

CARMEN WINANT

TOGETHERING

I wanted to call this: imagine imagining.  
Another title: join me in seeking feminist  
utopia. Finally: our shapes and our lives:  
how can we live, together?

One reason that I feel so hostile towards  
our patriarchy is because of just how well  
it suits me. I am comfortable inside of it  
and—from my stable perch—benefit from  
its preferences. I can’t help but acquiesce to  
its terms because the other option feels too  
daunting, and irreversible: turning my life  
inside out in order to refuse and obstruct it.  
Could I give it all away? Someone I used to  
admire greatly told me, on this front: there  
are no half measures.

It’s our patriarchy—all of ours—for all of  
the ways we work to both suffer and rein-  
force it, hourly. When I describe myself as  
an artist who makes work of our patriarchy,  
I want to make clear: this is the condition  
I describe: a double consciousness, a little  
death in every orgasm. I want to make clear:  
I am not an artist who makes work about  
‘gender,’ but of something more immaterial,  
less flexible. I want to furnish pictures as  
evidence of the ways we survive, withhold,  
and absorb externalized systems of power  
as barometers of utter self worth. I must  
acknowledge that art is not, here—in this  
project and across my life—a tool of resis-  
tance but rather a method of documenting  
an idea. This will be a presentation about  
other people’s bravery, about photography  
as a tool for living, and about the distance  
between lives.

A LIST OF CHARACTERISTICS:

my last name  
my children’s last names  
mankind  
he, the artist  
every president in my lifetime  
every president in this country’s lifetime  
46 presidents  
this president  
the work expected of me as a mother  
the love expected of me as a mother  
my body after pregnancy  
my unabiding fear of being killed  
my unabiding fear of being raped  
my fear of becoming irrelevant and invisible  
state-sanctioned marriage  
my products  
my fatigue  
abortion bans  
abortion shame  
my abortion  
fascism

A FEW NOTABLE MARKERS  
of feminist—lesbian—separatism, known  
not as communes but Womyn’s Lands:

1. THE ABOLISHMENT OF  
CAPITALISM,

which was fundamentally incompatible  
with their values. The embrace of a model  
of shared property, lovers, finances, gover-  
nance, and the general hardships of rural  
existence. They called this living in practice  
‘togethering.’

2. THEY TAUGHT THEMSELVES  
HOW TO LIVE,

literally, because the other option was dying:  
there are many accounts of coming into femi-  
nism, and sometimes into lesbianism, well  
after getting married to men and having chil-  
dren as very young women. Leaving behind  
constructed lives, they often arrived with  
very little knowledge about how to work and  
live off of the land, how to build structures  
to live inside of, how to irrigate, run electric-  
ity, how to dispose of human waste. A new  
kind of social reproduction; experiments in  
self-making. There are many accounts of be-  
ing freezing during wintertime, and suffering  
endless colds wrapped in only thin blankets—  
the new frontiers’ women.

3. THEY INVENTED A NEW  
LANGUAGE

to match their new lives: menstruation be-  
came moonstration, women became womyn,  
history becomes herstory. Fathers’ sur-  
names were dropped in favor of taken last  
names that reflected their lands; Johnson  
becomes Freedom; Smith becomes Hillwom-  
an; Eichler becomes Mountaingrove. They  
burn the clothes they arrive in in a purifying  
fire, they speak the ‘story of their loss,’ cut  
their hair, and are born for the second time.  
Some of the women objected to the term  
‘country lesbians,’ which they were often  
called, because it contained the word ‘cunt.’  
What could matter more than how we name  
ourselves in the process of re-identification?  
As June Jordan said, we speak the language  
of our lives.

4. THEY TOOK UP PHOTOGRAPHY,

which was at the center of it all—another  
way to re-name, another way to learn how  
to live. Thousands of prints remain. They  
are sets of instructions, testaments of life,  
recalibrations of desire, kinship, affinity,  
self, sight and insight. The women document  
documenting—all learning photography  
together and at the same time—so often  
meeting the camera with a camera. They  
strip off their clothes, and exist in a pictorial  
state of threatlessness, total equivalence.  
I learned how to make pictures in a very dif-  
ferent kind of classroom, competing for  
grades and attention while struggling to be  
taken seriously. Their joy disarms me. The  
few female photographers that I had been  
taught, and admired—Arbus, Woodman—  
had killed themselves. Goldin nearly did.  
In the archives, the separatist pictures  
have subtitles like: holding hands; being

in nature; making love; learning 4x5. Inside  
of them I witness women who live without  
the looming threat of sexual violence and  
harassment, who have—in the great tradition  
of migration—unhitched themselves from  
perpetual trauma and come to occupy a body  
that is neither a weapon nor a target.

If the feminist imperative is to believe that  
a radically different world is possible—and  
I believe that that *is* our imperative—here  
then, friends, is praxis: a model of transfor-  
mation that has moved through the theoret-  
ical and into the actualized. Have you ever  
found a map for a world that you didn’t know  
existed? I look at reproductions of these  
prints on my computer, recognizing myself  
in the shadows, knowing that I have arrived  
a little too late to enter the frame.

Because they have not retreated to a com-  
fortable life, can we still qualify this as an  
escape? And, if we do, can we understand  
escape as a form of rebellion? Or—its oppo-  
site? Is leaving it all behind—refusing to  
engage the terms—the most radical act of  
all, a kind of conscientious objection? To  
borrow our current vernacular, is it a way to  
resist—to simply stop as did Lysistrata—or  
an abdication of that resistance? Simone de  
Beauvoir might have skeptically called the  
feminist separatist a Mystic: she is a woman  
who invests her freedom in the Absolute,  
forsaking her world for her God.

At the center of it all are the ‘Ovulars,’  
a series of six, one-week photographic work-  
shops offered on Rootworks from 1980–84.  
Ovulars, another renaming, and reclaiming:  
in this case of the word ‘seminar,’ the ety-  
mological meaning of which is literally to  
‘spread seed’ or semen. It contains within it  
a near-rhyme with ocular—a one letter  
difference. Ocular: that which is connected  
with the eyes, or literally uses the eye  
muscles, is a word most often associated  
with trauma.

The Ovulars were held in an isolated setting  
in the Oregon woods, intended to create  
an environment of anti-competition, experi-  
mentation, idea sharing and generation. The  
electricity for the darkroom was supplied  
by marine battery and slide shows were pow-  
ered with a gas fueled generator. They built  
a six foot wet sink, used their fingers in the  
chemistry, strung hundreds of prints up to  
dry, and used every bit of the walls to put  
up their pictures, even the ceilings. Ovulators,  
as they were called, shared cooking duties,  
camped, pissed and shat in an outhouse, and  
bathed in stream water heated by the sum-  
mer sun. They made photographs in sequence  
as with the surrealist game ‘exquisite corpse,’  
passing on only the photograph that came  
before. Tee Corrine, one of the four work-  
shop founders, or ‘organizer midwives,’ and  
a photographer of great might, wrote of the  
experience: “We asked, how has the women’s  
movement changed the way we see? What  
kinds of photos are being produced and pub-  
lished now that haven’t been seen before?  
What are the realities of our shapes and our  
lives? What are the differences between  
the ways men have pictured women and the  
ways we see ourselves?”

At the beginning of this project, I wrote a single note for myself, and taped it above the profound mess of my studio desk. It reads: what does a free body look like? Corinne, it turns out, had already asked the question—if organized her life around it—almost four decades ago and in the years before I was born. She died before I came to know that she had lived, bathing in the stream water and teaching other women how to solarize photographs 100 years after Lee Miller invented the technology and Man Ray claimed it as his own. What is more patriarchal than the so-called art world?

FROM WOMANSPiRiT MAGAZiNE:

What is feminist photography?  
Do you consider every image you make a feminist image?  
Do you think you see as most women see?  
Who are your images for?

Can you picture the occupation of a new world, outside of our patriarchy? It is difficult to grope with our imaginations in this way, as children do. On a trip home to my parents’ house in California a few years ago, I witness my father crying into a newspaper—which is not an entirely unfamiliar sight. He addresses me when I enter the room by saying: how unfair that your generation never got to believe another world to be possible. He said something about optimism that I don’t exactly recall, and that was the start of all of this.

What he meant, I think, was that we—those of us who grew to age under Bush and endless war and endless internet and daily mass shootings and neoliberalism and on—have a foreclosed sense of what we deem possible. We dare not imagine. This cannot be the result, simply, of that which we do not know. After all, these women didn’t know, hadn’t glimpsed, anything but the paternalistic. How then to believe, unseen and unseeable, that we have the collective agency to change the terms of our world? Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, an Enlightenment-era German philosopher, defined optimism as the “world best possible among worlds.” Surely we must be able to not only imagine an alternative—a world among worlds—but truly believe in its possibility before staking our very lives on its premise. Look backwards and forwards—to witness force-feeding, the taking away of children, imprisonment, death—for a voice.

I spend an alarming amount of time searching the internet for women-only and single gender worlds. This takes me to surprising places, mostly to the terrain of science fiction: to Marge Piercy of course (*Woman on the Edge of Time*) but also to films like *The Last Man on Planet Earth*, *No Men Beyond This Point*, *If Women Ruled the World*, *What Women Want*, and *Sexmission*, a 1984 Polish film that imagines the world in 2044—then a very distant future—after men have been eradicated; the society is authoritarian and revisionist. Einstein, they claim, was a woman; so was Copernicus. With the exception of the Piercy book, the films, made by men, are all anti-feminist

parables, forewarnings of what might happen if women were to assume all control and banish men to virtual or actual extinction (a misdirection of the feminist threat). It’s an old story told in the Master’s house. I watch an episode of *The Bachelor* for the first time—a world away, full of women—and wonder how they might find a trap door. What does an un-free body look like? I don’t write on this question because I already know the answer and it frightens and disgusts me.

I cannot pretend that world building is a simple task. In addition to addressing the large philosophical problems—namely, its exclusionary mandate—I must work to disentangle my own romance at the idea from its lived reality. I gloss over the dysfunctions that arise in living this way—the exasperation, the fear, the jealousy, the conflicts—because those narratives interfere with my fantasy. I read accounts of women who have left these communities angry, very angry, because as celibate they didn’t have the same amount of authority; because they were not vegetarian in a community that frowned on that decision; because they felt the physical labor was not being equally undertaken; because they ultimately lost battles against landowners and banks; because their crops did not come in; because it was too difficult to be disabled in the country. JEB was not invited back to teach the second Ovular, and Tee left based on a personal divide described only as an ‘old hurt.’ If I look closely at these accounts, I must be made to believe that none of us can ever really leave the world behind as we know it. Coalition can be explosive and painful; that’s part of the design, part of the continual work of ‘togethering.’ Being alive is not a metaphor for being alive.

1. THE QUESTION OF ESSENTIALISM:

Trans women were not addressed as sisters; male children, in some cases, were disallowed. As profoundly unhip as it might be to say this—and as unlikely as it may sound coming from the mother of two and four year old boys—I *can* imagine this essentialism as a form of survival. I can imagine that safe spaces (as we would now call them) were needed. I have been sexually harassed, coerced, assaulted; I can understand male-ness as a threat, and its absence as a possibility. Still, we reinforce and replicate the terms of our oppression: similar hierarchies, especially racialized access-bound hierarchies, persist; very few non-white women participated in this subculture. Dropping out of society, however difficult, can be a privilege.

2. THE QUESTION OF CONSCIOUSNESS:

Here is Sartre’s version: When you are waiting for a bus with a group of people, you are not a collective. When the bus stops, and you all get on, you still remain individuals in the same place, passively doing the same thing. But: if the bus passes you by, just blows through the stop for no apparent reason, this is the moment that the group becomes, in the language of existentialism, fused. Consciousness is not the bus—the thing that

contains many bodies in motion. It is not even the group aboard. It is the act of being joined in common, mutual struggle. We only fuse after the bus has passed us by. Consciousness is a collective awakening, a figuring out of where we need to go, together, and how to possibly arrive there.

3. THE QUESTIONS OF AUTHORITY, BELONGING, AND INHERITANCE:

I’ve resisted shifting the emphasis of this project to my own biography, which seems like the least interesting part of all. And yet, here I am—I can’t ignore me. Not only did I not live in this world—I was born in the final years of the Ovulars—I cannot claim a shared physical or identity position. I did not author any of these photographs and do not identify as a lesbian. Why did I immediately understand these pictures and this history as my own inheritance? What is my place here? My friend Em says, their oppression is not your oppression, and I know that she is right; so why do I feel as though I belong to these pictures? These communities were founded in the spirit of separation, distance, safety: by drawing these pictures into my work and making them public, have I committed an infraction?

Ariel Goldberg addresses this tension, let’s call it, in their deep essay in the book. When we first spoke, they said: I don’t want to be your queer passport.

I don’t know how to resolve this dilemma. I do know that I want to use art to make subject of bodies that are not my body, and histories that beget my history. I want to reach towards an incomplete understanding, and associative memory. I generally find righteousness in artists to be conservative and nearsighted; I see it in my students, who are so often unwilling to make subject of anything other than that over which they have definitive authority. But: I must also acknowledge that as with any artist and any body, my actions have the power to hurt, misemploy, and take advantage—to take voice. I’ve long used other peoples pictures for my own ends, but for the first time—working with images made by artists in the process of radical openness and reinvention—I must confront that working progressively and working humanely are not the same thing.

At last: this project began as a romance not only with the prospect of feminist utopia, but the potential of imagination as a tool of conscientious liberation. It hasn’t ended—it will never end. But it has, for now, led me to territory (in my body and of the world) that feels both uncomfortable and generative, full of force. I care more about photographs than I ever have. I feel, for the first time, tender towards the camera and its process—countermanding my belief that it is a device that so often sends women to their deaths. Joy: suddenly a worthy subject of art, and living.

This text accompanies *Togethering*, a video work by Carmen Winant, produced as a companion piece to her publication *Notes on Fundamental Joy* (Printed Matter, Inc., 2019).