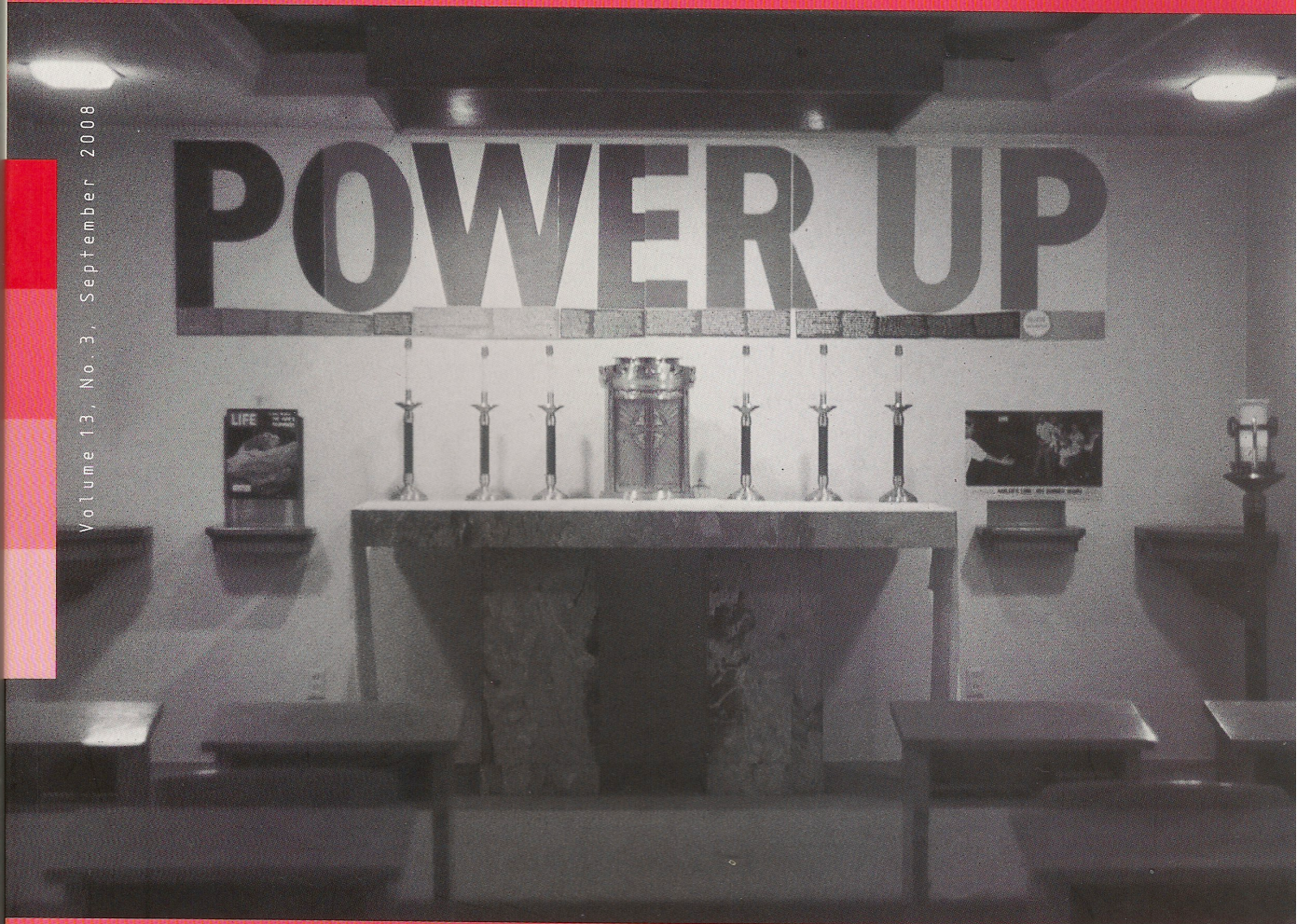


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# POWER UP



Congregation

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# Become

## Secret Acts in the Work of Kate Davis

KIRSTEN NORRIE

‘A miniature love story frames the discovery that a certain Boutades, a Sikyonian potter at Corinth, once made: he manufactured the first portrait image on behalf of his daughter, “who was in love with a young man; and she, when he was going abroad, drew in outline on the wall the shadow of his face thrown by a lamp. Her father, having pressed clay onto this, made a relief that he hardened by exposing it to fire along with the rest of his pottery” (Tarn Steiner 2001: 3).



• Aphrodite Kallipygos  
2007. Pin pricked paper  
186 x 82 x 2cm

### PRICKING APHRODITE

In 1946 Marcel Duchamp made a glutinous painting consisting of a daub of offish white on a black background, entitled *Paysage fautif* (*Harem-Scarum Landscape*). The word play entitling this work became all the more explicit when it later transpired that the substance he used to paint it with was his own semen.

Inseminating art work has been a less literal activity for centuries in the West, its metaphoric implication imbuing the activity of applying paint to canvas witnessed exaggeratedly in the work of male artists such as Jackson Pollock; in the vivification of Greek archaic and classical statuary through its mnemonic function to recall those lost at war or at sea; and in the incestuous relationships evolved between artists and their work (Paolo Ucello's wife beleaguering him to quit perspective and join her in bed). Yet what is even more interesting in the case of *Paysage fautif* is not its explicit performativity but the covert privacy in which it was enacted and the inevitable status of documentation it thereafter attained.

Kate Davis's work involves moments of intense private action. As an artist who sculpts, draws, makes video, text and installation, Davis's work has often proved resistant to language, attempts at description frequently caught up in a tautological reworking of events. This is not due to the number of areas she works in, but the deliberately subtle and complex interplay between parts. *come*, shown at Milch Gallery London in 1997, comprised complex works such



as *Negligé* (Woman with her Throat Cut) - thirty-six pin punctured drawings at ten degrees apart transcribing Giacometti's *sculpture*. Also included in *come* was *Drawing Towers while lying down*, an impressive biro inscribed sheet of glass tilted against the gallery wall. Taking almost three hundred hours to create, the repetitious nature of the work is accentuated knowing Davis's near blindfolded state in drawing through carbon paper. *Little Red* incorporates metal etched glass and the obscured shape of a lemon, abstracted by its lack of colour, cut in half, the symbol of bisexuality due to its hermaphroditic incorporation of both male and female parts. The vaginal appearance of the cross-sectioned fruit is heightened and hidden by Davis' placing it cut surface down; a subtle wound that iterates the tactile quality in much of her work. The nuanced and covert allusion to touch; sometimes a precisely damaged touch in the form of slices, pricks, slight but multiple burns and often a touch that elicits change through repetition has been extended to recent work.

*Headhearhole*, title of Davis's exhibition out of a 2007 residency at the Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere, included a delicately pricked: *Aphrodite Kallipygos*. *The goddess was the same height as the artist*. The etched glass of *What?*, a large panel whose spray of metal flecks adhering to the surface corresponded to the shape of an ink blot, evoked comparisons to the lumbar region of the spine or the thorax region of an insect. The piece was infused with the same punitive potential as *Little Red* as Davis held a grinder with her back to the glass and bent over the steel clasped between her feet so that sparks shot out between her legs, settling in a scorched spray on the glass.

#### IN ABSENTIA

'I was brought up to pray as if everything depended on prayer and to work as if everything depended on work. There was no room for anything else . . . I kissed the feet of Christ and sent the statue flying, shattering into a thousand little pieces on the floor. I will never be able to

put him back together. I am destined to be on the outside from now on.' (*Some References to red, remembered, conjured or stolen while walking for 28 Seconds* Lecture, Kate Davis, Milch 1998.)

Stone statues have long been used in funerary rites as substitutes for the dead. As compensatory doubles in Ancient and Classical Greece, the statues often suffered punishments meted out to them as if to the living embodiment of the person they represented. 'Thaegenes of Thasos, Olympic victor in 480 and 476, was honored with a bronze statue standing in the agora of his native city. Flogged by an enemy after the athlete's death, the statue toppled down on its assailant and, on being convicted of homicide, was thrown into the sea' (Tarn Steiner 2001: 8). The function of wax, lead and clay effigies employed in fifth-century Athens' curse rituals was no less rigorous; figurines mutilated, burnt or bound in an attempt to damage specific and relevant parts of the original person portrayed. The invisibility of the 'original', the animated thinking and feeling flesh of the statue's human counterpart suggests an autonomy and focused visibility all too easily centered on a figurative replica. However, Socrates suggested that the ideal portrait would consist of an amalgam of human properties, adding that the allusion to the soul should be the central concern in the fashioning of an idealised body. 'The statue maker ought to make the outward form like to the workings (erga) of the soul' (Tarn Steiner 2001: 34).

The metonymic presence of Davis's body is apparent in *Philosophical Object* (1997), for example, which presents the viewer with a cylindrical glass tube, the outside sprayed with a film of vaporized aluminium creating a separation between surfaces. The length is equal to the artist's forearm and the internal diameter is 10 cm - the maximum dilation of the cervix at birth. The sexualised metonymy of this work and *Aphrodite Kallipygos* presents Davis's presence as a subtle mnemonic device, alluded to in the potentially entrenched forearm and a reworking of personified love given the same stature as the



artist. These elements are potentially incorporated as contiguity rather than similarity - the artist's body extended through the work in a kind of tangible sympathy creating 'a bond that need not rest on any visible mimetic likeness' (Tarn Steiner 2001: 3), albeit selective likeness, and it is this exactitude which can be found in all aspects of Davis's practise, elevating acts performed within her process to defined moments of private performance.

The removal of significant value in order to create something of equal value is a consistent concern within Davis's work, particularly apparent in the drawings made painstakingly with a pin. As an anatomy (anatomising the materiality of the work itself), it rests equivocally between construction and deconstruction enabling a point of equipoise, a resting place, albeit an uncomfortable one. The somatic inference here of mystical or mysterious bodies, latent within *Aphrodite Kallipygos* and other significant works such as *Little Red*, is that the boundaries of knowledge and belief are open to reinvention, particularly when ascertaining anatomical 'truth' in confronting interiority, for example. However, Davis consistently concentrates on the exterior form of her figures, transfixed by Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, Werner Herzog's *Heart of Glass* and Giacometti's *Woman with her Throat Cut* - all of which allow interior states to dictate or shape external appearances. For *St. Teresa* it is the dichotomy of her climactic rapture, whether sexual or religious; for the cast of *Heart of Glass* it is the hypnosis they undergo to depict the love, obsession and murder surrounding the lost procedure to create the infamous ruby glass; and for the subject of Giacometti's sculpture it is a woman's stance in death. Rather than, the exterior images created by Davis suggest a psycho-sexual quality reverberating with emotional intelligence which is achieved, in part, by a particular handling and positioning of materials. It is this aspect of Davis's practise that encourages a revised reading of the performative act where the object or prop is the culmination of

a considered act within process as opposed to the more disposable prop of theatre or the live art object to be utilised as idea/action for the duration of the piece. Davis seems to refute this position by producing permanent evidence of live action purposefully imbued in the materiality of the object itself.

#### THE CORROBORATION OF TOUCH

*Red Shift* shown at Milch in 1998 is a video work comprising the artist moving away from the camera, her back towards the viewer in a simultaneous advance and retreat, the scarlet of her coat at first fully saturating the screen then receding as the figure moves away to produce enigmatically sexual shapes against a white background that could be interpreted as snow. Davis is fully aware of the indelible nature of red, an undertone to the seemingly bleached formality of works such as *Alone*, Milch 1998, where despite a tincture in varnishing a lemon with scarlet nail polish, all else remains white - a small table, marble-like folds of large white sheets of paper and a mirror with a white spray painted ellipse. The properties of red apparently bleed through in this delicately psychosomatic piece, but in unexpected places. (It is worth noting that 'alone' in Italian can also mean stain or halo).

Yet the corroboration of touch wilfully denounces accident in the construction and dissemination of such pieces, instead of which the artist has specifically chosen the formal moments and objects to imbue a red-edness. This colouring up of work encourages an emotive position within a minimally formal one, excited by the rigorous possibilities of repositioning Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, for example, and this is true of the succinct acts enmeshing the objects and drawings Davis has recently created with a particular interpretation of the emotive properties of form. It is this knowing detachment that allows the viewer distance from the rawer interface of private, personal and subjective emotional experience. The knowingness of touch, the preconceived relationship to Davis's creation



of recent objects and drawings could be said to harbour instinctual intuitive emotion and contemplation; certainly by the conditions of near silence (the pin pricks or flying sparks existing usually as afterword or rumour) and seclusion. But it is the action itself which already bears the implications of feeling; the propensity toward pain, repetition, conscientious action, heightened by a lack of visibility that allows Davis to coolly detach and re-align the intensive history of each work within the pieces she groups together.

#### OBJECTS OF CONTEMPLATION

'The bishop bends towards me to give me holy communion. I open my mouth to receive the body of Christ and before I shut my eyes I am suddenly faced with an aerial view of an open vagina. The bishops mitre. Red and shaped like the splayed female sex. Blood rushes to my cheeks, glowing with heat I am embarrassed not from what I see but from what I feel' (*Some references to red, remembered, conjured or stolen while walking for 28 Seconds* Lecture, Kate Davis, Milch, 1998).

This deference to her materials, to the conscripted act of making, poses a formal question for Davis herself - how can she connect the unmade to the made? In accentuating a vital self-awareness, by subscribing to the process of creation a vigorous and equal element in relation to the finished work, albeit a private one (and this is important), perhaps this inevitable fissure is temporarily overcome. The blindfold of carbon paper in *Drawing Towers while lying down* evokes religious artistic practises where the artist may not look at what they are conveying. Instruction through mirrors, where the object increasingly accrues more awesome/fulness than the individual creating it, is commonplace in the history of religious artefacts. This is deflection rather than peripheral vision, another fact possibly alluded to in Davis's consistent use of mirror, glass, nail polish and hard surfaced metal. The deflection extends to the pin prick drawings with the rhythmic extraction of tiny discs of paper, an elaborate sense of reduction

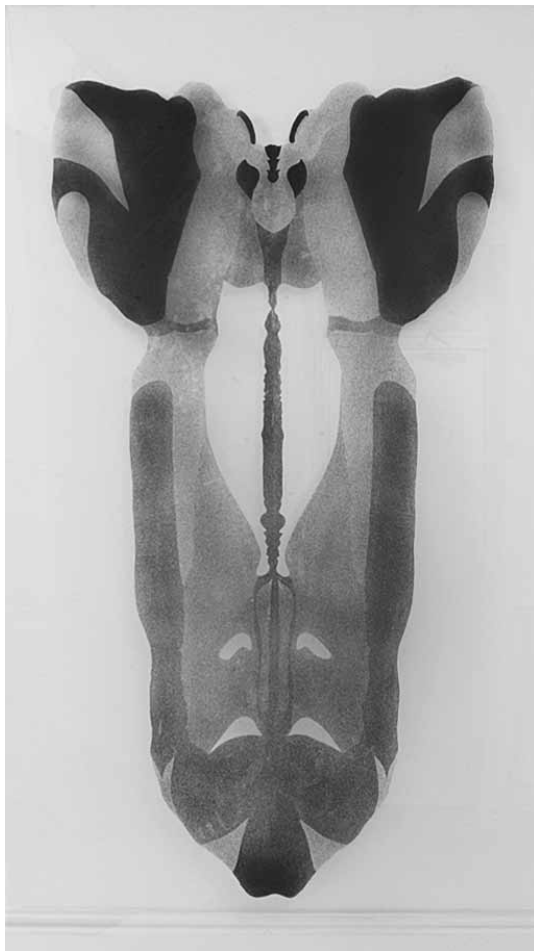
metaphorically and paradoxically analogous to the creation of an icon. The paradoxical tenderness applied in a potentially punitive fashion is reminiscent of the death by a thousand cuts, the gradual blinding of seamstresses forced to work by candlelight in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain and early 'tattooing' with a sharp wooden needle and ink. Reminiscent too of the small penetrations of cupid with his tiny arrow, somehow impotent in the enlarged and life-sized evocation of Davis's Aphrodite. In looking back over her shoulder at the viewer, this figure comprising many holes in the paper evokes the unturning red figure of *Little Red* in an uneasy equivalence mimicking Davis's assertion that 'there are two female fluids. Ancient sources called these the River of Life and the River of Death, meaning the clear or white flow at times when a child is more likely to be conceived and the forbidden red flow of menstruation, when it is most unlikely that a child can be conceived.' Of course Aphrodite was never meant to be fertilised; her calling is for the consummation of eros as a self-contained act. She is punctured into existence through the repeated penetration of a needle which brings her soft flesh into light-suffused being. It is too easy to read red and white as binary opposites; the staunch and the flow are perhaps more symptomatic of the kind of emotional defiance and reverberation suggested in redness as a position. In this light, Aphrodite's punctured form is cloaked in an attitude of red that declares itself through the repeated penetrations and the admonished reduction of the act of love.

Concurrent states of absence, terminally referencing the physical presence of the artist, point mnemonically and dramatically to the death of self, inferred in *Negligé (Woman with Her Throat Cut)*. That the artist must sacrifice a confrontational and holistic portraiture not only of her physicality but of the chosen depictions of emotional, psychological and sexual is only natural as one who traverses 'the outside'. Peculiarly classical in its aims, the rigour and strict adherence to boundary within much of her



work does not compromise the bleed of more implicit presences. Tracing the boundaries of conflagrating catholic and personal concerns, the work mimics and shadows the processes, images and practices of the faith; transubstantiation operating as the transformative and shifting meaning within much of her work where the act of making is an act within itself - it becomes.

Integral to this position is deference to substance, for of course her objects remain still, once released from the turbulent and painstaking demands of their creation. And yet it is this stillness that allows us to witness the gamut of attendant feeling associated with the imagery Davis uses. Insofar as all objects have the potential to be used, they are performative.



• *What?* 2007. Steel drawing on glass, 196 xx 113 x 25cm

This is accentuated by the position of interiority, fashioned out of specific intent in shaping and defining her materials to correspond to an interplay of somatic desires and frustrations. The conglomeration of specific parts within Davis's work, some alluding to classicism and perfect form: *Aphrodite Kallipygos*; the polished finger in *Little Red*; the cuts of *Negligé (Woman with her Throat Cut)*, imbued with a consciousness of artistic presence, of authorship sometimes metonymic, other times metaphoric, formally abstract or minimally defined could be read as a congregation of self, the constituent parts meeting in a vivid collusion that references the absence of the artist only to be re-iterated by her suggested presence. The inference in every one of those moments, heightened by the suggestion of private ritual, is of an instinctual system of reduction and construction shrouded in the mystery of oneself in absentia. The ever-departing Davis in *Red Shift* suggests a continuation of red as a condition, a belief through the transformative appearance of the artist at first wearing it and eventually, through distance, becoming it. The distance we are never very sure of, she carries herself with it and as she departs a small evolution occurs where, walking away - aphrodite with her back turned - she becomes a version of red she permits us to see: herself.

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## Congregation

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