



**Faith Wilding: Fearful Symmetries
A Retrospective**

September 5 – October 10, 2014
Opening reception: September 5, 6 – 8pm



Rhodes College

—1848—

Clough-Hanson Gallery at Rhodes College
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Memphis, TN 38112

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Faith Wilding: Fearful Symmetries is a traveling exhibition organized by Threewalls, Chicago. Initiating curators for the exhibition are Shannon Stratton and Abigail Satinsky. The exhibition and tour are made possible in part by: The Irving Harris Foundation, The Foundation for Contemporary Arts, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Other People's Pixels and Threewalls' benefactors, Lisa Key and Kevin Lint.

Additional support for the exhibition at Clough-Hanson Gallery is provided by the Department of Art and Art History at Rhodes College and the Lillian and Morrie Moss Endowment for the Visual Arts.

Threewalls is dedicated to increasing Chicago's cultural capital by cultivating contemporary art practice and discourse. Through a range of exhibition and public programs, including symposiums, lectures, performances and publications, threewalls creates a locus of exchange between local, national and international contemporary art communities.

cover image:

"Our skins are so thin where they touch," **Imago Femina** series
Watercolor and graphite, 1974
30x23"

Introduction

I'm not sure I can wrestle with everything Faith Wilding is in a short introduction. And in stating that, I am made aware of the necessity of the exhibition, the exhibition with accompanying texts, with accompanying archives, with accompanying reprints and of course, unraveling from this: the consequent artist talks, discussions, questions, and critical writing that come after the show opens. Everything is necessary, and perhaps then some, because to understand the complexity of Faith's work, not only its intention and subsequent materiality, but its influences and that which it has influenced, requires that collection. There is no succinct Faith Wilding.

It struck me that a retrospective of Faith's work was long over due when it was announced that the Women's Caucus for Art at the College Art Association would be honoring her with a lifetime achievement award. Needless to say, the breadth of Faith's practice alone warrants acknowledgement: from groundbreaking performance work to pivotal writing on feminism and art, to a painting practice that ushered in feminist abstraction alongside critical art making on biotechnology and war. Faith's productivity is impressive certainly, but it is her steady attention, care and total investment in all branches of her practice that make her a phenom. Spending time with her at her home in Rhode Island, carefully examining her rich archive of artwork and documents, made this abundantly apparent. She is a profoundly dedicated and generous artist – her hard work an amalgamation of care for her field, for her research and for her politics. As we mined her flat files and unpacked artworks, delved into filing cabinets and combed through slides, a lifetime came into focus, the extent of which would be challenging at best to honor in Threewalls' rather modest exhibition space.

Throughout Faith's work is a negotiation of becoming. Her drawings, paintings, sculpture and performance concentrate on the threshold, always framing that moment of emergence: beings manifest, voices are rendered and bodies become. Faith's threshold is the fleshy boundary between the psychological and the physical, and she renders the tension inherent here, as Amelia Jones describes it, in "glistening, moist, flesh soaked watercolor."¹ Fearful Symmetries lets an audience in on a lifetime of exploring

the never-ending process that is becoming, and the particular nature of this transformation for a woman, a feminist, and an artist. As you enter the gallery, that exploration is directed by a key image, the delicious, *Red Tongue* (1978). *Red Tongue* became the ideal pivot point: an image that recalled the leaf and chrysalis forms so prevalent in Faith's work, at the same time that it referenced the body and the voice.

With feminism now in its fourth wave, Faith's work feels timely. Her depiction of the persistent process of becoming is something that feminism parallels in its own process of regrouping and rematerializing as perspectives and convictions continually shift and are redefined. In the archive room, curated by Threewalls Associate Director, Abigail Satinsky, Faith's vital role in feminist organizing is evident through papers that range from early Feminist Art Program publications to her work with subRosa, a collective of feminist artists committed to art, social activism and politics. In light of the fourth wave being heavily defined by technology and its capability to "build strong, popular and reactive movement online,"ⁱⁱ Faith's dreams of a "new generation of young women – wired and inspired – who will use the knowledge and experience gained from past liberation movements to work for a new vision"ⁱⁱⁱ seems to have transformed into reality. This fourth wave, engaging more pragmatism and humor, is more inclusive and down-to-earth than ever-before, and due to its wider and more popular reach, might be poised for the work Faith had hoped for: contending with the "global conditions of technological and environmental change."

I'd like to acknowledge and thank Irina Aristarkhova and Mario Ontiveros for their insightful writing for this publication; Abigail Satinsky for her thoughtful diligence in selecting and assembling work for the archive; The Irving Harris Foundation, The Foundation for Contemporary Art and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts for their generous support of this exhibition; David Roman at Armand Lee for his heroic, last-minute framing; Alex Gartelmann for making us look good; Chad Kouri for his design expertise on this publication (and more); our dedicated staff, volunteers and Executive Board and of course, Faith Wilding, *for trusting us with her life's work*.

- Shannon R. Stratton

Executive & Creative Director, Threewalls

ⁱ Jones, Amelia. "Faith Wilding: The Enfleshing of Painting." n.paradoxa, online Issue 10, June 1999.

ⁱⁱ Cochrane, Kate. "The Fourth Wave of Feminism: Meet the Rebel Women." The Guardian, online, December 10, 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jones, Amelia

^{iv} Ibid.

Being Like Leaves

by Faith Wilding

My mother's voice is calling me. I crouch lower into the dense jasmine bushes not breathing a sound. I see her feet in dusty home-made sandals two meters away. She sighs and gives up, leaving me free to continue my work in the "fairy garden" under the bushes.

At the moment I'm midwifing a great grey-green cicada into the world. Encased in its carapace it sits blindly in the dappled shade, convulsed with the pangs of its birth. I wait patiently as a crack opens down its back, and in a moment the darkly wet and iridescent body begins to shrug itself out of the light-brown, translucent carapace. We children called them "zizi-houses". The intricately fashioned discarded cicada chrysalises were prized possessions, and the mainstay of my fairy garden. These miniature "environments" playfully mimicked the adult world of survival farming at the commune where I lived. I count them among my first art-works that provided a primal lexicon of shapes, textures, designs, and processes.

My fairy garden was a miniature landscape with fields, forests, pools, wandering paths and flower-beds. Fresh larkspur and windmill blossoms made startling patches of blue and white. Scarlet berries threaded on tiny twigs were beaded fences winding along paths paved with glossy citrus leaves. I spent hours maintaining, arranging, counting, repairing, selecting, designing, balancing color and mass, patterns and random arrangements. My mother's voice went unheeded as I worked—primeval, not Adam, nor Eve, but maker and mover of this vast, fresh, tiny world.

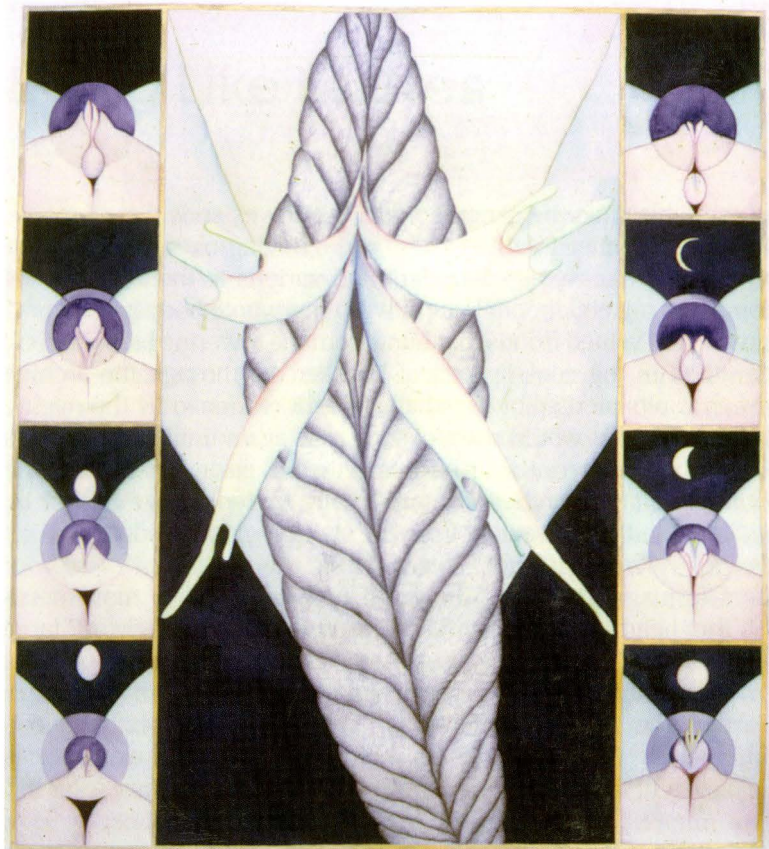
Leaves, too, I gathered endlessly. The ancient metaphor of the leaf's cycle signifying the human life span sang in me in the language

of the Bible: "...as the generations of the leaves so is that of man."; and of Hopkins: "Margaret are you grieving/over Goldengrove unleaving...". Leaves so abundant and various in the lush tropical forests of my childhood; I could wrap my whole body in the great, green, red-veined fronds that hung from the towering banana trees. Swathed in the cool, living leaf I looked up through the arching green vaults pierced by the shafts of light reddened by the mighty flower-bracts. I would not feel such awe again until I stood in the center of the labyrinth of Chartres cathedral gazing up through the branching stone arches clustered with carved foliage and lit by shafts of red and blue light from the stained-glass windows.

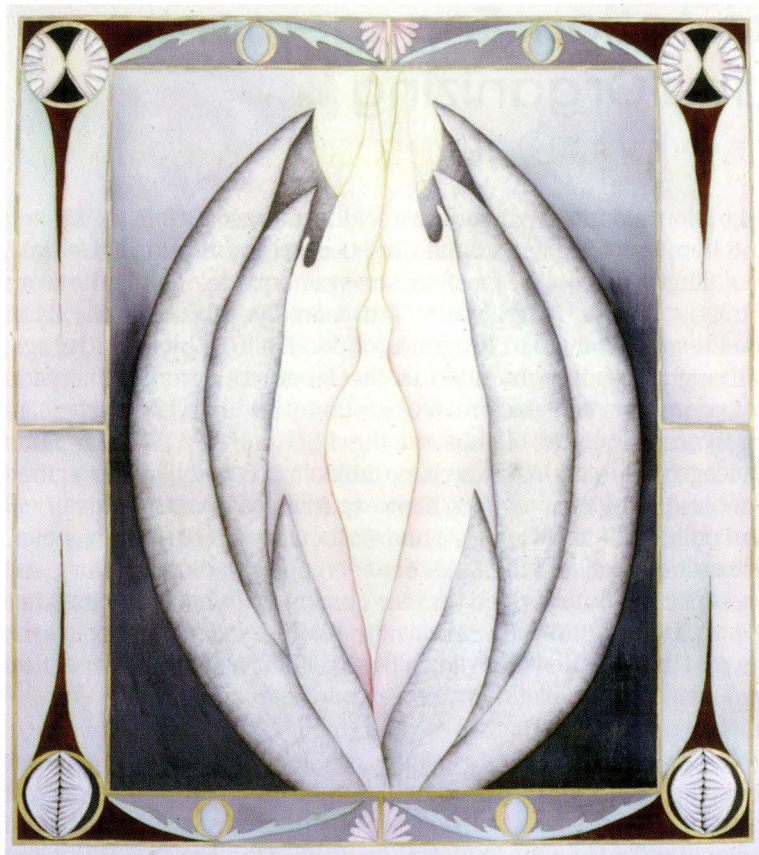
Leaf-forms suggested a thousand images, feelings, movements of the heart and mind. Years later, I made a body of large leaf forms suggesting tongues, flames, cocoons, bodies writhing and reaching, green souls leaping from the dark earth. The forms and ideas sprang from the sensuous immediacy of my childhood memories, from the experiences of leaves.

O leaves of my childhood, I remember your shapes and your names: were I to wander those forests again, I would know which to pluck to cool my hot tongue, to chew for a pleasant sour taste, to lay as a poultice on my wounds, and which to crush between my sheets to release tangy spices.

I am a being like leaves.



"Chrysalis II," **Cracks in the Carapace** series
Watercolor and graphite, 1974
32x29"



"Burst Chrysalis," **Cracks in the Carapace** series
Watercolor and pencil, 1974
32x29"

and the consequences of yielding to a host of social pressures and capitalist-infused desires to harness science to enhance the self. Drawing on "scientific" images and language from the seventeenth century to the present, *Embryoworlds* gives a sociopolitical history of the human body and focuses attention on the grisly effects of engineering life. The works' titles and the text within them give pause: ICBM Embryo, "infibulation," *Target Embryo*, "excised clitoris," *Anomalous Embryo (vaginacentric)*, "severe male infertility," and Male Failure. Wilding's visually alluring formal properties -- the vellum's sliver-thin surface and the stain-effects of the watercolors -- belie a microcosm of a world of remaking, mining and patenting life materials. In such work, Wilding writes that she seeks "an immanent, radical art that uses convulsive beauty as a transformative tactic."⁶ An inquiry into bioethics, *Embryoworlds* thus offers a cautionary counterpoint to the often laudatory discourse embracing the post-human and human-machine dynamics.

War Subjects (1995 – 1996), another ongoing series, continues the examination of the vexed, if not also pathological, relationship between machines and bodies by focusing on war violence and violence against women.⁷ Started in response to the war in Bosnia in 1992, Wilding's series engages nationalism, ethnic cleansing, rape, killing, and forced migration. Images and personal stories at the time, and today, testify to the atrocities in Bosnia, and Wilding's work contributes to this testimony. However, she calls upon the past to address present violence and existing structures of political power. The knights and men-at-arms, in War Subjects, do not evoke legends and fairytales, but indicate grim histories of genocide stretching back in time. Wilding's subject matter includes axes, swords, and body armor, military weapons and equipment more suitable for medieval reenactment tournaments than late-twentieth century battlefields. The antiquated arsenal emphasizes the viciousness of hand-to-hand, face-to-face combat. It focuses on the bare vulnerability of bodies and life, which is also felt through the thin skin-like paper, collage, and watercolor. *War Subjects (Battlefield)* sutures together the metaphorical and the material history of technologies of warfare.⁸ In this work, Wilding's depiction of scattered limbs across the battlefield reveals the failure of the melding of human, armor, and weaponry to reinforce and to protect the body. Extending this point, she writes that this series "addresses the psycho-somatic states of the contemporary body:

a recombinant war body violently cobbled together from nomadic social, cultural, and political fragments.”⁹

Simultaneously in dialogue with her 2-D studio-based work, Wilding maintains a collaborative-based practice that also demonstrates a commitment to the analysis of women, gender, and histories of the body, as well as to activism and feminist political organizing. In 1998, while a Research Fellow at the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon, she co-founds subRosa, self-defined as “a collective of interdisciplinary feminist artists committed to combining art, social activism and politics to explore and critique the intersections of information and bio technologies on women’s bodies, lives and work.”¹⁰ For instance, subRosa’s book *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices!* of which Wilding is a co-editor, examines the intersections of race discourses and technology, that had at the time of publication received less rigorous analysis.¹¹ As a collective, subRosa’s critical practice builds alliances by employing various methods of engagement: staging media interventions, unleashing “sneak attacks,” organizing public forums, participating in residencies and exhibitions. Decentralized, this feminist-directed network also maintains an active web-presence by providing users with an archive of subRosa’s projects and publications.

Wilding is committed to an engaged, sociopolitical practice. Holding open spaces for imagining solidarity serves as the organizing principle of her work.¹² Imagining solidarity is not idle daydreaming. Instead, it takes place in the questions her work raises about what is desired and needed to effect change in the realm of social or to bring about personal transformation (political or otherwise). It concerns sensitizing those who encounter her writing, art making, and teaching to the pressing urgencies of daily life and the material environment. Her work offers processes and strategies for imagining solidarity by creating conditions that allow for an ongoing commitment to action, engagement, organizing, and movement.

¹ Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands* (Santa Monica: Double X, Inc., 1977).

² bell hooks, “SISTERHOOD: Political Solidarity Among Women,” *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984; repr., South End Press, 2000), 67.

³ Ibid

⁴ For a selection of works from *Embryoworlds*, see Mario Ontiveros and Pamela Glaven's curatorial project "Portfolio," Special double issue, "Casualty," *The Massachusetts Review*, 52, no. 3 and 4 (2011): 470 – 475.

⁵ For a detailed analysis of *Embryoworlds*, see Amelia Jones, "Faith Wilding and the Enfleshing of Painting," *n.paradoxa* 10 (June 1999), http://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/nparadoxaissue10_Amelia-Jones_16-29.pdf. Jones' essay has greatly informed my understanding of this series of Wilding's work.

⁶ Ontiveros and Glaven, "Portfolio," 470.

⁷ War Subjects, while not on view in *Fearful Symmetries* can be seen on Wilding's website: <http://faithwilding.refugia.net>.

⁸ In the extended version of my essay, I situate this body of work and the issue of solidarity in relation to Wilding's Battle Dresses (1995-97), a contemporaneous series that the artist has "dedicated to the women raped in the former Yugoslavia," as cited on <http://faithwilding.refugia.net>.

⁹ Ontiveros and Glaven, "Portfolio," 470.

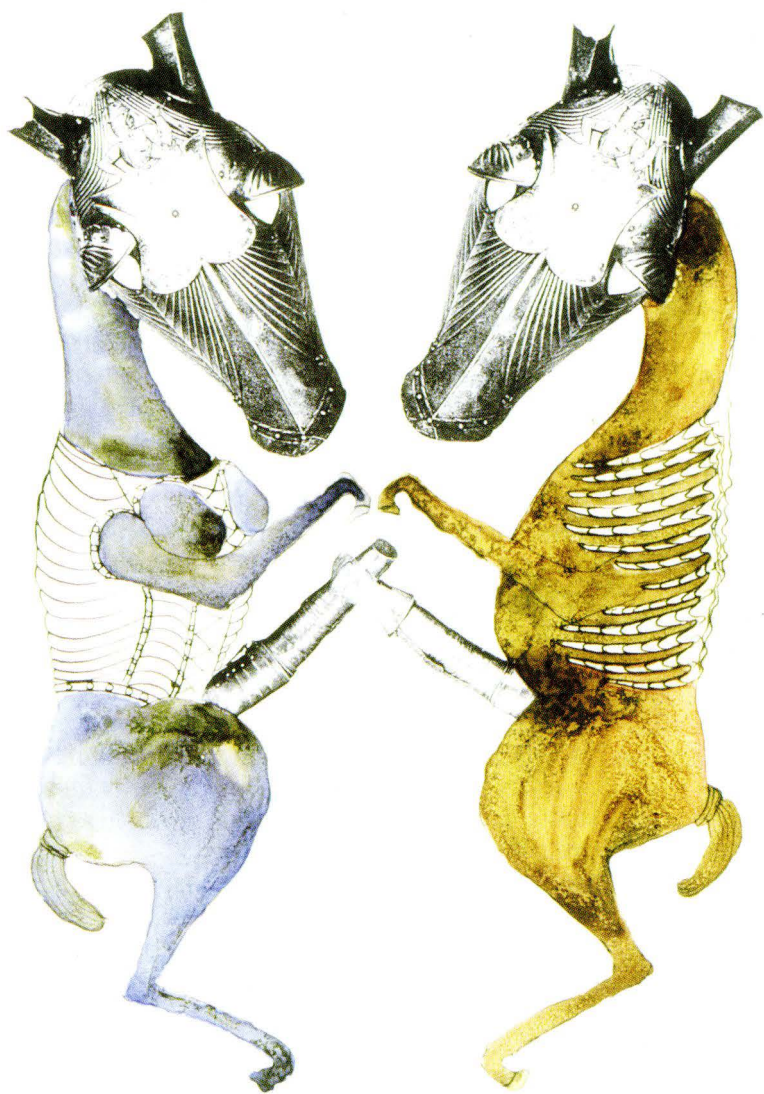
¹⁰ As cited on [cyberfeminism.net](http://www.cyberfeminism.net), the website hosting subRosa's work. See <http://www.cyberfeminism.net>.

¹¹ subRosa, *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices!* (New York: Autonomedia, 2002).

¹² In several interviews and phone meetings with Faith Wilding, "imagining solidarity" is a phrase that I have used to describe her multidisciplinary art practice. However, it is important to note that the phrase was initially inspired by ideas and issues raised in her lecture "Bread and Roses: How Do We Go on from Here," Vermont College of Fine Art, February 2011. Although I do not use imagining solidarity in the same way, I am aware of Craig J. Calhoun's use of the phrase in his essay, "Imagining Solidarity: Cosmopolitanism, Constitutional Patriotism, and the Public Sphere," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 147 – 171.



"Biodresses," **Embryoworld** series
Xerox collage, watercolor, ink, resin on vellum, 1998
70" x 48"



"Code of arms," **Recombinants** series
Xerox collage, watercolor, ink, 1993
9 x 12"

Waiting, Waiting With by Irina Aristarkhova

One of my students is sobbing. It is 2011, and the class is *Contemporary Women Artists*. Why? - I am asking. She replies: Because this is how I feel, this is the way we live. She is angry. She has just seen a three-minute video of Faith Wilding's performance, *Waiting*:

Waiting . . . waiting . . . waiting . . .
Waiting for someone to come in
Waiting for someone to hold me

...

Waiting to get sick
Waiting for things to get better
Waiting for winter to end
Waiting for the mirror to tell me that I'm old

...

Waiting for release
Waiting for morning
Waiting for the end of the day
Waiting for sleep
Waiting

It is 1972, at Womanhouse, a collective art project by the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, and Faith Wilding is rocking back and forth on a chair. The performance is as famous

as it is contemporary. Her figure imprints itself into our soul. Horror: We do not want to be her. We do not want to be one of those women who wait.

The artist herself has not imagined such a strong reaction, and her other projects of the time were often playful and colorful. Being so young, she probably was even taken aback by the overwhelming reaction of the audience. Tears were coming down people's cheeks. They were leaning forward. They were sitting around her, almost touching her knees like little children in a kindergarten listening to their teacher. I wonder if that nervousness, of so many people staring and crowding the room, contributed to the performance and overall mood. We have distanced ourselves since then. The audience no longer stands right there, in your face, or sits right next to your knees.

It is safer today. Better? Then why are my self-proclaimed no-feminism-needed-anymore art students of the 21st century having goose bumps? Why are they enraged and crying after *Waiting*? Why do I become angry, every time I watch this with them? A recognition, if not of oneself, then of one's mother, one's sister, one's grandmother, a million upon million of women, taken out of history, out of sight, memory, rocking in front of us, waiting. But Wilding had not waited as she was performing *Waiting*. She was chanting, remembering, raising the dead. Putting a curse on the horrors of that waiting.

For the artist, at least what I gather from our over a decade long conversation about *Waiting*, the performance is also a collaborative meditation on life, its stages and singularity. Wilding first had begun sketching a narrative about waiting in her notebook. After watching a Beckett play, a group of Womanhouse participants went for a meal and discussed the topic of waiting. A few words about what women have waited for were suggested, written down, some of which made their way into the final performance script. Wilding's connection to Beckett's work has been ongoing. She first saw his plays in the early 1960s, then a student at the University of Connecticut. In the 1980s she was the Associate Producer of Samuel Beckett's Radio Plays project in the US. However, Sartre's *No Exit* (1944) or Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1952) are dialogical, even though hardly relational. Waiting there is collective:

Estragon: What do we do now?

Vladimir: While waiting.

Estragon: While waiting.

Silence.

Vladimir: We could do our exercises.

Estragon: Our movements.

Vladimir: Our elevations.

Estragon: Our relaxations.

Vladimir: Our elongations.

Estragon: Our relaxations.

Vladimir: To warm us up.

Estragon: To calm us down.

This is self-help of waiting. Appeal to exercise, whether mental or physical, is comical. Nothing helps. There is no peace in their waiting. It is only negative, as a waiting stretched over life towards death. But waiting in Wilding's performance was no metaphor, no philosophical standing for absurdity of life. There is waiting, and there is waiting. Of this other waiting that Wilding's performance, poetically, stunningly, hauntingly, represented, Beckett and Sartre had no idea.

I pause. Next I show in my class *Wait-With* from 2007. The performance is a part of an important traveling exhibition "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution!" curated by Connie Butler. Wilding uses a similar form: the artist performs, alone, with her voice. She sits on a chair in front of the audience. Longer – over ten minutes. More vocal layers: singing songs from her childhood; speaking to her present and past friends and cultural influences. Now, she directly addresses her audience, inviting us to respond. She looks around, takes deep breaths, pauses. She wants to wait *with*:

Wait-with, an act of political love.

Wait-with, an action,

Wait-with, a meditation,

Wait-with, open space between actions,

Wait-with, a space of resistance,

in this room,

in this moment.

Wait-with as our work.

She is *at peace* with waiting. It is *her* waiting now. There is a deflationary feeling among the class members. The students do not have heightened emotional states. They have to engage, think, make an effort. It's a different perceptual register, corresponding to the forty years that have passed. Things have changed since 1972. Wilding's re-enactment of her own piece is a new work. *Wait-With* invites waiting. It refuses self-annihilation as the ultimate solution. Her *Wait-With* is not about self-help, some kind of positive psychology trick to forget the horrors of that waiting. But neither is it fatalistic or melancholic. Dealing with violent and violating waiting, head-on, even self-imposed, the artist welcomes waiting in her remarkable retake on it. Instead of rhythmic intensity, it is truncated: songs, monologue, questions to the audience. It is a pleasure of waiting, as in being-with.

There is this moment of hope in *Waiting for Godot*, when Vladimir says: "We are no longer alone, waiting for the night, waiting for Godot, waiting for ... waiting. All evening we have struggled, unassisted. Now it's over. It's already to-morrow." This moment passes, and it's not long before they decide to commit suicide. Wilding captures this moment not as the lost hope to be without waiting. Her *Wait-With* is still a contemplation, but now also an enjoyment of having lived well. A nourishing "waiting with" appears: parents, authors, friends; this moment, here and now. It is just for herself, and therefore, for me. All this wild waiting of Faith Wilding.



"Untitled," **Leaf** series
Graphite on paper, 1979-80
6.5' x 1.5'



Faith Wilding would like to thank Threewalls, Shannon Stratton and Abigail Satinsky, Hyla Willis, subRosa, Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Mira Schor, Irina Aristarkhova, Mario Ontiveros, Elizabeth Hess, Amelia Jones, Ellen Rothenberg and Dan Eisenberg, Helen Molesworth, Miwon Kwon, Mark Jeffery, Jim Duesing, Steve Kurtz, my VCFA posse, VCFA and SAIC, Lin Hixson, Kate Davis and Dominic Patterson, Page Sarlin, Deena Metzger, Suzanne Lacy, my students past and present, The Feminist Art Movement, Jim and Susan Lenfestey, and her family.

Faith Wilding is Professor Emerita of performance art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a graduate faculty member at Vermont College of Fine Arts, and currently a visiting scholar at the Pembroke Center, Brown University. Born in Paraguay, Wilding received her BA from the University of Iowa, and MFA from the California Institute of the Arts. Wilding was a co-initiator of the Feminist Art Programs in Fresno and at Cal Arts, and key contributor to the Womanhouse exhibition with *Crocheted Environment* and her *Waiting* performance. Her artworks have been featured in major feminist exhibitions including WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution; Sexual Politics; Division of Labor: Women's Work in Contemporary Art; and re.act Feminism. Her writings have been featured in such books as "The Power of Feminist Art", "By Our Own Hands" "The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader" (Edited by Amelia Jones), MEANING, and many more. Wilding has exhibited nationally and internationally, including the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid; Centre for Contemporary Art in Glasgow; MoMA PS1 and the Bronx Museum of Art in New York; Museum of Contemporary Art and Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; UC Riverside Museum of Art; the Singapore Art Museum; and many others. Wilding cofounded and collaborates with subRosa, a cyberfeminist cell of cultural producers using BioArt and tactical performance in the public sphere to explore and critique the intersections of information and biotechnologies in women's bodies, lives, and work, and she is the co-editor of "Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices!" She is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Creative Capital grant, and NEA artist grants.

Mario Ontiveros is a professor of contemporary art at California State University, Northridge. His research and writing focuses on critical art practices since 1970, examining issues of empowerment, social belonging, and political obligation. He also curates, writes art criticism, serves on the editorial board of X-TRA Contemporary Art Quarterly, and contributes to Vermont College of Fine Art.

Irina Aristarkhova was born in Moscow in 1969. She is the author of "Hospitality of the Matrix: Philosophy, Biomedicine, and Culture," and an Associate Professor of Art & Design, History of Art, and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Aristarkhova's current writing project engages aesthetics of hospitality in contemporary art, specifically focusing on the works of Lee Mingwei, Kathy High, Faith Wilding, Ana Prvacki, and Mithu Sen. Her work has been translated into seven languages.