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Waiting for Faith Wilding on the Internet

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Still from Faith Wilding's "Waiting" performance as seen in the 1974 film "Womanhouse" by Johanna Demetrakas, (1974, USA, 47 min.) (courtesy of Johanna Demetrakas and Three Walls Gallery)

CHICAGO — It was the second wave of feminism. I wasn't alive yet, but I like to daydream about what it would have been like to attend those women's consciousness-raising meetings, female-centric spiritual get-togethers, heated strategic battles over how to win reproductive rights, and the space to explore one's own sexuality without attaching labels. It was during this glorious second wave, in the early 1970s, that artist Faith Wilding performed her 15-minute monologue "Waiting" at Womanhouse in Los Angeles. Even though this video is not available online, the "Waiting" poem is, and those who feel so moved re-perform it as video for an internet audience, reading the text to a webcam and posting it for someone, anyone, to watch.

In the original video, Faith Wilding is sitting in a chair in front of a captivated audience, rocking back and forth while speaking — nearly chanting, at times — many pivotal moments in a woman's life. These are the moments that she is silently waiting for, that she can't tell her girlfriends, mother, sister, or brother about — but that they already know of. These are the things, she believes, that will transform her from a young woman into a woman, from a woman into a mother, from a mother into an elder, and then from an elder into a spirit. This follows a specific trajectory of feminine roles, however, which are not necessarily the path of all American women — and that is where this piece can, at times, feel stagnant and frustrating.

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In this sense, it is part of a prevailing feminine narrative that should be questioned and restructured when at all possible. In its historical iteration, it stands as a moment of second-wave feminism, and nods to strands of fourth-wave feminism that is happening on the internet today. Three Walls Gallery and filmmaker Johanna Demetrakas made exclusively available to Hyperallergic this excerpt from the 1974 film *Womanhouse*, which features Wilding's performance.

"Waiting" to Vimeo. The video begins like most amateur webcam videos — in a darkened, domestic space with little light and a gaze that never quite looks back at the viewer. Harrod, a young man with a perfectly trimmed goatee, is lit mostly by the screen of his computer. He doesn't explain why he is reading "Waiting," or what the purpose of this video is, but as he reads — "waiting to be cuddled, waiting for someone to take me outside, waiting for someone to play with me, waiting for someone to read to me, dress me, tie my shoes, waiting for my mommy to brush my hair ... waiting to be a pretty girl" — we see the fluidity of this poem, and its applicability to anyone who identifies with a feminist agenda and the turmoil of growing up feeling like girls will be boys and boys will be girls. Harrod's video is as relevant and moving today as Faith's original was nearly 40 years ago.

On YouTube, another reading of "Waiting" by user Brigid Walsh, takes place outside on a street in New York City. Dressed like the stereotypical all-black-wearing performance artist, she rocks back and forth much like Faith does in the original. But we never see her face, and we only see moments of her blonde hair as it dips into the frame. She reads off of sheets of paper that she holds on her lap, and we hear the noises of the city litter the air — from trucks backing up to buses stopping and kids screaming. Faceless Brigid reads from "Waiting"; like women before her, she is "waiting to go steady, waiting to neck, to make out, waiting to go all the way ... " She is rocking and waiting, not taking action but rather meditating on words that have been spoken by Harrod, by Faith, and by every other young performance artist or internet roamer who has made this poem. This person is waiting to become — but in the process of waiting, she is becoming. Waiting and becoming are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are one and the same.

In the catalogue for the exhibition for Faith Wilding's solo exhibition *Fearful Symmetries: A Retrospective*, now on view at Three Walls Gallery in Chicago through February 22, Executive & Creative Director Shannon R. Stratton writes:

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 ...

Wilding's work may have been made during feminism's second wave, but it is increasingly becoming absorbed into the fourth through recreations like these that are scattered across YouTube, Vimeo, and Tumblr.