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DiverseWorks Art Space, Houston, Texas

in partnership with the University of Houston's Women's Studies Program

Editors - Diane Barber, Caroline Goeser, MaryRoss Taylor | Essays by Lucy Lippard and others



to the conference. In an article published in *Newsweek* in 2007, journalist Anna Quindlen characterized the gathering as “the human equivalent of a four-day fireworks display.” In fact, the impact of the 1977 event and the creative and cultural forces it unleashed became the basis for a slew of exhibitions, articles, symposia, and panel discussions that popped up around the country in 2007. It seemed only fitting that Houston, ground zero for this historic moment, would mark it as well.

The resulting exhibition at DiverseWorks and the accompanying symposium organized by the Women’s Studies Program at the University of Houston were both notable for the dialogue they engendered. Discussions during studio visits with the artists in the months leading up to the show reinforced the fact that assumptions about the impact of societal baggage as it relates to female self-image, motivations, challenges, and life trajectory simply don’t apply in the studio. Not surprisingly too, the younger generation of women artists often eschews any association with the ideas and themes that formed the basis for early feminist work. I recall a conversation with MaryRoss in the gallery during the installation of the show in which we debated the mere mention of the word “feminist” in the exhibition gallery guide. It’s a strange paradox. The feminist movement in many ways laid the groundwork for the defiant rejection of a one-size-fits-all notion of female experience but in doing so invited women to reject it as well.

Clearly much has changed for women since 1977. We are living longer, balancing career and family in greater numbers (or rejecting one or the other outright with no apologies) and reshaping tired social constructs and political and professional power structures. And regardless of whether today’s emerging generation of artists fully

embraces the ideology ascribed to feminist artists and activists of decades past, the mark left by feminist revolutionaries on our current cultural framework endures. Because of them, subsequent generations are free to move in other directions, tackling different issues and setting new priorities. The artists in *Thrive*, many of whom had a hand in shaping this new paradigm, emphatically illustrate this point with the work that they do. These artists aren’t exiting the stage anytime soon and the art world would do well to sit up and take notice.

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| ELIZABETH GREGORY | *Thrive and the New Longevity*

The likelihood is that, whatever your age, you’re aspiring to be even older. Whether she thinks about it this way or not, every young woman who hopes to live long and happily aspires to being an old lady. And every young man, an old man. The good news is, these days we have a good chance of getting there.

But while we’re encouraged to live long, we get a lot of mixed messages about how we regard the old, and ourselves as we age. Ours is a youth-focused culture that equates youth with beauty and excitement, and age with un-beauty and tedium. How do we put it all together? With some difficulty, frequently!

But increasing numbers of the population are crossing the border into older territory. Due to increases in public health measures and medical advances, people in the developed world, and increasingly the less developed world as well, are living longer and longer, often in good health. We’ve added nearly 30 years to the average life

expectancy in the US over the past century, jumping from roughly 47 for all in 1900 to 75 for men and 80 for women in 2004.

That is an immense change — one that you may take for granted, but one that neither our culture nor our social systems has any real precedent or preparation for. Soon 20% of the population will be over 65, up from 5% not long ago. This affects our lives in all directions — shaping our investment strategies, our aesthetics, our decisions around healthy lifestyles, our housing construction, our career trajectories, our patterns of family formation, our health and elder care system, our relationships with parents and children, our tax structure, our sex lives, and on and on.

The *Thrive* show was developed out of conversations begun by Lynn Randolph with myself, Diane Barber, MaryRoss Taylor and others. It grew in tandem with the conference on *Gender, Creativity and the New Longevity (GCNL)*, hosted by the University of Houston Women's Studies Program in November 2008, to look, through different lenses, at the effects of the shifting demographics of age. Both events explored the intersection of the three terms in the conference title. Both worked also to foster the long-term success and well-being that the word *thrive* evokes, among women as a group and, especially in the case of the show, among women artists of all ages working to build enduring careers.

Over the past fifty years, increased longevity, in combination with widely accessible birth control and expanded career options, has been morphing our available life narratives, allowing women of all ages to think beyond the realm of domestic creativity for the first time ever and to re-imagine their lives and their life sequencing.

This enormous revolution expands the world's cultural and economic resources and redefines our understanding of what it means to be human.

While the GCNL conference looked at policy, health and career issues raised by the new longevity, *Thrive* tracked the responses of 16 Houston women artists to our changing sense of time, to aging and to the ageism we inherit but cannot be limited by for long.

In 2011 the first of the boomers will reach 65. There are predictions — based both on the economic downturn and on indications about choice — that many boomers with their big work identification will not retire at all, or they'll move to a second career or realm of volunteer work, which means we'll be seeing a new sector of productivity in our workforce — including of course our artistic workforce.

In the coming years, we'll be learning more about what the new longevity means at every turn. The work of women artists will be part of that learning process — as they report both from the frontlines of advancing longevity and from the early stages of careers as young women artists look forward to new possibilities.

While aging involves losses, it also involves gains. For one, we as a society have an opportunity to discover on a large scale what wisdom comes with long life, and to incorporate that wisdom into our social structures. As elders live longer, we have our history and traditions present among us in new ways.

Gains may be gender-specific too. Women may also find that old age offers an escape from a lot of social pressures, and a chance to set their own agendas.

Clearly the scene is changing fast, both in terms of prospects and in terms of current reality. As a group we often buy into the ageist view and don't want to think about the old or about ourselves becoming old. But that's a formula for trouble — since if we don't address the reality, we can't re-shape it to work well. It's time to explore the landscape that the new longevity creates — and to respond creatively to its opportunities and challenges. *Thrive*, curated by the inspired and inspiring MaryRoss Taylor, was just such an exploration, and I'm thrilled to have been part of it.

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| MARYROSS TAYLOR | *Thrive* *Thrive* is both a celebration and a multi-faceted investigation of time. It started out as an exhibition about aging, in conjunction with a symposium organized by the Women's Studies program at University of Houston, which was originally titled *Women, Creativity, and Aging*. (It was eventually titled *Women, Creativity and the New Longevity*.) Visiting with artists, I discovered that in the studio they don't think about age at all. On the contrary, their practice seems to suspend time in the usual sense. In the studio, they brought their accumulated experience to an intensely focused present in order to realize a work that began as something imagined, something future. What seemed like an impossible paradox in physics — the simultaneity of past, present and future — was the ordinary practice of artists. This, I felt, was a distinctive contribution to a symposium dedicated to helping women make sense and creative use of living longer than previous generations.

The sixteen artists represented in the exhibition share an interest in time. Time is the raw material that we measure when we talk about aging. Our idea of aging seems to suggest that time is linear, and that our relationship to it is defined by a clock that starts running at birth and winds down as our lives pass. The artists in *Thrive* investigate many other dimensions by which time can be conceived, and one's relationship to it defined: historical, political, autobiographical, familial, biological, environmental, archaeological, spiritual, and quotidian — the everydayness of work and habit. Their work speaks of the fluidity of identity, memories and ephemerality. It springs from, incorporates, and transcends the personal.

Both time and aging are gendered in our culture, affecting women artists in particular. Outside the studio, women artists deal with a culture that assigns women a very short shelf life — with consequences such as becoming invisible with age, though once you were stared at. Women are dismissed in our culture once their early fertile years have passed. Silver-haired men acquire trophy wives, but older women with younger boyfriends are “cougars,” predators rather than champions. Although the art market's craze for talent under thirty affects men as much as women artists, women command less attention as they grow older, and becoming invisible is never a good career move.

For women artists, an additional challenge is having time to work in the studio — or visit exhibitions, or stare into space. It takes a lot of time to be the primary caretakers of family. In the workplace, women's time is less valued than men's by employers, so while most artists work to support their art making, women may spend more time working to earn the same amount as men. For women artists, time is always a challenge.