydney Technical College (ESTC)
- 1936-1940 Studied piano at the Sydney Conservatorium
- 1937 LRSM, Piano
- 1938 Awarded Diploma ASTC and Bronze Medal for highest honours, ESTC
- 1940 Returned to Brisbane working as an artist and pianist
- Exhibition of paintings and drawings with Vera Cottew and Muriel Foote
- Member, Royal Queensland Art Society
- Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) purchased *Self portrait*
- Two piano recitals with Hilda Woolmer – State and National relay (ABC)
- Solo performances
- Member, The Musical Association of Queensland
- 1941 Exhibition with Cottew and Foote
- Member, Ladies' Committee Brisbane Symphony Orchestra
- Forming Member, Brisbane Concert Society
- 1942 QAG purchased the *Moussorgsky* series of linocuts
- 1943 Two piano Mozart Concerto at Celebrity Concert with Symphony Orchestra
- 1943-5 Taught music and art at Tamworth Church of England Girls School
- 1945 Married Melville Leonard Fry
- 1945-7 Broadcasts ABC, Sydney
- 1947 Moved to Perth and worked as a concert pianist
- 1948 Exhibition of paintings and drawings, Perth

- 1948-52 Member, Perth Society of Artists
- 1949 Recitals on radio 6WN
- 1949-51 Lectured on art for Adult Education
- 1949-52 Part time Lecturer, Faculty of Education, UWA (art 1949-52, music 1952)
- 1951 Exhibition of paintings and drawings, Perth
- Member, Art Gallery Society (secretary for a period)
- 1953-65 Member, Symphony Orchestral Subscribers Committee (President 1956-7, 1963-5)
- 1954 Exhibitor in *Ten Perth Artists* exhibition
- 1956-86 Appointed to the Board of Trustees of the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA); Vice-Chairman 1970-6; appointed Chair in 1976
- 1957 Soloist, Greig Concerto, Festival of Perth
- 1958-9 Built house at Boya and moved to the hills
- 1960 Exhibition of paintings and drawings, Perth
- 1964-9 Sketching assignment for Dr WDL Ride, Director of the WA Museum, for the book *A Guide to the Native Mammals of Australia*
- 1965-8 Member, Churchill Fellowship Committee on Arts
- 1969 Wrote *Music in Western Australia*
- 1970-6 Appointed Vice-Chairman of AGWA
- 1975 Death of husband, Melville Fry
- 1976-86 Appointed Chairman of AGWA
- 1982 Awarded a CBE
- 1983-4 Wrote *Gallery Images – From the Collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia*
- 1986 Retired as Chairman of the AGWA Board
- 1994 Solo exhibition, Gomboc Galleries, Perth
- 1997 Solo exhibition, Gomboc Galleries, Perth
- 1997 Ella Osborn Fry died, 17 May 1997, Perth

List of Works

Study of a girl reading 1938
oil on canvas, 74cm x 60cm
Brisbane Girls Grammar School (Gift of Jean Ashton 1984)

Portrait of woman in black c.1939-40
oil on canvas board, 57cm x 42cm
Brisbane Girls Grammar School (Gift of Jean Ashton 1984)

Self portrait 1940
oil on canvas on composition board, 75.5cm x 53.3cm
Queensland Art Gallery (Purchased 1940)

Girl peeling apples 1941
oil on canvas, 52cm x 45.5cm
University of Queensland (Gift of Dr J Duhig 1945)

Gnomus (Gnome) 1941
No.1 from 'Interpretations of music by Moussorgsky' series
linocut on thin cream wove paper
23.8 x 19cm (irreg.), 16.3 x 11.5cm (comp.)
Queensland Art Gallery (Purchased 1942)

Ballet of unhatched chickens 1942
No.5 from 'Interpretations of music by Moussorgsky' series
linocut on thin cream wove paper
16.8 x 15.1cm (irreg.), 15.2 x 14.6cm (comp.)
Queensland Art Gallery (Purchased 1942)

Portrait of Professor Robert George Cameron 1950
oil on canvas, 59.6cm x 50.2cm
University of Western Australia (Gift of Robert Cameron)

Wanderer 1960
oil on hardboard, 41.3cm x 51.3cm
Art Gallery of Western Australia (Purchased 1960)

Surreal farming landscape W.A. I c.1994-7?
oil on canvas, 39.5cm x 50cm
Private Collection?

Surreal farming landscape W.A. II c.1994-7?
oil on canvas, 39.5cm x 50cm
Private Collection?

Contrast (View of Perth) 1994
oil on hardboard, 29.5cm x 37cm
University of Western Australia

Coming storm 1994
oil on hardboard, 38cm x 50cm
Private Collection

Fantasy 4 1994
oil on hardboard, 28cm x 36.5cm
Private Collection

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This collection includes letters and embargoed documents referred to in the text.

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