

## Interview with Gail Wight



Elena Lledó

Gail Wight (Sunny Valley, USA, 1960) has created works which through their intelligence, poetic sensibility, and humor are stunning in a way that many people expect from only the greatest creative language. Her installations, performances, video and photographs pry into themes of biology, neurology and artificial intelligence, in order to illuminate

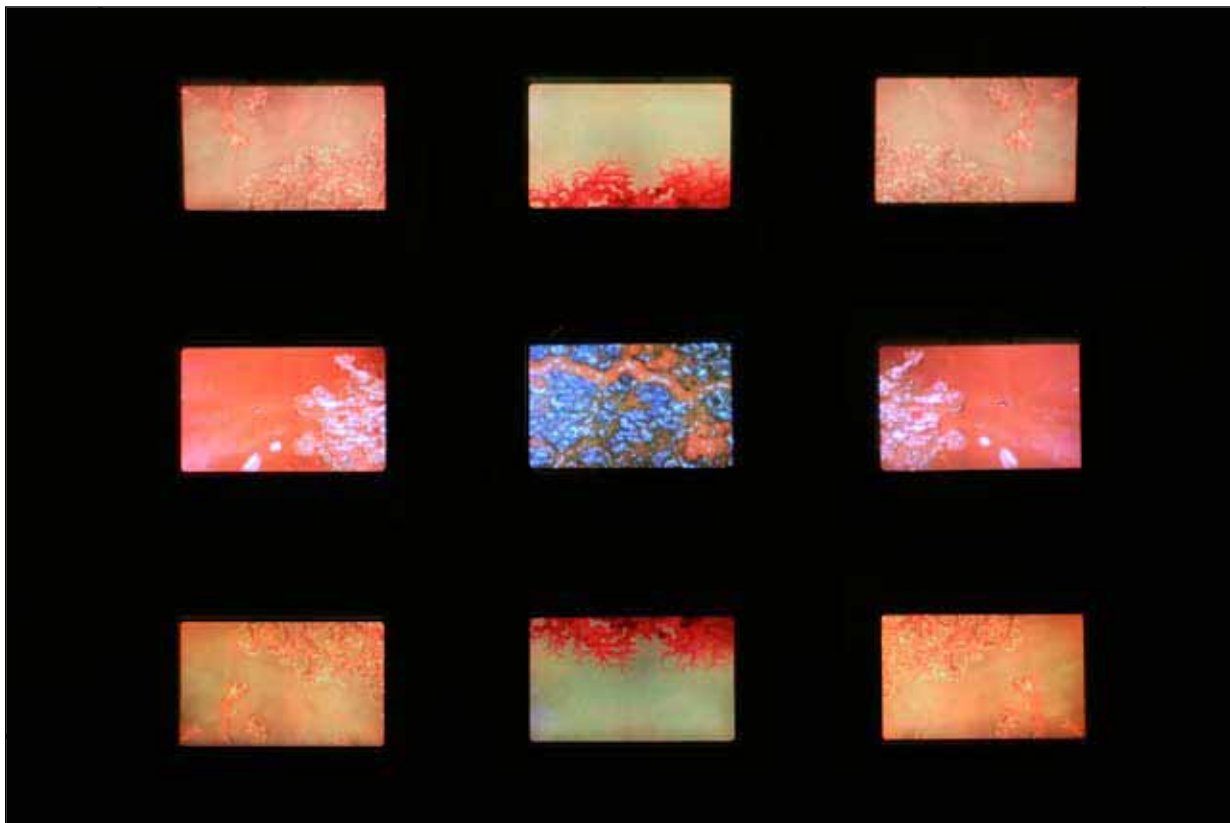
*“I want to be an informed, critical, and active participant”*

their dark side, such as the inexhaustible push towards experimentation which has been sapping the ethical vein. Wight lives in Berkeley, California, and travels to the University of Stanford every week, where she shares with her students reflections on art's potential when it incorporates the rules of digital systems, electronics, or science. Her work has questioned the methodologies of cognitive sciences, especially when they intersect higher ethical or emotional considerations.

**Could you explain how this interest came about?**

There's no getting away from the impact of science on our lives, particularly biology. From the first moment until the end, our understanding of biology defines

how we perceive the relevance of our own biological physicality, material and immaterial. This impacts everything. I started out making politically overt works that addressed the politics of the daily newspaper, feminism, capitalism—the politics of the obvious. Then, through a family illness, I started realizing how political the medical system was, and from there, the politics of science at large. This was the 80s, the era of personal politics. It made me realize that biology and other related sciences are an omnipresent link between the most intimate politics and its import at a global scale. There's no escape. But I do want to be an informed, critical, and active participant.



**Gail Wight.**  
*Hydraphilia*, 2009.  
Courtesy of the artist

**Gail Wight.** *Center of Gravity*, 2008. Courtesy of the artist

**What is the response you had from members of the scientific community to your work?**

Well... there's no one response. Only once have I had someone attack my work as being "too critical" of science, and a very interesting e-mail exchange ensued, in which we discussed the desire on the part of most scientists to be responsible and ethical, yet still be able to experiment. I felt that all sorts of desires which in principle are positive can still lead to tragedy. This of course doesn't mean that science as a human endeavor should end, but simply that we need a better way to predict our impact. DDT, for instance, was developed with the hopes of ending world hunger. For the most part, however, I get very positive responses from the science community. Most scientists appreciate the playful nature of my work, and usually my critique is developed with the perspective of an "insider". In other words, I try to engage the scientist's perspective as well as the layperson's, in order to create a nuanced dynamic in the work. In the end, though, the p.o.v. can, of course, only be my own.

**Could you tell me something about how "Afflicted Powers" came about, the work that you presented at the Seville Biennial in 2006?**

Okwui Enwezor curated the 2006 Seville Biennial. He had read a review of the book "Afflicted Powers" and contacted the authors to see if they'd like to participate in the exhibit. The authors, Iain Boal, Joe Matthews, Tim Clark, and Michael Watts, are part of a gathering of friends that share an anticapitalist, antiempirical, anarchistic hopefulness, calling themselves Retort. The group has been meeting for about two decades and I joined in discussions about ten years ago. The authors wanted to create a video installation with broadsides that had been published in response to the ongoing wars in the Middle East. They invited me to work with them, along with



James Brook, Franco Moretti, and Ann Wagner. I created the large video projection, in response to our discussions around the book and the broadsides, and the installation itself was largely a group effort. I had little to do with the writing—these are all very accomplished writers—so I focused on the visual aspects. Iain and Jim and I traveled to Seville to work on the final installation—it was a great experience. Since we focused on Picasso's "Guernica" and the history of aerial bombardment, Spain was a deeply poignant setting for the work.

**Humor is a fundamental part of your work and a tool you use to engage with the public...**

I need humor. I need it to engage myself first of all. And then, somehow, humor

seems to provide a connection for people entering the work from many angles. Laughing allows people to let their guard down. Once that happens, I hope a more serious subtext might work its way into a viewer's consciousness, even if it's years later.

**Many of your installations are very neat and meticulously presented. Is this an aesthetic choice or are there other reasons?**

This is definitely an aesthetic choice. The work is often referencing other spaces : science labs, science museums, hospitals and other medical offices and labs, science classrooms, even scientific toys. All of these things present themselves as orderly, clean, rational, yet experimental spaces. I'm trying to integrate this



**Gail Wight.** *The Meaning of Miniscule*, 2006. Courtesy of the artist

language with its own history (the early wood and brass of scientific instruments, for instance), and with other elements that might encroach from a less-ordered world. I like to mix up the materials of various eras, and a meticulous approach can help make this a seamless integration.

**You use a lot of different technologies in your work. Do you learn about them or do you rely on the collaboration with others?**

I love the things that electronics and computers can do, even if I don't always love electronics and computers per se. I generally employ technologies that I want to learn about, and enjoy the solitude of making the work on my own. Every now and then I'll need help. In general, though,

I want to be as fluid as possible with my medium, so that means understanding it deeply and working with it first hand. And in the end, I'm just not a good collaborator. I have a crazy schedule already, and making art is the one thing that happens on my own personal internal time. I crave that old-fashioned studio focus.

**It's often said that interactive art enriches the viewer's experience. Do you think it also enriches the experience of the artist?**

The word "interactivity" can mean so many things. I've experimented with interactivity but it's a very unwieldy territory, and I think it only works in certain situations. I've made a few works with very simple interactions—mostly using various

computer interfaces to navigate through visual and auditory material. I think they've been successful, for the most part, but that might be because I'm not pushing the boundaries in this area—I'm mostly playing it safe, because I don't want interactivity to get in the way of the art. I'm hoping that it can enhance the art, but for me, that means keeping any technological engagement as subtle as possible.

I've become more interested in interactivity between another species and a medium that can result in a work of art. I've been working with mice, slime mold, and worms to create works that are, for me, a form of interactivity. I've set things up with certain parameters (for instance, musical possibilities in *Rodentia Chamber*

Orchestra), and then let a species live unfettered, doing whatever it is they do, within those parameters. Part of this comes back to a critique of science: we're so anthropocentric, only just realizing the amazing interconnectivity between living species. I'm hoping to create unique ways of rethinking, re-seeing, and respecting other species.

**Could you tell me a few of the goals you have in mind when teaching experimental art to your students at Stanford University?**

**How much does the teaching aspect of your professional life inform your work as an artist?**

Every artist and every student is so unique; it's always a fascinating challenge to put oneself into another's state of mind, to imagine what it is that they want to communicate. This exercise definitely impacts my own work, since I'm trying

to comprehend biology, the history of science, and other species in a similar fashion. I think if I have a goal, it comes from my own undergraduate education at the Studio for Interrelated Media (MassArt, Boston). I hope students are able to create vital and interesting communities, being supportive of each other rather than competitive. I hope they'll bring the talent of their imaginations to bear on their social structures. I think artists are marginalized in day to day life in the US, and that comes at a great loss for society in general.

**Are there areas of inquiry, in art and/or science, that particularly interest you at the moment?**

Well, we've been talking about "science", but to me, the interest is really in biology. I'm interested in how "life" is constantly redefined by the biological sciences, in part and in whole. And, while this makes me feel very anachronistic, I'm very

interested in how history—even a small event in the distant past—is so prominent in the present. So much of the past defines how the present world functions, despite all of the hype of "newness" around new fields in biotechnology. In a Kuhnian sense, we're rushing into new biological paradigms with some very basic questions unanswered and some very basic territories of investigation left in the dust. And we still have a very problematic relationship between capital, academic science, and what I'll call "problem solving" (such as ending world hunger). I'm very interested in interventionist art, for many reasons but to tackle this would be another discussion entirely.



**Gail Wight.** *Crossing (study)*, 2003. Courtesy of the artist