

across generations and art contexts. And these discussions should be raised and challenged through education, whether within an arts institution or not, and given the means to continue afterwards.

This leads onto how we distribute and involve others in the questions we are asking, in the ways we are trying to live sustainable and ethical lives? My response is to employ every and any means possible. Questions need to be raised and asked continually within and outside of what we call art, with new and old technology, through open, public, inclusive situations, with energy and integrity (even if a redundant question, the answering still has the possibility to move things forward with difference). And I do believe that questions can be voiced as much through instinct, intuition and a real engagement with materials as through intellectual thought. If art has the capacity to transcend the limitations of the moment, how can we confront and shift those restrictions? Many seminal artists who have played a critical role in feminist discourse and challenged the limitations of art since the 1970s, denounced the reification of the concept of art in an object or image. Artists such as Carolee Schneemann and Adrian Piper have made explicit the processes ‘behind the work’, as the work itself. Whilst I have great respect and appreciation for both that departure and acknowledgement and the repercussions their work (amongst that of many others) has had on women and art, I am interested within my own art activity in asking whether I can turn that notion on its head somewhat and do something relevant to feminist concerns today by returning to an investment within the object/image and the conventions of the gallery. How can I ask the new questions that need to be raised with traditional materials?

I’d be interested to hear your thoughts on this Faith. And to return to your question, I wondered how you feel your feminist work has affected the way you live and work? And how you envisage the role of the feminist voice within art and life, could (and needs to) evolve in the future?

FAITH: Dear Kate, as it has turned out, the feminist work I do *is* my life and my work. It seems that everything streams from it now: my teaching, my friendships, my relations to the art world (whatever that is), my travel, my collaborative work with subRosa and with artists like you. For me, feminism has become a philosophy and an ethics by which I live and work, but I don’t do this alone. And I cannot separate it in any way from my present reality, and from my vision of what the future might bring.

As to your other question about raising new questions through the investment in the object/image and the conventions of the gallery. For me that is not something I think about a lot because most galleries cannot accommodate the kind of work that I do now. We seek out spaces that are welcoming and that seek us out. Even when I was making objects such

as drawings, collages, or installations, commercial galleries had trouble with them. It is really interesting to me that the wide re-circulation through WACK! and other shows, of many of the feminist art ‘objects’ that I and others made in the early 70s, has aroused an enormous response. My *Crocheted Environment* (womb room), for example, has been written about and reproduced in many articles with a whole new appreciation for what it is as an object. *But* this is largely because knitting/crocheting/fiber art are having a huge revival right now in the art world, *And* it is being recognized that the roots for this lie precisely in the feminist artists’ uses of craft and traditional ‘women’s work’ in wholly new ways in the 70s. This signifies to me that objects and images made by feminist artists in the past have indeed profoundly influenced the mainstream art-world, and are being very busily recycled and revisited now in every art school too, even if students often don’t know the radical feminist roots of this influence.

So, yes, I think that what you are doing with your work *is* bringing this history back into play in the present in an important way; and it is important that you and other younger artists are doing it. I feel I have a different task – that of stretching myself to look at and comment on the present and forge into new spaces and forms. This is what feminist art did in the past with transformational effect, and I feel the call especially to connect to the lived reality of women both locally and in different parts of the world. The question for me is how to expand what we think of as the task of art to encompass the burning questions of everyday lives in the real world: how do I live a life that is both pleasurable and ethical? How do I manifest my conscientious objection to war, violence, capitalist exploitation of all of life, despoliation of nature and the environment, etc. through the work that I do and the life that I live? The forms of dialogic and participatory work that subRosa has explored for a while now – and that characterized so much early feminist work – seem at the moment to be useful ways of exploring these questions. I don’t see them as that different from making the objects that I once made, but their effects and reception are much more satisfying at least in the short run. Who knows what will come of this experimentation and where it will lead us. What is exciting and satisfying to me about it is that it seems to be leading to ever new questions and experiments, and to new relations-between-us like the ones you and I are exploring right now. Thank you so much for opening yourself to me, and to this dialog, and for your impulse to bring it into the gallery world that you are working in. I don’t think you’ll be sorry in the long run.

KATE: As I said at the outset, I hope this text can ask more questions than it answers. Rather than evolving as the content of artwork, the subjective voice described here is used as a tool to negotiate questions and concerns, past and present. And as such, it is

open to losing its original intonation and gaining others through art activity. I return to the impossible honesty, or honest impossibility of Yvonne Rainer’s declaration, ‘I want everything I make to reflect my whole life’.⁴ As problematic and paradoxical as art making itself, there is a challenge within that sentence that goes beyond its baldness. I would like to use this conversation with Faith to add to Rainer’s words here: ‘I want everything I make to reflect my whole life and question beyond it’. Here’s to the long run!

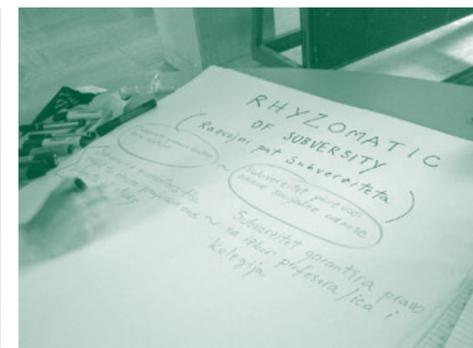
- 1 Previous dialogue between Faith Wilding and Kate Davis, commissioned by Glasgow International 2008 and published in Glasgow International’s *Cross Section*, 2008.
- 2 Taken from Gertrude Stein’s lecture ‘Portraits and Repetition’, collected in *Gertrude Stein: Writings and Lectures*, Patricia Meyerowitz (ed.), Penguin Books, Baltimore, 1971.
- 3 J C Davis, *Trouble at t’mill; (mis)adventures of a working class historian*, unpublished seminar paper delivered at Trinity Hall, Cambridge on 4 June 2008.
- 4 Taken from Yvonne Rainer, *A Woman Who...Essays, Interviews, Scripts*, PAJ Books, John Hopkins University Press, 1999.

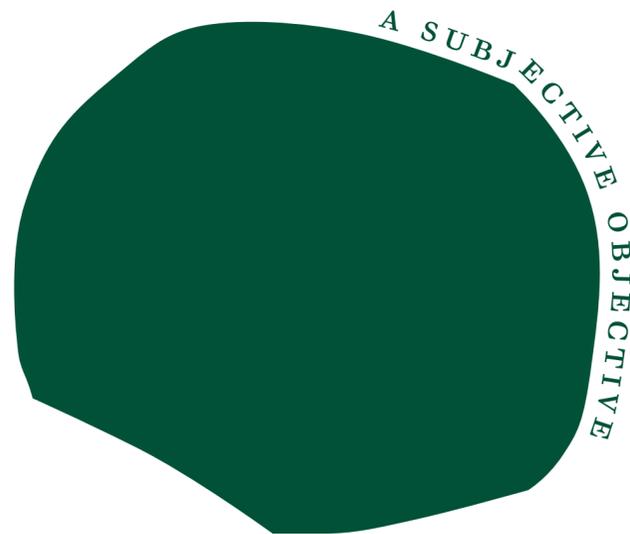
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covepark CCA: Scottish Arts Council

Cover image: Kate Davis, *Central Woman*, 2008. Courtesy the artist and Sorcha Dallas.

Images taken on subRosa’s recent 2008 project in Zagreb, working with wo.koletiv on the founding of Subversity. Courtesy subRosa, Faith Wilding and Hyla Willis. Photography: Damir Zizic (top right/bottom left); subRosa (top left/bottom right).





*This conversation has taken place, via the wonders of e-mail, during my three-month residency at Cove Park in Argyll and Bute, Scotland. Whilst at Cove Park I have been looking at and questioning the role of and possibilities for self-representation and the subjective voice within art practice today. With reference to a feminist history, I am keen to address those concerns through my own art practice and as part of a wider dialogue. Faith Wilding's work has been addressing feminist, social and political concerns since the late 1960s. She is Full Professor of Performance at the School of Art Institute Chicago and now works collaboratively with the cyberfeminist collective subRosa (www.cyberfeminism.net) which she co-founded. My recent solo statement, *Waiting in 1972*; what about 2007?, conceived for and exhibited at Art Basel 2007, readdressed Faith Wilding's seminal performance *Waiting* and was an attempt to re-examine Wilding's notion of 'waiting' in relation to women today, as Wilding herself has done with her own recent re-doing of that performance, titled *Wait-with*. Having previously developed a dialogue with Faith focusing on artist-led initiatives,¹ I was keen to extend that conversation across generations, contexts and art activities from Scotland to Chicago. And I was fortunate enough to be met with Faith's generosity of spirit and rigorous thought. The following text is a transcript of that conversation. I hope that it leads to more questions and is only the beginning of further discussion.*

KATE: When we began initial discussions Faith asked me to clarify my use of 'self-representation'. I think this is an important question and one which I find increasingly problematic to define within the context of art. In its simplest terms, if self-representation is the conscious action to represent the artist within the work (and to inevitably invite a reading of that decision as a reaction to the social, political and artistic concerns of the time), I am interested in the limitations and potentials of that action for female and feminist artists today. I am also interested in how this interpretation of the term may need to be challenged and redefined and hope this conversation may begin to do so.

As an artist in the 1970s, Faith, you began to use yourself as a physical and conceptual resource within your own practice. This move manifested itself through performances, writings, installations and exhibitions; the documentation of which continue to influence a generation of artists such as myself today. I wondered if you could describe the motivations, influences and concerns which informed the decision to utilise yourself as such an integral element in the work at that time? And how you feel the public reception of that work, alongside the personal impact of employing yourself in that way, may have affected the development of your future making and thinking?

FAITH: My feminist artmaking began in the context of the feminist art program at Fresno, California, and continued at the Feminist Art Program at CalArts, Los Angeles, with my involvements in such projects as Womanhouse. In Fresno I had formed the first women's consciousness-raising (CR) group with Suzanne Lacy, and we had begun by discussing our sex/love lives and our personal experiences as bodies, as a way of beginning to understand how sexual difference and gender roles are socially constructed. In the feminist art program, Judy Chicago encouraged us to make work from our own experiences as a way of mining hidden information and feelings about women's mundane lives that had never been represented overtly in art before. In CR we learned how personal experience is shaped by political and social policies (the personal is political), and how therefore a personal experience can be critically shaped (formed) to speak to the conditions of patriarchy in which we live. The work I did in Fresno and CalArts was not strictly about me personally, though its particular form was influenced by my autobiography (growing up in a Christian commune in South America). Thus my *Sacrifice* installation (Fresno) incorporated religious imagery with pagan blood sacrifice rituals and used my body as the sacrificial subject. My *Waiting* performance (Womanhouse) was actually not modeled as much on my personal experience as on a sort of collective picture of how Western women were conditioned to be passive and domesticated and give up their own life ambitions for the sake of their husbands and children.

In early feminist art we used our bodies as expressive and resistant vehicles precisely because of the way women's bodies have been used in service of the male gaze in the history of Western art, advertising and public representation. The unfortunate tendency of Hollywood/*People* magazine celebrity culture is always to want to identify the artist-maker as the object/subject of their work. The radical subjectivity in much early feminist body art performance is therefore often confused with an objectification of their bodies, partly because at that time most of us were young and good-looking. I have had people say to me on viewing the documentation of *Waiting*, 'oh, you were such a babe then,' (meaning that I was both young and pretty). I think that the aging, queer, raced, or disabled female/trans/intersex body is currently the possible radical subject for feminist art. In subRosa performances I never use myself in any way autobiographically, or as a subjective self. I use my performance to create social relation and to convey information. Still, I constantly have to resist people's desire to personalize what I am doing and relate it to biographical 'truth.'

Much feminist performance and other work has been about experiences of the female body and trying to re-insert that body into the culture with a difference. Thus many women artists are playing with ideas of gender bending, queer subjectivity and fragmented or cyborg bodies. Kate, do you think about the bodies and the flesh experiences of the women whose work you are collaborating with/ paying homage to in some of your works? How do you imagine them? Does it influence the way you are thinking about representing (or not) your own body?

KATE: My immediate response was that I only think about the bodies of the women whose work I have responded to (whether that be Käthe Kollwitz, Barbara Kruger, Faith Wilding, Lucie Rie or Joan Jonas amongst others) in the way that those bodies are implicated through visual means. However, in truth I think it is a much more complicated and contradictory relationship between physical bodies in time as well as visual bodies of work than that.

I can imagine the political/social/physical pressures and challenges (as well as opportunities or lack of opportunities) placed upon the bodies mentioned above through the wider context of the situation, time and culture in which they were made, as well as through the work itself. All of the artwork I have been drawn to reinvestigate I consider to be a radical gesture which has challenged what art can be at a time and that 'radical gesture' is inseparable from the body and the gender of its maker. The specific resonance and significance of Käthe Kollwitz's practice, for example, can not be applied to another time or be affected by a male maker. Just as when I am responding to a floor piece by Carl Andre, the cultural, social, sexual gulf between us is as much a quality within the sculpture as the copper

it may be constructed from. However, at risk of contradicting myself, in terms of flesh experiences I don't want to imagine something where I could end up projecting fallible histories, gender stereotypes and my own limited experience. So as much as flesh experiences are biographical, I am not an art historian (or desire to be one) and whilst I am in part using my practice to respond to works from the past, and in so doing reactivate certain questions they pose today, I need to be exploring these ideas through a visual language in such a way that an essay, biography or documentary could not. Whilst acknowledging the importance of the physical body behind the work, I want to read the artistic embodiment of that presence through my eyes as a female practitioner today and, as you describe, not through the *People* magazine's mentality of the quest for a subjective 'truth' to project onto work.

I recently came across a Gertrude Stein quote that, whilst referring to her own poetry seems to express this layering of readings and could be helpful here.

—the trouble with including looking... was that in regard to human beings looking inevitably carried in its train realizing movements and expression and as such forced me into recognizing resemblances and so forced remembering and in forcing remembering caused confusion of present with past and future time.²

The honesty with which Stein expresses this sense of looking, whether in reference to art work or the bodies that propelled them into being, I feel is essential to acknowledge. In a sense I am interested in how my female body with its own implications can utilise the muddiness of that subjective 'confusion'.

I have been employing my body as an element within my practice for several years, although initially it was often as a more generic signifier for 'woman' or the female body. However, responding to the work of other women artists has had a great influence on the way I am beginning to address my own body within the work. It has forced me to question my physical role and enabled me to bring myself (both literally and conceptually) more directly into the work. As mentioned in relation to your work at Fresno and CalArts, Faith, that is not to say that the work is about 'me' but what it means to use a representation of myself today and how or why that representation can be constructed. I am currently working on a new series of drawings which are responding to some of Franz Gertsch's photo-realist paintings from the 1980s. I am interested in how I can use myself as a female artist to react against or to elements within his oeuvre and mentally, emotionally and physically take ownership over the legacy and attitude of some of those works. Having said that, I am not sure if I have yet considered in sufficient depth and in isolation (independent of other works)

the role and possibilities of my body within the work.

In a previous conversation you mentioned that since co-founding and working with the cyberfeminist collective subRosa from 1998, you have virtually stopped making work individually. What do you feel can be achieved with this collective voice that you could not explore, activate and challenge as an artist working independently? Despite the fact that you do not use yourself autobiographically in subRosa performances, do you think the notion of a subjective self can still play a role in feminist discourse through contemporary art? And if so, are there examples of artists you could mention that demonstrate this?

FAITH: Kate, you made some really trenchant points in your last answer to me. It made me think about a book by Barbara Duden called *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (Harvard University Press, 1993). In the book, the author wonders how 'women's flesh' felt in earlier ages. She believes that before the invention of digital imaging and fetal monitoring techniques like ultra sound, MRIs and the like, women paid a different kind of attention to what was going on in their bodies, and had a different kind of language about it. She writes: 'In the 1970s we discovered a "different body" (ourselves) than bodies written about in the past.' This observation is acute and especially provocative in light of the fact that women's liberation and 70s feminism were so centrally engaged with investigating female sexuality, desire, contraception, abortion, women's health and medical treatment (*Our Bodies, Ourselves*) and experimenting with new ways of imaging women's bodies, sexualities, and desires.

This was the reason I asked you that question about whether you imagine yourself into the flesh bodies of the women artists you 'collaborate' with. I have to admit that I have done that quite intensely in the past. I have felt myself into Hildegard von Bingen, for example, the 12th century nun and mystic who was also a writer, composer, healer, naturalist, and even dramatist. I have read all of Virginia Woolf's and Käthe Kollwitz's published diaries and felt intimately connected to their lives and struggles. They give so many clues about women's relationships to their bodies and their lives as women. I have done this because it helped me understand how they were able to do their work out of a profound sense of their subjectivity as women creating art in/of their time. Our early feminist art work in Fresno and CalArts also tried to reflect and be true to the female lives we were living at that time — which was a time of great upheaval and change for women. In some ways everything changed. Especially in the realm of our bodily lives as women — or perhaps it was our perception that changed, we were 'thinking things differently' as Irigaray has pointed out. I've done many drawings about some of those different ways of experiencing a female body and about the 'different' body that Duden speaks about.

My work with subRosa is actually also for the most part about this different body and about the new imaging and biomedical technologies which are changing how conception, pregnancy, childbirth, menopause, aging and even death are experienced by women now. I have written and lectured about many of those effects in different venues, and our participatory performances include many moments of conversation and revelation with both women and men in our audiences that speak of these things also. So of course my subjectivity also enters into this work, and I inject my own questions, feelings, and experiences into it. The work of collaboration and collectivity compels us to listen to others, and to engage in social relations with an ethical and aesthetic sense that is very different from being involved in individual creativity. Much of the work of women artists who interest me today — for example, Emily Jacir, Lida Abdul, Sanja Ivekovic, Elena Jovanova, Irina Botea, Amanda Heng, Ursula Biemann — comes from a sense of women's lives lived in a globalized world where local histories and cultures are clashing and struggling with the relentless sweep of market capitalism (and war) that is trying to make the whole world over into its own image.

SubRosa recently did two residencies, one in Zagreb, Croatia, and one in Skopje, Macedonia. In Zagreb we held extended conversations and 'salons' with different groups of women activists and artists. The conversations led to collaborating with a group of self-declared young cyberfeminists, the 'wo kolektiv', with whom we 'founded' a university, which they dubbed a 'subversity'. In Macedonia, we worked intensely over a week's time to try to make an alternative mapping of different women's lives negotiating the city of Skopje — Muslim, Slav, and Roma women. It was very difficult, but also very stimulating work in both cases. We found ourselves asking a lot of questions and listening a lot. The 'art' in both cases lay in the manner of conducting the relations-between-us that our residencies produced, and in the ways in which we are trying to represent and continue these relations. Again, each person emerged as a singular subject in this process — a becoming historical subject — which is also so much about the struggle is in countries like those of Eastern European where women especially have to overcome so much brutal history.

So my question now to you (and to myself) is: What do we see as our 'feminist work' now, in the realm of what we call art? How does it affect the way we live and the way we work? How do we distribute it, and involve others in the questions we are asking, in the ways that we are trying to live sustainable and ethical lives? Those are my main questions now for both my life and my work (which are in a way the same thing). These have always been my questions, but as I am getting older and time is more precious and life more precarious, they feel ever more urgent.

KATE: As you describe, Faith, in relation to your early feminist art work at Fresno and CalArts, the key concern then was to reflect and be true to the female lives you were living and through addressing those issues, challenge how women's lives could develop. Forty years on and I think this is still the critical point, however much the context that is being addressed may have changed. How to reflect and be true to the female lives we are living now? How to address the ways that our perception is changing today and what another 'different female body' is feeling and saying? How can art engage with the new problems and possibilities facing women today and how can the expression of these ideas speak with a resonance and relevance to a range of important conversations within art today? This, for me, is one of the constant questions. I am interested in using the language and history of art itself to unpick, rebuild and represent that history with a relevance to today. The present time offers the opportunity to steal/ glean/filter/examine/look to/question/exploit and use the past in order to propose/initiate/discuss/lay the foundations for, and try out ourselves, ways to move forward differently.

As articulated in a recent seminar by the historian J C Davis:

Despite the claims of post modernism that reality is only a mirror, I cling obstinately to the idea that there is a reality to the past-however fragmentary our possible recovery of that might be. I want that reality to change my thinking and me, I want to learn from it.³

Just as you described intimately connecting with the lives of women such as Virginia Woolf, Käthe Kollwitz and Hildegard von Bingen and learning about your time from that understanding of their reality, within my own practice I am attempting to use a visual language to examine and interrogate an art historical past and to give it an active and reconsidered voice in the present. My hope is that this new voice could alter the thinking and discussion of that collaboration between past and present, which, in a sense, becomes neither but holds the possibility of something else.

In terms of how our feminist work affects the way we live and work, to be honest, I know I struggle with this. Ultimately, I would hope that the belief, aspirations and desires of feminism can be carried through to all aspects of life for women and men, however, I don't see this happening widely, and certainly not globally. As an artist, the way I live and work have become increasingly inseparable but I struggle to achieve a sense of balance. I think there is a real need for women and bodies to have time and space for nothing, as well as everything. Having said that, there are evident responsibilities in terms of the way we live and work today. There is a need to be active, enquiring and engaged in a global discussion