

Drawing as Practice: The Past as Potential

by

Heather Kai Smith

BFA with Distinction, Alberta College of Art and Design, 2009

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

VISUAL ARTS

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

2017

© Heather Kai Smith, 2017

ABSTRACT

This document expresses a theoretical and practical description of my research and studio practice. I engage in mining and querying historical and political archives, specifically those documenting the North American Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s to early 1970s. Images and text are collected, then re-presented through the act of hand drawing, furthered by layering and assembling the resulting images to stimulate embedded strategies of resistance and subjectively understand the affect of those positions in the present. A direct interest in themes of potentiality¹, possibility and the ability to visually and physically express these notions frames my practice. In short, through this work I am asking what are the capabilities of revisiting historical images as sites for latent possibilities of collective engagement? Drawing returns these images to the present, and therefore asks the viewer to reconsider the hopes and failures of the past, the ideals and goals not-yet-realized. The ultimate installation strategies of this work: fragmented, rearranged, layered and reorganized simultaneously seek to crowd the viewer in multiple drawing events, eliciting the sentiment of the crowd, the mass, and re-emphasizing the individual. Ultimately my practice engages in multiple temporalities – past, present and future, through a careful and embodied practice of observation, deliberation, and generative translation.

¹ Potentiality, "*the inherent capacity to grow or come into being*", further defined and elaborated to follow aided by theorists Giorgio Agamben, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Walter Benjamin. ("potential". Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. 14 Feb. 2017.)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	ii
Table of Contents	iii
List of Figures	iv
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	1
Drawing: <i>The Mark, The Tone</i>	2
Historical Context: <i>The Movement, The Crescendo</i>	6
The Archive: <i>Feminist Strategies</i>	9
The Challenge of Collectivity	13
Futurity and the Search for Energy	15
History Repeats Itself: <i>Reflections on the Women's March</i>	17
Conclusion	20
Works Cited	24
Works Consulted	27

LIST OF FIGURES

- Figure 1 Sam Durant, *CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) Civil Rights Demonstration, New York, 1963 (index) (End White Supremacy)*, 2009, Graphite on paper, 36 3/4 x 53 inches, p.3
- Figure 2 Heather Kai Smith, *Composition of a Riot*, graphite, parchment, washi paper tape, dimensions variable, 2016, p.4
- Figure 3 Heather Kai Smith, *Of Many*, oil-based pencil on paper, 25" x 19.5", 2017, p.7
- Figure 4 Heather Kai Smith, *If Yesterday is Tomorrow #5*, oil-based pencil on paper, 7 x 5", 2017, p.8
- Figure 5 Heather Kai Smith, *If Yesterday is Tomorrow #2*, oil-based pencil on paper, 11" x 7.5", 2017, p.11
- Figure 6 Heather Kai Smith, *Consciousness Circle*, graphite on paper, 30 x 44", 2016, p.13
- Figure 7 Heather Kai Smith, *The Imagination of Change*, oil-based pencil on paper, 25.5" x 19.5", 2017, p.15
- Figure 8 Heather Kai Smith, *Moment Before*, colored pencil on paper, dimensions variable, detail, 2016, p.16
- Figure 9 Heather Kai Smith, *If Yesterday is Tomorrow #8*, oil-based pencil on paper, 14 x 11", 2017, p.18
- Figure 10 Heather Kai Smith, *If Yesterday is Tomorrow*, installation view, Concourse Gallery, dimensions variable, 2017, p.19

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank my supervisors Kyla Mallett and Trish Kelly for their dedicated support and critical feedback and honesty. Special thanks to the following for their engagement and encouragement throughout: Randy Lee Cutler, Ingrid Koenig, Simon Levin, Sadira Rodrigues, Justin Langlois and Chris Jones. Thanks to my friends and family on the sidelines for their continued care and confidence in me.

Thanks to the University Women's Club, the James Lee Foundation, Alberta Foundation for the Arts and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for their generous funding to complete my studies.

INTRODUCTION

Employing historical images as a grounds for re-examination, my practice is a process of searching, drawing and arranging. I work to capture, hold and question specific moments of the past to ensure their significance in the present and rethink their ontological or epistemological implications. Through the collection of archival images of protest, dissenting youth and radical politics, specifically those aligned with the North American Women's Liberation movement of the late 1960s-70s, I seek to evaluate a subjective relationship to history to find parallels in this contemporary moment². I am attempting to rewind and untangle historical amnesia, processing the struggle to connect to subjects of the past. How can I re-contextualize a time, a movement and energy, in order to bring it into the present and the future? The project is ultimately iterative, provisional, shuffled and bent: qualities reflective of the archive and memory themselves. It relies on the power of the gestural mark made through drawing, a physical and temporal event, which fragments into abstraction while simultaneously steeped in figurative representation.

I attempt to navigate my research questions as contradictory and complex proposals: How are current Western conceptions of white radical politics informed by the problematic history of the 1960s-70s and its inherent failures? Are there pieces of this representational puzzle which can be re-assembled through drawing to provoke new criticalities and a sense of productive ambiguity? I allow the viewer to question what was lost and gained in the past and what requires action in the present. By revisiting movements rooted in idealism, collectivism and resistance bound their historic representations, I am engaging a drawing practice as a method of critique, reflection and to re-imagine this past as a diverse and interconnected "image" of potentiality. *Potentiality* ultimately acts as an overarching subtext within the work, called into question through the medium of drawing (its formative nature³), provisional and assembled methods of display, and an "unrealized future" evident when quoting historical movements themselves (Greaney 3). To be potential does not ignore an ingrained impotential⁴. The work decidedly seeks to avoid didacticism in service of allowing the viewer to re-address the form and content as a practice of examination, thus relying on the potential within the viewer herself (an agency and pre-existing knowledge). Historical events, chapters, figures are therefore collected in order to be deeply examined and given material form through drawing, as a physical artistic gesture and exchange with the viewer. This exchange does not end in

² I explicitly decided to focus this project on the photographic documentation and archival material of this era, rather than to include a reflection on the work of feminist artists actively engaged in the Women's Movement at this time.

³ See Nancy, Jean-Luc, and Philip Armstrong. *The Pleasure in Drawing*. Oxford University Press, 2013. pp.10-11.

⁴ "Every human power is *adynamia*, impotentiality; every human potentiality is in relation to its own privation" (182). See further Agamben, Giorgio, "On Potentiality", *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford University Press, 1999. pp. 177-184.

resolutions of what to do and where to go next, its non-specific provocations amplify the notion of potentiality as an open space for individual and collective action.

DRAWING: THE MARK, THE TONE, THE GESTURE

Drawing in an art historical sense is often situated as a preparatory medium: as starting point or study for a finished picture. Its process is evident in its making, typically produced from simple materials – a touch of the implement to the page. This direct relationship ultimately places drawing as a foundational communication tool, akin to writing, documenting and reporting.

These characteristics parallel aspects of photojournalistic representation and the historical document as elements within knowledge production and dissemination. By using drawing as a process to understand historical representations, I seek to engage these images with depth and intentionality. In essence, the time spent with the photographic image translated by hand and given new form in drawing becomes embedded in the image along with its original function to document a moment for a public. The viewer's time spent is also altered through this action, they are implicated in the temporal nature of the historical document drawn in the present.

The source image analyzed through the process of drawing then becomes a series of marks, lines, traces and gestures. The *mark* activates the image, singularly and collectively. The mark is indicative of time spent, of deliberation, of explicit action. Through *gesture*, the physical movement of the hand and arm making the mark, a confident line is generated which searches for the form. French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy describes the process of drawing⁵ as finding the "true form of the thing": an effort to trace and find this essence through line. "Here, to trace is to find, and in order to find, to seek a form to come (or to let it seek and find itself) – a form to come that should or that can come through drawing" (1/8). Drawing as a practice filters the image through the body into gestures, becoming visible as forms in the process of becoming. Reaching back into the past furthers my desire to find these forms, to see them in the present. As Nancy states, this "form to come" is directly related to potentiality, because through drawing process is always evident – an elemental quality of drawing itself. The material practice of drawing, and the process-oriented ontology of the medium, opens up experiential possibilities for the viewer.

Drawing practices which employ imagery derived from archives and documentary sources have notably emerged throughout the last ten years with examples such as Andrea Bowers, Sam Durant, Frank Selby and projects by Rirkrit Tiravanija⁶. This method is situated as a "documentary turn"⁷ within a broader arts discourse, along with the "archival impulse"⁸

5 See Nancy, Jean-Luc, and Philip Armstrong. *The Pleasure in Drawing*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

6 See Tiravanija's *Demonstration Drawings* project, Drawing Center, New York, 2008.

7 See Gilman, Claire. "Marking Politics: Drawing as Translation in Recent Art." *Art Journal* 69.3 (2010): 114-127.PDF.

likened to these contemporary practitioners whose work critically engages with the concept of the archive. As Mark Godfrey describes in *The Artist as Historian*, these activities “invite viewers to think about the past; to make connections between events, characters, and objects; to join together in memory; and to reconsider the ways in which the past is represented in the wider culture” (36). The objective within this position is not necessarily to construct history, but to demonstrate its contingencies, current relevance and implications for subjectivity.



Fig. 1. Sam Durant, *CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) Civil Rights Demonstration, New York, 1963 (index) (End White Supremacy)*, 2009, Graphite on paper, 36 3/4 x 53 inches

As Sam Durant’s graphite works are described (see fig.1), “[the] images possess a ruminative quality – perhaps as a simple function of having been transformed from the timely urgency of photojournalism into the slow, deliberative process of drawing by hand (Knight).” This ruminative characteristic of drawing aligns itself with a history of observation. Therefore, to observe through drawing places the image in multiple temporalities – the event photographed, the photograph observed, and the image in the process of being drawn. Hal Foster, art critic

Nash, Mark. “Experiments with Truth: The Documentary Turn.” in *Experiments with Truth*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Fabric Workshop, 2004).

8 See Foster, Hal. “An Archival Impulse”, *October* n° 110 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, The MIT Press, 2004), 3-22. PDF.

and key commentator on an archival return within contemporary practices, describes this action as a practice of making “historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present” (Ross 42). The documented event is only ever partially knowable, its message always mediated, open to interpretation. The marks are made in response to reflection. Some are made slowly and with great care, while others are laid down with a sense of urgency, a surge of energy which echoes the ebbs and flows of my research process. The labor of drawing informs my commitment to access the subject and to bring it forward into the present. It seeks to echo the labor of the activists themselves, to activate and re-charge these images.



Fig. 2. *Composition of a Riot*, graphite, parchment, washi paper tape, dimensions variable, 2016

Composed of multiple sheets of tinted translucent parchment paper, put in place with small strips of colored tape, *Composition of a Riot* (see fig.2) acts as an example of my method of fragmentation and combination of multiple source images (to compile multiple “angles” of the subject) while maintaining representational elements. Made with urgent and kinetic marks as described above, the image shatters into abstraction while holding on to moments of direct representation. This process takes on a kind of investigatory drive to better understand the depth of the image and its subject, its atmospheric and ineffable qualities. This is undoubtedly rooted in the tradition of drawing as gesture, suggested by Roland Barthes of Cy Twombly’s work as “the indeterminate and inexhaustible total of reasons, pulsions and indolences which surround the action with an atmosphere” (160)⁹. In this sense the picture does not aim for completion, instead it openly questions form as contingent and broken. The picture, a frame for the moment, becomes dismantled by mark making, an invitation for the viewer to engage in its explosion, or as Barthes specifies “its modifications, deviations and mitigations” (160). In Barthes terms, drawing symbolizes action: its very essence embodies a verb. Embedded within drawing’s eruption, it’s mid-explosion, is its possible erasure or re-configuration. This acts as a way of understanding Aristotle’s “potentiality”, furthered by Giorgio Agamben,

To be potential means: to be one’s own lack, to be in relation to one’s own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential. They can be because they are in relation to their own non-Being. In potentiality, sensation is in relation to anesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness (1999 182).

Composition of a Riot therefore seeks to relate to its own non-Being in its form and content. My practice searches for past manifestations of collectivity, though it equally acknowledges the inability to truly actualize or revivify history. As Agamben states, the knowing of this form of collectivity is in relation to an ignorance of its form. The work’s layered paper, clustered and hung with provisional taping becomes another type of gesture which connotes incompleteness, a coming together or adversely falling apart (simultaneously and at odds with itself). This ambiguous and uncertain space is exactly where the potentiality lies, a space for reflection of the past in the present, while instantaneously thinking about the future.

While *Composition of a Riot* functions to signify a particular approach to the subject, that of essence and deconstruction, the range of marks I employ in this body of work are all symptomatic of the struggle to approach the subject from diverse angles, pressures and distances. The works are not intended to be seen in isolation since their relationships further their content, as witnesses, supporters and informants.

⁹ Continued quote by Barthes, Roland “The artist [...] is by status an “operator” of gestures: he seeks to produce an effect and at the same time seeks no such thing; the effects he produces he has not obligatorily sought out; they are reversed, inadvertent effects which turn back upon him and thereupon provoke certain modifications, deviations, mitigations of the line, of the stroke (160)”.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: *THE MOVEMENT, THE CRESCENDO*

I intentionally chose the mid-20th century, the 1960s-70s as a cultural decade in North America for its crescendo and movement within the larger composition of the Western project of "history". Borrowing from a musical lexicon is offered as a strategy here to consider the sequential relationships this era has to the past, present and future. It provides a metaphor for the arrangement of historical events, moving impalpably through time. I want to contemplate the impact of this cultural decade as lingering spectres in the historical consciousness of the North American psyche. I use the word spectres with intentionality since this is a project of *spirits*, of energies and a sentient past¹⁰.

In practicality, the time was marked by an increased population of young people, the aftershock of World War II, a generation which would come to be characterized as a system of subcultures and movements. The Civil Rights Movement opened the floor for the origins of The New Left (SDS) and the Women's Liberation Movement¹¹. Over a considerably short number of years (1968-72) these movements aimed to smash the windowpanes of oppression they saw through. The perfect storm of activity, desire, necessity and participation. In tandem, these movements represent a youth-driven political urgency for change. Their gradual increase in volume all collided to create the extraordinary rattling of that time period: a crescendo (Unger). It is evident that during that time period, various forms of collectivity and activism were initiated. Though established at similar moments, The New Left engaged in direct action and participatory politics against dominant political systems. The Women's Movement emerged out of the challenge of identity politics deeply evident at that time, many of the members being entrenched in these questions while involved in various activist groups (Breines 12).

¹⁰ See Verwoert, Jan. "On Future Histories – And the Generational Contract with the No Longer and Not Yet Living and the Pan-Demonium of Irreverent Styles of Nostalgia", *Questioning History – Imagining the Past in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam, NAI Publishers, 2008), 90-98. PDF.

¹¹ See Burns, Stewart. *Social movements of the 1960s: Searching for democracy*. Twayne Pub, 1990.



Fig.3. *Of Many*, oil-based pencil on paper, 25" x 19.5", 2017

There is a density in the prolificacy and storytelling within the images associated with this era. This is formed through the complex organization of media-driven representation, of oral accounts, of textual documentation: viewed from the position of the present. The images hold a prescience, the makings of something which is possible. To look back at these images is to situate myself in the present with a question of historical possibility, examining its pressing urgency for reinvigoration. I am ultimately interested in puncturing the complex relationship these images have to history and simultaneously to an unrealized future. As contemporary theorist Jan Verwoert states, "truly historical moments are defined by the opening up of a horizon of futurity" (91). This futurity is always implicated in the concept of a movement, or a desire for revolution. Because of the proximity of this time period to the present, it becomes charged with a familiarity, not only because of a cementation of these images in visual culture over the last fifty years, but because of our internalization of their romantic associations. But the contingency of this period to its own past, to previous revolutionary models, deepens its position as a moment which could and may be repeated in the future¹².

Etymologically, *revolution* is rooted in the Latin *revolvere*: "to turn, roll back" (Oxford). The word is circular, turning, in process. This root becomes crucial to my research methodology – I am interested in the round edges of time, and their ability to turn back on themselves.

¹² See History Repeats Itself below, for a description of the January 21st, 2017 Women's March on Washington.

Revolution, to overthrow a political system or regime, is a kind of tilling, an overturning of the matted soil of the present and of the past in preparation for the future.

To take this material on necessarily reminds us of the reductive failures of the New Left and second wave feminism as advocating primarily white, middle-class demands. In reaction, contemporary feminism has undergone considerable changes in discourse to focus on the nature of oppressive institutions (racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, xenophobia, classism, etc.) as intersectional and inseparable. By focusing on the actions and collective representations of the late 1960s to early 1970s, I argue that reflection on this history can allow for further conversation about regressive politics of the present, positions of contemporary white, middle-class feminism and universal goals which have been lost within the flow of history. Within feminist scholarship recalling the slow dissolution of 1970s feminism, there is a recurrent voice of longing which goes hand in hand with a recollection of the aims of the civil rights movement. As African-American activist and philosopher Cornel West states, "I think when we look back on the civil rights movement, what we see driving people spiritually is exactly the desire for a transcendent connection – a form of universalism... people were able to link their particularity to a deeper universality that was always in the making, but never fixed and always aspirational" (Breines 9). This lack of fixity and aspirational collectivity become untethered themes of the era, which I intend to re-articulate and study in the present through my visual research practice. This practice emerges directly out of a necessity in the present to ask questions of the past – symptomatic of the deeply challenging societal prospects we currently contend with.



Fig. 4. *If Yesterday is Tomorrow #5*, oil-based pencil on paper, 7 x 5", 2017

My interest in addressing these themes does not come without criticality to the complicated history of exclusivity within liberal and socialist movements (whether this be racial, economic or intellectual). To me these characteristics are indicative of the potentiality which remains in the actual which Agamben describes: “we are confronted with a potentiality that conserves itself and saves itself in actuality” (184). What is made actual through political movements sustains possibilities, new ways of working in the future, new models to build upon. Recognizing unfulfilled aspirations alongside advances when reviewing the past is crucial for progression.

Indeed, the onward progress of time and reflections on that era of feminism informs my deep interest with it as an origin site for particular themes: e.g. consciousness raising, collectivity, etc. Recognisably, the artwork is being produced from the privileged position of the present. As feminist theorist Clare Hemmings describes, within critical historiography, the politics of the present are always involved in the making of the past (118). My own subject position is not neutral in the making of these images, they certifiably contain the historical narrative that has dominated my social and economic position, which I work to unpack, detangle and pay attention to. I am examining this era methodologically as a white, female contemporary artist. This position allows a particular kind of opening up of the material distinct from other modes of historical study. Consciously avoiding didactic strategies within the work allows a space for the presence of the viewer as political participant, a witness to research, a relational subjectivity. My understanding of the contemporary is articulated through Giorgio Agamben’s definition, as the ‘contemporary’ being one who, “dividing and interpolating time is capable of transforming it and putting it in relation with other times” (2009 53). To look at this era chronologically is to address it as a node on the unidirectional string of time. I am proposing to sever certain actions and representations from that era in order to suture new relationships which have previously been homogenized through a patriarchal system of knowledge production. I am proposing to examine the crescendo and the movement of this era as a study of potentiality. In essence I am seeking to return, to look again and to see the residue from my current point of view through practice. Notably this comes at a time when a personal definition of revolution, protest, or subversion is up for grabs and understood through the actions of the past. To find the caesura, the fissure, the crack of that time is never a relationship of lived time, in fact, it is the **unlived element** within this period (because of the onward movement of time) which I seek to retreat to (Agamben 2009 41).

THE ARCHIVE: **FEMINIST STRATEGIES**

Employing this material is made possible through accessing various historical archives. Focusing on the typically self documented collections of feminist groups (including Redstockings, Bread and Roses), or as sites for academic research (e.g. the collection of Duke

University). I am interested in assessing the desire to return to the archive as a site of knowledge, particularly when studying the history of feminism. As feminist archivist Kate Eichhorn states, "For a younger generation of feminists, the archive has never been a destination, an impenetrable barrier to be breached, but rather it has always been a site and practice integral to our knowledge making and cultural production and our activism" (264). In essence I am creating a subjective archival collection, sifted from these sites to claim an understanding of a particular historical moment and critically present these forms to the viewer for further engagement. This strategy of returning to the archive as a site for critical research has been established and championed by feminists and activists over the last decade¹³.

My feminist methodological approach merges with the above mentioned critical drawing practice engaging historical imagery, querying the idea of "agitprop" (inherently political images) (see fig.1). Curator Claire Gilman, taking a particular focus on the work of Sam Durant and Andrea Bowers in her exhibition *Drawn from Photography*, subsequently describing this work as a kind of "rote translation" (115). She remarks that, "in producing by hand a material document, these artists exercise their own form of agency. At a time of global strife and chaos, when it is unclear what to do or how to respond, drawing as translation confirms that action is still possible" (125-26). Again these precedents are in line with a legion of artists and cultural workers who have turned to the archive as a site for significant content and constructive potential. Drawing in particular holds the particularities of observation needed for this material – it honors and questions their significance in the present. It acknowledges their object-hood similar to a kind of still life observation, but with distinct aims to derive something from these forms: a new relationship to history and the contemporary.

Layering acts as a stratagem in my practice, not only of the marks themselves but of the layers of paper which compose the broader installation, or within specific works (see fig. 2). History is often imaged, or metaphorically framed as layers, a palimpsest, a way of understanding the sediments of time. Burial and its inverse exhumation become metaphorical processes that attend to these layers of history (idioms like digging up the past, dusting off history, etc. exemplify this tendency). The archaeological tendencies of language have been noted by critic Dieter Roelstraete¹⁴ in his undertaking of some of the strategies at play within contemporary art's "historiographic turn", he notes,

With the quasi-romantic idea of history's presumed remoteness (or its darkness) invariably quite crucial to the investigative undertaking at hand, these artists delve into archives and historical collections of all stripes (this is where the magical formula of "artistic research" makes its appearance) and plunge into the abysmal darkness of history's most remote corners (2009).

¹³ See projects such as: Pollock, Griselda. *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and The Archive*. New York: Routledge. 2007. 1-12. Print.

¹⁴ See further Roelstraete, Dieter. *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art*. Ed. Sarah Kramer. Museum of Contemporary Art, 2013. Print.

Due to the nature of historical documentation as inherently informed by interpretation, housed in archives and systems created with colonial and patriarchal agendas – there is an opportunity to reconsider and question their content and form. The “quasi-romanticism” that Roelstraete describes is unavoidable, there is an impetus behind the search into the archives which is rife with longing.

I am working to delimit my image selection process in a way which is beneficial to my practice. In many ways this process is intuitional, relying on as Roland Barthes’ famous description of a photograph’s *punctum*¹⁵. I choose images which have a distinct characteristic of collective gathering, a certain candidness or stillness amidst commotion. In other ways I search for monotonous images which mirror one another, images which overlap and together become a mass of masses. This decision intensifies the power of the representations, the number of collective bodies at work and the sense of inexhaustible proof that this era existed and wholly mattered.



Fig.5. *If Yesterday is Tomorrow #2*, oil-based pencil on paper, 11" x 7.5", 2017

The networked nature of feminism before, during and after the brackets of the Women’s Liberation Movement undoubtedly includes hybrid artistic/activist practices. While I have decided to focus my project specifically on the photographic documentation of a particular moment of feminist events, I cannot overlook the massive influence the feminist artists of that era have had on my practice. As art critic and activist Lucy Lippard outlines in her

¹⁵ “A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). See Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Harper Collins, 1981.

text *Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s*, several models of feminist arts practice were introduced within the burgeoning of the Women's Movement. "At its most provocative and constructive, feminism questions all the precepts of art as we know it. (It is no accident that "revisionist" art history also emerged around 1970, with feminists sharing its front line)" (362). Lippard goes on to describe various interactions that were highlighted during the artistic work of this era, one being "group and/or public ritual". "The popularity of the notion of ritual [in art] indicates a nostalgia for times when art had daily significance. However, good ritual art is not a matter of wishful fantasy, of skimming a few alien cultures for an exotic set of images. Useful as they may be as talismans for self-development, these images are only containers. They become ritual in the true sense only when they are filled by a communal impulse that connects the past (the last time we performed this act) and the present (the ritual we are performing now) and the future (will we ever perform it again?) ...The feminist development of ritual art has been in response to the real personal needs and also to a communal need for a new history and broader framework within which to make art" (364). This specific thematic, as discussed by Lippard, along with various other strategies paramount to the women artists working at that moment (collectivity, critical representation, etc.), deeply inform my way of knowing and making art. The concept of "group and/or public ritual" is carried through this body of work, questioning its "communal impulse" as connected to protest, dissent and activist gathering, along with the ritual of image-making through drawing, actions of documenting and the ritual of observation. Through the drawings do not specifically reference the work of women artists of that era, I am indebted to the history of their practices. This decision is also reflective of a desire to move away from the ossification of feminist art in art history as a particular and singular aesthetic.

The drawings I produce seek to spend time with these representations, to re-assess their aesthetic power – both as historical documents but as lasting representations of truth, protest and political agency. I am interested in how archival documentation can maintain an energy of radicalism, of a political shift, and an essence of authenticity as contemporary viewers in an era where our relationship to authenticity is continually called into question.

THE CHALLENGE OF COLLECTIVITY

Developing a series of drawings situates each work in relation to one another, and asks the viewer to create their own dialogue between the works. The overall affect in tandem is essential to the reading of the practice. This strategy is also grounded in the belief of the power of the collective as a feminist strategy (Whittier). Furthermore, this strategy also predicates the audience's complex image recognition and association, a symptom of an image-laden Western culture.



Fig.6. *Consciousness Circle*, graphite on paper, 30 x 44", 2016

Consciousness Circle (see fig.5) is a drawing depicting a circular formation of approximately 27 women. A composite of six individual black and white photographs from the early 1970s, the images have been digitally altered and collaged as a singular image. The formation of women appears to be floating on the background, centered and framed within the whiteness of the page. The women pictured are at slightly varying scales, seated in assorted positions. Some are attentive to the conversation within the frame as listeners, while others appear to be engaged in the act of speech, laughing or articulating a responsive gesture indicated through their body language or facial expression. Some of the women seemingly keep eye contact with one another from across the page, at a perpendicular angle or beside one another. The figures are overlapped, some of their features are less specific – hands, sweaters and hair are made of marks which collide with one another, merging in shadows and moments of clarity.

I am interested in the viewer's awareness of the constructed nature of the circle, of the subtle skewed perspective or off-scale figure in the farthest right corner (see fig. 5). The circle is not drawn with accuracy in mind, limbs or shadows fall in or out of the constructed path. Consciousness raising groups, most widely understood as developed during second wave feminism, acted as a collective space to actively discuss the politics of the personal with other women (Whittier 12). While collecting images of these meetings, I began to notice recurring pathways within the photographs – women sitting in circles, side by side or clustered in a series. The entire circle was never shown in the photograph, the "outer perimeter" became an imaginative edge for me to construct. The work takes on a tradition in drawing of allowing the paper to become an empty ground, a negative space which deeply informs the image resting on it, a space where form develops. The central opening in the circle is an invitation for the viewer, but also a gap for myself as a draughtsperson.

Consciousness Circle ultimately attempts to connect multiple references into a single composition, searching for an overall harmony, a community of many overlapping events. It strives to re-create a panorama of a fictional gathering, a circle constructed from many partial circles rooted in historical documentation. This allows a personal relationship to history to be imaginative, anticipative and idiosyncratic. Collectivity is ultimately linked to the potential to gain traction with others – collective engagement as a method of political and creative negotiation.

This work and the larger collection of drawings calls up the possibilities of utopia, and the convenient distance from the present which allows this reading to exist. Utopia in its very essence hinges on its own impossibility: (etymologically confused as "no-place" or "good-place" (Sargent 137). There is an opportunity to stimulate the past, and re-define a notion of utopia. There is an intrinsic fiction to these images, aggrandized through romantic notions of the era, its commitment and possibility. Perhaps this is why looking back to this time reveals a complicated desire to form anew and to pull at the threads of the era's remarkable goals. The reputation of this moment defines itself, both in its unprecedented moment of idealism and its eventual dismissal of essentialism. To return to Clare Hemmings' discussion on the idea of returning to the 1970s as a site for scholarship, she questions the ongoing narratives at play within Western feminist storytelling. She states, "My interest here is not whether seventies feminist theory is or is not essentialist, but the means by which our contemporary expectation that it is *necessarily essentialist* is secured" (120). This is to say, there are methods in which this history has been perpetuated by its own historical telling. Undoubtedly I argue this is entwined in the representations of the era. The present position in which a Western conception of these ideas is manifest is troubled by the forgetful nature of always pushing forward.



Fig. 7. *The Imagination of Change*, oil-based pencil on paper, 25.5" x 19.5", 2017

FUTURITY AND THE SEARCH FOR ENERGY

Walter Benjamin describes in Thesis XIV of *The Theses on the Concept of History*, the concept of "Jetztzeit", literally translated as "now-time": a type of revolutionary, electric time, "time filled by the presence of the now" which "can be blasted out of the continuum of history" (261). As Michael Löwy elucidates in his analysis of the text, this "now-time" is full with "explosive, subversive moments" (88)¹⁶. Benjamin specifically discusses the French Revolutionaries in relation to this concept, those who were capable of channeling *jetztzeit* in service of a radicalization of "homogenous empty time" put in place by the ruling class (261). To harness this energy is to necessarily modify a relationship to history as moments long gone; it is a kind of quotation of past potentiality transmitted through action.

I view the cultural decade of the 1960s-70s as a past charged with *jetztzeit*, and so I engage in ploughing its documents and images in order to cultivate what I see as an imperative relationship to the present and to the future. Those who seek to subvert traditional

¹⁶ Further: the aim of *Jetztzeit* is "to explode the continuum of history with the aid of a conception of historical time that perceives it as 'full', as charged with 'present', explosive, subversive moments (88)."

ideologies hold a unique relationship to this *jetztzeit* energy – an ability to disrupt the procession of patriarchal monumentalizing. By attempting to illustrate this disruption, I seek to challenge the logic of traditional historicism and tap in to an energy which I view as unfulfilled, full of potentiality and idealistic force. This action in itself seeks to subtly subvert an onward progress of time in order to better understand a prospect for future thinking.



Fig. 8, *Moment Before*, colored pencil on paper, dimensions variable, detail, 2016

Through the process of drawing I seek to instill a physical energy in the images. To return to Jean-Luc Nancy's description of this exchange which occurs through drawing,

Between the hand and the trace, in the pencil, quill, ballpoint pen, or charcoal crayon's impetus, in the movement that goes from the hand to the mark and flows back from the mark to bend the hand once again – in all this, an impulse is tapped, an energy is gathered from an entire culture and history, an entire thought or experience of the world come to be gathered in the vibration of the mark (5/17).

To tap the impulse of the image, as Nancy describes, is a huge goal of this vibratory exchange I employ, becoming evident to varying degrees in physicality and tone throughout

my practice. This is mostly evident within the small drawing set, *Moment Before* (see fig. 6), where individual photographic sources are rendered in deep black oil-based pencil. The pale pink toned paper drawings are contained within themselves, installed in small shadowbox frames, loosely pinned on each corner, installed in a grid. The images chosen possess a kind of “backstage” quality, a frozen moment where the viewer is uncertain of the actions before or after its capture. There is indeed a prescience, something indefinable and fleeting, pressed into paper as a black tone through the deep pressure of the pencil to paper. This again also responds to the “darkness of history” which Dieter Roelstraete describes – the back corners of the archives perhaps hold the most elusory clues, moments of candidness which reveal sites of knowledge previously untapped.

This element of the work, the energetic impulse, the desire to tap and puncture an energy embedded in the document, is where I see the practice fully realizing itself. While it is still in the process of being understood, for me, it possesses a deep ongoing challenge I am contending with as image maker and contemporary feminist.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF: REFLECTIONS ON THE WOMEN’S MARCH

Parallel to this project was the 2016 United States Presidential campaign of Hilary Clinton, subsequent defeat and the inauguration of Donald Trump. This particular moment (though not unfamiliar) in North American history and democracy is fraught with the rhetoric of hate, post-truth media coverage, and the urgency to attend to social justice concerns. On January 21st, 2017, the first day of Trump’s administration, a group of women of various backgrounds organized a large-scale grassroots protest titled the “Women’s March on Washington”¹⁷. In the burgeoning social media landscape, the event proliferated to include further national and global events carrying the same name, culminating in approximately 673 marches worldwide (WMW). The affect of this outpouring of genuine protest and disavowal of the new authority inevitably recalls the tools and subjects of the civil rights movement and undoubtedly the work of feminist predecessors.

This effort not only exemplifies a resurgence in the efficacy of protest, but honors a historical method of movement, of radical organizing and assertion of voice. This cannot go without saying the power of this moment is equally challenged by the noise of competing and idiosyncratic ideologies. The Women’s March on Washington 2017 was originated by white, middle-class women. From day one there was critique of the lack of intersectionality: though the organizers were diligent to respond with the inclusion of people of color, gender non-conformists and activists from diverse backgrounds. These gestures were not necessarily put in place at the March, noted by critics, and inevitably historically familiar questions emerged about the overall effectiveness of feminist protest¹⁸.

¹⁷ See “Women’s March on Washington”. <https://www.womensmarch.com/event-details/>

¹⁸ See further articles by:



Fig.9. *If Yesterday is Tomorrow #8*, oil-based pencil on paper, 14 x 11", 2017

As a reaction to this moment and continuation of my ongoing research, *If Yesterday is Tomorrow* (see figs.7-8) is a series of small-scale oil-pencil drawings which render moments from both the early 1970s and images from the Women's March on Jan.21st, 2017. The group of drawings is seen in simultaneity, often drawings of crowds, or rooms of individuals, the tiny figures become abstracted marks sitting on varying shades of cream and beige papers. The paper itself becomes a skin, a tonal ground for the figures. Each are placed in handmade wooden frames which echo the color of the ground, providing a specific space for the image and what it represents. Each drawing becomes part of the whole – another crowd. As political theorist Jodi Dean states, "the crowd is a temporary collective being. It holds itself together affectively via imitation, contagion, suggestion, and a sense of its own invincibility. Because the crowd is a collective being, it cannot be reduced to singularities. On the contrary, the primary characteristic of a crowd is its operation as a force of its own, like an organism" (9). This

Hampson, Sarah. "Women's March on Washington sheds light on the problem with feminism." *The Globe and Mail*. The Globe and Mail, 20 Jan. 2017. Web. 16 Feb. 2017.

Tolentino, Jia. "The Somehow Controversial Women's March on Washington." *The New Yorker*. The New Yorker, 18 Jan. 2017. Web. 16 Feb. 2017.

aggregation Dean describes is a goal in exhibiting *If Yesterday is Tomorrow* as a group. The moments of each drawing – whether a group photo or an aerial crowd shot come together to call upon the power of the collective, and its agency as a “being”. The anonymity of the figures in each drawing emphasizes their *collective subjectivity* and the power of what that represents – the possibility of what is not-yet-determined.

What drives much of my work is the desire to understand my subjective position as a feminist in relation to a greater historical female inter-subjectivity, and the potential of this collective position. When I participate in a Women’s March, my body becomes part of a larger political body – I become part of a crowd in the present. But I also become part of a history of collective action, in its unpredictability and preservation of potential. When collective action is made actual, it maintains its own potential, its own desire to become itself through multiple subjectivities. It also contains within it its own capacity to “not act”, and alternately to be subjugated to non-action by the power structures which incited its own becoming.



Fig.10. *If Yesterday is Tomorrow*, installation view, Concourse Gallery, dimensions variable, 2017

CONCLUSION

The ultimate goal of my practice is to return to the documents of the past as forms of knowledge production and as vestiges of resistance, routed through my subjectivity by hand-drawing. By re-presenting, putting a spotlight on the past, there is a search to find oneself: your ancestors, your mothers, your allies, there is the opportunity to engage in the contemporary with the information buried in these representations. In their visual presence, there are clues. There is an essential futility - a characteristic of all human production, ephemeral and ever-changing. The viewer is asked to lengthen their engagement with the images to deliberate for themselves the ways in which the fleeting present is implicated in all things past. This uncertain, ambiguous opening gives way to hope. As writer and activist Rebecca Solnit outlines in her book *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, "hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act" (xiv). She goes on to quote theologian Walter Brueggeman with the statement that "memory produces hope in the same way that amnesia produces despair", adding "[this] reminds us that though hope is about the future, grounds for hope lie in the records and recollections of the past" (xix). Solnit outlines that hope is not about resting in complete optimism or falling into the adversarial doomsday response, but a generative, reflective space for new outcomes based on the simultaneous and inextricable successes and failures of the past. To regress to the default ideological tools is to designate movements as victorious vs. thankless, but what I am interested in pursuing is a space of simultaneity and conscious ambivalence in service of imaginative results.

Resistance can therefore be subtle, it can surface from refuse, it can be about time spent searching for what's lost as a conscious effort to resist the idea of "progress" in a linear sense and sit with the past. It is undoubtedly pedagogical, as it requires criticality of multiple time periods and focus on what happened and what is happening now. The work emerges from a necessity the research demands, to habituate the images through hand drawing, to re-define their materialism and their relationships to the viewer. The remnant of the event acts as a site of both actuality and potentiality – in contradiction to itself is the desire for its unrealized future. I work then to preserve the potential of the past, to search through and query its substance.

The work openly asks the viewer to contend with the questions presented, it decidedly makes no effort to answer these questions with false authority or a sense of finality. My role as artist, steeped in critically viewing historiography, is always situated in the present, prodding at a personal desire to open up this history and question its charge. The work opens up a space for the viewer to attend to their own relationship to the content, to place their own desires, concerns and knowledge in the fissures in order to dismantle and simultaneously structure further, more complicated questions.

WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. 'What Is the Contemporary?' (2008, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella), *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 39—54. PDF.
- Agamben, Giorgio, and Daniel Heller-Roazen. "On Potentiality". *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford University Press, 1999, pp. 184-190. Print.
- Barthes, Roland. "Cy Twombly: works on paper." *The Responsibility of Forms* (1985): 157-176. PDF.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Theses on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations*. Schocken Books, USA, 1969. pp. 253-265. Print.
- Breines, Winifred. *The Trouble Between Us: An uneasy history of white and black women in the feminist movement*. Oxford University Press, 2006. Print.
- Bloom, Alexander, and Wini Breines. "*Takin' it to the streets*": *A Sixties Reader*. Oxford University Press, USA, 2003. Print.
- Dean, Jodi. *Crowds and Party*. Verso Books, 2016. Print.
- Eichhorn, Kate. "DIY collectors, archiving scholars, and activist librarians: Legitimizing feminist knowledge and cultural production since 1990." *Women's Studies* 39.6 (2010): 622-646. PDF.
- Foster, Hal. "An Archival Impulse", *October*, No. 110 (The MIT Press, 2004), 3-22. PDF.
- Gilman, Claire. "Marking Politics: Drawing as Translation in Recent Art." *Art Journal* 69.3 (2010): 114-127. PDF.
- Godfrey, M. "The artist as historian", *October*, No. 120: (The MIT Press, 2007), 140–172. PDF.
- Greaney, Patrick. *Quotational practices: repeating the future in contemporary art*. 2014. PDF.
- Hampson, Sarah. "Women's March on Washington sheds light on the problem with feminism." *The Globe and Mail*. The Globe and Mail, 20 Jan. 2017. Web. 16 Feb. 2017.
- Hemmings, Clare. "Telling feminist stories." *Feminist theory* 6.2 (2005): 115-139. PDF.

Knight, Christopher. "It's freedom, or something like it." *Los Angeles Times*, April 17 2009: D14. PDF.

Lippard, Lucy R. "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s." *Art Journal* 40.1/2 (1980): 362–365. Web.

Löwy, Michael, and Chris Turner. *Fire alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's On the concept of history*. Verso, 2005. Print.

Nancy, Jean-Luc, and Philip Armstrong. *The Pleasure in Drawing*. Oxford University Press, 2013. Print.

"potential". Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. 14 Feb. 2017. <Dictionary.com <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/potential>>. Web.

"revolution". *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. 2 Nov. 2016. <Dictionary.com <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/revolution>>. Web.

Roelstraete, Dieter. "After the Historiographic Turn: Current Findings." *e-flux Journal* 6 (2009). PDF.

Ross, Christine. *The Past is the Present; It's the Future Too: the temporal turn in contemporary art*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2012. (45-62). Print.

Sargent, Lyman Tower. "Utopia-The Problem of Definition." *Extrapolation* 16.2 (1975): 137. PDF.

Solnit, Rebecca. *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. Haymarket Books, 2016.

Tolentino, Jia. "The Somehow Controversial Women's March on Washington." *The New Yorker*. The New Yorker, 18 Jan. 2017. Web. 16 Feb. 2017.

Unger, Irwin, and Debi Unger. *The Movement: A History of the American New Left, 1959-1972*. Dodd, Mead, 1974. Print.

Verwoert, Jan. "On Future Histories – And the Generational Contract with the No Longer and Not Yet Living and the Pan-Demonium of Irreverent Styles of Nostalgia", *Questioning*

History – Imagining the Past in Contemporary Art (Rotterdam, NAI Publishers, 2008), 90-98. PDF.

Whittier, Nancy. *Feminist Generations: The Persistence of the Radical Women's Movement*. Temple University Press, 1995. Print.

Women's March on Washington (WMW). Women's March. www.womensmarch.com. Accessed 22 Jan 2017. Web.

WORKS CONSULTED

- Albertson, Dean (ed.) *Rebels or Revolutionaries? Student Movements of the 1960's*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975. Print.
- Alcoff, Linda, and Elizabeth Potter. *Feminist epistemologies*. Routledge, 2013. Print.
- Bammer, Angelika. *Partial Visions: Feminism and Utopianism in the 1970s*. New York: Routledge. 1991. PDF.
- Bartkowski, Frances. *Feminist Utopias*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991. Print. 8-14. PDF.
- Browne, Victoria. *Feminism, Time, and Nonlinear History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. e-Book.
- Burns, Stewart. *Social movements of the 1960s: Searching for democracy*. Twayne Pub, 1990. Print.
- Eichhorn, Kate. *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013. Print.
- Pollock, Griselda. *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and The Archive*. New York: Routledge. 2007. 1-12. Print.
- Roelstraete, Dieter. *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art*. Ed. Sarah Kramer. Museum of Contemporary Art, 2013. Print.
- Roszak, Theodore. *The making of a counter culture: Reflections on the technocratic society and its youthful opposition*. Univ of California Press, 1995. Print.
- van Alphen, Ernst. "Looking at Drawing: Theoretical Distinctions and their Usefulness." *Writing on Drawing: Essays on Drawing Practice and Research*. 2012. 59-70. Print.
- Zapperi, Giovanna. "woman's reappearance: rethinking the archive in contemporary art—feminist perspectives". *Feminist Review* 105, 2013. 21-47. PDF.