Mary Kelly. *Love Songs*, 2005. Installation view, front gallery, Postmasters, New York.

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Not-Forgetting: Mary Kelly's *Love Songs*

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The age of protected democracy in which we live—when, as Giorgio Agamben writes, security is the normal technique of Western democratic governments—has had a serious impact on art that wants to play a role in deepening and extending the public sphere.[1] Among the most urgent consequences are state censorship: for example, New York Governor George Pataki's recent cancellation of plans to make the Drawing Center part of the World Trade Center memorial complex; and criminal prosecution: the federal government's ongoing indictment of Steven Kurtz, member of the Critical Art Ensemble. A consequence of another kind, one that has captured less attention but that also limits art's participation in a richly agonistic public life, is a worsening of the left melancholy that surfaced in cultural discourse, including art discourse, in the 1970s.

"Left melancholia" was Walter Benjamin's derogatory term for a mood afflicting leftists who remain more attached to past political ideals—even, according to philosopher Wendy Brown, to the *failure* of a political ideal—than to possibilities of political change in the present.[2] Brown says that the left melancholic renders his political analysis thinglike and frozen, unamenable to transformation. Applying Benjamin's analysis to contemporary times, she argues that today's left melancholic adheres to a traditional leftist representation of the political, a representation that includes "notions of unified movements, social totalities, and class-based politics."[3] The melancholic therefore laments the challenges that have been posed over the last few decades to such unitary models of social change, scornfully calling them, among other names, "postmodern." The most basic challenge was the calling into question of the idea that society is totalized by a single, economic antagonism, which is the absolute foundation of all other social antagonisms and governs all emancipatory struggle. Against this questioning, the left melancholic tries to reground the political in the authority of an ontologically privileged foundation, insisting, as Stuart Hall observed in 1988, on the determinism of capital and dismissing the political importance of postmodernism's concern with the subject and subjectivity.[4] A current example is the introduction to *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War*, a book about the Iraq War that has attracted the interest of certain sectors of the

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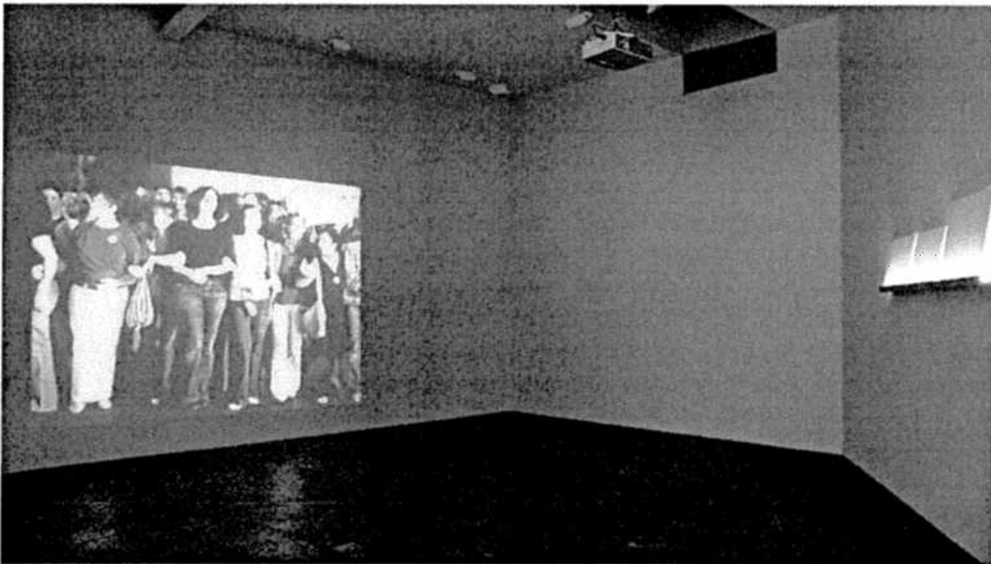
art world. After wrongly claiming that academic leftists of the recent past dismissed the political significance of capitalism, the authors write, "It is 'the end of Grand Narratives' and 'the trap of totalization' and 'the radical irreducibility of the political' which now seem like period items."[5] The phrases they mock as outdated stand of course for various postmodern, poststructuralist, and feminist critiques of traditional leftist political analysis.

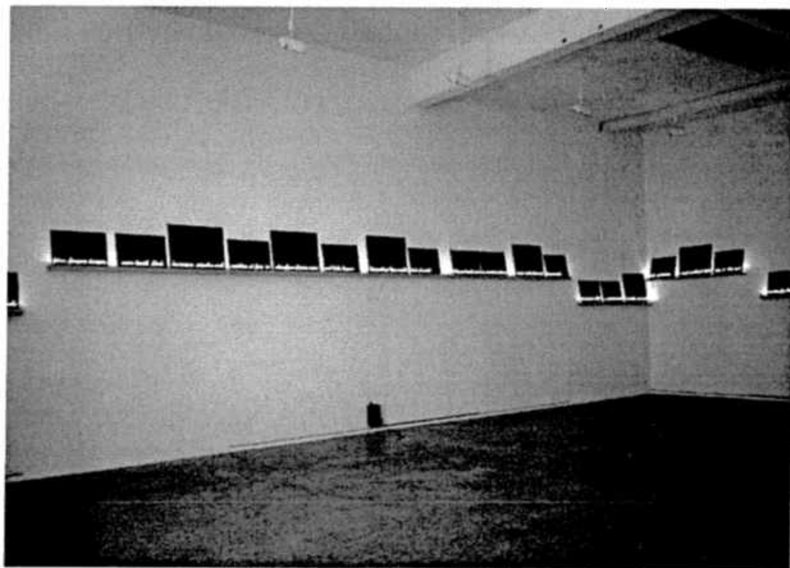
Brown suggests that left melancholy has a narcissistic dimension because the frozen analysis to which it clings once formed the basis of leftist self-love, giving "its adherents a clear and certain path toward the good, the right, the true."[6] Insofar as left melancholy rests on an image of society and of social change that is centered on the presence of an element that guarantees wholeness, the analysis is also masculinist. Hardly surprising, then, is the left melancholic's rejection not only of postmodernism but also of the feminist voice associated with postmodernism. For it was postmodern feminists and, in particular feminist artists, who explored the role played by totalizing images in producing and maintaining masculinist subjects. This exploration implied that subjective, psychic transformation, like material transformation, is an essential component, rather than mere epiphenomenon, of social change. Also predictable, then, is that critics and historians afflicted by left melancholia (including some who once theorized the meaning of postmodernism but now regard it as nothing more than "the cultural logic of late capitalism") would refuse to register the full impact of the feminist critique of the meaning of the political. Leftists may use the pressing nature of the current political situation to legitimate this refusal, but in the age of protected democracy, when the pursuit of mastery has become a self-evident virtue, the feminist critique seems more rather than less urgent.

The left melancholic's insistence on a pregiven ground of society and of political struggle restricts the growth of democratic public spheres. For one thing, as Claude Lefort argues, the public sphere emerged precisely when the democratic revolutions withdrew the ground, making the meaning of society uncertain and, as a consequence, open to debate. For another, being in public means responding to the presence of others and



therefore calls us out of our narcissism. Artists who want their work to be part of democratic public life are faced with the task not only of challenging protected democracy but of resisting left melancholy. One way of doing so—suggested to me by Mary Kelly's exhibition *Love Songs*, held last fall at Postmasters Gallery in New York City—is through fidelity to the event of feminism.

"Fidelity to the event" is a concept formulated by the philosopher Alain Badiou. Like left melancholy, the phrase implies a relationship to the past, a type of history and memory of earlier radicalism. To distinguish fidelity from nostalgic forms of memory, Badiou describes the relationship as one of "not-forgetting." Fidelity to the event is also Badiou's name for a new conception of ethics, which he defines as a refusal of conservatism. The event for Badiou is something that happens in a situation, something that supplements, but does not complement, the order within which the event takes place, whether it is the political, personal, or artistic order. Examples are the political event of the French Revolution, the personal event of an amorous passion, and the artistic event of Schoenberg's invention of the twelve-tone scale. The event cannot be understood within the framework of already-constituted knowledges. It "punches a hole" in such knowledge, releasing what Badiou calls a "truth-process."[7] The event is revolutionary, though not in the sense of something absolute that, as Julia Kristeva puts it in her criticism of revolution, will solve all problems.[8] Rather, the event presents hitherto unknown possibilities that put an end to consensus or dominant opinion in the order it disrupts; its course is uncertain, and, importantly, it compels the subject to "decide a new way of being." The subject becomes the bearer of a fidelity to the event when she decides henceforth to relate to the situation from the perspective of the event. "To be really faithful to the event," Badiou writes, "I must completely rework my ordinary way of living my situation."[9] After Schoenberg, for instance, I do not go back to writing romantic music. I persevere in the interruption. I do not break with the break and return to continuity. But neither do I make the event absolute, giving it total power and turning it into a new dogmatism. For the event, cautions Badiou, does not reveal the substance of the situation in which it occurs. Rather, it names the void of the situation. For example, the void of the political order is the meaning of the political community.[10] If, as Lefort argues, the democratic revolutions constituted an event that



Opposite: Mary Kelly. *Love Songs*, 2005. Installation view, back gallery. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.

Right: Mary Kelly. *Love Songs*, 2005. Installation view, front gallery. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.

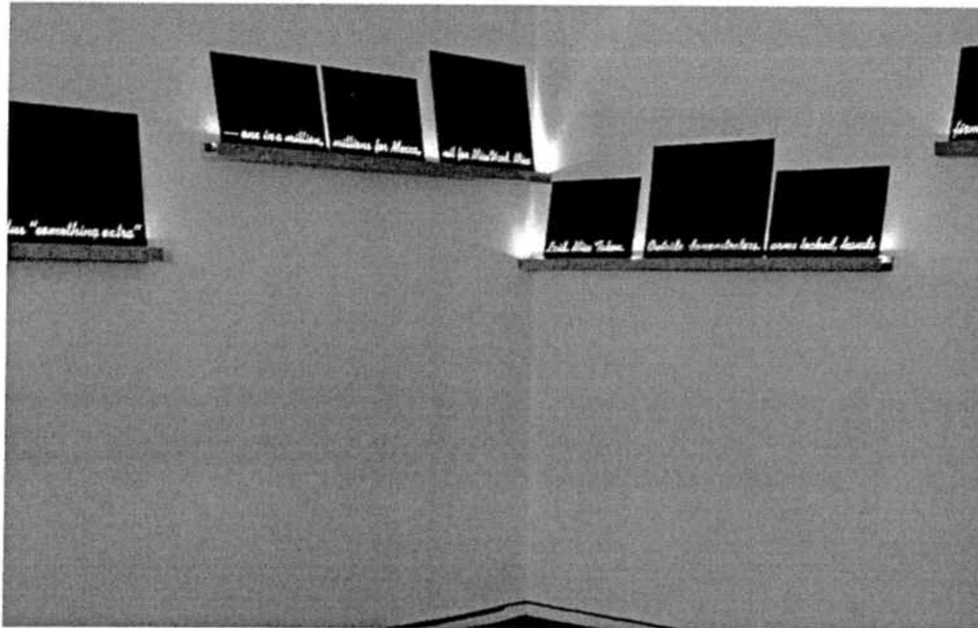
did away with references to absolute sources of the meaning of the people and opened the political community to question, then to endow the people with a substantial identity, to name the unnamable, is to betray the democratic event and, of course, destroy the public sphere it invents.

For Badiou, the subject of a fidelity does not preexist the event. Rather, the subject is someone caught up in the event, "simultaneously himself and in excess of himself." The event and the unpredictable course of the process it unleashes "pass through" this someone, who thereby becomes engaged in the invention of a new subject, a subject she has chosen to be and that extends beyond herself. The question faced by the subject of a fidelity is "how will I, as some-one, *continue* to exceed my own being . . . via the effects of being seized by the not-known?"[11]

Kelly's *Love Songs* demonstrated fidelity to an event that Badiou does not mention: feminism, which, questioning masculinist conceptions of both the subject and the political, attempted to build more democratic forms of each.[12] As its title indicates, Kelly's exhibition treated the political event of feminism as also a personal one, an amorous passion, giving new meaning to the slogan of the Women's Liberation Movement, "the personal is political." This slogan challenged both mainstream and traditional critical conceptions of the public sphere, conceptions that draw a rigid divide between public/political and private/nonpolitical space. Whereas the public-private division once forced women's issues into privacy, today the division is shored up by left melancholics who exclude feminist explorations of subjectivity from the public sphere. Against this exclusion, Kelly created a space—a kind of theater—dedicated to the history, memory, and postmemory of a feminism that mixes the personal and the political, a space in which the boundaries between the two could not be pinned down.

In her theater of not-forgetting, Kelly used a material that serves the philosopher as a metaphor for the event: light. The event, says Badiou is "a kind of flashing supplement that happens to the situation"; it bursts forth as if into flame and gives off light, which disappears, leaving a

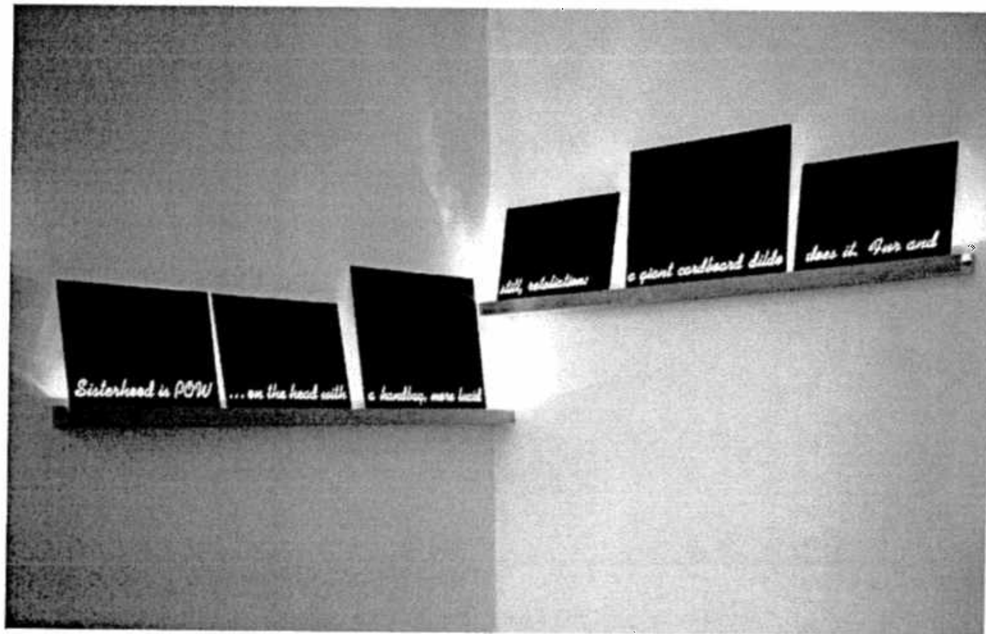
Below and opposite: Mary Kelly. *Sisterhood Is POW . . .*, 2005. Details. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.



"trace" in the situation, a kind of afterimage that refers back to the vanished event and guides the subject's fidelity.[13] *Love Songs* contains such traces: it took place in a darkened gallery; the only light emanated from the works in the show.

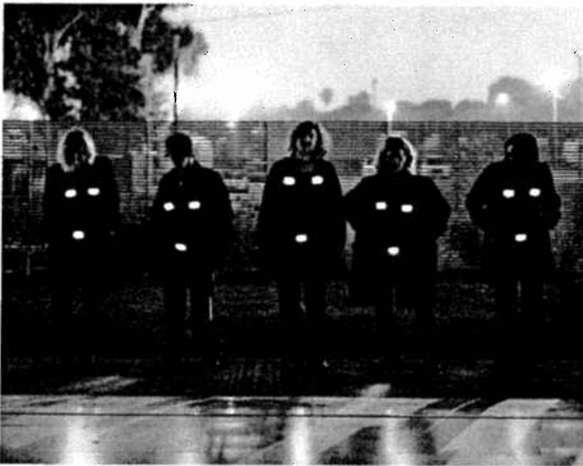
Running like a frieze around three walls of the gallery's front room was a work called *Sisterhood Is POW . . .*, a title that transforms the early feminist slogan "Sisterhood is powerful" into a phrase that registers the powerful impact—the POW—of feminism as an event. *Sisterhood Is POW . . .* consisted of thirty-six black, cast-acrylic panels incised with laser-cut script. Supported on wooden shelves, the panels were lit from behind by strip lighting, which illuminated the words and turned them into literal "words of light," Walter Benjamin's term for photography, a name that links photographs to language. Divided like lines of poetry, Kelly's text expresses her subjective not-forgetting of her participation in an episode of the British Women's Liberation Movement, a demonstration against the Miss World Contest held at the Albert Hall in London in 1971. Undertaking a type of historical work that Drucilla Cornell calls "the recollective imagination,"[14] Kelly recalls what was taking place inside and outside the Hall: inside, the Miss World contest, where "contestants flash / teeth and leg-length" as "judges tot up the / facts: figures, faces"; outside, a protest against this spectacle of patriarchal femininity in which "demonstrators, / arms locked, hands firm, fingers longer, / more lucid, flash / luminous nipples and / crotches at fans." The group of panels bearing short phrases and placed at slightly varying heights resembled a cluster of picket signs contesting oppressive constructions of the feminine.

On the room's fourth wall hung another, related work, *Flashing Nipple Remix*, consisting of three light boxes containing large black and white photographic transparencies. The activities pictured in the photographs are based on a snapshot in Kelly's archive. The archival photo documents the street theater protest described in *Sisterhood Is POW . . .* and could be considered a trace of feminism as an event. Over their clothing, in the area of their breasts and genitals, protestors had placed bright lights,



ironically mimicking the performance going on inside the Albert Hall. The first photo in *Flashing Nipple Remix* depicts a contemporary restaging of the protest by five young women. Representatives of a new generation of feminists, the women wore the same lights as the original protestors and set them in motion by shaking their bodies with increasing vigor. The women became radiant as their bodies dissolved into luminous streaks and patterns of light. A student of mine observed that the moving lights served as "a vehicle to problematize the definition of a woman by way of anatomical form. . . . Through their actions, the women become complex, ineffable figures of their own definition, defying the notion of a woman as an object presented for the enjoyment of the viewer."[15] The photos can also be read as somewhat humorous images of Badiou's subject of a fidelity, of, that is, women caught up in the flashing event of feminism, using a trace to guide them.

Love Songs continued in Postmasters' back room, which contained two works that echoed those in the front. *Seemed Right*, placed on the right-hand wall, repeated the form of *Sisterhood Is POW* . . . , only its acrylic panels were white, not black. As in *Sisterhood Is POW* . . . , the panels contained the recollections of older feminists, whom Kelly had asked to describe their initial responses to the Women's Liberation Movement. The most common answers, once again written in light, a form that matched their thematic content, characterized feminism as an event: "seemed right," "just made sense," "like a lightning bolt!"

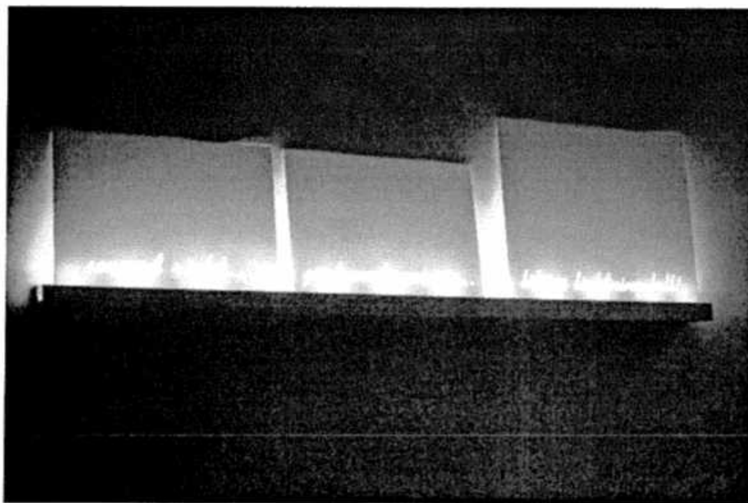


Across from *Seemed Right*, on the room's left-hand wall, Kelly projected a ninety-second film loop titled *WLM Demo Remix*. Like *Flashing Nipple Remix*, the film depicts both an early Women's Liberation Movement

street demonstration and its contemporary restaging. This work, however, uses an actual archival photo, a trace of the event, to represent the original demonstration, which took place in New York City in 1970, one of several demonstrations held across the United States to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Nineteenth Amendment giving American women the right to vote. Like *Flashing Nipple Remix, WLM Demo Remix* portrays a transgenerational haunting. An image that carries the legacy of an earlier generation of feminists appears to the new generation. Likewise, the women in the later image inhabit those in the earlier one. Using a slow dissolve to combine past and present images, a technique that imitates the scene of the unconscious mind, the loop begins with the later image—the photo of the restaging—which gradually fades and disappears as the earlier image emerges and grows clearer. The image of the restaging never fades out completely, however, but remains visible behind the earlier one, which itself does not picture an originary event, because the 1970 demonstration, mounted by a second wave of feminists, was haunted by earlier street performances—late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century suffragist parades. The archival photo, then, also depicts a restaging. Literally and figuratively, Kelly's work is a visual remix: a recording produced by bringing together ingredients in a new formation that modifies their identities.

The phrase on the demonstrators' sign oscillates between "Unite for Women's Emancipation," which appears in the archival photograph, and, in the restaged image, "From Stone to Cloud." A clear political exhortation to bring about emancipatory change, an exhortation recalling those of the suffragists, alternates with a far more cryptic word-image that describes a particular kind of change: a transformation from a thinglike thing, an entity—a stone—into something capable of remixing—a cloud. In the context of Kelly's exhibition, "from stone to cloud" can be read as a metaphor for at least two interrelated changes: mutations in the identity of feminism as a political movement and mutations in the identity of the subject seized by feminism. Each moves away from a fixed state and grows into something defined by its ability to change, to be reborn, liberated. Feminism as an event and the subject of a fidelity to it leave behind a conception of politics grounded in solid foundations and ascend to a more democratic one that exists in multiple incarnations and changes shape as it articulates with other political aims and objects; for example, human rights. Politics as a remix.

"From stone to cloud" is taken from a poem by Sylvia



Opposite, top: Mary Kelly. *Flashing Nipple Remix*, 2005. Detail. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.

Opposite, bottom: Mary Kelly. *Flashing Nipple Remix*, 2005. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.

Right: Mary Kelly. *Seemed Right*, 2005. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.

Plath titled "Love Letter." Kelly's choice of *Love Songs* as the title of her exhibition bespeaks a debt: The show may be influenced by Badiou, but it operates, quite literally, under the sign of Plath, whose life and poetry have long haunted feminists, and whose poem begins

Not easy to describe the change you made
If I'm alive now, then I was dead,
Though, like a stone, unbothered by it,
Staying put according to habit.

Plath wrote the poem six months after giving birth to its addressee, a baby girl, who, as the poet describes it, also gave birth to her. Since the 1970s, when she made *The Post-Partum Document,* Kelly has been interested in the mother-child relationship. Following Badiou, she suggests that it might be considered a form of fidelity to the event of love.[16] More important, she compares the relationship to the intersubjectivity of a political project; in particular, to the kind of love that existed among feminists in the early women's movement. This love, she claims, characterized a feminist community that recognized difference and, as a result, attempted to forge nonhierarchical forms of political organization.[17] The implied "you" to whom Kelly writes her love songs is, I think, both new and older feminists, with their own irreconcilable difference, as well as feminism itself, which gave birth to a new subject and whose own birth the women quoted in *Seemed Right* also address, saying, as Plath does, "I knew you at once."

Jacqueline Rose, in her superb book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath,* observes that in Plath the boundary between personal, psychic history and political history is uncertain.[18] For this reason, Plath has been severely chastised by critics who want to separate the two. But she has also served as a site of contestation about the meaning of the feminist formulation that the personal is political. Rose points out that some

Below: Mary Kelly. *WLM Remix,* 2005. Still of restaged demonstration. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.

Opposite: Mary Kelly. *WLM Remix,* 2005. Still showing 1970 demonstration. Courtesy Postmasters Gallery.

feminists claim that Plath's late work reveals the emergence of the poet's authentic self.[19] Plath, they say, was emancipated into a resolute identity. Those who interpret Plath in this manner often render her personal journey political by turning it into an allegory of feminism understood as a movement whose goal is to enable the emergence of a transcendent female selfhood. *Love Letter* suggests otherwise. In this and other poems, the stone stands for separateness from other things. And it is precisely this hard separateness that characterizes the phallocentric self, the self understood as constituted outside of relationships, a private rather than a public being. Because Plath describes her liberating transformation as a move *away* from a stonelike state, the transformation cannot accurately serve as an image of a feminism that wants to move *toward* self-constituted female subjectivity—especially if we consider *Love Letter* in relation to *Magi*, a poem penned by Plath one day later. There, the narrator, fantasizing a group of transcendent beings hovering over a baby's crib, shrinks from their "loveless" abstractions and asks, "What girl ever flourished in such company?"[20] Kelly, like Rose, claims Plath for a different feminism, one grounded in the continual opening and remixing of feminist politics and the feminine rather than in conclusive identities that disavow intersubjectivity and foreclose mutation. In *Love Songs* "from stone to cloud" counters—protests against—the danger that feminism and the subject of feminism might, as Rose cautions, "find itself reproducing the form of phallocentrism at the very moment it claims to have detached itself most fully from patriarchal power."[21]

Both fidelity to the event and left melancholy remember the past and write history. But unlike triumphalist historical narratives, in which emancipation leads to resolution, Kelly's history is written in the tense of the future anterior, an order of time in which, as Cornell observes, reimagining never ends.[22] Theorizing the future anterior as the time of personal history, Jacques Lacan wrote, "What is realized in my history is

not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming."[23] Lacan's description of personal history recalls Walter Benjamin's philosophy of political history. The historian, as Benjamin famously wrote, does not reconstruct the past "as it really was" but, bringing past and present into a constellation, "seize[s] hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[24] Kelly mixes Badiou and Benjamin—two philosophers of the flash and of revolutionary not-forgetting. For in *Love Songs* the Women's Liberation Movement cannot be distinguished from the transformations it undergoes in the hands of a new generation and, perhaps most important, in both generations' fantasies. *WLM Demo Remix*, for example, literalizes the future anterior, never allowing the image of the 1970s demonstration to appear in isolation. And while the image of the restaged demonstration does *technically* resolve, it, too, cannot be separated from its counterpart by virtue of its status as a theatrical reenactment, a repetition with difference, in which a group of women literally assume an image and in this way claim a relationship to an event in which they did not participate. Kelly's performers enact a mimetic identification that for Cornell forms the basis of feminist politics.[25] As a psychic narrative of repetitive time mixes with and reimagines a historical narrative of progressive time, Kelly writes feminism and herself as what they will have been for what they are in the process of becoming.

The principal way in which Kelly's fidelity to the event differs from left melancholy is in its refusal to "break with the break," to go back to prefeminist ideas of politics and history. In keeping with this fidelity, Kelly neither absolutizes the event nor takes up an authoritarian position in relation to a younger generation. Rejecting the paternal role, which would demand identification with a supposedly authentic feminism, Kelly foregrounds the category of fantasy, exploring her own and her young performers' imaginary investments in feminist history and politics. In this way, too, the subject of a fidelity diverges from the left melancholic, who must disavow his participation in fantasy, precisely in order to defend his fantasy of mastery.

Notes

1. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 14.

2. Wendy Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholia," in *Loss*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 458–465.

3. Brown, 460, 462–463.

4. Brown, 461–462.

5. Retort (Ian Boal et al.), *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (London: Verso, 2005), 9.

6. Brown, 460.

7. Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), 41, 42–43.

8. Julia Kristeva, *Revolt, She Said*, trans. Brian O'Keeffe (New York: Semiotexte(e), 2002), 104.

9. Badiou, *Ethics*, 41–42.

10. Badiou, *Ethics*, 80–85.

11. Badiou, *Ethics*, 50.

12. In Badiou's most recent book to be translated into English, feminism is absent from the philosopher's outline of the last forty years of French politics. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (London: Verso, 2005), xxxiv–xxxv.

13. Badiou, *Ethics*, 72.

14. Drucilla Cornell, "Rethinking the Time of Feminism," in Seyla Benhabib et al., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 152.

15. Josh Tonsfeldt, "Mary Kelly, *Love Songs*" (unpublished course paper, Barnard College, 2005).

16. Sasha Archibald, "Care and the Psyche: An Interview with Mary Kelly," in *At the Mercy of Others: The Politics of Care*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2005), 26. The exhibition was organized by the Helena Rubinstein Curatorial Fellows of the Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program and ran May 18–June 25, 2005.

17. Archibald, 26.

18. Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

19. Rose, 144.

20. On a BBC broadcast, Plath introduced this poem by saying: "Abstractions, by definition, are withdrawn from life and formulated in spite of life's minute and vital complexities. In this poem, 'Magi,' I imagine the great absolutes of the philosophers gathered around the crib of a newborn baby girl who is nothing *but* life." Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1981), 289–290, n. 130.

21. Rose, 149

22. Cornell, "Rethinking the Time of Feminism," 152.

23. Jacques Lacan, "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis," in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1977), 86.

24. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 255.

25. Cornell, 155.