

**GLOBAL FEMINISMS
COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES OF
WOMEN'S ACTIVISM AND SCHOLARSHIP**

SITE: U.S.A.

**Transcript of Holly Hughes
Interviewer: Miriam Asnes**

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Holly Hughes, born in 1955, is a performance artist, which she started doing in New York City during the twilight of the Carter administration. In the early 1980's, she became a member of the WOW Café, a feminist collective on which Hughes is currently co-editing a book. Her work has focused on issues of sexuality, identity, personal narrative, and freedom of expression. Some of her performances include *The Well of Horniness*, *The Lady Dick*, *Dress Suits to Hire*, *World Without End*, *Preaching to the Perverted*, *Turkey! The New Musical*, and *After a Fashion*. In 1996 Grove Press collected five of her early pieces in *Clit Notes: A Sapphic Sampler*. She is coeditor, with David Roman, of *O Solo Homo: The New Queer Performance*. She has performed or had her work produced across the United States, Canada, and Great Britain at venues ranging from cultural institutions such as the Hammer Museum, the Walker Art Center, and the Guggenheim Museum to alternative spaces such as Performance Space 122, a home base for urban cultural expression in New York City. Hughes has been awarded funding from sources including the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. Hughes is currently teaching at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor with a joint appointment in the School of Art and Design and the Department of Theater and Drama.

Miriam Asnes is a graduate student in Middle Eastern and North African Studies at the University of Michigan, where she is pursuing research on Palestinian Israelis and Arab Jews. A graduate of Harvard University, she has also worked with the organization Women Against Violence in Nazareth and hiked the entire Appalachian Trail (Georgia to Maine).

Transcript of Holly Hughes

[Song] *We who believe in freedom cannot rest*
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
We who believe in freedom cannot rest
*We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes*¹

Miriam Asnes: Welcome, Holly.

Holly Hughes: Thank you, Mimi. I can call you Mimi?

Miriam: Yes, you can call me Mimi.

Holly: Okay.

Miriam: Just to give you a sense of the flow, I'm going to ask you a bunch of questions about your work and life, and then at the end we'll open it to questions from the audience. So...

Holly: Sounds fabulous.

Miriam: Awesome. So, I guess I'd like you to sort of start at the beginning. Could you just tell me a little bit about where you were born?

Holly: Actually, does this, does this mean any... [holds up right hand, palm out and fingers up]—I'll test how much of a Michigander you are by holding this up and asking you if this means anything to you.

Miriam: [laughing] It does, it does.

Holly: It does. This is what we do in Michigan, is that we ... when you ask the question of “where you're from” we hold up the hand. There's another part of Michigan, but we don't discuss it [audience laughter]. And really this isn't the most accurate map of Michigan, I mean I would have to saw my thumb off and, like you know, glue it on here [points to an area below where the thumb joins the palm] but we're not going to do that today—I'm going to save that for radio. And I'm actually here [points to hollow between thumb and forefinger], from Saginaw, which is also the navy bean capital of the world, but I'm sure I don't have to tell you that. But that's where I was reared. And I went to school in Michigan, I went to Kalamazoo College, which is a small liberal arts college in the western part of the state, using the word “liberal” in the loosest sense of the word [audience laughter] and in a more academic than political sense of the word, and I attempted to escape Michigan by moving to New York in the late 70's. I was going to be part of this, this I don't know, this *feminist* organization, I don't know if you remember this—feminism was kind of a seventies thing, you know like kind of like when quiche

¹ These lyrics from “Ella's Song” by Sweet Honey in the Rock precede a biographical montage of each US site interviewee.

was a health food and John Travolta made his first appearance—so anyways, quiche has come back and so has John Travolta but not feminism [loud audience laughter]. Go figure. And I've come back, to Michigan!

Miriam: Full circle.

Holly: Full circle—[sighs] I was hoping for a different shape. I don't think circle is really my shape. But yes, so I spent twenty years in New York City doing I'm not really sure what. But we can talk about that later.

Miriam: Sure. To go back to the early years...

Holly: The Early Years. Yes. The Wonder Years².

Miriam: So, the Wonder Years. What was your relationship with your family like?

Holly: [laughs] My relationship with my family was hideous in a very typically American middle-class white way. We were sort of four slices of American cheese individually wrapped³ in our own private sorrow inhabiting the same, you know, faux-colonial.⁴ We were, we were—every once in a while my mother would ask these questions of like, “Why can't we act like a family?” and I thought that was so...that was so descriptive, “Why can't we act like one?” because clearly we're not, clearly we have no relationship to each other, we have no idea how we arrived at this. My parents were middle class, Republican, golf-playing, depressed people living in Michigan, and I had a complicated relationship with them which I'm trying to like, I've parlayed into a career since then [audience laughter]. And it's, my relationship with them has improved a little bit since their death, but not as much as one would hope.

Miriam: So there are four of you. You have one sibling, then?

Holly: Yeah, as far as I know [laughs]. But perhaps somebody in the studio audience will want to address that issue later. Yes, I have a sister, and where is she today since we're in Ann Arbor and my sister lives in Ann Arbor? But that says something about my relationship with my family, doesn't it?

Miriam: Yes, definitely. When did you leave home?

² This is a reference to the television show, *The Wonder Years*. On air between 1988 and 1993, the show was set during the late 1960s/early 1970s. It followed Kevin Arnold, an adolescent who was going through his own tumultuous years of growth (i.e. “wonder”) as the U.S. was going through its own adjustments.

³ This is a reference to a processed cheese that is sold individually wrapped. While it does contain dairy, this “American” cheese is generally considered a low-quality imitation of real cheese.

⁴ A Colonial Revival styled house. Colonial Revival is a type of architecture that was seen to reflect American patriotism and a desire for simplicity. The Colonial Revival house style remained popular until the mid-1950s.

Holly: When did I leave home? I left home to go to college, but, you know, I didn't have, like—I couldn't really get out of this [holds up hand] you know. But Kalamazoo felt, it felt like an escape from Saginaw, even though it was not the navy bean capital, it was the celery capital of the free world. And when I was eighteen I went to college, and then when I was twenty-three I moved to New York City.

Miriam: What made you move to New York?

Holly: Um, a plane [audience laughter]. I, you know, I came, I was in the process of coming out as a lesbian. I was, actually that's what I did in college, I was in the process of coming out as a lesbian and then I'd go back in as a born-again Christian. And there was a kind of—there was something, there's, there's something related between the born-again Christian thing and the lesbian thing in the seventies, I mean we wore plaid shirts in both things, lots of guitar songs, lots of sitting around in circles. In one circle you talked about brotherhood, in the other one you talked about sisterhood. There was a lot of passive-aggressiveness sort of disguised as political action. But, so I sort of did this back-and-forth between coming out as a lesbian in college, which was kind of, in Kalamazoo in the seventies, was sort of the sound of one hand clapping, really, I mean there was no one to really [from the audience there is the sound of a hand hitting against a leg]—there's that one hand right now, out there in the audience—IT'S STILL CLAPPING! So, you know, I tried to come out as a lesbian and then I'd give, give up and go back to Jesus. And after a while, He wasn't speaking to me anymore either, actually. He, it was the seventies and He had moved to the Sun Belt⁵ like a lot of people in the Midwest. It was a very grim time. And I, I realized that if I was actually going to have sex with another woman that I had to leave the state, or at least that part of the state. And I saw a nice little pink brochure for the New York Feminist Art Institute filled with all this, this sort of sisterly visions of all this sort of non-hierarchical, anti-colonial work we were going to make in collaboration. I had these visions of like, giant soft sculpture vaginas that we would kind of collectively erect, if I may [audience and interviewer laughter], in Times Square, and how that would topple the military industrial complex [audience laughter]. It was a time of naming yourself after condiments that you would find in your spice cabinet and feeling like that was really striking a blow against the patriarchy. So, I came to New York to be part of this feminist collective, and very excited about it, and I got there and none of the women in the collective were speaking to each other [laughs]. Sisterhood may be beautiful, but it was also kind of nasty at that point. But it got me out of Michigan, gave me a really interesting, diverse group of women, and it introduced me to a new way of thinking about making art, and a connection between my political concerns as a feminist and as an aspiring lesbian and my artistic goals, through consciousness raising; which is what we did back in the seventies, when we weren't eating quiche or watching John Travolta, trying to re-imagine him as a lesbian [audience laughter].

⁵ The *Sun Belt* is the Southern tier of the United States, focused on Florida, Texas, Arizona, and California, and extending as far north as Virginia. The term gained wide use in the 1970s, when the economic and political impact of the nation's overall shift in population to the south and west became conspicuous.

Miriam: You talked a little bit about coming out. I was going to ask you a little bit about relationships through your life—when did that start for you, or what have been some of the more important ones?

Holly: I think that my relationships—I discovered that I was a lesbian in the typical way of falling in love in the typical sort of pre-lesbian phase in college, and then I didn't know if I wanted to be this woman or have her, and I would sort of—I think the expression was...stalking⁶ [audience laughter] would be possibly a polite and probably accurate term for the kind of relationship that we had. And I came out in the context of lesbian feminism, which was a real break from the way that lesbianism was presented in America or experienced in America up to that point. There was a huge influx of middle-class white women into the lesbian world, and there was a sort of disavowal of some of the earlier cultural expression. Doesn't that sound good? Cultural expression. That means, like, ways we dressed up and flirted with each other, cultural expression. There was, there was a break with the birth of lesbian feminism, and there were wonderful things about that moment. There was also a way in which it, there was also a moment in feminism when—there's a whole sort of critique of sexuality and gender which played out in my personal life as this, as a time where it felt like every sort of type of sex and gender presentation was suspect. There was "no gender like no gender," you know, sex was really something that we were really going to possibly get rid of when the patriarchy arrived. It was, I mean I think about what else was happening in America in the seventies, and it was this wild time, but it wasn't really wild in the lesbian femini..—I know there's lesbian feminists who had—they can do their own show with you [audience laughter]. They had fabulous sex! Fine. I'm happy for them. But I was not one of them. I just had this image of coming out because I had this erotic pull towards women and then finding that all the lesbians had stopped having sex. Or it seemed when they talked about sex it would seem like two salmon lying side-by-side kind of wiggling in a dry streambed and I was just like - so it took, I was a, I was a slow starter [loud audience laughter]. And I had no lesbian skills! I didn't know that you needed skills to be a lesbian. But you know, I couldn't throw, I can't catch, sports involving balls frighten me. I'm not a vegetarian, I eat meat, I think all I eat is meat. But I did have a cat. That was what I had going for me, that was my one lesbian skill. And so it took me a while to have relationships other than in the privacy of my own...mind [audience laughter]. To admit that actually I was attracted to really masculine women, exclusively, women that were supposed to have gone the way of the dodo bird⁷ with the advent of lesbian feminism, women who were described as butch⁸. And so I felt this, like, double-shaming of my

⁶ *Stalking* is to follow or observe somebody persistently, especially out of obsession and/or derangement. However, the evolution of this word also has a less menacing vernacular meaning that indicates that one person may pursue another person indirectly by coordinating schedules and appearances to create more opportunities of interaction.

⁷ The *dodo* is bird that became extinct in 1681 due to human destruction of its habitat.

⁸ *Butch* refers to a woman (particularly a lesbian) who displays "masculine" characteristics. Butch women dress "like men." Often used in opposition to "femme" a term to denote more "feminine" lesbians. The butch/femme dichotomy is a particular representation of lesbianism often seen in opposition to lesbian feminism.

sexuality, even as I struggled to understand it as a lesbian, this other sort of like, you know, I'm drawn to this thing that's, you know, and I'm [Holly hits own forehead with hand repeatedly] "Bad feminist, bad feminist, bad feminist"...I was just hitting myself with the State of Michigan, did you notice that? [Audience laughter] It's getting layered in here, isn't it?

Miriam: Definitely. So, when you got to New York, how did you...could you tell us a little bit about what the WOW café is, or how you got involved in it?

Holly: I, there was this period between when the sisterhood of the New York Feminist Art Institute totally collapsed—I mean, it wasn't just silence, it just like collapsed, and a period between when I found the WOW café that, I just felt like a, I felt like a waitress without a cause. Why had I moved to New York City to live in an even crummier apartment and do the same things that I was doing in Kalamazoo? And then one day I saw this poster called, "Double X," it said, "Double X-rated Christmas Party for Women," and it was like, "I am so there." I am there before the doors open - and the doors are not the only thing that're open. And I walk inside and it's in the basement of a Catholic Church, it's a different moment in Catholicism [audience laughter]. And I walk inside and there's racks of thrift-store clothes, tuxedos, prom dresses, military outfits. So the idea is like you can check more than your clothes, you know. Come as you aren't, or as you wish you would be. And I looked at my sort of like purple paisley, gay-is-good clothes and ditched them and got into a, you know, scratchy prom dress. And I went inside and there were women that were performing strip-shows for other women, there were kissing booths, it was a highly sexualized atmosphere, and everybody was—there was a total blurring between who's the audience and who's the performer. And I developed this like collective crush on this group of people who at that point, which was the WOW café, and at that point I, I thought, I'm just, I just want to do whatever they're doing. I want to be part of this group of women. And if they'd been doing like, you know, volleyball, I would be a volleyball player. But at that point they were having fabulous parties like "The Party to End All Wars," a military drag party which realized that we were pacifists, but there were certain fabulous things about the military, like uniforms and having physicals that we didn't want to get rid of [audience laughter]. And you would come to this party, and you could like go into this like little booth and get "examined," and every once in a while this really butch number would, you know, like yell at us (it was so thrilling!). And make us drop to the floor and give her twenty-five—of anything! I didn't know what that meant, but I just was, I was so happy to give her twenty-five of anything I had [audience laughter]. So it was this satirical, strange, out-of-the-way place that was really out of—off of any map, there was no sign on the door, and I started hanging out there, and I started doing theater because that's what they did. They didn't do volleyball, they didn't run a food co-op, they were doing theater. So it just, it was, I, it was peer pressure, really.

Miriam: What was your first performance experience at the WOW café?

Holly: I did a piece called “My Life As a Glamour Don’t” and where I got friends of mine to dress up in their—and write little pieces about various fashion mistakes. I, there’s a sort of thread through here [makes sewing motion], it’s a thread. And, so that was the first piece I did, and then I did this evening, it was really long, in fact I think it’s still going on, possibly, called “Shrimp in a Basket,” which brought up my concern for personal narrative and seafood. And it was a collection of a lot, everything I’d ever written—I staged everything that I had written, not knowing what “staging” meant or anything like that, but one of, one of the parts of it was this show *The Well of Horniness* which I had written as, actually as a screenplay for a possible feminist porn video. And unfortunately the producer—it was my only contact I think I’ve ever had with someone who calls himself a producer—felt that it wasn’t pornographic enough, that women didn’t get horny. So I turned to performance art when I couldn’t cut the mustard⁹ as a pornographer [audience laughter]. It’s kind of a...

Miriam: So, how do you define performance art?

Holly: Besides failed pornography? [Audience laughter] ... which may be the one definition that sticks... you know, I didn’t really think of myself as a performance artist even when I had failed as a pornographer. Then for a while I thought I was doing theater, and even though I really didn’t go to see very much theater, but I thought what I was doing was theater. But the more I became aware of what was happening under the term “theater” in America, the more that I saw that it was, you know, the way that American theater was wedded to realism and a certain kind of narrative shape that I really couldn’t relate to. And this term “performance art” was floating around and became the sort of useful place where people who, people who wanted, sort of resisting codification of art forms for various reasons could sort of gather under this leaky umbrella of performance art. It’s kind of the garage band of art forms in a sense. There’s people who have resisted defining what performance art is, are people who call themselves performance artists, and it’s been people a lot of times who have wanted to work with artists of different disciplines, sometimes they’ve wanted to break out of realism, they wanted to work in different ways than American theater, which is a highly codified art form, functions. So it’s a very sort of amorphous space, it kind of functions like a cultural wetlands. [Audience laughter]. Whatever that means.

Miriam: And what, for you, has been the relationship between writing and performing? You mentioned that you’d have all these things written...which, the chicken or the egg, you know?

Holly: Usually it’s better, it’s better to write something before you perform it, but sometimes that hasn’t happened for me. Well, I really thought that I started out thinking that, okay, if I’m anything in this world, I am, I’m a writer. And I got very excited about that. And then I started to...the ham¹⁰ in me could not be denied. And, and every once in a while I think, “No, no, my strength is in writing.” One of the things that is so great about performance art is there’s not the sort of sense of compartmentalizing in the, that

⁹ “Cut the mustard” means to perform up to expectations or to a required standard.

¹⁰ A *ham* is person who overacts or exaggerates.

there is in a lot of theater, where the roles are really strictly defined. But I did a piece, my first solo, *World Without End*, in response to my mother dying, and a way of sort of thinking through my relationship to her, and I realized I couldn't, I couldn't really ask anyone else to do this, and I had some need to eulogize her, so the ham got trotted out again. And that's kind of how it happened.

Miriam: Was that the first time you used sort of a very personal story in your work? Or has that been something—

Holly: I think that that was, that was the first time that it was not totally metaphorical or extremely campy.¹¹ A play I had written before that had a character in it called Michigan, and so I was thinking, I was thinking more metaphorically. But *World Without End* was directly autobiographical although I think of it as like “new and improved autobiography.” That, you know, I mean you're not limited by the objective “facts,” you know, to get to the deeper truth, or to get back at people in the service of the larger truth and larger artistic goal.

Miriam: So we've heard a little bit about your work...I would love for our studio audience and for people watching this to get a sense of maybe what your work is like, or maybe if you want to share a little bit with us.

Holly: Oh, I'd be happy to.

Miriam: Excellent.

Holly: Why don't I read something from a solo of mine called *Clit Notes*. [Opens *Clit Notes: A Sapphic Sampler*] The first time I was in love with another woman? Well, actually, she was the woman, I was a kid, I was thirteen, in fact this little, this little story would have a much happier ending if there'd been some sort of gay youth organization in my hometown, some sort of North American woman-girl love association¹², but no! The men get everything good. The lesbian chicken, who worries about them? And they, this is a very important part of the attraction: her name was Ah-nee-tah Wendt. Which I discovered sounded an awful lot like, “I need a whip” if you said it enough times to yourself late at night, and I did. She was a Social Studies teacher, which, that's what they called history in my hometown of Saginaw, Michigan. I, I'm sure I don't have to tell you (and I've already told you) that Saginaw is the navy bean capital of the world, and you may have also heard of it in that Simon and Garfunkel song¹³, “it took us three days to hitchhike from Saginaw,” they had connections. But what, what they taught us in Michigan was not actually history. There were, there's laws against teaching history in Michigan, so what they teach you instead is amnesia. So by the time I was thirteen all I

¹¹ *Campy* describes something deliberately artificial, vulgar, banal, or affectedly humorous.

¹² Holly is making a reference to the North American Man-Boy Love Association, an organization that seeks to legitimize adult males' sexual relationships with young boys.

¹³ The song “America” written by Paul Simon in 1968, which includes the verse:

“Michigan seems like a dream to me now/
It took me four days to hitchhike from Saginaw/
I've come to look for America

knew about, say, World War II, I had, I had gleaned from *Hogan's Heroes*¹⁴: “funny little war.” I knew that there were slaves at one time in America and the Republicans freed them.

Now, there were forbidden books in my hometown, in fact I think most books were forbidden. They were, they were there on the library shelves but you had to get a special note from home to check them out. I could not get a note, from my home to read a book. My mother used to drop us off at Republican Headquarters to stuff envelopes for Nixon, even when he wasn't running [audience laughter], it was kind of, it was kind of her idea of daycare: “Keep Hope Alive!”¹⁵ And Anita Wendt like slipped me these, these forbidden books, books like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *I'm Okay, You're Okay*, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and I don't know. This made me love her.

So this love had this really unfortunate way of expressing itself. Sometimes I'd be, I'd be, I'd be in the eighth grade and I'd be in class and I'd think, “Oh God, oh-my-God, I, I'm going to kiss her. I am going to kiss her, and there is NOTHING anybody can do to stop me!” so I'd just throw myself to the ground and I'd start writhing around hoping people'd think I was merely epileptic, just a little foaming at the mouth is better than having people think you're queer. Sometimes I would be so inspired by her lectures that I'd start, I'd start taking my clothes off in class. I, I once I took my pantyhose off in class, I don't have any memory of taking them off, but then there they were, down on the floor in an incriminating taupe heap, and I thought, “You know, something is the matter with me. I mean, if I don't, if I don't do something about this, I don't know, I'm going to end up a Democrat or something.” [Audience laughter] So, I went to the most important sexual authority of that time, and well maybe all time, Dr. David Reuben's *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask*, and I'll tell you, just, I mean the table of contents was an eye-opener. I noticed that male homosexuals had their own chapter, but the females were just a footnote under prostitution. So I just read the whole damn thing, and up to this time I think, I guess I was naïve, I thought that homosexuality had, had something to do with you know attraction between two people of the same sex, but not according to David Reuben, oh no [audience laughter]. Not according to David Reuben. According to David Reuben the most important part of a homosexual experience, male or female, is their compulsive erotic relationship to household appliances. This is not fiction. And all that distinguishes the male from the female is that male homosexuals are forever shoving various appliances up their ass, you know, shot glasses, blenders, toaster ovens, and the lesbians are always strapping them on, you know, electric toothbrushes, color TV's, washer-dryers [audience laughter]— ‘Ladies, start your engines!’

¹⁴ *Hogan's Heroes* was a TV sitcom that aired from 1965-1971 about allied POW's held in a fictitious prisoner of war camp somewhere in Germany during WW II.

¹⁵ Although here Holly is associating this phrase with Richard Nixon, “Keep Hope Alive” is a catch-phrase of Reverend Jesse Louis Jackson, Sr., Founder and President of the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition. Jackson ran for president twice in the 1980s. Jackson is a strong supporter of civil rights and has been involved in many American movements for empowerment, peace, civil rights, gender equality, and economic and social justice.

Well, so I'm thirteen years old, and it, I don't know, it seems like a very shallow and materialistic form of love [audience laughter], and I noticed I thought that being a homosexual, if you wanted to be any good at it, would take a lot of leisure time, not to mention electrical outlets. And you know, it was a little hard on the environment, so I read on, and Dr. Reuben said that like cancer, impending lesbianism had its warning signs, the most ominous of which was, and I quote, "the enlarged clitoris of The Lesbian which can be inserted into The Vagina of her partner achieving a reasonable facsimile of...The Real Thing." Whatever that is. So, I read on, and Dr. Reuben said that "the most prized lesbians" and I thought—wait a minute. *Stop the buses*. I had no idea there were going to be prizes. Oh my God! [Audience laughter] Here I am, I'm in the Midwest and I'm in county fair¹⁶ country, and all of a sudden I can see the next Saginaw county fair. I mean, I there's the lesbian barn, I mean, I don't know how I missed it, it was there all along right next to the Holsteins.¹⁷ Just down from, down from the Clydesdales¹⁸, and I could, I could see all the people out on the midway¹⁹ saying, 'Come on down at four, they'll be judging the lesbians. You don't want to miss that.'" [Audience laughter] And I, I could see in my mind all the like 4-H²⁰ kids leading around all those lesbians that they had hand-raised, you know, suckled from baby butch all the way up to full-blown bull daggers!²¹ David Reuben didn't say what kind of prizes you could hope to win for being a lesbian, but I think, I don't know, I thought a few surge protectors might come in handy. And he said, he said that some of the most prizewinning specimens had clits four, five, even six inches, I don't know, long, I guess. He didn't really say, but I think, you know what I did—I went to, I went to my father's workroom. I got his tape measure. It was twenty-five feet long—you've gotta believe in yourself. Don't forget that! [Audience laughter] I figured, "that oughta do it!" [Laughs] I got my mother's hand mirror, I went to my bedroom, I pulled up my skirt, and I ran into all sorts of problems. Because I couldn't find anything between my legs that looked like it could be inserted into the body of another person, no matter how large it got, and I thought—I began to doubt the very existence of my clitoris, I mean it, it didn't seem like something someone in my family would have [audience laughter]. Not after all that, that work for Nixon.²² It didn't really seem like something someone in Saginaw, Michigan would have. Or maybe they had them but Simon and Garfunkel took 'em with them when they left [audience laughter]. So I just measured everything between my navel and my knees,

16 A *county fair* usually held every year at the same location in a county, especially for the competitive showing of livestock and farm products. Considered a big event for rural communities.

17 *Holsteins* are any breed of large black and white dairy cattle originally developed in Friesland.

18 A *Clydesdales* is a large powerful draft horse with white feathered hair on its fetlocks. The breed was developed in the Clyde valley of Scotland.

19 The *midway* is the area of a fair (or carnival, circus, or exposition) where sideshows and other amusements are located.

20 *4-H* is a youth organization that is most prominent in rural communities. The main point of the organization is to organize many competitions for youth, especially in the area of livestock raising.

21 *Bull dagger* is a derogatory term for lesbians, particularly directed to women who are butch. This term also was more popular in the past and has since been replaced by the equally derogative term, "dyke." However, when used by queer women the terms "bull dagger" and "dyke" can both connote empowerment and community.

22 Richard Nixon was a Republican and the 37th President serving from 1969-1974. During his Presidency, Nixon succeeded in ending American fighting in Vietnam and improving relations with the U.S.S.R. and China. But the Watergate scandal, in which he was involved, divided the country and ultimately led to his resignation.

I took the best score, but nothing was even six inches long. And I knew right then that, you know, I'd, I'd never win any prizes for being a lesbian. I mean, maybe I, maybe I wasn't a dyke after all. I just didn't measure up. So that's a little excerpt from...

Miriam: Thank you so much, Holly. Take a good sip of water after that one. So, I think that it's become a little bit obvious to everyone that you use humor quite a lot in your work.

Holly: What do you mean by that? [Audience laughter. Holly yells at them] It's not funny!

Miriam: I know, also, do you, has that always been something that's come naturally to you, or is that part, something you got from the women at the WOW café?

Holly: There were a lot of things I got from them, including a moldy BLT²³ that's in my purse over there that's stinking up this whole place [audience laughter]. But I think that I was a, I was such a strange child, mostly that, that I was just literate, and the theory of evolution made sense to me. And I didn't have a gender, I was kind of like Cousin It²⁴ on *The Addams Family*²⁵—oh, that's going to translate well into Poland, China and India. But if they don't know what Cousin It is, it's time they learned. So, my one way of coping was by making jokes. So that was, that was a, and I think it was also, had to do with being a gen... the first generation to grow up with television, and being really inspired by really terrible TV shows like *Gilligan's Island*,²⁶ *The Addams Family*—these shows were, you know, other American artists talk about Jackson Pollack,²⁷ they talk about *Waiting for Godot*,²⁸ and you know, I see *Gilligan's Island* and *The Addams Family* very much as sort of my *Waiting for Godot*, as my Jackson Pollack.

Miriam: Excellent. (Holly laughs). I see that.

Holly: Do you see that?

²³ *BLT* is an acronym for Bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich.

²⁴ *Cousin It* was a character in the TV show "The Addams Family" who had long hair covering its entire body including its face.

²⁵ *The Addams Family* debuted in 1964 featuring a macabre family including Gomez Addams, his wife Morticia, their two children, and various other family members. The story is of a loving family with well-behaved children—the ideal American family if they were not monsters.

²⁶ *Gilligan's Island* was a popular TV comedy sitcom from 1964 to 1967 in which the seven main characters are shipwrecked on an uncharted tropical island.

²⁷ Jackson Pollack was a U.S.-based artist known primarily for his innovative work in the 1940s and 1950s. He was famous for his unprecedented physical involvement with the act of painting itself. In the style of works he is most known for he spread his canvases on the floor, dribbled paint, sand and broken glass on them, smeared and scratched them, named them with numbers.

²⁸ A well-known play by Samuel Beckett (1906-1989). *Waiting for Godot* was written in 1953 and is categorized as Absurdist Theatre. There is almost no action in this play, rather everything is expressed through jokes or reflections on life

Miriam: And how has your work been received by different audiences? I mean, I know in the bio I read, you listed all the different places you've been performed or been produced. Any memorable, particular times you've been performing?

Holly: I think that a lot of my work—I see my work in conversation. Even when it's solo it's, it's imagined as a conversation. And it's a conversation that I wouldn't have begun, *begun* if I hadn't been part of the WOW café, if I hadn't been part of this tiny little world that seemed—like, what I was thinking about, what was funny to me, what was political to me, was going to be understood, and people would challenge me, and there would be work there that I would respond to. I also, one thing that unified people at WOW is that we had somewhat of a critique of feminism as we were experiencing it in New York in the early eighties. And part of it had to do with sexuality, and our desire to sort of place sexuality at the center of feminist discourse. Part of it had to do with style, about, in some ways borrowing and building from a sort of campy tradition that a lot of gay men had pioneered rather than a more earnest style that had been typical of other feminist art projects. So, I saw my work also in conversation—and this is like *World Without End, Clit Notes*—in conversation with other feminists. I mean, I think that a lot of times there's a sort of feeling that if you're speaking from a stigmatized subject position—and if you can't speak at all—from a stigmatized subject position, that your work should be addressing a mainstream audience. In other words, if I can't convince Jesse Helms,²⁹ you know, that gay people shouldn't be, I don't know, rounded up and branded, then somehow I'm not doing my work. So I imagined it in conversation, and I had a lot of disputes with feminist and lesbian and gay critics who saw my artwork as kind of a response to feminist and gay theory as it was being lived out at that time.

Miriam: How do mainstream audiences receive your work?

Holly: Well, mostly they don't receive it [audience laughter]. Although if you, you know, spent \$49.99 at my website, they could receive it and you could send me to...No, mostly I don't perform—I have performed a few times to more mainstream audiences but I've sort of gone with the Kate Clinton³⁰ idea about the mainstream that it's shallow and slow-moving, and it's the tributaries where the action is. I think that my work is preaching to the converted. But I—and I borrow from that expression which David Román,³¹ who is a theorist, uses—and talking about being a progressive person in

²⁹ *Jesse A Helms* (North Carolina, Republican), served five terms as a Senator and epitomizes the ultra-conservative Religious Right. He is loudly and overwhelmingly critical of queer individuals and rights, public funding for arts, and most social, cultural and welfare programs. Regarding the National Endowment of the Arts funding that Holly speaks about, he said, "What is really at stake is whether or not America will allow the cultural high ground in this nation to sink slowly into an abyss of slime to placate people who clearly seek or are willing to destroy the Judaic-Christian foundations of this republic."

³⁰ *Kate Clinton* is a stand-up comedian and writer who focuses on issues of politics, gay rights/humor, and feminism. She wrote *Don't Get Me Started* in which she critiques and satirizes marriage, the gay community and politics.

³¹ *David Román* is a professor at the University of Southern California and teaches in the areas of theatre, performance, minority studies, queer studies and American studies. Much of his work has been looking at performance and AIDS. He has also studied a women's cabaret performances and co-edited, with Holly, *O Solo Homo*.

America as an act of faith. It's really, there's nothing to go on except faith, particularly at this moment, and it's a faith that, like any kind of spiritual belief, is in danger of being eroded. So there's something active that happens between the audience and myself, we're not necessarily all in agreement, but we're inspiring, challenging each other, and reminding ourselves that just because our worldview is not part of commercial culture doesn't mean that our critique's not valid.

Miriam: In sort of all these different performance experiences, have you had some, have you had any experience with, censorship, say?

Holly: Oh, how many hours do we have? [Audience laughter] I hope we have several hours for this. Yes, I have. Censorship is my middle name. At first, my first early experiences with censorship were about my wanting to make work that was about a kind of irreverent lesbian sexuality. And just by reclaiming this word "horny," which, of course, relates to male sexuality, I remember having huge fights with feminist groups who thought this was just horrible. And I had been really inspired by Drag Theater and wanted women to have the same opportunities to have big wigs and lots of eye makeup and phony accents and late at night—it all seemed fabulous to me. What's not to like? It, that it wasn't incompatible with feminism. So I had various experiences early on, where I remember *The Well of Horniness* was, had a long run in Washington, D.C., and on opening night people's tires were slashed and flyers were, you know, destroyed for the show and things like that. And I had other disputes but I mean, it's more of a sort of a *dispute*. But in 1990, I was one of the artists whose work came under attack by right-wing politicians and had National Endowment for the Arts³² funding that was awarded to me taken away. So, that was sort of my induction into—that's when it became my middle name, as opposed to just my hobby.

Miriam: [Laughs] And how long did that take to work through? I know it was sort of a process.

Holly: It was a process. It was, it was quite a process. The initial denial of the grant was in 1990, and the sort of last stage of that chapter was in 1998 when our case was heard by the United States Supreme Court³³. And along the way there were lots of little victories. We were contending that the First Amendment³⁴ applied to government arts funding. And the First Amendment, specifically in this context, says that the federal government cannot discriminate in the way they give out funding in a way to suppress unpopular or minority

³² The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) is the largest annual funding provider of the arts in the United States and is the official arts organization of the United States government. The mission of the NEA is to support excellence in the arts—both new and established, bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education.

³³ The *Supreme Court* of the United States is the highest judicial body in the United States and leads the [judicial branch](#) of the United States federal government.

³⁴ The *First Amendment* of the U.S. Constitution (the first ten amendments of which are referred to as the Bill of Rights) reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances."

viewpoints. Not that I thought of lesbianism as a viewpoint, but, hey, it's you know, it's better than a lifestyle. I'd rather have a viewpoint. Because I see this, like, woman in a minivan going down the Interstate, and maybe she sees a sign that says "lesbian viewpoint next left," so I'll just go with that [audience laughter]. And I'm too sloppy to have a lifestyle, so I have a lesbian viewpoint. And so more than the grants that were denied to these other artists at the same time, it was the principle about whether free speech applied to government art funding. And two courts, two federal courts said, yes, it did, and that this was clearly a violation—along the way, the Clinton administration gave us our funding—but the United States Supreme Court eventually decided that the arts organizations weren't being compelled to consider decency, which is their code word for "No Queers, No Queers, No Queers!" When they just didn't want to come out and say that, you know, a quicker way is to say "decency." Since the arts organizations weren't compelled to take that into consideration, then it didn't violate the First Amendment. So it was a dissatisfying, dissatisfying settlement that we came to. And also part of something larger which was a total, total destruction pretty much of public arts funding in this country for individual artists and artists from outsider groups.

Miriam: Do you think that your relationship with either the queer community or the feminist community changed as a result of the NEA stuff?

Holly: It was a very complicated—my relationship with pretty much everyone, including a lot of my best friends, were really, was really challenged by this experience, because so many people in the art world, including good friends of mine, really bought into the idea that there's no such thing as bad publicity. And by singling out a handful of artists whose work was frankly provocative and intended to be controversial, it was easy to see this as a problem of a few artists, or artists that worked in particular topics, rather than what it really was, which is an attack, first of all on public funding of the arts, but an attack on public funding in general, because this model was used to attack public education, public health, yada, yada, yada³⁵. We have public nothing in this country anymore. So I felt that my private experience of it, which was being transformed into a political football, having to continually sort of justify my work, and the sort of psychic damage of having your work held up for ridicule, and including by people in the feminist and queer community, and at the same time getting death threats from the right wing, letters like, "I know where you live, I have a gun, I'm coming to New York this summer, P.S. Jesus loves you," and I'm like, thank you for that P.S.—that's my favorite death threat. All of that had an enormous...traumatizing toll on me. And plus, I felt like, "we lost." We lost; we lost the big political goal that we were hoping to achieve. So it was a very difficult moment. I mean I would find in some ways some solidarity with gay people because my work had been clearly singled out because of homophobia, but at the same time then I'd hear critiques in the gay media that, you know, "She's not really gay! She talked in that piece about sleeping with a guy!" Or, "She's gay but she's not queer!" You know, it's like, oh God, you know "She's got the wrong haircut! Her haircut oppresses me!" And so it was a very, it was a very difficult experience, and I was caught in this situation where the more I sort of responded to the charges and tried to talk about the issues, the

³⁵ *Yada, yada, yada* signifies that there is more to a conversation or story without detailing the specifics. Used to indicate that the rest of the story is not significant to the overall meaning.

more I think it sort of increased the sense that this was just an individual problem. This was, you know, like Holly, you know, Holly Hughes *mano a mano*³⁶ with Jesse Helms, as opposed to it being a much broader problem. You know, we want to like individualize and psychologicalize—even though I can't say that. We want to do it. I can't say it, but we do it anyways.

Miriam: Did you, did this affect your work in any way?

Holly: It did. It stopped my work, I mean I, and put me into a place of really standing outside my work and judging it in a way that I don't think is helpful for any artist, and being afraid. I was afraid. I was just—what was I afraid of? I'm not even sure. But it so echoed experiences of shaming and feeling like you were wrong, that it echoed my own sort of self-doubts and it echoed sort of the experiences of growing up feeling completely alienated from everyone else in the navy bean capital, and from my family, and through my political beliefs and, and my sexuality, those levels of alienation. So it reopened those wounds.

Miriam: And then, *Preaching to the Perverted*, you wrote after 1998? After the decision?

Holly: I did, I did.

Miriam: Would you like to talk a little bit about—

Holly: I was struggling for a long time, like, how can I take this experience—I think of myself as somebody who tries to take personal narrative and turn it into political parables, so like it's perfect! It's great material! How could I go wrong? But I couldn't find my way into the story for a long time. Partially because I think I was *in* the story, it was still happening. But then I went to the United States Supreme Court, and I have to say, Mimi, that it was the weirdest piece of experimental theater that I've ever seen [audience laughter], and I have seen a lot of weird, you know, site-specific theater.³⁷ And I started describing it to friends of mine, just like the fact that you have to get tickets to go to the Supreme Court, and they're not easy to get, you know [audience laughter], it's a long-running hit, and you have to know the right people. And I remember my lawyer saying, "You know, like if you wanna go to the hearing, you better let me know right away because tickets are going fast." And so I say, "Can I have two?" And he's like— [Holly mimics his look of disbelief. Holly laughs. Audience laughter]—"I'll see what I can do." And it was under the sort of veneer of democracy, it felt like some sort of national detention hall.³⁸ You went through many—this is pre-9/11—many, many metal

³⁶ "Mano a mano" is Spanish for "hand to hand." Used here it refers to direct competition.

³⁷ *Site-specific theater* is designed to be performed in one place or possibly at a certain time. It's not a touring production, or a piece that can be reproduced over and over again with a relative amount of similarity, like a more conventional play. Site-Specific Theatre can also illustrate the specific nature and shared experiences necessary between audience members and performers for their message to be successfully shared such that if you're not a part of that community, you will not understand it.

³⁸ *Detention* is space in a school where students, as punishment for improper behavior, are required to stay after regular school hours to ponder their errors.

detectors, but more than that, more than the endless surveillance, was the fact that the minute you walked into the foyer of the Supreme Court, two hours before the hearing starts, yards from where the hearing happens, the first rule is “No Talking” [whispers] “no talking.” And so there’s all these different lines. You don’t know where the lines are going, maybe they’re going to an outlet mall,³⁹ or Great Adventures,⁴⁰ or, you know, the Not-So-Supreme Court, you don’t know [audience laughter]. My lawyer said to me, “Make sure you get in the right line” and then it’s like, how do you find out what the right line is? And so you’re, so it’s this chaotic, weird feeling as you go into the Supreme Court, and then you’re escorted to your seats by members of the Secret Service, and they seat you in these pews.⁴¹ And I’m not talking about seats that resemble pews, remind you of pews—I’m talking about “Onward Christian Soldiers,”⁴² *Faith of our Fathers*⁴³ pew pews. So I’m telling people this, and they’re just like [Holly mimics a look of disbelief], because of course the Supreme Court is completely invisible. There’s no photography; there’s none of even those little funny court drawings. In fact, the journalists that go to the Supreme Court can’t bring any recording equipment, and they can’t bring pens or paper. So they’re out there trying, you know, after the hearing trying to reconstitute it, and I thought, “These are people who do not like to be reviewed.” And on that level, I could really understand and relate to them [audience laughter], but I, somehow I felt that it was wrong. I felt like it was wrong, and I wrote the piece—it began a way for me to talk about my experiences in the culture war and to “out”⁴⁴ the Supreme Court, not in the most exciting sense of the word “out,” but I felt like—just sort of peel back and, and show the kind of way this performance was constructed. Well you can tell I’ve been teaching, now—“This performance has been constructed.”

Miriam: Well, that’s just a wonderful segue into my next question. Yeah I was really, being a former student of yours, and really and having enjoyed your teaching, I wanted to know a little bit about how you got into teaching.

Holly: Well, it was another accident. Karen Finley⁴⁵ didn’t show up one day. It’s really true [audience laughter]. Karen Finley didn’t show up at NYU⁴⁶ and they called

³⁹ An *outlet mall* is a collection of retail stores housed in one larger building. Each store sells the goods of a particular manufacturer or wholesaler, usually at reduced prices. Outlet malls are generally located near large, metropolitan areas.

⁴⁰ *Great Adventure* refers to an amusement park called Six Flags Great Adventure in New Jersey.

⁴¹ *Pews* are long, fixed, backed benches that are arranged in rows for the seating of a congregation in church.

⁴² “Onward Christian Soldiers” is a traditional Christian hymn.

⁴³ James Cardinal Gibbons (1834-1921) wrote *Faith of our Fathers* which explains the basic tenants of the Catholic Church and why those beliefs are held. “Faith of Our Fathers” is also a Christian Hymn. In this reference, either makes sense.

⁴⁴ “To out” has become a verb and an action where one tells the secrets of others. This came about from the “outing” of public officials as homosexuals. It refers to the idea of “coming out of the closet,” the closet being a proverbial place where one can hide their identity, particularly queer identity, from people around them. When one comes out of the closet, they “out” themselves to those around them.

⁴⁵ *Karen Finley* is a performance artist who was also an Adjunct Faculty member of New York University. She was also one of the four artists, including Holly, whose funding was revoked by the NEA—dubbed the NEA Four.

⁴⁶ *NYU* is an abbreviation for New York University, a private university located in New York City.

me, and I was like—it was a slow time in the performance art days, it was, I was between gigs, and I was like, “Sure,” and then I thought [whispers] “I have no idea.” It was at New York University’s Experimental Theater Wing, which is a wonderful program, and I was like, “Oh my god, I don’t know what—I have no idea what I’m going to do.” And this friend of mine who had gone there said, “It’s, you know, experimental theater, you can tell them to run around Washington Square Park and do pushups afterwards, and they’ll do it.” And I got a suggestion from my friend and, and former NEA Four co-defendant Tim Miller about self-scripting, which is just like have people talk for a minute, do a story about what happened to them the day before, and out of that one exercise we did a whole semester of work. The students were great, they were really wonderful. I thought at that moment that that’s what was going to be, I could feel the love, and the students were really interested in the idea of taking their own experience and shaping it into performance and really generous towards me as the beginning teacher. So that was my first experience.

Miriam: Have they all been that like that?

Holly: No, they have not all been like that [both laugh]. They have not been all like that. I have a, it’s a wonderful job when it goes well, but it’s, and it’s very exciting, and then when it’s not going well, it feels like, it feels like some sort of version of *Groundhog’s Day*, the Bill Murray movie where he’s forced to repeat the same day over and over again, but you’re repeating the same comedy act over and over again and dying, you know “bombing,” as they say in comedy clubs, in front of the same people, it’s just like you know every day, you know. So it’s a kind of performance skill. Whereas one of my students in a class I’m currently teaching, I was trying to teach them about metaphors but I actually think after three weeks, they knew more about metaphors than before I started, I could see them losing knowledge in my presence, which is a very depressing feeling as a teacher, that they were actually smarter and more open before I started in on them. And so after three weeks of trying to find metaphors, they’re like, “So, like is death a metaphor?” And I’m like, “No. Death is a reality. It’s a reality I’m having right now.” [Audience laughter]. “On a daily basis. In front of you. This is what it looks like.”

Miriam: So there is a, so then there is relationship for you between teaching and performing?

Holly: Yeah there is, there is. And it’s a different; it’s a different kind of performance. I mean, it’s hard to sustain the fifteen—you know after teaching for a long time, I really haven’t, I don’t have enough material to stretch out for fifteen weeks. So unless someone else in the class starts doing their act, unless, you know, you trip the switch and other, you know, the circuit gets completed and other people start doing stuff and it becomes a conversation, they have to sit through, you know, my thirty-minute routine over and over and over again. I try to do it in different accents, but it’s, really—it is a performance.

Miriam: How did you end up here, specifically, teaching?

Holly: “End up?” You think this is where I’m going to end up? [Both laugh].

Miriam: How did you come, how did you come to Michigan? Again?

Holly: I make that joke because I mean a lot of my early work, I don’t know, the narrative arc, if there was anything in the work, was, “Well, maybe I really didn’t change the world or do all I set out to accomplish, but at least I got out of Michigan.” And then like I walk down streets here in Ann Arbor that smell like my childhood, and I see my mother’s hair walking down the street, you know, on someone else’s head. And I came to Michigan after having supported myself—being very fortunate, very privileged, for fifteen years, to be able to work independently, to tour, to do some teaching, but really be self-employed, and that was, and really travel all over the country and some places abroad, doing my work—and then I noticed my teeth were starting to fall out, and I noticed I didn’t have any insurance. And I thought, and I didn’t have any skills, and that I was also getting old and it was late to get skills. And so I thought that possibly the only thing I could do was possibly get a teaching job? Maybe? But performance art’s such a, you know, it’s just this weird—as I describe it—this *brat*⁴⁷ art form, that, you know, you can sort of see like ‘Theater’ and ‘Art and Design’ tossing it back and forth: “No, you take it!” “No, you take it!” “You take it!” “It’s yours!” “It’s yours!” “It’s yours!” I lived in a neighborhood in New York like that, neither Brooklyn or Queens wanted this neighborhood. They’d be like, you know, we...getting kicked out of different boroughs, “No, you have it!” “No, it’s part of Queens!” “No, we don’t want it!” So, I got invited to be here as a visiting artist a couple of years ago, and, I don’t know, maybe it’s more evidence of the decline of higher education [audience laughter], but here I am.

Miriam: Wonderful. So you have this joint appointment between Art and Theater. How do you feel being in the art department specifically?

Holly: It’s good. How do I feel about it...well, I feel like art has somehow remained more elastic in its definitions than perhaps theater has been, where theater, particularly in this country, has not embraced as much some new technologies, new sort of approaches to narrative, whereas Art and Design is continually like, “Oh yeah, digital art? Come on down!” You know, you know new media robots, you know, conceptual art come on down. You know, sit, sit down here next to painting. Yeah, you guys will get along. And it’s, performance art as a term really came out of the art world, and came out of people doing work in galleries, and it borrows from a lot of different aesthetic and political traditions, but that’s one, one of the places.

Miriam: Yeah, that’s neat. I guess we’re getting to the end of our question section, but I did want to ask if you’d want to share perhaps maybe one or two of the most memorable moments in your life.

⁴⁷ A *brat* is a very troublesome child especially a spoiled or ill-mannered one. A “brat art form” could be thought of as a discipline held in contempt by people who conform to traditional understandings of art.

Holly: Gosh, memorable moments in my life.

Miriam: You've already told us about the Supreme Court that seems quite memorable.

Holly: I told you about the Supreme Court, I told you about taking my pantyhose off in the eighth grade during—I think we were learning about how a bill becomes a law. That was significant. [Laughs] Let's see, I told you about my failure to educate students about what a metaphor was...what were some other significant moments...Well, I one thing that I *love* being able to do at Michigan and that I can only do within the framework of an institution is collaborating with a large group of people, making a piece of theater, for lack of a better word. And I did, I had the opportunity to do that last winter with a group of twenty-five students here at the University of Michigan. And we made this piece *After a Fashion*, and I think I said something at the time that it was about clothing and identity, and how, you know, does consumerism shape identity or the other way around, but really it was a show about shopping [laughs]. But that does sound better than if I, doesn't that sound better than if I say it's about consumerism and identity? Yeah, it sounds much more on the level of the University.

Miriam: I'd take it.

Holly: Yeah, you would take it. You'd go to that. And it was, it was a wonderful experience to work with a group of students from different parts of the university who had different ways of working, you built this community. The aesthetic product you make is only as good as the community is. And then we had the fabulous opportunity of taking it to New York and performing at the Guggenheim Museum last fall. And that was just a great experience.

Miriam: So you haven't really left New York.

Holly: No, I haven't.

Miriam: I did want to ask if there's anything in your life that you could change, what would it be?

Holly: All of it! Yeah! No, I'd be much taller [laughs]

Miriam: Really?

Holly: Would you be?...I would be taller! I know that the way that you're supposed to answer that question is, "no." [Dramatically] "No. I wouldn't change a thing." [Audience laughter]. But, you know, goddamn it—hello, rest of the world—yeah, probably everything. Let's see, where would I start. Yeah, taller would be good. You know, I would have, I would have flossed my teeth more. You know I really thought that wasn't a big...it turned out to be right, that's really important, flossing. I think I would,

yeah, there were decisions that I would have made differently. But, then maybe I wouldn't be sitting here with you!

Miriam: Exactly. [Both laugh]. And clearly, this is where you're supposed to be. Sitting here with me. I did want to ask you a question in closing that we do try to ask everyone who's been interviewed for this project. You've talked a lot about sort of your changing relationship with feminism over the years. In a nutshell, how would you define feminism for yourself, or how you've experienced it?

Holly: Right well, I think that unfortunately the sort of really, to me, simple premise of feminism is that women deserve equal rights with men, that our gender system has this sort of inherent discrimination in it, that that premise seems still outlandish and difficult to put into practice virtually everywhere, even as feminism has become, you know, really a denigrated word. A lot of my students don't want to identify as feminists, and especially when they find that I'm one—"We don't want to end up like her! We floss! We're not, that's not going to happen to us!" That, so, I think that, that the idea is that, any feminism is, as any political philosophy, continually changing. The political landscape is changing. I speak about a condition of being here in the Midwest as a middle-class white lesbian, and it's a very different experience in another part of the world, in another part of the city with a different class background. And we have to keep changing. We have to keep changing our strategies, the goals keep shifting.

Miriam: Thank you. Is there anything else you would like to add that we haven't covered?

Holly: I hope we're going to get rid of George Bush⁴⁸. That's, that's you know, and I'd like everyone that's watching—hopefully when they watch this video George Bush will be gone. And otherwise I just can imagine the audiences in other countries just like going, "Why should I listen to any of these people in America who are just like single-handedly destroying the world," but I don't know if that was really a comment so much as, or sort of, a nervous tick.

Miriam: Thank you for sharing that nervous tick with us. I would like to turn this over to you, now. We have a great audience with us today, so if you would like to take questions from them, we'd love to hear some.

Holly: I'll entertain, though not necessarily answer, all questions. Bring it on, as they say here! Who's first? Grill me, probe me!

Brian Heyboer⁴⁹: Well I have, I have just a... You mentioned your solo work as being sort of a conversation sort of, you know, with the audience regarding feminism, things like that, and you also mentioned the work that you've done with

⁴⁸ A Republican, *George W. Bush* was the Governor of Texas before he was elected U.S. President in the controversial election of 2000. The 43rd U.S. President, he is the son of 41st president George H.W. Bush. During his term, he primarily focused on the "War on Terror", including an invasion of Afghanistan and the Iraq war. He was re-elected in 2004.

⁴⁹ Brian Heyboer is a protégé of Holly's.

students. Do you sort of think of that as kind of a similar type of, of conversation, or does it function differently, or what do you sort of gain from that for yourself?

Holly: Well, you know I, first I just want to point out—you sat down, so, I was just going to point out that you needed to tuck in your shirt [audience laughter]. That's part of the conversation. I do think of it as a—what was the question? I was, I was so distracted by—otherwise I think your outfit is really nice. Is there? What is the question?

Heyboer: I don't know, what do you get out of doing, doing work that's kind of different people's narratives in conversation or, sort of what do you enjoy most about that?

Holly: Well, a couple of different things. One it's, as narcissistic as I am, and I think it's one of my best characteristics, I'm at this point even a little bit bored with myself, so putting on the hip boots and wading around in someone else's trauma is, is a relief. I also love to see those moments when, when people realize—I mean, this is going to like, this is like really going to sound like, it's not even like sappy lesbian feminism, it's like, it's like coffee table feminism, but I really believe it! Isn't that sad?—but that people have, that everyone has a story, that they have, that narratives that matter that connect to larger narratives, and those moments when people make those connections, whether or not they break into the glamorous and fast-paced world of performance art after that, and are able to land a waitress job as a result of that and at the risk of sounding totally corny, and maybe it's a moment of empowering, a moment of sort of—I'm particularly working with sometimes with young people who, you know, they're still, they're still sort of evolving a sense of self, and that, that can be a critical moment when somebody feels like they don't have anything to talk about, and then, you know, they start talking about that everybody in their family was obsessed with alien abductions. And they would spend their weekends driving around meeting other alien abductees—everybody except the person, this one person in the family, the aliens came for everyone but her. And the moment that she realizes that it's not just, like a trauma that she has to—you know, the little green men did not want me—that she realizes that that's a story, that there's something she can do with that, is a wonderful moment. And if she doesn't do something with it, then I have to kill her and the alien abduction story becomes mine. Yes.

The End