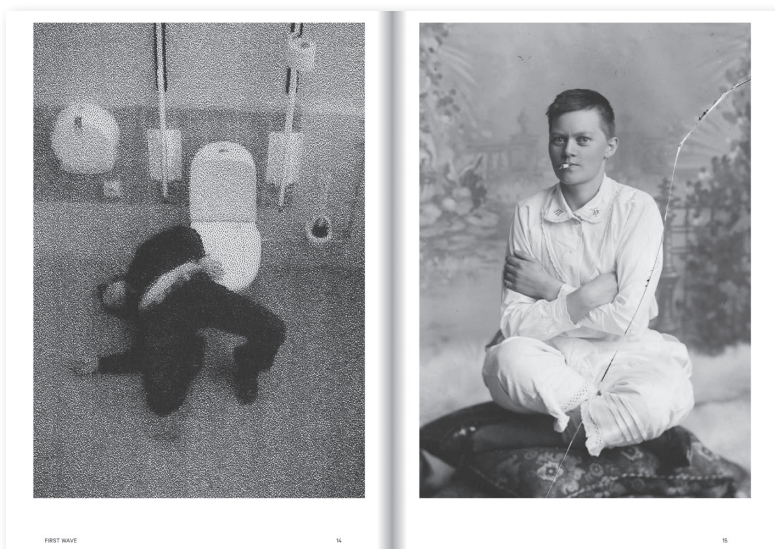


MATHIAS DANBOLT

## Breaking the Waves

Tuning into Queer History with FRANK's *Voluspå*



Spread from FRANK's *Voluspå*, with Klara Lidén *Untitled (Handicap)* (2007), dias print, courtesy of the artist, and Marie Høeg, *Untitled* (around 1895 to 1903), photograph printed from glass negatives, courtesy of Preus Museum, Horten. Copyright FRANK.

**IN ONE OF** the first double-spreads in the artist book *Voluspå* (FRANK 2013), by the Norwegian queer feminist art platform FRANK, run by Liv Bugge and Sille Storihle,<sup>1</sup> two photographs are printed side by side: the one on the left is a grainy black and white photo taken by what appears as to be a surveillance camera, and shows the contorted body of a

person collapsing in a public accessible toilet. Although the person still has her ass half-placed on the toilet seat, the head is firmly planted on the floor. The bars of the accessible toilet are up, like raised arms in a gesture of surrender, unable to support the body falling to the ground. The figure's face is indistinguishable, lost to the grainy image that seems to be disintegrating – not unlike the person in the picture.

The photograph on the right, on the other hand, is a razor-sharp portrait taken in a traditional photography studio. In front of a painted romantic backdrop, a person dressed in white shirt, lace trimmed pants and pointed black patent leather shoes sits in lotus position on a cushion with crossed arms, looking directly into the camera. A diagonal line crosses the surface of the image, indicating that the photograph is printed from a broken glass negative. If the crack gives the photograph a patina of old age, the defiant stare and direct posture of the person gazing out at us gives the photograph a sense of contemporaneity.

The double-spread is one of a series in the chapter “First Wave” in *Voluspå*, where FRANK has paired images from the Swedish contemporary artist Klara Lidén's *Untitled (Handicap)* (2007) with portraits of and by the Norwegian commercial photographer and suffragette Marie Høeg (1866–1949), taken sometime between 1895 and 1903. FRANK also staged an encounter between these artists in the exhibition *Marie Høeg Meets Klara Lidén*, first presented at SKMU, Sørlandets Kunstmuseum in Kristiansand in 2013. How to read this meeting between Høeg and Lidén's work? Should we read it as a narrative of succession, where the pairing of imagery by these figures working with over a century in-between each other suggest the difference between past and present expressions of queerness? In that case, should we read the pairing as one that could indicate a narrative of decline – from clarity to obscurity, from strength to death? Or does the ambiguity and playfulness confounding the stagings of bodies in both Høeg and Lidén's pictures not prevent any quick fix interpretations of the relationship between these figures? Instead of approaching the encounter in search of narrative, we might instead read the pairing as a constellation that instead of inviting

historical comparisons calls us to consider the coexistence of different forms of queer and feminist visibilities, expressions, and conceptualizations across time.

### **How to Memorialize a Movement That Is Not Dead**

FRANK's book and exhibition with Lidén and Høeg's work were initially made in response to the 2013 centenary celebration of the suffragettes' fight for the right to vote in parliamentary elections in Norway. The official homepage of the Norwegian state-sponsored anniversary, "Women's Suffrage Centenary 1913–2013," described the event in the following terms:

Norway was the first independent country in the world to introduce universal suffrage, with women and men enjoying equal democratic rights. The Government wants Norway to celebrate this centenary locally, nationally and internationally.<sup>2</sup>

And so it did, with numerous art exhibitions, seminars, and international conferences – kicking off the series of tributes to the history of feminism that have taken place in conjunction with the centenary celebrations of women's suffrage in Denmark and Iceland in 2015.

In her inaugural speech at the international conference *Women, Power and Politics: The Road to Sustainable Democracy*, held in Oslo in November 2013, the former Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland (2014, 13), explained that the anniversary was intended to "celebrat[e] progress and requesting change for all those women left behind, in large parts of our world." Brundtland's speech underscored the chronopolitical and geopolitical framing of the official anniversary founded on an understanding of how "our" progress could and should inspire women in the rest of the world "lagging behind" to follow in "our" footsteps. In short, the centenary was structured around a narrative of progress that worked to produce Norway as an exceptional country, in front of everyone else in terms of equality, and thus a normative model to follow for others. This rhetoric of Norwegian exceptionalism did not

only work to strengthen already well-established forms of what Nazila Kivi (2015) has termed “femi-nationalism” in Norway, where feminist rhetoric is used to buttress nationalist politics and self-understandings in ways that figures other geographies and populations as always already “backwards.” The framing of the anniversary also seemed to suggest that feminism is nothing but history in Norway, and that the job ahead is to export the Norwegian model of feminist equality to so-called less developed countries.

While there are obviously many good reasons to commemorate the courage of the suffragettes of the so-called “first wave” feminists, how is one to participate in a celebration that is organized around a remarkably paternalistic and self-congratulatory model of feminism that reproduces some of the most well known imperialist understandings of historical progress? And what stories have to be forgotten in order for this happy narrative of Norwegian exceptionalism to work?

FRANK responded to the celebratory historicizing of feminism in Norway with a book and exhibition that scrutinize the work that histories and narratives do in and to the political present. *Voluspå*, and the exhibition *Marie Høeg Meets Klara Lidén*, display an interest in putting pressure on the ways in which history not only *represents* but also *shapes*, *produces*, and *takes part in* the production of the past as much as the present. The book brings together a wide selection of artworks, photographs, texts, and material from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until today – materials that are organized in three chapters entitled after the three historical “waves” of feminist activism and politics. But the waves that structure the material in *Voluspå* disturb more than they create an order or narrative coherence to the queer feminist histories invoked in the book. Each of the book’s chapters present alternative visual and textual genealogies that break out of the established narratives of political, national, and artistic histories in Norway and beyond. The visual constellations place historical images and contemporary artworks in proximity of each other with often surprising and confusing effects.

The investment in examining how queer and feminist ideas, or ideas of queerness and feminism, work in and across time is emphasized by

the artwork used on the cover of *Voluspå*. The facsimile from Swedish contemporary artist Kajsa Dahlberg's (2006) artist book *A Room of One's Own/A Thousand Libraries* shows two spreads from a Swedish translation of Virginia Woolf's classic *A Room of One's Own*, where Dahlberg has compiled and retraced all the underlined passages and notes that readers have made in every single library copy that exists of the book in Sweden. Dahlberg's palimpsestic focus on the messy politics of trace and tracing of feminist ideas, continue into FRANK's chapters on feminist waves in *Voluspå*. In addition to the meeting between Klara Lidén and Marie Høeg's work, the "First Wave" section also includes a conversation between FRANK and the Swedish queer feminist architect Katarina Bonnevier about feminist history of architecture and the current potential for transforming the buildings and walls that condition social and bodily movement. The chapter "Second Wave," brings together a photo from the International Women's Day in Oslo in 1977, a painting by the Norwegian contemporary artist Vanessa Baird, and a conversation between FRANK and the former performance artist and now queer feminist scholar Wenche Mühleisen on how her sex-positive performances in the 1970s and 1980s challenged dominant views pertaining gender and sexuality in Nordic feminism. In the "Third Wave," the Norwegian feminist artist Sidsel Paasche's work *Burnt Match* (1966) stands side by side with similar sculptures of burnt matches conceived later by artists Claes Oldenburg and Henrik Olesen. FRANK also included a conversation with me in this "third wave"-chapter of the book. The interview touched upon the politics of inspiration, appropriation, and absent recognition implied in FRANK's homage to Paasche's sculpture *Burnt Match*, while addressing the current conditions for queer and anti-racist thinking in Norway, with emphasis on the racist effects of Nordic ideologies of colorblindness.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than presenting a story of progress that leads us through the feminist historical waves from the past to the present, *Voluspå* delivers a set of temporal and historical collisions. Before discussing what I see as the potential political effects of these collisions in more detail, by zoom-

ing in on the constellation of the photographs by Marie Høeg and Klara Lidén that I started out with, some words on the history of the waves in feminist history writing might be necessary.

### **Waves of Transmission**

The wave metaphor has, of course, been a central part of the “political grammar” of feminist story telling in the West over the last many decades.<sup>4</sup> The organization of the history of feminism as a series of waves has been a central to the self-understanding of the international women’s movement, particularly from the 1960s and 1970s and onwards. Framing the feminist fight against patriarchal structures from the late 1960s and onwards as a “second wave” of feminism, both helped to establish a historical connection to the “first wave” of feminist suffragettes at the turn of the century, while also marking the novelty of the new women’s movement that were ready to hit the shores of patriarchy. Harboring elements of tradition and newness, continuity and rupture, repetition and progression, the figure of the wave has been used as a political orienting device in feminist story telling to represent and connect specific struggles and problems to specific periods and generations. The different “waves” have thus been used as central figures of identification as well as dis-identification for both older and younger feminists.<sup>5</sup> Whether the wave metaphor is used to tell stories of progress or of decline in feminist history, the figure of the wave tends to presuppose an linear and unified model of history, and as such, it risks cover up and confuse more than it clarifies the movements of and within feminisms. The tendency to lock certain feminist fights to certain decades and generations have made it difficult to discuss and analyze how feminist fights against injustice have been overlapping and running parallel to each other across time. The widespread presumption that issues of racism and race first came to the forefront in “third wave”-feminism, for instance, risks neglecting and marginalizing the crucial legacy of black feminists, black lesbian feminists, Chicana feminists, and other important groups in the women’s movement, developed both before and in the 1960s and 1970s. And when Norway and Denmark celebrate the “first wave” suffragettes,

people tend to forget that the fight for the right to vote remains an urgent political question in our own political context today, as the new austere racist asylum- and immigration laws that have been, and are on the verge of being, implemented across the Nordic countries, keep complicating the process of gaining proper citizenship, and thus the right to vote in national elections. When questions of the universal right to vote gets celebrated as a feminist victory that was gained once and for all a century ago, what does this say about the presumed subject of feminism in the Nordic countries today? Is it not a queer feminist issue that 350.000 Danish residents over 18 years old did not have the right to vote in the last election due to lacking citizenship (Dahlin 2015)? In short, telling feminist stories through successive waves risks preventing us from attending to how often “historicized” issues, such as the right to vote, remain relevant and urgent across conceptual, temporal, and geographical boundaries.

While it could be tempting to throw the wave metaphor into the sea of oblivion, another option could be to follow Ednie Kaeh Garrison’s (2005) recent attempt of recalibrating the figuration of the wave from oceanic waves to radio waves. Approaching queer feminist history as a series of radio waves rather than oceanic waves, might make us better equipped to attend to the coexistence of different but overlapping projects across time and space. This figuration allows us to consider how we orient ourselves politically by tuning into different political projects and histories at the same time. While some might have fidelity to one particular frequency, some of us might enjoy switching between different channels, or even to listen to different channels at the same time. This might help us get away from the recurrent framings of feminism as a uniform movement, where there is only room for one “wave” or issue at the time, where one generation replaces the next in a conservative or conservationist mother-daughter-model, steeped with expectations of reproducing and extending a particular political legacy. The figuration of the radio wave might in short enable us to move away from linear models that tend to misrepresent political differences in terms of generational conflicts. This can invite us to examine how we navigate

in history by tuning into coexisting and overlapping frequencies that are broadcast simultaneously. Frequencies that might be conflicting, but also at times in harmony, and that most often create a sense of distorting cacophony.

### **Resistant Ambiguities**

*Voluspå* tunes us into a wide range of voices and histories. FRANK's use of the three feminist waves in *Voluspå* can be seen as an attempt to shift the political grammar of feminist history from one structured around oceanic succession to one organized around acoustic distortion and disorientation. By challenging the tendency to connect specific feminist fights to specific times and generations and waves, FRANK disturbs often-held expectations and desires for consensus and agreement that mark many political communities – expectations that often make differences and disagreements appear as noisy distortion. The meeting between the photographs by Marie Høeg and Klara Lidén in the “First Wave”-chapter of *Voluspå* is a case in point, as this encounter is far from straightforward, filled as it is with dissonances as much as resonance.

The photographs of Marie Høeg were not taken in the context of art. They belong to a series of images found long after her death in the 1980s in a box labeled “private” in the barn of the farm where she had lived together with her partner, the photographer Bolette Berg (1872–1944) (*Marie Høeg* 1996; Klerck Gange 2009). This series of portraits of Høeg are different from the commercial studio portraits that Høeg and Berg usually took in the photography studio they had established in Horten in 1895, that followed the conventions of the *carte de visite* of its times, with their concomitant repertoires of standard gender and class performances. Taken in front of the same painted backgrounds with flowery nature scenes and rococo architectural props as the conventional portraits, the person looking into the camera in these images do not confirm to the conventions of photographic behavior or modes of visibility of her time. The always shorthaired Høeg dresses up in a series of different attires with different gendered references – such as a well-

worn wool pajamas, or a polar coat of seal skin – while often smoking a cigarette. Sometimes she stares directly into the camera, like in the photo described above. In others, she bluntly turns away, refusing the camera’s gaze. The specific contexts of these photos are unknown, but when seen together they seem to give a glimpse into the alternative ways that Høeg, her partner, and their friends lived together and played with the camera’s world-producing potentialities.

In *Voluspå* the intriguing photographs of Høeg meets Klara Lidén’s images from *Untitled (Handicap)* of a body collapsing in an accessible public toilette. This is one of several works where Lidén draws attention to the relationship between bodies, social regulations, and systems of support. With an attention to ways of life that deliberately or not fail to conform to the established repertoires of gendered, sexual, and class-oriented behaviors, Lidén often work with the expendable and disposable both materially as well as conceptually. The images in *Untitled (Handicap)* are made from photocopies of photographs that have been transferred to clear acetate, that has been cut to form handmade slides – a process of forced deterioration. The photographs of the body in collapse are ambiguous in their appearance, vacillating in their staged nature somewhere between stop-motion animated slapstick comedy and the grainy images from surveillance cameras of people OD’ing in public bathrooms – not a uncommon occurrence in a country such as Norway, that has a high amount of drug related deaths each year.

By pairing the two artists, FRANK makes the images of Høeg and Lidén appear in a “queer space” of sorts, a space that challenges our routinized language around questions of gender, sexuality, time, and history. The meeting between the two suggests an attention to how the works work differently in and across time. It also suggests the relevance of re-positioning Høeg in the narratives of feminist history in Norway. Over the last decades, Høeg has only been known for her feminist activism in relation to her engagement in the suffragette movement. Høeg founded important feminist groups, such as Den selskabelige Diskusjonsforening in Horten, and wrote and agitated for women’s rights. Her photographic

career – and her life-long collaboration and partnership with Bolette Berg – has been downplayed, understood to have little relevance and connection to her activist contribution to the “first wave” feminism.<sup>6</sup> Echoing the stories and legacies of unconventional couples working with photography to explore alternative forms of gender, sexuality, and intimacy – such as Claude Cahun with Marcel Moore, or Hannah Cullwick with Arthur Munby – Høeg and Berg’s private portraits have only recently entered the field of visibility.

### **FRANK’S Performative Historiography**

FRANK’s staged meeting between Høeg and Lidén invites us to re-approach Høeg’s photographs as historical “agents” within a different time-space than the feminist “first wave” in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century they usually speak to. The juxtaposition with Lidén’s work allows us to consider the photographs as anachronistic interlocutors that can address present issues of performativity and performance in queer feminist art and politics. Allowing Høeg’s images the status as a “source” that speaks to and in our present, rather than *only* about the past, is central to the “performative historiography” at play in FRANK’s work – one that suggests that a proper historical contextualization of objects under scrutiny is not enough, since it is just as important to do “justice to the concrete historical situation of the *interest* taken in [...] objects” (Benjamin 2002, 391).<sup>7</sup> Such a performative historiography seeks to pay attention to the processes of cultural recall – processes where objects from the past become “historical matter” in the present, and thereby material that matters to our historical sense of the now.

The fact that many people who encounter Høeg’s photographs tend to believe that they are contemporary restagings that only *appear* to be old, says something about how questions of representation of gender and sexuality, of conventions of self-assertion and right to decide and enjoy shifting identifications, is still an unfinished struggle and everyday matter of concern that conditions peoples lives – and for some their death. By creating a space for collisions like these, *Voluspå* productively distorts and confuses what historians call the “separation principle” that safely

distinguishes the past from the present, the living from the dead, the here from the there.<sup>8</sup> FRANK's disoriented historical practice baffle the sense of security in both retrospective evaluations of the past as well as in attempts to use the past as an anchor that confirms and consolidates the present order. Challenging the way we navigate in time and history, *Voluspá* calls for the insistence on cultivating vigilant and tentative approaches attentive to long-overdue issues of injustice that risk being neglected or positioned as anachronistic within historical logics invested in chronology and progression.

### **Political Deep Listening**

It is of course impossible to know how Marie Høeg and Bolette Berg would have appreciated the tune that puts their work in dialogue with Klara Lidén. But dissonance and friction is presented here as a condition and not as an obstacle for conversation. The distortion of the historical narratives of progress in *Voluspá* reads in short less as an a-historical move, than as an invitation to mobilize forms of political “deep listening,” to borrow the composer and theorist Pauline Oliveros’ (2005) term, attentive to desirable dissonances in the sounds of unfinished histories of injustice. FRANK's invitation to tune into queer history through collisions and ruptures can in other words work as a reminder of how challenging it can be to train our abilities to listen to difference, to attend to the voices in the noises of conflict, and to appreciate the generative potential in dissonance. Focusing on dissonance is not to privilege violently antagonistic soundscapes, but rather about enhancing our “sonic awareness,” as Oliveros (2005) might put it, that sharpen our attention to the conditions for political conversations, conflicts, as well as celebrations past and present.

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histories of Nordic colonialism and histories of racism have been published in anthologies including *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* (2014), *Not Now! Now! Chronopolitics, Art & Research* (2015), and *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Histories* (2016). Danbolt is Assistant Professor of Art History at University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

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## NOTES

1. FRANK describes itself on the home page as, “an Oslo based platform, established [in 2012] to nurture art and critical discourse revolving around gender, desire and sexuality. The platform operates in different locations and with various co-curators. Our aim is to build a community and create discussions that address hegemonic structures in society. Since 2012, the artists Liv Bugge and Sille Storihle have run FRANK.” The title of the book, *Voluspå*, references the first poem of the *Poetic Edda*, an important collection of Old Norse poems, which have been a central source to understanding Norse mythology. As Sille Storihle writes in the introduction to the book, “‘Voluspå’ means ‘the prophecy of the volve.’ The volve was a mythic figure, a shamanistic seeress that looked into the past and into the future. In Viking society the volve – meaning ‘wand-bearer’ – was a figure who broke out of strict family bonds to practice *seid*, a type of sorcery. The volve and the poem ‘Voluspå’ thus serve as a reminder of a historical female figure who was valued for her powers, but feared as well. The volve symbolizes a figure that transgresses notions of normality, breaks out of social restrictions, and recalls the potentiality of varied gender notions in a past pagan society.” (FRANK 2013, 6)
2. “Women’s suffrage centenary 1913-2013.” <http://stemmerettsjubileet.no/in-english> (accessed June 23, 2015).
3. In a gesture of disclosure, I have collaborated with FRANK on different projects since the publication of their book *Voluspå*, as the conversation that started in the pages of the book continued. For more info, see [www.f-r-a-n-k.org](http://www.f-r-a-n-k.org).
4. For a discussion on the “political grammar” of feminist history writing, see Clare Hemmings (2011).
5. For a thorough discussion of the wave-figure in feminist story telling, see Astrid Henry (2004).
6. This is, for instance, the case in both publications about Høeg mentioned above. While both include reproductions of Marie Høeg and Bolette Berg’s private portraits, the exhibition catalogue *Marie Høeg* (1996) includes only one proper article which is centered on Høeg’s life in politics, while Brit Connie Stuksrud’s (2009) book, similarly, is framed as a “political portrait,” as the subtitle of the book makes clear.
7. For a more thorough discussion of performative historiography, see Mathias Danbolt (2013).
8. For an argument of the importance of the “separation principle” in the production of “true” historical knowledge, see Allan Megill (2007, 39).