

... any individual, a woman or a man, can and must recreate her or his personal and collective history.¹

... it is necessary also to discuss the ends and the aims for which we are fighting, for which we are doing battle with these formidable obstacles. Those aims cannot be taken for granted; they must be perpetually questioned and examined [...] You have won rooms of your own in the house hitherto exclusively owned by men [...] But this freedom is only a beginning; the room is your own, but it is still bare. It has to be furnished; it has to be decorated; it has to be shared. How are you going to furnish it, how are you going to decorate it? With whom are you going to share it, and upon what terms?²

How do we go on from here? How can we begin to understand what Faith Wilding and Kate Davis are asking with that question, with this exhibition? It is significant that this project began with them asking questions of themselves, of their practices, and of each other. It is also important that this questioning has been conducted in a collaborative form – as a collaboration, that is, not only between the two artists, but in dialogue with many ‘co-inspirators.’ The ‘peculiar resources’ evoked by Davis and Wilding in their letters, proposed as ‘feminist lines of flight’ by others at their invitation, and gathered in the CCA, are in many senses the grounds of possibility for the whole project. The epigraph from Virginia Woolf underlines the fact that these resources are rich, and the questions they pose still urgent. We might, then, proceed by drawing on some of the writers whose works Davis and Wilding have shared with each other, and with us.

“What woman has not read *The Second Sex*?” Luce Irigaray asks, by way of beginning her 1990 book *je, tu, nous*, “What woman hasn’t found it inspiring? Hasn’t as a result, perhaps, become a feminist?”³ What has this got to do with *The Long Loch*? A lot, I think. Not only because, by beginning with a question, it resonates with Davis and Wilding’s own working practices, but because, by linking reading with becoming feminist, it also relates to the *feminist becoming* which their work remembers, celebrates and fosters. Further, with the invention of the printing press and the development of mass literacy, reading created the possibility of ‘imagined community,’ of collectivities constituted across distance and difference. The relationship between feminism and reading is central to the work we encounter in *The Long Loch*, insofar as it too creates an imagined community in which, as Wilding puts it, it is possible to take inspiration from “conversations with the living and the dead.”⁴ Irigaray and Woolf are joined by Katherine Mansfield, Julia Kristeva, Catherine Clément, Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and Eva Hesse, as some of the figures whose words, works, and actions are given voice and responded to here. Woolf writes that “a woman writing thinks back through her mothers.”⁵ If history has all too often been written as a patrilinear succession, this statement might be taken as suggesting a reevaluation of maternal lineages, in both literal and metaphorical senses, allowing for more affective, plural, and communal understandings of our relationships to personal and collective histories.

A history of women’s literary achievement is amongst the material conditions which Woolf argues in *A Room of One’s Own* are essential for women’s intellectual and creative freedom. She hopes that her readers will

have money, space and time enough “to contemplate the future or the past of the world, to dream over books and loiter at street corners and let the line of thought dip deep into the stream,” but she also notes that “If you consider any great figure of the past ... you will find that she is an inheritor as well as an originator”⁶ *The Long Loch* reckons with the inheritances received from previous generations of feminist writers, philosophers, artists, and activists, but not in any nostalgic sense. The question *How do we go on from here?* sets Davis and Wilding the challenge of finding forms which can honour, follow, and continue that inheritance, but also transform, multiply and replenish it. To go on is to remember but not to repeat. In speaking of and with so many others, living and dead, Davis and Wilding are addressing the present more than the past, crafting acts of memory that try to care for the future.

Amongst Irigaray’s trenchant proposals for a *feminist* future is her call for other models of relation to displace the dominance of ‘between men’ culture. She makes practical suggestions for a restitution of a female genealogy, including the use of images, words and gifts to acknowledge the centrality of the mother-daughter couple and “to designate realities they feel and share but for which they lack language.”⁷ For Irigaray (and indeed for Woolf), a feminist historical awareness opens up the possibility of thinking, writing and *being* differently. “Don’t restrict yourself to describing, reproducing, and repeating what exists,” Irigaray writes, “but know how to invent or imagine what hasn’t yet taken place.”⁸ Wilding and Davis address these issues not only by incorporating collective reading and discussion into *The Long Loch*, but also by trying to imagine forms within art practice which are capable of linking with, and advancing, a feminist consciousness. Such work with form can be a vital part of the feminist task of imagining new, non-patriarchal modes of relating to *I, you, we*, different ways of relating to ourselves and to each other. In *The Long Loch* this work is iterated as a series of questions or proposals voiced in the feminine plural. How do *we* go on from here?

In 2007 both artists – each unbeknownst to the other – took Wilding’s 1972 performance *Waiting* as a point of departure. The poem Wilding had recited in that piece presented a woman’s life as marked by continual passive waiting. Responding to this work, challenging its terms, and bringing it into a new life, Wilding re-performed it as *Wait-With* as part of the exhibition *Wack: Art and the Feminist Revolution*. In *Wait-With*, Wilding’s voice became a vehicle for voices of others (friends, collaborators, and inspirations) who posed questions to her, and for her own thoughts on redoing/undoing *Waiting*. The performance itself became more markedly intersubjective, with Wilding’s recitation followed by a dialogue with the audience. The piece was thus made hospitable to others and to Wilding’s own active self-questioning. Davis, meanwhile, posed the question *Waiting in 1972, what about 2007?* in a series of objects and drawings which made her own body and its representation one stake in that question. These two ways of continuing *Waiting* – bringing it into a critical relationship with the present, and extending it to include intersubjective relations – can be seen throughout the work in *The Long Loch*. How do we go on from *here*? The question is asked of all of us, in the present tense.

Davis’s titles often insist on this temporality. *What Have We Got To Do With A Room of One’s Own?* echoes, in its mode of address, earlier works such as *Women! We Are Not Historical Documents! Can we... I am asking?* and *I Want To Function In The Present Time*. As Davis put it in a dialogue with Wilding: “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



1. Luce Irigaray, *je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin, (London: Routledge, 1993), 28.

2. Virginia Woolf, ‘Professions for Women,’ in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, (London: Penguin, 1993), 106.

3. Irigaray, 9.

4. Faith Wilding, Letter to Kate Davis, April 23rd, 2009.

5. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (London, Hogarth Press, 4th Impression, 1929), 146.

6. *Ibid.*, 164.

7. Irigaray, 48.

8. *Ibid.*, 49.



9. Kate Davis and Faith Wilding, ‘A Subjective Objective,’ (Cove Park, 2008), unpaginated.

10. Virginia Woolf, ‘The Cinema,’ in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, (London: Penguin, 1993), 55.

11. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, (London, Hogarth Press, 4th Impression, 1929), 63.

12. Amelia Jones, ‘Faith Wilding and the Enfleshing of Painting,’ *n.paradoxa*, No. 10, (June 1999), 18.

13. Faith Wilding, Letter to Kate Davis, 31st May, 2009.

14. Irigaray, 109.

ourselves, ways to move forward differently.”⁹ The presence of art historical and literary references in Davis’s work should be thought in the light of this statement. The drawings, objects and films which respond to Eva Hesse’s work certainly speak of the ambiguity and ephemerality of Hesse’s ‘studioworks,’ but they also function as focal points for Davis’s investigation of her own relationship to the space of the studio, and that of the gallery. Object and image, self and other, shift places continually in these works, revealing the subjective, emotional dimensions of a relationship to another’s practice and thought that is, at one and the same time, a critical and questioning relationship.

Likewise, *What Have We Got To Do With A Room of One’s Own?* uses the writing of Woolf and Katherine Mansfield to establish a space in which subjective and contemporary resonances of their work can be discussed. By disrupting the narrative flow of the film (and of Mansfield’s short story ‘Miss Brill’ which runs through it), Davis keeps pulling us back to ordinary life, to embodied existence, to domestic spaces, to familial relationships. Various strategies of interruption and disjunction undercut any sense of smooth continuity; non-diegetic sounds and inter-texts (including references to Yvonne Rainer, an artist particularly important to Davis’s approach to film) interject frequently. Davis and her mother appear in the film, often reading aloud, but we do not hear their voices; rather, a male voice narrates Mansfield’s words, preventing any easy identification between the women we see and the protagonist of her story. We must negotiate for ourselves the possible continuities and discontinuities between the images, words and sounds, and what they (and we) might have to do with *A Room of One’s Own*.

Woolf described cinema as offering a view of life in which “we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence.”¹⁰ Not so in Davis’s film. It functions as something of a collective self-portrait, in which aspects of the artist’s life are placed and displaced in relation to each other: herself, her mother, Mansfield, Woolf, Yvonne Rainer, Mansfield’s Miss Brill – all might be the subject of the film, whilst domestic space jostles with the space of the studio, the street, and the gallery as the locus proper to the imagery we are presented with. At one point we see a net, through which an urban view is visible. It might recall Virginia Woolf’s claim in *A Room of One’s Own* that “fiction is like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners.” In words that speak pointedly of the historical experience of women, Woolf continues, “when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.”¹¹ Davis’s work remembers precisely that, even as it tries to find new forms through which to move forward.

Corporeality and the feminist politics of lived experience have been vital concerns in Faith Wilding’s work since the 1970s. These concerns can be traced through her work in feminist consciousness-raising, her participation in the Womanhouse project, and her collaboration in cyberfeminist collective subRosa. Alongside this body of work, watercolour and collage have been important mediums for Wilding’s investigation of contestatory, critical, and celebratory representations of the female body. As Amelia Jones notes, when in the early 1970s Wilding used the visual properties of watercolour “to render the juicy flesh of women’s genital anatomy,” she thereby linked these pictures with the bodily and performative concerns of *Waiting*.¹² On the same model, her work in *The Long Loch* might be aligned with *Wait-With*. Just as that performance made waiting into a shared, dialogical, experience, so Wilding’s pictures make the representation of an imagined community

a matter of personal history, of affect, emotion, tenderness, and care, of thinking through, and of being present with, others. This is not just a question of content: it is the palpable delicacy of formal means, the sense of a careful, caring attention to densities of colour and line, that communicate, before any direct moment of recognition, the passionate attachments that are being represented in these collaged, painted and drawn works.

The persistent use of the ‘tear’ form also registers a shared, affective and embodied understanding of identity. Wilding explains in a letter to Davis that the tear is a “basic form” which accommodates multiple readings and associations. Tears are intellectual as well as emotional, joyful as well as sad, an out-pouring of empathetic as well as private feeling. The tear, she writes, is “a semiotic form that can be anything from a heart or bladder, to alchemical vessel, inverted comma, balloon, uterus, testicle, seed pod, flower, penis, etc.”¹³ The tear form also recalls Loch Long, and Wilding insists that this association too is ambiguous, as the Loch figures both as space of thought and artistic creation (as the site of Cove Park) and as harbourer of death (as the home of Britain’s nuclear submarine fleet). These ambivalences mark the tear as a “shape of possibility,” one which in its indeterminacy might be a suitable vehicle for the attempt to represent feminist lineages, affinities, and interrelations between *I, you, and we* which go beyond narrow, conventional understandings.

These works, like Davis’s, might be self-portraits in a sense, but the selves portrayed are understood as constituted in relation with others, and as such as being in states of becoming. To turn once more to Irigaray, we might see in Wilding’s pictures an attempt to link a feminist genealogy with the “shape of possibility” of feminism understood as still in a process of becoming. Speculating on the possible outcomes of liberation from dominant forms of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, Irigaray suggests that “color is what’s left of life beyond forms, beyond truth or beliefs, beyond accepted joys and sorrows. Color also expresses our sexuate nature, that irreducible dimension of our incarnation.”¹⁴ These words resonate with the ways in which Wilding and Davis have decorated, coloured, shared and re-formed the CCA into a space hospitable to collective feminist continuance, to artistic experimentation and *going on*. By recalling a history of feminist questioning, they give a place to the past in the present; by continuing to ask questions they work towards what hasn’t yet taken place, towards a feminism still to come.

POSTSCRIPT

Invited to contribute a ‘Line of flight’ to the list of feminist works put together by Davis and Wilding and their ‘co-inspirators’ I struggled to settle on a choice (or choices) from amongst the many transformational works which suggested themselves. In the end I picked a chapter from Tania Modleski’s *The Women Who Knew Too Much* which offers a feminist re-reading of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. It was only when I came to write this essay that I realised what had overdetermined this choice. Much as I enjoy and admire this text, it is because the book was a gift from my mother that it was particularly significant to me. Feminism might be thought of as a gift given by many mothers (real and figurative), and it is to them that we owe our present and our future. This text is dedicated to my mother, to Faith Wilding and Kate Davis and to all those who work to make possible a feminist future in which we can all share.