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THE RECONFIGURE PROJECT

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Anger and rage threaten to spill over into everyday life at any moment; in the form of hysteria like Linda Blair in *The Exorcist.*¹ Every time we open our mouths the words come spewing out in a torrent of terse, tumbled thoughts at high pitch, aimed at demolishing everyone. We are angry about injustice, about society's tolerance for violence against women. We are angry at the telco who calls us "madam," we are angry at the bank that treats us like criminals. We can never quite manage to hide it, the rage. Our faces always betray us. It must be the knitted brows of our constant companion, the migraine or endometriosis. The derogatory term for this rage is resting bitch face, a way of putting us back in our place, of dismissing the rage. We feel it, most often when we are silenced. It is palpable.

Most women have a period for 40 years. A constant forgetting and playing catch up, it can be a living hell. Followed by menopause lasting a further seven to 14 years: a different kind of hell envelopes every waking moment. If we seem a little shrill or confrontational, this is clearly the source of our rage. Western society prescribes tonics for what ails us and taboos to contain the rage; this is the equivalent of waving a red flag.

It's tragic that we argue amongst ourselves when we need so desperately to organise.

Lauren Elkin's recent book *Art Monsters*² strives to resolve the friction in understanding the monstrous. Writing against Barbara Creed's initial idea – one which named the monstrous as it appeared in *Horror Film* as a masculine construction of the female monster in films such as Cronenberg's *The Brood* or Brian De Palma's *Carrie* – Elkin examines the monstrous where it resides in a feminist literature and art history. She begins with Virginia Woolf and focuses on an embodied female experience that is abject, painful, full of rage and excess, one that seeks to overturn the essentialising critique aimed at the beautiful, youthful bodies of Ana Mendieta and Hannah Wilkie, a critique which buried them in obscurity. Elkin wants to restore them to their rightful place as trailblazers within an art historical canon. In over 200 *Silueta* Mendieta made visible the invisible ties between female biology, rage and the natural world. We are not separate from nature, we are inevitably tied to it, our bodies bear the scars. Scars that Wilkie and Mendieta externalised.³

The artist Kiri Mitchell and I talk about rage a lot. As it developed, the Reconfigure Project became an attempt to turn our anger into action. What we discussed turned out to be various shrill configurations of the monstrous, embodied experience of women's daily lives in material forms: wallpaper that seems to be screeching at your eyeballs; a manifestation of anxiety crossed with embroidery; big sculptures of women's actual bodies, figures that demonstrate impoliteness; or video works where violence in our homes, inflicted on our bodies, is constantly justified by deferring to the ideal body or endured because we always put others first.

In 2017 the exhibition "Reconfigure" was staged in a suburban house. The initial exhibition was designed to reinvigorate the landmark historical enterprise of *Woman House*,⁴ initiated in 1972 by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, which highlighted the lack of a place to exhibit work by women within the closed system of the art establishment and to examine representations of women by women. Alongside "Reconfigure," we held a symposium, "Figuration and Feminism," at Dunedin School of Art. This project mapped some of the discussions that



Kiri Mitchell, Bed Bath and Beyond (detail), 2021, felted Romney wool 1800x1100x800mm.

had taken place after *Woman House*, such as the problematic of the male gaze that defines women as objects, not subjects, as discussed by Laura Mulvey in her ground-breaking essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). While the eighties saw the Guerilla Girls⁵ rampage through New York highlighting inequality in the art world – if the art world is defined as New York – in novel ways, it seemed that representations of figures of women were taboo in painting and sculpture. Only a few examples of the female body as abject object/subject, à la Kiki Smith, made it onto the scene during the nineties.

In the Art School where we both taught, it seemed like a different set of trends were emerging. We were working with Master of Fine Arts students who were interested in dragging the female figure out of Sandy Orgels' Linen Closet⁶ and into the limelight and putting the figure to work for us. This was something that I had felt was necessary since my encounter with education American-style in the nineties. Suddenly there were enough students interested in body politics and how advertising still used sex to sell products, and how these images that still filled our screens diverged from every woman any of us had ever encountered. The initial exhibition featured work by then students Shelley McConaughey, who focused on the maddening routine of housework; Megan Brady (the smooth and tidy middle-class body and home); Francine Keach, who made a video work which explored do-it-yourself Botox via a reading of the slapstick comedy of Lucille Ball, as evoked by Sianne Ngai;⁷ and Sarah Baird, who made an army (300) of small ceramic fist-waving, multicoloured figures. Along with their offerings, Mitchell's video, *How to decorate a cake,* and my own self-sucking saddles came together in Mitchell's suburban house in South Dunedin. We hired a bus and ferried people out to see it. In the spirit of *Woman House*, we were doing it for ourselves.

As time passes some things change and some stay the same. The initial premise, of somewhere to exhibit, remained a consistent problem. Kiri Mitchell, Sarah Baird and I thought the project should be ongoing and so worked towards nurturing local interest and showcasing emerging artists working in the terrain of body image. "Configure" was exhibited at Ashburton Art Gallery in 2021, with Kylie Norton, Tamara Nicholson and Maggie Covell. Adopting new strategies, where media can be used to reconstruct old stereotypes in a critical way for a contemporary media-savvy audience, Mitchell, Baird and myself sought to re-establish a place where the image of the female can find new sculptural form through a material insistence on the haptic,⁸ desiring bodies of every woman, not just the twenty-somethings usually represented and typecast as representable. Norton's embroidered encounters with text messaging and the violence of online dating; Nicholson's video projections of a dystopic suburbia; and Covell's multifaceted social project involving participatory workshops, focus groups and billboard sites all highlighted the barely visible lives of women outside the prescribed but limited social norm, together providing a means of directing our audience to conflicting readings of what it means to demonstrate the female monster:

I was surprised at the underlying violence in each of the works we selected – as if we never see the patterns of behaviour that have become ingrained, but are reflected in loneliness, in date rape and in capitalism's will to maintain the perfect body through a series of overt social relations (the selfie and social media) or echoed in the labouring bodies of working-class women, but forgotten instantly.

Sarah Baird's *The Bertha Revolution* is a call to arms, a demonstration against invisibility. On the surface, a Lilliputian army of multicoloured, naked but angry figures, waving their little fists in the air, seems funny. One need only remember what the Lilliputians did to Gulliver and the work turns from slight to serious. In attempting to make the multitude visible, Baird's army assembles an image of collective spirit for feminism.⁹ One where difference is acknowledged but solidarity is maintained. The collective solidarity of assembly unifies a "web of relations"¹⁰ into a fight for women's rights – one that acknowledges each woman's rebellion as unique, but that stops that response from being fragmented and dismissed and indeed galvanises what Nicholas Mirzoeff calls "a space for appearance."¹¹ A space to see and listen to each other. While Baird's tiny figures are painted in unexpected colours – baby-shit green, blood-clotted red, old ladies' lavender, mustard yellow and a grubby cerulean blue – they are not reflective of any one group or single ideology, but nonetheless allude to differences of race, gender and class. Her lumpy, grumpy bodies resemble the disenfranchised and invisible bodies of middle-aged women. If the Berthas are angry, they have every right to be.



Figure 2. Sarah Baird, The Bertha Revolution Continued (detail), 2017, ceramic 100 figures, various dimensions.



Figure 3. Sarah Baird, Red Flag, 2023.



Figure 4. Kiri Mitchell, TURF (still image) 2021, video stills.

The idea of not being seen is explored in Kiri Mitchell's short animation, *Turf*, where the main character Pat (Malone) attempts to drown out the noise of contemporary nonsense in order to recognise herself. In the narrative, a space of redemption is sought through the definition of friendship. Pat sees herself reflected in her own likeness, Pat. Mitchell then doubles down on this idea through references to popular culture (*Pulp Fiction*'s dance sequence) and by mining her own history of labouring, a workforce assembled by Beryl act as co-conspirators, on ride-on lawnmowers, while flame-throwing Pat as *Alien*'s Ripley¹² evokes a scorched-earth policy which restores balance and quiet. Meantime, to reinforce the central idea – to be seen – a series of large-scale sculptured portrait busts of Beryl that echo versions of the good neighbour, but reference a different, unspoken heroism, are constructed from fake hedging, hydrangeas, faux marble and woolly felting – those working-class craft versions of middle-class sensibilities that are incorporated into the schema of the home beautiful on a budget, echoing neighbourly competition and how-to-do-it community crafts. A three-metre sculpture constructed with plastic box hedging of a big-breasted matron, a monstrous mother, Beryl is a 'Mother Nature' with irony. While the materials used represent an idealised version of woman/nature – clean, manageable, safe and picturesque – the toxic, man-made plastic product is conflated with the image of the female body and gross categorisations of landscape to confront those who are only too willing to typecast menopausal women as 'past it.'

Disneyfication picks up on Nicholas Mirzoeff's¹³ idea of the invisibility of the structures of authority, in that the mechanisms of authority are normalised through the dominant aesthetic. These works seek to undermine Disney's narratives of the good girl by insisting that there is more at stake in the violence implied by the cartoon. In "Debbie Does Disney," exhibited at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery in 2008, work after work attempts to tell a different story than a Grimm¹⁴ interpretation would have it. Christian morality and family structures are played out, as women can be violent too; schoolyard bullying and harassment circle around a work like *The Raft of the Medusa: Blood and Guts in High School* as the schoolyard bitch fight finds its full force. *DUCK* undermines the role of violence implied by popular culture, reversing the roles of victim and victimiser. *MMMM* invokes the spirit of Marilyn Monroe, specifically a sequence of photographs taken in 1955 and used as stills in *the Seven Year Itch*,¹⁵ whereby the camera records something like Monroe's pure pleasure in being a woman. In my version, the onlooker's gaze is met by the opacity of the faux fur, which deadens its potential for categorisation, undoing standard representations which stereotypically identify the body of woman as something to be consumed by the gaze, and redoing it – reveiling in Monroe's libidinal desire as animal, monstrous and carefree.

In Tamara Nicholson's videos *Jelly* and *Gravy*, which occupy two adjacent walls, we see opposing views, the effects of keeping up appearances. The pressure that society places on us if we do conform to the mother/ father/ two-and-a-half children option is now extreme. Struggling to be a good soccer mum and foodie goddess, or the typical-yet-resentful breadwinner, is for some a private version of hell, one that is endured year after festering year. In *Jelly* an impossible and Sisyphean task is played out: the figure, who we only see through her hands, attempts desperately (but fails miserably) to scoop a collapsed jelly terrine back together. In *Gravy* we see a man sitting at the dinner table, dressed in a white shirt. He pours gravy all over his food over and over again. He looks at the camera while pouring. The work plays on the relentless monotony of having to do the same thing day after day, year after year,



Figure 5. Michele Beevors, Penicillin Pink, 2021, faux fur and mixed media, 2000x1000x1000mm.



Figure 6. Michele Beevors, *Raft of the Medusa: Blood and Guts in Highschool*, 2010, fibreglass, steel, enamel paint, 2000×1700×1700mm.



Figure 7. Tamara Nicholson, Jelly (still image), Gravy (still image), 2019. Video installation.

eating the same meal. And yet there is an undertone of violence here, too, hinted at in the man's menacing look and his moustache. It is interesting that while the male looms over the screen, threatening to spill over, the female is represented by her hands alone, fragmented, yet it is her labour that is holding things together.

Kylie Norton uses embroidery and cross-stitch to examine the temporary and tenuous nature of dating in the digital world. Joining a host of fourth-wave feminist embroiderers protesting the abuses of power that women still encounter daily, she renders her throwaway Tinder messages and Instagram pages with loving care as a permanent reminder of how far we have come and how far we have yet to go. Norton's embroidery tells it like it is, just between us girls, and in so doing she lays bare, in a conversational way, those things our grandmothers' generation once kept secret. The brutality of the dating scene in the age of Tinder: rendered in carefully stitched quotes from text messages, female figures display their bruised necks and risky behaviours. Embroidery is the opposite of text messaging, which is gone instantly.¹⁶ Embroidery once defined femininity: the task of prescribing behaviour in a ladylike fashion, sitting quietly for hours in one spot and working with care so that we could prove to the world we were marriage-worthy is taken up by Norton to re-examine what those failed stereotypes and social norms mean for contemporary women. We will not keep your secrets for you, and we have the means to do it. Work like Norton's demonstrates the power of #MeToo – technology effecting change, online platforms that can bring people together in ways unimagined by our mothers' generation.

In *Hidden in Plain Sight*, a series of staged billboards, workshops and online focus groups, Maggie Covell insists on making visible the unseen: rape statistics in New Zealand are shameful, the implications for women's mental health and the toll it takes, horrendous. The digitised, high-key-coloured patterns embedded in Covell's wallpapers represent common household items, the colour emphasising a sense of hypersaturation and sensitivity to ordinary things. The digital glitch opens a feeling of unease and disease in the fabric of a society that tends to wallpaper over the cracks of uncivilised behaviours. Covell also understands the importance of opening up a dialogue and dragging those secrets into the public realm, creating a safe space for discussion and a sense of solidarity. The community embodies the idea of working together, of thinking through things together, and making spaces where celebration is a part of the encounter (workshops and live music venues) – taking us back to the beginning, where the Art School provides a safe environment, one where all kinds of differences can be examined.

"Configure: Home," exhibited at He Waka Tuia 2023, returned to the home as theme, this time in a series of encounters with the lonely and aging body, having an existential crisis over an exercise bike or with more recent developments around gendered identity. Unlike previous exhibitions at the Forrester Gallery in Oamaru and Ashburton Art Gallery, which concentrated on the figure, this exhibition was specifically designed to address the idea of the home and the influence of 'commodity' with a more critical eye. As successive waves of feminism have addressed the shifting ground around identity politics, and cultural and gendered responses to an all-white, middle-classist approach to the question of "Who is speaking for whom and why?" are canvassed, various positions are identified and articulated through the image of woman. Different strategies for dealing with commodity are used to break apart the old stereotypes that continue to confine bodies and minds.



Figure 8. Maggie Covell, Trauma Chevron, from the Hidden in Plain Sight Project, 2021, wallpaper treatment.

Richard Hamilton's iconic 1969 work, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* exposed the way that advertisements, shaped by stereotypes of gender, sold the idea of having 'stuff' to the world. Pop art's emblematic couple, the body builder and the babe, explored the idea that we had a choice in the matter, their identities reduced to the mantra, 'you are what you own.''The whole world bought this idea and reduced everyone to being a slave to the commodity.

In Norton's new works, identity equals commodity. In *Diet Coke, Winfield Menthol* and *Lady Shave* disposable razors replace Ford Pills and shape-forming girdles, but the drift is the same — to change one's image to please the man and, I might add, other women, judging from the narcissism that the social media revolution has bought about. Norton's work here gives us the full picture: thinliness, like cleanliness, is next to … well, you know. But there is something about the persistence of the stitching that unravels the plan. The works are large, much larger than the actual commodity, but the stitching is so small, and the compulsion is so big. Our addiction to commodity is so extreme there is no escaping it. However, you just have to wait a moment and the slogans and jingles and negativity that fill your head come flooding back as a scar on the surface of the work. This obsession with stuff and image is echoed in earlier works addressed to a generation of women 'dating' on Tinder. Dating is such an antiquated term in today's online culture, and 'hooking up' seems too soft a term for what really goes on – more like the "fucking and punching" of *Californication*.¹⁷ Risky behaviour just got exponentially riskier as body image continues to be a primary mode of prescriptive control, as women judge women. Too fat – too thin. Never enough.



Figure 9. Kylie Norton, Winfield, 2023, embroidery.



Figure 10. Kylie Norton, All the Single Ladies, 2023, embroidery.

For Nicholson now the home is a workplace, a workout space, where the female toils at getting nowhere all day long. This work, too, is about body image – the repetitions, the frantic pace or slow monotony of endless toil by the mother, while the child swims in a dreamscape of amniotic fluid in the bathtub, oblivious of the bubble, amid the efforts of the mother to obliterate her own trace and the abject traces of the child. The theme of the endless unfolding of time juxtaposed with frantic activity is methodologically applied to other videos in the series. Failure and menace versus monotony and obliviousness.

In my own work in "Configure: Home," the home and the commodity are united through the notion of maintenance. Products for cleaning are examined, turned inside out; these soft sculptures become the dust-catchers of decoration. The soft breeze blocks almost carry the smell of bleach and here, too, the mother's trace and that of the child are magically whisked away. Joy and magic exist in the clean and tidy home, where one can enjoy the experience of being home alone. To have a room of one's own, to dance naked with the curtains drawn, to exude pleasure in one's own body are themes that run through the other works as well. Fake fur M&Ms, all animal instinct and pleasure of the flesh (or fur) in your mouth. *Black Beauty*, like previous versions of self-sucking saddles, demands contact with the naked body, and yet any potential pleasure is denied through the material transformation of animal to object, of surface to sandpaper. The work is abrasive to the imagination.

Mitchell's animated world, *RSI*, is full of sadness. The old lady behind a grubby window reveals a house denuded of furniture and knick-knacks. There is nothing left of a life in the service of others, except an empty house and an immensity of loneliness. Loneliness is a theme of the late-night office cleaner who dies at work, as well. There is something sadistic in the way the characters reap what they sew. In Mitchell's animated works *Turf*, *How to Make a Cake or RSI*, the characters swap roles as victim/victimiser; they are often the victims of a lifetime of self-obliteration, of giving oneself for others: children, husbands, the elderly. Women being overlooked is a consistent theme in Mitchell's work. Her sculptures are monumental encounters with the strength and vitality of the matronly body. Light on her feet and sleight of hand, not leaving anything to chance, in *Bed Bath & Beyond* the undervalued material of the craft shop is congealed to examine every voluptuous curve of the fearless middle-aged woman as she turns into the aging matron who outlives her generation, with saggy boobs down to her knees – one who now has nothing left to lose.

Covell has other ideas. In wallpaper designs made to look pretty in pink, lie secrets – concealed in the pattern, under the colours, hidden in plain sight. Amid the all-too-real statistics of rape and violence against women, the pushback for body autonomy, women's voices fall to silent screams. The wallpaper is overwhelming in its overlapping stories and high-key colours. Images of the pills that control our behaviour and the car keys which we clutch to keep us safe form the patterns, while words are obliterated by information overload. Covell's project which, at an earlier stage, included online focus groups and workshops intended to gather these stories, went on to examine them in the context of the law faculty at Otago University. Most recently, they were exhibited at the Forrester Gallery, alongside blackboards where staff, students and the general public could add to or erase the content – and in so doing become complicit in silencing women's voices.

Judy Chicago's work *Red Flag*¹⁸ is referenced by Baird – still waving obliquely after all these years. Chicago's photo litho-print of a woman pulling a bloody tampon from her body shocked the art world in 1971. A graphic encounter with the human body, in a way that had never been seen before, has been replaced in Baird's work by a row of diminishing, fist-waving figures, printed on a 3D printer from a digital scan of an early sculpture. The marvels of technology aside, the message is still clear: hands off our bodies. This message, however, is portrayed in a very distinctive way, one that focuses attention on the construction of the word 'woman' for those in the LGBTQ community. For gender, as constructed and codified through language and use in an attempt to open up new meanings, comes close to diminishing the real lives of those whom feminism seeks to protect when we put empathy aside and resort to name-calling.

New to the group, Anna Muirhead spent a long time working and living in China, far from Invercargill where she grew up, experiencing the birth of her son as well as suffering a major health catastrophe thousands of miles from home. Her series of watercolours examine this time through a diary documenting the ordinary workings of the hospital where she stayed, but also the extraordinary effect that a crisis of this kind can have on one's family. The watercolours are intensely personal and tender, yet they transcend this, because they invoke feelings of empathy. Among the many images there is a very pale drawing of an empty hospital cot. It reaches out from the page it is drawn on and touches your heart. Home, after all, is where the heart is.



Anna Muirhead, Pill, 2023, watercolour.

An historical precedent for most of the work in this project can be found in a careful investigation of *Woman House*; from Sarah Baird citing Judy Chicago's *Red Flag* to Faith Wilding's *Waiting*,¹⁹ a poem and performance that demonstrated the immensity of a life given in the service of others, to the real loneliness expressed in Mitchell's *RSI*.

The work is ongoing for each of the artists involved.

Watch this space.

Michele Beevors is an Australian artist and principal lecturer Dunedin School of Art where she has taught sculpture for the past 22 Years.

- William Friedkin, The Exorcist (Warner Bros, 1971).
- 2 "Her Body is a problem." For a discussion of the essentialist label aimed at Wilkie and others who dismissed the complexity of the work, see Lauren Elkin, Art Monsters: Unruly Bodies in Feminist Art (Penguin Random House UK, 2023).
- 3 See Claire Johnson, Femininity, Time and Feminist Art (Palgrave McMillian, 2013) for an in-depth analysis of Hannah Wilkie's contribution to a radical feminist art practice. See also "Feminist Narratives and Unfaithful Repetition: Hannah Wilkie's Starification Object Series" and "Critical Mimesis: Hannah Wilkie's Double Address," and Ana Mendieta, Silueta Series, https:// www.guggenheim.org/artwork/5221.
- 4 Woman House, https://judychicagoportal.org/projects/womanhouse.
- 5 Guerilla Girls, https://www.guerrillagirls.com/.
- 6 Sandy Orgels, https://artreview.com/ar-april-2018-feature-womanhouse/
- 7 Sianne Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute and Interesting (Harvard University Press, 2015). In the chapter on Zany, Ngai analyses the slapstick moments of I Love Lucy to reveal the relationship of gender to labour.
- 8 The obese, all-encompassing, fat matronly body in Mitchell's work Bed Bath and Beyond, made with wool and faux flowers, or plastic hedging, invites touch; while Baird's small ceramic figures, a multicoloured army placed on the floor, invite a certain amount of aggression towards the material from young male viewers and encourages these tactile encounters. I have spent my entire teaching career extoling the importance of the material /content /form interchange.
- 9 Nicholas Mirzoeff, The Right to Look: A Counter History of Visuality (Duke University Press, 2011). See introduction.
- 10 Mirzoeff turns from the individual to the collective as a means of opening up and laying bare the way that institutions of power become naturalised.
- II In relation to Black Lives Matter protests, Mirzoeff argues that community is larger than 'us' and 'them' and that there has to be room for oppositional arguments, yet he understands that this coming together, while inclusive, is also provisional. He also emphasises the element of joy in seeing a multitude of likeminded individuals rather than destruction experienced by the collective. There are lessons here for intersectional feminists, for sure.
- 12 Barbara Creed, The Monstrous Feminine: Film Feminism and Psychoanalysis (Routledge, 1993). In the chapter "Horror and the Archaic Mother," Ripley, the heroine in the Alien franchise, shifts between feminine and masculine positions as she dresses in a robot suit and takes up various weapons to fight the female egg-laying alien with two sets of teeth (Vagina dentata, dentata). See also Ridley Scott, Alien (20th Century Fox and Brandywine, 1979).
- 13 Mirzoeff, The Right to Look.
- 14 In the Grimm's fairytales, moral conflict is resolved in relation to good girl/bad girl behaviours, storylines rendered banal by Disney. See Amy M Davis, *Good Girls and Wicked Witches: Women in Disney's Feature Animation* (Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey, 2006). My work in "Debbie Does Disney" attempts to get closer to an understanding of the initial tales, and the monsters they invoke; for example, as a contemporary depiction of mother's love, the junky mother/Sleeping Beauty of the sculpture *Nevermore* (2008) hints at the complexity of addiction, rape, bestiality and post-partum depression.
- 15 Billy Wilder, The Seven Year Itch (20th Century Fox, 1955).
- 16 While embroidery is slow work for the artist (taking months of painstaking labour) and remains a trace of hand and body, viewed on a mobile phone on Instagram or X or sent in a message the viewer's encounter takes a few seconds and becomes disembodied evidence. We absorb the information supplied by each at the same rate, quickly. While online platforms provide hope for a new kind of connection, they also can be difficult to manage, as what you say online is caught and comes back to haunt you. The digital archive is yet to be understood as a volatile place, rife with potential criminality everything you ever uttered on your phone can be used against you, rearranged, re-imaged, reminding us that we are not digitally safe.
- 17 Californication was an American TV series created by Tom Kapinos (2007–14). The storyline focuses on the male protagonist, Hank Moody, a failing writer supported by a host of female characters who fall into stereotypes (a too-young femme fatale, an unreachable baby mamma, or a kind but conflicted daughter) but are never Moody's equal. The term "fucking and punching" is lifted from Californication to describe sexual violence against the male protagonist.
- 18 Judy Chicago, Red Flag, 1971, photo lithograph.
- 19 Faith Wilding, Waiting, Vimeo video, https://vimeo.com/388693458.