

Opening A Closing Door: Feminist and Queer Artists as Historians

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While chatting to a university art teacher recently, I mentioned my interest in the work of feminist artists. “Feminism!” she exclaimed, as if greeting a long lost friend, “How fascinating. I used to follow feminism... in the eighties.” One of her female colleagues, overhearing our conversation, interjected consolingly. “You’re a feminist. So you must find the younger generation terribly disappointing.” Although such comments long ago stopped surprising me, and I’ve become used to defending feminism against charges of being deeply anachronistic and tragically unhip, this exchange briefly caught me off guard. For although I couldn’t find the words to say so right then, I recently have realised, unexpectedly and with delight, that many younger people share both my fascination with feminism’s history and my belief in its continued relevance.

Particularly striking are the many smart, engaging contemporary artists whose work delves into feminist history. In many cases born during or after the era of women’s liberation, they nonetheless identify intensely with the movement. Seeking information about figures and events both iconic and obscure, these artists have become historians. They build on Virginia Woolf’s maxim that “we think back through our mothers if we are women” to continue second wave feminism’s project recovery of women “hidden from history.” By animating activities and artworks that they previously would have known through photographs, fuzzy videotape or hearsay, they forge affective connections to the past that exceed citation or homage. They know that they cannot reproduce earlier times faithfully or return to a coherent past. But by devising portals between now and then, they suggest that both are mutable. Personal and institutional memories are unstable, memorials take the form of transient performances or events, a self-aware anachronism favours obsolete and outdated symbols and media, and historical ideas and images become common property to be freely sampled, circulated and adapted.

Fig. 1
Luis Jacob
*A Dance for Those of
Us Whose Hearts Have
Turned to Ice, Based on the
Choreography of Françoise
Sullivan and the Sculpture
of Barbara Hepworth
(With Sign-Language
Supplement)* 2007
Video (DVD), colour, silent,
08’35 mins. Three-channel
video installation with
free-standing wall, HD
video projection, television
monitors, and area rug;
reading area with 16-page
brochure, teak-root chairs,
mirror-polish chrome table,
and handwoven basket
Overall installation
dimensions:
426 x 365 x 240 cm
Courtesy of Birch Libralato,
Toronto



Fantasy, glamour, humour and irreverence, often considered scarce in the women's movement, prevail. Eyes as feminist as they are queer scan social and art histories for feminist, woman-centred and gay male experiments. Rather than enacting the close one-to-one identifications of identity politics, this new art spans gender, race and generation. Women and gay male artists channel the work of female artistic icons while lesbians "strap on" elements of gay male culture. Euphorically queering everything in sight, they pillage our collective archives to update and replenish them. Far from historiography's conventionally fusty rummagings, this historical research is deeply embodied and sexually charged. "I pursued texts with the dogged energy I usually reserve for cruising," writes the British author Neil Bartlett in his book about Oscar Wilde. "I became excited by the smallest hints; I scrutinised every gesture for significance; sometimes I simply stood close and waited for a response. I went to the most unlikely places."¹ This desire to connect with historical precedents through re-enactment and reconstruction brings to mind the Dutch philosopher Rosi Braidotti's account of embodiment as "a portion of living memory that endures, that lasts, that goes on – for a while – by undergoing constant internal modifications following the encounter with other bodies and forces [...] desire and yearning for inter-connections with others lies at the heart of subjectivity."² Fantasies of ingesting the other implied by such embodied approaches also recall Freud's characterisation of identification as a preliminary stage of object-choice: "The ego wants to incorporate this object into itself, and, in accordance with the oral or cannibalistic phase of libidinal development in which it is, it wants to do so by devouring it."³

This archival link to the past has a living, breathing complement in the apprenticeships that operate through institutionalised student-teacher relationships as well as social networks and "secret" collaborations with artists both living and dead. The Conceptual feminist American artist Mary Kelly, whose teaching, writing and art shaped successive feminist generations, recently has brought ideas of mentorship and inheritance into her work. Her three-part light box *Flashing Nipple Remix, #1* (2005) depicts women dressed in black with flashlights hoisted on top of their breasts and crotches as they restage a snapshot from Kelly's archives of a Miss World demonstration from 1971 in which she participated. The first picture shows the women standing still, while the second and third – shot with a slow shutter speed – capture them jumping around, turning the lights into abstract swirls. Flashlights that had originally parodied the sexualisation of the Miss World contestants now hint at non-biological reproduction. Part of *Love Songs* (2005–07), Kelly's mixed-media installation exploring women's memories of and identifications with women's liberation, this work underscores the differences between the "then" that Kelly helped form and the "now" that she imagined while doing so. *Love Songs* "attempts to describe what is left after the specific demands of the moment have faded, and what, if anything, is passed on from one generation to the next."⁴ Underscoring activism and art's shared affective nature, *Love Songs* encourages

the hope that radical movements can catalyse anyone who encounters them, however "belatedly". "I came late to feminism," recalls American art critic Johanna Burton,

by which I mean that I was born in the early 1970s. In that way, of course, I "missed" the *being-there* part of a movement [...] to which I felt nonetheless totally cathected and totally indebted [...] my first encounters with feminism – its histories and its conversations – were taken up from the double divide of time and place. This, I realise now, made my discovery of its figures, its terms, and its relevance all the more potent. For however "late" I had arrived to feminism, it seemed urgent and relevant and powerful – a tincture still waiting to be drunk.⁵

The affective results of belated events also figure in the work of Olivia Plender, including the literal uses of channelling other voices that the British artist explores in her graphic novel *A Stellar Key to the Summerland* (2007). The book shows how women in the Spiritualist Movement that developed in mid-nineteenth century rural New York, and is still practised in parts of England and Scotland, used their positions as spirit guides to address political gatherings where they expounded radical ideas about female suffrage and the abolition of slavery under the guise of channelling the dead. In the feminist continuum that Plender evokes, demands for social change survive across time and space, articulated through previously unimaginable bodies and contexts.

Concepts of channelling spirits from "the other side" also resonate with the generative effects that artistic precursors have for Canadian artist Luis Jacob. Inspired by *From Sea to Shining Sea*, AA Bronson's 1987 survey of artist-directed activity in Canada, in 2002 Jacob curated *Golden Streams: Artists' Collaboration And Exchange In The 1970s*. Taking Bronson's project as central to the creation of a Canadian artists' culture, Jacob built on Bronson's desire to make something from nothing:

What do you do when there is no art scene that you can relate to? More strongly: What do you do when the agents whom you are supposed to rely upon to establish your legitimacy as an artist *themselves lack this legitimacy in your eyes*? Well, perform a scene, perform an audience, in order to summon what does not exist.⁶

By alluding in his title to the sexual practice of golden showers, Jacob gives Bronson's ideas of national collectivity a decidedly perverse twist. This productive use of historical precedents also informs Jacob's installation *A Dance for Those of Us Whose Hearts Have Turned to Ice, Based on the Choreography of Françoise Sullivan and the Sculpture of Barbara Hepworth (With Sign-Language Supplement)* (2007), which centres on a video of the queer performer Keith Cole dancing (naked in one version, clothed in another) in a snowy landscape (Fig. 1).

As the title indicates, Cole channels two female artists from the 1940s: the Quebecoise choreographer and painter Françoise Sullivan, part of the Canadian avant-garde's defining movements, and the British sculptor Barbara Hepworth, who invested inert matter with life-like vitality. Beyond suggesting that geography affected the comparative fame and obscurity of these pioneering artists, *A Dance...* underscores the productive impact of two women's work on that of this gay male artist half a century later.

However, this relationship can also run the other way, as it does when American artist Emily Roysdon conjures up radical sexual and artistic precursors that our era of compromise and conservatism would sooner forget. The photographs in *untitled (David Wojnarowicz project)* (2001) depict friends of Roysdon wearing a picture of the deceased artist and activist as a mask. *untitled...* builds on Wojnarowicz's *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* (1978–79) for which he photographed men (and sometimes cardboard figures) wearing an image of the French poet over their face while performing criminal activities like shooting up or urinating in public. One picture in Roysdon's update shows a mask of Wojnarowicz's face staring out uncannily from a crowd. Another depicts a female figure lying on a bed, naked apart from underpants, a syringe stuck into her thigh; masturbating a strap-on dildo. For Roysdon as for Jacob, re-enactment bridges both generation and gender. However, in an important reversal of gay men's fascination with female divas, Roysdon uses Wojnarowicz's legacy as a foundation from which to affirm the eroticism of art and activism. Wojnarowicz's project, cut short by his death from AIDS, erupts with affective force. Conjuring the story of how a kiss awakes Sleeping Beauty, Roysdon proposes that the "kiss" of historical recuperation – a touch across time and place – releases frozen images from the past. This intimate desire to get under someone else's skin also intersects with Sherrie Levine's understanding of creative reciprocity: "I like to think of my paintings as membranes permeable from both sides, so that there is an easy flow between the past and the imaginary future, between my history and yours."⁷

This fluid exchange between feminism and queerness past, present and future has a further life in LTTR. The queer feminist art collective, formed in 2001 by artists Ginger Brooks Takahashi and K8 Hardy, later expanded to include Roysdon together with another artist, Ulrike Müller. Along with publishing an annual art journal whose format varies each issue and that includes literary, activist and critical texts as well as artists' projects and multiples, LTTR organises exhibitions, performances, screenings, readings, workshops and read-ins. Like second wave cultural feminists, though less evidently angry, LTTR creates alternative, affirmative spaces. As Roysdon says, "We are not protesting what we don't want, we are performing what we want."⁸ Traces of the genderqueer past reverberate through their projects, yet LTTR members raid the icebox partly to replenish it with their queer feminist projects. As suggested by the third issue of their journal, titled "Do You Wish To Direct Me?" and inspired by Lynda Benglis's auto-erotic video *Now* (1973): "Sometimes,

when you call, what you get back is both an echo and a response. The residual pleasure makes you want to call again."⁹ LTTR's concern with retrieving and creating heroines and heroes – what Roysdon calls Mythical Images – promotes a non-biological, decidedly queer understanding of reproduction, inheritance and kinship. Roysdon writes of "Spinning histories wide, looking far and queering all that we can," and notes that the "the ravaging of our communities through AIDS and the straight world we live in" has made queers "less willing to forgo our icons and the lessons from the past. We have had the opportunity to cull our history and in that action we perform our failure."¹⁰

The expansive notion of "spinning histories" epitomises the horizontal model of collaboration advocated by LTTR, and their commitment to initiating projects with open calls for participation. As the American critic Julia Bryan



Fig. 2
Emily Roysdon
POW 2005
Video stills
Courtesy the artist

Wilson notes, “Promiscuity, whether sexual or – in the case of LTTR as an organization – curatorial, generates all-important moments of unexpected connection.”¹¹ Performing failure is also key. For all their visibility as a group, LTTR members court the mishaps inherent to experimentation just as they mistrust celebrity culture and forms of cultural representation that fix and neutralise difference. Roysdon’s artworks aim for a condition of simultaneous “ecstatic resistance and structural collapse.”¹² The looped video *POW* (2005) depicts Roysdon writing on chalkboard: “SURPRISE, I KNOW THIS IS NOT OUR AREA OF INTEREST BUT...” and “POW,” sometimes adding “ER” beneath it (Fig. 2). Meanwhile another woman climbs into the frame only to fall out of it repeatedly. Simultaneously embracing and renouncing pedagogical authority, *POW* suggests the ecstasy and exhaustion of feminist action, where the “pow” of “Sisterhood is Powerful” still packs a punch. Exploring speech and communication, movement and gesture in her recent projects, Roysdon wonders how to form radical movements and keep them vibrant. Dressed as if for a dance rehearsal, the shoeless participants in the silent video *Social Movement* (2004–2005) tentatively mount a makeshift stage. Sometimes alone, sometimes in groups, at times forming elegant classical formations, they grasp microphone-free mike stands, their mistrust of dominant forms of speech stifling their urge to communicate.

But if *POW* and *Social Movement* fold queerness into a broader political mix, other works by LTTR artists and collaborators Ginger Brooks Takahashi and Olya Hogan Finley foreground the queering of their politics by positioning anonymous sex, S+M practices and gay male hanky codes as exemplary forms of generosity and community building. Nor are they alone in their queering of political community. One kindred spirit is Canadian artist Paige Gratland whose work salutes lesbian icons. *The Sontag* (2005), a clip-on lock of grey hair, enables users to resemble the celebrated author, while *Celebrity Lesbian Fists* memorialises lesbian writers like Eileen Myles and artists like Catherine Opie by casting their clenched hands in silicone. Gratland based the series on ceramicist and groupie Cynthia Plaster Caster’s practice of casting the penises of her rock n’ roll heroes. However, by foregrounding her heroines’ sexuality, Gratland playfully critiques the phenomenon of lesbian celebrities who assure the straight world that “we are just like you”, instead equating lesbian visibility with political defiance and raunchy sex.

While Gratland pays tribute to her contemporaries, American artists K8 Hardy and Wynne Greenwood (also a regular LTTR collaborator) revisit 1970s-style feminism for inspiration in their performance and video *New Report* (2005). As anchors and reporters for the fictional feminist news station WKRH, “pregnant with information”, they log cross-country reports of anachronistic events such as bra-burning and the discovery of a dumpster full of a woman’s destroyed art (Fig. 3). Dressed in berets and black turtlenecks, with myriad woman signs adorning them and their graphics, *New Report* eschews spectacle



Fig. 3
Wynne Greenwood
and K8 Hardy
New Report 2005
Video still

and professionalism for old-school, hand-held media aesthetics. Their campy, irreverent approach to signifiers of radical feminism evokes Elizabeth Freeman’s application of “temporal drag” as key to cross-generational identification: “what makes a drag show ironic and draglike (rather than an earnest attempt to pass) is the performer’s play with anachronism, ungainly or exaggerated gesture, off-beat timing, and peek-a-boo suspense” she argues, suggesting that engaging with concepts of temporal drag “might allow for a more dynamic sense of performance and performativity that encompasses reception as well as address, and might capture the gestural, sensory call-and-response by which gender is built or dismantled within a given space or across time.”¹³ In no hurry to race ahead, *New Report* values interruptions, detours, mishaps and hesitations, chiming with Greenwood’s request elsewhere: “CAN YOU PAUSE THAT FOR A SECOND... and let yourself groove.”¹⁴ Taking time to consider the recent past, including that of the artwork and the dynamics between audience and performer, live and recorded footage, the video’s pause encourages us to contemplate the confusions and indeterminacies of today’s sex, gender, politics and art.

A more deadpan, though still witty, investigation of earlier political events is American artist Sharon Hayes’ speech-based series that explores how history both informs the present and also gets distorted by mediation and narration. The four-part video *Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA) Screeds #13, 16, 20, and 29* (2002) shows Hayes recounting from memory the audio letters that Patty Hearst recorded for her parents while a hostage of the revolutionary SLA. When Hayes forgets or fluffs her lines, an off-camera chorus corrects her.

Prompting thoughts about the affective and mimetic powers of speech, and our susceptibility to influence (Hearst later claimed that the SLA brainwashed her), this work suggests that Hearst was performing a role when she took on the revolutionary name “Tania” and joined her captors’ struggle. By re-enacting events that have become flattened-out media clichés – beautiful heiress becomes beret-wearing, gun-toting revolutionary – Hayes attempts to reinvest past events with historical texture and complexity. Hayes’ desire to avoid one-dimensional interpretations also informs how this work is exhibited. Rather than being screened, the videos sit stacked up in the gallery beside a note inviting visitors to take a copy and pass it along.

Clearly, Hayes objects to overly simple media images, and this resistance also inspires *In the Near Future* (2005). Carrying placards on the streets of various cities, Hayes revitalises slogans from earlier protests: “Who Authorized the War in Vietnam?”, “Ratify the ERA”, “Votes for Women” and “I AM A MAN” from the Memphis Sanitation Workers’ Strike of 1968. In each case, demands that initially might seem anachronistic, a moment’s notice in each case reveals their continuing relevance. For instance, though suffragist Alice Paul wrote the Equal Rights Amendment in 1921, it is still not law as the necessary 38 states never ratified it. Evoking the tense of the future anterior, an uncertain time when our political goals “will have been” successful and which the American philosopher Drucilla Cornell sees as central to feminist concepts of temporality, Hayes states:

I’ve started to think of myself almost as a placeholder. I’m holding the place of a kind of address that had meaning and resonance and impact at a certain moment in time. And I’m thinking about the possibility that this specific resonance and impact could be present for a future time.¹⁵

These performances might suggest that feminism and other radical movements whose time, rather than having passed, has not yet arrived, can retain their force when restaged under new conditions. Like *Symbionese Liberation Army Screeds*, *In the Near Future* operates in multiple ways. In the gallery, an uneven line of projectors shows slides of Hayes’ actions. As in real politics, we realise, Hayes’s protests were staged for the camera. Further complicating questions of real and staged, phrases such as “Nothing Will Be As Before”, or “The American President Might Have to Call in the National Guard to Put This Revolt Down” do not stem from actual demonstrations but are fictional. Similarly propositional, her 2006 performance *Everything Else Has Failed! Don’t You Think It’s Time For Love?* has Hayes calling out on a busy New York street as if to a lost friend:

After all these various forms of communication have failed, I’m just standing on the street throwing the words out and hoping they’ll find a way. My interest is in laying political desire and personal desire on top of one another.¹⁶

Bound to fail, or at least not to succeed, these performances repeatedly return Hayes to the question of what it means to claim a public space and a public voice. This sense of perpetual incompleteness drives much of the art associated with today’s deliberately fragmentary feminism, as when Paulina Ołowska follows still-captivating traces of female-centered pasts. Standing apart from feminist activism *per se*, the Polish artist’s work frequently evokes creative women who worked before, outside, or alongside the women’s movement (perhaps growing up under Communism has made Ołowska wary of mass movements). Her collages, paintings and performances are also more overtly stylish than Hayes’ anti-aesthetic projects or Hardy and Greenwood’s low tech, DIY performances and videos. Not that Ołowska doesn’t sometimes evoke the unfinished quality of weathered fly posters, but she also exploits an alluring formal elegance and rhythm. Claiming “It is always somehow sweeter to work with a friend, or a ghost,”¹⁷ Ołowska often summons up female iconography from sources like fashion design and dance posters, and has collaborated with contemporary women artists like the American Frances Stark and the Scott Lucy McKenzie (including co-running the popular Nova Popularna bar in Warsaw in 2003) as well as dead ones like British pop artist Pauline Boty and Polish artist and designer Zofia Stryjenska. When referencing creative women, Ołowska often appropriates details of their biographies as well as their art. *Pauline Boty Acts Out One Of Her Paintings For A Popular Newspaper* (2006) depicts Ołowska painting the artist as she removes her shirt, a reference to Boty being photographed naked with her work in 1964 (the same year that Carolee Schneemann enthralled swinging London by performing *Meat Joy* naked, covered in paint—a performance that Boty attended). Ołowska identifies with Boty’s wish to be a serious artist while remaining glamorous and sexual. In the case of Stryjenska, whose work was celebrated in pre-Communist Poland but neglected during the Communist era, Ołowska’s declared affinity is even more overt. For her exhibition at the fifth Berlin biennial, Ołowska not only exhibited portraits of Stryjenska and copies of reproductions of her paintings, but also dedicated her section of the catalogue to photographs of the artist and diary entries written by Stryjenska during her own international debut in Paris.¹⁸ Skipping over the issues of authorial displacement and the myth of genius that concerned the appropriation artists of the 1970s and 1980s, Ołowska reconnects with feminist art history *à la* Linda Nochlin to make room for an artist excluded from the history books. Despite Stryjenska’s seniority (and the fact that Stryjenska died in the year that Ołowska was born), the relationship that Ołowska evokes is one of sisterly kindred spirits.

However, Ołowska’s desire to surround herself with female soul mates interests her more than 1970s-style feminism, as can be seen from her exhibition *She Had to Discard the Idea of the House as a Metaphor* (2004). Filling the gallery with portraits of women from the Bloomsbury group and displaying them on mobile canvases, Ołowska created the atmosphere of a Modernist salon. The exhibition might sound like a Judy Chicago-esque congregation of great women from history, but mingling with talented eccentrics who forged their own unconventional



Fig. 4
Paulina Ołowska
*Sie musste die Idee eines
Hauses als Metapher
verwerfen (She Had to
Discard the Idea of the
House as a Metaphor)*
2004
Kunstverein Braunschweig,
Brunswick
Installation view
Courtesy of the Artist,
Kunstverein Braunschweig
and Metro Pictures

lives interests Ołowska more than retrieving mythic heroines (Fig. 4). Her project chimes with *Being Boring*, the Pet Shop Boys 1991 ode to bohemian flamboyance. “I came across a cache of old photos,” the song begins, “And invitations to teenage parties/‘Dress in white’ one said, with quotations/From someone’s wife, a famous writer.” The “someone’s wife” is of course Zelda Fitzgerald and the “quotations” come from her article about the flapper:

The Flapper awoke from her lethargy of subdebism, bobbed her hair, put on her choicest pair of earrings and a great deal of audacity and rouge and went into battle. She flirted because it was great fun to flirt and wore a one-piece bathing suit because she had a good figure, she covered her face with powder and paint because she didn’t need it and she refused to be bored chiefly because she wasn’t boring.¹⁹

Pet Shop Boys salute Fitzgerald’s self-dramatisation and excess as an example that sustained them as they grew up gay in the north of England: “When you’re young you find inspiration/In anyone who’s ever gone/And opened up a closing door.” Like them, Ołowska sees glamour and decadence as positive forces that sustain contemporary efforts to forge a creative life. The bob-haired flapper entices her far more than does the dungareed political militant. Refusing a certain feminist proscription of self-display, Ołowska depicts herself and other beautiful women in her pictures, and sometimes gives performances too. Her appropriations of art and design from the Communist period also evidence her optimism about image-making. What some dismiss as propaganda, she values as examples of creativity that flourished under

repression. It’s a fascination with gesture, exuberant expression and the aesthetic possibilities of striking a pose that intersects with Luis Jacob’s appreciation of unliberated movement in the work of Sullivan and Hepworth. Describing their work, Jacob writes of “the relationship between frozen desires, and the striving for personal freedom and social liberty.”²⁰

One form of liberty, though, might be to break from society entirely, to disappear rather than be overlooked. Thus, where Ołowska honours female artists who have not received their historical dues, the Dutch collaborative duo Bik Van der Pol explore a very different form of archival absence: deliberate disappearance. Part of their ongoing “Past Imperfect” project focuses on US artist Lee Lozano who, with her *General Strike Piece* and *Drop Out Piece*, literalised Conceptual artists’ preoccupation with dematerialisation by eschewing the art world and art making altogether. This self-erasure raises questions about the aesthetic and political efficacy of strategies of absence, non-compliance and refusal. Yet it also underscores the art market’s ability to co-opt even the most resistant gestures: initially dismayed at the paucity of historical documentation about Lozano, Bik Van Der Pol became disillusioned when they discovered that the powerful art dealer Sprüth Magers had started to represent her estate.

Opening up the past to revision as they do, Ołowska, Bik Van Der Pol and others recall Rosi Braidotti’s Deleuzian account of memory as “fluid and flowing, it opens up unexpected or virtual possibilities [...] When you re-member in the intensive or minority-mode, in fact, you open up spaces of movement – of de-territorialisation – that actualise virtual possibilities which had been frozen in the image of the

past.”²¹ Yet despite, or perhaps because of, this revisionist turn, fears that our histories will stay frozen in the past remain. Perhaps these archival anxieties are inevitable. As Hal Foster has suggested, “For why else connect so feverishly if things did not appear so frightfully disconnected in the first place?”²² In “Feminist Art: A Reassessment,” the American artist and writer Mira Schor (who participated as a student during *Womanhouse* in 1972) and the American artist Susan Bee noted the “frustrating reality that once the feminist canon of 70s feminist art was in place, it has been seemingly as fixed as the first (male) art historical canon had been [...] many artists whose work was initiated by their generative encounter with early feminist art at the beginning of the movement [are] still excluded from this reinvestigation of the history of that time [...]”²³ But Schor and Bee aren’t the only ones to notice this stasis, and a similar desire to expand the feminist canon has prompted several recent initiatives. In the Netherlands, the curatorial project *If I Can’t Dance* has included exhibitions, performances, symposia, combining the work of contemporary practitioners with a strong archival focus. In the US, the major museum exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007) reframed the art of the 1970s as a global phenomenon that encompassed many artists and artworks not typically associated with the women’s movement. The exhibition’s expansiveness (the videos alone were impossible to see in one visit) destabilised familiar art historical categories, introducing unexpected connections. Yet “Feminist Futures,” the symposium that accompanied *WACK!* and the concurrent exhibition of contemporary work *Global Feminisms*, focused less on the generative effect of such projects and more on fears for the future. “Ironically, given the title,” noted art historian Aruna D’Souza, anxieties proliferated,

about the inscription of feminism as a historical past as opposed to a current or future practice [...] question periods were filled by women asserting their roles in that history. There was nostalgia, yes, but also hostility toward a “younger” generation of feminists, a recurring claim that we (I include myself) were not adequately taking up the feminist banner.²⁴

To some commentators, the 1970s focus of recent projects represents an anti-intellectual tendency to downplay feminist theory. The American critic Rosalyn Deutsche, in a 2007 roundtable on “Feminist Time,” noted the absence of the polemical 1984–85 exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* from lists of acknowledged precedents in *WACK!* and other current projects. This trend, to Deutsche, “stands for a tendency to suppress a particular difference, a specificity, that might be placed under the rubric ‘the eighties’ [which] goes along with another tendency: to look back on the women’s art movement as a time of ‘raw’ vitality and ‘messiness’ that was dampened by the so-called academicization of feminism in the 1980s.”²⁵

However, I see something more complex than a rejection of theoretical feminism in play. For one thing, most of these artists studied at institutions like UCLA, Whitney Independent Study Program and University of Malmo where

they received a thorough grounding in feminist theory from strong feminist teachers. So they needn’t defend the influences that have thoroughly shaped them. Their ease with feminism and other theory means they’re comfortable merely suggesting these facets of their work. Many of the theoretical concerns that we associate with the 1980s are alive and well in their works, from appropriating mass media images to provoking the subversive power of women’s laughter. Moreover, contemporary genderqueer artists are familiar with Lacan’s account of how subjectivity emerges with the acquisition of language, which they use to explore the violence inherent to identity and the performative nature of gender. Contemporary feminist artists know their theory. The question is whether their art history classes teach them enough about the breadth of art that the dialogue with feminism produced. The fact that many younger artists have become historians suggests that this appetite for an array of feminist and queer precursors remains unsatisfied. The American art historian Mignon Nixon suggests that paying attention to the dynamics of transference might help us to think through a certain antipathy to 1980s feminism that she has observed:

When feminism became the stuff of university seminars, it became subject to the dynamics of the pedagogic situation, which, being a scene of mastery, is structurally ambivalent . [...] Although many feminist teachers, both artists and academics, deployed psychoanalytic theory in their work and in their pedagogy to expose questions of authority and mastery, still, transference to a figure “presumed to know,” as Lacan put it, is structural to the pedagogic dynamic and perhaps even the dynamic of viewing certain kinds of art. This happens even if the artist or teacher disavows the position of mastery [...] one way to consider the ambivalence and even antagonism that developed toward feminist discourse of the 1980s might be as a response to a perceived authority.²⁶

The polymorphousness needed to counter this mastery gives rise to the expansive, euphoric and omnivorous approach to creativity and community that run through these projects. Where the British film maker and theorist Laura Mulvey called for the destruction of conventional visual pleasures “to conceive a new language of desire”,²⁷ contemporary artists forge feminist and queer pleasure from whatever means possible. Embracing ephemera, performance, process, open-endedness and tactility, they make art that diverges from the slick, closed surfaces and the “miming the master” mass media manipulations of Kruger, Levine, Holzer et al. This “yes, and” approach to aesthetic options chimes with Austrian artist Ulrike Müller’s remarks that:

In my own fraught relationship with identity, I’ve learnt a lot about roles. Rather than take a defensive position, I say “yes” to all assumptions about my identity and continue doing what I do, hoping to produce productive queer inconsistencies.²⁸

Producing inconsistencies, disavowing mastery, practising more failure, artists send themselves “back to school” to search for the pioneers upon whose examples they improvise, and for the building blocks that will enable the creation of new movements. Instead of promoting oedipal fantasies of overthrowing the previous generation, their projects thrive on inter-generational networks of exchange and affiliation.

So how can we prevent the divisions, discussions, complexities and polemics that make feminist and queer history so vital from being diluted by bland generalisations? One example of what such a collaborative approach to the feminist past might look like is Kajsa Dahlberg’s *A Room of One’s Own/A Thousand Diaries* (2006). For this book and exhibition the Swedish artist persuaded public librarians from across Sweden to send her transcripts of readers’ marginal notes and underlinings left on the 1958 translation of Virginia Woolf’s 1929 book. Dahlberg then redrew their scribbles onto one copy, which she printed in an edition of 1000. With the quality of hypertext, or what the Canadian critic Jennifer Allen describes as “the collective instantaneity of a blog,”²⁹ these comments depict a feminist community formed through impassioned dialogue and communication. At times the annotations take over and make reading the text almost impossible, no doubt making Woolf, who apparently detested finding such marginalia, turn in her grave: the death of the author indeed! As if by way of answer, the most annotated section explicitly discusses collective influence and inheritance: “For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.”³⁰ This picture of a feminist community, fascinated by footnotes and intertextuality, underscores the queer habit of finding meaning in random evidence that Elizabeth Freeman terms “over reading.”

As the complexities and conflicts inherent to women’s lib and gay activism recede, we must retain this focus on negotiation and conversation, and avoid the uncritical celebration of previous eras that turns radical movements into marketing clichés. Nostalgia is potentially conservative, and the idea that “things ain’t what they used to be” and that we only repeat our predecessors’ gestures can paralyse activism and its energies. We must credit our precursors without slavishly erecting heroines and heroes, just as we must steer clear of artistic repetition that leans on other artists’ work to claim pedigree and prestige. At a recent symposium at The Power Plant in Toronto, British philosopher Simon Critchley criticised “mannerist” historical and artistic re-enactments that fetishise period detail, while Swedish curator Maria Lind objected to “one-to-one re-enactments” that shore up familiar histories without revealing hidden or suppressed dimensions.³¹

If we prevent re-making and citation from containing and diluting the past and its potential, we hold past and future open to negotiation, as the artists that I discuss here do admirably. Dangers of nostalgia and limitations of historical

records aside, denying the need for historical knowledge, or letting others tell our histories for us, diminishes the generative effect that a shared lineage affords, and the valuable sense of purpose that this gives – communicated across time and place, through figures living and dead – and that we still need in these frequently conservative, anti-feminist and homophobic times.

So to offer the art professor who was dismayed about the lack of feminism amongst younger generations the kind of belated rejoinder that the writer Theresa Duncan termed “the wit of the staircase”: younger people’s feminist inclinations don’t disappoint me at all. By “laying political desire and personal desire on top of one another”, as Sharon Hayes puts it, they understand how the past fuels the present and how radical movements whose time “has not yet come” can retain a vital force. Sustaining our less collectively-minded contemporary times, they keep us connected to earlier periods of feminist and queer activity even as the doors to radical histories threaten to close around us.

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