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STOP FRAME, REWIND, PUSH FORWARD: MARY KELLY'S LOVE SONGS

TEXT / SUSAN RICHMOND

The artist initially balked at the salmon-colored walls, no doubt expecting to find her work installed in a more typical, white-cube exhibition space. But Roger Buerge, *Documenta XII*'s director, and curator Ruth Noack insisted that the color stay, citing their desire to strike an emotive chord with visitors to the Neue Galerie. The artist complied, and for the remainder of the summer of 2007, Mary Kelly's four-part installation, *Love Songs*, remained on view in its oddly pink—dare one say "ultra-feminine"—environment.¹



Installation view of *Love Songs* at Documenta XII, Kassel, Germany, 2007 (courtesy of the artist and Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA)

In the end, the salmon walls may not have been altogether detrimental to Kelly's project. The museum, an institutional nexus of social and aesthetic relations, has been an important site for her practice since the 1970s. At a time when many artists were abandoning the museum's elitism to engage more directly with the democratic potential of film and television, Kelly found that the "archaic" gallery space enabled modes of viewer interaction not afforded by media technology. "An exhibition takes place," she wrote in 1981, "not [as] the continuous progression of images unfolding on the cinema screen, but [as] the flickering fragmented frames of the editing machine; a passage very much at the disposal of the spectator to stop frame, rewind, push forward."² Kelly's version of the museum's "spectator-as-producer" drew its logic from Walter Benjamin's notion that outmoded artifacts and spaces harbor unfulfilled and often forgotten potential, to be radically appropriated in the production of new knowledge. For Kelly, the gallery space continues to enable open-ended and reflexive interaction. As such, any last-minute curatorial decisions—say, to have pink walls—impose a specific but by no means definitive framework for the reception of her work.

Begun in 2005, *Love Songs* presents a series of intergenerational conversations between women for whom feminism was and continues to be a vital social and political movement. The project was inspired by Kelly's desire to explore "what is left after the specific demands of the moment have faded and what, if anything, is passed on from one generation to the next."³ If the legacy of early feminism is the manifest content of *Love Songs*, the project also explores history itself, and more specifically the roles played by memory, desire, and fantasy in the formation of historical narratives.

Kelly has a stated, personal stake in her project. Now a professor of art at UCLA, she has long participated in the women's movement as an artist, activist, writer, and educator. Her earliest and best-known installation, *Post-Partum Document*, 1973-1979, marked the beginning of her aesthetic interrogation of female experiences in post-industrial, patriarchal society. Produced while Kelly was living in London, *Post-Partum Document* traces her experiences of raising her

infant son. Its rigorous intellectual framework—a combination of Marxist, semiotic, and Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts—reflects an interest she shared with many British feminists in developing a theoretical apparatus to articulate the subjective dimension of women's experiences.



Installation view of *Flashing Nipple Remix*, 2005, 3 black-and-white transparencies in light boxes, 38 x 48 x 5 inches each, edition of 3 + AP (courtesy of the artist and Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA)

Over the years, however, Kelly's early work has come to feature prominently in a series of problematic historical divisions in early feminist art. Work such as *Post-Partum Document* is regarded as a sophisticated reaction to the so-called essentialism and theoretical naiveté of earlier feminist practices, which often prevailed in the U.S. For Kelly, this narrative not only aligns her work with a later generation of feminist practitioners, but also misrepresents the vital interface of political activism and theory from which her work initially emerged. For this reason, perhaps, *Love Songs* gives more prominence to feminist political action than to theory. In *Sisterhood is POW...*, 2005, for example, Kelly draws on her memory of participating in demonstrations against the Miss World pageant at London's Royal Albert Hall in 1971. Riffing on the popular feminist slogan "sisterhood is powerful," Kelly's title reinvests the phrase with the palpable political force it once possessed. The work consists of thirty-six black, acrylic panels incised with laser-cut script, backlit and set against the wall on wooden shelves. Two narrative strands unfold across the panels. One describes the events inside the hall, where "contestants flash / teeth and leg-length" as "judges tot up the / facts: figures, faces." The other represents the demonstrations outside, a satirical piece of street theater with participants bearing signs, "Miss Used, Miss / Laid, Miss Taken" while others "flash / luminous nipples and / crotches at fans." Typical of Kelly's work, the minimal materiality of *Sisterhood is POW...* is nonetheless rich with visual signification: the backlit script metonymically calls forth the "flashing" corporeal spectacles occurring both inside the hall and out on the street, while the rows of black panels look like picket signs held aloft by the protestors.



The related work *Flashing Nipple Remix*, 2005, three black-and-white backlit photographic transparencies, clarifies the somewhat cryptic description of "luminous nipples and crotches." For this light box triptych, Kelly directed and documented five young women's reenactment of the historical event, in which the performers attached lights over their clothing at the breasts and crotches, using an archival snapshot of the original street theater as script. In the first image, the women stand relatively still, their dark silhouettes punctuated by the bright points of light at their nipples and crotches. By the third image, their bodies have all but vanished behind the frenetic pattern of flickering lights.



Detail of *Flashing Nipple Remix*

As the documentation of a reenactment, *Flashing Nipple Remix* says less about the specific circumstances of the original performance than it foregrounds the processes by which historical connections are forged. On many levels, Kelly's references to "light" call forth Benjamin's famous definition of "true history," whereby "the past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again."⁴ The moment of recognition, the flash, is an injunction to resist the appearance of history as mythology. In having a group of young women reenact a minor episode in early feminist political action, Kelly encourages them to look askance at that legacy and to assume "the task of dream interpretation," as Benjamin described the historian's job.⁵ In turn, the ghostly forms that appear in the images in *Flashing Nipple Remix* encourage the viewer to trace her own, imaginative dream path.



Detail of *Flashing Nipple Remix*

A recent addition to Kelly's Love Songs, *Multi-Story House*, 2007, is the series

A recent addition to Kelly's *Love Songs*, *Multi-Story House*, 2007, is the series' most interactive work. Made in collaboration with the artist's husband Ray Barrie, the construction's size recalls a small shed. Here, fragments of quotations about early feminist politics that Kelly gathered from two generations of women are laser-etched on white, acrylic panels. Comments from women born after 1968 face outward; the perspectives of Kelly's age group appear on the inside. The quotations are an aggregation of memories, descriptions, opinions, and proclamations that elude the formation of a cohesive narrative. The two sets of generational stories are strikingly different. The voices from inside the house overwhelmingly speak in collective terms—statements such as "you didn't speak for others" and "there was no master plan" reinforce each other. The voices on the outside stress individual, and at times contradictory perspectives about the impact of feminism. While one proclaims, "I missed the moment when women could act together decisively," another asserts, "I wouldn't say I missed something." What's more, many of the younger voices frame feminism in terms of race, sexuality, and nationality. "I grew up dodging bullets in Angola," states one, "so the term feminist didn't mean much."



Still from *WLM Demo Remix*, 2005, black-and-white film loop, 90 seconds, projection dimensions variable, edition of 5 + AP (courtesy of the artist and Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA)

Kelly's decision to organize the texts by generations was risky: on the one hand, the generational model imputes that the past constitutes a recoverable set of facts to which present forms of feminist consciousness are beholden; on the other, it insinuates that feminism in its present form constitutes a better, more progressive version of past generations. In both instances, the generational paradigm not only situates history as a linear, progressive phenomenon, but it also demands fidelity to one's moment in time. Although *Multi-Story House* appears initially to uphold this structure, it also suggests ways to think beyond it. Kelly's choice of the house-form proves significant in this regard. As a trope of feminine domesticity, the home nonetheless served as an important site of early feminist activism and consciousness-raising—a safe space that women reclaimed for political organization and sisterly communion. Like the gallery itself, the house is an outmoded space, radically reconfigured as a site of feminist intervention, first by early feminists and again by Kelly.

Lighting is a crucial dimension of *Love Story*. Illuminated from within, *Multi-Story House* initially beckons with a warm, comforting glow. Once we step inside, however, the light assumes a different, starker quality that dispels any lingering nostalgia and demands a more reflexive engagement with the text. Of course, the viewer remains in control of the situation: she chooses how, or even whether, to read the quotations as she moves in and around the installation. Though her movement unfolds in a present tense, it also gestures toward the "future anterior," the tense Lacan employed to characterize the coming-into-being of subjectivity. Future anteriority has more recently been taken up by a number of feminist scholars seeking alternative theories of female subjectivity. Diane Elam claims that the future anterior "emphasizes radical uncertainty...."

Stone then claims that she feels another "unprocessed feeling" and that "[it] is a message that is handed over to an unknown addressee and accepts that its meaning in part will have to depend upon that addressee."⁶ *Multi-Story House* offers a comparable moment of uncertainty, in which feminist voices are momentarily freed from the burden of generational time.



Detail of *Sisterhood is POW...*, 2005, 36 units, laser-cut cast acrylic, linear strip lighting, wood support, 15 x 20 and 24 x 20 inches each, 72 feet overall (courtesy of the artist and Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA)

A similar type of temporal collapse occurs in *WLM Demo Remix*, 2005, a ninety-second film loop depicting a contemporary restaging of a photograph of another early feminist demonstration in 1970 in New York, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment giving U.S. women the right to vote. The footage begins with a photograph of the reenactment and slowly dissolves into the archival image. Lingering on as a ghostly presence behind the original, the contemporary image never completely disappears. Likewise, the historical image never comes entirely into focus, but also slowly dissolves as the footage loops.



Detail of *Sisterhood is POW...*, 2005, 36 units, laser-cut cast acrylic, linear strip lighting, wood support, 15 x 20 and 24 x 20 inches each, 72 feet overall (courtesy of the artist and Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA)

The image in *WLM Demo Remix* is more iconic than the street theater of *Flashing Nipple Remix*: a formidable crowd, primarily of women, presses towards the camera, bearing aloft a protest sign reading "Unite for Woman's Emancipation." In the re-staging, the signage has changed, the political proclamation replaced by a verse excerpt that reads "From Stone to Cloud." Based on Sylvia Plath's 1960 poem "Love Letter," the phrase couples emancipation with transformation, the image of a heavy and inert stone yielding to a light and nimble cloud. Plath wrote the poem soon after her daughter's birth, and the line, "from stone to cloud," captures the profound impact of that experience.

experience.




Detail of *Sisterhood is POW...*, 2005, 36 units, laser-cut cast acrylic, linear strip lighting, wood support, 15 x 20 and 24 x 20 inches each, 72 feet overall (courtesy of the artist and Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica, CA)

With a nod to Plath's poem, Kelly's *Love Songs* is both a proclamation of and a call for a feminist community based in love, with all of the responsibilities and pleasures that the concept elicits. Though not an implicit source for Kelly, Luce Irigaray's writings suggest a way of thinking about this notion. Light, the dominant medium in Kelly's work, plays a central role in Irigaray's philosophies on love. Along with air, light forms the connective tissue or texture that suffuses the space between self and other. In the conclusion of *Elemental Passions*, Irigaray hints at the significance of this fullness: "I opened my eyes and saw the cloud.... Seeing it all the better for remembering the density of air remaining in between. But the resistance of air being revealed, I felt something akin to the possibility of a different discovery of myself."⁷ Here, Irigaray recognizes that we understand ourselves through our relations with others and not against them. *Love Songs* makes a similar proposition, and in doing so, Kelly's project articulates an intergenerational feminist subjectivity born out of connection rather than division.

NOTES

1. *Love Songs* was also featured in "Mary Kelly: Words are Things" at the Centre for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, March 28—June 8, 2008.
2. Mary Kelly, "Re-Viewing Modernist Criticism," *Screen* 22:3 (1981); reprinted in Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996, 100.
3. Kelly, "Images," *diacritics* 35:3 (2007): c3.
4. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, tr. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, 1968, 255.
5. Benjamin, cited in Ackbar Abbas, "On Fascination: Walter Benjamin's Images," *New German Critique* 48 (Autumn 1989): 59.
6. Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 41.
7. Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, tr. Joanne Collie and Judith Still, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 105.

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