Re-Turning, Re-Visioning, Re-Citing: Feminist Art Work as Historiography

**Abstract**

**(200-300 words)**

Since the mid-2000s, art historians and theorists have repeatedly called attention to the expanded role of the archive, the process of artistic re-enactment, and a so-called historiographic turn in the work of contemporary artists. In recent years, art historians working from within a feminist perspective have started to explore the specific political issues raised by such practices, particularly in regards to authenticity, temporality and political efficacy (Jones, 2011; Grant, 2011; Zapperi, 2013). This article engages with and contributes to this expanding scholarship, articulating a broad framework for understanding feminist archival practices as a fundamental form of visual research and knowledge production. This argument centres particularly on works produced by Kate Davis since the mid-2000s, but makes connections with earlier artworks to demonstrate that feminist artists practicing since 1970 have had to simultaneously historicise their own practices. Therefore, this archival form of art (and art historical knowledge) production can be considered fundamental to the enquiries of an expanded feminist art movement, one that functions today in terms of legacy and currently requires greater theorisation of feminist art as a history and as a contemporary political demand.

**Keywords**

Archive

Contemporary art

Historiography

Women artists

Re-enactment

**Article word count:**

**References and Endnotes:**

**Acknowledgements**

I am extremely thankful to Angela Dimitrakaki for her comments on an earlier draft of this article. I would also like to thank Tamara Trodd for commenting on an earlier paper presentation of this research and introducing me to useful further readings.

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Those who have no country have no language. Women have no imagery available – no accepted public language to hand – with which to express their particular viewpoint. (in Tickner, 1978: 238)

The above statement, made by Linda Nochlin in 1973, establishes one of the foundational concerns to shape investigation by feminist artists and art historians over the past four decades. That is: if the institutions of art history have been implicitly, yet firmly, aligned to a universal *paternal* subject, to the exclusion or marginalisation of feminine (and particularly female) subjects; and, if the historical languages of the discipline, as well as the requisite practical training, have denied access to women artists; how can a feminist movement that has been in existence since the late 1960s (and is arguably still active, or even re-animated today, although increasingly dispersed) participate in the disciplinary spaces of contemporary art and art history, if not by producing new historical paradigms – or, in Nochlin’s terms, without producing new historical and visual languages with which to speak? Rather than producing an entirely *new* language (an epistemic impossibility) the works considered in this article distinctively enact a mode of reworking, quoting, pastiching, revisioning and thereby *reinvesting* the paternalistic visual language of the discipline.

The following enquiry explicates this introductory provocation, primarily by reference to the work of Glasgow-based artist Kate Davis (b. 1977). The discussion begins to articulate a framework for understanding Davis’s work within a feminist logic of re-visioning and re-citing, strategies that I explicate below and suggest are paradigmatic to feminist art production. This article responds to and expands upon scholarship published recently by Giovanna Zapperi in *Feminist Review*, in which she crucially started ‘to point out art’s significance for feminist historiography’ (2013: 23). This article seeks to offer a complementary perspective to Zapperi’s, thereby creating a fuller understanding of feminist archival strategies. If Zapperi focuses upon artists’ productive, fictitious imaginings of desired historical precedents, this article adjacently examines artworks that function as another (related) form of art *work* as feminist historical research. And, if the histories of feminist art have been ignored or marginalised by a broader theoretical community that does not take seriously art’s significance within contemporary global culture and its economies (Dimitrakaki, 2013a), then addressing and reasserting their importance has repercussions beyond feminist historiography, and is arguably pertinent to understanding more broadly the production of gendered subjects in contemporary society.

Re-Turning

There has been, since the mid-2000s, an increased preoccupation within feminist art with the return to or re-enactment of specific moments and events, as, it seems, artists and scholars seek to make sense of the substantial legacies of 1970s and 1980s political advancements. In 2005, for example, Sharon Hayes produced *In the Near Future*, a project that appropriated slogans from 1970s social protests and reengaged them in the contemporary public spaces of New York City. Mary Kelly produced a multi-part project entitled *Love Songs* in 2007, in which historic demonstrations from the 1970s are refracted through the experiences of younger women. Less immediately recognisable as a return strategy, a 2009 experimental research event organised by Liz Linden and Jen Kennedy indicated the sustained and often weighty influence of ‘second-wave’ feminist knowledge, which (the event suggested), although critically necessary and productive, should never be left uncontested or carelessly reiterated.[[1]](#footnote-2) However, although these historically-relational works have become highly visible in recent years, it would be incorrect to assume that they are a limited phenomena. As early as 1990, Dara Birnhaum produced *Canon: Taking to the Streets*, a video-work that evoked and recalled both 1968 Paris protests and feminist Take Back the Night marches of the 1980s. To delve even deeper into history, a link could be made with the late nineteenth century suffragettes, who sometimes re-enacted their prison experiences for a public audience. It is, therefore, evident that political histories have long provided the material for performative and artistic re-enactments and are not explicitly unique to our current moment. The significance of protest re-enactment has been discussed ably elsewhere, particularly its effects upon temporality and the potential political efficacy of such actions (Schneider, 2010). Therefore, although a number of Davis’s artworks relate significantly to political histories (especially women’s suffrage campaigning), the re-enactment of political protests do not form the primary focus of this article, which instead concentrates on the repetition of specifically *art historical* tropes.

Re-enactment has appeared, probably most strongly, as a practice within performance art. A vital strategy for feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s, it is logical that performance artists have wanted to return to these productive moments to re-experience or even extend their possibilities. Concurrently, however, it is undeniable that at times these *spectacular* performance re-enactments have been in service to the global museum sector with its growing demand for uncharted historical areas into which to expand. I am thinking particularly of Marina Abramovic’s *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim in 2005 and *The Artist is Present* at MoMA in 2010 - significantly the ninth most well-attended exhibition that year (*The Art Newspaper*, 2011: 23). The performed body and its traces have been discussed thoroughly by art historians including Amelia Jones (1997; 2011) and, although other examples of such practices are numerous and continue to require scholarly attention, for the purposes of this discussion are not directly relevant.

This article instead explores Davis’s complex strategies for adopting and adapting motifs from within the archives of art history, arguing that her *work constitutes a mode of visual research and historiography*. The discussion below offers a fundamental contestation to the characterisation of historiographic or archival artwork as a trend or ‘turn’ in contemporary art production; contending instead that the visual artwork has formed a constitutive part of a feminist art historical research project investigating the epistemic parameters of disciplinary knowledge, and can therefore be considered active alongside exploratory processes such as teaching, writing, and curating. In her earlier article, Zapperi similarly argued that the discussed works ‘are investigations into the formation of historical knowledge’, therefore this critical visual research project requires further acknowledgement and contextualisation.

In a 2012 essay published in *Mousse Magazine*, Lars Bang Larson accurately lampoons the hysterical and obsessional restlessness of contemporary art’s myriad ‘turns’ over recent years (Larson, 2012).[[2]](#footnote-3) Yet this notion of turning continues to hold considerable sway over contemporary art theory and, as such, requires attention. In two articles published in the influential online journal *eflux* during 2009, curator/philosopher Dieter Roelstraete articulates his theory of the ‘historiographic turn’ in contemporary art, a trend that he describes as:

apparent in the obsession with archiving, forgetfulness, memoirs and memorials, nostalgia, oblivion, re-enactment, remembrance, reminiscence, retrospection – in short, with the *past* – that seems to drive much of the work done by some of the best (and most highly regarded) artists active today…[[3]](#footnote-4)

Two years earlier, art historian Jan Verwoert presaged Roelstraete’s article with the online essay ‘Living with Ghosts’, in which he contrasts 1980s and 2000s appropriative art strategies, declaring somewhat modestly that: ‘[t]o practice and discuss appropriation in the present moment means something different than it did before’.[[4]](#footnote-5) Both writers draw not dissimilar conclusions about the ambivalent effect that pluralistic histories appear to exercise upon cultural production in the twenty-first century, although Roelstraete in particular disapprovingly concludes: ‘the one tragic flaw that clearly cripples the purported critical claims and impact of the current “historiographic turn” in art: its inability to grasp or even look at the present, much less to *excavate the future*.’ These prominent articles contribute to an expanding field of literature around this significant subject in contemporary art (Foster, 2004; Godfrey, 2007); yet there is a sizeable failure on the part of both writers to take into account the importance of (art) history, including especially its legacies of exclusion, for canonically or economically marginalised artistic subjects. To wit: women may have gained greater recognition as ‘artists’ but they continue to earn significantly less than their male counterparts and additionally make up the vast majority of underpaid (or often unpaid) workers in the art sector (it is no coincidence that Madeleine Schwartz has described interns as the new housewives).[[5]](#footnote-6) Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock famously recognised ‘it is only in the twentieth century that women artists have been systematically effaced from the history of art’ (1981: xxix), yet this erasure was both swift and clandestine; therefore Roelstraete’s conclusive comment fails furthermore to comprehend how crucial the politics of memory are to a contemporary feminist movement that remains all too aware of the persistent risk posed by historical elision.

Verwoert differentiates the ‘dead commodity fetish’ of 1980s appropriative strategies from the post-1989 move towards appropriation as the ‘invocation of something that lives through time.’ The article compelling contrasts a contemporary vision of history as moving fluidly through temporal registers, rather than as something static to be seized and possessed; yet (to extend Verwoert’s reasoning), in order to relinquish one’s hold on an object, it must be possessed in the first place. Miriam Schapiro, Sylvia Sleigh, Ana Vieira, Hannah Wilke, Orlan – these feminist artists had to (initially, at least) gain legitimacy as cultural producers, in a historical canon that negated their very existence as such, *by seizing, possessing and reinscribing* the signs of art’s great masters. Not by letting go. The historical break that Verwoert locates at 1989 is, of course, unquestionable, but he correspondingly fails to note the transhistoricity of ‘patrilineage’ in modern art history, which both pre- and post-dates this significant juncture, and therefore structures the relation between (women) artists and art history more or less continuously over the past century (Schor, 1991).[[6]](#footnote-7) To quote Verwoert, in the 1980s, to ‘appropriate the fetishes of material culture, then, is like looting empty shops on the eve of destruction. It’s the final party before doomsday.’ This universalist perspective, in which everyone has equal access to and equivalent desires toward destroying the symbols of a profligate society in stagnation, refuses the particularities of an artist’s encounter with and relation to cultural production and its historical legacies. To be even more precise, this destructive resignation exists in direct opposition to the feminist utopian dream of remaking culture and society that I locate within feminist re-visioning works.

The examination below seeks to consider what specifically happens when art’s preoccupation with looking back, retrieval, appropriation, archival impulse, historiographic turn – whatever one wishes to term it – is considered specifically in relation to feminist politics. Arguably, women artists have always had to be historians of their own practice, therefore this research and reflection is not (as advocates of the ‘turn’ imply) new, fleeting or fashionable; instead it can be considered a fundamental visual contribution to the historical enquiries of the feminist art *and art history* movement. I specifically employ this emphasis to reflect what Angela Dimitrakaki has also recently highlighted, namely that the feminist art movement should perhaps be renamed ‘since art history played a major role in the movement’s claims and direction’ (2013b: 2).

**Fig. 1 – *Who is a Woman Now?***

**Fig. 2 - *Disgrace***

Re-Visioning

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; *it is an act of survival*. (Rich, 1972: 18)

The above citation, from the celebrated American poet and essayist Adrienne Rich, succinctly illustrates the feminist impulse to invade the languages and structures of paternalist artistic canons, ‘not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us’ (1972:19). Rich’s enthusiastic acknowledgment of re-visioning as critical strategy marks a stark contrast to contemporary art theory’s conception of the fashionable, yet transitory, historiographic turn. Rich’s essay makes clear that, for women poets, excluded from both the practical institutions of literature and, just as crucially, the creative narrative that constructs men as creators, pilfering the raw materials of this history and re-visioning it within a feminist imaginary is a vital critical strategy. Davis has produced a number of projects that employ a re-visioning tactic, working through various series’ of responses to a particular artist’s oeuvre. In particular, the two series examined here respond to the legacies of early-twentieth-century modernist painting and the art historical narratives that construct vanguard (formal) innovation as a principle sign of artistic greatness, often entwined with the depiction of the female nude. It is no coincidence that feminist art historians have highlighted women’s secondary role within these narratives as models, lovers and muses to the productive male artists (Meskimmon, 1996).

The earliest of Davis’s series to react to the traces of modernism is entitled *Who is a Woman Now?*, and was produced in 2008 as a response to Willem de Kooning’s notoriously disputed *Woman* paintings of 1950-52. Art historian Carol Duncan has criticised de Kooning’s paintings for representing their female subjects as ‘vulgar, sexual [and] dangerous’ (Duncan, 1989: 173), and although feminist consensus on these works may be less resolute in recent years (Barber, 1999), the images continue to exert a divisive anxiety upon modern art historiography. Davis utilises cheap postcard reproductions of de Kooning’s *Woman*, tenderly folding and pushing the cards into shape, so that they assume a sculptural, physical quality that contrasts the flat, violent paintwork of the original canvases. She then redraws the folded postcards in stark pencil works that contrast dark and light planes, permitting only glimpses of the de Kooning women. Through this deceptively minor act, Davis returns to these women a sense of corporeality and contests a flattening art historical vision. Her strategy recalls that of the Portugeuse artist Ana Vieira, who in 1973 restaged Edouard Manet’s *Le dejeuner sur l’herbe* (1863), in a literalised gallery installation. In Vieira’s re-visioning, picnic paraphernalia litters the gallery floor and Manet’s painting is projected onto the illusory white space of a picnic blanket; the viewer is enticed to awkwardly step *into* the scene, but of course she cannot. The work is suspended uncomfortably between two- and three-dimensionality, and the painter’s palette and brushes are piled conspicuously in one corner to remind viewers of the falseness of the material. It is the awkward materiality of both Vieira’s and Davis’s works that disrupts the ocular power of the alluded paintings; and, moreover, the modernist art traditions that construct viewing relations in which the naked female body is presented for the viewer’s authoritative gaze (Berger, 1972). Tellingly, in Vieira’s 1973 installation, the nude model’s head is projected onto a white plate, thereby satirically exposing the façade of art history that serves women’s naked bodies up to the viewer’s delectation. Both of these artworks instantiate a feminist deconstruction of the ‘scopophilic instinct’, articulated most notably by film theorist Laura Mulvey in 1975:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure has been split between active/male and passive/female… In their traditional role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-look-at-ness*. (1975: 47-8)

Davis‘s almost sculptural intervention disrupts the *to-be-look-at-ness* of the two-dimensional models, viciously rendered in strokes of flat colour and encourages her audience look anew at these famous works that they might think they know. The uncanny materiality of the redrawn postcard figures also confronts viewers with the vagaries of vision and concealment, provoking reflection on the complicated *pleasure* derived from looking and the displeasure when this is prevented. Davis has tellingly spoken of the ‘contradictions’ in her relationship to these ‘powerful works’, and her ambivalent visual responses certainly suggest the push-pull lure of art history’s most well-known artworks.[[7]](#footnote-8) Consequently, her re-visioning strategy does not negate the significance or even primacy of the canonical artworks she adapts, but acknowledges the ambivalence that women artists and viewers must feel towards these scopophilic renderings, even as they experience some pleasure in looking.

In the palimpsestic 2009 series *Disgrace*, Davis develops her process of ambivalent re-visioning by refocusing her attention on Amadeo Modigliani’s drawings of nude female models, made in the earliest decades of the twentieth century. Tearing pages from a 1972 exhibition catalogue of his work, Davis begins by tracing the outline of her hand upon the pages, before expanding this line to encompass her entire body. The pencil marks build up upon the pages, blurring the distinction between Modigliani’s and Davis’s lines, her body complicating and protectively instantiating itself between the viewer’s gaze and the exposed model. In this manner the work echoes and extends a recurrent strategy from earlier feminist art practice, wherein women artists inserted their (often nude) bodies within art historical frameworks so that their corporeal reality might abruptly, visually counter the male/artist, female/model dichotomy. There are, in particular, strong resonances with Hannah Wilke’s responses to the inescapable artistic legacies of Marcel Duchamp, who is often referred to paternally as ‘the father of conceptual art’. In 1976, Wilke performed a discomfiting striptease behind the iconic 1923 glass-work *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* and, in a second performance, played chess nude in front of the work.In a later intervention, Wilke challenged the voyeuristic and deeply unsettling *Étant Donnés* by producing a book-sleeve-styled photograph of her own naked body, unashamedly exposed in contrast to Duchamp’s sneakily peaked glance. The title of this work declares somewhat ambiguously, ‘I Object’, presumably voicing a protestation in contrast to art history’s enforced objection of woman as ‘I, Object’. The uncertain stress of this phrase reflects a more general concern: could Wilke, by insinuating her naked, but live and authored body into art historical frameworks, disrupt the erotic construction of woman-as-object in visual histories? (Griselda Pollock has theorised the complex gendering of subjects in modernist painting histories specifically around the female nude, 1992). This ambiguity extends to the title of Davis’s work: where does the ‘disgrace’ lie? Is it with Modigliani, the named and powerful artist who drew these anonymous models, or with an art historical discipline that continues to endorse such asymmetrical practices of art production and consumption? Or does the disgrace lie with Davis for distorting and defacing these masterpieces? Perhaps the disgrace is to be found elsewhere, in the shame of the artist for her uncertain filial desire towards Modigliani, which troubles her political affiliations to feminism?

Davis acknowledges this iconoclastic uncertainty and claims to be ‘seduced by the quality and character of [Modigliani’s] pencil drawing’, while simultaneously desiring to refract it through a ‘feminist lens’. This affectionate irreverence towards the paternal figures of art history is crucial to feminist re-visionings of the canon, as it productively merges filial desire and critique without customary recourse to avant-gardist rupture or rejection. Wilke employed a similar rhetoric in 1988, when she wrote: ‘History is a dialectical process. To honour Duchamp is to oppose him’ (Wilke, 1989: pp). Art historian Tamara Trodd discusses this tension in the work of Tacita Dean, who has made multiple films representing older, male artists such as *Mario Merz* (2002) or *Edwin Parker* (2011). The feminist problematic that Trodd (2011) locates is at the fascinating intersection between artistic inheritance and a ‘desire for usurpation’ that requires a powerful process of ‘homage-yet-erasure’. Dean contributes a key to understanding this conflict, by reference to ‘the unwritten portion between the first two Theban plays, where Oedipus’s sister/daughters lead their blinded brother/father through the wilderness to Colonus; so reversing the usual direction of parental guidance’ (in Trodd: 2011). This narrative suggests an alternative to the Oedipal successions so long associated with vanguard advancement within the arts and emphasises instead a (still necessarily *critical*) trans-generational attachment and negotiation.

Re-visioning strategies have been crucial to feminist artists seeking to establish their practice within a history of art that negates their very existence as cultural producers and therefore constitutes a fundamental form of feminist research – a visual historiography. Davis’s work is part of a legacy that includes, for example, Sylvia Sleigh’s adaptation of Ingres’ languorously posed odalisques to depict male sitters; Chila Burman’s own colourful body prints, dusted with glitter, that playfully echo Yves Klein’s orchestrated models; Orlan’s multiple art historical engagements, from tableaux vivants swathed in Bernini-blue drapes to the monstrous medical interventions that seek to remake her face in the image of art’s beauties; and, of course as mentioned, Vieira and Wilke.[[8]](#footnote-9) The re-visioned elements in these artworks are like scraps or fragments plucked from art history, materials ready to be reworked and reinvested with meaning. *By self-reflexively foregrounding the re-visioned art historical element, these artworks emphasise women artists’ historically tenuous relation to art and its institutions, as well as pointing to the problematic construction of ‘woman’ through art history’s representations.*

**Fig. 3 – What have we got to do with a room of one’s own? (Film still)**

Re-Citing

We think back through our mothers if we are women. (Woolf, 1929: 99)

In 1999, Mieke Bal presented her concept of ‘visual textuality’, a term that she explicates thus: ‘By recycling forms taken from earlier works, an artist takes along the text from which the borrowed element has broken away, *while at the same time constructing a new text with the debris*’ (1999:9, emphasis added). To borrow from this theory, it can be suggested that ‘to re-vision’ is to break off, possess, and reframe a visual fragment from art history to make it anew in the present. To ‘re-cite’, by contrast, means to summon, or call, to set in motion; and it is in this more fluid sense that younger women artists respond to, play with, and extend the legacies of their feminist forebears, rather than ambivalently or even antagonistically confronting the same. Pragmatically it could be suggested that, if during the 1970s the first large-scale collections of feminist artists began to re-vision the art historical canon from a marginal interventional perspective, since (at least) the 1990s women artists have been able to trace clear matrilineal connections across new feminist narratives (or even imagined narratives, as Zapperi suggests). In the 1929 citation above, Virginia Woolf articulates the importance of procuring a maternal artistic heritage and becoming subjects of an elected history. Discussion of feminist generations has maintained academic traction over the decades and has appeared recently in Lisa Ticker’s 2002 article ‘Mediating Generation: The Mother-Daughter Plot’ or Catherine Grant’s 2011 article, ‘Fans of Feminism: Re-Writing Histories of Second Wave Feminism in Contemporary Art’. Although Grant’s central contention is undoubtedly commendable, Dimitrakaki has criticised the article for establishing contemporary feminism as politically inefficacious: ‘the difference between historical moments is unambiguous: a fan of feminism in the now whereas a feminist is in the past’ (2013a: pp). Born in 1977, Davis could be included in the category of the fan; indeed, she fits Grant’s conception of the feminist fan in so far as there is a profound lack of critical distance between Davis and her maternal subjects – ‘the action of a fan focuses on attachment and desire’ (Grant: 269). However, Dimitrakaki’s assessment helpfully points to an aestheticisation or depoliticisation of feminism that is common to this mode of (nostalgic) fandom and which contributes to its temporal delineation to the past. Similar to Zapperi’s examples of Zoe Leonard, Renee Green and Andrea Geyer, I believe Davis’s work continues, or even reanimates previous feminist politics, and shares with these artists ‘a similar understanding of archival research not as a nostalgic operation, but rather as a powerful form of reactivation’ (2013: 45).

Davis’s 2010 film *What have we got to do with a room of one’s own?*, explores the concept of matrilineal heritage on a number of levels and perhaps provides a key to understanding the artist’s relation to historical moments of feminism. The work was initially conceived as part of a 2010 project, *The Long Loch*, produced in collaboration with the influential feminist artist Faith Wilding. Davis appropriately met Wilding as a result of a recitative artwork that echoed one of the older artist’s epochal performances: *Waiting in 1972, What About 2007?* Davis’s 2010 film takes as a title provocation Woolf’s famous essay of 1929, thereby establishing a second matrilineal artistic figure alongside Wilding; ultimately, however, the film is a black and white exploration of the artist’s real-life mother’s house. Davis’s film asks the spectator to imagine what role these maternal registers might have in relation to feminist politics today, and to consider how these “mothers’” experiences and battles have contributed towards the contemporary moment: ‘what have *we* got to do’ to extend these legacies? The film provides a clue to understanding Davis’s recitative actions as an act of drawing the politics of the past into the present, enquiring what we can do to extend or relocate the historical project of feminism in the 2010s. My own wariness towards the concept of the feminist fan is that fandom requires an *active* articulation of support, whereas (to my mind) all women artists working today have benefitted from the vast structural advances brought about by second-wave feminist interventions within the institutions of art and art history. Working across various maternal platforms, Davis’s film acknowledges that she is a daughter born of feminist struggles that changed the landscape of contemporary art production, and that a vital responsibility of this inheritance is the working out of political affiliation and expansion. The works examined below explore this daughterly reclamation in greater detail and broadly example this process of working out one’s position as a subject within feminist history.

**Fig. 4 – Reversibility (Militant Methods)**

**Fig. 5 – Curtain I-VII**

Davis’s exhibitions *Peace at Last!* and *Not Just the Perfect Moments*, both included works relating to the history of the women’s suffrage movement in the United Kingdom.[[9]](#footnote-10) These works insistently reiterate moments of political aggression located in feminist organising and, rather than perpetrating a cloying nostalgia, remind viewers of the violence that has long surrounded women’s rights campaigns (and continues to do so, as evidenced by the growth of online threats on Twitter and so on). *Reversibility (Militant Methods)* exposes a moment of anti-suffragist destruction, visible via a defaced pamphlet that Davis discovered in the Glasgow Museum of Modern Art archives. The photograph of Christabel Pankhurst, reproduced on the pamphlet cover, had been vandalised, scratched out so violently by pencil that there were small tears to the paper. Davis meticulously redraws the photograph and tenderly re-enacts the scribbled defacement. In contrast to the aggression of the original act, the re-enactment required time, gentleness, and careful application of the lead to match the original. Displayed as a large-scale poster, Davis’s drawing reclaims an act of anti-feminist aggression and inscribes it within a demonstrative act of remembrance; re-citing the original action, Davis’s work *draws* this history into the present moment and raises vital questions about concealment, visibility and knowledge in historical memory and narration.

*Curtain I-VII* conversely recalls Mary Richardson’s aggressive artistic gesture of 1914, when she entered London’s National Gallery and slashed the Diego Velasquez painting *The Toilet of Venus* (1647-51). The suffragette, Richardson, claimed that she wanted to ‘destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history’ in defence of the imprisoned Emmeline Pankhurst (Paterson, 2012). Immediately after the incident the seventeenth-century artwork was repaired by conservators and only a single photograph remained as evidence of the destructive political act. In *Curtain I-VII,* Davis fills a space in The Drawing Room gallery (painted deep red to resemble the National Gallery environment, rather than the contemporary white cube) with seven *Toilet of Venus* poster prints and, layering cut-outs of the damaged canvas photograph, re-photocopies the resultant collage multiple times. In one sense, the act of re-citing this gesture, reframing and exhibiting it in a gallery, pulls to the fore its artistic gestural quality, and Richardson’s cuts begin to emerge as a shadowy antecedent to mid-twentieth century art history. (Particularly its celebration of the violent embodied act, including Jackson Pollock’s slashes of paint across the canvas, or Franz Kline’s thick black strokes of paint, which the photocopied knife marks begin to resemble.) However, this is not an empty aestheticized reiteration - the monochromatic photocopies of the damaged canvas are roughly cut-out and pasted, the jagged edges jarring the smooth poster-rendered body of the Venus and thereby countering the restorative process that made her emphatically whole again for the viewer’s delight. This cut-and-paste aesthetic quite appropriately recalls Riot Grrl fanzines of the 1980s and 1990s. However, the repeated photocopying of the black-and-white damage photograph begins also to soften and fade the image, requiring that Davis draw it back in with pencil. Writing in the exhibition essay, Dominic Paterson argues that, comparable to the conservationist act of repairing the damaged painting in 1914, Davis’s ‘redrawn cuts care instead for the political force which motivated Richardson’ (Paterson, 2012). Extending Paterson’s suggestion then, the re-citing of these political acts – both of which centred upon the site of the visual – suggests a curatorial approach to feminist history, a caring and tending to these overlooked moments. (The word curator derives from the Latin *curare*, meaning to take care of). If re-visioning can be understood as an artistic research project, examining and adapting the canon of art history within a feminist perspective, these re-cited works instead care for and think back through maternal lineages, dragging the political potential of such moments into the present.

Davis’s re-citing of the anonymous pamphlet defacement and Richardson’s protest, serves to expose to viewers these peripheral historical moments and remind the audience that visual culture (and its ideological implications) have been a profound site of contestation throughout feminist history (Tickner suggests that this was especially true of women’s suffrage collectives, 1988) and must continue to be so today. The title of the exhibition, ‘Not Just the Perfect Moments’, fittingly implies the non-celebratory, flawed and *im*perfect moments that are often occluded within dominant historical narratives. This title phrase is borrowed from the artist Jo Spence, whom Davis references across multiple recitative works in both exhibitions. Resonating with the examples above, throughout her career Spence comprehended and repeatedly called attention to the ideological effects of the visual, particularly the role of photography in reinforcing conventional socio-political myths regarding femininity and class. Davis establishes a powerful respect for Spence’s preceding work by meticulously portraying cluttered scenes from the Jo Spence Memorial Archive, depicting these archival traces in scrupulously detailed pencil drawings. ‘To draw’ in this instance evokes both the literal pencil work of Davis’s painstakingly recreated drawings, and the enticement or lure of feminist art history, which repeatedly draws the artist’s attention. This history is simultaneously drawn into the present by a contemporary audience’s engagement with the re-cited imagery, which suggests the possibility for collective political action that so often seems lost to the past.

Spence provides an immediate and highly pertinent political predecessor to Davis, her efforts to enact a public art practice within a socialist-feminist logic was born of resentment against the 1980s context of conservative politics and the increasing constriction of women’s freedoms under public funding cuts. If we ‘think back through out mothers if we are women’, Davis establishes Spence as an elected ancestor whilst simultaneously caretaking and extending her historical artistic practice, re-citing it and implying the transhistoricity of these particular political struggles. From ancient mythology to contemporary Disney films, the mother-daughter conflict myth is well-rehearsed and endlessly reiterated; however, Davis’s intricate drawings of Spence’s (public) photographs and (private) archival bric-a-brac refute this myth, offering instead an act of daughterly affiliation. The simple curatorial model of re-citing also marks a refusal to unnecessarily innovate, reject and advance – for, as we know, the institutionalisation of father-son dissent as *productive* is predicated on the converse myth of mother-daughter conflict as *hysterical*. Lisa Tickner suggests instead that we ‘consider the question of attachment or rupture, not as a *gendered* distinction, but in terms of an *historical* contrast in mode of production’ (2002: 27). She highlights the shift away from an artisanal mode of induction within a craft, towards the modernist deskilling of art-making which, entwined with the ascendance of avant-garde narratives, devolved upon the rigid negation of female artistic subjects who were (this narrative implied) psychologically ill-equipped for the revolutionary necessities of autonomous art-making. Davis’s copied drawings of the Spence Archive act to mock this gendered narrative securing vanguard innovation by re-citing and recycling copied images, in some cases literally redrawing her photographs in pencil.

**Fig. 6 – Exhibition Installation View**

Art Work

The *langue* of architecture is in some ways no different to that of ordinary language: no single individual can alter it at his or her own will; it embodies certain culturally accepted values and meanings; it has to be *learned in some detail by users before it can be employed effectively*. (Hutcheon, 1988: 183. Emphasis added)

Linda Hutcheon’s 1988 pronouncement can be fluently extended to encompass the visual arts, or indeed any area of knowledge; but with particular regards to art, the necessary learning and labour required to become educated into the *langue* (the structures that implicitly govern behaviour or speech)*,* are habitually masked behind myths of creativity and its essential innateness. The works examined in the ‘Re-Visioning’ section above, produced by a range of feminist artists since 1970 including Davis, foreground visual references that have been extracted from within art’s history. It is my contention that through this strategy of underlining and drawing attention to the reframed motifs these artists emphasise that their *art is work*. By re-staging historical imagery these artists foreground the heretofore-denied accumulation of cultural capital that is necessary for participation in the markets of art’s circulation, display and history (as theorised by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s). This exposure of the processes of cultural accumulation denaturalises the myth of artistic creativity, emphasising both art as work and, concurrently, indicating women’s exclusion from these gendered spaces of labour. It is no coincidence that throughout the 1970s women struggled with the question of ‘work’ both in relation to art and the home, as the two spaces have been particularly indivisible for women. Just as women’s reproductive labour has been constructed as natural, in opposition to men’s productive waged labour (see the Wages for Housework campaign); so too has women’s artistic labour been almost irrevocably tied to their homes, bodies and femininity, in opposition to male artists’ public works (Parker, 1984).

In a 2004 article, Shelley King discusses the mythological tale of the Corinthian maid, a young woman who traced the outline of her lover’s shadow on the wall, which her father subsequently cast into a clay bust. King suggests that this art origin myth therefore distinguishes ‘private feminine mimetic and derivative artistry and a public masculine creative artistic genius’ (2008: 630). Davis explicitly explores this conundrum, producing a series of intricately rendered drawings copied from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instructional literature. In *Not Just the Perfect Moments* these drawings are displayed alongside (or in some cases spliced within) twentieth-century ‘stock’ commercial photography, suggesting further levels of artistic derivation, as well as destabilizing hierarchical divisions between high and low art. These works indicate a history of women’s private artistry, in which competent drawing skill was considered a worthy feminine attribute, but rarely ever fully accepted as a form of ‘real’ (i.e. useful, economically-productive) art work. The inclusion of stock reproductions, alongside Davis’s precise pencil copies of Spence’s (already reproducible) photographs, additionally challenge the art historical notion of originality and progression; ideas that are bound up within the characterisation of particular art-making as gendered work. Writing about the work of Rachel Whiteread, Tickner effectively summarises the women artist’s dilemma: ‘[her work] is almost a parody of the assumption that women elaborate, colour and interpret, rather than originate structure and form’ (2002: 29).

Davis’s drawings are displayed on and alongside oversized abstract forms that only reveal themselves from a distance: a pink pencil eraser, a blackboard duster, a white eraser smudged grey from rubbing out. These items are surprisingly forceful, awkwardly taking up space and implicitly alluding to the acts of erasure that Davis seeks to draw back into historical memory. Most surprising, for an exhibition of drawings, is the resolute objectness of the displays: set upon sculptural forms that the viewer is forced to move around, hung in brightly coloured little frames that demand the viewer’s proximity, and reflected in mirrors that shift focus. The tangibility of the works require the audience to move around and between them; these are not flat, unobtrusive drawings but *things* that markedly take up space, intrude and constantly surprise. Their materiality reflects, perhaps, the artist’s treatment of history as an artistic material to be grasped, grappled with, and reworked. This approach is also evident in the de Kooning and Modigliani re-visionings, and the re-citing of Richardson’s protest, in which Davis uses cheap reproductions, the stuff of museum gift shops. This is not the distant ‘high art’ of history but the mundane exposure we usually have to art history’s commercial detritus. To return to Roelstraete’s article, he claims:

art and archaeology also share a profound understanding – and one might say that they are on account of this almost “naturally” inclined to a *Marxist epistemology* – of the primacy of the *material* in all culture, the overwhelming importance of mere “matter” and “stuff” in any attempt to grasp and truly read the cluttered fabric of the world. (Original emphasis)

He stresses that it is within this materialist logic that we can understand both art and archaeology irrepressibly as *work* – ‘hard and dirty work, certain to remind us of our bodily involvement *in* the world’. Feminist *art work* may be historiographical (as I suggested earlier) a research project, re-visioning paternalistic histories and exploring maternal feminist links, but it can also be thought in this sense as archaeological. Treating history as a malleable, physical body of knowledge to be re-visioned, re-cited, and re-worked continually into new narrative forms.

Feminist Politics: Now

Davis has stated that she desires her work to ‘bear witness to the complexities of the past’; but, as result, do her artworks fail to look towards the future? This is a recurrent criticism of historically responsive or archival art projects. For example, Roelstraete suggests that the ‘historiographic turn’ is an direct outcome of the Bush-era, a rejection of the present and all its awful impossibilities, in favour of a nostalgic regression to an idealised past. This view is complemented by Dimitrakaki’s suggestion that Grant’s ‘feminist fan’ abdicates political responsibility in the present moment, projecting it onto the past. It is, in fact, entirely comprehensible that feminists might suffer a longing for the politically potent, *collectively organised* moment of the so-called second-wave; however, I believe Davis’s works function to extend these possibilities rather than regressing nostalgically toward them. Nostalgia is not the only possible relationship with the past, even if it is a postmodern legacy to often see it in these terms.

One argument that could be advanced in Davis’s favour is that, by rejecting the allure of vanguard innovation or an expansive, progressive momentum, her works exercise a different logic to that of either patriarchal (teleological) or neoliberal (global) narratives. However, I am not convinced that this is the crucial effect within the work. Rather, to my mind, these projects coalesce as an archive of visual research, a working out of the artist’s personal and collective place in the world as a subject of (art) history, and as a feminist. The confusing complexities of feminism in the twenty-first century have been meticulously glossed by numerous theorists in recent years. Angela McRobbie has argued that feminism as consumerism, or as a model of productive employment has thrived at the expense of feminism as politics, ‘shap[ing] notions of womanhood so they fit with new or emerging (neo-liberalised) social and economic arrangements’ (2008: 57). Nancy Fraser has suggested that an identity-based ‘politics of recognition’ has unhelpfully dominated a ‘politics of redistribution’, and even stymied the possibility of constructive feminist discussion centred upon political economy.[[10]](#footnote-11) Hester Eisenstein has demonstrated that the grammar and structure of second-wave feminist struggles have been recouped (if they were not always already amenable to) neoliberal capitalist organisation (2009). With regards to the historicisation of feminist theory specifically, Clare Hemmings’ 2011 study examined the reiterative narratives that are often employed to make sense of feminist histories; as, she argues, these scholarly abbreviations carry substantial risks toward limiting our understanding of the past. Therefore, in her desire to bear witness to the complexities of the past, I recognise in Davis’s work a longing to understand previous feminist moments differently (not necessarily more authentically) to the narratives often proffered by historical or theoretical accounts. Furthermore, in direct opposition to the gradual negation of political potential that McRobbie, Fraser and Eisenstein identify in the evolution of feminism, I believe Davis’s narrative projects enact three specific moments of exposure and emphasise the important work that feminist cultural production has done and continues to do.

(1) The artist’s re-visioning strategy extends the earlier work of ‘second-wave’ feminist artists by intervening in the (still extant) patrilineal narratives of the art historical canon. This feminist strategy recurs across four decades of art-making and establishes a body of visual research that treats the art historical canon as a material to be renewed within, and in relation to, the present. (2) Davis’s output establishes strong matrilineal links by caring for (or curating) previous moments of protest and cultural production. These works serve to simultaneously remind viewers of precedent political successes (which often required transgressive action) and work toward the artist becoming a conscious subject of feminist (art) history. (3) Finally, Davis’s archival explorations treat ‘art history’ as material to be reworked. Adapting visual motifs from the canon foregrounds the hidden labour inherent to all art practices and this model of art-making thereby emphasises women’s complicated historical relation to conceptions of work and, in particular, entrenched mythologies of artistic creativity and productivity. In short, Davis’s approach to the past demonstrates that political work, and especially the political work of feminism, cannot be done once and for all but rather requires duration, repetition and adjustment.

In one sense it is possible to read the trajectory of Davis’s art practice as a metaphor for the development of feminist cultural consciousness over the past four decades. Beginning as a form of artistic research she examines and adapts motifs from paternalistic modernism, re-visioning these paintings within a feminist imaginary; subsequently, the works begin to trace a feminist matrilineage through moments of political action and artistic antecedents. Latterly, Davis has claimed to move away from manifest art historical referents, attributing this shift to the increasing invitations from art institutions and funding bodies to respond to a collection, or archive – an instrumentalisation of artistic research. Ultimately, however, the projects may have served their purpose as a working out of subjectivity and Davis has carefully called attention to Paolo Freire, who states: ‘We need to be subjects of history, even if we cannot stop being objects of history.’ In 1995, at the height (arguably) of the postmodern moment in cultural studies, Ella Sohat and Robert Stam asked: ‘How then should the struggle to become subjects of history be articulated in an era of the “death of the subject”?’ (1995, 11) Crucially, at this latterly significant juncture for feminist politics and contemporary art, as the postmodern dissolution of the subject shifts towards a stable agent acting within a realist or Marxist paradigm (Gunnarsson, 2013), the question needs to be reformulated. Davis’s body of work attempts to do just this, by enquiring: ‘How should the feminist struggle to become subjects of (art) history be articulated in an era when particular women artists have greater visibility than before but women continue to be negated as prime producers of culture, knowledge and history?’ Representational strategies can only be the beginning. As I mentioned at the introduction to this article, via Zapperi, art is starting to gain significance within wider feminist historiography. However it is also true that: ‘Outside the circles of art world intellectuals, such practices [contemporary art] are rarely ever associated with the affirmation or subversion of neoliberal ideology, for instance, or with the boosting of knowledge economies or with the glamorisation of mobility’ (Dimitrakaki, 2013b: 2). Debating the significant art historical project mounted by feminist artists at a particularly fraught historical moment such as ours, rife with conflict and perceived in terms of an ongoing crisis of values and subjectivity, can therefore contribute to a broader understanding of how we come to exist as political beings (indeed, as feminists) through a creative, often unorthodox and politically motivated appropriation of the past rather than always having to start from scratch.

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1. *Back to the Future*, Whitney Museum New York, February 2009. At the event an invited audience purposefully disengaged the vocabulary of feminism from its lexical history in order to test a ‘Dictionary of Temporary Approximations’; this suspensive conversation ultimately concluded by returning to and rejuvenating the historical terms from which it had departed, thereby marking and making visible the linguistic assumptions that can linger through reiteration rather than contestation. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Lars Bang Larson, ‘Turn! Turn! Turn!’ *Mousse Magazine* 35 (October 2012). http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=879. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Dieter Roelstraete, ‘After the Historiographic Turn: Current Findings’, *eflux journal* 6 (May 2009). http://www.e-flux.com/journal/after-the-historiographic-turn-current-findings/. See also: ‘The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art’, *eflux journal* 4 (March 2009). http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/. [20 October 2013] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Jan Verwoert, ‘Living with Ghosts: From Appropriation to Invocation in Contemporary Art’, *Art and Research* 1.2 (Summer 2007). http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/pdfs/verwoert.pdf. [20 October 2013] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Madeleine Schwartz, ‘Opportunity Costs’, *Dissent: A Quarterly of Politics and Culture* (Winter 2013). Online: http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/opportunity-costs-the-true-price-of-internships. [20 October 2013] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Verwoert has written elsewhere on the importance of historical legacies and narratives specifically for the women artist Michaela Melian: ‘Past, Present and Future’ *Frieze* 105 (March 2007), but he does not fully engage a feminist perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Artist’s quotes are all excerpted from an unrecorded lecture given by Kate Davis at Edinburgh College of Art on 11th October 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. For more information on these artists/works see: Sylvia Sleigh’s work is discussed in many publications but the *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* is a good compendium to start with. Chila Burman’s body prints are discussed by Lynda Nead in *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, and she has also written a monograph on the artist. The specific role of art history in Orlan’s career is discussed by Sarah Wilson, *L’Histoire D’O: Orlan, Sacred and Profane* (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. *Peace At Last!* Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow: 13 July – 16 October 2010. *Not Just the Perfect Moments,* The Drawing Room, London: 4 December 2012 – 3 February 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Nancy Fraser (2000), *New Left Review*: http://newleftreview.org/II/3/nancy-fraser-rethinking-recognition. [20 October 2013] [↑](#footnote-ref-11)