

# 'WEIGHING THE WORK OF LOVE: ON KATE DAVIS'S RE-VISIONED ICONOCLASM

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## ABSTRACT

This essay offers a close reading of recent work by Glasgow-based artist Kate Davis to argue that her practice engages iconoclasm in ways importantly modified by her feminist commitments. Often Davis's source material has significant historical, political or art historical import, as in her works dealing with the Suffragist attack on Velázquez's Rokeby Venus in 1914. What is at stake in her 're-visioning' of such moments, which often involves labour-intensive drawing as a key method, is a formal commitment to a kind of delicate or caring vandalism, often pursued through labour-intensive drawing (iconoclasm as a means of making images) and a specifically feminist contention with existing hierarchies of value and systems of representation (iconoclasm as contestation). To reckon with these stakes, Jean-Luc Nancy's account of 'the pleasure in drawing' and the feminist concept of the 'work of love' are brought into relation with Davis's work.

## KEYWORDS

**Feminism | Drawing | Value | Revisions | The work of love**

'Love does not simply cut across, it cuts itself across itself, it arrives and arrives at itself as that by which nothing arrives, except that there is "arriving," arrival and departure: of the other, always of the other, so much other that it is never made, or done (one makes love, because it is never made) and so much other that it is never my love (if I say to the other "my love," it is of the other, precisely, that I speak, and nothing is "mine").'

(Nancy, 1991: 102)

Iconoclasm, as Marie-José Mondzain has shown, begins with a conservative view of images: innovation was precisely not the iconoclasts' aim, which was, rather, fidelity to what has they understood to have been given as the law vis-à-vis worship and its mediation (2004: 70). The true innovation, on Mondzain's account, comes from the iconodules' positing of an economy in which the icon is given a special status analogous to incarnation. The way value has been conferred on artistic images in the Western tradition flows from this moment, she contends. When it comes to modern art, of course, innovation becomes an injunction (and a value) in its own right, and a certain reciprocity, even complicity—well-remarked by most authorities on the subject—between the veneration and the casting down of images is intensified. With the avant-gardes, iconoclasm becomes a means of production practiced through the negation of traditional mediums and materials, and it is the iconophiles who are often moved to acts of purifying destruction or disfigurement in response. Witness, for example, the application of white paint to Chris Ofili's *Holy Virgin Mary* during its exhibition at Brooklyn Art Museum's presentation of *Sensation* in 1999, or the actions of an indignant attendee at an Oxford discussion event who threw red paint over Jake Chapman during the 2003 exhibition *The Rape of Creativity* which included the Chapman brothers' notorious overpainting of eighty etchings from Goya's *Disasters of War* (Barber and Boldrick, 2013: 130). Marcel Duchamp, canny as ever, puts his finger on the sense that modern iconoclasm takes place in an economy of debts and obligations, in which each act demands its own cancellation by another, with his formula for a 'reciprocal readymade' that would answer to his own treatment of everyday

objects as artworks: "use a Rembrandt as an ironing board" (Duchamp, 1961: 142).

In Duchamp's equation, our attention no doubt concentrates on the fate of the Rembrandt, but might it not be significant that this comes via its transposition into the space – highly gendered and consequently overlooked – of daily housework, and 'home economics'? Helen Molesworth has persuasively shown that a key context for the 'production' and the reception of the readymades was Duchamp's own home/studio, where they stymied the daily work of maintenance, letting dust breed and clutter proliferate (Molesworth, 1998). The readymades participate, that is to say, in a certain bachelor aesthetic, one that negates the labour inherent in domestic decorum. That such labour *is work*, and that it is of the greatest possible consequence, have been crucial claims lodged by feminist interventions in art, theory and political action.<sup>1</sup> As Nancy Fraser insists, without the work of social reproduction that is euphemised as care, maintenance, or as the 'work of love,' "there could be no culture, no economy, no political organization" (Fraser, 2016: 99). Molesworth herself stresses this point in her assessment of the problematic art-historical polarization of so-called 'essentialist' and 'theoretical' feminisms associated with the 1970s and 1980s. Insisting on the need to recognize both the ongoing centrality of 'maintenance work' as the fundamental but disavowed foundation of the social and aesthetic realms alike, and the continuities and affinities across different feminist generations, Molesworth calls for "a feminism vibrant enough to encourage dissension and conflict without closing off potential points of contact, moments of unexpected convergence" (Molesworth, 2000: 97). This essay will attempt to consider how these issues are given visible form and urgent force in the practice of Glasgow-based contemporary artist Kate Davis. It attends in particular to the works Davis has made over the past decade which have striven to rethink feminist iconoclasm via a lexicon of gestures that redraw the distinctions between care work and economy, and between drawing as careful attentiveness and interruptive violence. Davis has done

1. A number of key interventions in the 1970s debates on this point are gathered in *The Politics of Housework* (Malos, 1982). Especially formative for Davis's understanding of these issues is Marilyn Waring's *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* (London: HarperCollins, 1989).

this through continually addressing herself to works by other artists—often ones of historical import—and frequently by making appropriative contestations of their iconic status and the very terms of their visibility. My account of her practice starts with the clearest examples of her interest in, and use of, iconoclastic gestures in a feminist, appropriative, key, and will then turn to how she brings this back to the home — to an insistence on the foundations of the economy in the *oikos*, and to the consequences of weighing the love of art against the work of love.

An ambivalence lies at the heart of what we might term Davis's 'touching appropriations,' a phrase I use to signal her glancing way of taking images (that is, taking them indirectly, via their circulation in reproductions), her focus on the affective registers of reception—and here true ambivalence, rather than mere mixed feelings are indeed crucial (Phillips, 2015)—and her understanding of appropriation as above all question of taking things into her own hands, and figuring that grasp on the past. Her use of photorealist drawing techniques in a number of key works has, moreover, allowed her to effect appropriations of 'touch' itself—that quality presumed to inhere, like a signature or

watermark, in demonstrations of artistic mastery—so as to insert her feminist interrogation of artworks into their visual language, rather than simply remark on that language from outside it. That artworks, as unique demonstrations of artistic touch, should not themselves be touched is of course one of the taboos that iconoclasm breaks, and Davis respects this at one level. If her touching appropriations do often deal in a reformulated iconoclasm, it is nonetheless clear that she is not interested in making scandalous transgressions, which are already marked as a male prerogative in the history of avant-gardism, and which play out across binarised notions which oppose art to non-art, the priceless to the worthless, 'natural' pure ground to 'cultural' semantic inscription.

Though Davis's artistic trajectory is a coherent and gradually evolving one, it is noticeable that as her work took on an emphatic feminist orientation in the late 2000s so putatively iconoclastic procedures became more pronounced in it. My account therefore starts with *Who is a Woman Now?* [figs. 01, 02]. This 2008 series of three large-scale, labour-intensive drawings takes as its subject Davis's conflicted regard for Willem de Kooning's iconic representations of femininity in the *Woman* works of the 1950s. This ambivalence expressed itself first in a simple



Fig. 01- Kate Davis, *Who is a Woman Now I* 2008

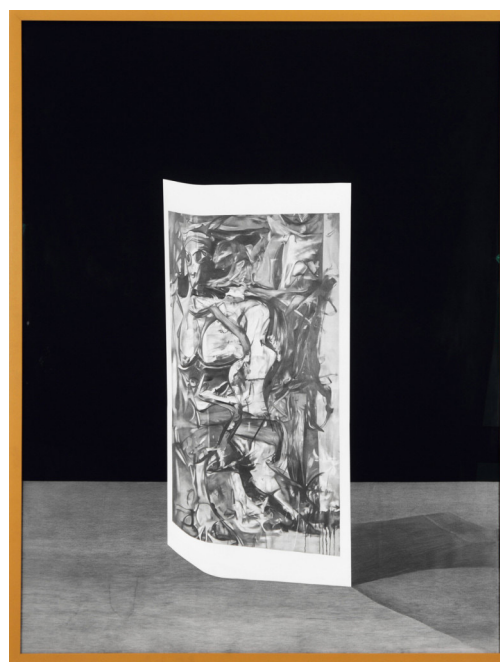


Fig. 02- Kate Davis, *Who is a Woman Now II* 2008

gesture: Davis purchased postcards of *Woman I* from the Museum of Modern Art's gift shop, and tore a reproduction of another of the *Woman* paintings from the pages of a monograph on the artist; she then bent these with her hands so as to enable them to stand upright unaided – something that de Kooning's distorted, top-heavy figures would seem unable to do. Davis then drew, the resulting abstractions of (reproductions of) abstractions of the female body with photorealist precision. The drawings were mounted on silkscreened backgrounds that suggested spot-lit theatrical stages (at a scale only marginally smaller than the original paintings), as if the bent, but free-standing, *Women* were at last ready to step into the limelight on their own terms.

In an important feminist account of de Kooning's *Woman* series as deployed in MoMA's canonical presentation of art's history, Carol Duncan notes that the works are typical of the way that the 'heroic' enterprise of modernism has been played out around transgressive representations of the bodies—often nude—of women. That modernist 'breakthroughs' – as defined in the lineage MoMA presents – occur in a series of disfigurements of the female nude, and culminate in a passage to blank abstraction, is no coincidence for Duncan: "The peculiar iconoclasm of much modern art, its renunciation of representation and the material world behind it, seems at least in part based in an impulse, common among males, to escape not the mother in any literal sense, but a psychic image of woman and her earthly domain that seems rooted in infant or childish notions of the mother" (Duncan, 1989: 172). Duncan's essay concludes with a parallel drawn between paintings such as de Kooning's, and an advertisement for *Penthouse* magazine that she photographed in New York. What drew her attention to the ad was that it had been defaced in spray paint with the phrase 'for pigs'. As Duncan prepared to take her photograph, she was interrupted and heckled by young boys who, she suggests, recognized in her act an appropriation or 'pollution' of a male preserve (Duncan, 1989: 176). While that contest was played out, nakedly as it were, in the public realm, for Duncan the problem of de Kooning's *Woman* series is that it manages, in the art museum, to veil its derivation from a common visual culture predicated on male anxiety and male privilege, and to do so through the heroic figuration of the act

of painting itself. An alternate feminist revisioning of readings such as Duncan's is offered by Fiona Barber in an essay that starts from the difficulty of thinking through her own pleasure in response to de Kooning's *Women* (Barber, 1994). Might it be possible, Barber asks, to think those *Women* as something other than objects for the male gaze? Might their grotesque, visceral, but assertive embodiment prompt not just revulsion, but identification, in female viewers? In the *Who is a Woman Now?* drawings we see the cogency of both Duncan's antipathy and Barber's investment played out. Davis's tactile warping of the reproductions conveys something of the torsion between these two responses. Moreover, by labouring over the production of drawings which demonstrably take care to reinscribe the works' institutional iconicity, to abstract their masculinist representational repertoire, and to make of these contestations a new self-sufficiency, Davis finds a way to frame her own experience of them, and to insist on her own capacity to find pleasure in artistic creation and virtuosity.

If *Who Is a Woman Now?* emerged from Davis's ambivalence towards existing artworks, similar feelings motivated a series of drawings and a film work, each titled *Disgrace*, in 2009 [fig. 03]. Here, however, and in response to the intense physical strain that the photorealism of the previous series had required, Davis turned to another, emphatically non-virtuosic, means for contesting images. The object of her interest in this case was the work of Amedeo Modigliani, more specifically a group of drawings of nudes featured in a 1972 publication of his work. This book was part of a series on 'Master Draughtsmen' that included, at the point of its publication, forty eight artists in total, of whom only one—Käthe Kollwitz—was a woman. The introductory text in this publication includes a paean to Modigliani's capacity to create drawings quickly, especially if he needed something to trade for drink or hashish: "such was his genius that the line was that of a master, no matter in what haste it was done" (Longstreet, 1972: unpaginated). As Jean-Luc Nancy and Federico Ferrari note, Modigliani's nudes might be seen as sated, as folded into a pleasure they take in themselves—an effect that derives in no small measure from the terse certainty of the artist's line. While for Nancy and Ferrari these works belong to a subset of 'nudes that suspend desire, subordinating it to a presentation of forms that are not meant to be desired because they are content with taking pleasure in themselves, or with being their

own desire and pleasure,' Davis's intuition was that their (formal) satiety was in fact a (gendered) vacuity which Modigliani's facility in drawing enclosed and offered to a male gaze (Nancy and Ferrari, 2014: 17). Her retort to this emptiness was to add to certain pages cut out from the book self-portrait nudes of her own, by gradually tracing the outline of her own body, part by part, over each Modigliani drawing. As Adam Szymczyk has characterized Davis's tracings, 'their lines are bold and fragile, un-gracious, as if done very fast or by an untrained hand – and obviously mocking Modigliani's mastery. To make the disgrace complete ... her refusal here to compete with the master represents a controlled and staged suspension of her otherwise excellent craftsmanship' (Szymczyk, 2010: 80). That staging is extended in the film *Disgrace*, which consists of successive still images of one of the *Disgrace* drawings in process. We don't see Davis's body or hand at work, just the results of their actions, and between each addition (sometimes identifiable as a hand and arm, say, but increasingly impossible to 'read' in that sense), the screen blacks out and a chorus of voices chants 'boo hoo.' Whether they are lamenting the Modigliani nude or its transformation at Davis's hands is left open to interpretation. The chorus diminishes in number with each successive iteration, until finally Davis's voice alone utters the words, aligning, perhaps, her finding of a voice with the formation of a new nude (or *nudes*) on the printed page.

Although there is no question that Davis intends to overwrite the Modigliani drawings, and to that extent her act is iconoclastic, it is also important to state that her aim is clearly not their destruction, nor the striking out of images per se: there is no 'breakthrough' to blankness here. Rather, the effect of the *Disgrace* drawings is that in each case the division between original image and iconoclastic inscription becomes lost in a skein of tracings: Davis's lines both cut up and con-fuse Modigliani's, and form a new image out of their mingling. The beautiful irony is that the 'real' nude does not look like a body at all. Davis's body has pressed upon each image, and each instance of pressure is figured, as if to allow her to take the measure of her own body against Modigliani's subjects. But the force of her subjective experience of her body-as-herself is itself tangled up and confounds any visualisation of coherence. In their

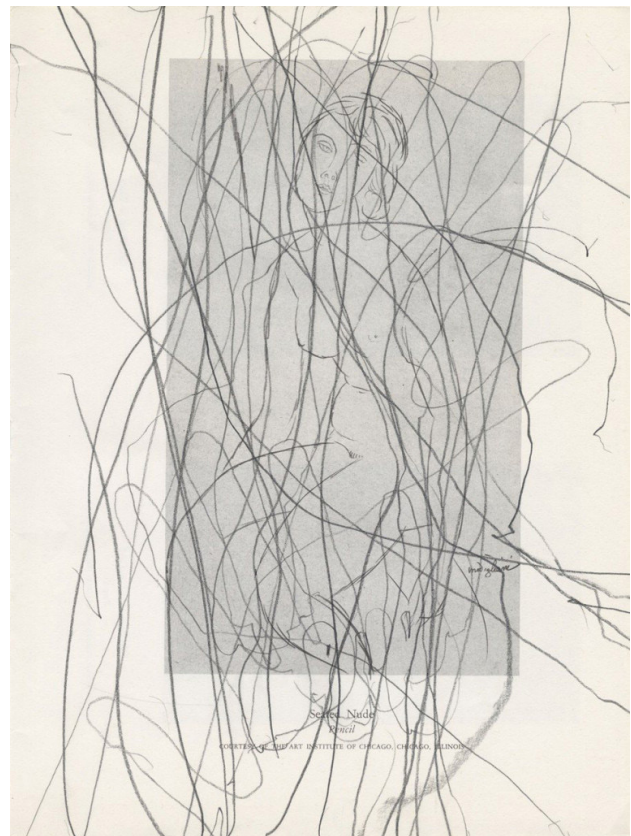


Fig. 03- Kate Davis, *Disgrace I* 2009

forceful formation, their tangible coming into being, the *Disgrace* drawings exemplify Nancy's account of drawing as 'the gesture that proceeds from the desire to show this form and to trace it so as to show the form – but not to trace in order to reveal it as a form already received. Here, to trace is to find, and in order to find, to seek a form to come (or to let it seek and find itself) – a form to come that should or that can come through drawing' (Nancy, 2013: 10). Mimesis, Nancy goes on to claim, 'is pleasurable because it gives us a relation or because it lets us enter into a relation' (Nancy, 2013: 63). It is not because a given thing is replicated that mimesis is valuable – or pleasurable – but because it attends to the nascent state of things, their particular coming into being. "In general drawing constitutes a way of placing itself in contact with the formation of the form (of the thing, the thought, the emotion...). It is opened up by seeking the way it coincides with the most profound and secret movement of an appearance—how is it *specifically*? How *exactly* does it form itself? What is its particular energy? What is its force and how does it come into being? How is it formed? Little by little, what is at stage each time is nothing less than: how does the world form itself and how am I allowed to embrace its movement? *Mimesis* proceeds from the desire of

*methexis*—of participation—in what plays out before the birth of the world; in its profound truth, *mimesis* desires to imitate the inimitable “creation,” or more simply, the inimitable and unimaginable uprising of being in general” (Nancy, 2013: 64).

Nancy’s attention to drawing as formation is a way, it seems, of drawing out a figure of the ‘being singular plural’ of selves that has been the preoccupation of much of his philosophy. And it is notable that this account resonates particularly with a crucial moment in the development of that thought, in his reflections on “the inoperative community” (Nancy, 1991). If Nancy’s account of *mimesis* as something that is formative of new images, and new forms of relation, helps us to grasp that Davis’s labour-intensive drawings and the *Disgrace* works are both expressions of ‘the pleasure in drawing’, his re-reading of the relationship of community offers a further clarification of the formal and political stakes of Davis’s interventions in the *Disgrace* series especially. Nancy introduces a key distinction between the concept of ‘singular being’ and that of the ‘individual’: “Individuation detaches closed off entities from a formless ground – whereas only communication, contagion, or communion constitute the being of individuals. But singularity does not consist from such a detaching of clear forms or figures (nor from what is linked to this operation: the scene of form and ground, appearing linked to appearance and the slippage of appearance into the aestheticizing nihilism in which individualism always culminates). Singularity does not *proceed* from anything. It is not a work resulting from an operation” (Nancy, 1991: 27).

The dramatization of figure and ground in certain kinds of modern iconoclasm—those pointed to by Carol Duncan in both the modernist turn to ‘pure’ abstraction and the travesty of female figures as grounds for male artistic mastery—turns on just such an appeal to individualism. Davis’s *Disgrace* drawings offer in its place an image of ‘exposure-sharing’ that accords with Nancy’s evocation of singular being shared in an ‘unworked’ community (1991: 29). Yet from a feminist perspective, the notion that mutual exposure and an absence of work underpin social life are deeply problematic, to say the least. ‘Exposure-sharing’ and the relational rapport between Davis’s

drawing and the works they entwine with or redraw, become, then, increasingly tasked with exposing how violent gendered conditions determine how exposure and work are actually distributed.

In 2011 Davis was commissioned by Glasgow’s Gallery of Modern Art to make a solo exhibition that would respond to their collection. Two points of orientation emerged from time spent in the institution’s archives and stores. The first was the practice of Jo Spence (1934-1992), whose pioneering work in applied ‘photo-therapy’ and the contestation—through photography and writing—of a given cultural repertoire of ‘happy memories’ and best selves became a key touchstone for Davis. Encountering two of Spence’s powerful representations of self-exposure on the racks of Glasgow Museums’ storage facility, Davis chose to make a meticulous photo-realist drawing from her own photograph of these works in situ. The resulting image was presented in the gallery supported by a structure that replicated the metallic struts of the store. Pointing out that artworks can be effaced not only by deliberate acts of violence, but also by their place within institutional walls that ostensibly protect them, Davis tried to not only make Spence’s work present in the museum (notably, other works by Spence from the GoMA collection were included in the exhibition), but also to make visible her absence from the selection of works usually on view.

Davis’s archival researches also led her to two items, at that point not formally accessioned into Glasgow Museums’ collection but filed under ‘women’s history,’ which became central to the exhibition. One was a mass-produced, early 20th-century postcard depicting a caricatured harridan whose tongue has been nailed to a wooden table, under the caption ‘Peace at Last!’ This repellent artefact was exhibited in the first room of the exhibition and gave the show its bitterly ironic title. The postcard’s iconographic content, and its resemblance to other examples of the genre, suggest that it was probably published as a disparagement of the Suffrage cause. The other historical item that Davis was drawn to was a small pamphlet reproducing a 1908 speech on ‘Militant Methods’ by Christabel Pankhurst, one of the leading members of the Women’s Social and Political Union (WSPU). A small

oval portrait of Pankhurst was printed on its cover, but what caught Davis's interest was that this portrait had been deliberately and precisely scratched out. Having examined the pamphlet closely with a paper conservator, and having produced detailed images of its frayed, burred and partially eroded surface, Davis then undertook the task of rendering it as an enlarged drawing, which restored Pankhurst to an assertive, life-size presence, but which did not in any other way occlude the violence wrought on her likeness. The result, *Reversibility (Militant Methods)* [fig. 04]

is an extraordinary feat of attention to every detail of the strange hybrid image that resulted from an anonymous attempt to efface a woman. As she had in *Disgrace*, Davis here mobilised the mark-making logic of the graffito. This a logic Rosalind Krauss glosses in her account of Cy Twombly's work as re-reading Pollock's drip paintings enacting a "striking at the figure" (1993: 263). For Krauss, the graffito, like the Barthesian photograph, is an indexical mark that in marking a presence is always already iterated in the future anterior, 'this will have been.' "Whatever the



Fig. 04. Kate Davis, *Reversibility (Militant Methods)* detail 2011

content ... the mark itself is its vehicle, its support, that which bodies the message forth ... With the graffito, the expressive mark has a substance made up of the physical residue left by the marker's incursion: the smear of graphite, the stain of ink, the welt thrown up by the penknife's slash. But the form of the mark—at this level of expression—is itself peculiar; for it inhabits the realm of the clue, the trace, the index. Which is to say the operations of form are those of marking an event—by forming it in terms of its remains, or its precipitate—and in so marking it, of cutting the event off from temporality of its making" (Krauss, 1993: 259).

On John Berger's account, "a drawing slowly questions an event's appearance and in doing so reminds us that appearances are always a construction with a history" (Berger, 2005: 70). Davis's work certainly enacts this critical relation to historical givens, but it is not, or not only, trying to visualize 'what really happened.' If the graffitist's mark is always an uninvited incursion, "the desecration of a field originally consecrated to another purpose, the effacement of that purpose through the act of dirtying, smearing, scarring, jabbing," then its very structure as mark also gives it both semantic and temporal instability (Krauss, 1993: 259). Perhaps because of this, Davis seems to grasp the violent effacement of

Pankhurst as available to her reinscription within the present, and as a possible figuration of a feminist critique that engages not only 'this was' but also 'this might have been,' this 'could be.' Here what Krauss identifies as the graffito's "attack on organicity, good form" opens the image to an acknowledgement, played out in Twombly's art, of a bodily sense that is arrayed across his canvases in pieces, as a fragmented corpus, "the erotics of which is that its body will never be reconstituted, whole" (Krauss, 1993: 266). Davis's own corpus is rich in comparable erotics, and as her redrawing of the Pankhurst pamphlet shows, its attention to historical works and moments is not carried out in the name of restitution, but in the hope of finding new ways to 'body forth' embodiment in images.

In *Reversibility (Militant Methods)* we see an iconoclastic act *against* a Suffragette turned into a portrait that makes Pankhurst's image indistinct from the violence of the misogynist forces that she sought to overcome. Later in 2011, Davis turned to an almost diametrically opposite case. For *Curtain I-VII* [figs. 05, 06] she combined two very different representations of the same artwork: a commercially available National Gallery poster reproduction of Velázquez's *Toilet of Venus* (also known as the *Rokeby Venus*), and an archival photograph that is the sole



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Fig. 05• Kate Davis, *Curtain I*, 2011





Fig. 06• Kate Davis, *Curtain VII*, 2011

visual record of the damage done when a Suffragette, Mary Raleigh Richardson, attacked the painting with a cleaver in March 1914, as an act of political protest against the imprisonment of Emmeline Pankhurst, Christabel's mother and the leader of the WSPU. The former image, of course, gives no hint of the latter act, the painting having long since been restored and this event in its history being given little-to-no visibility, as is usual practice given institutions' fear of 'copycat' acts of vandalism.

In her memoir *Laugh a Defiance*, Richardson notes that she had decided to attack a work of art in accordance with Emmeline Pankhurst's insistence that acts against property were necessary to gain universal suffrage, as governments valued property over life. The advantage of Richardson's choice, surely, was that it dramatized precisely the distorted hierarchy of values Pankhurst identified, insofar as an artwork could be both a piece of property and a representation of human life. "Values were stressed from the financial point of view and not the human. I felt I must make my protest from the financial point of view, therefore..." (Richardson, 1953: 165). The costly acquisition of Velázquez's work in 1906 was much-publicized, and so his *Venus* impressed itself upon Richardson as a suitable target. Having gained WSPU approval for her plan, Richardson purchased a small axe that she could easily conceal and ventured to the National Gallery on the 10th of March, biding her time until

the policemen posted to guard against Suffragette acts were sufficiently distracted. Her alibi for lingering in the gallery was a sketchbook, which she drew in as she awaited her chance to strike. When that chance came she made seven slashes against the painting's protective glass, and then its very canvas, before being overpowered and arrested. Richardson's explanatory statement, circulated by the WSPU, was equally direct. "I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst, the most beautiful character in modern history. Justice is an element of beauty as much as colour and outline on canvas.... Until the public cease to countenance human destruction the stones cast against me for the destruction of this picture are each an evidence against them of artistic as well as moral and political humbug and hypocrisy" (Gamboni, 1997: 94-95). However, as if to corroborate those accounts of attacks on art that stress the fine line between art appreciation and violence against images, Richardson's later testimony in *Laugh a Defiance* added a note of doubt and even aesthetic appreciation to the political certainty of his first public comment: "To control my feelings of agitation I took out the sketch book I had brought with me and tried to make a drawing... I found I was staring at an almond-eyed Madonna whose beauty it was far beyond my powers to reproduce. Her smile, however, impressed itself sufficiently upon my senses to bring me a certain calmness of mind" (Richardson, 1953: 167).

That Richardson was staring at eyes at all relied, of course, on Velásquez's device of having Cupid hold a mirror—ostensibly for the goddess, but ultimately so that the spectator is indeed shown her face despite the fact that she is painted with her back turned. As Jennifer Higgie (2009) has pointed out, "a painting of someone turning away defies portraiture," and the sleight of hand by which Venus's face is given visibility does not undo that specular cutting apart of body and face which ensures we can't read the painting as in any way a 'portrait' of Venus. However reassuring Richardson found Venus's smile, then, and however much the critical literature stresses the treatment of the artwork as if it were a subject, the painting's composition might be presumed to have fitted well with the contrast between human lives and prized property that underpinned Richardson's targeting of the work. That Richardson identifies a mythological nude with a Madonna is no doubt of interest here too—and the complexities and inconsistencies in her accounts of her actions and in her political trajectory have been the source of much conjecture and debate.<sup>2</sup> Of particular relevance to Davis's artistic response to the attack, as we will see, is the point that Velásquez painting contains a sublimation of its own that precedes Richardson's equation of it with the Virgin. As staged reconstructions of the painting's pictorial geometry have shown, the mirror is angled not to show Venus's face to the spectator but her genitalia (McKim-Smith, 2002). In an instance of sublimation that perfectly accords with Freud's theory that thoughts connected to the sexual organs were displaced 'upwards,' Venus's face *fronts* for the sight of the female body which psychoanalysis insists so profoundly troubles the male psyche (Freud, 1995).

As in *Militant Methods*, *Curtain's* response to the effacement of feminist agency and its visibility deals with the nature of mark-making and of constructing pictorial corpses. For each of Richardson's seven slashes against the painting, Davis produced seven prints that emulate and alter the National Gallery poster of Velásquez's painting. Each print overlays an enlarged photocopy of the photograph of Richardson's act on the nude body of Venus. Their scales matched and the photocopy carefully aligned, the effect at first is almost of an x-ray view through the seamlessness

of the poster surface to Richardson's act, concealed under layers of conservators' work. As the series progresses through its seven iterations, however, so two changes gradually occur. First, the photocopy is itself re-photocopied with each new work in the series, losing form and legibility each time. As its lines and contours lose distinction, so Venus's body especially is abstracted through over-exposure, fusing with the increasingly uncertain ground—and blending into the ever-more-warped rectangular frame—of the original image. This process ensured that Velásquez's nude was partially effaced, but with each successive photocopying Davis carefully reinscribed Richardson's cuts in drawn pencil lines, so that *they* start to register as the consistent, intentional artistic act at each print's centre. Drawing is aligned here with incision and with contestation, as if Richardson's sketchbook and her iconoclastic attack have shifted places, drawing now reading as slashing, or vice-versa. Davis's pencil lines also serve, we might note, to multiply, across the image, marks that substitute Richardson's slashes for the bodily reality that the painting occludes in its altered angle of reflection. Secondly, with each print in the sequence, the poster's caption gradually alters; the delicate pink lettering declaring 'The National Gallery' on the original poster is first overlaid, and finally replaced, with a line taken from Richardson's explanation of her attack: 'The Most Beautiful Woman in Mythological History.'

Here an ostensibly iconoclastic act becomes a reparative gesture, a caring for subjective and political experiences veiled in the 'perfect' aesthetic image. If the conservators who restored the painting to aesthetic completeness enacted a form of institutional, proprietorial care, Davis's redrawn cuts care instead for the political force which motivated Richardson. And, in the works made over the past five years, the questions of value that underpinned Richardson's propulsion to 'deeds, not words' have turned for Davis (as for many others in art, politics, and theory) to a reconsideration of the labour of care, of social reproduction, that underpins all economic value while being excluded from the very terms of the economy.

2. That Richardson later became a member of the British fascist movement is one cause for this. So too is her later suggestion that a discomfort at the prurient interest of male spectators in the Venus was an additional motivation for her acts. A feminist response to these difficulties and inconsistencies is found in Kean (1998).

One point of departure for this reconsideration was an extended dialogue with Faith Wilding, whose 1972 performance work *Waiting*, made for 'Womanhouse' in Los Angeles, was cited by Davis in a body of work presented at Art Basel (Davis, 2007). The exchange and collaboration between Davis and Wilding resulted in *The Long Loch: How Do We Go On From Here?* at Glasgow's Centre for Contemporary Art in 2010. During this exhibition, the artists hung fabric banners from the gallery's first-floor offices [fig. 07]. One posed, or re-posed, an interrogative feminist slogan of the 1970s: 'Workers of the world: who washes your socks?' The other framed

its question in an emphatic present tense: 'what is the work of love today?' Within hours these questions had received an answer of sorts, irreverently scrawled on a bed sheet and suspended from a residential apartment in a facing building: 'your mum washes my socks'. In retrospect, this recourse to the denigration of maternal labour casts a long shadow over Davis's own consequent preoccupation with visualising, or 're-visioning' (a phrase the artist borrows from Adrienne Rich, via Yvonne Rainer, to characterize her work), 'the work of love' so often carried out precisely in the 'natural' guise of mothering.



Fig. 07. Kate Davis, *What is the work of love today\_* 2012 installation view Art Basel Miami

In 2012 Davis made a sculpture that returned to one of the questions which she and Wilding had posed to the public. *What Is the Work of Love Today* [fig. 08] consists of a replica version of Robert Indiana's 1964 *Love*. While *Love*'s perennial iconicity derives from its economical compression of four letters and an abstract concept into a neat square, here its good form was emulated only to be disaggregated, shattered into multiple abstract units, rendered more or less illegible.

It is notable that Davis also developed a series of works on paper, *What is the work of love today (Helping at home I-VIII)*, [fig. 09] which clarified her renewed deployment of the titular question by taking the various abstracted shapes of the sculptural work, and painting them over a set of illustrations taken from an early-years book which depicts small children assisting their mother with domestic tasks.

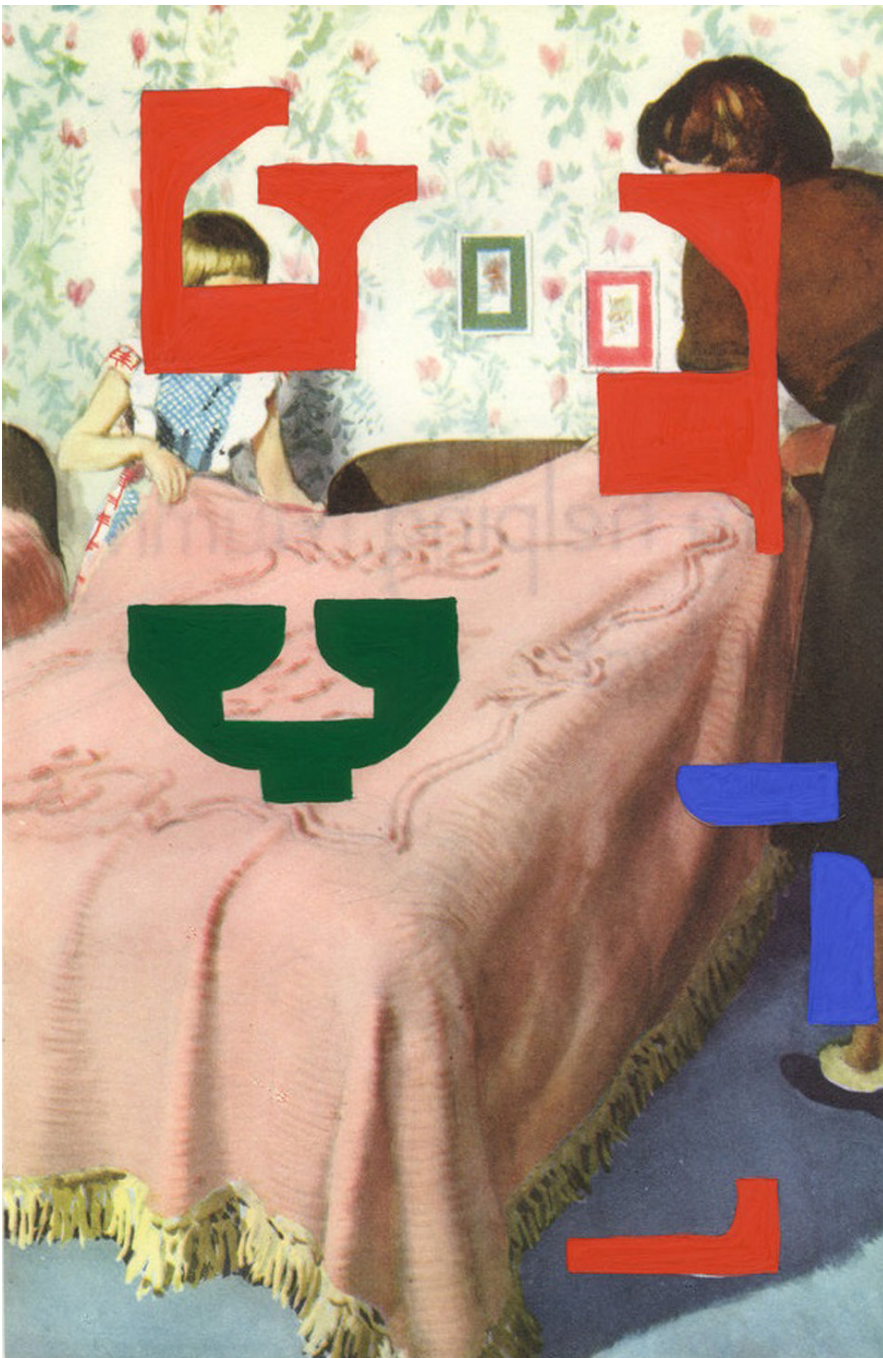


Fig. 08. Kate Davis, *What is the work of love today Helping at home VII*



Fig. 09- Kate Davis and Faith Wilding, *The Long Loch banners*, 2010

The 2014 film *Weight* [fig. 10] extended Davis's practice of cutting into the received systems of value in which artworks are lodged and replicating existing works so as to incisively, decisively alter them. In this case, the work in question was a 1961 BBC television documentary on sculptor Barbara Hepworth, which Davis subjected to two displacements. At the level of its spoken content, both the narrator's fulsome evocation of the splendour of Hepworth's work, and her own spoken accounts of its genesis, were replicated, with strategic alterations to change the objects and working processes discussed from those proper to sculpture to those of housework. This was done with no lowering of the rhetorical temperature, so that we hear cooking and cleaning described in awed tones as "massive and monumental." An actress emulates Hepworth's own *ex cathedra* pronouncements too, but here she speaks only as 'this woman.' The account of the evolution of her style becomes one of "training as the same sink as her mother" and of how "it took a long time for me to find my own personal way of making meals, a long time to discover the purest flavours which would exactly evoke my own sensations." Over images of quotidian female labour we hear that "the right hand is the motor when ironing, and the left hand is the thinking, feeling hand," and so on. Though this mismatch of tone and content often elicits laughter

on the part of audiences, it is not (only) intended sarcastically, for the work so described is indeed the monumental one of reproducing the entire social fabric and the very conditions of possibility of art. As Silvia Federici stated in 'Wages for Housework' "we must admit that capital has been very successful in hiding our work. It has created a true masterpiece at the expense of women" (1975: 219).

Davis also displaced the visual content of the BBC film completely, creating rostrum camera versions of its set-piece, studio-shot images of Hepworth's sculptures, and substituting in their place items such as peeled potatoes, washing bucket and rubber gloves, shopping bag and purse. She also searched the BBC archives for any footage of housework that was roughly contemporaneous with the original Hepworth documentary. This shift in content is not arbitrary, for Hepworth's work often addressed the topos of 'mother and child' and its complex, equivocal negotiations of the relations between materiality and maternity, gender position and authorial agency, have been extensively analysed (Wagner, 2005: 135-191). Unsurprisingly, perhaps, and despite the diligent collaboration of the BBC, Davis's researches here



Fig. 10. Kate Davis, *Weight*, 2014, HD video. installation view at 'Nudes Never Wear Glasses' Stills Gallery Edinburgh 2017

produced only scant returns—fleeting scenes, some so short that they had to be treated as still images, and anonymous subjects. Where Hepworth's sculptures often turned on the relation between solid forms and the holes carved through them, Davis's *Weight* is itself in a sense a portrait of an absence. Though it may seem to overextend the term 'iconoclasm' to apply it to this work, *Weight* is indeed engaged in a struggle over

artistic images and objects. Here the weight of barely-recognised work pressures—disfigures even—the structure upon which it is placed, namely the rhetorics of artistic authorship and of individualistic narratives of artistic becoming. Hepworth herself not the victim of this action, which targets instead the systems of value into which her words must enter in order to locate her work as artwork at all.

Davis's 2016 retrospective exhibition at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery was titled *The Unswept Floor*. The title recalls those Greek mosaic designs that in trompe l'oeil fashion suggested the aftermath of a symposium through those morsels that fall from the table – gatherings, perhaps, like that which according to Plato inaugurated philosophy's thinking of love. In *On Sensitive Ground* [fig. 11], a series of prints produced for the exhibition, she chose to literalise the domestic lexicon of the printing process – its plates, beds, presses, blankets, trays, sinks and so on – by using metal plates cut to the shape of their nominal household equivalents, which she then used as per their normal function. The result was the production of printable marks indexed to housework, but not to the codes by which it is normally represented (or effaced): sweeping, scrubbing, eating, and tending to a child became acts of inscription.



Fig. 11. Kate Davis, *On Sensitive Ground (sink)* 2016

In keeping with the ethos of her artistic practice, Davis made space in *The Unswept Floor* for her new prints to enter into relation with a set of works by other artists that resonated with, or laid the ground for, her own explorations of maintenance work. Where Duchamp proposed to use a shovel or a urinal as artworks, and a Rembrandt as an ironing board, Davis drew into a shared exposure with the sensitive ground of the work of love artworks such as a tiny, tender Rembrandt etching of his mother, and *Task* by Joanna Margaret Paul showing, simply, ironing. Davis made, we might say, an unworked community of artworks, a set of relations sharing themselves out. Kate Davis's complicated love of drawing, her pleasure in drawing—in art, in fact—is itself a shattered love, in other words, one that is practiced in pieces or shatters, in and through cuts, erasures, effacements, acts of appropriation and of dispossession. It is a love that 'cuts itself across itself' as Nancy puts it in the epigraph to this essay. It is a re-visioning comparable to Nancy's re-thinking of love as an undergoing of the experience of love which 'lets the experience inscribe itself' (Nancy, 1991: 84).

The last lines of Dario Gamboni's still indispensable book *The Destruction of Art* turn to iconoclasm's seemingly paradoxical complicity with the love of images noted at the start of this essay. 'The history of iconoclasm,' Gamboni concludes, 'continues to accompany art like a shadow, bearing witness to its substance and weight' (Gamboni, 1997: 336). This formulation risks scanting historical challenges to art's weightiness, or to the scales on which it is measured, subsuming these within an economy of simple reversals in which the figures of the iconoclast and iconophile swap places in an otherwise unchanging system of value. Gamboni himself invokes, only to dismiss, the category of the inadvertent, agency-free destruction of art—often avant-gardist art that emulates or is embodied in detritus, dirt or waste—by cleaners or other maintenance workers. Might there be, however, a different iconoclasm to be found, or re-visioned, there? Davis practice is an attempt to use her labours of love to draw attention back to those acts of cleaning, care, or maintenance which, as 'works of love,' are not inscribed in the ledgers of value. The shadow cast by that as-yet-unavowed work is indeed where the weight in Kate Davis's art lies.

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