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Statement – *Speak to Me*

The birth of our country revolved, in part, around freedom of religion, which in turn wove an often-explosive tale concerning cultural interest in spiritualism. As we know, the tug-of-war between spiritualists with their ability or interest to “speak to the beyond” conflicted with early Puritan beliefs, resulting in well-known tragedies such as the Salem Witch trials. Those that challenged or confused the religious doctrine of the time were most often women. Years later, Victorian America (1837-1901) produced cases of women who were identified as psychic mediums and spiritualists who aligned themselves with both the rights of women as well as people of color. Many attained a modicum of celebrity in doing so such as the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York in 1848 to the great Victoria Woodhull, a somewhat ignored leader in the women’s suffrage movement who was not only one the first woman-owner of a Wall Street brokerage firm but also declared herself the first woman candidate for the Presidency in 1872.

This work does not share the biography of such individuals but instead explores the embodiment of power attained by women identified as spiritualists. In a time where women had little power or voice beyond the confines of the domestic space, those identified as being able to communicate with those that have “passed on” certainly rocked the boat regarding the identity of women as the quiet, unassuming caregiver, domestic servant and sexual object. This point of exchange is what interests me - the temporary slip from one role guided by social norms to one of spectacular interest and importance.

In the table installation, the unnamed medium is the point of power and those that seek her counsel and are involved in the exchange of communication are set around her. Scenes are presented and secrets exchanged within the unworldly realm as told through our guide through the use of an “automatic writing” device whereby the medium is blindfolded and messages revealed through Spiritual sources via pencil to paper. Though intended to be interactive, currently, the message exists as a quote from Susan B. Anthony from 1894 which still rings true, “No self-respecting woman should wish or work for the success of a party that ignores her sex.”

Recently, President Obama cited the need for equal pay for women for equal work and it struck me how problematic and almost unnoticed it seems that this challenge continues to exist in 2012. Today, young women are asked to self-identify at an earlier age than ever before. With growing societal acceptance of sexual identities beyond heterosexuality, increased choice concerning reproductive rights to the post-Feminist ideal of the “working mother”, women have the ability to identify their goals and social, moral and political beliefs within a much broader spectrum of social understanding. With the ever-present challenges still facing inequality for women in our country, it is here I take a moment to remember that a simple spiritualist could challenge the male-dominated teachings of religious and social beliefs.

Though many of these psychic guides were later identified or confessed to be scam-artists and purveyors of the hoax, their ability to find a way to be “heard” and to achieve the spectacular is one that I revere. The same model brings to mind the contemporary power of single voice to incite change through a blog or those organizing for political change on a college campus. Though not to advocate the use of “the hoax”, an element already well-embedded into our culture through media and advertising, there may be some that are interested in finding a little support “from the beyond” so I invite them to sit down and give it a shot this evening.

Historical Information

Woman suffrage in the United States was achieved gradually, at state and local levels, during the 19th century and early 20th century, culminating in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which provided: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

The Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 formulated the demand for women's suffrage in the United States of America and after the American Civil War (1861–1865) agitation for the cause became more prominent.

In 1869 the proposed Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which gave the vote to black men, caused controversy as women's suffrage campaigners such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton refused to endorse the amendment, as it did not give the vote to women.

Others, such as Lucy Stone and Julia Ward Howe however argued that if black men were enfranchised, women would achieve their goal. The conflict caused two organizations to emerge, the National Woman Suffrage Association, which campaigned for women's suffrage at a federal level as well as for married women to be given property rights, and the American Woman Suffrage Association, which aimed to secure women's suffrage through state legislation.[2]

Victoria Claflin Woodhull, later Victoria Woodhull Martin, (September 23, 1838 – June 9, 1927) was an American leader of the woman's suffrage movement.

Woodhull was an advocate of free love. She and her sister were the first women to operate a brokerage in Wall Street. She was the first woman to start a weekly newspaper; an activist for women's rights and labor reforms. In 1872, she was the first woman candidate for President of the United States.

Woodhull went from rags to riches twice, her first fortune being made on the road as a highly successful magnetic healer before she joined the spiritualist movement in the 1870s. While authorship of many of her articles is disputed (many of her speeches on these topics were collaborations between Woodhull, her backers and her second husband Colonel James Blood[citation needed]), her role as a representative of these movements was powerful. Together with her sister, she was the first woman to operate a brokerage firm in Wall Street, and they were the first women to found a newspaper, Woodhull & Claflin's Weekly.

At her peak of political activity in the early 1870s, Woodhull is best known as the first woman candidate for the United States presidency, which she ran for in 1872 from the Equal Rights Party, supporting women's suffrage and equal rights. Her arrest on obscenity charges a few days before the election, for publishing an account of the alleged adulterous affair between the prominent minister, Henry Ward Beecher, and Elizabeth Tilton, added to the sensational coverage of her candidacy. She did not receive any electoral votes, and there is conflicting evidence about popular votes.

Many of the reforms and ideals, which Woodhull espoused for the working class, against what she saw as the corrupt capitalist elite, were extremely controversial in her time. Generations later many of these reforms have been implemented and are now taken for granted. Other of her ideas and suggested reforms are still debated today.

Reform-movement links of Spiritualism

Spiritualists often set March 31, 1848, as the beginning of their movement. On that date, Kate and Margaret Fox, of Hydesville, New York, reported that they had made contact with the spirit of a murdered peddler. What made this an extraordinary event was that the spirit communicated through rapping noises, audible to onlookers. The evidence of the senses appealed to practically minded Americans, and the Fox sisters became a sensation. However, the Fox Sisters later admitted that this "contact" with the spirit was a hoax.[1][2]

Amy and Isaac Post, Hicksite Quakers from Rochester, New York, had long been acquainted with the Fox family, and took the two girls into their home in the late spring of 1848. Immediately convinced of the genuineness of the sisters' communications, they became early converts and introduced the young mediums to their circle of radical Quaker friends.

It therefore came about that many of the early participants in Spiritualism were radical Quakers and others involved in the reforming movement of the mid-nineteenth century. These reformers were uncomfortable with established churches, because they did little to fight slavery and even less to advance the cause of women's rights.[2]

Women were particularly attracted to the movement, because it gave them important roles as mediums and trance lecturers. In fact, Spiritualism provided one of the first forums in which American women could address mixed public audiences.[2]

The most popular trance lecturer prior to the American Civil War was Cora L. V. Scott (1840–1923). Young and beautiful, her appearance on stage fascinated men. Her audiences were struck by the contrast between her physical girlishness and the eloquence with which she spoke of spiritual matters, and found in that contrast support for the notion that spirits were speaking through her. Cora married four times, and on each occasion adopted her husband's last name. During her period of greatest activity, she was known as Cora Hatch.[2]

Another famous woman spiritualist was Achsa W. Sprague, who was born November 17, 1827, in Plymouth Notch, Vermont. At the age of 20, she became ill with rheumatic fever and credited her eventual recovery to intercession by spirits. An extremely popular trance lecturer, she traveled about the United States until her death in 1861. Sprague was an abolitionist and an advocate of women's rights.[2]

Yet another prominent spiritualist and trance medium prior to the Civil War was Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875), of mixed race, who also played a part in the Abolition movement.[12] Nevertheless, many abolitionists and reformers held themselves aloof from the movement; among the skeptics was the eloquent ex-slave, Frederick Douglass.[13]