'On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Period of Time,’ was a response, in the form of an exhibition, to a suggestion that the era associated with the events of 1968 had ended. I began with a rather broad question: What defines an era and for whom? Certainly, for many, May 1968, is simply an event in the political history of France, but for some, it has come to mean the beginning of an era characterized by new social movements, which have been transformed over time, but by no means ended. The women’s movement is one of the most prominent among these, and ultimately, it’s why I’m interested in having this conversation. But, I would like to start by narrowing down the unwieldy topic further by focusing on the London Women’s Liberation Workshop, in particular, the History Group, and recollections of events I shared, as a member of the Group, with Sally Alexander, Rosalind Delmar, Juliet Mitchell and Laura Mulvey.

When I arrived in London in the fall of 1968, to do post-graduate work at St. Martin’s School of Art, many of the art schools were occupied and the repercussions of recent events in France were palpable. In just a few months, I found myself marching in the largest anti-Vietnam war demonstration that had taken place in Britain up to that time. Then, the London Women’s Liberation Workshop was formed in 1969. This, as I remember it, is when Branka Magas brought me to a meeting of the History Group at Mary Kennedy’s, I think, and quite simply, it changed my life.

Before coming to London, I had been living and working in Beirut, Lebanon. As part of a community of new left intellectuals, mostly educated in France, my introduction to politics was Fanon’s “Wretched of the Earth,” Sartre on
scarcity, and, of course, Marx. I had read Juliet’s “Women: The Longest Revolution,” in New Left Review, but it was considered by many there to be something of a deviation from ‘the main struggle.’ I came to the History Group with that agenda, and it explains why my contribution to the History Group’s issue of the Shrew in 1970, was “Women’s Liberation and National Liberation.” But it was also a turning point in making the struggle my own. In the collective process of editing our articles, I felt that pieces of the ideological puzzle were starting to fall in place. For instance, Althusser’s notion of ‘relative autonomy’ might imply that the economy wasn’t always determinant in the last instance. “Miss World” is unsigned, but, even now, when I read it, I hear Laura’s and Sally’s voices recounting our experiences of the protest, discussing the vulnerability of the spectacle, and I recall making a connection between images of women and ideology as a system of representation, which, for me, meant that art could have political efficacy. With Juliet’s argument in “Why Freud?” I remember thinking we had found both the object – the unconscious, and the discourse – psychoanalysis, that would finally make sexuality pass into the grand narrative of social change. That was a euphoric moment, and it has had consequences for almost everything I’ve done, personally and professionally, since then.

To start the conversation, I would like to ask you – Sally, Rosalind, Juliet, and Laura, who or what brought you to the History Group? How would you describe its objectives in relation to other groups in the London Women’s Liberation Workshop? What do you remember about working on the 1970 issue of Shrew? What discussions/debates do you recall most vividly? Was your experience in the History Group a transformative one? In what way?

Another thing I find very interesting is that we were all in different fields – history, literature, film, art. It suggests that a non-academic, politically motivated interdisciplinarity was one of the defining features of our individual as well as collective practice. Certainly, it was for me. When I began Post-Partum Document in 1973, I said it was grounded in the feminist tendency represented by the History Group and the Lacan Reading Group, and called this ‘the debate-specific site.’ But at the time, on a daily basis, that meant it evolved in constant dialogue with other women, especially, Sally. I wonder if you could comment, in a general way, about the work you were doing then, and how it was informed by the ideas and personal relationships of the History Group?

3. Juliet Mitchell
04-13-2015
07:42 PM ET (US)

As I have been lying awake for a long time thinking about you and your request, I have decided to get up and write to you - I am going to try to explain why my experience of the History Group feels very different from yours. You all were, or became, my friends and have remained very important to me... but the History Group was not so significant. Very recently Verso republished “Woman’s Estate” (1972) and in having to write something on-line for its publication I realized how the woman’s movement had enabled me to transform my earlier article/pamphlet – “Woman: The Longest Revolution” (1966). It was the activism – Sally’s engagement with Miss World, Nightcleaners, all of us with/against the miners in Skegness, the mainly US Tufnell Park Group, forging the London Women’s Liberation Workshop, the seminar I started at the ‘Anti-University’ that led to the Peckham Women’s Housework pamphlet, the books with Ann Oakley where we published women who hadn’t written before – it was all the community of political women that changed the world utterly, not the History Group (which somewhat baffled me). This is because I came from a different place – I am sure we all did and this conversation will open it up. So mine:

I had imbibed the pleasures and pains of feminism with my mother’s milk. Psychoanalysis was part of the air I breathed from early childhood, as was socialism and Marxism. I grew up at home (communal) and always at only one school (hugely important) in HAMPSTEAD! It was by no means a privileged childhood not emotionally, physically, economically or psychologically – but in intellectual and political terms – it was. At least it was if one wanted feminism and Marxism (though when they were in opposition it could be painful).

What always interested me was not the antagonism but the opposition from within the same politics, the same intellectual pursuit. First it was the middle not the late Reich – when he was a rebellious psychoanalyst. Ditto R.D. Laing. American feminism’s opposition to psychoanalysis was the motivating thrust for my absorption in it – from 1966 when “Women: The Longest Revolution” hit the ground running I spent a lot of time with US feminists in America. What date did the History Group start? Anyway, I was interested but puzzled by the interest in psychoanalysis in the History Group. I remember finding your own Post-Partum Document fascinating but thinking ‘one cannot psychoanalyse an adult mother’ – it is the child in the mother that concerns psychoanalysis. Much retrospectively I realized you could, but from something I now think is missing in psychoanalysis - viz gender, not sexual difference – what I had then been working on – Shrew, teaching, “Women’s Estate,” “Psychoanalysis and Feminism.” I’ll stop here, though the thoughts go on!
What brought you to the History Group?

My son was born in the summer of 1969 and although I wasn’t involved in any of the early moments or founding steps of the Women’s Liberation Movement during 1970, I already knew a number of the History Group women, but I think it was actually Juliet Mitchell who suggested that I should join. The History Group was an ideal intellectual and political environment for me. Some background: I had always thought of myself as an intellectual (in my mother’s family, women’s education, women’s ideas and aspirations had had an important place for a number of generations); 1956 (and my mother’s influence was crucial) introduced me to politics through the Suez crisis, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament movement, demonstrations about the last outposts of British colonialism etc. But I lost confidence and direction during and after my time at Oxford, from 1960-63. I studied history, which was what I had always wanted to do, but I found it difficult and I failed to find an intellectual perspective or to grasp hold of ideas that were, in principle, interesting and important to me.

When I joined, the History Group was reading widely in order to think about whether or not there had been historically, or continued to be socially, an identifiable ‘fall from grace’ on which women’s oppression had been founded and had continued to be perpetuated. I remember the Group reading Levi-Strauss on the exchange of women in kinship systems and moving on to Engels “The Origins of Private Property and the Family.” Soon after we began to read Freud and for a number of us psychoanalytic theory was a revelation, offering a vocabulary, a set of concepts etc that directly addressed our concerns with ways in which sexuality and gender structured society and lay at the root of women’s oppression. For me, the Group provided an environment of solidarity, daring, exploration, excitement and so on, and as Mary mentioned in relation to her experience in the History Group, it changed my life. I began to feel that I could think outside a given, rigid and traditional framework and that I could think in terms of political, rather than academic, priorities.

Writing about the Miss World demonstration in Shrew brought a number of different strands of thought and experience together.... [Unfortunately, I have to stop now and will carry on later...]

5. Rosalind Delmar
04-14-2015
01:53 PM ET (US)

I’m sorry to write you such a long letter. The more I thought and wrote the more thoughts came, so here is the result.

In 1968 I was in Rome with my husband, who was translating sections of Gramsci’s “Prison Notebooks” (published 1971). We had moved to Rome for a year from Manchester, where I had graduated and then gained an MA with a thesis on Soviet disarmament policy. Active there in student politics and CND, my most absorbing education came from belonging to the Manchester New Left Club, meeting many left intellectuals with a wealth of political experience from a wide range of countries, reading and discussing, organising and campaigning. I helped organise a teach-in on Vietnam and contributed to a Read-In on Vietnam (published 1965). Politically and theoretically I was drawn towards the new(ish) concept of non-alignment and what became known as critical theory. 1965-66 were also intellectually important years because of regular trips to Paris to see the latest Godard movies and buy books and journals. We read Tel Quel and Les Temps Modernes. Similarly, when, in 1971, Italian women introduced me to Irigaray and the Lacanian Women’s Group Psychanalyse et Politique, and I visited Paris to meet them and went with them to a Lacan seminar.

Sexual politics had mattered all my life. Born into a family which mainly worked in steel-making and with five older brothers at home, I was convinced that if I wanted anything like equal treatment I would have to fight for it – this included my ambitions to go to grammar school and on to university. If there wasn’t an argument that as a girl there was no point in getting a good education, there was an argument about whether as the daughter of a manual worker this kind of education was for ‘the likes of you/us.’ In Manchester in the early 1960s, my friends and I tackled ‘everyday sexism.’ We campaigned for the desegregation of the Students Union Bar (there was a ‘Men’s Bar’ and a ‘Mixed Bar’) and of the Billiards Room (women were barred), demanded the right to wear trousers in Manchester’s venues (it was the age of the trouser suit) and drink pints out of pint glasses (women were only served halves) in Manchester’s pubs. The position of women was hotly discussed and beginning to emerge nationally, through women journalists on The Guardian and The Observer, even though there were many who thought that the battles had all been won by the suffragettes and there was nothing left worth worrying about. In fact as well as the new demands for equal pay and education, for free contraception and abortion and childcare, this was the start of a different sort of battle against the constraints on choices, a battle in the field of representation, involving the stereotype, the image and the consumerist spectacle.

1967-68 was a year of student occupations in Italy as elsewhere. The Turin University occupation was particularly significant for me; not just was Turin the centre most closely associated with Gramsci’s active politics, but it was there that
I heard for the first time, in a packed hall, the arguments for deploying Freud as a pathway to understanding cultural and sexual revolution. In Milan I met some of the women who had published in 1966 the first manifesto denouncing male authoritarianism. Back in England I heard about the women’s workshop at the ‘Anti-University’ and participated in my first meeting exclusive to women at a conference of socialist student organisations. On our return to Manchester we joined a Capital Reading Group and helped set up a ‘Critical Seminar’ influenced by the counter-universities we had seen abroad; meeting in the Students Union, it featured thinkers and speakers not given space within the academy. It seemed to me at the time that the most lively and creative thinking happened outside the universities, and that this was as true of our understanding of women as of political and cultural theory.

The founding of the History Group came shortly after the Oxford Women’s Conference (February, 1970), where the need for more historical research felt especially urgent. After conversations with Juliet Mitchell, from whom I was renting living space whilst looking for somewhere to live, we decided to set up a History Group within the London-wide Women’s Liberation Workshop, within which Juliet was already active. After I moved to Pimlico in May the Group often met in my flat, and that is where I first remember meeting Mary, an enigmatic and striking presence who rarely spoke and then in a very quiet voice which commanded attention.

The Workshop was a loose network of mainly all-women groups, most neighbourhood based but with some campaigning groups. The History Group was its first study/reading group. Many women participated in more than one group and engaged in specific campaigns. Women’s liberation was an intense and immersive experience. Workshop Groups were committed to developing a collective, non-authoritarian practice growing from women working together. They aimed to be leaderless, autonomous and heterogeneous. Some of us experimented in collective living – in my own flat, in Sally’s house in Alderney St nearby, and elsewhere. Volunteers from each Group met regularly at a small central office, where we answered letters, produced a newsletter, organised regular monthly meetings, sold badges and pamphlets and acted as an information exchange. If called upon we gave interviews to journalists. No one could speak on behalf of anyone else and when differences were discussed, often with passion, the aim often was to give all views an airing rather than to arrive at a common position. Even when we found a police informer in our midst we took it to a monthly meeting where the ramifications were thoroughly discussed but no further action was taken. This way of working enraged male left groups, who saw their role as providing ‘leadership.’ They were keen to teach us the lessons of the class struggle (in particular that women’s issues came second, or were a distraction) and seemed unable to grasp that they might have something to learn from us.

The Workshop monthly was Shrew, produced each month by a different Group. The History Shrew grew out of debates inside the Group and actions outside it initiated by individual members. Juliet’s contribution “Why Freud?” aroused considerable controversy within the Group – I learnt a lot from the members who had had an analysis. In general Freud and psychoanalysis were widely distrusted. The Miss World demonstration, in which several members took part, was another contentious issue. Its place in disrupting ‘the society of spectacle’ was ultimately what counted with me. The mix of intellectual work and activism was typical of the Group – we were as likely to read and discuss Levi-Strauss and Engels as “The Redstockings Manifesto” — and we also debated bread and butter questions like ‘who does the housework and why?’ Some women were hostile towards us because of our perceived intellectualism but many women on the left felt excluded from theoretical debate and were hungry for such discussions.

Many Workshop Groups were small and ‘closed’ to new members, which brought its own concern about ‘exclusivism’ but for its first year or so the History Group was open. There was a core of regular members, but a fluid membership of those who joined for a short time, leaving once they had found a group or campaign that suited them better. In time the Group transformed itself into the ‘Family Group’ and moved to the more intimate practice of consciousness-raising, using our life-experiences as material for exploration in what I think of as the autobiographicalisation of theory. At this point we closed the Group. For me the ‘History Group’ equals the ‘History-Family Group’.

The Group was a crucible of transformation for all of us because it produced a space in which we could find a common language, inhabit each other’s skins, react and interact with exhilarating effect. The process also produced frictions and splits, as did the wider movement, but that is another story. In Groups such as these and through the women’s movement as a whole the fabric of a social and political network of women was woven that survives below the surface of our lives.

As well as being saturated with the needs and developments of the movement, I was working as a writer (film criticism and politics) and translator. I had been a student journalist at Manchester and enjoyed using editorial and technical skills in the production of the History Shrew. During 1970 the group of men who were planning 7 Days approached some of us to join the planning group and I was one who did, becoming production manager on the weekly, which first published in 1971.

Writing this, I have become aware of how many strands and themes from this time have resonated through my life. 7 Days was followed by Emma Tennant’s Bananas, the Virago Advisory Group, Red Rag, and Feminist Review and other journals. The History Group work provided an orientation for the women’s studies courses I taught; when I looked for psychological help, it was to psychoanalysis that I turned, later deciding to build on its insights as a counselor and therapist. As a mother I was sufficiently convinced that women’s liberation was about women having options that I was able to choose to give
several years to nurturing my children rather than pursuing a professional career. I still translate from Italian and research women’s writing and lives.

Above all, women’s liberation and the History Group transformed my relationships with women. In 1970 I had a few close women friends but in general had more friendships with men. My increased political, intellectual and emotional engagement with the women’s movement brought with it a widening network of loyal friends, which has been one of its most lasting legacies. Whilst individual friendships have been rich and rewarding, so too has been the complex social world of friend networks, the affections, alliances, differences and disagreements that allow our relationships to remain alive.

The complex textures of these networks and friendships have an intricacy and resonance often not recognised in female relationships but writers like Elena Ferrante and Emily Gould are currently exploring them. These processes are something I’m sure we share with the younger feminists of today.

6. Sally Alexander
04-14-2015
04:30 PM ET (US)

Who brought you to the History Group?

I’d just finished two years at Ruskin College Oxford, a trade union college, when I moved into Pimlico in the summer of 1970, put my daughter in the local primary school and began a degree in History at UCL. I think Rosalind and Juliet asked me to join; we met at Sutherland St, Rosalind’s home, round the corner, sometimes in Laura’s flat in Notting Hill, sometimes in Alderney St. I’d known Juliet through the organisation of the first National Women’s Liberation conference which was held at Ruskin.
The History Group was a reading, study group. A few of us were mothers; some divorced. Most came from different parts of the left – Anna Davin, Branka Magas (who brought Mary the first time?), Rosalind Linnell, Margaret Walters came sometimes. Our question was ‘what was the source of women’s oppression?’ We read Levi-Strauss’s “The Elementary Structures of Kinship,” Marx, Engels on the family (I remember reading and talking to Rosalind for days/weeks about the latter, then writing her indispensable and lucid essay), Mao, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling. I did not read all with equal attention, I seem to remember. Mary Kelly gave a talk on national liberation struggles, Palestine, and women’s oppression; she had lived in Lebanon for a year; produced the History Shrew. There was a huge row over the Miss World demonstration. Margaret Walters was made angry by the protest. We – or I – read, avid for knowledge, understanding of the world we lived in, and women’s position in it. Juliet’s “Women: The Longest Revolution” had appeared in New Left Review in 1966. I’d not read it, though I’d encountered some of the new left when working on The Black Dwarf in 1967-8 (a radical newspaper based on Thomas Wooler’s of that name in early 19th century, started by Clive Goodwin, literary agent and close friend).

One meeting of the History Group Juliet protested: ‘why are we not reading Freud?’ Perhaps we’d just read Kate Millet, or Shulamith Firestone (which I loved; as I thought of myself as radical feminist as well as Marxist). ‘Psychoanalysis,’ Juliet said (as I recall) ‘addresses female sexuality, sexual difference, women’s desire and we’re not reading it.’ So, I read Freud’s 1933 “Femininity” essay in the bath, and nearly drowned. I can still remember the shock. It spoke directly to me – of things I knew implicitly – in an unfamiliar language, but the voice was human and reasoning. This was 1970 or ’71. It contains everything that feminists hate about Freud on women: ‘riddle of femininity,’ ‘a claim on your interest second almost to no other’; you are yourselves the problem; penis-envy, women’s propensity for jealousy, their weaker super-egos, little sense of justice (134), and - his proviso at the end: women are human in many ways other than the sexual. For me it was an epiphany.

Working on Shrew: I learnt everything I know about layout through watching and helping Mary produce History Shrew. I learnt about white space, size and tone of font; how to use Lettera set. Ever since, in the Politics or History department, I’ve known how to design a report, a poster - amazing.

The History Group was transformative because it was part of the intense activism of Women’s Liberation Movement, one group among many others, the source of close friendships, which went very deep with me.

The History Group led to Red Rag, teaching in the WEA and for the Extra-Mural department of UL, the Political Economy of Women Group, and more. But I have to stop now.

7. Sally Alexander
04-14-2015
04:33 PM ET (US)

I want to add that reading Freud became part of my life; still is. An endless resource and companion.
8. Mary Kelly  
04-14-2015  
05:25 PM ET (US)  

Returning to the History Group’s *Shrew*, 1970, and with Juliet’s emphasis on activism in mind, I found that questions of sexuality and the ‘sexism,’ were deeply imbricated with those of class, race and nationality throughout the issue. So this perspective was there from the start, at least in the European Women’s Liberation Movement, not something that came later, and I was reminded of the slogan, ‘separate, but not autonomous,’ which described the need for an independent women’s movement, and at the same time, a commitment to engage with the broader political agenda. Most notably, 1970-73, the trade union movement, specifically the unionization of low paid workers, most of whom were women, and the Nightcleaners *Shrew*, 1971, is entirely devoted to this issue. Sally and I, together with others in the LWLW, were involved in the campaign to unionize night cleaners, and talking with the cleaners made it clear just how much childcare was underpinning the social/sexual division of labor in the workplace.

The Nightcleaners Campaign became visible during the picket of Sanctuary House in 1970, organized by May Hobbs, the cleaner’s ‘unofficial’ representative, and it was around that time, I think, that Marc Karlin and James Scott invited me to join the Berwick Street Film Collective in making an experimental documentary on the Campaign. Much has been written about the film since then, but I wanted to ask you, James, what you recall about that moment – the decision to take on a ‘women’s issue,’ and to represent the LWLW by including me in the collective. Did this change the project for you in terms of production or how the film’s narrative evolved?

Another instance of engaging the ‘broader political agenda’ that stands out for me is a weekly newspaper, *7 Days*. Rosalind mentioned it in her response. I think it ran from October 1971 until May 1972, not long, but exemplary in this way: it was founded by an alliance of women engaged in feminist politics and men in the self-styled ‘revolutionary left,’ whose aim was parity in the production process and full support for the WLM. The content was wide ranging – cultural as well as political news. I remember writing a review of Frank Zappa’s *200 Motels*. Maxine Molyneux was the Arts editor then, as well as a
frequent contributor. I wanted to ask you, Maxine, what you recall about the editorial process, and how an alternative narrative of current events was shaped? How would you and Rosalind say it was informed by feminism?

Hello Mary, thank you for inviting me to join the conversation. I must say that my background and memories are all very different from your own and the others. I came from a family of artists and while my father was working class, Protestant and Northern Irish, my mother was English and part of the liberal bourgeoisie and I was sent to private boarding school from just eight years old to become a ‘proper gentleman’ and a good leader of the Empire. Many of my fellow students found their way to become administrators in the Colonies. However, the real watershed moment for me was not 1968, but 1956, the Suez Canal crisis when the British and French sent troops to hold on to the canal and were forced by the US to withdraw. Suddenly all my education was thrown out of the window and I realized that most of it had been based on one big lie, and realized that no more was Britain the dominant global power that I had been brought up to think it was.

As a filmmaker I was seriously under the influence of European and Japanese cinema, and I managed to find my way to Paris in 1959 for the birth of the Nouvelle Vague, and spent every waking moment in the small independent cinemas that at that time hardly existed in London. I had never thought of myself as a documentary filmmaker, despite the fact that, before starting work on The Nightcleaners, I had made three of them on contemporary artists – David Hockney, RB Kitaj and Richard Hamilton – and was at the time of the cleaners’ Sanctuary House strike, launched on the fourth in the series –

Stills from The Nightcleaners (1972-75)
an expanded, two screen film on Claes Oldenburg. It was around this time that I was also reading and researching a new film based on the life of the artist Gaudier-Brzeska and the Bloomsbury set before World War 1. It was at this time that I met my old friend Marc Karlin in the British Museum reading room. He had also been a friend from private boarding school and we also remained friends when I was at the Slade and he was at acting school and I worked with him on some drama projects after a group of teachers and students broke away and formed Drama Centre London. Marc had been working with Cinema Action making political films and told me in the British Museum reading room about the Nightcleaners. Then one cold November night, together with Humphry Trevelyan, also from Cinema Action, we went out with a 16mm Éclair camera and Nagra sound recorder to film the strike at Sanctuary House.

I was completely new to this kind of political action and one of the things that struck me most as we waited in a dimly lit street by the entrance of Sanctuary House was how surreal the whole experience was. Through closed grilled gates an animated conversation was taking place between May Hobbs and some of the striking cleaners and the ‘scabs’ on the other side. While this was in progress, smart well-dressed young politicos from New Left Review were arriving in taxis to give support. Marc referred to them as the ‘Gucci Socialists.’ This was my first experience of how the Left was split and this continued to be in the background during the Nightcleaners’ campaign. My own political education at this time was fiercely independent and without any party affiliation. What was happening at the Sanctuary House strike was almost invisible. The surface was impenetrable. And when we viewed the ‘rushes’ the next day, we had these grey, grainy images that seemed to add up to nothing. Except, for me, a fleeting moment, a woman’s face in the shadows, through the grill expressing pain and anguish, an image that would not go away. So started The Nightcleaners film.

Now Mary, to answer your question about taking on the ‘women’s issue’ and including you in the collective, I can only remember being somewhat surprised when Marc told me that there had been some pressure on us to include a woman in our group. Not because of the issue itself, because this made sense being a film about women in struggle, but how the film that had begun with no clear political objective was now being absorbed into the Women’s Group. I was told that you, Mary, would be assigned to our collective. I did not know you, and I did not know how this decision was reached to assign you – but I welcomed it as another dynamic and another direction. However, it is perhaps due to this that the myth grew up that The Nightcleaners film began as an agit-prop campaign film, which was never the case. Mostly, it was Marc who became the point person between what I remember as being the Holloway Group and the Victoria Group. I believed our objective was to make a film that would represent the campaign against a wider political background of seventies England, economic unrest and Ireland since now we also had troops in occupation in Northern Ireland. The concept of ‘a campaign film’ came later and we did actually produce a short film for this purpose.

I hope this helps, and let me know if you have any more specific questions.
My memories of the time were also of the ferment of new ideas, and creative politics, along with the shared conviction that a social transformation was under way and that we were part of it. I had arrived in England four years before from Uruguay, and was a jobbing freelance journalist writing about art and current affairs when I was invited to join 7 Days as Arts and Culture editor. It was a time of creative collectives on the critical fringes and I remember flat-sharing with the Brechtian-inspired founders of the theatre company Red Ladder, and with a member of Cinema Action, before moving to Sally's where my most enduring friendships were forged. Mary's room was next door to mine with opportunities to exchange thoughts on contemporary art and politics; and Sally's busy kitchen was a place of feminist theory, debate and shared anxieties, of which there were plenty. I was reading an eclectic array of works on art and culture from Trotsky on Literature and Art to Benjamin and Adorno. I had long been a feminist in spirit but feminist theory came via de Beauvoir’s “Second Sex,” Juliet Mitchell's “Women’s Estate,” and later Firestone et al. Mary and I joined a Capital Reading Group to which Clive Goodwin, also briefly a member, ferried us in his Mini Cooper. At the end of 1970 I resigned from my main paper, The Herald Tribune and went to Argentina to research two projects, to write some pieces about the art movement, and to investigate the publishing activities of the remaining Nazis. On my return I joined the 7 Days collective in the bleak unheated offices of Shavers Place, sharing a tiny room with my future husband Fred Halliday, the International Editor, whose trouser bottoms were always burnt at the back as he tried to keep warm by standing against our unguarded bar heater. To write about the gender politics of 7 Days would take longer than the patience of readers would endure, but it was informed by the new spirit of the age: no man would dare to ask a woman to make tea; no sexist jokes (we were far too serious for that!) and democratic principles prevailed in terms of the editorial line – divisive issues were debated and voted on. There was a Women’s Caucus, which occasionally raised some demands, but on the whole the collective got on with the demanding job of getting the paper out each week.
I’d like to stay with the magazines/newspapers for a while. Sally talks about *The Black Dwarf*, Rosalind mentions *Red Rag* and *Feminist Review* as well as *7 Days*, and it seems to me that the print media, in the days before the internet, was the place where positions were argued and tendencies consolidated, if only briefly. For instance, in 1978, the first issue of *m/f* came out. This was the last year the WLM National Conference met in Britain, and in a way, *m/f* continued debates that had started there, arguing that socialist feminism needed to be distinguished from both radical feminism and orthodox Marxism. In my view, what developed over the ten years of its publication was an improbable, perhaps, but productive combination of discourse theory (Foucault) and psychoanalysis (Lacan). There was a strong connection with French feminists. I was on the advisory board and remember vividly our meetings with Chantal Mouffe and Catherine Millot, because they were so articulate, AND so well dressed! But, here, I think it would be great to have some input from Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie, who were founding editors. Could you talk about the magazine’s formation, and what you see as its legacy in the movement and in your own work?

The events leading up to *m/f*’s launch were particularly important for me in conceptualizing the institution of the family and shifting my focus from domestic labor to the psychology of the mother/child relationship in *Post-Partum Document*, which I began in 1973. Rosalind said that when the History Group dissolved, she became part of the Family Group. Around the same time, I joined the Lacan Reading Group and there was a certain amount of overlapping membership among these research-based groups and local consciousness-raising groups. Jacqueline Rose, who had started reading and studying
Lacan as a graduate student in Paris, was a central figure in the Reading Group, and would be in the best position to speak about how it started. So, Jacqueline would you be willing to weigh in here?

All the reading, thinking, arguing and aligning that took place in the Lacan Group, changed the way we thought about the relation between the social and the psychic, I mean, made it possible to reformulate ‘the subjective moment of women’s oppression,’ as a question of positionality in language and the construction of sexual difference. The ongoing debate over the relevance of Lacanian theory for feminism came to a head in WLM at the Patriarchy Conference in London in 1976. To put this in context, though, Juliet’s book, “Psychoanalysis and Feminism” was published in 1974, Laura’s article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” appeared in Screen, in 1975. And in 1976, the same year as the Conference, I exhibited the first three parts of Post-Partum Document at the ICA (Institute for Contemporary Art, London), and the so-called ‘nappies’ caused a scandal in the press. I still remember Laura saying, “Mary, your picture is in all the papers and people are stepping on it in the subway!” For the public, it was a waste of funds, like Andre’s ‘bricks.’ But the controversy didn’t stop there. In the movement the theory issue was just as problematic. Laura, Parveen, Sue Lipschitz and I led a seminar at the ICA, defending the show in face of some fierce opposition. Rozsika Parker did an interview with me for Spare Rib, but they refused to publish it. This was when she and Griselda Pollock began their ambitious history of art informed by feminism, which eventually became the book, “Old Mistresses.” Griselda, I was wondering if you can recall any of our conversations, then, and if you could describe the way that project evolved?

12. Jacqueline Rose
04-21-2015
06:45 PM ET (US)

I started reading Freud in Paris. I was preparing a thesis on children’s fiction and Marc Soriano at the École Pratique des Hautes Études told me that the project required an understanding of psychoanalysis and that the only way to understand Freud was by reading Ernest Jones’s biography and every time he mentioned a work by Freud, to stop and read the work, making my way through the complete works. I got about half way but it changed everything and turned me into an avid reader of Freud. It was only later that I started reading Lacan, as part of the discussions around Screen Magazine which, when I returned from Paris to London, was the only serious intellectual space in the UK for French theoretical thought.

Juliet’s “Psychoanalysis and Feminism” was crucial as it was the first book to suggest you could be a feminist and interested in Freud. The interest in Lacan followed from there as he seemed the most radical Freudian thinker and also his concern with language allowed us to link both to literary language and to questions of ideological formation. The Lacan Study Group brought together a group of women who all found his thinking genuinely provocative and who all one way or another saw his critique of subjectivity as self-presentation, his stress on lack and subjective division a crucial antidote to patriarchal ideologies of acquired, accomplished or fulfilled femininity. So, paradoxically perhaps, it was what was disturbing in his vision that felt liberating.

13. James Scott
04-21-2015
09:34 PM ET (US)

I am just about to travel to London. While I am there I shall be attending the screening at the BFI Southbank of The Nightcleaners. Who would have thought that over forty years later this film would be showing as a classic of seventies political film making?! It seems strange and weird. In that connection, I came across a piece from my diary written on the last day of the strike. It is a little whimsical, but I thought it would be interesting to post. Here it is:

“From 30 July Sunday a strike was called on the Ministry of Defense building in Fulham, Empress House. Later it was made official by the CSU. The boss of this building was a Mr. Rhodda.

Tuesday 15th August 1972

The strike has been going for nearly 2 weeks now. There have been many developments – it has spread to the Admiralty building and to the Home Office Building off Horseferry Road from last night – all these strikes have been made official by the CSU. The cleaners have changed a lot, especially the ones at the M.O.D. Empress building in Fulham. They have become much more aware. The other night they were talking about education. They are really good to see together. The pickets are managing to turn back a number of lorries, telephone engineers, supplies for the canteen, etc. It is unbelievable how far the cleaners have come in nearly 2 years.

The question of the film is complicated – what exactly are we doing? Is it possible to just go on filming like this night after night? What is the meaning of these images? What do they communicate? Have we shot too much or too little? Editing? How long will it all take – it could be a month just syncing up.

Thursday 17th August
Last night the strike at the M.O.D. building ended – earlier in the day there had been a meeting between Mr. Rhoda of Cleanagents Ltd and the CSU. This meeting came as a result of an approach by the TUC to the Dept of Employment to act as mediators in the dispute.

There was an atmosphere of tenseness amongst the cleaners and the picket. They were worried that they might have been sold out by the Union. Above all May Hobbs was very tense. The cleaners must have been in the meeting for about an hour when I saw Liz and Daphne come down in the pub looking jubilant. The result was that the cleaners have been offered £3 rise taking their wages from £14 pw to £17 pw and above everything else the Union has been recognized. I think this was perhaps the greatest victory for the cleaners – to realise that by keeping together and sticking it out they could actually achieve something. No longer were they the menial slaves bowing to Mr. Rhoda, the boss, but now they could actually challenge him. Not only had they achieved something for themselves but they had also set a precedent for cleaners throughout London.

It really is a remarkable step forward – it has been an experience in which the cleaners have really learned – and everyone has learned as they have themselves. They were jubilant as we filmed them after the meeting – but at the same time one could sense a sadness – they knew that they would be losing touch with all those people who had supported them – and for May Hobbs particularly it must be a difficult time. The spotlight was on the cleaners and the Union – no longer on the Action Group who had brought about the conditions for the strike. The Action Group who spent months and months of slogging work trying to get cleaners into unions all over London, trying to keep them in the Union, talking to them, collecting dues, taking them through periods of immense depression when everything looked black.

May must see this as a victory in one sense yes, but what of herself, having devoted everything to this? She cannot be a cleaner now herself. She has long outlived that even if she could get a job at it. Effectively the rise in wages will make no difference to her. Where does May go from here? Of course this could be seen as only the beginning of the struggle. There must be more talking, more organization, more just spreading the news of this one struggle at the M.O.D.

But even so what is in it for May? She cannot go back to cleaning – and I cannot see that she could exist as an officer of a Union. The cleaners still need to get a branch of their own – this is an aim – but will any Union take on May as an officer? In a sense, May has fought too hard; she has been too quick to change her alliances, she has burnt all the bridges behind her. Not only this: she has outgrown her class – she has become involved with educated women, middle class women, writers, intellectuals... but she cannot break with her class. It is the same with her marriage – Chris and May have outgrown themselves. The situation is a very sad one – one that could have been brought about by the toughness of the struggle, by the nature of the struggle i.e. women’s rights, championed by the largely middle class movement of women’s liberation.

So the victory has taken its toll. There will always be losses. May could even overcome this. One suddenly sees how the whole class nature of society is a really insidious thing – relationships just fragment in the face of it – and behind class is economics – human beings tied in the most complicated knot of history and present circumstances combined – tied relentlessly through a struggle for survival – a need for basics: food, clothing, shelter, becomes a web of human conflict – failures and disasters, a mesh of exploitation, profit seeking, in which fear and anxiety are the weapons.

The more I see this the more I realize that the answer has to come with education – the revolutionary process has to be based on very thick foundations of knowledge and understanding. Without this the struggle will only deteriorate into senseless violence and killing. And yet in society at the moment, the class with the most revolutionary potential is the working class, the underprivileged, the oppressed and exploited. This is where society hits and hits hard – this is the section that is most angry – that most vehemently needs better conditions in which to live. And yet without the education this struggle develops into oppressed minorities fighting themselves; witness Ireland with the Catholic and Protestant working class conducting a war between themselves, a bloody vendetta, organized assassination. Or look at the dockers fighting each other for jobs. There are divisions in Unity – the Unity that is so essential if the working class is to fight to improve their wages and conditions, divisions that are in themselves exploited ideologically by the capitalist class in the sense of asserting laws to provide rights for an individual not to be a member of a Union. Ideas that assert national Unity over working class Unity – that in the end will only lead to a greater division in society – a hardening of the class nature. Class vs. nationality: this is an ideological war.

But it is knowledge about all that the working class needs and yet within our system of education and mass communication, everything weighs against this dissemination of knowledge to the working class. Every idea that contains the roots of human equality is frozen – becomes a moment of the past – as though all that had been achieved in the days when barbarians fought each other. And now there is no danger, no divisions in society, all that we need to do now is work and then we will have economic prosperity. Education itself has become debased by the nature of our society, by capitalism, by the economic principle of one person exploiting another for profit.

So above all we need a language that grows from the belief in human equality – a language through which ideas can be formed about a future that is radically different and untainted by the principles that uphold the superiority of one class over another and the need to compete and fight each other in order to sustain our society. Language based on possibility,
on the principles of change and contradiction that are inherent in reality itself; language based in spontaneity, proximity, touch; a language that is not rooted in fear; language that can contain ideas about ourselves that have been shut out of men’s consciousness; language that can act in the space between people bringing them into a proximity rather than throwing them apart; language that allows itself to change as men change rather than seeking to prevent men changing by imposing restrictions, authority; language that converts necessity into what men need as a whole.

Note: Nick Hart Williams – was the Founder of The Other Cinema and documentary filmmaker, moved to Australia.

Friday 18th August

Last night (Thursday) the cleaners went back to work. They met in the pub opposite and most people who had been involved turned up. A reporter from Radio London was trying to make them sing and a photographer tried to make them do ‘Knees Up Mother Brown’ (Irrelevancy of the media not to say its bias). They went on drinking until the time came for them to go back. We filmed them as they walked back to the building. So much was said in that moment and yet unsaid – cleaners returning to cleaning this mammoth skyscraper through the night, the supporters waving to them as they went in, saying goodbye... a bizarre unbelievable situation. Mostly middle-class people, some Trade Union supporters cheering them as they went back, shouting ‘Unity’ and other such things. Later Nick Hart Williams who was there said he saw one of the cleaners come to the window to see if any one was left. The lights went on in the building, and it all began again – relationships that had existed quite closely for two weeks were now at an end. It was very sad in a way. And when one asks what was it all about it seems very difficult to explain.”

14. Griselda Pollock
04-26-2015
05:55 PM ET (US)

Women’s Lobby and Women’s Report on a demonstration

15. Griselda Pollock
04-26-2015
06:49 PM ET (US)

I became involved in politics in my final year at university. Taking part in an occupation of university buildings, the participants from the Women’s History conference at Ruskin came to lend support. Through the windows I saw what the press named ‘women’s libbers.’ When I left university I knew I wanted to continue to be active, but how, in whose name. I sought out the Women’s Liberation Movement, which operated through a newsletter and I tracked down a Women’s Group. I cannot now remember how it came to about that I heard about a Group who were seeking to agitate for the bill outlawing sex discrimination, a bill that had repeatedly been introduced to Parliament as a Private Members’ bill and just as often got unceremoniously thrown out. Modeling ourselves on the suffragists, we formed a Group to make enough noise outside Parliament to make those inside take it seriously. We hired Conway Hall and called a meeting. I remember I had to go and speak to Women’s Institutes armed with facts and figures about discrimination. I even tried to recruit Vanessa Redgrave to our cause by standing outside the theatre in which she was playing. We called our Group Women’s Lobby and over two years we made enough fuss, brought enough women to sit in the galleries above the House of Commons, or to assemble outside, to make it possible for the political parties to take up this piece of legislation.
Our Group soon realised that information was power and so we decided to create a monthly newsmagazine, called *Women's Report*. All month we clipped from a range of papers and magazines, collecting items on every aspect of women's legal, political, economic and social life. My contribution alongside another Group member, who was an artist, was to create a page on books and art. We found a wonderfully sexist font that made letters out of women's bodies: we re-used it to create a page on Images. *Spare Rib* already existed as a glossy. We were gathering information that enabled us to review the situation of women in Britain each month and thus get a sense of the ups and downs. It was a typical women's liberation project, which had to negotiate all of us learning new skills from the journalists and writers in our midst, while not allowing the skilled to become the leaders. I learnt so many things about writing and about analysing information.

I was at the time studying art history. One day we were given a slide test. We all identified 9 out of 10 images but were stumped by the tenth. It had to be late nineteenth century, postimpressionist etc etc. The shocking fact is that it was a work by Suzanne Valadon. More shocking was the fact that none of us searched our extensive art historical data-bases for the name of a women. The idea was simply missing. So we got together and made sure that our graduate school invited Linda Nochlin to come and lecture. She made history by talking as a feminist in those hallowed halls. Made aware of the consistent erase of women from the history of art, I followed up an event reported in both the newspapers and *Spare Rib* about the attempted censorship of an exhibition by socialist-feminist Swedish artist Monica Sjöö at Camden Library. Her work showed a woman giving birth in muted muralist style. It was considered obscene. A meeting was called. It was there I met Rozsika Parker for the first time. We formed with Pat Kahn, Alina Strassberg and Anthea Callen the Women's Art History Collective and set about studying images of women, the history of women in art, and the nature of the critical language that consistently belittled work by women by calling it feminine.

We started offering our work to art schools, going into art schools under the angry eyes of men in leather jackets, telling the women in the audiences about a forgotten history and a current structure of discrimination. We taught a course for the Adult Education. In doing this Rosie Parker made us aware of the Artists' Union that had women in charge and a special Women's Workshop. We affiliated our collective to the Women's Workshop and thus to the Union. In 1974, a show on women in conceptual art curated by Lucy Lippard was meant to be put on at the Royal College. This was refused and in the end it was put up by volunteers in a space in Earlham Street. Condemned by the press as a 'ghetto' of women complaining, the show was the focus, however, of a lively series of meetings and debates, on women and art criticism, women and politics of resistance in Chile, and the Collective presented its work. It was there that I first heard Mary Kelly speak. She gave a lecture on the Parthenon, offering a brilliant reading of its cultural as well as economic meanings. It was an eye opener. By then I was lecturing at the University of Manchester, writing a PhD on Van Gogh and beginning to make sense of contemporary art and the massive changes occurring in art through conceptual art, performance, photography on the one hand and through the growing feminist consciousness and critique on the other.

When the Women's Art History Collective came to a natural conclusion around 1975/76, Rosie and I took on the task of writing up our work, making a book out of what we had developed as a distinctive way of thinking about the issues of women, art and ideology. As the only feminist art critic/art writer in Britain, working for *Spare Rib*, Rosie was getting to know all the artists working in this new area, when art was also new if not alien to the mainstream women's movement. We asked ourselves what made our work different from the recovery model of lost women artists typical of American feminist art history. We also asked ourselves how our historical studies could make a difference to the artists of our own moment who might as easily disappear unless we created a new language to make sense of their work. Searching for ways out of the dead ends of modernist art history that I was being taught as the only art history, I turned to film studies, attending *Screen* study days, having my mind blown by sudden exposure to the wilds of Lacanian psychoanalysis whose complexity initially dispossessed me of any intellectual confidence. But the fascination of the new film studies proposed by Laura Mulvey and others, captured my attention sufficiently to plough on through my dark confusion and slowly come to inhabit this intellectual playground made weird and wonderful by psychoanalytical thinking coupled with wonderfully detailed semiotic and ideological analysis. Having attended several of the national Women's Liberation Movement conferences, but also begun to work on specific projects like the newspaper and then the adult education, the moment of *Screen* was my new education. I cannot stress enough the importance of reading groups, weekend schools, a whole apparatus of unofficial but absolutely brilliantly studying together and transmission of new ways of seeing the world and reading cultural practices.

I wrote my first article for *Spare Rib* in 1974 on women artists in the collections of the National Gallery. I was still hardly ready to grasp *Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document* in 1975 or *Riddles of the Sphinx* in 1976. It is hard to convey now the nature of the gap between these incredible artworks, so richly acquainted with a whole history of avant-garde practices from early cinema through to conceptual art and the ‘cultural politics’ of the Women’s Movement: artists might be useful to make posters. There was as yet little understanding of the politics of representation or the role of images in making gender. It was emerging in sociology and social psychology. But the intellectual project of feminism was emerging out of the combination of social activity, protest and solidarity, with the work we were doing in study groups, reading groups, collectives. Nothing was institutionally available. We were making it up as we went along. By 1976-77, Rosie Parker and I were hard at work at weekends, writing ourselves into the book that became “Old Mistresses.” A feminist intervention in art history was taking shape and we knew that our book would have to conclude with the present, with what we were witnessing in the art being produced by women around us. Unlike the present, now, when contemporary art is what most
students want to study, then, it was very strange to combine historical studies with what was actually happening. Feminism necessitated breaching that barrier. It also made it possible to see the history of art in a completing different light, following the thread of gender through its dark labyrinths and discovering a means of redefining women and creativity.

I know this sounds more ‘academic’ than anecdotal, but it is necessary to stress that something had to be constructed from nothing in a way. Looking back now, students have a category of ‘feminist art’ or feminism. We had the women’s movement, and a general atmosphere of silence on women’s issues. The process of my own development depended on groups, on working in collectives, of sharing skills, and simply learning from those who clearly way more sophisticated and knowledgeable than I was, with my English university education, about a world out there that included Marxism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, semiotics. Writing then was like ventriloquizing ways of speaking I was barely able to grasp. But working through it in the collectives, with artists, art historians, journalists, political exiles, a whole new way of thinking and making was emerging. Being a foreigner, being an art historian, living between Manchester, then Leeds and London, I had a sort of outsider view. The collaboration with Rozsika Parker, the first person to dedicate herself to writing about women in art, remade my education and gave me access to the world being described in these pages. I saw The Nightcleaners and Riddles of the Sphinx, but it would take me another decade of self-education and teaching in a School of Fine Art to meet them in full appreciation of their brilliance. I teach them, supervise theses on them, and try to avoid too much romanticizing of my younger days. But a history of the decade of the 1970s, mixing our lived memories and our thoughtful retrospect is vital. I uploaded a photograph that reminds us that it was a movement, joyous as well as fraught, full of unfinished business and a conviction that we would change everything.

16. Parveen Adams
04-27-2015
06:29 AM ET (US)

It started when I fell in with the New York Radical Feminists for a summer in New York in 1970. I remember that the group was called Red Brigade No 1, but I only have my memory to back me up on the name. I was thrilled to be in a group that shared my concerns, though I remember my unwillingness to join them in daubing ‘Off the Prick’ on the steps of Norman Mailer’s house.

Back in London I joined the Family Study Group, successor to the History Group, mentioned by other contributors to this discussion. We described ourselves as a consciousness-raising group and read and discussed Freud and Marx in alternate weeks. Perhaps this interest in Freud filtered through from early History Group discussions with Juliet Mitchell who was to publish “Psychoanalysis and Feminism” in 1974. Freud’s thought was a revelation. Armed with little else apart from my own convictions I offered a course on ‘Women’ in 1972 at Brunel University. I had to teach myself how to think about what I was to teach my students. The days of m/f were far off.

Elizabeth Cowie and I were in both the Family Group and the Lacan Study Group. Rosalind Coward, studying at Stuart Hall’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, joined us in the Lacan Group. Together we decided to work on a journal in 1977 and m/f first came out in 1978. We passed a hat round for funds for m/f – relatives, friends, Penguin Books, Stephen Heath, John Ellis and many others were generous. We were most fortunate to have Red Lion Setters as supportive publishers. We worked long hours editing articles and composing issues – all in the days of the typewriter and Sellotape. Beverly Brown joined us. We held reader’s meetings for the first few issues.

For years m/f was central in my life. I felt pushed to read and think theoretically in order to find a way of thinking out in detail the personal being political. I worked at the limits of my capacity for thought. We had a few staunch supporters – in London, Ljubljana, New York. But m/f was not easy to read. Moreover a few men wrote articles for it. m/f argued that there was no pre-given unity of women, ‘women’ being constructed differently through social discourses. And it argued that the individual was a divided subject, something that considerably complicated the question of women. Many feminists did not take kindly to these positions. The first was taken as a lack of solidarity with the movement and the theory of lack and subjective division was taken to be a confirmation of the subordinate position of women rather than a challenge to received ideas. Getting copy became difficult. We felt more and more isolated. In 1986 we published our final volume 11/12 in a black and white cover.

I learned a great deal while working on m/f. First of all, French, in order to translate Michèle Montrelay for the first issue. I grappled with Foucault and Lacan. The link between this work and my later writings on art and film was Mary Kelly. Her invitation to give a talk at the opening of Interim in 1990 at the New Museum in New York that made me try to talk about art through psychoanalysis. How I think now stems from the way I learned to think in the m/f days.
Both Jacqueline and Griselda talked about the importance of Screen, and I, too, remember the excitement of seeing those issues in the early seventies, issues like “Cinema Semiotics and the Work of Christian Metz” (1973) and “Psychoanalysis and Cinema” (1975). As I watched the migration of French theory to the UK, and more importantly, from literature to film, I couldn’t help wondering what possibilities it held for transforming the fields of art and art history, and especially, with regard to my own work, for rethinking conceptual art, which was dominated by the kind of positivist linguistics that Art & Language espoused. For me, their move from interrogating the object to interrogating the interrogation itself made no sense without a theory of the subject, which is something I tried to address in Post-Partum Document. But for art criticism, the problem of how to proceed remained, as the French theorists rarely referred to art. When they did, the object was ‘painting,’ and, unlike film, ‘it could be taken in at a glance.’ Mark Nash, who became editor of the magazine in 1979, was also interested in this question and so it was that we began plotting our intervention over many cups of tea, at Valerie’s near the Screen office in Old Compton Street. Our effort began in 1980 with the publication of Tim Clark’s preliminary treatment of Olympia, followed by Peter Wollen’s response, then, Victor Burgin, “Photography, Phantasy, Function,” and Griselda Pollock, “Art History and Mythologies.” In 1981, after my contribution, “Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism,” it petered out. Short lived, but significant, I think, as the prologue to what would eventually become known as ‘the new art history.’ Mark, I wondered what your thoughts might be about this project, and, if you wanted to go there, the broader trajectory of Screen as an intervention in the politics of representation at that time?

It should be noted that the avant-garde films being produced then were enormously influential, too. In 1971, I went to a screening of Straub and Huillet’s Othon at the National Film Theatre with Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, who had written the program notes, and at one point in the film, there’s a very long tracking shot of the road leading into Rome – I think they ran the whole roll, about ten minutes in those days – and it took my breath away! From that point on, I wanted to do something similar with the still image in the context of the exhibition… to emphasize the experience of real time in a way that would be radically anti-gestalt. Peter Wollen called it ‘diegetic space,’ when he saw my show at the ICA. He and Laura were shooting Riddles of the Sphinx, then. Post-Partum Document makes an appearance in it, but what I remember most is the film’s 360-degree pan. It was riveting. Now, in retrospect, I think both this kind of pan and the long take were effective ways to undermine the ‘objectification’ of conventional point of views, though, perhaps, we arrived at this intuitively. We were trying everything we could to figure out what a visual proposition about sexuality or race – informed by feminism, but not based on positive images – would look like. It was just the beginning, but became a central debate in the coming decades under the rubric of ‘identity politics.’ Isaac Julien and Sutapa Biswas have addressed this issue critically, and in different ways, suggesting that experimental film, informed by feminism, and perhaps, by conceptualism, has been influential for artists working in video and projected image installation in the 1980s and 1990s. So, of course, I’d like to bring Isaac and Sutapa into the conversation here. Could you talk about your early work in this context?

Mary asked about the beginnings of m/f – there are two stories here, the personal, and the political. m/f was born from our belief that we must develop new theoretical understandings of femininity and the politics of sexual difference. We were involved in the turn to psychoanalysis, first Freud and then Lacan, as ways to understand sexuality and the family as
psychological as well as social constructions and which were nevertheless not essential, not biologically given. Juliet Mitchell’s book “Feminism and Psychoanalysis” was of course hugely important here, as also the critiques of traditional Marxism – both from within Marxism, by Louis Althusser, and outside, by Michel Foucault. Socialism on its own was not delivering women’s liberation from family structures and the social stereotyping of women’s ‘femininity.’ The project for the journal took shape following the Patriarchy Conference in May 1976, with its fierce debates over the role of theory, including the paper that Ros Coward, Sue Lipshitz and I presented on “Psychoanalysis and Patriarchal Structures.”

m/f was a feminist project in creating a journal whose concern was the conceptual understanding of how to think about women’s oppression, ‘femininity,’ and motherhood as an emotional and as a socially constructed identity, as well as being a response to the current politics of feminism, in all its complexity. The project required then, and perhaps still does, a specific space. By the mid-1980s the shifts in British politics – notably Thatcherism, and in the Women’s Movement, together with the workload of sustaining a wholly independently produced journal, led us to choose to cease it.

For myself, the ideas of how we are made as men and women that I was learning about were enormously exciting as a means of liberation from traditional approaches in relation to assumptions of positive versus negative images. This especially in relation to representation - how we are seen, are deemed, to be women enough. My journey in the Women’s Movement was an extraordinary learning curve that was founded on chance, for while beginning in a local consciousness-raising group in West London, my re-encounter with theoretical ideas after university came about through my sister Celia Cowie who, as a student of Parveen’s at Brunel, was encouraged to join the Family Study Group with her, and I went along too. There I first read Freud, and then became a founder-member of the Lacan Reading Group. My interest in these ideas came as well, however, from my new job as an editorial assistant on a small journal developing film studies called Screen, newly relaunched (then supported by British Film Institute) which drew on writers interested in film associated with New Left Review - Peter Wollen, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, and Ben Brewster (later editor of Screen and translator of Althusser) - and also of course Laura Mulvey, whose work both as a film-maker with Peter Wollen, and as a writer has been so important for me. For Screen’s new approach to cinema was a radically materialist one, concerned with the politics of film as representation. These reading groups, and Screen, but most of all m/f were my postgraduate education, and through them both what I learned, and how I learned to critique, have remained central to my thinking.

It was through the Lacan Group that I came to know Mary, and we later collaborated on a paper, “Representation vs Communication,” together with Claire Johnston, Cora Kaplan, Jacqueline Rose and Marie Yates, which we presented at a socialist feminist conference in 1979, addressing art practices and the role of ideology. Where I had been mainly concerned with mainstream fiction film, Mary’s art practice changed my thinking. Like Griselda, it would take me time to understand all that Mary was achieving aesthetically and politically as an artist in her Post-Partum Document, some of which I was able to put into words in my essay in m/f in 1982, revisited in a postscript in 2009. I learned the importance of a conceptualism that includes the embodied, of narrative and stories within the sculptural, and of the seriality in Mary’s work, of parts in a whole. But also in single works which are palimpsests as layerings of times and events, and as montage, collisions within the frame, to use a film metaphor - for film has always been important to her. All of which are there in her recent exhibition ‘On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Period of Time’ that has also led to this discussion.

Of course, what was difficult was the theory. But it was theory we turned to in order to think feminism outside the boxes of traditional socialism and Marxism, as well as of biology as solely determining difference. It is equally important now, to think our current struggles for women as workers, as mothers and as daughters and sisters, and as subjects of desire in the wider politics of ethnicity, the post-colonial and globalisation. I see the continuities not only in my own work on documentary film and video art, but also in the work of women artist film-makers, such as Sarah Turner’s remarkable film Perestroika (2009), or Hala Elkoussy’s brilliant video work set in Cairo, In search of a city (In the papers of Sein) (2011).

19. Mark Nash
04-30-2015
11:45 AM ET (US)

I recently attended a discussion at the National Film Theatre around Laura’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” essay which was published when I began to be involved with Screen in the mid-1970s. One of the more humorous sides to that discussion was seeing a number of us there present ‘outed’ as belonging to the 1970s (and 80s) generation, rather than the 1960s. I was still a university student in 1968 and although the historical events we are familiar with were taking place around me, I kept myself at some remove. 1968, in fact, was a defeat for the aims of the student movements of joining with the workers and unions to challenge the ruling classes of Europe and the US, if not the world. We don’t need to go into the craziness of say the Maoism which Godard’s Le Chinoise gently points fun of, but there was a sense that it might, it should be, possible to change the state of things.

It was in the context of that ‘failure’ that French theory was imported into the United Kingdom. As opposed to the 1960s, which one might characterize as focused on anti-imperialist politics (the Vietnam War) as well as the hippy personal is political movements, I would say that the 1970s were less utopian, marked by a ‘teoria-filia’ born of the defeats of the late 1960s. Just as in the late 1940s and early 1950s the French nouvelle vague and cinephile movement was inaugurated by
the release of hundreds if not thousands of films held back from exhibition during the German occupation, so the 1970s Anglophone world was flooded with nearly 20 years of francophone critical and theoretical reflection. Barthes “Elements of Semiology,” Foucault’s “What Is an Author?” and various texts by Lacan and others all arrived at roughly the same time. So there was something of a theoretical delirium. I sometimes think when visiting Universities such as Goldsmiths today that they still live a kind of theoretical dérive that originated in those formative 1970s.

It also needs to remembered that all this critical and theoretical activity took place outside the academy. There was one film studies Post Graduate course (at the Slade). Literature at Cambridge was just beginning to incorporate structuralist thinking. No galleries (apart perhaps from the ICA) engaged in these discussions. The British Film Institute Education Department and the Society for Education in Film and Television were vanguard institutions - there were even some members of the Communist Party of Great Britain on staff! Only later on did the academy take over.

As your question points out, the position in the visual arts was even less developed. I well remember conversations with both yourself and Victor about the need to develop a parallel discourse to that of Screen for the visual arts. In a sense Victor’s practice as a writer was to develop discursive connections to provide a context for understanding of his art work. You were more engaged politically: in the feminist movement, the Women and Work Group and so on. So, as I recall it, our initial conversations concerned this ‘underdevelopment’ of art history. What was later to become ‘visual cultural studies’ was two decades away.

When I took over editing Screen in about 1976 (I don’t have the issues to hand to check the exact date) we had already been discussing how to develop a wider audience for the work of Screen and SEFT, faced as we were by the dominance of the heavily subsidized BFI house magazine Sight & Sound. Screen in fact had been relaunched earlier in the decade with the model of the New Left Review in mind. Cahiers du Cinéma and Cinéthique were developing projects involving ideological critique of cinema and its institutions and we thought we should try and follow their example. We also wanted a format more conducive to visual illustration and argument. Our collaboration on a visual arts issue of Screen was one of the first of a new format intended to engage a wider audience.

It seemed to me, when I took over the direction of the journal, that the theoretical issues regarding ideology, subjectivity, the gaze and so on, were not medium specific, or if they were then what would be interesting would be to see if we could explore these issues in, so to speak, adjacent fields. The visual arts came to mind because of the overlap in our circles of friendship, political activities and so on. Whilst the Screen Board supported this project of a widening audience, I think those who were less enthusiastic felt that Screen theory as developed so far should be seen more as a Leninist Vanguard project, produced by and for an elite group. I was part of a tendency that said ‘yes, but our project has these wider implications.’ However, apart from yourself, I was one of the few with an interest in the avant-garde tout court (possibly because I spent a lot of time at University attending Fine Art lectures rather than the science I had originally signed up for!). (I don’t think we really considered either performance and theatre (which in some ways would have been closer to cinema aesthetics in the questions they pose) nor music). You also have to remember that this was the time when different tendencies in critical and theoretical work were beginning to be developed in different cities (cultural studies in Birmingham; a more Frankfurt School theory in Essex, I seem to recall, and so on).

The visual art issue we developed was an important one. Indeed, as you say, many of the contributors were founding members of the new art history, some of whom I am still in touch with (Griselda of course, and Tim Clark with whom I found myself sharing a panel (on the representation of Capital) for the first time since that issue of Screen). We couldn’t continue this widening of our theoretical reflections at Screen, not so much because there was not the support on the editorial board, but I think because we didn’t have a clear enough strategy as to how to develop a long term critical intervention. What was needed were visual arts specific publications like Block which developed subsequently.

To come back to your question about the politics of representation at that time. That’s a tough one. Godard writes about the reality of representation not the representation of reality being the proper focus of cinema. The journal Screen was concerned with forms of ideological struggle in the fields of cinema, and as we have been discussing, visual culture more generally. However we also lacked a theory of the relation of the lived subjectivity of our daily lives, our direct action politics (feminism, troops out of Ireland), squatting and community action, Big Flame, The Labour Party, whatever) and the theoretical practice of projects such as Screen. Living in Brixton at the time I would cycle home with both Althusser and ‘Wages for Housework’ literature in my bag! Naively, perhaps because we lived these contradictions and we somehow held together, we thought these networks of different kinds of praxis would continue.

In fact what happened very quickly was a dispersal of energy and talent both into academia and Channel 4 (founded in 1984). I think it was Raymond Williams who commented on how theory was particularly productive when more creative production was blocked. Now in the mid 1980s we entered into a period of creative television production (and consumption) and the batons of ideological struggle were transferred elsewhere (academies and artists, abroad mainly).

I was in psychoanalysis at this time with a Freudian, who was rather skeptical of the Marxist Lacanian set I saw myself as part of. And it did seem to me that the discussions of psychoanalysis in theory and contemporary art and film took place at
a considerable distance from the experience in and of the clinic. Juliet Mitchell was training as a Freudian analyst then I seem to remember. The UK Lacanian discourse was developed as a theoretical practice, along the lines that Jacques-Alain Miller set out rather than the more politically socially and personally engaged Pierre-Félix Guattari (who was the heir apparent of Lacan before Miller). Your work at this time, for example Post-Partum Document, dramatized this split – on the one hand the enigmatic ciphers of Lacanian geometry, on the other the seductive surface of your artworks in which they were engraved: textiles, clothing (the leather jackets) and personal narratives. Also as an obsessionalist artist (most artists have to be), you were less affected by the neuroses of the hysterical analysand.

I am still not clear about the historical significance of this period. My current sense is that we are all still living the 1970s and 1980s problematics that we were formed in and contributed to forming and disseminating. In many ways the theoretical tools developed then seem as pertinent now as they ever did. For example, I find it difficult to move ‘beyond’ Althusser to the post-post structuralists. I am not sure that new concepts such as affect and cognition are particularly helpful. I find the pedagogic practice of Ron Clark at the Whitney Independent Study Program (where we saw each other on several occasions in New York City) greatly encouraging with its insistence on ideological critique for the basis of artistic, curatorial and educational practice. Ron lives the present through a 1970s and 80s problematic and presciently, like yourself, was an artist before he developed his pedagogic practice.

Over the years my practice also shifted. From theory and Screen, to production (a couple of projects with Channel 4 and the BFI in the 1980s), collaboration with Isaac (Julien) which in turn led to my more recent practice as a curator (and academic). Your question is particularly challenging because, while I recognize ‘the interrogation of the interrogation’ as an essential component of critical art and film practice, I have in recent years been much more preoccupied with the forms of global art and cinema which are often tied into ‘earlier’ realist aesthetics, driven by quite different energies, whether this is in Russia, Africa or various indigenous communities. And I have the troubling sense that conceptual work has often avoided the political and cultural challenges facing the developed economies of the west. No doubt this is partially due to a Faustian pact with the gallery and the market. The political has returned as a category of artistic and curatorial practice now, and however under-theorised it might seem, it is able to take the space for continued reflection carved out by projects such as your own.

Where we might connect the concerns of the Screen project then and artistic and curatorial practice now might be in the idea of curating as a critical and discursive practice, a form of interrogating both works of artists, their political and social context as well as the conditions for that curatorial practice itself. There is not so much curating that is critical in this sense. (Though right now I am working with Isaac and Okwui Enwezor the artistic director of the Venice Art Biennale, to produce a reading of “Das Kapital” for the six-month duration of the exhibition.) The readings form a kind of ‘basso profundo’ or critical interruption for those visiting the exhibition. Hopefully we are finally returning to some of the ideas and projects that inspired us so many decades ago.

PS
In your question to Isaac you might also have been describing the film History Lessons, which has a 10-minute tracking shot through Rome. When challenged as to the meaning of this shot (there is no voice over or commentary), Straub or Huillet said that the ruins of Rome provided commentary enough, or words to that effect.

In retrospect it seems to me now that experimental and avant-garde cinema was attempting to catch up with 1920s artistic and literary modernisms both pre and post WW2. Screen in the 1970s had to face two ways – ideological analysis of mass entertainment and spectacular cinema as well as supporting experimental and avant-garde cinema. Peter Wollen’s “The Two Avant-gardes” essay summarises this very elegantly. We still live with the division that Peter sketched out all those years ago: a ‘political’ cinema which relies on narrative content, versus an ‘avant-garde’ which focuses on experiments with medium and form. Very few directors (Straub-Huillet, Godard, Oshima were some that we supported in Screen) managed to do both. Isaac’s generation, as you say, had a different formation. In Isaac’s case a formation in experimental and avant-garde film, but within a political culture which was combatting racism and homophobia in the streets of London, and which developed a more poetic register for their work, one reminiscent of Cocteau, Dali and others, whilst attentive to the work of the 1970s generation. I am sure he will say more about this.
Among the many great comments Mark made, there are two things I’d like to follow up on. One is about audience. He said that around 1976, *Screen* as well as *Cahiers du Cinéma* and *Cinéthique* were trying to reach out with projects aimed at new readers, and this reminded me of the importance of *Camera Obscura*, which also began publication in 1976, I think. It was based at UC Berkeley, then, and produced by a collective including Janet Bergstrom, Sandy Flitterman, Elizabeth Hart Lyon and Constance Penley. They wanted to jump-start the discussion of film theory in the US, and take it in a new direction that was informed by feminism. Their views were closely connected to *Screen* and, later, *m/f*, but their journal was unique in the prominent place it gave to practicing women filmmakers and artists. Constance, you were often in London in those days, which is where we met as I recall, and I wondered if you could talk about that connection and the early issues of *Camera Obscura*?

The other point I’d like to take up is about medium. Mark said that theoretical issues such as ideology, subjectivity and the gaze were not medium specific. This takes me to the New York connection and the impact that film theory and psychoanalysis, especially, began to have in the visual arts in the late 1970s. *October*, for instance, was founded in 1976. Much excitement was generated by Craig Owens’ writing in the early 1980s, first, “The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism,” then came “Discourse of the Others: Feminists and Postmodernism.” My discussions with him about feminism and psychoanalysis remain indelible, interspersed with events of the moment… listening to Samuel Ramey at the Met…having a heated exchange about *Blue Velvet* around my kitchen table with Laura, Mandy Merck and others. It was around this time, too, that I recall having my first arguments with Rosalyn Deutsche about the relevance of psychoanalysis for feminism and postmodernism. It might have been Jane Weinstock who introduced us. Jane, correct me if I’m wrong, but I think I met you much earlier in London, either during or just after you finished the Film Studies course at...
the Slade. Were you already involved with Camera Obscura by then? My memory of you and Rosalyn, as well as Lynne Tillman and Silvia Kolbowski in the early 1980s, is one of sharing a common interest in psychoanalysis and taking the so-called anti-essentialist position at a time when it was extremely controversial. I’m thinking, in particular, of the response to the exhibition Kate Linker curated, ‘Difference: On Representation and Sexuality,’ at the New Museum in 1984, and the public forum she organized in conjunction with it at the New School. Silvia, you were very instrumental in bringing us together and shaping the overview as I remember it. And Jane, you curated the film program. We insisted on including men and representing work in all media. Looking back at it now, do you see that as an important intervention? And what was most memorable about this ‘brief moment in time’ for you personally?

21. Rosalind Delmar
05-04-2015
06:43 PM ET (US)

You ask, Mary, about how the editorial process on 7 Days was informed by feminism. As I wrote in 7 Days, feminism was for me the political movement of women, which necessarily could take different forms. So it was important to me that the men who wanted a feminist input chose to deal with the Women’s Liberation Workshop – i.e. with the autonomous groups rather than with the affiliates or sections of general leftist groups.

The 7 Days project was initiated after a split in The Black Dwarf in 1970, after which one group, allied to the International Marxist Group, started Red Mole and the others sought a wider alliance and audience. I first heard about it from Juliet. In 1970 we had co-edited a women’s liberation section of The Black Dwarf, controversial with the editors because we insisted on including an article from women who worked for New Left Review describing that experience. Juliet wrote to me in Italy to tell me about the new project and I joined the planning group on my return. There were meetings with women from the Workshop and others joined, including Ros Linnell from the Family Group. The main foci emerged through debates and discussions over the following year – ideology was to be a central concern, with opposition to sexism and the family, a cultural stress on popular music and cinema as a way into youth culture, the Northern Irish troubles, Africa (Ros’s specialism) and militant trades unionism. There was an ‘ideas page’ for the diffusion of theoretical concerns. We used new technology – offset litho – and provided a platform for photojournalism. Events shape newspapers and that year our commitments were sharpened by the Derry Massacre, the Angry Brigade raids and the miners strike. Once the paper was launched, as Maxine says, there was little time for extensive discussion of working practices. Funding the paper was in the hands of a small group of men and we let them get on with it.

I remember what an achievement the Christmas issue felt like and in the weeks that followed the editorial direction seemed more established. The weaknesses lay elsewhere and were structural. When the women on the paper met during the financial crisis we realised that none of us felt trusted by the men to do our jobs properly – there was an assumption of male competence and female incompetence and we were tired of feeling we had to ‘prove’ ourselves. In addition we had consistently been kept in ignorance of the financial state of the paper. When it emerged that the paper was chronically underfunded, had started with enough to last six months and that this was as long as it lasted – no more had been raised – I felt a deep sense of betrayal. Not just had sacrifices been called for and made without an open acknowledgement of risk, but exclusion from financial concerns put us in the classic position of women within domestic economies who worked whilst men controlled the purse strings.

And yet it seemed also that this was not done with full consciousness, and that led me back to the Family Group, into which the History Group was transforming itself. We tried to examine and re-experience what happened when psyche and social worlds meet, within contexts provided by psychoanalysis and Marxist theories. Domestic labour had always been central to Women’s Liberation, starting with the Peckham Group’s paper at the Oxford Conference. It was the Manchester Women’s Conference immediately after the last issue of 7 Days in March 1972, and I remember that you and I travelled back from it discussing intently Selma James’s new proposal for ‘Wages for Housework,’ for which we shared a deep scepticism.

The end of the 7 Days experiment also made me question myself. I was uncomfortably aware of how I had slipped into a facility with leftist jargon and empty rhetoric; I felt as if I was no longer speaking for myself – as if I had lost my voice. In the years of self-questioning that followed, psychoanalytic theory became increasingly important whilst still denounced by many. When Dinah Brooks rang me wanting to know more about Lacan we agreed to convene a Lacan Reading Group at her house (within a week or so, however, she ‘went orange’ and departed for Puna). Other members of the Family Group joined, as did Barbara Taylor, Ros Coward and Jacqueline Rose. I had been introduced to Jacqueline on her return from Paris by Sally. As you say, Jacqueline was central to our work, not least because she knew one of Lacan’s translators, who was prepared to lend her draft translations for us to use.

I’m sorry that there isn’t the time to talk about the impact of both Women & Work: a document on the division of labor in industry and Post-Partum Document. I’d just like to register the immense joy that Post-Partum Document gave at its first outing at the ICA. And to say how suggestive your mention of Straub-Huillet has been. I don’t know what you thought about the Brechtianism that shaped their work, but I’ve been seeing connections between their and your radical subversion of representation through a distancing which whilst calming also provokes remarkable outrage.
What you call this ‘brief moment in time’ was crucial in my political and personal development. I had been very involved in Women’s Liberation during the late 1960s, but hadn’t yet brought feminism into my work as an art historian and critic. This really bothered me, but I didn’t know how to do it. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, with the rise of the feminist critique of subjectivity in visual representation, especially its psychoanalytic component, I finally found a philosophical basis for analyzing art from a feminist perspective. The ‘Difference’ show and, before it ‘Public Vision,’ shown at White Columns in 1982, and ‘The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter’ (1983), were super-important because they announced the arrival of something new in art informed by feminism. In that way, they were manifesto-like. But it was all a bit difficult because at the time I was also connected to October and some of the editors were highly critical of ‘Difference.’ I can’t even remember why. In any case, the feminist critique of vision, coupled with Claude Lefort’s and Laclau and Mouffe’s political philosophy, provided me with the tools I needed to criticize the masculinism of the Marxist geographers, whose work I had previously used to write about the role the art world was playing in the politics of urban space. The geographers had begun writing Jamesonian-style attacks on postmodernism, in which they totally ignored feminism or positioned it as a threat to class struggle. Once I criticized them from a post-structuralist feminist position, I became persona non grata among the Marxist geographers, but my essay “Boys Town,” a lengthy critique of David Harvey’s book on post-modernism, was welcomed by many feminist geographers, such as Doreen Massey.

I got to know Lynne and Jane, and other psychoanalytic feminists, including Jacqueline Rose, at Abigail Solomon-Godeau’s wonderful dinner parties. Jane re-introduced me to Silvia, whom I had known when I was pursuing a Masters degree at Hunter in the 1970s. I don’t remember how I first met you, Mary. Was it also at Abigail’s or around ‘Difference’? It seems now as though you, like many other people, were just ‘around’ at that exciting moment. I had seen the first parts of Post-Partum Document at the ICA in London, where it was shown, I believe, around 1976. Of course I loved it, and asked Linda Nochlin to put it on my PhD oral exam, which took place sometime in the mid-80s. I remember talking so much about it and about anti-essentialism that there was hardly time for anything else! Nonetheless, I passed. I also remember arguing with you about something—was it about those artists who were included in and excluded from ‘Difference’? I think we had a disagreement about that.

Looking back, as you’ve asked us to do, I still think it was very important to include male artists in Difference. Public Vision had been all-women and that, too, was a good tactic, because it signaled the feminist agenda of work that wasn’t yet being written about as such and, in addition, signaled opposition to the then widespread celebration of the all-male neoexpressionist phenomenon. Even though the kind of feminism represented in Public Vision wasn’t gender-exclusive. The inclusion of men in Difference helped make clear that something different was happening in feminism and that feminism in art didn’t only mean supporting women artists. The difference represented by Difference is, I think, largely suppressed now—either by ignoring the show or by treating it as part of a supposedly unified feminist project. WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution is a good example, as are other shows of so-called ‘feminist art’ that took place around the same time.

I regularly teach a course on the intersection of postmodernism and feminism in the 1980s – which I treat not as a decade but as configuration of ideas, texts, and artworks – because I want to pass it on to younger feminists. Thanks, Mary, for another opportunity to exercise memory about this moment. It’s such a pleasure!

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23. Silvia Kolbowski
05-05-2015
06:58 PM ET (US)

Hello, my name is Silvia Kolbowski and I contributed to an essentialist issue of HERESIES journal in 1977. That’s the first time I’ve confessed to that! Actually, I’ve managed to repress it for decades. I’ve been strongly associated with an ‘anti-essentialist’ feminist position since the late 1970s, but as an artist in my early 20s, finding my way through a mid-1970s New York, and being interested in pursuing feminism in art, I ended up attending some Heresies meetings at A.I.R. Gallery. A.I.R. was a feminist collective gallery with very strong identifications with what they saw as female-centric concepts – the goddess, craft traditions, etc. In 2006, when Hal Foster interviewed me for a catalogue, he asked me why I was drawn to a feminism of psychoanalytic critique in the late 1970s, instead of what he termed a feminism of ‘natural womanhood.’ My vague response was that I was looking for a different context, which I realized at the time was an extremely unsatisfactory response, but I couldn’t bring anything else to mind. But your question, Mary, has jogged my memory. My experience of Heresies was probably very formative in pushing me toward a feminism that acknowledged the unconscious and sexual difference. Two aspects of that Heresies experience come to mind. One was that the approach taken by the people involved was unquestioningly sociological. It depended on a level of pragmatism that rubbed me the wrong way, because it was mostly surface, and surface didn’t seem to me sufficient to address problems that were formed over such a long period of time. Also, there was the traumatic moment in the house of one of the A.I.R. and Heresies members where the following exchange took place. One of the artists (a generation older than me) had recently had some significant critical
and commercial successes. Another artist of the same age was advising her on how to change her life in regard to that success in order to further it. ‘You’ll have to change your daily life completely now,’ she said, ‘in order to optimize your production time in the studio. No more food shopping for you,’ she said. ‘Get someone else to do that!’

I remember being very surprised by that statement. First of all, these women were too quick to degrade the significance of the domestic realm they celebrated in their work. And secondly, that struck me as a profoundly conventional and bourgeois way of approaching labor and aesthetic production. As I’ve recounted in more depth in a recent interview, a couple of years later I made my way into a reading group on psychoanalysis and feminism, formed out of the last meeting of the New York Group Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, and I never looked back. I met Jane Weinstock in that Group, as well as several other women working in film theory. That was the beginning of my real education. We didn’t read Camera Obscura in the Group, but I personally read every issue published in those days, usually cover-to-cover. Screen was also hugely important to me. I think that what was crucial to me in both journals was not only the feminist theory included, but also the attention to medium at the level of spectatorship – the exquisite excavation of representational structures. For me, that’s always been a feminist focus. It’s not surprising that I first came across your work, Mary, by watching Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen’s film Riddles of the Sphinx. The attention to sexual difference could be located, in those days, in film and film theory for the most part.

I had gotten to know Kate Linker in the 1970s, and the Difference show she curated was very exciting in many ways. It brought the American and British worlds together, and posed a strong challenge to an American feminist fixation on gender, rather than sexual difference. I do vaguely remember a very tense public panel discussion that took place in relation to the exhibition, during which some of the artists who had been associated with A.I.R. (in fact, I think it took place in the A.I.R. Gallery, but organized by The New Museum) lashed out at the psychoanalytic feminists (to use a shorthand) for having betrayed the true feminist cause. But even in 1995, when as a co-editor at October I edited a special feminist issue (no. 71) along with Mignon Nixon, some of the same fissures remained. We sent out two questions about what seemed like a return to essentialist feminist discourses and an attention to an unmediated body, and what also seemed like a backlash against theory at that time. We solicited responses from a fairly broad group of artists and theoreticians, men and women, and in quite a few of the twenty-four responses we received and published, you can still read the schisms I experienced in the late 1970s. There’s a lot of arguing for a complex appraisal rather than polarizing the terms ‘essentialist’ and ‘psychoanalytic,’ but it still seems to me that the split existed even then. I have less of a sense of where we stand now, because the realm of art is so large and diffuse. But I do get inklings from talking to young feminist curators, artists, and historians that there are fewer psyche-deniers these days.
I started reading theory while I was at the Slade in London. Joan Copjec, whom I’d met in Boston, and I moved to London to study film theory, and there we discovered Screen. Practically every article in the magazine had references to Althusser, Freud and Lacan and reflected a feminist, psychoanalytic, Marxist ‘position.’ These ideas were very exciting and life-changing for me. After I moved to New York, I met Craig Owens and Douglas Crimp. My advisor at NYU, Annette Michelson, was an editor at October, and she set me up with an internship at the magazine. I got to know Craig and Douglas better in the 1980s, and Craig became a great friend and an important influence. Craig taught me about contemporary art and art theory, and I talked to him about film theory and feminism. And we loved to cook together. A lot of my feminist education took place in reading groups. Right after I got to New York I met Silvia Kolbowksi in a feminism reading group that came out of Artists Meeting for Cultural Change. Anne Friedberg, whom I knew from NYU, was also part of that all-women’s group. We read Mulvey, Mitchell, Rose, Cixous, irigaray, and other feminist theorists. In 1978 or 79, I joined another reading group that included Sarah Charlesworth, DeeDee Halleck, Joseph Kosuth, Joel Kovel, Anthony McCall, Claire Pajaczkowska and Andrew Tyndall. We all came from very different fields and positions, but everyone was interested in finding new ways to think about Marxism, semiology, feminism and psychoanalysis. We read “Language and Materialism” by Coward and
Ellis. Four of us (Anthony, Claire, Andrew and myself along with Ivan Ward) went on to make Sigmund Freud’s “Dora,” which starred Silvia as Dora and Joel, a Marxist analyst, as Freud. I spent a year in Paris and was part of a feminist reading group of English-speaking graduate students and professors. I was the only film theorist in the group. Alice Jardine was a professor of French literature and had translated Kristeva, and Rosi Braidotti was a philosopher who was bringing Deleuze to feminism. None of the members of the group were particularly enamored of Lacan, so it was very useful to me to argue for psychoanalysis in this context. I also encountered several French feminist groups while I was in Paris, but they were very sectarian and seemed to have complicated rivalries. One group, Analyse, rejected the word ‘feminism’ as a bourgeois concept while another rejected psychoanalysis as hopelessly patriarchal. Around this time I met the Elizabeth Lyon and Constance Penley, two of the editors of Camera Obscura. I felt that Camera Obscura was making an extremely important contribution to debates around feminism in the United States, and I was very happy to publish my first article there (on Sally Potter’s Thriller). I also got to know Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie at m/f and read every issue of the journal. I became more and more interested in contemporary art and in art theory in the early 1980’s. Mary, I think I met you at Patisserie Valerie in London with Claire Pajaczkowska, probably in 1980. I loved the work you were doing and also the way you thought about art. There were very few American artists and critics/theorists working in the rigorous way that you were/are. I remember clearly seeing the Post-Partum Document for the first time at the ‘Revolutionary Power of Women’s Laughter’ show. I still have the poster. Around this time I met Lynne Tillman, Rosalyn Deutsche and Barbara Kruger. I wrote about Barbara’s work for an ICA catalogue, and that essay is still probably my favorite of the critical writings that I did. Lynne was making a film at the time with Sheila McLaughlin, Committed, and I became a great fan of Lynne’s work. (I later included Committed in the ‘Difference’ show.) I was also very interested in Rosalyn’s ideas about the city and about postmodernism in art. While I was living in Paris, Claire introduced me to Leslie Dick who was living in London and who was starting to write very powerful experimental fiction. In 1982 I was invited to substitute for Michael Asher at CalArts. There I was introduced to people in the Los Angeles art world who were very political but who had experienced feminist art as essentialist and separatist (à la Judy Chicago). I made a point of learning about that other feminist work even though ultimately I disagreed with aspects of it. In answer to your question about the ‘Difference’ show, I felt that certain men had made significant contributions to the debates around sexual difference and cinema (notably Peter Wollen, Raymond Bellour and Jean-Luc Godard), so of course I included them in the film and video section of the show, and Peter wrote an essay for the catalogue. The fact that this choice reflected an anti-essentialist position was important to me, but I also felt the work was strong in multiple ways.

25. Mary Kelly
05-11-2015

07:47 PM ET (US)

Reflecting on the historical significance of the period, Mark mentioned that Ron Clark, who started the Whitney ISP (Independent Study Program) in 1968, had developed a pedagogy that ‘lives in the present through a 70s and 80s problematic.’ The program brought together artists, curators, historians and activists who were interested in the theoretical work of the new left. Of course, this was international in scope, but there was a special connection between New York and London in the 1980s. This is when I started giving talks at the Program, and Lacanian psychoanalysis was a new kid on the theoretical block. Eventually, I became full-time faculty, and between 1989-1996, our core seminars consisted of my lectures on Lacan’s reading of Freud, Ron on Althusser and Marx, Benjamin Buchloh on Adorno and Hal Foster on the provocative and timely themes that would become his book, “The Return of the Real.” In 1990, I showed Interim, the complete project, at the New Museum, and there was a symposium organized in conjunction with it, ‘On the Subject of History,’ in which Hal, Parveen Adams, Isaac Julien, Laura Mulvey, Griselda Pollock and Emily Apter as well as myself participated. The title made an oblique reference to Jameson’s ‘new subjects of history,’ and I feel this moment marked a turning point with regard to the way ‘identity politics’ and ‘post-medium’ positions played out through the 1990s. There are at least three tendencies I’d like to refer to here — not comprehensive, but what I recall most vividly, that have engaged those positions critically.

The first concerns the intersection of feminism and conceptualism in performance-based practices. I’m thinking of Andrea Fraser’s early collaborations with the V-Girls, and being shocked when I first saw their send-up of feminist theory...the institutionalization of it anyway, during my exhibition at the New Museum, but being completely won over because it was so smart and so funny. Andrea, I wondered on what might comment on what was going on then, as you saw it? In another way, I think of the critical writing of Alex Alberro and Juli Carson as forging a similar path. Alex, you often mentioned feminist theory as one of the reasons you came to the ISP, and for a historian of conceptualism, this was quite uncommon at that time. Could you describe what it was like then, and how your position has evolved? And Juli, I’ve worked on many projects with you since the ISP, and clearly, psychoanalysis has informed your critical and curatorial work, but it’s a very innovative methodology based on analysis rather than interpretation. Could you talk about this? The second tendency has to do with the intersection of feminism and psychoanalysis with postcolonial theory, which was a game changer in terms of thinking about race and ethnicity. Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha were frequent visitors to the Program then, and there was much excited discussion of Fred Wilson and Renée Green early installations. I think Renée and Simon Leung were at the ISP around the same time, and I remember especially, Simon’s pinhole drawings, and later the Squatting Project, as works that trace the trajectory of sexual difference, first as the discourse of the Other, and then, as an interrogation of the ethical. But I’m sure, Simon, that you could put this more eloquently, so if you’d like to join in here that would be great.
The third tendency is related to the Aids crisis, and the founding of ACT UP, in which many from ISP took part, including Don't Rhine. I’d like to ask you, Donta, to comment on the importance of feminism and psychoanalysis for your work then, as well as what led to the formation of Ultra-red?

26. Mary Kelly
05-13-2015
04:13 AM ET (US)

If the era is defined by the events of 1968, not just in terms of what took place, but also as Badiou insists, ‘what was thought,’ then it seems reasonable to ask what, if anything, is passed on from one generation to the next. In the online forum, I’ve focused on only a few people and traced a rather thin line of thought, but perhaps, my earlier reference to the ‘debate-specific site’ is one way to make sense of my choices. So far, the conversation has addressed, at least in part, what I mean by site considered as a movement rather than a place, and debate as a set of questions rather than an event, in this case, questions specific to a feminism informed by psychoanalysis. But it needs to make a generational shift. When I left the Whitney and came to UCLA in 1996, I started ID, an Interdisciplinary Studio area, within the MFA Program there, hoping to maintain a certain connection with the ideas and community of the ISP, and it seems appropriate to conclude, but by no means end, the discussion by bringing in some of the artists I’ve worked with in that context.

For those who came of age in the new millennium, reading the reminiscences of the early women’s movement might seem rather remote, but on the other hand, there might be a sense of uncanny familiarity, too, as some of you were born around 1968, and share, unconsciously, your parents’ memory of that time. I started to become aware of this during the anti-war protests after 9/11, in the déjà vu of the slogans and through our conversations about it in ID. Trying to understand how the past reappears in the present has been an underlying motive for most of my work since then, beginning with Circa 1968, (2004), Love Songs (2005–07) and On the Passage of a Few People (2014). And so, I’d like to ask a few more people whose work I find especially relevant to this inquiry… Sharon Hayes, Alex Segade, Michelle Dizon, Meleko Mokgosi, Wu Tsang, Ryan Kelly and Brennan Gerard… if you could talk about your ‘project,’ how it started, your early work, and what you see now as the legacy of feminism in that formative moment.

27. Isaac Julien
05-13-2015
09:42 AM ET (US)

My formation at St Martins School of Art (1980-84) was first in painting and then fine art film (although I had already worked with Newsreel collective as a teenager on True Romance (1978)). However the kind of work that was promoted and taught by the artists and filmmakers there - like Malcolm Le Grice and William Raban - was really on the formal side of Peter Wollen’s seminal essay “Two avant-gardes,” that Mark mentions. London was criss-crossed with different aesthetic tendencies at that time – there was Peter and Laura’s work on theoretical film and on the other extreme, you might call it, say Newsreel’s politically committed but, aesthetically conventional, documentaries. Essentially all films made by left filmmakers. The Nightcleaners combined political commitment with avant-garde experiment, and was a favourite of mine, partly because of many night-cleaners reminded me of my own family and friends. Recently a younger generation has revisited this work, along with other political and experimental works of the period, with great enthusiasm – a sign of their enduring importance, I hope.

When I left St Martins in 1984, inspired by the 70’s radical and political generation whose films I watched and whose art I went to see, I formed a film collective (Sankofa Film and Video workshop) with black students of art, film and film theory, mainly from Goldsmiths and PCL. The riots of early 1980’s (1981 and 1984) and the 1981 Scarman report on the Riots had forced the conservative Thatcher government to admit that there were too many voices excluded from the main bastions of cultural life. So when Channel 4 was born it supported black and Asian cultural voices in the film cultural sector. So immediately we were able to address questions of ‘race and representation’ that our generation was particularly focused on because of our interest in photography, film and art.

Although this is often called the black workshop movement, in fact, a number of different social movements formed film groups – there was a short lived gay black group, for example, which I was also part of, as well as several Asian groups - Newham 8, for example - with counter-parts in film groups like Re-take. So for a while, the early days of Channel 4, there was a real breakthrough in terms of voice, content and form. The fact films from these groups were shown on television was only part of the interest (and to a lesser) to have the development of film production culture that extend theoretically into other arenas of the arts and political culture.

I was already familiar with left political debates as a teenager, and my teachers at St Martins included Rosetta Brooks, who published ZG and Angela McRobbie. They brought questions of feminism, centre-stage together with modernism and contemporary art, which were very much on our agenda. It was just that we addressed them in, how can I put it, a more ‘improvisational’ form.
We had followed your work and Victor Burgin’s very closely, because we saw both your works as very special examples of the theoretical art we wanted to emulate. I guess you could say that to us it represented the height of sophisticated cultural left response to political questions of the day. So in our films we would discuss scripts, character, framing, editing with all these questions in mind. The majority of collective in Sankofa were also women, Martina Attille, Nadine Marsh-Edwards, Maureen Blackwood and I was gay so there was no question of not dealing with sexism. The Passion of Remembrance was our first work real collective work that was completely dedicated, a critique of phallocentrism in the UK black body politic. We also read theory exhaustively. Kobena Mercer was a fellow art student at St Martins, and during this period we formed a reading group together and I wrote my MA thesis on Mapplethorpe’s gay imaginary of black bodies, heavily influenced by feminist, and post-colonial writings utilizing psychoanalytic theories.

I was particularly excited by the convergence of Marxism, psychoanalysis and film which I recognized in Laura’s writing as well as your own work, which showed one could develop conceptual art at the same time as being politically progressive. One exhibition, which particularly struck me, was your Post-Partum Document at the ICA at the same time as the Tate showed Carl Andre’s Equivalent VIII. At the Tate – a uniform set of bricks denoting space, time, art and labour. At the ICA – your uniform plexi vitrines with the inscribed nipples that hinted at the complexity of individual psychic development. That was real experimental work.

Of course post-colonial theory was really the dominant discourse at the time, but it did not always translate into interesting art projects. There seemed to be some kind of time-lag in which many artists embraced realist modes, or documentary expression and avoided the realm of ideologically and aesthetically engaged work like yours. InIVA initially encouraged the theoretically and critically speculative and then avoided it. In some ways the critical turn moved with you to the Whitney ISP, where you had first invited me to show my work in the early 1980s, and which I viewed as an important critical think-tank.

28. Andrea Fraser
05-14-2015
07:25 PM ET (US)

It’s been great to follow this online conversation and it’s an honor to participate in it and be identified with this incredibly important history. It’s probably true that I first become aware of the work of members of the History Group and its successors at the Whitney Independent Study Program, where I began studying in January 1984 at the terrifyingly young age of 18. The previous fall I had taken a class with Craig Owens at the School of Visual Arts and it was Craig who directed me to the ISP and first exposed me to Lacan and Foucault and possibly also to Mary’s work. But it was at the ISP that I heard Mary lecture on psychoanalysis and Laura lecture on film; that I read “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” “Feminism and Psychoanalysis,” and Mitchell and Rose’s introductions to “Feminine Sexuality,” among many other important texts that developed out of the ground-breaking work of the History Group.

I moved to New York in 1981 from Berkeley, California. My mother studied art in New York and Paris and become involved in the women’s movement around 1970. Her experiences in consciousness-raising groups and with feminist counseling led her to pursue a PhD in psychology. I grew up reading “Our Bodies Ourselves,” poetry by Adrienne Rich and perusing books by Lucy Lippard and Judy Chicago – I cut class in 8th grade to attend the pre-opening of The Dinner Party at SFMOMA with a school friend whose mother worked on the project. I also grew up with conversations about transference and dream interpretation at the dinner table. So when I moved to New York to study art, I was well primed for work at the intersection of art, psychoanalysis and feminism, albeit a different kind of feminism than the feminism I grew up with.

However, I would describe the intersection of feminism and conceptualism in New York in the mid-80s as problematic and contested. My sense of conceptualism was framed largely by Benjamin Buchloh’s writings, which did not recognize feminism at all. His important “ Allegorical Procedures” text, notable for its early formulation of ‘the critique of institutions,’ identified as second generation conceptualists a group of artists who were all women, but without ever recognizing or reflecting on that fact, much less linking their practices to feminism. I think I saw it as the historical task of my generation of young females artists to bridge this divide between feminism and what was becoming known as institutional critique by developing a feminist, psychoanalytically informed approach to the critique of institutions. Of course, that bridge was already to be found in feminist critiques of art history, authorship, film, the institution of psychoanalysis and, fundamentally, of patriarchy. It was the intersection of feminist and psychoanalytic methodologies of here and now, personal and political analysis that formed the basis of my approach to institutional critique as a critically-reflexive site-specificity that must engage institutions not only as social structures that we might position ourselves outside and against, but as affectively invested sites of subject formation that are also internalized and embodied. And it was feminist art practice that made performance the obvious medium for that project.

In 1985 I wrote about Louise Lawler, studied with Joan Copjec, and began participating in the New York Lacan Study Group (which included a number of clinicians and did not have a feminist focus). In 1986 I had the opportunity to review the paper-back version of Post-Partum Document for Afterimage. 1986 also marked my first performances in the form of museum tours and the formation of the Group later known as The V-Girls. Martha Baer, Erin Cramer, Andrea Rosenthal,
Marianne Weems and I started meeting weekly to discuss feminism and psychoanalysis. We read Freud, Lacan, Mitchell, Rose, Montrelay and others. The journal m/f was an important resource. In 1987 Jessica Chalmers joined the Group after Rosenthal left and we developed our first performance in the form of an academic panel discussion. Performing at ‘Subjects of History’ at the New Museum, in Mary’s show, was a watershed moment for us. It was a return to the scene of the ‘Difference’ show, which had been formative. But I think mostly we couldn’t believe we were sharing a stage and an exhibition space with these incredible women who had made the history that inspired us and that we were struggling to find our place in. In retrospect, I can understand how our intervention might have been shocking, and not only for the ambivalence of that struggle. I can’t imagine that the barely twenty years since the formation of the History Group would have prepared you for our inter-generational reflection of what was, for us, already an historical reception.

29. Dont Rhine
05-14-2015
11:27 PM ET (US)

I want to echo Andrea’s words and say how great it has been to follow this online conversation. Tracing the threads that weave through the contributions I am particularly struck by the tremendous desire (and perhaps even melancholia) that’s being recounted in the shift from collective feminist and political activity to the powerful lure of theory. Does a ‘debate-specific site’ ever return to its material contradictions and the organizing of struggles? Is the political ever more than artistic content or the gesture of critique? As you know, Mary, these are the sorts of questions that have dogged me during the twenty years we’ve known each other.

When we first met at the ISP in 1994, my own political context – the militant HIV/AIDS movement in Los Angeles – was in complete disarray. Like most chapters across the United States, ACT UP Los Angeles had diminished greatly by 1994. Most of the original leadership had died, especially in those traumatic final years. With the advent of antiretroviral therapies one or two years away, many of the surviving activists faced total exhaustion. At the same time, the queer subcultures that had nourished me as a young man and artist had been decimated in the early 1990s. And strictly on a mainstream political level, the election of Clinton in 1992 peeled away liberal support for militant AIDS activist tactics.

My own collective, Ultra-red, came together in the first half of 1994 in the context of the Los Angeles needle exchange program, ‘Clean Needles Now.’ The then-street-based program began as a committee within ACT UP Los Angeles comprised members of ACT UP’s People of Color Caucus and numerous artists, like myself. Our feeling was that the need for harm reduction services for people actively using drugs challenged ACT UP dogma that had forced a wedge between direct action and grass-roots services. That dogma was codified in AIDS cultural analysis. But we knew that providing a grass-roots service like needle distribution was already an act of civil disobedience. In this sense, we felt much more like the inheritors of the women’s health movement, which had also rejected the split between the critique of representation and taking direct control of healthcare. But still, for me, the implications of all this for a cultural practice embedded in a “struggle-specific site” remained unclear and would remain so until I returned to Los Angeles after the ISP in 1996.

I first learned of the ISP from the director of ‘Clean Needles Now,’ Renee Edgington (who died in 1998). Knowing that I was burning out from the intensity of everything, Renee felt that my getting away for a year would help me encounter new ideas. She knew that Ultra-red had just started but that it lacked conceptual rigor in how it was thinking about sound art within the field of cultural action. The ISP had a strong reputation for Marxist and feminist study. In terms of psychoanalysis, this was something I was especially interested in because of my involvement with needle exchange where we knew full well the power of the unconscious in the daily lives of people living with drug use. I had read some Lacan, Bakhtin, and post-structuralism during my undergraduate studies. But most of my understanding of theory came from the AIDS movement and the brilliant people in the fight, so many of whom continue to haunt (and taunt) me.

Arriving in New York, I found that ACT UP New York could barely muster a quorum at their meetings let alone organize street actions. And yet city streets were filled with weekly protests against the renewed offensive on municipal spending (particularly targeting public education) as well as the beginnings of a devastating wave of gentrification in the East Village. Adding to my disorientation, the ISP was my first encounter with people who had tremendous facility with theoretical texts and concepts but little to no active political engagement. (This betrays the fact that I was not the product of art schools.) The norm seemed to be a notion of praxis wherein theory existed AS NOT ALONGSIDE the field of struggle. I must admit, looking back, I did not deal with my confusion graciously.

But one of the most important ideas that I took from my time in the ISP was to take seriously the implications of conceptualism, particularly the ‘synthetic proposition,’ within the larger histories of revolutionary literacy. This helped me begin to question the binary between representation and reception. That question would in time become a central conceit for Ultra-red as a sound collective. To pedagogically activate a representation within the scene of reception has allowed us to find our own object, the organization of silence, within the discourses of political education – particularly that of popular education, liberation philosophy, and liberation psychology. Your work as a teacher especially, Mary, would help me find a way through and beyond mainstream conceptualism with its fixation on tautologies – what Barthes, in “Mythologies,” called right-wing petite bourgeois speech. Admittedly, it wasn’t until many years later (solidified thanks to my time at UCLA
with you in the 2000s) that Ultra-red would find a way into cultural action embedded in a practice of political accountability. I’m not sure if that would be considered a successful ISP story, especially since it has led me further and further away from art and theory as ends in themselves.

30. Sutapa Biswas
05-15-2015
07:38 AM ET (US)

I have written the following in response to Mary’s request that I speak to the question of identity politics in relation to race and gender within my early artworks. In order to do this it’s necessary, I feel, to contextualize my experience - how I came to be living in England and some of the circumstances under which we live.

I was born in Santiniketan, India, in 1962 and was raised in England from the age of four. My parents were born in what was then Mymensingh in British India (east). My father came from a family of barristers and was displaced consequent of the partition of India. He was an academic, teaching agronomy at Tagore’s cultural institute in India (Santiniketan). In 1964 he won a prestigious scholarship to undertake a doctorate at Chicago University. At that time in history America was dealing with the consequence of race riots, and, under family pressure, he turned down this scholarship and came instead to England. From an early age I was exposed to lively discussions about capitalism, philosophy, Marxism, literature and poetry. I believe my early experience of encountering more than one set of ideals and cultures lent itself to my developing an acute sense of observation.

In my early years living in the UK I recall that in completing forms, for example for employment purposes, there was a section in which an applicant was required to state whether one was either ‘black or white’ (there were no alternatives at that time). It’s important to note this not only because this defined how an individual was identified in the UK, but also in terms of how one identified oneself politically in the UK – a factor which has been key to considering the history and emergence of the Black British Arts Movement of the 1980s, and that as a term included artists who are non-white.

In 1979 a series of riots began in Southall, west London. The predominantly Asian community had formally requested by petition to the then Home Secretary, Merlyn Rees, to ban a planned meeting of far right wing fascists (National Front) at Southall Town Hall right in the heart of this community on April 23rd – St. George’s Day. Rees refused the request and instead awarded permission to the National Front for their meeting to progress with full police protection. The National Front were not from the local area but were brought in by coach. Until this time, the black Asian communities in the UK had been projected within mainstream and tabloid media as being meek and compliant. However, in the face of acute provocation by the National Front and Rees’s refusal to ban a racist meeting in the heart of an Asian community, the younger black Asian generation of Southall felt that they could no longer sit back and, consequently, protested this meeting by turning up in their thousands in protest to peacefully register their objection. However, as has now been formally acknowledged the response of police to this peaceful protest was brutal and left one man dead (Blair Peach), and hundreds of innocent civilians injured. There followed a series of anti-race riots in Southall [For further reading about the Southall riots please see: http://www.dkrenton.co.uk/ann/southall.htm]. Social economic disadvantage and complex political factors affected the black (Afro-Caribbean and Asian) communities in Britain, resulting in a growing dissatisfaction within these communities. The introduction of the so-called ‘SUS’ Laws that allowed the police to stop and search and ultimately to jail individuals on the mere ‘suspicion’ of wrong doing resulted in further riots in Brixton and elsewhere throughout the UK in the 1980s. The 1981 Scarman report following on from the Brixton riots, finally forced the conservative Thatcher government to acknowledge that indeed too many communities were excluded from the mainstream of cultural life in Britain. However, the Scarman Report of 1981 concluded that ‘institutional racism’ did not exist. Further riots followed in the UK and there was continued dissatisfaction and unrest amongst the black communities here. In 1999 following an investigation into the murder of another black man, Stephen Lawrence, the MacPherson Report concluded that the police force was ‘institutionally racist.’

I was a student of Fine Art with Art History at the University of Leeds between 1981 and 1985 and was the first non-white art student to graduate from this department. At the time it was, ‘one of the few in a British university to have the practice of fine art within its regimes of academic study,’ and which following T.J. Clark’s appointment to Chair of Fine Art (and that continued after his tenure), created a distinctive programme of study defined by a course that was, ‘evenly divided between history/theory and practice/theory,’ (Griselda Pollock, ‘Tracing Figures of Presence: Naming Ciphers of Absence. Feminism, Imperialism and Postmodernity: The Work of Sutapa Biswas’, 2004.). These components were held in common by both artists and art historians in a politicised theorisation of a critique of modernism. It was a context in which my tutors that included Griselda Pollock, Fred Orton, Terry Atkinson, John Tagg and visiting tutors such as Mary Kelly, Laura Mulvey, Art & Language, Lorraine Leeson amongst many others, generated a discussion between practice and theory inside a studio context, but also outside of it. But this wasn’t ‘any old discussion.’ What made it particularly important was that within it, as Pollock writes, ‘Art History worked to provide a critical genealogy of the formation of modernism, while contemporary practice in the studios explored modernism’s legacies and manufactured a critical practice that, while it was chronologically postmodernist, was not theoretically entirely symptomatic of what we now call postmodernism. Art History - predominantly grounded in historical materialism - ensured that theoretical revision proceeded from an understanding of
interests, power, domination, exploitation. It stressed that there are important and concrete issues at stake in the challenges mounted to modernism’s suspension of the social and the historical as valid referents for art.’

Within this, feminism played a vital part of the historical and political discourses that developed in Leeds. It was feminist discourses in particular which for me challenged the canonical histories of art pointing to the writing out from history, the work of women artists. Artworks that were particularly key to my early experience as a student included Mary Kelly’s Post-Partum Document, Riddles of the Sphinx by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, and The Song of the Shirt by Sue Clayton and Jonathan Curling. My exposure to large-scale projections of iconic artworks within the comfort of the Rupert Beckett Lecture Theatre at Leeds University, alongside a brilliant and critically adept (for the most part) academic team who presented intelligent and refreshing critiques of these art works, was a privileged context in which to engage with and reflect upon ‘the blurring of art and life’ (this term borrowed from Allan Kaprow’s book). At the same time, as a student in the context of a critically radical art department, I was struck by the absence of any art historical critiques of modernism that engaged more specifically with questions of race, gender and class. Feminism, therefore, presented a ‘model’ by which I could critique art history through my art practice not only in relation to questions of gender, but importantly in relation to questions of race and class — more specifically, in relation to questions of imperialism and modernisms’ colonial project.

During my first year, as part of my ‘Theories and Institutions’ essay assignments, at the end of each essay completed, I presented a list of questions relating specifically to questions of race, gender and the relationship between Eurocentric art historical discourses and the rest of the world. Griselda always gave time and thought in responding to my questions.

In 1982 during a studio assignment I was struck by a fellow student’s work in which he presented a series of prints that explored various geopolitical events such as the Gdañsk protests and the Soweto Riots (1963). Part of his series of prints included a re-working of Manet’s seminal work Olympia in which the student sought to liberate Olympia from the context of the objectified woman as prostitute by offering her a speech bubble. The black cat within the print was also afforded a speech bubble. What was surprising is that the black maid/servant who brings Olympia flowers within Manet’s work and was also pictured within the student’s own re-worked print, was not, however, given any voice (speech bubble). There was for me an inherent contradiction within this. On the one hand the student clearly wished to engage with questions of capital, labour and race. Yet on the other hand, he was not able to see the black woman maid servant in Manet’s Olympia, or even within the context of his own re-worked print of Manet’s Olympia, or to see the inherent power relations between the portrayed white and black woman. Though puzzled, I realised that the student’s failure to read the complexities of Manet’s painting in view of questions of race, gender, labour and capital may well have been to do with the fact that at the time a key text on Manet’s Olympia, written by T.J. Clark and part of our course reading list, had itself failed to critique the power relations between the white female sitter and her black servant. Consequently, what T. J. Clark had failed to see within Manet’s Olympia, was also overlooked by my fellow student. [I should like to mention here that since 1982, Tim Clark has revised his initial reading on Manet’s Olympia.]

In autumn 1983/84, still a student, influenced by Happenings, Fluxus, Miro’s performance works across the Catalan landscape, Kathakali dance traditions, an encounter with the Bahumutsi Theatre Company at Leeds University, my interest in Brechtian Theatre, together with my personal knowledge of Hindu mythology and iconography, I created a performance work titled Kali, in which the aesthetics and intellectual dynamics of all of the aforementioned influences were playfully collaged. The performance ‘happening’ involved three performers: myself; a fellow student (Isabel Tracey); an academic staff member who was invited to my studio and unexpectedly became participant, observer, and the central object of the performance narrative. This performance was realised on two separate occasions – in the first performance, the art historian John Tagg was the third participant, and during the second performance (which on that occasion then was recorded on video), Griselda Pollock was the third participant. My video recording of Kali (1984) - the second performance involving Griselda - is now in TATE’s Collection (accessioned in 2012).

For me, engaging with critical art theory, and in particular feminist literature, became central to my studio practice and a means by which I was able to unpick and re-configure the critical, aesthetic, formal contexts and subjects I was exploring within my work. Reading seminal publications such as Screen was especially significant. In particular Volume 24, Number 2 March / April 1983, “Racism, Colonialism and the Cinema,” is phenomenal and had a strong impact in terms of providing relevant tools for deconstructing cinematic representations of race, gender and class. At the same time, I was reading literature by the psychoanalyst Franz Fanon and for me Fanon’s writings had a resonance with feminist literature and artworks underpinned by psychoanalytic theory including that by Laura Mulvey, Juliet Mitchell and Mary Kelly. In addition to reading critical art historical texts, literature by Edward Said, C. L. R. James, Angela Davis, Bell Hooks and others were hugely significant, though Said’s seminal book, “Orientalism,” was particularly important to me.

Between 1984 and 1985, I produced Housewives with Steak-knives a large-scale painting that continued many of the themes I had explored earlier in 1983 in the performance work Kali. Within Housewives with Steak-knives I reworked Hindu mythological narratives to create a figurative piece in which a four-armed goddess Kali (loosely depicted as a self-portrait) holds up her hand as a gesture of peace, a weapon, a rose, a flag and a man’s head. Collaged within the flag are two photocopy reproductions taken from the book “Old Mistresses,” written by Rozika Parker and Griselda Pollock: the first is
of Judith Slaying Holofernes by Artmesia Gentileschi and the second, Judith Beheading Holofernes by Caravaggio. In installation, the painting is hung such that the top half of the work sits forward of the wall (‘activating’ the image). The four-armed figure is centred within a white space (background) that for me referenced Rauschenberg’s series of White Paintings. I was interested in the way these works by Rauschenberg were very simply made and comprised of white house paint on stretched canvas. Of equal interest was that these works by Rauschenberg were read within the media when they were first exhibited in terms of the artwork’s temporal qualities - for instance, what was visible within the painting’s surface as light fell or moved across it. For me the ‘whiteness of space’ became a metaphor for the institutional space. Though Housewives with Steak-knives is a layered work that functions on several levels, the white background in part represents what was visible to me within the ‘whiteness’ of space - the black woman, the black cleaner, the black servant - the invisible forms of labour that black women undertake.

In mid 1984 I came to know other Black British artists including Lina Gopaul of Black Audio Film Collective (who I met at a conference in Sheffield), Lubaina Himid (whom I also met at a panel discussion at Mappin Gallery, Sheffield), Sonia Boyce and Rasheed Araeen.

Regarding the question of my relationship to film and the filmic space – I came to it from a painting background and through studying projected slide images at Leeds University. However, amongst my earliest recollections in England are family outings when my parents took us as children to watch the black and white films of Satyajit Ray. Although I was too young at the time to comprehend the full gravity of the film’s narrative or to understand more fully the reasons my parents gained such pleasure and, simultaneously, sorrow from seeing images of ‘home,’ I do recall being enraptured by these black and white projections (films), and the familiar-looking figures who loomed large across a temporal space. Though I have worked in video since 1983/4 after my son was born in 1997, Mary Kelly’s work Post-Partum Document continued to have a signifying presence alongside my earlier recollections at a formative age of Ray’s film works. Other important influences included works by Jean Cocteau, especially La Belle et La Bête (1946). The culmination of this from 1997, for me, was a return to the temporal form of film projection within my practice (alongside continued use of other media) such as in the work Birdsong (2004) and that features my own son aged four. In terms of the context of making my artworks, I would say that like life for me it is cyclical.

31. Juli Carson
05-15-2015
11:32 PM ET (US)

Mary, you asked me how I use psychoanalytic theory in my writing and criticism. Wow, that entails a long journey with many twists and turns, but I’ll give you the short, 50 cent version. While I had been introduced to psychoanalysis through the art historical lens of the October group in the late 80s – when I was working on my master’s thesis with Rosalind Krauss at Hunter College – it was really at MIT that I began to study the discourse with the proper level of rigor necessary to forge a meaningful writing practice. It was there that my intensive one-on-one tutorial on Lacan began with John Rachman who counseled me that I needed to study the primary texts, first as a meta-discourse, with an eye on the fact that Lacan’s discourse was always an unfolding of positions vis-à-vis the people he alternately fell in and out of. After studying the entire arc of his corpus, it was “Seminar XI” that I fell passionately in love with. And, as we know, once you fall in love you are never the same. Consequently, in one way or another, I’ve been committed to that text throughout my writings, intertextually reading it through various aesthetic and political theories in the space of art. And it is what you, Mary, kindly invite me to your psychoanalysis class at UCLA each year to teach. But I’m rushing ahead...

In 1995, after going ABD, I attended the ISP with Lindi Emoungu. We were there to study Tarantino’s films through a psychoanalytic lens, specifically addressing the jouissance that attends / defines the subject of race. This was before Tarantino was mainstream, so I remember Isaac Julien warning us not to go there. Tarantino was just a racist pawn of the culture industry he argued. (Funny, years later, when Isaac was working on his documentary on blaxploitation films, he capitulated and even asked Lindi to help with the production. Ironically it was on Isaac’s LA set where we finally met Tarantino over what I remember were many many long Island ice teas.) But back to the ISP, I wanted to continue studying Lacanian theory as a meta-discourse – unhinged from its art historical or literary application – whereby a given artwork (or film) could be activated through a materialist psychoanalytic reading rather than interpreted through an applied cultural reading. So I remember, Mary, that I gave you quite a hard time finding just the right mentor to help me develop that skill. But you put up with me, and we finally arrived at Parveen Adams, a theorist who changed the way I was writing at the time. What she taught me was deceptively simple as an axiom because it was quite difficult in application: when reading a film through a psychoanalytic lens, never enter into its narrative symbolically, describing what it is about. (This is the standard doxa of descriptive art criticism that you’ll find in such trade magazines as Artforum.) Rather, address what the film is doing to the viewing subject through a semiotic analysis of the film’s material construction, with all the cultural discursive formations that that entails. Today, I rarely write on film – unless it’s an art installation such as Yael Bartana’s ‘Berlin Congress’ exhibition at the Secession – but I’ve maintained and applied Parveen’s axiom throughout the 20 years of my writing on art, a practice I’ve come to teach at UCI and have called “critical aesthetics,” a performative model for both art making and writing.
More broadly speaking, questions of ethics. What Griselda refers to here, ‘willing to enlarge the critical discourse to accommodate the subjects of class, gender and race in their intricate and painful tau...”

It was her critique that forced us to all acknowledge the Eurocentric who defined the absences in these seemingly radical discourses deriving from Marxism and feminism. It was she who named the imperialism that still structured analyses, and which spoke in undifferentiated terms of class and gender, never acknowledging the issues of race and colonialism. It was her critique that forced us to all acknowledge the Eurocentric limits of the discourses within which we practised. Her challenge was mounted face to face, not at the level of abstract taunts, but by the direct engagement of people sharing a space, a space thus assumed by her generosity to be able and willing to enlarge the critical discourse to accommodate the subjects of class, gender and race in their intricate and painful conf...” (2004).

What Griselda refers to here, ‘...responded, and the course then altered,’ is hugely important precisely because it raises questions of ethics and that is still of great relevance today - not only within the context of academic communities, but more broadly speaking.

32. Sutapa Biswas
05-16-2015
06:13 AM ET (US)

Regarding my earlier comment, concerning Clark’s critique of Manet’s Olympia and my encounter with a fellow student’s work, I should add that this was addressed in the opening paragraphs of my dissertation, “Black Women Artists - One Hell of A Big Subject” (1985) at Leeds University. My experience of having been an undergraduate student at Leeds University was of course enriching and transforming for me, but was also significant in that through my challenging the context of what was taught within the theory/art history course, the course was then changed. Griselda Pollock mentions in her essay about my work the following, ‘Sutapa Biswas earned her undergraduate degree in the Department of Fine Art at the University of Leeds. For some readers this statement will immediately signify; for others, it may indicate no more than ‘educational background’... There was no doubt that this academic environment, this conversational community, influenced the development of Sutapa Biswas... But... Biswas’s presence on the course was also highly influential. It was she who defined the absences in these seemingly radical discourses deriving from Marxism and feminism. It was she who named the imperialism that still structured analyses, and which spoke in undifferentiated terms of class and gender, never acknowledging the issues of race and colonialism. It was her critique that forced us to all acknowledge the Eurocentric...”

The specific intersection of feminism and psychoanalysis in my writing and curating occurred in 1997 when you asked me to move out to LA to teach in your program at UCLA. You had asked me (I think it was a year in) if I knew of anyone who might want to work on your archive, specifically the material related to Post-Partum Document’s conception. I thought – following the logic of my total immersion into Lacanian theory – that the only way to really understand that complex artwork would be to construct its archival substrate. So I volunteered myself, another life changing experience. As we know, that archive found its way into the Generali Foundation’s 25th anniversary of PPD’s making. And I was mindful to employ the same performative, self-reflexive, structure in constructing the archive as Parveen had taught me when writing about film and which you yourself employed to produce PPD. Hence all the commentary, by you and me, that attended the archive in the form of a folder full of notes displayed for each case that followed the logic of PPD, the latter of which was a series of documents attended by psychoanalytic explications of the complex subjects at hand: the “mother” and the “child,” but also, the “artist-as-mother.” Similarly, in the archive the speaking subjects were not just the “artist” but also the “archivist,” both of whom, conventionally speaking, were two so-called authorities on the work – you as author, myself as art historian. But we were also mindful to complicate that authority at each turn: the archival documents themselves correcting the author’s memory of making of the work and the author, in turn, correcting the archivist’s occasional teleological interpretation. I remember that to prepare, you and I spent the summer of 1998 sitting by your pool eating, drinking and talking hours on end about the archive and exhibition – the history, theory and criticism that gave birth to it – the result of which was the most thorough dialogue on the artwork to have occurred at that time. Not only did we publish it in its entirety, when we returned to UCLA to teach I decided to write my dissertation solely on PPD as a case study of a combined psychoanalytic, conceptual art practice. This is what informed my coursework with Kerry Tribe, Sharon Hayes and Kenny Berger, all graduate students of ours at the time. And now it’s been long enough, since then, that we’re seeing how the exhibition and dissertation have come to influence a younger generation of scholars, evidenced by Kathy Battista’s, “Renegotiating the Body: Feminist Art in 1970s London” and Eve Meltzer’s, “Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn.” It certainly continues to influence my own work on that period today, most notably my writings anthologized in the forthcoming “The Conceptual Unconscious: The Poetics of Critique.” So yes, it’s been quite a journey! One I’m still on, even while my writing continues to mutate into some very unexpected conceptual and psychoanalytic worlds.

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I thought it may be interesting to upload an image of *Housewives with Steak-knives* (1985) in light of the various threads of conversation and with reference to my own comments. The image is of a happenstance moment captured at Tate Britain in 2012 during the exhibition ‘Thin Black Line(s)’ when *Housewives with Steak-knives* was exhibited as part of a special display curated by Paul Goodwin (then at Tate) and Lubaina Himid.

I don’t recall when I first heard of the ISP, though I know that it was sometime in the late 1980s. I was writing a Master’s Thesis at the University of British Columbia that focused on the censorship of Daniel Buren’s work from the Sixth Guggenheim International exhibition in 1971, and had become very interested in the emergence of Conceptual art. Jeff Wall, then a professor at UBC, ran a dynamic lecture series that brought a lot of artists and critics to Vancouver, and Serge Guilbaut, with whom I also worked, organized several important art history conferences in those years. Along the way, I met many of the artists on whose work I would subsequently focus, and a good number of critics and art historians too. The ISP must have come up in that context.

Mary had shown *Interim* at the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the museum’s chief curator at the time, Judith Mastai, had invited her and Griselda Pollock to conduct a public dialogue and a small seminar. I think I met Mary then, certainly Griselda (who led the seminar). I found the way Griselda combined psychoanalysis and the genealogical method of Michel Foucault, which presented itself as antithetical to psychoanalysis, to be brilliant, and became very interested in feminism and psychoanalysis. In 1990 I relocated to Chicago to pursue a PhD on Conceptual art, and took this theoretical framework with me.

I studied in Chicago for two years, completing my PhD coursework, and as soon as I could I relocated to New York to conduct field research. I applied to the ISP thinking it a kind of working reading group that would allow me to continue to actively engage with theory, and to think about matters that were only peripherally related to my dissertation research. I had underestimated the ISP, of course, since the intense critical and theoretical discussions that took place there in those years (which Mary described earlier) could not but have an enormous impact on my way of thinking.

The PhD that I was working on when I started at the ISP focused on the various important ways Conceptual artists working in New York in the late 1960s reimagined the relationship of art to its public, granting the spectator a greater role in the realization of the artwork. One of my central arguments was that for Conceptual art in the late 1960s the artwork was no longer considered a thing made in advance of the context in which it was invoked, but as a dynamic of relationality that could only be produced at the site where the art object and spectator met, where object and subject came together. The rationales underlying the creation of late 1960s Conceptual art varied, as did the degrees and conditions of subjective agency it actualized, yet I argued that the different forms of artwork subsumed within this phenomenon not only fundamentally realigned the manner in which art addressed the spectator, but also constructed the spectator in new ways.
While the changing role of the spectator in the context of early Conceptual art in New York was my primary concern, my study was also attentive to several other issues. One of the most relevant of these to the present discussion involved the role of the artist. Along with new conventions of spectatorship, a new type of artistic subjectivity was manifested in Conceptual art, as the traditional, artisan-like exercise of manufacturing the artwork was discarded in favor of presenting catalytic objects or ensembles that encompassed, and in fact required, the spectator for their completion.

Questions of human subjectivity and of subject-object relations more generally speaking were also fundamental to my investigation. What could the art of late-1960s Conceptual artists tell us about the conditions of human identity, about the status of subjectivity, in that period? To what extent was the notion of the expressive subject, the self-made ego of the humanist tradition, troubled or repositioned by the logic of that art? What might be the underlying reasons for that shift? And how did that phenomenon play out in spectatorship? These weren’t easy questions, but they were ones that served as a lens for me in so many of the interesting dialogues and debates that I had with Mary and others at the ISP. It was as a direct result of these intense dialogues that I came to realize the extent to which developments in late-1960s Conceptual art paralleled a more wide-ranging transformation of the concept of the subject brought on by challenges to humanist values during those years. The many readings and presentations that articulated and developed complex approaches to gender, post-coloniality, racial and ethnic identifications, and queer theory, all of which troubled the centrality of the subject as an object of study, disrupted my preconceptions and were crucial to my intellectual history. Over and over again through we explored the dissolution and decentering of the subject into an ever-widening series of differences, and questioned how humans are formed as subjects, how humans are constructed discursively and ideologically across a range of different subject positions. The subject, accordingly, was an indispensable category in our discussions, providing an understanding of what we are as humans and as social beings.

Of course, since psychoanalysis has a privileged relation to the theory of the subject, and since unconscious factors have paramount importance for a theory of spectatorship, I became very interested in the split subject, divided within itself in its relation to the world. While I was convinced that the Conceptual art I was studying was critical of the transcendental ego, the intellectual exchanges with Mary and the rest of the group at the ISP helped me to realize the extent to which, paradoxically, the subject early Conceptual art theorized was ultimately one that was identical within itself and in its relation to the world. Mary was crucial in helping me to understand the extent to which the increasingly open and participatory art that Conceptual art initiated in the late 1960s came in the subsequent decades to yield fissures and splits in the consciousness of the artist as much as the spectator. I’m still working with that problematic today, which means I’m still working with Mary.

35. Meleko Mokgosi
05-17-2015
11:27 PM ET (US)

My ‘project’ slowly unfolded throughout the time I worked with Mary Kelly. Our first studio visit at the Whitney ISP in 2007 proved to be incredibly important, and this put me on a path to continue working with Professor Kelly at UCLA. My early work had been focused on generalized ideas of ethics as well as political and critical statements. In this instance, there seemed to have been no desire to articulate a set of questions, rather my work aimed at a general critique of colonial history informed my psychoanalysis and post-colonial theory, hence this was a critique with tactics and no sustained strategy rooted in specificity.

So my project really began when I threw this out, and prompted towards deep research and thinking – activities that were gently yet effectively guided by Mary. Gradually, my project took shape, and as I understand it now, it can really be described through adopting Mary’s formulation, one that I first encountered in a recent publication.

The ‘project’ or more broadly speaking, the ‘project based practiced’ has been defined by Kelly as a practice that is driven by a process of interrogation. Both process and interrogation are key because the former deals with the contingency built into the studio practice, something Kelly has always stressed; and the latter points towards how an engagement is always circumscribed by a discursive site. In the above, Kelly stresses the idea of the ‘debate-specific site’ – wherein debate is not a temporal and somatic event but rather the articulation of questions within a particular discursive framework; site as both the content and processes of identifications – which in turn inform and structure identity. Here I am perhaps rehashing an old division between identity and identification; i.e. a division already outlined by Freud, as he sought to theorize the libidinal bonds within group identifications. Libidinal bonds, as many know, over-determine the identification process. Paring this down even more, we could argue that identification is an affiliation coded through emotional investment, and in some ways can be seen as a subset of identity. That is, our identities are formed through identifications processes; that is – the emotional ties we have with particular objects and ideas. But both rely on difference as a marker. The reasoning behind looking at processes of identification and not identity per se is to avoid simplifying something as complex as identity. A compromised idea of identity, or an essentialized identity also compromises an identification with said identity. So for identification to happen in the desired form or way, the identity of the thing or person with which you are trying to identify with has to be perceived in a way that will be most agreeable to the kind of identification you are aiming at. Such a formulation, I think, is helpful in trying to understand the idea of a site as a movement because to belong or not belong to
a movement and its ideas presupposes some kind affiliation. But site, as Mary has argued elsewhere, could also refer to other things such as social systems, artistic movements, and geopolitical locations etc. Another element to briefly highlight here is the fact that discourse should be thought of in relation to how Foucault theorized the term. So discourse then is a specific form of language use shaped and determined by situational rules and contexts. This performance of language and extra-linguistic materials around communication are focused on a few questions:

1. Who has the right to use a particular discourse?
2. What benefits accrue to those using it?
3. How is the usage policed?
4. Where does this usage derive its authority from?

With this in mind, I would formulate my ‘project’ as that which is engaged with various African nationalist movements as the discursive site, and here I would emphasize that I consider these movements both in their emergence and subsequent forms. Because the African nationalist movement functions as the discursive site, then my work will always be informed by postcolonial studies and Marxism; and the rules or protocols are generated by history painting, cinema studies, and psychoanalysis.

In ‘Pax Kaffraria’ (2010-2014), I used psychoanalytic and post-colonial theory to work through the ramifications of national identification in Southern Africa. Briefly, contemporary psychoanalytic theorists account for nationalism in two ways: first they propose that nationalism is structured by the particular ways in which communities organize their enjoyment. So the way one would answer a question like: what makes you a Motswana, or what makes you South African or American or German or Mexican – to answer this, we tend to list things that we think are singular about our cultural identity, everything from how we celebrate weddings, customs, music, rituals of mourning, to the particular food we eat and what they signify. Therefore the organization and experience of enjoyment is key. Secondly, nationalism or group identification, is also structured around a projected outsider who is said to come and steal our enjoyment. Developing this more, it is argued that enjoyment and fantasy are in fact the forces that drive our identification acts. It is because we go through limited experiences related to a jouissance of the body that we imagine the possibility and promise of recapturing our lost jouissance; the enjoyment we think we once had, the original grand state of our nation. Thus one experiences the impossibility to fully satisfy one’s desires – which in turn provokes dissatisfaction. Not only is this dissatisfaction the result of the limited experience of jouissance, it is also the result of fantasy. Fantasy ensures dissatisfaction or the impossibility of full enjoyment in two ways – according to Yannis Stavrakakis: firstly it ‘promises a harmonious resolution to social antagonism’ and secondly by covering up this lack, we are able to construct an alibi – literally, an elsewhere on which we project the reason for the failure of experiencing full enjoyment. Again, fantasy cannot satisfy desire, this is impossible, rather the aim of fantasy is to ‘construct and support desire; it is only through fantasy that we learn how to desire.’ The outsider is said to have stolen our rightful enjoyment, and we imagine him to be enjoying more. We imagine a full enjoyment, the failure of which we project onto an outsider, as a way of projecting the full realization of this enjoyment onto the future.

Additionally my project has always been informed by what I think is the basic element of feminism; namely that feminism, in the more theoretical, always points to the instance when a thing begins to universalize itself. Universalizing oneself merely means the point at which one takes him or herself as the primary example of an ethical engagement with the world because this individuals takes him/herself as belonging to a culture with a critical and academic tradition. This has been incredibly useful because it readily fits with how I continue to use Marxism, Critical Theory, and Post-colonial theory. To clarify, I am not suggesting that feminism is the ultimate de-centering tool, but it is a very useful one, and one that allows for a productive examination of history.

As a history painter, theory continuously informs how I use what looks like history to put emphasis on the importance of historicity, that is, the idea that history is not something that happens, but something that unfolds in different directions but folds the subject into these multiple directions. History, then, is not an event or collections of events, but rather a number of ‘unfoldings’ that bear the mark of things before.

This idea of historicity cuts across how feminism and psychoanalysis were crucial at the beginning of my project. Psychoanalysis, as mentioned above, sought to examine the interconnected-ness of libidinal energies, it is the focus on these energies in relation to gendering as the foundational material of the human subject, before anything else takes hold. Much has been said and done with psychoanalysis in this regard, so my efforts here are to briefly repeat the already dominant idea, that it was psychoanalytic theory that allowed us to come to terms with how we as subjects invest privilege through difference – all done within the rubric of systems that function like language. So in my work, I have always counted on psychoanalysis and feminism as interdependent fields that always work against universalizing principles, not so much to negate them but rather to expose how they function as double binds that we have to reconcile here and there. Another way to put it would be to propose that while psychoanalysis is preoccupied with the subject’s psyche or internal material, feminism concerns itself with issues of justice. To pare this down so as to avoid the seemingly loftiness of such a statement, justice here may be understood not as an abstract ethical call but rather as move towards a universalizable access to self actualization that is not rooted in autonomy or the individual will, but rather in the recognition of
incommensurable difference as a founding principle that allows access to abstract thought through which the democratic can be exercised.

Titled ‘Democratic Intuition’ my current projects begins with all these ideas and specifically uses feminism in addition to theories of democracy and justice, as a way of examining how democratic judgment manifests at the level of the ordinary citizen as well as those who are supposedly ‘well-educated.’ In this project, I propose that issues of gender and sexuality, labour and education can be used to articulate a set of propositions that can be used to define democratic judgment not as an abstract thing but as an ethical reflex.

36. Simon Leung
05-18-2015
01:50 AM ET (US)

Thank you for including me in this great discussion, Mary. When I read through some of the earlier entries, I realize that in part what we’re doing is to recall the feel — the tone and overtone — of the times and places of meaningful encounters. So here’s a little bit on the late 80s, early 90s, in New York.

The significant moments of my formal art education before the Whitney Program consisted of studying with Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelley in the UCLA New Forms and Concepts area (before it was changed to New Genres) and two years of graduate art history seminars with John Tagg and Donald Preziosi (seminars built around Lacan, Foucault, Derrida). Wedged in the middle of my LA college years was a year spent at Columbia, where my real education was going to every gallery and museum exhibition I could in New York. Around that time, I read all the essays in “The Anti-Aesthetic,” the anthology edited by Hal Foster (in 82-83, I had met Hal at UCLA briefly when he was part of a group of critics doing what I believe was a national tour, bring ‘postmodernism’ to the provinces). I met him again when he, Silvia, and Ron were the primary instructors at the Whitney ISP during my year there (88-89). Around that time, I also attended Julia Kristeva’s seminar on psychoanalysis at Columbia. That’s when I met you, formally, as well, because you conducted an intensive seminar that year, but I wonder if I ever told you that I attended a lecture you gave the year before in LA under the auspices of the Foundation for Art Resources? And that I had gone to your opening at LACE where you showed the Corpus section from Interim?

As someone who entered my 20s in the 80s, it now feels as though everything came to me as waves until I felt myself a part of the waves, without making clear distinctions of the breaks: feminism, deconstruction, critical race theory, écriture féminine, psychoanalysis, post-colonial theory, the legacy of conceptual art, the politics of difference, the nascent queer theory... they all seemed absolutely necessary. I began to feel, then, and still to this day, that my work as an artist was how I ‘did’ theory (how I read and thought it, what I would do to rework and repose it), and that the obligation in engaging within a discursive area was to find within it that which I felt I must work on. For me, that was a primary lesson from being in the Whitney program. But that doesn’t quite get to the feel of things during my year at the ISP — for me, there was a primary event: AIDS. During the end of the 80s in New York, not a day went by when AIDS was not a preoccupation. It haunted our intellectual lives, our friendships, our politics, our most intimate liaisons. I have recounted this elsewhere, but this was how I structured my time during the year in the ISP: I, alongside with at least 4-5 cohorts from the program, would attend ACT UP meetings on Monday nights and ISP seminars on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. In between was life in New York: art-making, reading, partying, nightclubbing, friendship, and activism. If during that year in the ISP I had made a commitment to being an artist who ‘works politically,’ who deals with, what I have described since that time as, ‘the ethical’ (which is/was always already political), it was because the late 80s felt like a time of perpetual mourning. It was very common to learn that someone you know, people in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, had died — people you knew who debated tactics at an ACT UP meeting or demonstrated along side you or published an op ad that angered you because they took a retardeataire position on the politics of gay life. Some of them were lovers; or friends almost exactly my age, like Ray Navarro, who was the first person I met during my year in the ISP. My interest in the ethical, in the vulnerability and mortality of the other (and in Levinas in particular), indexes coming of age in this atmosphere. I can even locate the word that concentrates this obsession with thinking the ethical, because ‘ascessis’ (in what I read to be in the Foucauldian sense a care of the self), was literally the last word in Leo Bersani’s “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in the 1987 special AIDS issue of OCTOBER, which I read before attending the ISP.

I am grateful for your generous remembrance my pinprick drawings ‘as works that trace the trajectory of sexual difference, first as the discourse of the Other, and then, as an interrogation of the ethical.’ Perhaps I can augment by briefly noting how it was, in retrospect, a formal and theoretical reception of the kind of thought in art that I feel psychoanalytically informed feminist work first charted (e.g. the Menacé portions of Corpus in Interim, or the internally interrupting dialogue and images in Yvonne Rainer’s Journeys from Berlin/1971). In 1988, with the writings of the likes Bersani on my mind, I had a theoretical compulsion to find a condensed metaphor in material form that doubled back on itself, that could speak to feelings and contradictions within a quasi-linguistic apparatus. I found that the pinprick did this for me as a deconstructive trace, it pictured a touch of both the rectum and the grave: sexuality, violence, presence, absence, the phallic, the wound, repetition, dispersion, entropy... something I could write with, draw with, but something that self-reflexively pictured the accumulative slowness of its coming into being, while being, literally, barely visible. Perhaps similar to what others here
have located as a need to study psychoanalysis in addition to Marx in the 1970s, I tried at this time to cohere and then disintegrate sexual images that resisted being mobilized moralistically, to get at the emotional complexity of signifying porously. This was in part the ambition of the drawings, but it was really through the 1990 live/video work Transcrypts: Some notes between Pricks (literally making good on the claim of theory through art by building a performance out of the thinking developed in the pinprick drawings) when I used the formal congruence between the pinprick, and its twin, the glory-hole, to get to an anti-humanist articulation of sexuality, one which is grounded not in identity (or perhaps even subjectivity per se), but in an ethical relation with otherness. Transcrypts, being essentially a performative lecture, was a bit of a thesis, tracing how I read Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, Deleuze, Crimp, Bersani, Laca, Irigaray in a historical moment when queer theory was just coming into being. I don’t know where I got the ambition, but it felt necessary—it was how I wanted to theorize sexuality, queerness, AIDS, and the limits of activism. I performed Transcrypts in different contexts (an art history conference at UCLA, a cultural studies conference at CUNY Grad Center; what was then still a gay/lesbian film festival at Anthology Film Archives; LACE, the Drawing Center) but by 1991 I stopped performing the piece because the discourse was changing. It wasn’t until a decade later when I returned to working on a topic related to AIDS again, because the discourse was once again changing (with among other factors, the introduction of protease inhibitors), but this time, it was an opera. I am not quite getting to squatting and post-colonial theory—I’ve talked about this elsewhere, but perhaps I should just quickly say that the image of misrecognition par excellence in my work is still a squatting body. The form and medium might shift, but as a heuristic cipher, I am still learning from its picturing of power, its contingency, its almost nothingness.

37. Ryan Kelly
05-18-2015
10:51 AM ET (US)

What has feminism taught me? How has it impacted my life and work and made me who I am – here and now – tapping away at my computer in a café in Brooklyn? Having just now finished reading the feed of responses to Mary’s prompts at remembering and reflecting – a kind of reverse chronology of a movement, or perhaps more accurately, its legacy, through generations of inheritors – I am infused with gratitude. Thankful to be born at this moment, at this point of transmission, to have been touched by the specific others who have been my teachers and collaborators or the writers to whom I have been reader. I sense my enthusiasm, but I want to interrogate it, too. What have I inherited?

It’s an odd question to bring to this discussion, since we might think of ‘inheritance’ as something more properly patriarchal. But I am not speaking of wealth or of birthright; instead, I am thinking of the movement as gift, the bestowal of history that places one – perhaps paradoxically – in the present. I feel placed by this dialogue. And for that I am grateful. And beyond gratitude, I feel obliged. Is that not the fidelity of which Badiou speaks?

But what specifically have I inherited through these non-reproductive processes of cultural transmission (teacher/student, mentor/mentee, writer/reader)? First, I inherit that ‘critically-reflexive, site-specific’ awareness and the imperative to reflect which Andrea mentions in her contribution below. By virtue of this awareness, I am obliged to acknowledge the multiple processes we are, as a group, enacting by participating in this dialogue, the ways in which we anoint a legacy and secure our positions within it through our activity here. To reflect on the pride aroused through such a process and at the same time, the shame and envy mutually coaxed by rivalry with past – and even future – generations along a given line – is this not critical to a feminist approach? To acknowledge the affective impulses that code every one of my actions even as I continue to go about them in the complex, self-contradictory way which is, from an anti-humanist perspective, thoroughly human? I have drawn on that perspective many times since my graduate work at UCLA to address systems of representation and to elaborate contexts for the body and the unconscious – or in other words, to make space for sexuality.

Next, I might say, that a discourse of non-identitarian and psychoanalytically-informed feminism makes my participation in this thread possible. As a male-identified person, it is exactly this critical work on feminism, done by many in this thread some forty years ago (and by others, still today), which decentered the locus of feminism from the essentialized and solitary subject of biological woman.

It is the legacy of feminism which guides me to not interpret but genuinely listen to the details of this conversation, the everyday moments, so affectively charged that they are lodged in memory decades later – a heated conversation on Blue Velvet around a kitchen table, Chantal Mouffe’s fashion sense, cooking with Craig Owens, overhearing one woman say to another ‘get someone else to do the food-shopping’ – because it is there in the shared tea at Valerie’s that the bond was joined between subjects, driven toward one another by the dynamics of an intimacy hard to define. A shared ideology is what floated to the top, not what forced collaboration. Feminism has made sense of this world of affective alliances for me.

Over the past fifteen years, I have made work almost exclusively in collaboration with another artist, Brennan Gerard. We attended both the Whitney ISP and then, by Mary’s invitation, the Interdisciplinary Program at UCLA. A few years back, while at UCLA, we adopted the signature ‘Gerard & Kelly,’ in part to mark the distance of our so-called subjectivities from
our shared public identity as collaborating artists. In retrospect, this turn (no less than an annunciation of the names of our fathers!) enabled a self-reflexively critical investigation of the terms by which our own relation had been made to signify and by which we have been interpolated. I think this may have something to do with what Sylvia Kolbowski writes below of the promise of feminism to make possible ‘the exquisite excavation of representational structures.’

For the past three years our performances have investigated the couple as the paradigmatic sign of intimacy. We have brought a queer perspective on gender and sexuality to this research, setting up choreographic procedures for manifesting unimagined and unscripted relations of intimacy beyond the heteronormative model of enduring, monogamous coupledom. This work felt increasingly necessary for us to do given the turn within the modern gay rights movement away from what Douglas Crimp termed a queer resistance to oppression, in all its forms, and toward an identitarian project of expanded access to the patrimony, specifically through the institution of marriage.

Does this last statement return me to my initial reflection on the value of feminism in my life and work? That there is any alternative to thinking inheritance in ways other than through the institution of the family and the terms of patriarchy must be understood as the gift of this discourse. I regret that I disagree with Sylvia’s hopeful statements below on a current shift away from the historical polarization of essentialists and psychoanalysts. My experience has been that the force of accelerated capitalism, the free-fall of an ever more terrifying precarity, has only solidified the identitarian project which reaches its apotheosis in the stabilizing effects of patriarchy. To put it otherwise, our generation may be more attuned to the rhetoric of psychoanalysis, but in action, driven I think by panic and anxiety, we tend toward marriage and family-building as a response to the devastation of our shared institutions, commonwealth, and public sphere. The project of feminism is only more demanding and necessary to conduct.

38. Brennan Gerard
05-22-2015
11:34 PM ET (US)

It may be productive to reflect on the temporality of belatedness, the sense of arriving late to the party, given (a) my delay in posting to this fascinating conversation and (b) Mary’s provocation to consider what of feminism may be passed on across generations. I arrived to New York City in the aftermath of AIDS and gentrification. A month after I got here, two planes slammed into the World Trade Center, and no matter how many times we marched up and down Fifth Avenue, Shock & Awe still happened…and happened again…. and again. And now we have drones. I came to New York in pursuit, conscious and otherwise, of a site that continues to inform and guide my shared project with Ryan—the legacy of a non-essentialist and oppositional queer movement informed by feminism and psychoanalysis. My uncle Bill, who lived in San Francisco and wore an earring in his left ear, visited me when my family lived in a suburb outside Nashville, Tennessee. I was 12. I had never been west of the Mississippi, north of Ohio, or east of the Carolina coast. He arrived with a box set of Maria Callas CDs, and his presence opened up a world to me. I still recall his voice. Did he tell me about ACT UP on this visit? I cannot remember, but ACT UP, Queer Nation and the interdisciplinary rigor of queer theory quickly became formative in the development of my own consciousness.

I began writing about moving to New York and arriving late. The movement that moved me here had entered a new phase, or perhaps had moved on. I felt as if the people and debates that brought me to this place were in hiding and recovery; what remained were so many traces and fragments. So many had died. I understood this absence in my body as I walked around the East Village, where we lived on Avenue B. Others in my generation shared this feeling of having arrived late, and so we invented utopias—the sexual liberation of the 70s, the activist fervor of the 90s, an engaged art world of the 80s—imagining better times before us to compensate for our belated loss. Of course, our fevered search for a political primal scene participated in a retrospective fallacy. Still, we came out of a lack and a desire for belonging—not only to a place, nor merely an identity, but a history. I did not find a crucial part of this community until, alongside Ryan, I studied at the Whitney ISP in 2010. This is where I met Mary and Andrea, where I started to understand consciously what had been transmitted to me in terms of the legacy of a psychoanalytically informed feminism.

My work with Ryan began in 2003. By the time of our encounter with the ISP, we were feeling limited by what we perceived to be the impoverished notions of medium-specificity, site-specificity and so-called institutional critique in the contemporary dance scene of that moment. Advanced work in dance, as entertaining as it often was, was obsessed with the ontology of performance, under the influence of what I can only refer to in short-hand as a kind of retrograde humanist philosophy, coming from the social democratic states and cultural contexts in Western Europe. The field was also governed by an identity politics that had nothing to do with the critique of subjectivity, or the historical processes of subject formation, and everything to do with marketing—a queer choreographer must make queer work that (re)produces representations of queerness, leaving questions of class, race, and gender, as well as the material and labor conditions of a given performance, outside of the frame. Indeed, although one could argue that certain representations were replacing dominant ones, the frame of representation remained un-addressed.

Our drive for a wider, more supple discursive frame for our work—for voices inflected by feminism and psychoanalysis—led us to the Interdisciplinary Studio with Mary at UCLA immediately after the ISP. Our current project, Timelining, takes as
explicit Mary’s idea of ‘remembering as a performative act.’ Circling the exhibition space in an interlocking floor pattern, two people involved in some form of an intimate relationship speak timelines of their lives from the present moment backwards. One timeline intertwines with the other according to the rules of a movement score, producing temporal jumps and unscripted moments of intimacy.

Throughout our time in the ID program, we had been performing this score ourselves, and we wanted to explore transmitting the score to others. There’s a lot of re-thinking these days about what a partner is, of what family might mean, and we wanted to get away from the reduction of every intimate relationship between two people to the paradigmatic figure of the couple. Yes, we are working with couples, but we have also included siblings, friends, former lovers, mentors and mentees, and combinations of all of the above. To write the performers’ individual chronologies, we collectively mine the past via those dependable engines of memory—images, sounds, smells, and tastes. But there is also a history of touches, textures, movements, somatic memories. We know about vibrations, temperature, pressure, the feeling of things and history in our bodies and on our skin. How do we remember and perform such perishable materialities? More than representing a queer identity, we hope in Timelining to model a queer relational structure between two people; for us, this means thinking about subjectivity as formed in relation to others and to history, splintered by desire, always in motion. The project is our way of working through theories of intersubjectivity, queer temporality, and sibling relations—and to accept the responsibility that has been transmitted by those who have spoken before me in this forum to re-imagine, embody, and enact our most intimate relations critically.

39. Sharon Hayes
05-26-2015
03:27 PM ET (US)

It is a deep pleasure and privilege to be invited to read through these meaningful accounts of activities, interactions and interrogations since 1968.

For the last fifteen years, I have been engaged in a practice that interrogates the relationship between an event and what I call a not-event or a document of that event. The material form of the document might be a photograph, a piece of footage, a sound recording, an object, a residue, an archive or piece of an archive, a written narrative or simply a relayed anecdote of the event. What has allowed me to sustain this investigation is that the relationship between an event and its not-event is constitutive of a complex field of aesthetic, political, ideological, temporal and psychic conditions that has everything to do with the conversation that you have initiated Mary and with the question you precisely pose to those of us who studied with you at UCLA.

To answer your question about when my project started, I can only summon a list of dates: 1970, 1988, 1991, 1999, 2000, 2004. This list is not finished and, thus, what it describes is not resolved but these dates do elaborate temporal boundaries that I have come to see as specific to a field of political concerns and psychic inhabitations.

I was born in 1970. The exact date was a few weeks after the Kent State murders, in a small window of time during which Daniel Berigan and others of the Catonsville Nine were underground, evading the FBI and their convictions for burning draft records in the town outside of Baltimore to which my parents would move three weeks after my birth. And 1970 was, of course, a year that encompassed activities and events of the various and intersecting liberation movements. This is my primal scene, the cusp of two decades that contain the events to which I continually circle back.

In 1988, I became a feminist, an activist and an artist on the campus of an institution that began admitting women students 17 years prior. I didn’t understand until many years later the brevity of such a duration as 17 years. I didn’t understand until years later that the social, political and psychic environment that I and other students – feminist, queer, students of color – were reacting to in our activism was a moment that still touched that of 1971, when, in the face of intense political pressure from the women’s liberation movement and economic pressure from declining enrollment, the school’s board of trustees altered course after 177 years of educating only men.

In 1991 I moved to New York City, into the queer, political world of downtown dance, theater and performance and, as others have elaborated, into the middle of the AIDS crisis. My position in the city in relation to the AIDS crisis was not that of Don t or Simon or Andrea nor is it that of Brennan or Ryan nor is it that of you or Juli or Rosalyn or Sylvia or Sutapa or Griselda or Isaac or Mark or Meleko although we all have a relation to the AIDS crisis, even a relation to the AIDS crisis in that city at that moment. The specificity of my temporal and geographic position vis a vis that event has become deeply impactful to how I understand my relation to politics and my relation to the feminist movement. This is because it was only after I moved to New York and began various conversations, with artists, filmmakers, scholars, activists, organizers, that I was able to account for the fact that three years before coming to NYC, I was becoming a feminist and a lesbian on a small liberal arts college campus seemingly unaffected by the violence of the political crisis of AIDS. In this accounting, I came to understand the ways in which I was complicit with an invested narrative that positioned AIDS as elsewhere than at a private liberal arts college in New England. My formative experience with feminism and then AIDS activism called upon me to reevaluate the normative maps through which temporal and geographic relations are positioned.
When I then met you, Mary, in 1999 at the Whitney ISP and, in 2000, went to study with you at UCLA, these observations and encounters coalesced into a project in which I work NOT with the legacies of feminism but rather with experiences of the event/s and the not-event/s of feminism, gay liberation, black liberation in the U.S. from the late 60s through to the present moment. My investment, as an artist, is in examining the ways in which the struggles and debates of the near past persist unresolved in and through new political, economic, social and psychic circumstances in the current moment. It was you and Juli who led me first through Freud and Lacan and from psychoanalysis I understand my attachments as specific even where I find myself in common with others who cathect to similar objects, texts, images, events.

For many years, I’ve been interested also in the simple observation that Hannah Arendt makes in “The Human Condition,” that the term public signifies, among other phenomena, appearance: ‘something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves.’ Because of the way in which events appear far beyond the moment of their occurrence, this signification of publicity suggests the possibility of a transthistoric public: a being-in-common to an event to which I was not in temporal or geographic proximity. It is my relationship to feminism that has allowed me to understand my work as grounded in an experience of a given present moment, and therefore a given public, as composed of and through many temporalities that exist simultaneously. I am interested in the ways in which belonging to this transthistoric public provokes and demands precise and singular ethical responsibilities.

40. Alexandro Segade
05-27-2015
12:00 PM ET (US)

In 2013, Mary Kelly appeared in a video by my art collective My Barbarian, called Universal Declaration of Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected in the Creative Impulse, playing a character based on Mary Cassatt, who, like Mary Kelly, is an artist known for her work about motherhood. In the video, Mary Kelly appears to be painting a portrait of a model (Jade Gordon) and her child. The camera pans behind, revealing that she is in fact painting a Lacanian diagram, not a representational likeness. Later, in her parlor, Mary sits at the piano and plays as the analyst (Malik Gaines), analysande (myself), and the model from the prior scene, sing along to lyrics adapted from Kelly’s Miming the Master, for which she wrote the music, adapted for voice by Malik Gaines. At the end of the sequence the camera cuts to a close shot of Mary Kelly/Cassatt, who explains that the law of the mother is that ‘you can’t kill your brothers and sisters,’ and that this is at the heart of any ‘communitarian project.’

As an artist who is interested in, invested in, and a part of collaborations, this message was very important to me: if I take into account not only the Oedipal demand to transgress the law of the father, but prioritize this mother’s law, I can be an artist and a part of a larger community too. My project, as it were, is to trace these lines by which we draw group identities, to understand where and why there is the threat of violence, and to find my brothers and sisters.

It is not surprising to me (actually painfully familiar) that I am one of the last to post my response to my mentor Mary Kelly’s call for a response to the question: how to assert my project in relation to what she has termed the ‘political primal scene’ of the 1960s. I came to the ID program in 2006, having already developed a working performance collective, and, at 33, older than most of the other students. A little late, it felt, though not terribly so, and with that lateness a kind of clarity. And this is perhaps why, for me, it is never really a question of if one relates to history, but how one marks the passage of time, which seems to slip so easily away, and yet never seems quite...over. In fact, it all seems to recur. I believe in second, third, fourth and fifth chances. In part, it is feminism that has taught me that. (I echo Brennan Gerard too, it seems, who is also late, and self-conscious about it!)

Because: feminism is foundational to understanding that the experiences that have marked our bodies/minds matter, and take time to understand, and we are not alone. Being queer, Latino, born in the 1970s, from California, and middle class, made it a little harder for me to embrace the position of the artist, which seemed rarified, reserved for singular people deeply embedded within society – even as I produced art because all of my experiences, and networks of identification, make me marginal. Mary Kelly’s teaching – and the conversation we had over a 3-year period, which was rooted in a discussion of the legacies of the 1960s – allowed me to identify with that productive persona of the artist while unpacking it and making it over again. Thanks to this unmaking, I have found that at root my project is collectivist, collaborative and built on understanding relationships between people, audiences, publics, cultures – both popular and sub - and their attendant politics, which may not always manifest consciously. And if I am often a little late, it is because I don’t really believe in the present, and am always looking backwards to understand, and analyze, where we are heading in that most dubious of concepts: the future.

(Of course, psychoanalysis also helps one understand lateness. Mary once told me that it is narcissism that makes people late, admitting that she used to always be late to things because she thought the universe would provide, and traffic, for example, would not be an issue... Another thing Mary once told me, noting that some other students younger than me were identifying as ‘trans,’ is that I was ‘One of the last old school queers.’ I took that as a kind of provocation, and have returned to that description many times. If queerness is an invention largely of the 1990s – when I came of age and took
that term to describe myself -then in fact my ‘old school’ serves as a location from which to see, and speak, and make. And of course, the activism and critique of the 1990s owed much to models of the 1960s. As for the narcissism...well, I do work in performance...)

I refer to Mary Kelly as my mentor because that is what I wanted of her when I went back to school. I am an artist who works in video and performance; I produce objects and artworks in relation to and as a means of making performances and videos; my work takes the discursive site into account with the actual, imminent space in which it occurs; and my work involves theatrical, musical and cinematic aesthetics that are produced through group efforts. There are very few models for this kind of work. I needed to turn to someone who could help me makes of these creative impulses a project. Mary’s teaching, and her own investigation into that political primal scene – which was my own ACTUAL primal scene as a person whose parents were both greatly affected by the political upheavals of the 60s - provided a forum to interrogate these structures, and a history to attach them to, and a critical position from which to speak.

41. Michelle Dizon
06-12-2015
05:45 PM ET (US)

I’ve been asked to speak about my ‘project’, how it started, my early work, and what I see now as the legacy of feminism in that formative moment.

It was in the Interdisciplinary Studio program with Mary Kelly that I learned how to see and think visually. Her methodical and rigorous understanding of the visual field opened the historical, cultural, political, and ethical dimensions of visibility for me in ways that have deeply informed the way that I teach and practice today. While I was an art student at UCLA I learned about art’s discourses, grammars, and rituals, and in hindsight I would say that I was in a productive tension with the knowledges that I was being exposed to, a tension that speaks more to the imbrication of knowledge with power and the institutions that subvert both. In the most basic terms, I was deeply dissatisfied with a theory that spoke to itself and with an art that made for itself. I struggled to locate the relations of power that helped maintain these knowledges and struggled to find the fissures that might, in silence, speak to the colonial legacies that are so much a part of my historical reality. The feminist legacy where I found a language to talk about silence, invisibility, and the layered conditions of race, gender, and class was from women of color in the United States.

My practice began when I realized that there was a profound difference between learning and understanding. If learning is the way knowledge becomes solid, frozen, and set in place, then understanding is the capacity to turn knowledge fluid again, to have it bear the energy for change and transformation that is part of the historical dynamism of our world. As someone who entered the United States school system from an immigrant background, I was deeply colonized by the knowledges that I was taught. From kindergarten through graduate school I entered into a vast and labyrinthine euroamerican-centrism in which knowledge did not acknowledge its limits or that it was delivered by, for, and to produce those ensconced in their privilege. Learning produced a deep dissatisfaction for me. Understanding came when I started interrogating the limits of knowledge and questioning the relation of theory to practice. This process of unlearning is one that I understand as an ongoing process of decolonization. I have sought to look elsewhere for my knowledge, to grapple with the question of solidarity, and to understand that the line between voice and silence is also one of life and death. It is from this position that I approach the ‘legacy of feminism’ and ask: ‘what would a feminist relation to legacy, one that challenges some of its more colonizing meanings look like?’

I can’t explore this in any adequate way without wrapping my mind around what it means to talk about legacy in our contemporary moment. Many dictionaries have at least one definition for legacy as ‘that which is handed down from the past by an ancestor or predecessor.’ It is this understanding of ‘legacy’ that is shared by some contributors to this forum, like Rosalyn Deutsche when she says that she often teaches a course on postmodernism and feminism in the 1980’s ‘because I want to pass it on to a younger feminists’ or Mary Kelly when she frames this prompt by asking, ‘what, if anything, is passed on from one generation to the next?’ While I understand the necessity to ask about what is passed on, especially since feminist struggles are constantly being erased from the historical record and a younger generation comes of age in a state of profound amnesia, I also wonder if it might be necessary to unpack some of the resonances contained within the word legacy, resonances which have to do with property, legality, institutions, and systems, resonances that direct our attention to the colonial undertones within the idea of legacy itself. In what follows, I hope to trace the etymology of the word legacy in order to approach this question concerning ‘the legacy of feminism’ for our present. I hope that such an inquiry will open onto the challenge of how a decolonial feminist relation to legacy might be charted and why it might be important to think about the plural, heterogenous, and often irreconcilable legacies that we inhabit.

My journey through the etymology of the word legacy unfolds from Medieval Europe to our globalized present. The word legacy can be traced through a 14th century French word, legatie, which describes a body of persons sent on a mission by a sovereign. The French use of legatie can be traced to the Medieval Latin word legatia, which comes from the Latin legatus, meaning ‘ambassador’ or ‘envoy.’ Now, legatus comes from the word legare, which means to appoint by a last will or to send as a legate, with legate denoting an authorized representative of the pope. Interestingly, the word legare also means
‘to gather’ and bears a relation to the word legal, derived from the Middle French and pertaining to the law. From *legatie*, to *legatia*, to *legatus*, to *legare* we discover that there is strong subtext of representation that is contained in the word legacy. It is a representative function that exists in the form of an ambassador, envoy, or body of persons, set on a mission to carry out a sovereign’s will. It wasn’t until the mid-15th century in Scotland that the word legacy would come to be associated with property left by will or legal decree.

There are two themes within the word legacy that I will highlight below: the first is that of representation and the second is that of property. First, if there is a question of representation that is contained in the terms of ‘legacy’ then to speak about ‘the legacy of feminism’ is rife with the politics of position which Gayatri Spivak wrote of nearly thirty years ago in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” By teasing out Karl Marx’s two understandings of representation, on the one hand as mimesis and on the other hand as proxy, Spivak unravels the transparency that the first world intellectual has in relation to the third world subjects of which he writes and questions the relations of power and knowledge that move across global north and global south. To link the question of representation with ‘the legacy of feminism’ is to ask ‘whose feminism?’ Second, if there is a theme of property contained in the idea of legacy, then to speak about ‘the legacy of feminism’ is also to ask who is the rightful owner of this legacy and how it is passed on from one generation to the next? Under which law is this passage validated? Who is assumed to be the rightful heir to this legacy?

Some newer meanings for legacy have emerged in the 21st century. In 2005 the Oxford English Dictionary added the following definition for legacy: ‘an applicant to a club, university, etc. regarded preferentially because a parent or other relative belonged or belongs to that institution.’ This 2005 OED definition opens an understanding of legacy linked to privilege, belonging, and institutions. From this definition, an additional question we can add to our list is: what role do institutions play in the ‘legacy of feminism’ and what spheres of privilege and belonging do they validate? Finally in 2007, the Oxford English Dictionary added this definition for legacy: ‘designating software or hardware which, although outdated or limiting is an integral part of a computer system and difficult to replace.’ The 2007 OED definition takes legacy into a realm where system hardware is outdated but cannot be replaced because it is integral to the system’s operation. With this last definition we open onto an understanding of how something becomes legacy in the 21st century. The system is dependent on this hardware, however out of date it is, and so it becomes legacy. Without this legacy hardware, the system will become something other, something different, something unrecognizable. So there is some aspect of self-preservation and identity that is also involved in something becoming legacy.

The question of feminist legacy must be asked in the plural. We must ask about feminist legacies, often contradictory or irreconcilable, open to being undone and renewed. Rather than being a past that appears in the present, these legacies assert their status as memories of a future recalled and fought for in an ever transforming present.

42. Wu Tsang
06-12-2015
06:10 PM ET (US)

First of all, it’s so inspiring to read through this thread. I’m incredibly honored to respond to your question, in hopes of contributing in some way to a bigger conversation that has been so generative and fundamental for me. I too am late, having just exited China where the Internet is very unreliable and many sites are blocked. The other day I was at the Propaganda Museum in Shanghai, staring at a wall-sized needlepoint(!) of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao, trying to grasp how differently 1968 manifested in China.

When thinking about my project, two significant dates come to mind: 2005 and 2015. 2005 is the year I moved to Los Angeles in hopes of becoming a queer feminist artist, a desire that I primarily located in your Interdisciplinary MFA program at UCLA. I wasn’t your student at the time, but I was dating one of your students, and the mere proximity to this intellectual community fed me for several years until I had the nerve to apply, and ultimately the privilege to participate. I remember during our first studio visit you told me that a ‘project’ was precipitated by the intersection of a subjective political investment and historical events. In other words, a project means not only identifying with a cause, but understanding one’s personal position in alignment with greater forces. I suppose that is true for anyone at any time, but perhaps even more so for those working around significant cultural political shifts, and the task of the artist is to recognize this project and be true to it. So I guess my project chose me. Because I happened to be transgender at a time when it seemed like the whole world was opening up to this identity, and it seemed like ‘trans politics’ had the potential to impact change on society. In 2005, I really believed that. Today in 2015, I definitely feel distance from trans identity, but that is something to return to a little later.

2005 was also the year that I traveled to China for the first time. I was searching for my familial and ethnic roots, but when I got there I had a total crisis of not finding what I was looking for. Instead I discovered an invisible queer history (a love story between 19th century writers Qiu Jin and Wu Zhiying), and ended up changing my name to Wu, thus creating my own mythical ‘origins’ and lineage. Now 10 years later, I am back in China and finally making a project about this experience and exploring issues of queer feminism in contemporary China, so everything has come full circle, which makes me trust in the bigger project.
I feel incredibly indebted to your work and pedagogy, because every time I approach a new question or idea, I always try to apply your ‘method’ of mapping out the political, the subjective, and the historical trajectories. For example even the process I just described is based in a kind of critical analysis that forces me to look deep inside myself, and also way beyond myself. I've recently felt distance from the so-called trans movement (encompassed today by a media circus of Caitlin Jenner and other 'brave' trans capitalist icons), whereas for the past 10 years, I was obsessed with trying to document and represent it. I've always been preoccupied with questions of ‘voice’ in social movements: Who is speaking? And for whom? What do we demand? What constitutes ‘we’? (To which you once pointed me towards Ranciere’s "Cause of the Other") I always thought those questions defined community. But I recently had a revelation (during a lecture by Dr. Scott Von in London about the ‘disavowed community’ and recognition of desire vs. the desire for recognition), which changed my definition of community. A community is not one in which we are all ‘alike’ but actually one in which we are producing difference. When the conditions of sharing space necessitate that we create a new - if temporary - sense of belonging to each other. I realized that this sometimes but not necessarily happens with queer communities (especially with increasingly stable LGBT identities...). So the queer, trans, or feminist, or counterculture project is always shifting, it is always having to re-articulate itself.