

Curated by Andrea Fatona and Caroline Seck Langill with video programming by Rebecca Garrett and b. h. Yael

FEBRUARY 16 TO MAY 14, 2022







This publication accompanies the exhibition, Fable for Tomorrow: A Survey of Works by Wendy Coburn, presented at Onsite Gallery, OCAD University, Toronto.

#### EXHIBITION

Fable for Tomorrow: A Survey of Works by Wendy Coburn February 16 to May 14, 2022 Onsite Gallery 199 Richmond St. W. Toronto, ON M5V 0H4

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Cover: *Fable for Tomorrow*, 2008, bisque-fired clay, 7" x 7" x 5.5" each Page 3: *The Divers*, 2006, fur muff, figurines and plastic, 7.75" x10.5" x10.5". Collection of Oakville Galleries, purchased with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts Acquisition Assistance Program and the Corporation of the Town of Oakville, 2009.

All works, unless otherwise noted, are courtesy of the Estate of Wendy Coburn and Paul Petro Contemporary Art, Toronto.



# WENDY COBREE FABREFOR TOMORROW

*Silent Spring*, 2008, bronze, 18.5" x 6.5" x 5.5"

Fable for Tomorrow is a survey exhibition of the late Wendy Coburn's (1963–2015) multi-disciplinary artwork that includes video, sculpture, and photography. The name of the exhibition is borrowed from the title of one of Coburn's haunting sculptural works and originates from a chapter in environmentalist Rachel Carson's germinal book Silent Spring, published in 1962. Carson's book serves as a warning to humans of their overuse of pesticides and the harmful effects of the practice on the environment. Much like Carson, Coburn's work and her past pedagogical engagement in the classroom unpack practices of control or power relations that circumscribe human-animal engagement with both human-animal beings and other non-human entities. Primatologist Donna Haraway has stressed the need for humans to "...live well together with a host of species with whom human beings emerge on this planet at every scale of time, body and space,"<sup>1</sup> also noting that "[c]o-constitutive companion species and co-evolution are the rule, not the exception."<sup>2</sup> Coburn worked to reveal our dependence and love for our companion species by blurring, and sometimes dissolving, the boundaries between us and them. In this exhibition, these and other power relationships are parsed out at the macro and micro levels through the artist's exploration of performances of gender, gueerness, nations, environmentalism, and public protest. These concerns have shaped the organization of Fable for Tomorrow.

<sup>1</sup> Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness.* Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 32.

hence the works are grouped around the following themes: institutional critique, nature/ecologies, alchemy/science, queer relationships, and surveillance to allow Coburn's astute observations, warning calls, and expert making skills to reverberate across her various bodies of work.

In 1990, the exhibition Supposing It Was Your Sister, presented at Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver, featured two works by the artist-Supposing It Was Your Sister and Subscribe-that underscore her profound commitment to dipping deep beyond what appears on the surface of any event or thing and foregrounds her process of meticulously sifting through and reshaping materials to allow objects to convey new meaning. In both works, Coburn draws the viewer into questioning reality, its construction, and the urgent need to problematize taken-for-granted truths in order to see past the surface. Subscribe consists of 240 popular magazines transformed into solid blocks with human silhouette cut-outs that penetrate the thickness of each publication. Coburn wrote, "this work takes on every subject from pornography, health, sports, cuisine, travel, current events, business, art, music, socialism, war, ecology, and fashion etc...and examines the flattening effects of photographic representation on the body....."<sup>3</sup> She went on to state, "As hundreds of expressive human silhouettes are forced into new contexts an irritating subtext appears to reveal the contradictions and complexities in the ideologies we are asked to subscribe to."<sup>4</sup> The video installation, Supposing It Was Your Sister, based on official documents of a lynching in Duluth, Minnesota sees the artist deconstructing ideologies of gender and race, posing guestions about which bodies are "precarious and grievable."<sup>5</sup> These two early works, mark Coburn's life-long engagement with deconstructing presumed realities to cleverly highlight the ideologies that underpin them. The breadth of works

<sup>3</sup> Brief project descriptions by the artist for the exhibition, *Supposing it Was Your Sister*, Artspeak Gallery, Vancouver, BC, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?, Verso Books, 2009.

in the exhibition *Fable for Tomorrow*, asks us to radically think and act upon the type of world/ecology we desire in the now and to re-imagine possible futures.

Turning again to Haraway, "It matters what matters we use to think other matters with: it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories."<sup>6</sup> Wendy Coburn was an acute observer of her surroundings and adeptly used both form and imagery to provide different dimensions to the viewer through practices of reframing and denaturalizing as a way to nudge us to guestion what we see and how we perform our humanness in the spaces and stories we have constructed. The technique of calling the frame into question and re-framing is at the core of Coburn's practice. This type of re-contextualizing demands that a double-take is required to apprehend the reality Coburn makes visible. Drawing on scholar Judith Butler's discussion of how we come to apprehend the world around us, Coburn reminds us that there is always something in excess of what is presented as truth or reality.7

Through her use of recognizable forms, realism, narratives and images, and shrewdly employed sleight of hand, Coburn demands that we do a double take of the art object in front of us. The sculptural works' (*Fable for Tomorrow* (2008) and *Silent Spring* (2008))-a pair of porcelain dolls with silhouettes of insects crawling across their bodies and a DDT sprayer cast in bronze with the names of family and friends etched into it as substitutes for insect species that have become extinct-hail us to look closer, to think again, to implicate ourselves. Similarly, *Idea Object* (2011)

<sup>6</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Wendy Coburn, "The End," in *The Event, the Subject, and the Artwork: Into the Twenty-First Century*. Eds. Ann McCulloch and R.A. Goodrich. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.

and *The Alchemist* (2013), present a puzzling proposal regarding alternate use of turkey basters as a means of procreation, with the assistance of the toaster oven as a DIY autoclave.

The wry humour of these pieces is transcribed across many of the works, nowhere more evident than in her germinal sculptures, *Spirit of Canada Eating Beaver* (2000) and *Leda and the Beaver* (2000). Riffing off of Joyce Weiland's canny commentary on the two solitudes of Canada in which the artist depicted herself as a miniature bronze mother suckling two beavers, Coburn eschews the imperial narrative of French and English Canada to suggest a queer "non-productive" sexuality in order to "...parody the legitimating discourses of respectability, modesty and heteronormativity that have served to authenticate the imperial project, "<sup>8</sup> portraying herself being pleasured by, and then pleasuring a beaver. Once again, Coburn co-mingles human-non-human relations to speak to disciplinary norms that limit what is possible.

Despite the wit and humour often employed by the artist, melancholy and grief permeate much of the work. The "911" Suite (2007), composed of *The End*, *Untitled (Buck)*, and *Sack*, is an admixture of sculptures that address loss, bridging the global event of 9/11 with the death of the artist's father. Coburn reconciles these events and their affect accordingly, "...[P]erhaps being one with a state of melancholia and in memory of the other might be a preferable political alternative...."<sup>9</sup> These words, published in the year of the artist's death, suggest that mourning and melancholia are ethical activities that allow us to hold the past and loss in dynamic tension with the present, as a way to permit events and objects to take on different sets of political and social meanings.

Wendy Coburn was an erudite thinker and artist who was fiercely committed to taking up the big issues plaguing humanity through

<sup>8</sup> Margot Francis, Creative Subversions: Whiteness, Indigeneity, and the National Imaginary. UBC Press, 2011. 50.

<sup>9</sup> Wendy Coburn, "The End." 212.





Top to bottom: *Idea Object*, 2011, bronze,  $15" \times 3" \times 3.5"$ ; *The Spirit of Canada Eating Beaver*, 1999–2000, bronze,  $9.5" \times 2.25" \times 2.75$ ". Promised gift from the Estate of Wendy Coburn to the Hart House Collection. Courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto.



Top to bottom: *Leda and the Beaver*, 2000, plastic, 2.5"x11.75"x5.5". Promised gift from the Estate of Wendy Coburn to the Hart House Collection. Courtesy of the Art Museum at the University of Toronto; *The Alchemist*, 2013, bronze, 8"x15.75"x9".

small gestures-often literally small in scale-that produce grand ripples across many spaces. As an arts educator who developed queerness as a methodology for studio practice in the classroom, Coburn's contributions to the arts and art pedagogy are undeniably important for future generations of artists. She understood the way discourses circulated and found their way into different formations and how to distill and translate them into art. This was her gift to her students, and this is her gift to us all.

# Andrea Fatona and Caroline Seck Langill



# CRITICAL ATTACHMENTS WENDY COBURN'S VIDEO WORKS

Video and digital media, with their ubiquity and indexical connection to 'the real', combine the deceptive banality of the everyday, of the surface, with the complexity of embedded historical and representational codes. Video art has a less visible history, evolving against the grain of dominant representational norms through: deconstruction, critique, performing queerness and otherness.

Wendy Coburn's methodology, questioning and interrogating the surface of appearances, led her to use video to extend her practice, to deconstruct the image and analyze how constructions of subjectivity and power relations by external forces, most often political and ideological, are internalized. She was interested in an undoing of, and, at the very least, understanding the forces that granted privileges to some and not others. But she did not stop there: much as Marlon Riggs, whose work she respected, she took apart and re-constructed events and narratives, re-staging a subjectivity and a queer performance of authorship.

In her first video based work, *Supposing It Was Your Sister* (1994), de-construction and re-construction of archival materials complicate the representational frame and implicate the viewer. Having stumbled upon a record of a race trial, seventy years previous, Coburn identifies the misrecognitions and the misuses of racialized and gendered bodies in the ideologies of bigotry and sexism.

The first iteration of the work was a complex immersive installation with five monitors, four audio tracks and a revolving chair. The chair was for the audience and one of the monitors displayed Coburn's image, also revolving and observing "the murderous rallying power of the white mob in the name of protecting white womanhood." In addressing a historical event of murderous proportion, Coburn links the past to the present, putting her body as both witness and subject. "Having been raised in a white middle-class, Protestant family in a colony of Britain," she asks in her exhibition statement, "what were the conditions and the costs of those privileges?"<sup>1</sup>

In two short video works from the early 2000s, Coburn continues this investigation into archival and found images, questioning cultural and psychoanalytic theories that render humans and animals as objects of scientific experimentation. In *My Heart Divine* (2001), a collage of images including divination exercises and lesbian porn, she plays with the consequential and incomprehensible, irrational and arbitrary aspects of desire and longing. In *Die Trauernde* (2003), images of interrupted attachment, of a monkey and its mechanical 'mother,' are excruciating, the experiment and the laboratory mentality shown to be deeply flawed and brutal.

These works speak to Karen Barad's assertion that "intra-actively emergent 'parts' of phenomena are co-constituted. Not only subjects but also objects are permeated through and through with their entangled kin; the other is not just in one's skin, but in one's bones, in one's belly, in one's heart, in one's nucleus, in one's past and future."<sup>2</sup>

*Slut Nation: Anatomy of a Protest* (2014) is most significantly connected to these past media works, especially *Supposing It Was Your Sister*, as Coburn examines and deconstructs an event, the Slut Walk of 2011, at which her antennae perceived a miscarriage of justice, a deliberate attempt to undermine and subvert a feminist reclamation of bodily agency and integrity. The walk was a response to a Toronto Police Constable's pronouncement, "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized," when speaking to students at a safety and security panel at York University.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wendy Coburn, Artist's Statement for Artspeak, 1994.

<sup>2</sup> Karen Barad, Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning. Duke University Press, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Sanguinetti, February 2011, quoted in numerous media outlets.



Visual element from the exhibition *Wendy Coburn: Anatomy of a Protest*, Justina M. Barnicke Gallery, Toronto, 2014.

*Slut Nation* reveals the resistance to confronting gender-based violence, and the deliberate undermining of the message of the Slut Walk by performers, possibly provocateurs. Coburn positions the possibility of agent provocateurs at the Slut Walk within other urgent and recent examples of state violence, especially the suspension of civil liberties at the G2O Summit, held in Toronto the previous year, as well as the lack of action on missing and murdered women, many of them Indigenous. In her artist statement she recalls the slogans of protest: "Enough Is Enough–Stop Police Violence" against the police raids on gay bathhouses in Toronto in 1981 and the resonating "Because We've Had Enough" slogan of the 2011 Slut Walk.

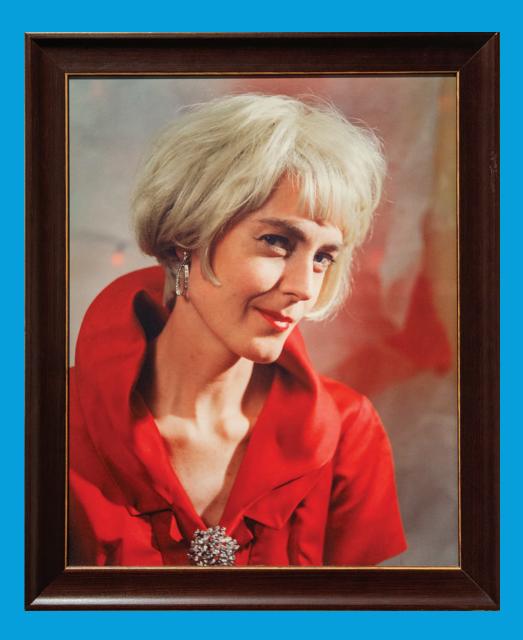
By looking at the politics of assembly and issues of state power, Coburn questions who gets the right to occupy public space, who gets to protest, who feels safe in the streets and who doesn't.

By taking on the form of an investigative exposée, with forensic, precise analysis and authoritative voiceover, having scoured the internet for images and documentation, *Slut Nation* challenges the viewer to ask: is the narrator credible? Is this a work of fiction or fact? Foreshadowing our present moment of fake news, we must question everything and everyone. And who are 'we'?

Freedom does not come from me or from you; it can and does happen as a relation between us, or indeed, among us... The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or rather, when through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being. <sup>4</sup>

# Rebecca Garrett and b.h. Yael

<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, quoted in Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard University Press, 2015. 89.



Untitled, undated, photograph, 19.5" x 15.5".

# **BIOGRAPHIES**

**WENDY COBURN** (October 5, 1963 – June 15, 2015) was a Toronto-based artist and art educator whose studio practice included photography, sculpture, installation and video. Her multidisciplinary work engages a range of concerns such as human relations to land and ecologies, power relations and the construction of differences, popular culture, mental health, gender, whiteness, nationhood and the role of images in mediating cultural difference.

Her work has been exhibited and screened in galleries and festivals including Anatomy of a Protest (Justina M. Barnicke Gallery), Photophobia (Art Gallery of Hamilton), The Living Effect (Ottawa Art Gallery), MIX (New York Gay & Lesbian Experimental Film/ Video Festival), Transmediale International Media Art Festival (Berlin, Germany), Beaver Tales and Uneasy Pieces (Oakville Galleries), Kassel Documentary Film & Video Festival (Kassel, Germany), and the Dublin Lesbian & Gay Film and Video Festival (Dublin, Ireland).

Coburn received her MFA from Concordia University and AOCA from Ontario College of Art. She worked for 18 years at OCAD University including as Assistant Dean and Associate Dean in the Faculty of Art, and as a faculty member with the Sculpture Installation and the Art & Social Change programs. As the founder of OCAD U's Art and Social Change minor, Wendy developed the groundbreaking course: "Making Gender: LGBTQ Studio" which seeks to foster a greater awareness and understanding of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer cultures and subcultures.

ANDREA FATONA is an independent curator and an associate professor at OCAD University. She is concerned with issues of equity within the sphere of the arts and the pedagogical possibilities of art works produced by "other" Canadians in articulating broader perspectives of Canadian identities. Her broader interest is in the ways in which art, "culture" and "education" can be employed to illuminate complex issues that pertain to social justice, citizenship, belonging and nationhood. She is the recipient of awards from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Fatona has published scholarly articles, catalogue essays and book chapters in a range of publications. Some examples of her curatorial projects include: *Queer Collaborations* (1993), *Across Borders* (1995/6), *Cadboro Bay: Index to an Incomplete History* (1999), *The Attack of the Sandwich Men* (2001), *Reading the Image: Poetics of the Black Diaspora* (2006–08), *Fibred Optics* (2009–10), *Will Work for Food* (2011), *Land Marks* (2013–14) and Settling in Place (2018).

**CAROLINE SECK LANGILL** is a writer and curator whose academic scholarship and curatorial work looks at the intersections between art and science, as well as the related fields of new media art history, criticism and preservation. Her interests in non-canonical art histories, gender studies and Indigenous epistemologies have led her to writing and exhibition-making that could be considered post-disciplinary. With Lizzie Muller, she has been looking at questions of liveliness in art and artifacts. This ongoing, SSHRCfunded research resulted in the exhibition *Lively Objects for ISEA: Disruption* (2015) as well as the recent co-edited anthology *Curating Lively Objects: Exhibitions Beyond Disciplines* (2022). Caroline Langill resides in Peterborough and works at OCAD University where she is Vice-President Academic and Provost.

**REBECCA GARRETT** is a Toronto-based artist whose use of media is situation-specific. Since graduating from the Ontario College of Art in 1981, Garrett has been exhibiting film and video installations; photo-based wall pieces; mixed media and performative interventions; site-specific installations; and single channel videos, in numerous venues in Canada and abroad. Garrett's works explore experimental formal concerns and are committed to the evolution of an alternative and innovative image language. These concerns are located and challenged by the indexical nature of the sign and the documentary traditions and responsibilities of varied social and political contexts. Many of her works can be seen as investigations of the effects of structures of containment or control-such as architecture, colonialism or global media-on perception, psychic and cultural survival, and knowledge production.

Garrett has worked collaboratively and/or collectively with many groups and individuals in Canada, the USA, Zimbabwe, Kenya and the UK. Her work expresses a long commitment to naming economic, colonial and social injustices, and building relations of exchange and reciprocity.

**b.h. YAEL** is a filmmaker and installation artist. A book about her work, *Family States* (edited by Mike Hoolboom; published by ConverSalon; available at bhyael.ca) was released in 2021. Her films are distributed by Vtape and a collection of them stream online through Cinema Politica. Yael's work has been shown in various setting-from festivals to galleries to community and activist groups-and been purchased by universities. Yael is Professor of Integrated Media at OCAD University and was the Visiting Scholar at Massey College in 2021.

Yael's films and installations have dealt with: intersections of identity and family (*Fresh Blood* and *Lessons for Polygamists*); activist initiatives in Palestine/Israel (*Palestine Trilogy*); and apocalypse, geopolitical and environmental urgencies (*Trading the Future*). Yael has worked collaboratively with Johanna Householder (*Approximations*) and in collectives such as Spontaneous Combustion and Hardpressed. She has programmed screenings and arts lectures (Art Creates Change) and is currently writing a family memoir.

# FREE PUBLIC EVENTS

# On alternate Saturdays, 2 to 4 p.m., beginning February 19\* Holding Coburn: exhibition activation with Jess Dobkin

Inspired by Wendy Coburn's life and practice, Jess Dobkin will create a participatory performance exploring what art works are for, how we engage with and take care of them, and what goes into creating them.

## Date to be confirmed\* Curators' Tour with Andrea Fatona and Caroline Seck Langill

Join Andrea Fatona and Caroline Seck Langill for an exhibition tour in which they share their perspectives on Wendy Coburn's multidisciplinary practice and themes in the exhibition.

### Date to be confirmed\*

# Panel Discussion on Wendy Coburn's Commitments as an Artist: Ian Carr-Harris, Barbara Fischer and Liz Magor, moderated by Caroline Seck Langill

Our guest panelists will discuss Wendy Coburn's facility as a maker and her uncanny ability to imbue her works with the principles by which she lived.

# Date to be confirmed\* Video Curators' Chat with Rebecca Garrett and b.h. Yael

Join Rebecca Garrett and b.h. Yael for a conversation discussing the intricacies of Wendy Coburn's video works.

# Date to be confirmed\* CONTENT FEELINGS with jes sachse and Rea Sweets New media making workshop and slow social gathering

Inspired by Wendy Coburn's video practice and concern with authorship and its manipulations, join artists jes sachse and Rea Sweets for a time and space of slow content, silent protest, and social media.

## Friday March 18, 1 p.m. — online OCAD U BIPOC Faculty: Digital Minutes

This online event will feature OCAD U BIPOC faculty members delivering pre-recorded, fast-paced presentations about their work and research, followed by a live Q & A.

# Friday May 6, 6 to 8 p.m., Onsite Gallery and 8 p.m. till late, Sweaty Betty's (13 Ossington Ave.) Dyke Night

Discover Wendy Coburn's exhibition through a queer lens with a tour open to the 2SLGBTQ+ community at Onsite Gallery followed by a community gathering, with DJ Sasha Van Bon Bon and special guests, at Sweaty Betty's.

# Date to be confirmed\* Exhibition Closing Reception

Join us for the public closing of the exhibition, with a land acknowledgement and remarks from the co-curators.

\*All events are free and at Onsite Gallery, 199 Richmond St. West (unless otherwise noted). For event dates not confirmed and more information, please visit our website: ocadu.ca/onsite

# UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS

# June 15 to October 29, 2022 Jordan Bennett: Souvenir

Curated by Ryan Rice

Jordan Bennett mediates a re-reading of Mi'kmaq heritage embedded, woven and veiled in the crafts he recovers from museum collections. His interdisciplinary approach across a wide range of media grants the range of Mi'kmaq archetypes a new vitality in for future generations to reclaim.

November 23, 2022, to May 14, 2023 *The Cochlea: In Quest of Equipoise* 

Curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung

In this multi-site exhibition of sound-based artworks, OCAD University's inaugural International Curatorial Resident, Dr. Bonaventure Ndikung, brings together eclectic local and international artists who use the aural as a means to attain personal and societal equilibrium. In the inner ear, the cochlea maintains our sense of balance and literally translates physical sound vibrations into nerve impulses in the brain to create understanding. This ground-breaking exhibition asks us to listen collectively—to each other and to other existences—to find a new shared equilibrium and solidarity.



The End, 2007, plaster, 13.5"x25.5"x8"-.

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Onsite Gallery offers powerful, thought-provoking exhibitions of art, design and new media to stimulate conversations on critical issues facing Toronto and the world.



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