



*Charity*

Kate Davis

17 Sept – 28 Oct 2017

LUX

LUX presents a solo exhibition by Kate Davis featuring her new film, *Charity* (2017), commissioned as part of the Margaret Tait Award. Working across a range of media, including film and video, drawing, printmaking, installation and bookworks, Davis questions how historical narratives are produced and perpetuated. This has often involved probing the aesthetic and political ambiguities of particular artworks and specific historical moments from a contemporary feminist perspective.

Commissioned by LUX and Glasgow Film Festival in 2016, *Charity* was inspired by the ways in which the work of film-maker, poet and artist Margaret Tait invites the viewer to contemplate fundamental emotions and everyday activities that are often overlooked. Taking artistic representations of breastfeeding as its focus, the film explores how the essential—but largely invisible and unpaid—processes we employ to care for others could be re-imagined.

*Charity* is shown alongside related artworks, bookworks, research materials and a selection of films and videos from the LUX and Cinenova collections.

The exhibition is presented with LUX Scotland.

## On *Charity*

Amy Tobin

The nude has long been a litmus test for the artist. But the nude was never a human body; it was always symbolic or allegorical, a connecting thread between the lived condition and spiritual world. The nude has been a form of investment, a figure to which to project aspirations, a manifestation of sublimated desires and holy virtues. These wishes have played out across a spectrum of gendered figures, through a litany of saints and allegories. And these nudes, whether clothed in pose or gesture or draped in cloth or fashion, populate our cultural imagination. The figure of Charity, often represented by a breastfeeding mother, is the subject of Kate Davis' film of the same title.

But perhaps *subject* is not quite right. Davis' film is a whistle-stop art historical tour through images of Charity—or as she put it to me, not Charity at all, but pictorial representations of breastfeeding. Some are framed close-up, cropped from their original context; in others we glimpse the wider social world of the breastfeeding mother. Sometimes we see allegorical representations of Christian charity, elsewhere Roman Charity; and sometimes, what appear to be satirical representations of charity failing, as with an image of a woman feeding pups instead of the baby at her feet, while the narrator remarks: 'It can be hard work

keeping a baby fed'.

This encyclopaedic array of imagery transforms the figure of Charity from its allegorical function as a maternal signifier to an inscription of a social relation. The accompanying monologue describes the act of breastfeeding in terms belonging to paid employment. The female voice, the voice of the mother, describes the lack of contract, her hours, the kind of duties undertaken. If the spiritual significance of the figure of Charity seems far away from contemporary approaches to breastfeeding, this film offers another turn of the screw. Gone is the tender intimacy of the maternal relationship, along with the rhetoric of health and responsibility that accompanies more recent 'Breast is Best' discourse.

Davis' film is not explicitly concerned with the nursing versus formula debate, or other lactic politics—as Esther Leslie has so brilliantly explored—but the labour relations between mother and child within the domestic environment.<sup>1</sup> This marks an important feminist intervention into visual culture, as well as the history of art, which has not and often does not pay close attention to images of paid or unpaid working women across the domestic boundary line. *Charity* (2017) overturns this overlooking by confronting the viewer with high definition images of breastfeeding mothers. Drawn from numerous institutional archives and picture libraries, these high-

<sup>1</sup> Esther Leslie and Melanie Jackson, 'Journeys of Lactic Abstraction', *Cabinet*, issue 62 (Fall–Winter 2017). Available: [http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/62/jackson\\_leslie.php](http://cabinetmagazine.org/issues/62/jackson_leslie.php)

quality images invite close looking. They attest to a history of domestic work salvaged from allegory by the re-interpretation of spoken monologue. In this way Davis' film continues and updates the work of feminist art history defined in the 1970s, of tracing representations of women, finding evidence of diverse and varied lives absent or ignored in written and visual record. As Victoria Horne has argued, this method of historical looking parallels Davis' explorations and 're-visionings', and it is also evident in *Charity*.<sup>2</sup>

Horne situates Davis' work in a longer history of feminist re-visioning, tracing a complex web of references and citations as a mode of active, and even activist, historical work. Lynda Nead has also outlined a network of feminist affects in her study *The Female Nude*,<sup>3</sup> which explores the patriarchal codes underwriting the representation of the female nude. Nead argues that these representations depend on 'wholeness and containment', denying the carnal physicality and bodily processes of the actual human woman and therefore coding her living body as abject threat. The second part of Nead's study, 'Redrawing the Lines', offers a counter history of feminist re-writing, beginning with the suffragette Mary Richardson's slashing of the *Rokeby Venus*, which Davis has also explored in her series of prints *Curtain I–VII* (2011). Nead continues by looking to 'recent feminist art', defined not as 'a unified stylistic tendency' but

<sup>2</sup> Victoria Horne, 'Kate Davis: re-visioning art history after modernism and postmodernism', *Feminist Review*, no.110 (2015): pp.34–54.

<sup>3</sup> Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, Oxford: Routledge, 1992.

'the production of certain meanings through visual images, the effects of these images/works and their conditions of reception'.<sup>4</sup> 'To speak of feminist art', she writes, 'is to speak of visual representation that engages with and challenges historically constituted audiences and ideologies'.<sup>5</sup> *Charity* certainly fits this definition, using film to re-sequence and re-describe a history of maternal work.

However, Davis also departs from Nead's analysis of feminist reinterpretations of the female nude:

In general terms, feminist art and theory have been involved in the politics of self-definition. If the history of the female nude is defined as the representation of women in patriarchy, then feminist art has tried to wrest back this power, claiming the right to self-representation.<sup>6</sup>

*Charity* does not straightforwardly represent the artist, or any particular person. In fact the images presented are of at least two figures, troubling the possibility of 'self-representation', or self-identification. As the psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott said, 'There is no such thing as a baby... If you set out to describe a baby, you will find you are describing a baby and someone'.<sup>7</sup> These images of breastfeeding mothers

<sup>4</sup> Ibid: p.61.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> D.W. Winnicott, *The Child, The Family, and The Outside World*, London: Penguin, 1964: p.88.

agitate the delineation of the female nude—her wholeness, her integrity—and offer up a picture of duality, symbiosis and interconnection, both harmonious and violent, that fundamentally challenges the ideal of the singular subject; as the narrator remarks, ‘I’m often... beside myself with the baby’. In this case Davis’ feminist re-visioning takes another form.

At intervals the sequence of images in *Charity* is interrupted. These sections of footage, filmed using a GoPro camera, break with the flow of static images, re-situating the viewer in the home and in the hectic activity of washing, feeding, dressing and sweeping. We glimpse the interaction of mother and child, as well as the detritus of the rubbish bin, the interior of a washing machine and the bubbles and suds of the sink. Our view is restricted, confused, spun around and covered over. Davis exchanges the intensity of Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen’s renowned 360-degree pan in *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) for snatches of activity, relocating the camera to the centre of action and removing it from authorial control.

The footage captured by the GoPro camera in *Charity* complicates the question of self-representation. Davis does not hold the camera or frame the shot; she abandons creative control over the image. As such the work of the artist is suppressed to represent the work of the mother. Yet these scenes contrast dramatically with those in the sequence of reproductions. The contact of mother and child, if evident at all, is mediated by clothing; mostly we see the other tasks, manual and mechanic. The view is limited and

disempowering, matching the detachment of repetitive household chores. The augmented sound is alarmingly loud, breaking the rhythm of the monologue like a rude intrusion: domestic work literally interrupts the artistic investigation.

But if these sequences are insistent, they are not angry. Davis does not protest the particular hardship of her domestic tasks, but the structural issue of unpaid (and poorly paid) domestic work and its instrumentalisation of the labour of care and love. In this way Davis cites a long history of feminist activism, from campaigns for state childcare after the abolition of war nurseries at the end of the Second World War, to the campaign for Family Allowance, to the Wages for Housework campaigns. Likewise, she keys us into a longer history of creative practice, which might extend from the small objects made of household waste produced during the *Postal Art Event* (1975–77) to Mulvey and Wollen’s *Riddles of the Sphinx* and Gill Eatherley’s film-performance *Aperture Sweep* (1973). Indeed Davis’ withdrawal from and reorientation of the camera has a feminist legacy of its own. The artist cites Jo Spence as a particularly important touchstone. Spence experimented with embedding cameras in everyday objects, including a Wellington boot and a pram, to encourage the community groups she worked with to see things from a different perspective. Similarly, the GoPro camera harnesses find their precedent in Margaret Raspé’s helmet-mounted cameras, which she would wear to record household tasks like washing up and cooking, as well as her painting.

Perhaps the GoPro camera also offers a contemporary parallel to the handheld 16mm Bolex camera, which enabled and advanced experimental and artist filmmaking, particularly for women. As Sarah Neely has noted, the handheld Bolex—often associated with intimacy—was the primary camera used by Margaret Tait,<sup>8</sup> the filmmaker for whom the award that commissioned *Charity* is named. A parallel to *Charity* might be Tait's *Portrait of Ga* (1952), which follows the filmmaker's mother as she moves across the rural landscape. Although Tait stays behind the camera and her mother in front, the film explores their relationship and plays with picturing and withholding; as Neely writes, 'there are obvious moments of interaction between filmmaker and subject: smiles are shared and words are exchanged'.<sup>9</sup> In the domestic sections of *Charity*, the camera does not break the relationship between mother and child; in fact, this relationship is never clearly defined and sometimes not even shown. Instead the camera acts as a witness to the confusion of the domestic and it becomes clear that there is more to care than breastfeeding.

For Davis, it was Tait's *Blue Black Permanent* (1992) that proved most influential in the development of *Charity*. Tait's sole feature film follows three generations of women: Barbara, her mother Greta and grandmother Mary in Orkney and Edinburgh. Neely describes how

<sup>8</sup> Sarah Neely, 'Stalking the image: Margaret Tait and Intimate Filmmaking Practices', *Screen*, vol.49, issue 2 (July 2008): pp.216–221, p.218.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*: p.219.

'intricate flashbacks weave together' the narratives of the different characters across generations as a 'treatment of autobiographic material'.<sup>10</sup> The film's complex structure provides another way to imagine Davis' citational practice as an accumulation and accretion of forms and ways of working. More directly, Davis invokes Greta, the mother in *Blue Black Permanent*, through the voice of Gerda Stevenson, the actress who plays her. Davis was interested in Greta because she 'wrestles with her desire to fulfil her creative self and also to meet her personal responsibilities as a mother and wife'.<sup>11</sup> As an indirect act of self-representation, Davis' invocation of Greta stands in for Davis and perhaps any artist-mother.

However, the monologue in *Charity* departs from this theme and Tait's narrative, and instead imagines that Greta has a 'new paid job and that job is breastfeeding'.<sup>12</sup> Written in a speculative mode, in which Greta considers the conditions of her new job, *Charity* shatters the sentimental elusiveness of the maternal bond, re-situating experiences of love, pain and boredom as work. The images that accompany the monologue jostle against it; sometimes appearing to illustrate what is said, sometimes contradicting it. For instance, when the voice describes the spurting of her milk, which makes her 'look like one of those biblical fountains', only a semi-abstract line drawing lingers on screen. Likewise, the discussion of

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*: p.220.

<sup>11</sup> Kate Davis in email correspondence with the author.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*.

unions and superannuation schemes is accompanied by a gilded Madonna, while Greta's description of finding a comfortable 'setting' so the baby can feel her skin—quoted from Winnicott—is accompanied by an image of the rough-textured, violent coupling in Henry Moore's *Maquette for Mother and Child* (1952).

In Davis' 2017 exhibition *Nudes Never Wear Glasses* at Stills, Edinburgh, *Charity* was shown on an alternating loop with her earlier moving image work *Weight* (2014). *Weight* certainly functions as a pendulum piece to *Charity*. The film is an adaptation of a 1961 documentary about the sculptor Barbara Hepworth. Davis re-interpreted the original script by John Read, which emphasised Hepworth's exemplary skill, replacing all references to Hepworth with 'this woman' and to artworks with 'unpaid, domestic, invisible labour'. This act of rewriting transforms the text, moving domestic work to the foreground and highlighting the uneven value between housework and artwork—both activities that Hepworth engaged in. Indeed the footage of Hepworth in her studio and walking through St. Ives was replaced with footage of domestic work gleaned, with difficulty, from television archives.

Although these films, as Horne has commented, are both part of a 'sustained research project examining the role of representation in reinforcing and naturalising the gendered aspects of reproductive labour', there is an important difference between *Weight* and *Charity*. Artworks, which are removed from view in *Weight*, return in *Charity* as material to be recoded. As Nead and Horne have

both also argued, herein lies the work of feminist art and feminist art history. And yet, this act of recoding, which coincides with a legacy of complex feminist theory, is also interrupted and resisted by raucous interjections from Davis' own domestic environment. Despite their disruptive quality these parts of the film create a kind of continuity looping in references to Spence, Raspé and Tait—who is, in turn, invoked in the monologue, as well as representing Davis, the artist, as carer. As such, *Charity* operates on multiple levels—autobiographical, historical, personal and social—representing the discontinuities between work, labour, care, art and motherhood. The film reveals what the allegory of Charity has always cloaked.

Amy Tobin is an art historian and writer based in London.



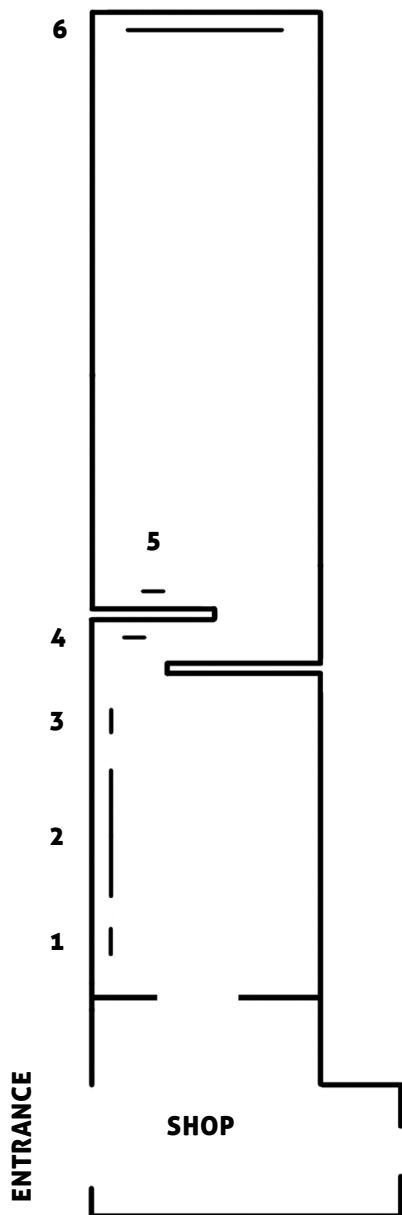
Left:  
*Panel of the Fonte Gaia (Fountain of Joy)*, Jacopo della Quercia copy made by Tito Sarrocchi, 1868

© The Courtauld Institute of Art, London

Right:  
*Baby at the Breast*, Medardo Rosso, 1889

© The Courtauld Institute of Art, London.





- 1** *Self-sufficient minority (version I)*, 2009, laser-cut steel ruler, painted wooden shelf
- 2** *Reversibility (It is the body and Excised)*, 2011, framed C-print
- 3** *Self-sufficient minority (study)*, 2009, framed C-print
- 4** *Charity*, 2017, framed C-print and drawing/collage
- 5** *Brick Wall I*, 2017, framed silver gelatin print (A/P from limited edition series of 10 prints)
- 6** *Charity*, 2017, HD video, 16mins

All artworks courtesy of the artist.

This free booklet is an edition of 250, produced on the occasion of Kate Davis' solo exhibition at LUX, London:

Kate Davis—*Charity*  
17 Sept – 28 Oct 2017  
Wed–Sat, 12pm–5pm

The exhibition is presented with LUX Scotland, and curated by Nicole Yip.

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Front and back cover image:  
*Charity*, Kate Davis, 2017, video still



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