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ARTFORUM

Faith Wilding on her life and work
As told to Jason Foumberg
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View of "Faith Wilding: Fearful Symmetries," 2014.

FEMINISM, in my experience, is not really studied these days. The language has changed so much. After a recent lecture I gave, many of the questions people were asking made it seem as though they weren't aware of feminist history. Perhaps the millennials aren't interested. What does it mean to be a feminist today? To become the head of Yahoo, making billions? It's a disgusting power thing. We still need to think politically about capitalism and patriarchy, and how they are basically wrecking the world. I find that so much of social networking—this kind of maker, DIY stuff—is apolitical. But it's attractive, of course, and it's very '60s; I've seen it before. Too much of it does not seem to have politics. Are any of these "social" networks inclusive? Are we creating a common good? A very favorite author of mine, Silvia Federici, talks about this. She's a strong socialist feminist.

I grew up in a puritanical Christian commune in South America. It was all God the father, Jesus the son. Women's bodies were always covered, and there was a strong gender separation between the males and females. At about twenty, this didn't work for me anymore. And that's what really drove me to feminism: As a kid, I felt like I never got any of my questions answered.

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On the commune we made our own clothes and shoes. We learned crochet, ceramics, handiwork, woodwork, and leatherwork. I also read like a demon and began to draw. Many of my early feminist abstractions come from nature. I grew up in a very lush tropical environment. The commune sent me to college in the US, so that I could train to be a teacher. When I got there I joined the student peace union, and before I knew it I was going to the March on Washington, and getting involved with the civil rights movement and the antiwar movement. And then came the feminist movement.

In 1970, my husband and I got to Fresno, where I met Suzanne Lacy. She and I started Fresno's first feminist consciousness-raising group. Fifty women joined immediately when they heard that we were going to talk about orgasms. We initiated a course called the Second Sex; we read Beauvoir and Woolf. Around that time I met Judy Chicago in Fresno and Mira Schor at CalArts, and we started doing research in art history, looking for women artists. We were only reading novels and books by women, and whatever Marxist texts were available at the time.

Today, I am very aware of generational gaps. I want to be a mentor and a resource. That's really why we did all that work in the '60s and '70s: so future generations of young women and men wouldn't have to; so we'd have a different world. Perhaps we have only done a bit, but that's my bit.

Born in 1943 in Paraguay, Faith Wilding is an artist, activist, and professor emerita of performance art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Wilding was a key figure in the nation's first feminist art programs, at Fresno State College (now California State University, Fresno) in 1970, and at CalArts in 1971, and she continues to work with the collective she cofounded called subRosa. "Fearful Symmetries," her debut retrospective, is currently on view at Threewalls in Chicago through February 22, 2014. The show coincides with Wilding's lifetime achievement award from the Women's Caucus for Art. She is currently writing her memoirs.