

ACTS OF SURVIVAL: re-visioning the work of Delpha Hudson

By Dr Marianne May, 2018

*Any mother of young children who wants to do serious creative work -
with all that such work implies of the will to self-assertion, self-absorption,
solitary grappling – must be prepared for the worst kind of struggle,
which is the struggle against herself. ¹*

Introduction:

Since the late 1990s, Delpha Hudson has built up a body of work of performance, painting and sculpture that whilst using her own life-experience throughout, also addresses many of the issues women face today. There has been a recent resurgence of interest in the way in which women are visualised, especially in performance where a number of a new generation of artists are working with themes such as the ambivalence of motherhood that Hudson has been using as material for over 20 years. Much of her work has been influenced by feminist theory, her practice developing, and adapting as the feminist movement itself has changed and evolved. Using the perspective of the present to examine the slippage that has occurred in the intervening period of time creates new critical directions. Renegotiating ideas through a retrospective lens is what Adrienne Rich describes as using “fresh eyes” to reassess events. Rich contends that, for a woman, this goes further than cataloguing one’s oeuvre for posterity but rather the act of “re-visioning” itself is “an act of survival”.²

Hudson began a retrospective process in 2017 when she set aside time to re-read 30 years of diaries. Some of the contents were saved or noted but most were ritually burned at the end of each day. This cathartic exercise was intended to guard against misinterpretation rather than to destroy what was written. For Hudson the act of writing oneself is an ongoing activity; destroying the texts of the past enabled her to re-interpret herself in an unfixed and fluid way. This performance project entitled *Theatre of the Self*, documented and posted on social media at the time, brings together many of the ideas that her practice has been engaged in; use of the body

¹ Suleiman, S., *Writing and Motherhood* (1979), in Garner, S.N., Kahane C. and Sprengnether, M. (1985)

² Rich, A., *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (1980), p.35.

and performance to explore women's lives, and their lived experience. Like many feminist performance artists in the late 1980's and '90s Hudson was influenced by theories of 'strategic essentialism', the idea that the personal can be utilised as a force of consolidated political identity was developed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, albeit in relation to imperialism and the "third world woman".³ Judith Butler, in *Bodies That Matter*⁴, (1993) argued that gender identity is a performance in process. Such ideas initiated a reaction by women artists against the didactic emotional restraints of the 1980's and once again there was a return to direct articulation and exploration of the subjective experience of gender differences with a focus on political change.

Absorbing the impact of these and many other feminist writers, including Helène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, and having enrolled at Solihull college (Coventry University) to study fine art in the late 1990s, Delpha Hudson began to develop an art practice which shifted from painting to performance, video and installation. One major influence throughout her career has been the artist Mary Kelly, especially Kelly's representation of motherhood via the image and the language of the maternal and its objects. Kelly has stated that her way of working 'is a visualisation and a theorisation simultaneously':

*If you're involved in a construction of meaning that's tying together form with content, then it's primarily the ideas that you're working with that are prompting you to take on the problems of different media.*⁵

Influenced by film and conceptual art, Kelly's work uses multiple registers of signification, with the visual form of the writing playing a vital part in the work, being as charged as the image rather than transparent or documentative. They are 'poèmes-objets'. It will become clear just how pertinent Kelly's vision of a radical feminist art is to understanding Hudson's studio practice.

Tracing this history of a body of work and providing a commentary to understanding Hudson's various performances and studio-based artwork, we start with *Theatre of the Self*, a cathartic moment of destruction which allows an insight into the

³ Spivak, G. (1988). 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in C.Nelson and L.Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*.

⁴ Butler, J. (1993)

⁵ Mary Kelly in conversation with Griselda Pollock, 1989, in M.Iversen, D.Crimp and H.K.Bhabha, *Mary Kelly*, p.30-31.

biographical origins of these powerful expressions of the feminine subject in all its guises.

Returning to the starting point

Delpha Hudson was born in Surrey in 1963. She studied history at London University (1985) reading fine art at Coventry University (2001) where she established a performance practice in combination with video and multi-media installation. The over-arching theme of the maternal in Hudson's work reflects her determination to explore the lived experience of motherhood and understanding her personal experiences are key to understanding her commitment to re-representation of women and mothers. Hudson was brought up in a Mormon family, marrying a fellow Mormon at a young age. By the age of twenty-six she had three children under five years old. Suffering from post-partum depression and additional guilt and confusion imbibed from Mormon religious patriarchal culture, she became severely depressed. For her at that time the only way out of this agonising situation was to leave the Mormon church and her marriage, her children remaining with their father as she felt she could not take them with her, not knowing where she was going herself. The trauma of that period, suffering from guilt and loss as well as anger at the societal expectation and blame of mothers was poured into making art.

Throughout her life, Hudson has kept a daily diary. As a Mormon it was a requirement in order to bear witness and to strive to be a better person through reflection. Once those ties were severed, keeping a diary became a strategy for survival, a way of working out a very different future to the one she felt she had been originally assigned. Now in her mid-fifties, settled in a safe and supportive relationship and close once again to her children, and now grandchildren, she felt able in 2017 to return to the past through her diary writing. Intended as a performance project and scored as such *Theatre of Self*, took thirty days to read through thirty diaries, starting from the year 1977.⁶ Some had long entries, others shorter with gaps in between; many were happy, others desperate and disturbing. Hudson wrote down snippets from the diaries and some passages were kept. At the end of each day when the diary had been read it was then ritually burned. The one

⁶ It is interesting to note that in the field of affinity numerology the number 30 represents creative and social energies, resulting in imaginative and effective communication resonating with optimism.

exception was from the year 1986 when Hudson's daughter was born. Her daughter persuaded her not to burn it and has the diary now. Each daily performance was documented, with one photograph of reading and one of burning, and posted on social media. This sent a clear message that the artist, whilst making it plain she was not hiding anything or re-creating the past in some way, did not wish to let the diaries continue to exist as they would be open to misinterpretation. They were hers to destroy and yet the project was more about the process of reading and re-editing rather than complete destruction. Hudson's aim was to express the non-fixity of the historical past, those "selves" in the various diaries changing and mutating into new forms as a result of experience and of the awareness of the cultural pressure for women to remain fixed in their socially designated roles. In *Theatre of Self* Hudson herself becomes an object in the performance, opening up practices of self-constitution, recognition and reflection, thus becoming part of the spectacle.

There is an ambiguity in the narratives we make for ourselves, particularly those inscribed on the page. Returning to the text, how representative and truthful these accounts are is scrutinised, especially after a long period of time in between the writing and re-reading. Hudson was curious as to whether the *truth* in her diaries would change how she thought of herself in the present. The fluidity of identity she intended to expose within this "theatrical" space became both a metaphysical and political act. The fragmentation the diary entries revealed in terms of memory, time, trauma and the maternal, would, she envisaged, be a vehicle for strategies of creative renewal. For Hudson this was not about re-living any of her past life but rather creating multiple realities through the re-presenting of events. The slippage between then and now sheds new light on past actions and experiences. The focus is on how we perceive ourselves and are perceived by others, and this interchange has the potential for uncovering our own self-creation, fallibility and potential for generating empathic understanding.

Trauma is at the heart of much of Hudson's performative work, expressed in *Theatre of Self* in a particularly poignant way. In her study of this phenomenon, *After-effects | After-images*, Griselda Pollock explores psychic trauma and whether aesthetic practices can bring about its transformation. For Pollock "Psychic trauma knows no time. It is a perpetual present, lodged like a foreign resident in the psyche...This happening is not in the past, since it knows no release from its perpetual but evaded

present. No words or images are attached to this Thing”.⁷ However constant and timeless trauma’s position in the psyche remains, Pollock argues that “some kind of representational formation offers deliverance that *returns* the ‘event’ to the subject changed through temporising and spatialising.”⁸ A new space of contact with trauma can be created by the process of making art which itself has a significance within its own time and space. *Theatre of the Self* encapsulates many of the dominant themes that pervade Hudson’s practice. Spiralling out from the subjectivity of selfhood and the maternal come ideas around time, presence and absence, the present and the historical. Feminist and aesthetic theories underpin ideas of repetition and return as functions of performance where dialogue and encounters are captured at the time and relayed through a variety of media.

The physical and the impermanent: performances and installations

As the daily diaries she kept over several decades logged her life so the physical traces of giving birth and caring for her children were inscribed on her body, some of which involved psychic trauma and depression which fed into performance and her work in other media. Performance enabled multiple registers of form and meaning to teased out in Hudson’s representations of the feminine/maternal subject and when combined with video and installation are aesthetic strategies that engage with the personal and the political and a range of feminist theories. In conversation with Griselda Pollock in the late ‘80s, Kelly states “...my way of working is a visualisation and a theorisation simultaneously”⁹ For Kelly, the objective of employing a variety of formal practices to construct meaning is in “...tying together form with content, then it’s primarily the ideas that you’re working with that are prompting you to take on the problems of different media”.¹⁰

In an attempt to counteract the pressure from society for mothers to, in Katherine Stone’s words, “...live up to impossible ideals and finally to maintain the mask of motherhood at the risk of their emotional health”,¹¹ Hudson created *Double Void* (2001), a durational performance and installation focusing on the repetitive work involved in bringing up children. During the performance Hudson continuously circled

⁷ Pollock, G. (2013), p.2.

⁸ *Ibid* p.3

⁹ Iverson, M. (1997) p.130.

¹⁰ *Ibid* p.131.

¹¹ Stone, K.

the gallery dragging a hessian sack filled with lard the same weight as her youngest son. To accompany this a recording of her son's first word "bag" was repeated over and over, with three video screens showing Hudson's staging of other repetitive walks, reinforcing the message of the monotony and the wearisome nature of many of the tasks a mother faces from day to day. *Double Void* was part of a series of related performances made over time including *Burden* (1998) and *Double Burden* (2017). Inspired by Elizabeth Grosz's call for the "autonomous representation" of the female body, developing "a new use of language and new forms of knowledge capable of articulating femininity and women's specificity in ways quite different from prevailing alternatives", ¹² Hudson's aim was to create new meaning in representing the lived reality of being a mother, as in *M/utter* (2002). In this durational performance weighted down by bags of seawater tied to her legs, Hudson worked at filling a wheelbarrow with buckets of seawater, stones, mirrors, and an illustration of da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Playing on the German word for mother and reading a newspaper article on 'superwomen' - working mothers - it also alluded to utterance in terms of enunciating the experience of the maternal body and thereby representing it in non-stereotypical ways. Once the tasks were completed Hudson, fuelled by anger and regaining her strength, crashed the wheelbarrow through the doors of the gallery, a reminder of all those times she had had to manoeuvre pushchairs and toddlers through unsuitable spaces.

Like many performance works *M/Utter* was a development of metaphor and form developed from previous performance experiments. It mined a repertoire of symbolic actions which over time created nuanced relational dialogues with objects and media. *Something's Fishy* (2004) was a performance and installation first shown in the Surface Gallery in Nottingham. Hudson tied gutted fish to her arms, filling their mouths with newspaper cuttings related to women. Performing in dialogue with the audience, whose own stories were very funny at times, Hudson read the news stories, sometimes singing them, whilst the rotting fish eventually fell from her arms. Masquerading as both the fish-wife and the news-seller in clothing associated with a feminine guise, the negotiated interactions with the audience created an inter-textual platform which re-coded representations of gender. Taking a similar message into the public space, *Bag Lady II* (2003) was performed outside the Ikon gallery in

¹² Grosz, E (1994)

Birmingham, with the assumption it was a public space. During the performance, in which Hudson sculpted a baby from lard and made repetitive attempts to empty a suitcase of baby clothes to a looped repetitive soundtrack, a watching security guard explained that the space was privately owned. For Hudson this reinforced an underlying message of exclusion and otherness of women in the public spaces and arenas.

Peggy Phelan's assertion that performance can only be in the present, becoming itself through disappearance,¹³ influenced the ways in which Hudson plays with time in performance. For Phelan, there is no visible trace left afterwards, and if performed again 'this repetition itself marks it as "different". The document of a performance is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present'.¹⁴ Whilst acknowledging the difference between the spectacle and its documentation, Hudson employs film, video and recorded sound alongside performance, all having equal parts to play in creating a relational loop between past and present. presence and absence. *Something Special, Something Else, Something In-Between* (2001) were three works in different media shown as a triptych, inspired by the connection women have with objects and personal belongings, especially clothes. The final installation used the inter-relation of performance, video, sound and sculpture over time. In *Something Else*, decomposing sculptural copies of various garments were on display, whilst *Something Special* played a series of videos on three monitors in which interviewees talked about the clothes that made them feel special. *Something In Between* was performed and recorded and then re-combined with the other media with the intention of creating dialogues between the two other pieces as well as being part of the whole. The contrasting dialogues between performance, objects and vox pop interviews engaged with the mutability of the subject, drawing on Hal Foster's reading of Freud's concept of psychic temporality being different to the biological temporality of the body.¹⁵ Lacan developed Freud's ideas by proposing that subjectivity is not set once and for all but rather, as Foster states, "it is structured as a relay of anticipations and reconstructions of traumatic events".¹⁶ With this continual back and forth of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts "one event is

¹³ Phelan, P (1993) p.146.

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ Foster, H. (1996) p.28.

¹⁶ *Ibid* p.29.

only registered through another that recodes it; we come to be who we are only in deferred action”¹⁷ The use of multiple sites – the body, the domestic and institutional spaces in this work, creates a complex relay of meanings and interpretations and lends a sense of timelessness in which memory interacts with the present. Hudson’s ideas around ‘multiple embodying’ through time, site and associated objects in relation to women’s experience, focuses our attention on the psychic trauma and anxiety that can be re-lived through this idea of the back and forth, relayed simultaneously in the combination of media.

In *To the Lighthouse (and back)* (2004), a silent film of the beach at Godrevy in Cornwall, Hudson explores timelessness as a female trope. The camera moves slowly and silently across the figures on the beach, passing a young child and eventually resting its gaze on the lighthouse, the inspiration for Virginia Woolf’s novel. From her reading of Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* published in 1927, Hudson emphasises the sense of return and memory, the camera moves away from the lighthouse and then returns past a child alone on the beach. The figure of the mother, evident in the novel, is absent in the film. Whilst time stands still, *To the Lighthouse (and back)* is anchored historically and inspired by Woolf’s attachment to memories of spending seaside summers in St Ives in Cornwall. Working with ideas around re-interpreting site, history, place and gender, *Miss-Readings* (2007) was commissioned by Tate St Ives and performed at the Barbara Hepworth Museum in St Ives. Hudson’s objective was to deconstruct the stereotypical museum tour by creating an alternative that explored the contradictions and tensions in the sculptor Barbara Hepworth’s life and work. Masquerading as Dame Barbara, Hudson encouraged the “tour group” to touch sculptures and experience the space, work and sound of the museum via a humorous and multi-sensory performance. The performance included live recordings of Hepworth talking about her work as well as having her achievements as an artist compared to the famous list produced by the feminist activist group, the Guerilla Girls, ‘The advantages of being a woman artist’. Stressing Hepworth’s identity as a wife and mother as well as a sculptor, aspects often omitted in accounts of the artist, Hudson’s aim in performing a personal and textual exchange with audiences was to enable an alternative analysis of a well-

documented past and also to consider the different ways history is presented in museums and institutions.

An earlier performance, *A Walk with Jane Austen* (1998), used the historical tour to consider ownership, control and how they relate to gender. Conducting the tour of the grounds of Blossomfield House in Solihull in a humorous re-evaluation of nineteenth century women authors and historicity, Hudson explored the historical construction of women. The event was documented and repeated without an audience, the resulting video was spliced together and overlaid with a manipulated soundtrack of music by Philip Glass and was installed in Solihull Art Gallery in 1999. From the public spaces of gardens and walkways, *Written in Honey* (2002) moved into the domestic realm of Helmsley Castle, a medieval castle in the North Yorkshire market town of Helmsley, that was later developed into a Tudor mansion in the sixteenth century. Having searched for domestic histories of the Tudor period, and finding few, Hudson wrote an alternative history on voile using local honey as ink. When coated with honey voile, a semi-transparent material becomes transparent. It was made into window hangings for the Tudor mansion house, the light making the text visible, symbolic of all the lost or invisible histories of women's domestic lives considered of no useful significance and therefore not recorded.

Moving out of the gallery, museum and stately house, Delpha Hudson has taken to the streets in sited public and political encounters. In doing so, she has created a direct interface with a variety of audiences, some very different to those who frequent art galleries. Often these sited works have focused on the power structures exposed when women move from the home to the street and how they are expected to behave within culturally and socially gendered conventions. By challenging these codes of behaviour in subtle incidental acts of transaction, Hudson opened up meaningful dialogue with passers-by, finding that people are often friendly, open and interested, asking questions and bringing humour to the events. In *Tealady* (2003), performed at the SEEN festival in Leicester, a domestic setting was created in the street with the artist offering tea and sympathy to members of the public in a parody of the stereotypical caring role of the mother relocated from the private to the public arena. In caricaturing the offering of a cup of tea and a biscuit to people whilst listening to their problems and worries, there was a gradual awareness that, for

many mothers and women in general, this was an everyday event, often taken for granted by those benefitting from such care and attention.

Another aspect of women moving through streets and shopping malls was acted out in *Pleasure in Slowness* (2004), performed with Helen Battelley at the Mailbox Intervention Festival in Birmingham. The performance referenced the *Arcades Project*¹⁸ in which the cultural critic and essayist Walter Benjamin portrayed the *flaneur* in nineteenth century Paris. This male member of the bourgeoisie had the time and leisure to wander the streets, strolling in a locale to experience and observe modern urban life there. Hudson and Battelley alternated their movement around a shopping arcade in periods of speed and slowness. Carefully scored, alarm clocks rang every ten minutes, signalling a change of speed. Slow activities included window-shopping, sitting in shops, and changing outfits in different shops. During the fast sections, they ran around the arcade carrying heavy bags, children's balloons, and dragging a two-dimensional representation of a man. The romanticism of the flaneur was absent, highlighting the clock-watching and alternate hectic lifestyle/boredom that many women are subject to when they have caring responsibilities.

In using parody, mimicry and metaphor, to produce new imagery for women's lives and live experience, Hudson brings the question of deconstruction and exploration of cultural representations of women into focus. By looking at motherhood, woman's position in the home and in the public sphere, as well as the veracity of time and historical context, our attention is drawn to the potential we all have for fluid multiplicity and change. Hudson's attention to gendered bodily experience and alternative representation open up debate as well as engender empathy and engagement.

¹⁸ Benjamin, W. (2002).