



THRIVE

DiverseWorks

ART  
SPACE



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curated by MaryRoss Taylor and organized and presented by DiverseWorks in Houston, Texas,  
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published in *The Anarchist Reader*, George Woodcock, ed. (New York: Fontana / Collins: 1977).

<sup>5</sup> Quotes by Julia Kristeva and William Blake, as used by Elizabeth A. Grosz and Elspeth Probyn in *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1995): 181. Blake quote taken from, "A Vision of the Last Judgment" 1810.

<sup>6</sup> *Waiting* was performed at Womanhouse in Los Angeles, 1971 sponsored by the Feminist Art Program, California Institute of the Arts.

<sup>7</sup> Rachel Hecker, artist statement, 2008.

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| TRACY XAVIA KARNER | *Fearless, Outspoken, and Absolutely Free: [Women and Creativity]* Artistic practice, Robert Adams<sup>1</sup> writes, can affirm one's personal sense of meaning and thus keeps "intact an affection for life." Artists may not make a living through their art, he continues, but they are made "alive through it." Adams equates the creative impulse with the life force — two sides of the same coin — for those who pursue art. With the new longevity of contemporary society, these twin desires for life and art become more pronounced as artists, as well as their cohort, age into new phases and previously unimagined possibilities. At the forefront of this societal shift are the artists included in the *Thrive* exhibit. Curator MaryRoss Taylor has gathered together 16 women from the Houston area who have been actively engaged in art making for the majority of their adult lives and many for even longer than that.

I was delighted to have the opportunity to visit with 15 of the 16<sup>2</sup> artists about art making, creative process and growing older. The *Thrive* artists represent a variety of ages, experiences, approaches, and situations, yet each maintained a firm and constant commitment to her artistic practice. Many women remembered having a childhood

interest in creativity, often beginning to draw or paint at early ages. All but two of the women stated that they knew they wanted to be artists before reaching their early 20s. One did not begin her art career until after divorcing in her 40s; another came to art only after being diagnosed with cancer in her late 20s. Some of the women married, some had children, some divorced and remarried while a few remained single. Most attended art classes at the college level, some completed Bachelors of Fine Arts and others went on to do graduate work. A few are primarily self taught. As a group, their artistic work spans many media from performance to video, painting to photography, as well as installation and mixed media.

My life and my art are interchangeable....  
It's like living and I think that art and life are synonymous. My art goes in the direction of my life; or my life goes in the direction of my art.... It's not like I can step aside and make art.  
It's a core identity.

Lynn Randolph

Universally, these women reaffirmed the inseparability of their experience of art and life. "I don't separate art from life," Rachel Hecker explained, "I don't think you can." Many talked about their creative practice as integral to their sense of self and how they 'do' life. "My art truly is a reflection of my life," Dee Wolff proposed, "I think every artist's is." Others expressed art making as a life process like breathing or eating. Being an artist Kathy Hall states, "means life to me." She spoke of the twin emotions of joy and frustration inherent in art making as extremes that make "you feel alive." In a similar vein, Kelli Vance referenced something she had read, stating that human desire is not to "find the meaning of life but to find the experience of being alive" which she finds in her passion for painting. "Being an artist is a career, it's an identity. It is totally

100% of your life...It's a very complete personal identity," Suzanne Bloom summarizes. This totality of the artist's path frames Debra Rueb's musings, "Does life imitate art? Or does art imitate life? Or are they the same thing?"

The equation of art making with life leads to an impulse to be involved in creative pursuits at all times. "I think each of us work...out of stubborn need to do [art]," Joanne Brigham states. "We're going to do it because that's what we do." As an artist, one woman stated that she could not just do common things like plant a garden or mow a lawn in mundane ways. Since she is an artist, she felt the need to accomplish even routine tasks in creative ways. Some talked about feeling "guilty if I'm not making art every waking moment," while others say they "never stop working." The desire to create art is discussed alternately in terms of an overwhelming need, a compulsion, and a continuous state of engagement. "I make [art] because I have to," Roberta Harris explains, "I'm always thinking about my work."

I never stop working...I see it in my head. I just turn it over in my head until I feel like it's beginning to be more complete, but at the same time I am researching and trying to understand more about what I am thinking about.

Joanne Brigham

In responding to my questions about how creative process may have changed over time, many saw their work as having evolved as their lives had. "As you grow older you become more experienced and hopefully wiser," explains Laura Bennett and you can "incorporate that experience and take it and make it something that somebody else can see." With experience also comes an enhanced awareness of one's expression. Kathy Hall reflects, "I have learned to trust my instincts much more than I ever did before." Lynn

Randolph concurs, "confidence and self-esteem really help build a stronger expression and I have become fearless." Similarly Toby Topek recalls, "I used to be meek and mild and now I'm outspoken." Mary Jenewein remembers her discovery of art as her liberation, "when the point came in my life that I could make art, I felt absolutely free and I still do. It's just a wonderful, wonderful feeling that I didn't have most of my life." For these women, art has become a more focused celebration of life and experience that is enriched with age.

Artists always come back to it (art) for that joy or the growth involved in it; and I think that probably never stops because you are always growing. With each new piece, you are learning something about yourself, your thought process.

Kathy Hall

Perhaps the sense of growth comes in part from the inherent uncertainty in the process, Debra Rueb says "you never know exactly where you are going." Roberta Harris concurs, "It's like going on a journey...I never know, nor do I really want to know exactly what the outcome will be." Suzanne Bloom notes the importance of a creative space "that allows me to be free to make moves" in exploratory directions. Relishing this sense of indeterminacy Dee Wolff offers simply, "I love exploring." Elia Arce embraces the transformational possibility for both the artist and her audience that seems to emerge out of the unknown, emergent process. This delight in the unknown quality of the creative practice was common theme in our discussions.

Art, for these women, is seen as an engagement with life, so our talk of growing older seems very different than one may find in mainstream gerontological discussions. Early theories of aging, now dismissed, called for a voluntary "disengagement" as one aged. Older individuals

were to gradually withdraw from work and social life until death. However, as the Baby Boomer generation has grown older, they are redefining our stereotypes of aging.<sup>3</sup> Currently a significant portion of the U.S. population is becoming older (20% is predicted to be over age 65 by 2030) and gerontologists and other scholars are engaged in developing new theories of aging processes, analyzing the social supports necessary for an older populace, and positing steps for "successful aging."<sup>4</sup> Beyond the vicissitudes of health, two core factors have been identified as contributing to a positive aging experience — having strong social networks and a sense of purpose — both of which are integral to the artistic life and are evidenced in the narratives of the *Thrive* artists.

Strong social networks often grow out of a sense of community. "You cannot thrive without a community — this is one of the best things about Houston," Lauren Kelley says, "I love our artists' community." Artists who've been in Houston since the 1970s or before also note the strength and solidarity of the early women's community. "We fed each other and enriched each other's lives. And they are all still my friends," Lynn Radolph recounts, "and I adore them — the beloveds." Roberta Harris advises, "It's important to have supportive people around, people who care that I'm an artist or that I'm doing something that's important to me." Community support, whether family, friends, dealers, curators, or other artists, play a key role in weathering the ups and downs of the art world. Charles Mary Kubricht laments, "There are so many reasons to get discouraged with an art career." Community can provide "some help in responding to the work, some feedback," Suzanne Bloom adds, "some compatriot who will seem to understand, someone to spar with, someone

to debate with."

Community and strong support networks play vital roles in helping artists face the challenges and disappointments of art making. Questions of utility and value may be intrinsic to the artistic life. "The doubt is constant," Rachel Hecker reflects, "I wonder and worry about time spent in the studio — is it a valuable or useful activity? And generally it isn't." As Suzanne Bloom notes, making art is "feeling the courage to be different and be involved in something that seems internally to be necessary, and yet externally from a pragmatist's point of view not at all necessary." You need to "believe in what you are doing and believe that it is worthy," Laura Bennett agrees. In making art, artists find a purpose that can engage them throughout the life course.

The whole history of my art and my career has been personal work. Taking it in and giving it back. And learning about myself to be better, in order to give back better...what you breathe in, you breathe out.

Dee Wolff

As Dee Wolff exemplifies, creating art can provide a clear sense of purpose and meaning to one's life — a key component noted in the literature on successful aging. "The best thing that being an artist means to me," Mary Jenewein says exuberantly, "is I don't think I will ever be too old to do it." Many women noted the possibility of physical decline or limitations that may come with aging when envisioning their later years. "I can't work as long hours as I used to," Toby Topek explained, "but I'm not a dancer or a singer — I'm a visual artist...and I don't see why I can't keep working." This desire to continue to be creatively engaged is similar to the findings of a recent study of New York artists over the age of 65. Joan Jerffri<sup>5</sup> found that regardless of the medium, artists had no plans to "retire" from making art, moreover they work in their

studios daily, have high life satisfaction, high self esteem, and a large, supportive network of friends in the arts. Aging does not seem to deter the creative process. "I've got a lot of art to make...instead of ideas drying up...I feel like they are coming, coming...I want to stay healthy and keep making my work," Roberta Harris projects. "I want to keep this [art making] going, I want to keep this going until I'm gone." "The older I get, the more choices I recognize that I have; it's not less," suggests Rachel Hecker.

In choosing to continue making art, many women had begun to contemplate accommodations that might be



**Joanne Brigham performance at the opening reception November 14, 2008**

needed as they get older. Currently, Kathy Hall prides herself on "being a very strong, physically strong woman" and is exploring options for creativity with com-

puter technology that does not require physical strength. Likewise, Mary Jenewein has also thought about how to continue working in her studio should she lose mobility. "I'm lucky because I have this studio, and I've already figured out how I can build ramps out here. My next door neighbor has told me he'd be happy to push me up the ramp everyday or I'll get a motorized [wheelchair]. At least I will have this studio." The impetus to create remains in the forefront of our conversations when we talk about how these women envision their later years. Lauren Kelley "wants to continue being a maker" and hopes to become a centenarian, "there is so much work to do...I hope my elderly years are evidence of the fact that I've done my part...as

long as I can."

Other women address the lessening of time directly. "I don't have a lot of time to explore and waste, but I can't make my art as though I don't have the freedom to explore," comments Suzanne Bloom. "Still I know that I need to keep moving, and produce, and realize things now." Some talked about mortality and the opportunities it provides. Dee Wolff mentioned that ephemerality has been a common theme throughout her work. "When I recognize the ephemerality during the day, it's very liberating," says Rachel Hecker, "It's not bad at all." Lynn Randolph believes that, "dealing with your own death and how you think about that is one of the most important factors in your creative life." Finding that it helps you reprioritize, she continues, "death becomes an ally...that has moved me to see everything in a fuller, richer way, a more appreciative way."

The artists of *Thrive* are making the most of the new longevity, and are creating new models for aging creatively while staying fully engaged with life, community and their own enriched sense of purpose. Surely something we all aspire to.

- 1 Adams, Robert. 1994. *Why People Photograph*. New York: Aperture.
- 2 One artist was unavailable due to travel constraints. All conversations were videotaped and can be found in the Women's Studies Archive at the University of Houston.
- 3 Karner, Tracy Xavia. 2001. "Caring for an Aging Society: Cohort Values and Eldercare Services," *Journal of Aging and Social Policy*, 13(1): 15-36.
- 4 Rowe, John W. and Robert L. Kahn. 1999. *Successful Aging*. Dell books.
- 5 Jeffri, Joan. 2007. *Above Ground: Information on Artists III: Special Focus on New York City Aging Artists*. Columbia University: Research Center for Arts and Culture.

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