The commonly presented scene of a guest’s arrival, with a smiling host opening the door, signifies the happy anticipation of a social encounter. In her work *The Greeting Committee*, discussed in chapter 1, Ana Prvački focused on the politics and aesthetics of etiquette training in preparation for hosting. She was concerned with what she calls “social lubrication,” or what I call microcourtesies—the smiles, small talk, and gestures that enable belonging, helping to make others feel included and invited. In this chapter, I offer a deeper engagement with the emotional labor of hospitality. This emotional labor is supposed to be concealed under cheerfulness, as any anxiety about power relations between hosts and guests should be hidden by both parties. The work of hospitality is time-consuming and starts long before the guest arrives, with tasks such as setting the table, preparing one’s attire and the body to look “ready,” and identifying and finding the resources necessary for welcome. Another aspect of hospitality that takes time is waiting for the guest to arrive. My focus in this chapter is on one of the more challenging situations of hospitality: when the host is kept waiting. What does this situation mean for the power relations of hospitality?

This chapter unveils the anxieties of the emotional labor of hospitality, which I define here as the mental and physical effort it takes to comport oneself as a welcoming subject. When faced with prolonged waiting for a guest, the host has to decide how long to continue the effort of waiting. Where waiting is concerned, not all hosts and guests are judged equally. Unconditional hospitality sets the highest standard, as described in the Introduction: no matter what the conditions, such as the availability of time and resources, hospitality is provided to its fullest extent; the host is prepared to give away as much as is asked for, perhaps more than is asked for—everything the host has (including time and even self). As with other aspects of unconditional hospitality, waiting is not expected equally from all people. Some people’s time is considered more valuable than that of others. Some people (such as those in need of refuge, or approval, or another type of actual or social capital) are expected to spend more time in waiting than are others. What is it about waiting that makes one feel powerless?
Waiting is hard. As a part of life, waiting is looked down upon in societies and cultures that prioritize living as doing, making, moving, and action. Waiting, thus, is seen as one of the most passive moments in life, a sign of not just doing nothing but being nothing. Outside of waiting done as a responsibility in a position of paid employment, waiting is often involuntary, such as when we must wait to board a train that has not yet arrived, or wait for a traffic light to turn green before we can proceed to where we need to be. In such circumstances, we have to wait for something or someone, whether we want to or not.

There is one situation in which waiting is praised: waiting is seen as noble when it is connected to patience. In this case, waiting is viewed as virtuous because patience is supposed to be rewarded. Hence, the concept of delayed gratification associated with hospitality: if the guest turns out to be a god or a goddess in disguise, the reward can be eternal life, for example, as happens in many ancient stories of hospitality (as described in the Introduction). But even in its relation to patience, waiting itself is still negatively defined as an absence of action, because it is a time outside of and in between activities. If it is labor, it is of an emotional type, as it is unseen and unproductive. For the host, waiting starts when she has prepared everything and has nothing left to do. She is ready to open the door and welcome the guest, but the guest is not yet there. The waiting starts when hospitality is arrested in its progression.

Waiting is disempowering. That is why a good guest is not supposed to keep a host waiting. By making the host wait, the guest shows a disregard for the host’s time. When such disrespect is shown, waiting can be maddening. Time is life, with all its possibilities. Time is money. Time is past, present, and future. All of that is suspended in waiting. An expectation of being waited for, unconditionally, is an indication that one considers one’s own time and life to be more valuable than the time and lives of others. Waiting makes both hosts and guests acknowledge how much power they have (or do not have) when weighing their positions vis-à-vis others. When one is waiting for another, one considers various options. How long should one wait? How long is long enough? At what point is it acceptable to stop waiting and carry on with one’s life? There is no law about how long one should wait for another, whether a stranger or a family member. But there are cultural expectations, and they target certain groups. A good wife is supposed to wait for her husband forever, just as Penelope did; as related in Homer’s Odyssey, she was willing to wait for the missing Odysseus no matter
how long it took. Penelope’s waiting was rewarded, but such an outcome is never assured beforehand—that is why her waiting is praised.

Prolonged waiting is often seen as a sign of love and generosity (with one’s time), while a refusal to wait can be viewed as indicating selfishness or a lack of consideration. A defiant man does not wait even when he faces a more powerful force, as in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Experiencing the anguish of waiting, Beckett’s main character would rather commit suicide than experience the sense of a lack of control in his life.

Some of our cultural expectations about waiting have to do with gender. Typically, it is women who are expected to wait, and men who expect to be waited on. Can a woman, however, refuse to wait? Would that mean that she would stop being a perfect, welcoming hostess? And what would then happen to waiting, as we have known it? In this chapter, I explore the power relations in hospitality as they relate to waiting, focusing specifically on their gendered complexity. My guide to unpacking the gendered expectations of waiting, with their arrested welcome, is contemporary American feminist artist Faith Wilding, whose 1972 performance artwork *Waiting* has represented the disempowered act of waiting for many generations of artists.

In 2006, Wilding was asked to perform *Waiting* again. The occasion for considering *Waiting* anew was an important one: a large retrospective of feminist art. The artist was unsure whether a reenactment would mean anything for her at that time. During this period, Wilding was staying at my house in Pennsylvania, and I remember conversations we had about this request and her ambivalence. We discussed hospitality and our unease with that original performance. (Who waits like that any longer? we wondered. Why dwell on that kind of negative waiting today, when we have the ability to choose which guests to wait for?) As Wilding reconsidered what waiting had meant for her over the decades from 1972 to 2006, she decided that she wanted to undo waiting and make it a part of the larger context of hospitality and power relations (around the same time, Wilding also created collaborative projects to explore hosting in other ways). This chapter examines Wilding’s ideas about what kind of waiting she wanted to undo, and whether it is even possible to do this, taking into account the cultural expectations of passive women’s waiting. First, I discuss lessons from the 1972 performance, *Waiting*, and then I turn to the lessons of Wilding’s more recent performance artwork *Wait-With* (2007), created more than three decades later, which imagines a role for a new, more hospitable, and equitable kind of waiting.
Lessons from the 1972 Feminist Art Movement

The year was 1972. The location was Los Angeles. Faith Wilding’s performance of *Waiting* took place at Womanhouse, which was both a place and a project of the new and radical Feminist Art Program (FAP), started by Judy Chicago at Fresno State University in 1970. The FAP moved to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) the following year, headed by Judy Chicago together with Miriam Shapiro. The women artists enrolled in the FAP renovated a large abandoned house away from the main campus of CalArts and turned it into an experimental space for the creative exploration of women’s traditional roles. The field of feminist performance art was only beginning, and Womanhouse was one of the key sites of its development.

In a packed, spacious living room, guests were welcomed by an inviting brick fireplace, large windows, and colorful floor pillows. Wilding, in her performance character, rocked rhythmically back and forth, speaking into the void. “Waiting to be a pretty girl, waiting for him to notice me . . .” Her voice started softly. She stared blankly, fixated on her life of waiting. She bent lower and slower as time went on. Her voice was soft, not purposefully modulated. (Many historical accounts of this work would later describe her voice as monotonous.)

At first, this waiting seemed too passive to her audience. Why should she be waiting like this? Can’t she just stop waiting? There was no joy in her expectation of even potentially desirable events, such as “waiting for my breasts to develop” or “for him to notice me.” Even when she was waiting for something other than a man or a child (“to be myself,” “for fulfillment”), the possibility of waiting for another kind of achievement did not enter her mind.

It was the peak of the women’s liberation movement across campuses in the United States, including in California, where Wilding was performing. Women were refusing to wait much more openly than they had ever done before. Why were they refusing? No longer content to fit into the traditional white middle-class American housewife stereotype, Wilding and her collaborators at Womanhouse challenged such passive expectations. Judith Dancoff (and her team at Fresno) and Johanna Demetrakas (at Womanhouse in Los Angeles) filmed the participants, their processes, their work, and their lives. Thanks to their video documentation, there is an archive of this work.

Wilding’s *Waiting* character was dressed to represent domestic ideals of modesty and passivity, her clothing rendering her as invisible as possible. Wilding has spoken about her choice of attire—a light, cream-colored long-sleeved blouse
Faith Wilding

and a long wrap-style skirt with horizontal stripes of dark green and cream—
not as businesslike but rather as the “ordinary dress” of a person “you would
not give a second look to.” Her costume covered her entire body, in a manner
routinely described in the vocabulary of religious communes as “modest.”

For Wilding, who had grown up in a religious commune in Paraguay, this was
a comfortable, everyday choice. This was what desexualized (or oversexualized?)
female bodies were supposed to wear. Wilding characterized her big black shoes
as an “old woman’s.” Mira Schor, a well-known artist, critic, and theorist, and
one of the participants at Womanhouse, has referred to Wilding’s character as
“old,” too (see Plate 2). Wilding was only twenty-four years old at the time. Later
on, the body—especially the naked body—became a focal subject of feminist
art. The character in Waiting, however, hid her body. For Wilding’s audience in
California in 1972, the costume represented aging, passivity, and a compromise

FIGURE 2.1. Faith Wilding, performance still from Waiting (1972), in Womanhouse, a film by Johanna
Demetrakas, 1974 (47 minutes). Courtesy of Johanna Demetrakas.
with a culture that tells women how to dress and live. By portraying a dutiful waiting woman, Wilding chose to give such historical precedents of waiting a voice.

At the time when women were refusing to “wait” and were transforming their lives, the character in *Waiting* epitomized what they were refusing. She was a “good woman”: modestly dressed, sitting precariously on the edge of her chair inside a living room, dutifully waiting for anyone to come. She would be praised by someone like Emmanuel Levinas, one of the philosophers of hospitality, who described such “passivity beyond passivity” as essentially a feminine quality, enabling hospitality to be imagined and practiced. The ring on Wilding’s left hand, perhaps an engagement or wedding ring, added to the sense of her domestication and the propriety of her waiting. To add even more to that effect, Wilding kept her hands on her knees, parallel to each other in a “proper” schoolgirl position. Her hair was gathered into a “modest” bun, rather than left loose.

Near the end of the performance, Wilding’s character waited for “things to get better,” “a good bowel movement,” “the end of day,” and “the struggle to end.” Her words came out more and more slowly. Her voice was subdued and hopeless, and her breathing slowed, too, as her “end” approached. Wilding’s rocking slowed down as well, one motion at a time, almost to a standstill. This spoke to a rhythmic form in the work: unlike a metronome, which goes forever at a set speed, Wilding’s body used rhythm differently. We often attempt to ameliorate the monotony and boredom of waiting by doing something repetitious. When theatrical performances or movies depict nervous waiting, the audiences see characters rocking, fidgeting, stretching, tapping their feet, or looking around or up and down. Wilding did not do any of that; there was only waiting “for winter to end.” In one of the surviving videos of the performance, an audience member can be seen swallowing her quiet tears.

While Wilding was not deliberately trying to scare her audience by looking abandoned, lonely, or bitter, fear was one effect of her performance, as audience members could imagine their own lives in such hopeless waiting. Why was fear an effect? The nineteenth-century British poet Alfred Tennyson, in a poem reflecting on the wanderer Ulysses, expresses this fear of waiting when he presents an ideal of the good life, which involves vivid adventures and specifically not waiting. Those live fully who explore the world, who “move” “to seek a newer world,” because “How dull it is to pause, to make an end, / To rust unburnish’d, not to shine in use!” Wilding’s character rusted alive as she waited. Old age is
different for those who do not wait. As for Ulysses’s waiting wife, Tennyson does not reward her patience with respect or the suggestion that her life is also “good” because of this virtuous waiting. He suggests that Ulysses should leave again, rather than be content now at home “among these barren crags, / Match’d with an aged wife” who does nothing more than “hoard, and sleep, and feed.” So, according to Tennyson, being a good, waiting, loyal, welcoming wife means not having a good, well-lived life. There is a double standard here, one for men and another for women. It does not come to Tennyson’s mind that the wife is cognizant that she potentially wasted her life in waiting rather than living it fully by seeking a newer world.

Wilding’s performance questioned such existing traditions of hospitality, with their assumptions about when and for how long women are supposed to wait. Wilding presented a “rusted” life, but the questioning of it was not done by Wilding’s character. The actual work of questioning was done by the audience and by society at large. The performance was widely popular. Wilding performed Waiting twice a week for four weeks. The performances took place in the living room of Womanhouse, which accommodated from eighty to one hundred people. The room was always full with paying audiences, and there was always a waiting list to purchase tickets. Hundreds of people witnessed Wilding’s Waiting in person.

Waiting has since become a classic work of the feminist art movement in the United States. Amelia Jones, who has written extensively about feminist art performance, connects Waiting to “earlier manifestos such as Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique” (1963). She notes that Wilding produced a “feminist subject” who is “profoundly embodied, a universalized ‘woman’”—a universalized woman-in-waiting, stereotyped in the United States of the 1960s as white, cis-gender, and middle-class. But can one claim that Wilding’s woman, as a housewife especially, was universalized? Despite the ethnic diversity of the audiences at Womanhouse, as seen in video and photographic documentation, the persona that Wilding adopted in Waiting was also (un)recognized as a white woman who felt trapped in the post-Victorian, tradition-bound ideal of domestic and domesticated femininity imposed after the end of World War II. In 1969, the overwhelming majority (94 percent) of American stay-at-home housewives were, in fact, white.

At the same time, many African American women held jobs in the domestic sector, with too many still working as household “help” for white families.
This work, which often involved taking care of white children, also required the workers to perform the uncompensated (or undercompensated) emotional labor of welcoming, such as appearing cheerful and attentive, smiling, and showing care for members of the employing household, all while leaving their own children at home. The whiteness of Wilding’s housewife needs to be acknowledged in the context of the divergent experiences of white women, especially middle-class white women, and women of color, who often could not afford to stay at home and “wait” for their spouses and children.

Dorothy E. Roberts has summarized how race affected the gendered experiences of American women in this period, especially in relation to motherhood: “Patriarchy does not treat Black and white motherhood identically. In America, the image of the Black mother has always diverged from, and often contradicted, the image of the white mother.”8 African American women were also much less visible on television as models of housewives and mothers. Thus, Waiting, as a collective product, reflected the whiteness of the Feminist Art Program at CalArts.

In contrast to Wilding’s Waiting, a work by another famous feminist artist, Betye Saar, titled The Liberation of Aunt Jemima, unpacked the contradiction in the domestic status of white and African American women and its racist context. Saar’s work was created and exhibited in Los Angeles around the same time as Waiting. Art historian Lisa Farrington has discussed The Liberation of Aunt Jemima as a political statement made by Saar, who is African American, on behalf of African American women.9 The work was first exhibited at a Berkeley venue, the Rainbow Sign, adjacent to Black Panther territory in Oakland, California. If in Waiting whatever anger Wilding’s character felt, if any, was left unexpressed and internalized, in The Liberation of Aunt Jemima anger was on display through Saar’s artistic choices signifying rebellion. This work was intended to transform anger into action, as the artist has explained:

For many years, I had collected derogatory images: postcards, a cigar-box label, an ad for beans, Darkie toothpaste. I found a little Aunt Jemima mammy figure, a caricature of a black slave, like those later used to advertise pancakes. She had a broom in one hand and, on the other side, I gave her a rifle. In front of her, I placed a little postcard, of a mammy with a mulatto child, which is another way black women were exploited during slavery. I used the derogatory image to empower the black woman by making her a revolutionary, like she was rebelling against her past enslavement.10
The historical and geographical contexts of making, experiencing, and remembering *Waiting* are important. Wilding and Saar operated within parallel circles while working within the civil rights and feminist art movements at the same time.

Saar herself has provided a critical take on the racial divisions she observed in the feminist movement of the 1970s, even in progressive feminist art spaces such as Womanspace (which Wilding calls “a natural progression of Womanhouse”), reminding us that, despite the fact that she knew many white women artists at Womanspace and also was a native of Los Angeles, at the opening of her exhibition at Womanspace, “it was mainly black women and men who turned out for the activities.” “It was as if we were invisible again,” Saar has stated, noting that “the white women did not support it. I felt the separatism, even within the context of being in Womanspace.”11 With this context in mind, it is important to ask whether Wilding’s *Waiting* was passively complicit not only in the character’s being unwelcomed within the patriarchal order of hospitality but also in the conditions of women of color, especially domestic workers who could not afford to stay at home and did not have the option to follow the ideals of “good motherhood” and passive femininity, and who were all around Wilding when she performed in California. This kind of passive complicity damages any possibility of change as it drains personal and collective energy from efforts to build intersectional solidarities. And Faith Wilding the artist was certainly not complicit, as I show later in this chapter when I discuss her more recent take on waiting in a new performance that she wanted to “undo” *Waiting*.

Aside from the whiteness of Wilding’s character, what has also been omitted so far in discussions of *Waiting* is the assumption that this woman, as hostess and housewife, belonged to the middle class. In that regard, she was not simply a symbol of the middle-class housewife, as many critics have claimed. In fact, the character in *Waiting* was actually not very representative of a normalized image of the white middle-class American housewife, even adjusted for age. And as much as one can make an argument for this character as a representation of a housewife, she was certainly not that middle-class American, pearled and perky lady from the 1950s and 1960s television commercials. Wilding looked old rather than energetic and happy. She was successful in looking older than her twenty-four years because of her costume (including her shoes), her demeanor, her slouching figure, her hairstyle, her voice, and the words she spoke (see Plate 2). But the woman in *Waiting* looked more like a member of a religious
sect than like that cheerful person in the advertisements who packed her children’s school lunches, smiling and exuding happiness. If a housewife at all, she was of a lower economic stratum, neither urban nor suburban, and not young. Wilding, arguably, could have been performing her own mother, who had lived in a strictly gendered and regulated religious commune. Or the character may have been a woman the artist was afraid of being forced to become, one who would not have an opportunity to decide how to live her own life.

The connection between hospitality and female passivity is what makes *Waiting* so poignant. Judy Chicago, describing the origins of *Waiting*, recounts that Wilding initially wanted “to do a theater piece about female passivity.” Chicago traces the birth of *Waiting* to a conversation she and Wilding had with Paula Harper, an art historian who was instrumental in conceptualizing Womanhouse:

> Faith and I went to Paula Harper’s house for dinner. While there, we began talking about Faith’s piece and her ideas. Soon we were writing down all the things we had ever waited for in our lives, particularly in adolescence, when we “waited for boys to call, waited for boys to ask us to dance, waited for boys to take the initiative in just about everything, never daring to ask a boy out for fear of being thought unfeminine.” Faith took the long list home with her and worked on it, bringing it back to the performance workshop, where we went over it, working on the lines, the emotional tone, and the rhythm until the piece felt right to all of us. The fact that we all exchanged roles provided a fluid working situation and meant that everyone had a chance to express herself. Sometimes several women would try a role until we found the one who was best suited for it.

The meeting Chicago describes is connected to a series of discussions that Wilding and other FAP members had about preparations for her performance. The artist recollected during one of my conversations with her that her initial ideas about passivity and the role of waiting were fleshed out after a group of the members attended a performance of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in Los Angeles. Wilding had seen the play around 1964 when she was a student in the University of Iowa’s well-known program in comparative literature, and Beckett was a big influence on her, but her character in *Waiting* was very different from Beckett’s characters.

In *Waiting for Godot*, one of the most famous texts on waiting, waiting represents melancholy, where life could be framed as being-toward-death. Wilding
performed her character melancholically too, with cultural and religious references, but it is important to make a distinction between the melancholic, existential waiting of Beckett’s male protagonist and Wilding’s aesthetics of waiting. Both are negative, but they are not the same. Wilding’s work is a feminist critique. In Beckett’s *Rockaby*, written eight years after Wilding’s *Waiting*, another waiting is portrayed, that of a woman who will eventually “sit in her mother’s rocking chair where she will wait for death.”¹⁴ Beckett himself could not see a woman’s waiting as similar to a man’s.

Feminist scholars and critics have explored the differences between the circumstances and the meanings of man’s and woman’s waiting in Wilding and Beckett, and have noted how differently female characters are treated when it comes to the negative consequences of waiting. Lara Shalson asks what *Rockaby*, *Waiting*, and the role of waiting in theater as a genre can teach us about waiting in real life: “Could the history of theatre be a history of waiting?”¹⁵ Her question evokes the famous Shakespearean metaphor between life and theater: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.”¹⁶ Analyzing theater critic Michael Fried’s negative response to the process of waiting as “intolerable ‘endlessness,’” Shalson uses Wilding’s performance of *Waiting* to present “the theatrical being that waits” and who is “rendered in a specifically feminised position of dependency within patriarchy.”¹⁷ “Intolerable endlessness” is what “waiting for winter to end” and the rest of Wilding’s aesthetic (words, blouse, breathing, and so on) engenders.

Patriarchy, the power of men over women, is where Wilding’s idea of waiting as something imposed on a woman, rather than chosen by her, comes from. Art historian Arlene Raven emphasizes this difference between men’s and women’s expectations of waiting in her brilliant and complex reading of *Waiting*:

Wilding is the American female vernacular of existential modern “man.” Beckett’s singular figures waiting for God, an interpretation of human hope and futility based on Heidegger’s philosophy and Sartre’s fictional characters, somehow find courage and the will to be in a world devoid of ultimate external meaning. But the housewife has not freely and fully committed herself to her own life, nor has she been invited by the structure of her existence to do so.

The housewife is a full-time solitary worker who has not, in her own mind, stood alone. Sitting and waiting, she still feels “stood up.” And for the young women working on the Womanhouse project, even as they evoked her they
bade her good-bye as an image of the women they would become. Their work had already led them into far different realms than the woefully stricken traditional female model they portrayed.\textsuperscript{18}

Raven asserts here that Wilding’s performance of \textit{Waiting} was undoing the patriarchal waiting imposed on women but also highlighting the fact that this existential waiting that was expected of men and praised as profound and even courageous in the face of imminent death was not available to women. The angst of those whose lives have been made “futile” by a physical or semantic imposition of passivity should be written about, performed, dealt with. Thus, the time of waiting and the work of waiting became a form of passive resistance in Wilding’s performance.

Whether the audience saw Wilding’s character as a housewife or just as a person whose life was encapsulated by waiting, reactions to the performance depended on individual audience members’ personal and cultural histories. Because Wilding’s character was virtuous and she was wasting her life, she was seen as irredeemable. What makes waiting feel so wasteful is its quality of passing life by, as Beckett’s plays show and Fried’s criticism evokes. There are confusing and simultaneous cultural expectations around waiting. On the one hand, “good” hosts wait unconditionally, as long as it takes. On the other, waiting is defined as inaction, and even those who might have recognized their family members or themselves in Wilding’s character also struggled to feel empathy for her because they rejected her inaction: Why did she need to wait?

The reception and subsequent history of \textit{Waiting} cannot be understood separately from the work’s connection with Womanhouse. \textit{Waiting} was part of the first collective exhibition held at Womanhouse by the CalArts Feminist Art Program, which meant that Wilding performed for a receptive audience within a broad feminist context. Important figures in the new feminist movement, including Gloria Steinem and Linda Nochlin, traveled to see the Womanhouse exhibition. Popular magazines such as \textit{Ms.} and \textit{Time} covered the event, as did many other media outlets, and \textit{Ms.} published the text of \textit{Waiting} as a poem.

Wilding performed \textit{Waiting} for a one-hour special on Womanhouse that was broadcast on public television in Los Angeles in 1972. She was asked to wear makeup and change other elements of the performance for the show (a customary practice for the television station at the time). One of the big differences was that the performance was filmed in a bare TV studio with no audience.
This context was in stark contrast with the original performance space where Johanna Demetrakas recorded *Waiting* for her 1972 film *Womanhouse*. In addition, Wilding’s hair was done differently for the television production, in a ponytail, and the speed of her monologue was faster. Though this footage is lesser known, it successfully captures the impact of the original performance.

According to Wilding, many artists who identify as women and many who are part of the LGBTQ+ community have redone *Waiting* over past decades in galleries and museums, at colleges, and in their private homes. They have spoken to her about the personal and cultural impacts of the difficult emotional state that the process of waiting entails. Waiting is connected to the cultural and social framing of disempowerment and is tied to femininity. In societies and cultures that privilege masculinity, women and sexual minorities inhabit the vulnerability of waiting as yet another sign of disrespect, because they already feel disempowered in many other ways.

Some traditions of hospitality emphasize waiting as an important virtue, as in the “Holy Waiting” of Faith Wilding’s communal childhood hymns. Wilding’s *Waiting*, with its “passive beyond passivity” expectation of her character, lends itself well to traditional tropes regarding how one prepares for the arrival of another and the self-discipline that it takes to perform this kind of waiting in real life and in art. However, various readings of *Waiting* in art criticism and reenactments by contemporary artists have also shown how Wilding’s artwork, while looking traditional, does much more than simply affirm or even reenact those traditional tropes. Jane Blocker makes this point when she discusses *Waiting* in relation to Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse*. Blocker sees Wilding’s own performance as contributing to, critiquing, and updating Barthes’s male lover’s dialogue, with an effect that makes Blocker “question whether the feminization of the one who waits is as common or straightforward as Barthes seems to have thought it was.”

Was *Waiting*, then, clearing a path to a new, different kind of waiting? Was Wilding the feminist artist refusing to wait as Wilding the character did? In many mythological stories, women who have dutifully and loyally waited for their husbands (think of Penelope, who waited twenty years for Odysseus) are rewarded with happy reunions. But those are stories told, again and again, to make women wait by offering them the hope of a reward. By 1972, such endings after waiting no longer seemed so “happy,” just as waiting for “one’s man” to return no longer seemed like something that was rewarded. That might explain
why Wilding, when asked to perform *Waiting* again in 2006, decided to make a new work that would undo waiting.

**The Aesthetics and Politics of Waiting with Others**

Refusing to redo *Waiting*, Wilding decided to create a new performance that would reflect how differently she considered waiting in 2006 compared to 1972. The *Waiting* performance’s legacy weighed heavily on the artist, who has done anything but wait in her own life. Wilding, in search of new political and aesthetic strategies, and also prompted by our conversations during her stay at my house in 2006, shifted her thinking toward the topic of hospitality after she was invited to redo *Waiting*. For Wilding, hospitality was always related as much to politics as it was to ethics or aesthetics. Who is welcomed, when, and how; how hospitality is connected, or not, to feminist and other civil rights projects—these were very important topics to Wilding. More than any other artist discussed in this book, Wilding has always considered her art practice as intimately and profoundly tied to her lifelong political activism. She has taught me that when hospitality becomes resistance, its practice questions existing political power and its distribution. Wilding incorporated elements of our earlier conversations into the script of the new performance, which starts with references to her mother’s waiting and her desire to undo the original *Waiting* performance:

I. Waiting discussion with Irina: Nov. 24, 2006

In Waiting, I performed the woman who was trapped
I want to undo Waiting
I want to undo and redo Waiting

In 2007, the resulting performance, now called *Wait-With*, became part of *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, a traveling exhibition curated by Connie Butler and shown in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., New York, and Vancouver. The exhibition of 2007, just like Womanhouse in 1972, became very important in energizing a new wave of attention to feminist art and its impacts for the next decade. In this new performance, *Wait-With*, Wilding was no longer playing a woman who was waiting unconditionally and unhappily. The title indicated her intention, by moving away from a process of personal interior waiting—*waiting* as a verb, a gerund, with a sense of time in its present continuous tense—to the noun of *wait-with*, with its sense of collaboration and community, a period of
time with a beginning and an end. Wilding devised three different forms of *Wait-With* to rethink waiting.

The first form was a durational performance that occurred at Wilding’s home. Between early January and March 2007, Wilding hosted tea parties with people who had been important in her life, to honor and wait with them. That “waiting with” was marked by a pot of hot tea with scones and little tarts.

Wilding would sit—symbolically and metaphorically—with the person she had chosen to wait with on a given day, whether that person was alive or not. In her diary she would record the conversation and her reason for choosing the specific person she was waiting with that day. For example: “Today I am waiting with Roland Barthes.” This was followed by a quotation from Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse* about waiting for a lover who never comes. Wilding then sang an old German love song, which I remember her singing in my house as she was preparing in November 2006. To me the tonality of her voice at the time was both soothing and deeply meditative, in stark contrast with the previous *Waiting* performance. Wilding started to undo her previous waiting with invitations to those writers, philosophers, artists, activists, friends, and family members she felt she had waited *with*, rather than waited *for*. The power dynamic shifted, as “with” placed two potentially equal separate beings on the same plane, in contrast to one of them living “for” the purpose of the other’s needs.

After the conceptualization of the performance in the fall of 2006 and the “waiting with” tea sessions at home in the early months of 2007, Wilding presented the second form of *Wait-With* as part of the *WACK!* exhibition in Los Angeles. She did five performances in one day, with pauses of about twenty minutes between shows. Ten to twenty people were in the room each time she performed. Two persons stayed for all five performances. Wilding wore black clothing during these performances. She had recorded herself reading the script first, and she listened to the recording through headphones while she repeated the lines (since her memory was not as good as in 1972, she told me). The recording also helped her to keep the rhythm and the timing of the performance.

Compared to the old performance of *Waiting*, with its passive, monotonous quality, these performances had a rhythm that was meditative, like Wilding’s tea sessions at home. It was reminiscent of the people whom she had waited with—rather than for—as a choice, a new type of waiting. When the original *Waiting* happened in the beginning of the feminist art movement, it was seen as a break with the past, with that kind of enforced waiting, that passive, negative type of
waiting. This time, the politics of waiting had changed. It might be important to pause here to mark the moment of this significant shift in Wilding’s aesthetic, which also signifies her politics.

Wilding has been consistently involved in critical and political art throughout her entire life—in the subject matter of her drawings, performances, sculptural objects, and multiple collaborative works with other activist artists in the United States and internationally—and she has approached hospitality as connected to her political struggle for social, economic, and cultural change. In *Wait-With* she made politics and discussions of power into an important but often omitted element in conversations about hospitality and how and why one waits: “I/she/he/you/we wait-with those who resist violence and hatred.” Wilding stressed “waiting with” as

an act of political love.

Wait-with, an action,

Wait-with, a meditation,

Wait-with, open space between actions,

Wait-with, a space of resistance,

in this room,

in this moment.

Wait-with as our work.

“Waiting with,” for Wilding, is an act of “solidarity, and not waiting alone.” By directly referring to her politics of waiting as an act that is not domestic, Wilding questioned the old separation between women’s expected waiting, which was positioned as domestic at Womanhouse, and the public waiting of this new performance. *Wait-With* was resistance. Philosophers of hospitality such as Levinas and Derrida insist on separating the public and political realms from the gendered (as feminine-maternal) hospitality of home, of the domestic sphere. Wilding’s new waiting refused such separation and reclaimed hospitality as this liminal relation where the individual becomes public. If in *Waiting* the personal was claimed as political, in *Wait-With* the political was personal. The internal strength to wait would come from the community of Wilding’s political allies:

Wait-with the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, the Mothers of Juarez,

Wait-with Audre Lord, Angela Davis, and Black Ministers for Peace,
Wait-with Palestinian families in Gaza, Wait-with the Soldier’s Mothers of Russia,
Wait-with Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva, and farmers fighting expropriation, Wait-with the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan,
Wait-with the Women in Black,
the Center for Women War Victims in Zagreb, Wait-with the indigenous women of Chiapas, the Women on Waves,
Wait-with Iraq Veterans against the war, with Women’s Strike for Peace,
Wait-with Gush Shalom supporting Israeli soldiers refusing to fight in Palestine

Wilding reclaimed the public and the political realms of waiting as hospitality to strangers, to prisoners, to the oppressed. She affirmed hospitality as part of the nonviolent political struggle. She was also performing herself, her own life over the last decades.

Wilding named those whom she happily waited with (rather than waited for): her personal mentors (her mother, her father), her spiritual mentors (Samuel Beckett, Virginia Woolf), her political role models (Angela Davis, Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva), and her friends. “Waiting with” is part of an individual life well lived. The mutual existential choice of waiting with each other is a political choice. As a feminist activist artist, Wilding showed in this new performance that it is fine to wait only for those who value you and your time on this earth.

The artist’s personal history speaks not only to the childhood, private, domestic realm of waiting but also to the larger context of social and political realms. That history led to the Other entering her waiting, including in the third form of *Wait-With*, which involved the direct participation of the audience (unlike *Waiting* in 1972):

My father was a conscientious objector in England in World War II;
My mother emigrated with him to Paraguay,
She waited 25 years to see her mother again.
I waited with her. I wait-with you. Breathe
Listen Wait

At the end of this performance, the artist directly addressed the audience members, inviting them to respond by reflecting on who they were “waiting with” in
their own lives. She looked around, took deep breaths, and paused before her invitation to her audience to consider:

Wait-with, an act of political love.
Wait-with, an action,
Wait-with, a meditation,
Wait-with, open space between actions,
Wait-with, a space of resistance,
in this room,
in this moment.
Wait-with as our work.

performer takes off headphones and
wait-with the audience to become
participants in a dialogue.

This last sentence of the script refers to the headphones Wilding used in this performance, which caused her and her audience to experience the performance differently. It was an auditory performance as much as it was visual, and in addition to being more focused on hearing and listening than Waiting had been, it was longer. Further, in this performance the artist was present to her audience as Faith Wilding, and not performing the role of a waiting woman.

Dont Rhine, a sound artist and colleague of Wilding, was one of those two persons in Los Angeles who attended all five performances of Wait-With in one day during the WACK! exhibition. When I asked him about his response to the work and why he chose to stay for all five iterations, he specifically commented on the use of headphones, the passage of time, and the difference between Wilding’s 1972 and 2007 performances:

The usual argument would be that by responding to the audio recording, like a mechanical amplification, the performer could no longer respond to the conditions of the real-time event. Those with a dogma around “presence” would say that such a maneuver would marginalize the audience as if the performer was speaking past them. . . . My attention to the unique composition of each sitting was amplified by the bio-mechanical reproduction of the text. Faith had something to share with us. It was important enough to be committed to tape and recited in precise fidelity to the text, the tone, the pacing, and the musical cadence of the voice. . . . It was too complex and too urgent to be handled casu-
ally or even conditionally. It was, in a sense, an unconditional performance. This fascinates me as it flies in the face of liberal morality about authenticity or sincerity. The aleatory aspects of performance were not in Faith’s recitation, but in the composition of audience members; enacting a re-composition of relationships across the stratum of feminist histories. And silences.²¹

Here Rhine provides a very generous reading that captures Wilding’s challenge to herself and her audience of articulating the complex connection between the internal and external conditions of wait-with, and how Wilding showed that not all waiting is disempowering. She demonstrated how waiting can be joyful in its anticipation when those who wait are equal—politically, economically, socially, and culturally—to those whom they wait for.

What Rhine did was to listen and notice, to take time to recognize the differences in Wilding and in the audience compared to 1972. Had all political problems been solved? Certainly, they had not. But a lot had been achieved, and the struggle needed to be acknowledged, the life of struggle and activism that Wilding had led as a feminist artist and political activist.

This acknowledgment of *Wait-With’s* moment in time—specifically, in Wilding’s own lifetime—has not been received in the same generous vein by all members of Wilding’s feminist community. In Los Angeles, the first time this performance took place, the response from the audience generally followed the artist’s mood. In 2009, when she performed it in Berlin, the reaction was different. For some of those who experienced her 1972 performance, this new performance did not have the same solitary power of anger and angst. One could argue that the shift to a focus on hospitality in *Wait-With* diminished the political power of *Waiting*. We can see in the video documentation of the 2009 performance in Berlin that the audience members disagreed about the impact of *Wait-With* compared to the 1972 work. One audience member said that she missed the “old performance” and started rocking on her chair, chanting, “Waiting . . . Waiting . . .” However, not everyone missed that iconic form. Another person said that the old performance was never about the person Faith Wilding; rather, her character was a collective product of many voices in the Feminist Art Program. The comparison between the two works was intensified by the fact that the Berlin audience viewed a filmed performance of *Waiting* before Wilding’s *Wait-With* performance. The screen was there, with the ghost of the original work haunting the current anticipation of Wilding’s new ideas about waiting with others.
In *Wait-With*, Wilding was at peace with waiting, no longer performing passivity with downcast eyes and hands on her knees. It was her own waiting now, not imposed on her against her will by cultural and social norms. And she looked more “contemporary” in this performance than she did at twenty-four when she performed *Waiting*. Members of the audience engaged with Wilding in a conversation at the end of the performance; their experience did not include an emotional jolt of the kind many felt when they attended a performance of *Waiting*. *Wait-With* audience members were asked to think about who they wait with, who inspires their contemplative waiting, the “good” waiting that can happen when one is confident in one’s self-worth.

This later performance was of a different perceptual register, quieter, more contemplative, and introverted, corresponding to the thirty-five years that had passed and the changes that had occurred since 1972 in Wilding’s own life and successful career. But it was not apolitical—the politics of *Wait-With* were found in Wilding’s welcome of specific persons, from her mother, father, and favorite writers to leaders of liberation movements around the world. Here, Wilding represented herself. No longer the character of the housewife, as she was in *Waiting*,

she was still a hostess, but her choice of waiting was just one more moment in her otherwise full and self-directed life. One could call her “wait-with” a privilege too, the privilege of a white middle-class woman who chooses to wait. But this new privilege was fought for, hard-won through self-empowerment and a life of activism and art making. And now Wilding shared this experience of arrival back to her waiting self with others, who could learn from her own waiting.

Instead of the rhythmic intensity of the original Waiting, the later performance was punctuated by songs, monologues, and conversations with the audience, all of which were more in line with contemporary art performances. Did that mean that we, as a culture, had moved on too, to a better place as far as waiting is concerned? Yes and no. Yes, because Wilding herself did not live her life in the complicit white woman’s Waiting of 1972, which was challenged by Betye Saar’s work The Liberation of Aunt Jemima, as discussed above. When curator Connie Butler brought the two works together for the WACK! exhibition in 2007, Angela Davis came to speak about Saar’s work, just as Wilding spoke about her lifelong waiting-with progressive political leaders, including Davis. Saar has commented about the inclusion of her work in the show and what Davis said: “When my work was included in the exhibition ‘WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution,’ at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007, the activist and academic Angela Davis gave a talk in which she said the black women’s movement started with my work The Liberation of Aunt Jemima. That was a real thrill.”22 The fact that after decades, Waiting, Wait-With, and The Liberation of Aunt Jemima were all part of the same retrospective of feminist art and feminist revolution, within the context of the American civil rights movement, signifies how these works have always been joined at the hip. Although their approaches to domesticity are radically different, they share the goal of liberation. But if Wilding herself has moved on to Wait-With, to other “waitings” that refuse to wait any longer and call for transformation of individual anger into collective power against patriarchy and white supremacy, the challenge of her original Waiting remains. The patriarchy’s hold on the lives and minds of women still tells them that passive waiting is what makes them “feminine” and what enables others to feel welcomed at home and in the world.

In this sense, no, in many cases, as a culture, we have not moved to a better place as far as Wilding’s Waiting is concerned. As an experiment, I showed the video of Wilding’s Waiting performance to a class of my art students in Pennsylvania. After watching, many became angry and cried. This was in 2011.
They said they recognized this waiting woman, and it hurt to watch her performance. Then I heard from Wilding that about once a week she gets e-mails from artists around the world who ask her permission to perform *Waiting*, as it speaks to them. Despite her own progression to a space of “waiting with” rather than “waiting for,” for many people of various genders and sexualities around the world, the kind of waiting that inspired the original *Waiting* has not ended, and this needs to be acknowledged.

One waiting does not erase another. And *Wait-With* was not about moving on, leaving behind those who are still waiting. This work was more about acknowledging various types of waiting, for Wilding and her audience, and their relation to vulnerability and power. Hospitality traditions expect women to spend their lives in waiting. That is why my students are not alone in still recognizing that woman from 1972. A poem titled “The Woman Waits,” by Anna Riveloté, the pen name of a contemporary poet and writer from Novosibirsk, Russia, went viral on the Russian Internet in 2010 when many people, most of whom self-identified as women, felt the poem spoke directly to their souls and how they felt about their lives. In the poem, Riveloté suggests that if the woman stops waiting for the man, the whole world will break like a mirror into a million pieces. Her waiting is painful and heartbreaking but also dutiful, novel, and hopeful.23

This poem is not complicated: the woman waits because if she does not, the world will break down. It is her responsibility, the duty she fulfills (notice the continuing heteronormativity here, explored further in the next chapter). At the same time, between the lines of “The Woman Waits,” in the original Russian, I can discern a set of mixed emotions about waiting. There is the pride of a job well done, a sense of moral superiority. The woman becomes important in her seemingly useless waiting, because her waiting keeps the world together. But there is also anger, together with the threat of refusal, signifying her choice to wait. Although the woman seems angry (at the man who “does not rush to see her”), she forces herself not to question her situation of waiting, because, like the woman in Wilding’s *Waiting*, she is a “good woman.” Waiting is hard, especially if it makes one feel disempowered and disrespected. And my students’ reactions in 2011 to Wilding’s performance in Los Angeles in 1972 and the viral success of Riveloté’s poem in the Russian blogosphere in 2010 show that as waiting has stayed in the zeitgeist of a woman’s life, the inequality of who waits and how continues.
The poem presents the refusal to wait as leading to the end of the world. What world? A world in which a woman’s waiting keeps a community together. The woman provides unconditional hospitality by waiting unconditionally, waiting whether the one she waits for arrives or not. Someone needs to be there, in the world, at home, to take responsibility for feeding, sheltering, and caring for others. Riveloté’s poem speaks directly to key philosophers of hospitality, providing affirmation of their traditional association of women with passivity. In the *Waiting* performance and in “The Woman Waits,” a woman’s voice confirms the connection of welcome between people and nations to the first hospitality of the home, of being welcomed by the femininity of the house (a mother, a wife, a concubine). The woman does not ask for any recognition or thanks for her unconditional waiting. It is others who ask something on her behalf: the philosophers, Riveloté, the audience of Faith Wilding’s *Waiting*. Can the woman choose not to wait? Should she?

Riveloté uses the technique of an authorial voice to separate herself from her character in the poem. When Wilding said, “Waiting for him to notice me . . . ,” she chose to become her character, making the audience transfer their feelings about her character onto her (sometimes passersby at the galleries where she performed, seeing her sitting and chanting, worried that she was mentally ill and needed help). Riveloté, speaking on behalf of the woman who waits, speaks directly to God, asking him to reward the woman for her unconditional waiting.

Unlike philosophers, who ask only for cultural rewards and recognition of woman’s endless waiting as representative of her everlasting welcome, Riveloté, the author, the woman, asks (begs) for something rather concrete from God for the woman who waits: wings. These wings are to be God’s gift “for her waiting for him.” Why wings? What would wings do for her if she is waiting indefinitely, unconditionally, forever? After all, to be called an angel—for waiting—is not the same as having the ability to fly like an angel. Perhaps wings are about hope that one day *Waiting* will become *Wait-With*. In her memoir about her childhood in a harem in Fez in the mid-twentieth century, Moroccan thinker and feminist scholar Fatima Mernissi says this about the wings:

In a harem, you don’t necessarily ask questions to get answers. You ask questions just to understand what is happening to you. Roaming freely in the streets was every woman’s dream. Aunt Habiba’s most popular tale, which she narrated on special occasions only, was about “The Woman with Wings,” who
could fly away from the courtyard whenever she wanted to. Every time Aunt Habiba told that story, the women in the courtyard would tuck their caftans into their belts, and dance away with their arms spread wide as if they were about to fly. Cousin Chama, who was seventeen, had me confused for years, because she managed to convince me that all women had invisible wings, and that mine would develop too, when I was older.24

Wings here are a metaphor for freedom, as they often are in literature, mythology, and art. To clip someone’s wings is to arrest her flight, to consign her to a life without the freedom to go and be where she pleases. What are those wings? In Mernissi’s book, they are education and freedom of movement. Mernissi certainly developed wings through her own lifetime of work as a feminist scholar and activist in Morocco. It is not clear, however, what the wings are for in Riveloté’s poem. Would they give the waiting woman the strength she needs to continue waiting and saving the world? This sounds rather cruel, that she would have wings, be empowered with even more capacity to refuse waiting by flying away, and yet still must stay and wait “for him.”

The poem asks a question about the refusal to wait and the consequences of such a decision. Wilding and Riveloté have very different answers, however, to the problem of waiting. *Wait-With* was performed by an artist who had grown her own wings, in solidarity with others who had fought for women’s rights to choose how and whom to wait for, and flown all over the world, to the stars, and back to the earth. She waited with her friends from 1972, her collaborators at Womanhouse. But Wilding’s *Wait-With* was not about self-help. It was a testimony to a collective refusal. Having dealt head-on with violent and violating waiting, the artist had moved on. She was self-assured, confident, and calm. She was centered—even, one could argue, self-centered—and she was fine with putting herself first.

Carol Ann Duffy’s poem “Penelope,” which may be read as a kind of response to the work by Tennyson quoted earlier in this chapter, adds support to Wilding’s choices in *Wait-With* through its take on ancient hospitality expectations. In Duffy’s vision, the waiting Penelope is imagining and embroidering a new world for herself—“I was picking out / the smile of a woman at the centre / of this world, self-contained, absorbed, content, / most certainly not waiting”—when she hears her returning husband’s steps.25 To paraphrase Tennyson, Duffy’s Penelope is creating a newer world of her own making. What does Penelope do when she
hears Ulysses/Odysseus return? What is she to do? Duffy opens up alternatives in her new ending, or non-ending, of this ancient story. Her Penelope, rather than running out to greet the arrival of her husband, continues to work on her imaginary world of a woman who refused to wait. Penelope does this defiantly and gently at the same time, with a thread becoming a weapon she uses to create a new story for her own life. Duffy writes her own vision, an alternative to Homer’s and Tennyson’s, leaving us with an opening to other endings of this story.

What is this new world that Duffy’s Penelope creates? In this new world, unconditional hospitality is no longer a resignation to one’s own fate of being the perfect hostess who experiences her life as suspended in waiting, idealized in the ancient stories of hospitality or their contemporary counterparts, such as Riveloté’s “The Woman Waits.” Perhaps Duffy’s new Penelope is Faith Wilding in Wait-With, who “undoes” the sacrificial hospitality of her first Waiting. The path to this undoing is solidarity. The result is pleasure in waiting as a meditation on the enjoyment of having lived well, unapologetically self-contained, absorbed, content. If sacrifice of the woman is no longer hospitality’s formula, the door is opened.
This page intentionally left blank