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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Suzanne
Lacy, 1990 Mar. 16-Sept. 27

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Suzanne Lacy on March 16, 1990. The interview took place in Berkeley, California, and was conducted by Moira Roth for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This interview has been extensively edited for clarification by the artist, resulting in a document that departs significantly from the tape recording, but that results in a far more usable document than the original transcript.—Ed.

Interview

[Tape 1, side A (30-minute tape sides)]

MOIRA ROTH: March 16, 1990, Suzanne Lacy, interviewed by Moira Roth, Berkeley, California, for the Archives of American Art. Could we begin with your birth in Fresno?

SUZANNE LACY: We could, except I wasn't born in Fresno. [laughs] I was born in Wasco, California. Wasco is a farming community near Bakersfield in the San Joaquin Valley. There were about six thousand people in town. I was born in 1945 at the close of the war. My father [Larry Lacy—SL], who was in the military, came home about nine months after I was born. My brother was born two years after, and then fifteen years later I had a sister—one of those "accidental" midlife births. My dad was from a very poor Tennessee hillbilly environment, and my mother [Betty Little—SL] from Canadian-Scottish background. Her dad was one of the early settlers of the town of Wasco. In his childhood, my father, for some strange reason, completely out of context of his class, had developed a very strong interest in classical music and opera. He was also artistically inclined. He lied about his age to get into the military during the war and, once in, I think it became what college was to my generation. They taught him photography, which gave him an artistic outlet, and he also became a captain and flew bombing raids over Germany. He spent his leaves in Europe hanging out with opera singers. Apparently he had some desire to be an opera singer and didn't have quite strong enough a voice, although a good voice at one point. So as I knew him, growing up, he was an intensely creative man, who was singing and playing music—everything from Mexican Mariachi to La Traviata. He also painted, you know, what we'd now call a Sunday painter. And drew, and wrote. He's written two books about the war that have not been published. They are evidence of the fact that he is intensely creative, though not necessarily professional.

MOIRA ROTH: What did he do in the way of livelihood?

SUZANNE LACY: After the war my mother apparently did not want him to fly commercially, which was basically the thing he might have done with his skills. I think he made the choice to be married, live in a small town, and raise his family. I don't think it's a choice he's ever regretted, but I think there's always been a tension between his aspirational level and his family. He was an electrician and refrigerator mechanic for the first several years, probably till I was about fourteen or so. Then he had an accident, cut his hand off, and they sewed it back together. But it meant that he couldn't do that kind of work anymore. Being very proud and increasingly reactionary politically, he felt like taking government money to retrain himself amounted to welfare. So, after looking around at the variety of things he could do, he settled on selling life insurance, which he has never been very happy with. He can only approach it as a way of servicing people and helping them prepare for their families in case of death or accidents, but he can't really handle the salesman business. That's not of interest to him. So I think it's not something he's ever been comfortable with. In his later years now, he's back to painting and playing with his grandchildren. He's an incredible father and grandfather. My mother [Betty Little—SL] was never really excited about children, as she has told us. She wanted her own, but is not a typical "mothering" type. She worked throughout my childhood. She was twenty-one when I was born, and he was twenty-two. When I think now about people that age having children, I'm kind of. . . . When I think what it would have been like for me to have children at that age, I'm astounded that people would embark upon it that early. But they did, and my parents, being young, were always a lot of fun. My brother and I went places with them, played with them, and as I grew older, my mother was as much a friend as she was a mother. More a friend in certain ways. We have a

very close-knit family. But one without strong male-female definitions or strong mother-father definitions in the traditional sense.

MOIRA ROTH: Does that apply to how your siblings viewed it? Your family? Do they see it as you do? Your brother and your sister?

SUZANNE LACY: Well, in exactly this way, I don't know. We are very close and we talk a lot, but we haven't compared views of growing up. My brother [Philip Lacy—SL] was not as happy as I was growing up, I think. I figured out real quick right from wrong and how to get approval, and in fact was probably overly conscious of the discrepancy between what I might be feeling and how other people might be perceiving a situation. My brother didn't, and as a result he was constantly in trouble, into things. He was never a malicious child. He was just without certain kinds of rules and regulations inside of him. He would do things like swing on horses' tails, drag home live roosters from other people's henyards, help himself to the neighbor's ice cream in their freezer—things that I don't think he had any notion of whether they were right or wrong. I developed a kind of a protectiveness toward him as we were growing up, one I'm sure he sometimes felt was overwhelming.

MOIRA ROTH: And you were very close.

SUZANNE LACY: Very. Yeah, we've remained close, to this day.

MOIRA ROTH: And your sister who was born fifteen years after your brother?

SUZANNE LACY: My sister, I think, has been shaped by similar familial influences. We have similar characteristics. But having been born fifteen years later, most of her growing up was when my brother and I were out of home, in college and Europe and various places. I think my parents had time to discover that whatever it was they had done in raising us was not about to produce grandchildren in a normal, you know. . . . As much as they love us, nevertheless I think they also longed for some of these other things, and given the era she grew up in, my sister, Jeannie [Graff—SL], became the traditional child. She's a Christian and she's raising her third child now, with another coming soon. She is living in a small town with her husband who is a teacher. We have a great time together—laughing: We all share a sense of humor and we're all very oriented toward taking care of and supporting each other in a real nice way—the whole family is. But we are as different as you can imagine. We all went away for a week together last summer. We started watching TV movies, and we would go into the TV shop and try to find the movie that would fit our whole family: an Archie Bunker, a born-again Christian, a feminist, etc.

MOIRA ROTH: [chuckling]

SUZANNE LACY: You can't have, for example, any kind of a reference to devil worship for my sister's sake. You can't have anything about violence against women; that would freak me out. We finally settled on Tom Cruise's Cocktails, and then went back and reported to the woman next day that she was completely successful. We found something we all agreed on: everybody hated it. [chuckles]

MOIRA ROTH: And you keep up a very constant relationship with them. . . .

SUZANNE LACY: Yes.

MOIRA ROTH: . . . because you go there for Christmas, birthdays; you spend holidays with them.

SUZANNE LACY: Yes. I'm very close to the whole family.

MOIRA ROTH: What was your schooling like, as a child?

SUZANNE LACY: Well, I went to a small grammar school and a small high school. I graduated high school in a class of about a hundred. As a child I spent a lot of time alone and a lot of time organizing everybody in the whole neighborhood.

MOIRA ROTH: I'm surprised.

SUZANNE LACY: So I would do both, you know; I would spend six hours sifting through piles of sand to collect fool's gold, or building little "Charles Simmons-like" houses on the local ditch. Or I would, alternatively, organize the neighborhood into games, like "AB, Son of Oz," which was a caveman book I'd read. We'd play caveman games for days. And I would do elaborate theatrical productions with other kids and have parties where everybody had to wear costumes. I didn't watch television at all.

MOIRA ROTH: Did you read?

SUZANNE LACY: Incessantly, constantly. Under the covers at night, walking to school. I read comic books, library books. I read everything I could get my hands on. My father would not allow us to have a TV in the house, so it was never attractive for us.

MOIRA ROTH: Did you have contact with art?

SUZANNE LACY: Constantly through my father. I joined an oil-painting class after school, I ran for student government and did theatrical skits, decorated for banquets, etc. I was vice president and secretary and yell leader in high school. This was a small town, so you could be the class brain and the class yell leader at the same time. It wasn't fragmented like it is in larger schools. I was a little idiosyncratic, however. I refused to join the sororities and would not show up when I was nominated as a candidate for prom queen. I did the decoration for the prom, however, and then proceeded to watch the whole thing from the roof with several of my friends. I had a kind of belonging/not belonging, insider/outsider experience going on most of life. Being inside, belonging totally, was the kiss of death, as far as I could see, in Wasco. It was quite usual for a girl to get pregnant at thirteen or fifteen and get married. (There was no abortion at that time.) I was pretty clear from an early age that I didn't want to get stuck in Wasco. So my energy was dedicated toward being "inside" enough to be accepted, and being "outside" enough to keep out of the clutches of that place.

MOIRA ROTH: Was it in college that you left Wasco?

SUZANNE LACY: Yeah, I left in '63. I went to junior college. I was a premed student. In high school, I had wavered between art and premed, and premed won out because of two things: I had a high school art teacher who said to me, "You could only be a commercial artist or a teacher. That's it, if you're going to be an artist." That didn't sound remotely appealing. In the meantime I'd met an incredibly charismatic science teacher who ordered a *Squalis Ecanthus* (a shark), and I got to come in in the morning and dissect it. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: [chuckling softly]

SUZANNE LACY: . . . and whereas originally as a child I was terrified of dissecting, by the time I got out of high school I found the insides of bodies incredibly beautiful—an aesthetic response. Also I should mention, in high school I edited the school annual, planned the junior-senior banquet decorations, and things like that. Every time I did one of these projects, I always ended up doing it in an unusual way—like finding some cement pillars for the junior-senior banquet and having a tractor drag them into the school cafeteria, and bringing in trees and fountains and water. The annual, if you look at it now, is not particularly creative; but in terms of the genre of annuals at that time, it's creative. I actually got my ideas from *Seventeen* magazine and *Glamour* and things like that which were all I was exposed to in a small town.

MOIRA ROTH: [chuckling]

SUZANNE LACY: So I went to junior college for two years, lived away from home, worked in science labs, was voted the outstanding premed student when I graduated, was an Ayn Rand fanatic. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Which school?

SUZANNE LACY: Bakersfield Junior College. I graduated with an A.A. from Bakersfield. I think that being from a working-class or lower middle-class background has always been a bit of a problem in that there were opportunities that were never even revealed to me. I could have easily gotten a scholarship. I graduated as the top woman in the class but nobody ever said, "You could get a scholarship to Radcliffe," or, "Why don't you go study literature at

Barnard?" It was just assumed that I would go to school, and, yes, that I would go to junior college—which was handy—and that I would then go to a state college. So that's what I did. I went to junior college for two years. I did modern dance and art—all through college while I was studying premedical sciences. I worked in the Kern County Public Health Lab, graduated, and went to University of California at Santa Barbara. I majored first in philosophy and then changed that to zoology. I was going to be a medical doctor, probably more in the realm of psychiatry. Psychosomatic medicine, effect of the mind on the body, was really interesting. As was dying. I read Ed [Edwin—SL] Schneiderman when his work on suicide prevention first came out at UCLA, and [Herman—SL] Feiffel's book on death and dying. People were just starting to explore the meaning of dying in our culture. I read Ludwig Wittgenstein and other philosophers, but eventually graduated with a degree in zoology and a minor in chemistry.

I took an extra year of college to accommodate courses in literature, writing, drawing, and dance. By the time I got around to applying for med school, I was starting to burn out. My compulsion to push through was weakening and I was starting to get a little bit nervous about what I was seeing in medical schools. The rhetoric they espoused about wanting you to have a broad education was not true. I applied to three schools (that was when there was still an eight to twelve-percent quota on women) though the convention at the time was to apply to fifteen schools in order to get in. When I was asked to come in for interviews at all three, I told them I would come on my timeframe not theirs. Needless to say I didn't get in. I remember at UCLA the interviewer said, "Well, let me get this straight. If we admit you, you may not come?" And I said, "Well, yes, that's the case since I am also interested in a Ph.D. in psychology." He said, "Well, let me be very blunt with you." [both chuckle] In retrospect, I think it was my way of backing out the door. But it left me unclear about direction for a couple of years. I went into VISTA.

MOIRA ROTH: VISTA being. . . .

SUZANNE LACY: Volunteers in Service Training to America. It was a government program that placed people in communities for service. I went thinking I would teach kids basketball in the ghetto and ended up in a community organizing training program headed by the Maryland School of Social Design. It was so radical that the FBI routinely investigated their program. I was told, for example, "If you select Virginia for your field assignment, you will have to do welfare-rights organizing; however, welfare-rights organizing has been excluded by the governor as a viable use of VISTA volunteers' time. Therefore if you get caught doing it, we will disown you." Many of my colleagues who went off to, I think it was Cincinnati, were thrown in jail within the first week for organizing. I went to Virginia and chose medical organizing for health care with rural black people. Eventually, I had problems with the team leader and left VISTA, much to several people's surprise, including my own. While in Washington, D.C., kicking around, I discovered feminism—this was in '69. I then applied to graduate school at Fresno State. And. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Why did you single out Fresno State?

SUZANNE LACY: I think I had a boyfriend going there. [laughing] Some real profound reason. Fresno had a fairly decent grad program in psychology, and I got right in. Even though my undergraduate degree was zoology, I was asked to teach immediately because of my science background. At that point feminist organizing was beginning in psychology. I went to the founding meeting of The Women's Psychology Associates at an American Psychological Association annual conference in Washington, D.C. I met a lot of woman psychologists who were just starting to ask questions of Freud's attitudes toward women, etc. In graduate school, I taught a course in feminist psychology, which was very new then, for my graduate peers, and rabble-raised as much as I could every time Freud came up in a class, and I was known as "that angry woman."

At Fresno, I ran into Faith Wilding, who was there as a graduate in English literature. Her husband was a teacher. She was probably the only other person at Fresno that knew anything about feminism. We proceeded one day to stick up signs all over campus saying, "Feminist meeting tonight." There must have been over thirty or forty women who showed up. Faith and I sat there dumbfounded and looked at each other and said, "What do we do now?" We did what has become, I think, a kind of strategy. We began talking about sex.

MOIRA ROTH: [chuckles]

SUZANNE LACY: We had a totally enthralled group of women, and the next thing you knew

we had begun feminist organizing at Fresno State. In the meantime, Judy Chicago, looking for a way to start a feminist art program, came to Fresno from Los Angeles, approached Faith, and began to talk about organizing young women art students. I applied that spring, after a year of graduate school. I remember the interview with Judy sitting there with her straw hat and two or three of her little groupie girls around her. You know, I'd always done art, so I felt like this is a natural for me. She said, "No, I don't want you." I said, "What do you mean? I know all about creativity [I'd just written a fifty-page research of the literature on creativity, from psychology's point of view—SL] and I've always done art. She said, "That doesn't matter. You are on the career track for psychology, and I'm only interested in working with women who will become professional artists." I didn't know what on earth she was talking about, but I did know I really wanted in that program. So Faith and I proceeded for the next several months to strategize how to get me into the program, which we eventually succeeded in doing. I love to tease Judy now, because I'm probably one of the most successful of the artists from that time, along with Faith. We've always teased her about what bad judgment of character she has.

MOIRA ROTH: Could you describe the program at Fresno that Judy Chicago ran? How it was run, who was in it, how she conducted it, how you felt about it.

SUZANNE LACY: Well, once I got in, I was very excited. I was a second-year grad student in psychology at the time, and I was moving so far out of academic psychology by then that I was working in sociology and race relations and things like that, so this was a kind of an extension of feminist studies, and that was the way I rationalized it to my program. I spent quite a bit of time, got very immersed in it. I think one of the major things I got out of it was my first real encounter with female sensibility. I had always had women friends, but I had been trained academically with men, had identified with them, and had found some things about women quite provoking. Mostly, their lack of freedom and inability to experiment, go places, and do things (which I thought was what men did). But when I got involved with that program for the first time I began to appreciate not just particular women but all women. In terms of the structure, Judy brought about fifteen students together. We had to make a major commitment of time and (for us) money. That is, we could take anywhere between three and twelve units of school credit. For many of us, over fifty percent of our schooling was this program. The first thing she did was ask us to buy work boots. Then she taught us how to deal with realtors, as we canvassed Fresno to look for an abandoned space to make into our studio. We found this huge old theater outside of town and, with our workboots, began to transform it. Judy taught us carpentry. I was certainly familiar with tools and stuff, but I'd never learned how to sheetrock. We made flawless walls. We completely renovated this whole place. And in order to do that, we had to pay money; I think at that time it was twenty-five dollars a month, which was, given that I think my total income was two hundred, a rather major commitment. I was freaked out, as I've always been, since I've been an artist, about money. But nevertheless, we all did it to support the rent and utilities in our studio. We had a series of courses. We had reading studies, feminist art history and studio art. That's when we first started discovering people like Frida Kahlo, Mary Cassatt, and other women artists, who were uncovered subsequently or simultaneously—I'm not sure which—by art historians. Several women we discovered by rooting through used book stores. I remember when Nancy Youdelman came to class one time with the book of the 1883 Chicago World's Fair and the first Women's Building. This was revolutionary to us. We poured over this and other books and found photographs in esoteric places. I emphasized feminist literature and tried to get the group more cognizant of the major themes, like racism, lesbianism, violence against women, etc., that were under discussion in the feminist movement (which Faith and I were more connected to than the other students). I remember the time, for example, I had to tell people about Ti-Grace Atkinson, and convince them to greet her since she was coming to speak at Fresno State. (Obviously Judy knew who she was.) Ti-Grace came to Fresno and we prepared a cheerleading reception for her. We went down to the Fresno airport prepared to do our "C-u-n-t" cheers—with the pink cheerleaders—and off came forty or so Shriners as we were screaming, "Give us a C, give us a U." [laughter] Right behind them came this giant leggy woman wearing sunglasses at six o'clock at night and carrying a cigarette holder. She had buckskin pants and a giant fur coat. That was Ti-Grace Atkinson, who sat there sort of bemused while we were performing madly for her. It was quite an evening. Actually it's on film. Judy and she had a real run-in, and the woman who was doing the film—Judy Chicago and the California Girls, I think it was—managed to capture it on film. The gist of it was Ti-Grace felt that everybody, male or female, who had anything to do with patriarchy was completely screwed, and Judy's position was to work with the men in your life.

MOIRA ROTH: And you named your dog Ti-Grace.

SUZANNE LACY: Yes. I had a dog named Ti-Grace, a dog named Simone—after Simone de Beauvoir—and a cat named Red Emma [Emma Goldman—SL]. They were fixtures of the early feminist movement. You'll find photographs in a variety of places, documenting the building of the Woman's Building. The dogs, I mean; not de Beauvoir and Atkinson. So we built ourselves an art studio, and we spent a lot of time working on our art. Judy would give us assignments having to do with topics, for example, like rage. You know, like, "How do you feel when you're walking down the street with men leering at you?" There was indeed a lot of anger that got expressed in those early performances. . . . People turned to performance almost intuitively. It wasn't as "sophisticated" as some of the conceptual performance works at the time. For the most part, we didn't know anything about that work and I don't think Judy knew a lot about it either. We were doing what I'd call skits. She intentionally steered us away from anything that was conceptual, that was removed from a direct engagement with our feelings. We made art of our experience. I remember I put up huge pieces of paper on the wall, eight feet by six feet, and I'd throw balloons full of paint at it, and slosh paint around. We were very physically engaged. As well, we had crits and we had consciousness-raising sessions.

MOIRA ROTH: In crits, were the standards whether one was emotionally engaged? Were there aesthetic judgments made?

SUZANNE LACY: There were aesthetic judgments, but it was based on the ability of the work to authentically reveal the self and one's feeling states. It was probably not divorced, in some respects, from abstract expressionism, although some of the work was not abstract. But it was a form of criticism which we might want to talk about later when we talk about the Woman's Building, because it continued to develop and is different than criticism I've seen at other art schools since then. For example, Judy gave assignments having to do with emotional states, or feelings about mothers or about other women. Of course, one could also just do art art. There was no prescription against that. But we were very caught up in a burgeoning awareness of what it meant to be a woman. . . .

Tape 1, side B

SUZANNE LACY: Those first consciousness-raising groups were incredibly intense. It was like uncovering, in a funny way, an entire new world, within your self. I remember seeing the movie, *The Bell Jar*, from the book by Sylvia Plath, the movie, and watching the scene where she's almost raped by her date, and thinking, my God; while I have never been raped, I had certainly had rather forceful experiences with dates. The kind of pressure that you wouldn't ever describe as attempted rape in the fifties and sixties. So our work together was like a continuing revelation. So performance developed. I did paintings, not much performance at that point. I did a lot of conceptual work, wrote, and I made sculptures. Things that looked like interior organic shapes. I did a lot of pencil and pastel drawings. And I guess one sculpture that sort of stands out in mind is a life-sized bride, which ended up looking like a cadaver, that was made with resin.

MOIRA ROTH: Oh.

SUZANNE LACY: It looked like a macabre Kienholtz, with birth-control pills for her bridal bouquet and a gag over her mouth, and she was lying in a position like she was about to be raped. And she was, because of the material. . . . It was papier mache figure with about an inch of resin meticulously layered, and then this cloth wedding gown that was also layered in resin. So the whole thing had this rigid fifties look. And her eyes were popping out of their sockets. For a cunt she had a plunger with a pink lightbulb in it. I didn't realize it at the time but it was an aggressive and frightening image of marriage as a trap. Lord knows where that came from. Needless to say, however, I've never gotten married. [chuckles]

MOIRA ROTH: [chuckles]

SUZANNE LACY: The consciousness-raising was interesting because it was also borrowed from—this was the late sixties, early seventies—from the intensity of the Gestalt therapy movement. People all over the country were sequestering themselves away in little rooms and screaming at each other in the service of changing their psyches. [chuckles]

MOIRA ROTH: Um hmm.

SUZANNE LACY: That was not much different than what we did, and at times that aspect of the program made me nervous. I would back out of it. Part of it was my psychological training. I just felt that there was a kind of a group practice. . . . And I was always an outsider to the group. I was older; Faith and I were the oldest. I was educated very differently—in science and psychology. And I was very logical and conceptually oriented. Everybody else operated in a much more expressive emotional and intuitive mode. Some of it was quite good. People went through a lot of changes. Some of it I thought was a little destructive, though not any more so than any of the other encounter groups that I had participated in during that era. And I led many of them myself, including some sort of rebirthing experiments.

MOIRA ROTH: [Oh.]

SUZANNE LACY: You know, in the sixties in California we were always mucking around in each other's psyches—experimenting in psychology. Mostly it didn't hurt anybody.

MOIRA ROTH: How did you and Judy relate to one another?

SUZANNE LACY: In the beginning, Judy did not know how to take me. There was a way in which I was separated from the group and critical of it. I would interject psychological analyses of their psychological analyses—in the middle of an encounter group. [laughing] And I also wasn't able to fully engage with my work as an artist. I was still inclined toward the methods of social science. I remember one significant moment—a turning point for me in my relationship with Judy—when Vanalyn Green called. She was a very good friend and as a psychology undergrad had that level of remove from the group I did. She called me and said, “You know, you're gonna present your work in crit tomorrow, and I heard some people saying they don't trust you and they're gonna use this as an opportunity to get you.” Apparently there was some rumor going around that I was a CIA agent at one point.

MOIRA ROTH: [chuckles]

SUZANNE LACY: I thanked her for telling me, and I went to bed. I laid awake from about ten in the evening to two in the morning, just going through all these defenses in my head, like, “How could they feel that way?” “I didn't do it.” And then about two o'clock in the morning, I guess I wore 'em all out, because suddenly I said, “Well, on the other hand, I could see how they might think that.” [laughs] It just turned everything around for me. The next day I went in and presented my work and they responded to it. Nothing overt was ever said, but it was a turning in my relationship with Judy, and I became very close with her. She began to trust me. . . . I don't know if it was a subliminal thing that happened. Later when the group was getting ready to leave for Cal Arts, a similar rapid transformation happened. Judy and Miriam Schapiro were going to do a feminist art program at Cal Arts, and everybody was preparing to go there and trying to get in and I wasn't because I was a second-year grad student in psychology, on my way to getting a master's. One day, Faith Wilding said to me, “Have you thought about coming to Cal Arts?” and I said, “Well, no. Not really.” That night I just stayed awake for hours in a fever, tossing and turning, and the next morning I got up and immediately went to the phone. I called Cal Arts to apply for a scholarships—because I didn't have any money at all. At that precise moment, Judy broke into the line. This was before call-waiting [both chuckling]. Judy's method of getting through to you was through emergency interrupt. At that moment, just when I was talking to Cal Arts, I get this emergency interrupt from Judy, who says, “Suzanne-ey, I've been thinking. Maybe you should apply to go to Cal Arts. Have you thought about that?” And so I went to Cal Arts. There's a lot about the Fresno program that should be said and has been said in *Through the Flower* (Judy's book) that's not this personal anecdotal information. I don't know what is relevant here. Is anybody else going to be talking about. . . ?

MOIRA ROTH: Well, I imagine so, but maybe you'd like to add some more things that are less perhaps to do with you and more to do with your memory of the . . . perhaps other performances or things that began to emerge.

SUZANNE LACY: I think that the women did some very good work. I think that they uncovered some important historical information in that program. Many of those women

went on to be artists. Some dropped out later in the years, but by and large I think it was a tremendously affirming experience to be with all women, to have such a charismatic woman role model in Judy. We talked a lot about role models. I think it organized people's psyches in a different way, and allowed them to move forward with a lot more courage. We got to a point where we were doing exhibitions for Fresno State Art Department, and all the faculty and students came. They were blown away by what they were seeing. We took the show on the road a few times, and I remember one time (it was pretty funny) when somebody in the audience got up and slugged Faith. The presentations almost always ended in confrontation. There was a lot of antagonism men had to what we were saying.

MOIRA ROTH: Hmm!

SUZANNE LACY: We were really gutsy. I mean, we were really presenting a very tough female image—to the world through our art and our panels. Because of Judy's connections, we were able to make presentations in Los Angeles, the art world, and at schools. There was one weekend when Larry Bell came, and Miriam Schapiro, and Sheila de Bretteville. . . . Vickie Hall did a performance there. She was a terrific performance artist who moved to Fresno to study with Judy. A lot of people from Cal Arts came down, and we would have these big powwows, art showings, slumber parties. They were very exciting and intense times. That's when I met Sheila, who decided, prompted by Miriam and Judy, to do a Feminist Design Program at Cal Arts.

MOIRA ROTH: Did you also witness the beginning of Miriam and Judy talking with one another?

SUZANNE LACY: Yes, that was during that time. They began to meet each other and talk together, and indeed we were. . . . Witness is a good way to put it, because particularly Faith and I, who were older, were privy to conversations with Judy, who is very open about her process. Judy's a very, very fine teacher. She's incredibly demanding, and she knows how to push through to the tenderest parts of your psyche, and she goes right for the jugular in her criticism, which I think is good. Not in a humiliating manner, as it is in some art schools, but in a very direct and compassionate way. Why talk about the form and shape of something to the exclusion of what somebody is trying to express about themselves? She's also brilliant about historical context. The woman reads incessantly. Whenever she wants to know about something, she sits down and plows through scores of books. She's also tremendously supportive of her students. I remember many times over the years when I had trouble with money, she'd just quietly hand me twenty-five dollars. And I would never have to pay her back. I mean, it was just an issue of supporting me. Judy also had certain biases that were very problematic for me. For example, I remember once at Cal Arts, Arlene Raven came back from New York having just seen a big conceptual arts show, and said, "You know, Judy, I think Suzanne's a budding conceptual artist." My ears perked up at that.

MOIRA ROTH: [laughs]

SUZANNE LACY: I said, "What is that, Arlene?" Judy went into a fit about it, because in her mind conceptual artists were people like John Baldessari—distanced, aloof, abstract. In fact, that is part of conceptualism, but nobody had at that time managed to integrate a feminist emotive consciousness into that form of art, which they subsequently did.

MOIRA ROTH: And then, when you did finally decide to go to Cal Arts, how were you integrated within the programs?

SUZANNE LACY: Personally, or how were the feminist programs integrated into Cal Arts?

MOIRA ROTH: Well, both, I guess, because you were also working for Sheila de Bretteville.

SUZANNE LACY: The feminist programs at Cal Arts were several. Miriam and Judy did the Feminist Art Program. Sheila did the Feminist Design Program. Deena Metzger did Women in Literature and Women's Writing. In the social sciences program—I think it's called humanities at Cal Arts—there was also a group of women working on women in sociology. At this point in time (1970, I think) there was a massive amount of feminist consciousness and activity there, which Cal Arts has still not recovered from or else they'd admit that they had it. They've totally blocked it from their historical memory. Instead we hear a lot about David Salle et al.

MOIRA ROTH: And Cal Arts had begun of couple of what? A year or so before? It was a hot spot.

SUZANNE LACY: Cal Arts had begun a year before at a temporary campus in Glendale, where such things as nudity in the swimming pool took place, and Allison Knowles' flying helicopters distributed paper for an event and Ravi Shankar played in the halls.

MOIRA ROTH: Yeah.

SUZANNE LACY: Gene Youngblood was there, and Allan Kaprow—there was an amazing amassing of talent that happened in the early days at Cal Arts. And while that was Disney's vision. . . . And it was Paul Brach's doing, I gather, much of it, at least in the visual arts. He was head of the art department. But the Disney family was not Walt Disney, and it took them a while to figure out what they had done. Much more conservative, they tried to whip the school into shape. They moved to the new campus at Valencia, and it happened that the head of the design program. . . . I had already made a liaison with Sheila, who liked my rationality. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: [chuckles]

SUZANNE LACY: . . . felt more comfortable with it, I think. [chuckling] She thought I could teach the theoretical aspects, the reading, and lead the group discussions, since I'd been through this process. She would do the design piece, and I'd be her teaching assistant. So it had nothing to do with being interested in design that I went into that program. As I looked around the school, it became clear I could go into the art undergraduate program, but by that time I was—whatever—twenty-five or twenty-seven. I mean, I had been through seven years of college. And I wasn't real interested in being an undergraduate student again. But it turned out that the design program was run by Richard Farson, who was founder of the Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, a psychologist. And working on staff was Jivan Tabibian, who was a futurologist and urban planner. I knew Dick casually from when he had led a gestalt workshop at Esalen. I worked out a deal where they would admit me—as a graduate—in something like urban design. And of course, once you got into Cal Arts, there were no grades, there were no required courses. It was a very unique, chaotic place, and it was very loosely structured. You just did whatever you did. That worked out fine for everybody I knew. I don't know if that would work out fine now for people, but we all—Charlemagne Palestine was there, David Salle, Jim Welling—seemed to do fine. You know, Baldessari was one pole of the conceptual world, and Kaprow was the other, and then there was Chicago and Schapiro, which was a very strong feminist influence. It turned out that the feminists who were conceptually oriented gravitated toward Kaprow, because he was infinitely more receptive to that than Baldessari, who used to discuss such things as how rape might be considered an artform. [chuckles] In all fairness John didn't bring it up; it was one of his students that brought it up. Such topics were common, however. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: Yeah.

SUZANNE LACY: . . . because there was so much feminism that I think the men were reacting. I wouldn't even be surprised if David Salle's early works as a student with women in semi-pornographic poses had something to do with that, because he was there when there was this very polarized energy between women and men.

MOIRA ROTH: Did you also have contact with people outside Cal Arts, such as Barbara Smith, Rachel Rosenthal, Nancy Buchanan. . . .

SUZANNE LACY: No, none of those people. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: . . . Eleanor Antin. . . .

SUZANNE LACY: Well, Ellie did a lecture for Baldessari. Cal Arts had a very active visiting artists program, so I got to know who was who in the conceptual world. But, no, Barbara Smith was probably just getting out of Irvine about that time, and Nancy as well, and so their activity was neither considered feminist—by them—nor reaching other than a regional audience south of Los Angeles. But we did in fact have contact with national feminist artists, because we had the East-West Coast Bag Conference at Cal Arts. A woman was raped on

campus, and so that became a focus point; we had a panel discussion with the feminist Z Budapest. Judy kept us connected with the Los Angeles, even national, feminist art scene. Like the Los Angeles County exhibition by Linda Nochlin and Ann Southerland Harris, that came about as a result of protests by artists like Joyce Kozloff and Bruria. Womanhouse was the production of the art program. I was in design program, so I did not participate directly in Womanhouse. Judy did a performance workshop, and I took that, along with other classes she taught.

MOIRA ROTH: What kind of assignments did she give?

SUZANNE LACY: One that I remember with fondness was "Route 126." We had to drive along this two-hour stretch of road between Cal Arts and the coast and at some point stop the caravan of cars and get out and do a performance that had to somehow be identifiable as done by a woman. That was the only guideline. So we stopped at a telephone pole, and Judy and Shawnee Wolleman tacked Kotex on the pole. We have pictures of them being chased away by the highway patrol, who made us take them down. Nancy Youdelman did this lovely piece at the beach where she draped herself in flowing scarves like Isadora Duncan and walked into the water until she disappeared. Somebody else (I think it was Shawnee) did something with eggs. This old, abandoned jalopy in a wash had fascinated me, and I stopped the caravan there for my piece. I gave everybody pink paint, red velvet, and a big stuffed heart, and we transformed this old jalopy into a woman-renovated car, and then we left it. After years there, it was subsequently hauled away in a week. [both chuckle] So, that was one assignment. Another assignment. . . . I don't remember what the assignment was, but I remember two other pieces that we did, both of them about breasts. We were involved with things like menstruation, breasts, ovaries, all the female anatomy parts. [chuckling] I did one with Laurel Klick and Susan Mogul on mastectomy. We developed an image that we used later in a piece on mothers. We had a woman ace-bandaged around the chest, and somebody came in and cut her nipple off and blood came out. (We were into blood and guts.) But it was a long work about breasts and social attitudes toward breasts and breast cancer. In a second piece that Nancy Youdelman, Jan Lester, Dorie [Atlantis—SL], and I did, we took Nancy, who was flat-chested, and we pooled our money and sent away to several breast-development advertisements. This piece was called I Tried Everything. [chuckles] And we documented her for a month trying all these breast-enhancement devices. Every day we measured her, and we took photographs of her and we displayed them in the library, along with the various artifacts.

MOIRA ROTH: [chuckling]

SUZANNE LACY: Another thing we thought about was mothers. I believe it was while I was still at Cal Arts that Susan Mogul and Laurel Klick and I did a piece on mothers at Womenspace Gallery. It was very interesting piece. It's unfortunate there's only photographic documentation, because the text was our exploration of . . . not the traditional stuff about mothers. Very body-oriented, organic, preverbal.

MOIRA ROTH: Could you talk about Ablutions? Because that was where you appeared fully formed as a performance artist.

SUZANNE LACY: That was in '72, so I believe it was in the same semester I was graduating. Judy never let us rest in terms of reaching audiences. In fact we didn't show at Cal Arts itself. We showed in classes to prepare the work, and then we were out there some place in L.A., some school or a gallery. She wanted us to put it out. For some reason, I was always very conscious of violence—I believe it has to do with my relationship to being in a body and with understanding sexual violence as an invasion of the body as a sacred space. At Fresno I said to Judy, "Wouldn't it be interesting if we tape-recorded stories of women talking about having been raped?" I imagined the audience would sit in a dark room and we would play the stories for them. That's not particularly interesting now, but you have to remember that in 1970 you could not find stories of women who were raped. They wouldn't tell you. So Judy said, "That's a very interesting idea. Why don't we start collecting stories." So Judy and I spent the next year tape recording. We'd hear rumors about a woman who was raped, and we'd find her friend, and we'd. . . . You know, it was literally having to go down dark streets and end up in strange places in the middle of the night, tape recording these stories. Some women had never told anyone. We used seven womens' stories. Out of the performance workshop came many beautiful images. Sandra Orgel came in one day and showed us pictures of taking a bath in eggs. The slides showed the parts of her

body—her breasts and her vagina—covered with these eggs with menstrual blood kind of running through them. It was a very beautiful image. I had been nailing beef kidneys into the wall every chance I got. Almost got thrown out of Cal Arts for doing it one time, actually. I conned Paul Brach into giving me a space in the graduate studios and. . . . Did I ever tell you this?

MOIRA ROTH: Hm mm.

SUZANNE LACY: It was about half as big as this room, somebody's studio. I layered plastic and beef kidneys and then strung cord through the whole thing. So if you went in, there was an experience of being inside a body cavity. I was to leave it up for three days, and I came back the second day, and there was Stephen [_____]—Ed.]. . . . What is his name? The big, tall sculptor, who taught there. You know who I'm talking about?

MOIRA ROTH: Yeah. Can't remember his name.

SUZANNE LACY: He and this host of graduate students lined up behind him, had an aerosol spray that they were spraying in the air. [laughs] They were out to get Paul to throw me out of school. I wasn't even a painting student. I think it had to come down early. All my beef kidneys were constantly getting. . . . I did one show at Womanspace. I thought it was quite elegant. It was four beef kidneys hanging with a string net, fence, in front of them. It looked gestapo-esque. I would change the kidneys every couple days so they would stay fresh. I came in one night, and there had been a feminist meeting and somebody had cut them down. Their four little strings were limply hanging there. [laughing]

MOIRA ROTH: Well, back to Ablutions.

SUZANNE LACY: So we took these images, and the tape recordings and we put them together in a piece that was a linear narrative. The sound track was exclusively the women talking; really straightforward, like, "I was walking down the street. I was pushing my child in a stroller. . . ." Just telling in great detail the whole story of the rape. We had three galvanized metal tubs and piles of kidneys and piles of rope, and Jan Lester and I in white T-shirts and Levis and white gloves came out and methodically pounded these beef kidneys, in a row, starting from one side of the room to the other. In the meantime a nude woman came out and took a bath, first in eggs, then in blood, then in clay. She got out, was wrapped in white, laid down on the ground, and then another woman did it. I think two women went through the ablutions. Two other women did some imagery where they were twinning. They were adorning each other's hair with chains. This was very methodical and throughout women were talking about being raped on a sound system. At the end, Jan and I, like giant spiders, tied everything to everything: the beef kidneys to the people, to the trays, to the. . . . And then we left the scene.

MOIRA ROTH: This is when the two women who'd been nude were bound.

SUZANNE LACY: Yeah. They were wrapped in white and bound. They weren't bound really; they were wrapped in white and laid down, and then they were tied to everything. We went over the set, tying it together. And the last words on the soundtrack were, "I felt so helpless. All I could do was just lie there. All I could do was just lie there," and the tape stuck on that ending. The audience was stunned. They were really stunned. It was in Laddie Dill's studio, and so there was a fairly heavy-duty Venice art audience there. Apparently, several people just sort of gagged and ran for the door at the end of it. They had never been exposed—not only with that information at that level of detail, but to women's perspective on it. And the rage and the intensity of victimization that was in the piece. In fact, a couple of the women who were in the piece, one of them—I think it was Jan Oxenberg—had an emotional reaction to allowing herself to participate from the vantage point of the victim. She was one who took the baths. It was a very evocative work of art. We did it just before we graduated from Cal Arts. In the meantime Womanspace Gallery in Los Angeles had been developed. So we were starting, even as young students, to relate to it.

MOIRA ROTH: Which was an exhibition space.

SUZANNE LACY: Um hmm, run by women. And Judy had done Womanhouse, which I think was a tremendous accomplishment. And Sheila and I. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And you'd gone to that.

SUZANNE LACY: Oh, I went to the opening and performances there, yes, of course. I was very close to Judy and several students as they were developing it, but I did not do a piece for it. I was very immersed in the design program. We were doing the Menstruation tapes and the Menopause tapes. We started out thinking that we would take on, as a design project, redesigning the way in which menstruation information was provided to young women. Disney movies were still teaching with diagrammatic ovaries and uteri—all about mechanics. We videotaped young girls talking about menstruation, as a way to present sharing of information between them, using a consciousness-raising model. We started by doing our own consciousness-raising on the subject. We started thinking, "Well, if menstruation is the beginning of life," which was the way the propaganda promoted it, "does menopause mean it's the end of life?" Somehow I was in touch with some older feminists in Santa Monica. They had a group meeting about menopause and I tape-recorded it. It was an eye-opening discussion. Six of them came to Cal Arts and we videotaped them. I subsequently followed up with those women and wrote an article—it was not published—using their experience. Followed some of them for years. The most adorable grandmotherly Jungian therapist turned out to be a lesbian her whole life.

Tape 2, side A

SUZANNE LACY: Ablutions was a kind of exit performance for us. It was moving from Cal Arts to Los Angeles. It was moving from graduate school into the professional community, so that our relationships then would be closer to Womanspace, as opposed to the school. The year before I graduated I had an important encounter with Judy. She had done Womanhouse, we had the performance program, and it was the last day of school, just before summer vacation. I had shown some sculptures in the crit class. I had taken some mannequins and put wax all over their faces, and then melted it, so that they looked like women whose faces were falling off. During the class, Judy said, "Suzanne, this has got real potential, this body of work. If you don't stop splitting yourself between design and literature and this and that and the other and make a commitment to art, I'm not going to work with you anymore." When I left class I ran around shaking and grabbed my friend Jill Soderholm and mumbled incoherently and ran off and grabbed somebody else. And then I just made this switch inside. I went out and caught Judy in the parking lot, and said, "Okay. I'll be an artist." I didn't actually feel pressured; I didn't feel like she was going to abandon me or anything. It had nothing to do with that. I knew that she was challenging me, which she had tried to do earlier, to acknowledge that I was an artist, not six million other things. And Judy knows about commitment, and I think that's what the issue is, and she knows how to push you up against the wall, those of us who are more nervous about making commitments. The second year at Cal Arts is when I did Ablutions and a variety of other things that began to establish my interest in performance. I worked with Allan Kaprow. I think Allan and Sheila and Judy formed three kinds of very important influences, with Arlene Raven and Deena Metzger being other influences. But the three of them, theoretically, the way they thought, was so different and yet I managed to merge some of their forms of thinking and take what I needed from each of them. They gave me a very strong base for exiting from Cal Arts.

MOIRA ROTH: What did you draw from Allan Kaprow?

SUZANNE LACY: Well, first an incredible legacy of events, happenings, conceptual work. He had collected an array of books at the Cal Arts library. Michael Kirby and Richard Scheckner and fluxus history. Allan's formalism was supportive to my own inclinations in that direction. I know it's hard to see the formalism, because people aren't used to assessing the formal aspects of time-based work. I'm concerned with the structures and shapes of things. I like very controlled works. Because he was working so closely with many of us feminists, Allan's work gave us a foundation for the move into "life" that we were looking for in a political sense. He gave us a rationale for it. I thought of them, humorously, as the passionate mother (Judy Chicago) and the affectionate, distant father (Allan).

MOIRA ROTH: [smiling]

SUZANNE LACY: Because Judy was all content. I mean, obviously Judy is herself a strong visual formalist, but her teaching was for expression, expression, expression, whereas Allan's teaching methodology was cool, discursive, anything was possible, everything was interesting to discuss. And Allan also was at a very interesting point in his career. I learned

from that—quite a bit. We knew him as the founder of Happenings, the Abstract Expressionist of the time-based media, a very major figure who had suddenly dropped into obscurity. I think Allan himself was struggling with how to handle not only the move to the west coast, but the move from the grand, expressive gesture to a different kind of concern. He was just beginning to have a shape for those concerns then. So I watched him work with his body, work with his pulse. He'd spit on his hand and note how fast it dried. He'd put us through all these paces, too—just like we put him through paces in our pieces. I remember having a revelation one day. We were sitting in a group, when Allan casually mentioned how when he was a child, he was so intensely allergic that even to this day, if he eats a nut, his whole body literally blows up. And I sat there thinking, "My God, that's what's going on. This man has this relationship to his body that's at once kind of quizzical and distanced and yet threatening, tragic." I could empathize with these incessant experimentations and kind of medical approach, having come from a medical background. I had an intuition about what he was trying to do. On a psychological level, I was also very sympathetic to what he was trying to do, which was to uncover the range of unconsciousness that happens within the seemingly simple gesture—the sociology of the unspoken. It took him a while to find a form for that. What I learned was not only that there is always an intimate psychological connection but also a level of self-investigation that goes on in most art. I also learned what it was like for somebody to deliberately walk away from a major career and rebuild it. I think the man has incredible integrity. It was, interestingly enough, in his vulnerability that I understood what kind of strength an artist can have. He also was the first person to introduce me to nontheatrical performance. (Judy's performance work was theatrical.) I did a performance called Maps during a period when I was working in slaughterhouses. Maps involved a journey through Los Angeles, a caravan of people in cars and on foot. At Cal Arts, where we began, I gave them paper bags, into which they put the parts of a sheep, after having nailed them on a wall in the right diagrammatic form of the body. They carried the sheep parts and walked through a hospital for the mentally retarded, watching the isolation of the peoples' bodies. I don't know if you've ever watched retardates on a playing field, for example.

MOIRA ROTH: No.

SUZANNE LACY: They're very (Diane Arbus captures that quality) very separate individuals. Bodies revolving there in their own world. That is what this piece was about. It was like moving together, the parts of the body, the bodies that we were, then splitting up and moving back together again. We ended up at an abandoned slaughterhouse down in Vernon where I gave them each bloodstained but pressed labcoats (Allan's said "art" on it) and they carried their organ again as separate bodies—through this abandoned space, and then assembled them in the biologically correct order on the fence and left them. So it was like assembling and reassembling, assembling and reassembling a body. That event introduced Susan Mogul to the area, and she developed a photographic series of Slaughterhouse workers. As we were leaving, she jumped out of the car and started taking pictures of people on strike.

MOIRA ROTH: Is this the point at which you exited Cal Arts?

SUZANNE LACY: Right. I exited and became a carpenter, while Judy, Arlene, and Sheila started the Woman's Building. Miriam and Judy had had a falling out, and there was not enough money to hire me or Faith or anybody else at that point, so it was Judy, Sheila, and Arlene that started the first Feminist Studio Workshop. I became a carpenter and worked many hours, many days a week, and didn't have a lot of time or energy to do much else. I stayed in close touch with them, but was very despairing of ever making a living as an artist—or ever being an artist at that point—because I worked so hard as a carpenter. But I began framing things, so to speak. I "framed" a bathroom I was doing as a work of art, so that you could come visit it on certain days while I was doing the carpentry. I did a series of things like that. At one point, I got a lawyer to draw up an actual thirteen-page legal contract on the transplantable parts of my body, which allowed me to sell my eyes, my heart, my kidneys, and so on. I continued to explore issues of the body. I was also working on bridging that gap between what I always felt to be the strangely esoteric and elitist environment of Cal Arts with the real world. I felt, as a working-class kid, like I was from the real world. I would sit at Cal Arts and listen to kids talking about going to the Bahamas for Easter vacation. Their frames of reference were very different. So when I got out of school, I was very concerned with those kinds of issues. I had a studio I renovated for myself, basically a giant garage.

MOIRA ROTH: And then the Woman's Building was created in 1973?

SUZANNE LACY: Well, no, it was created that first year. The following year, 1973, they expanded the staff and took on Helen Alm [Roth—SL] to do printmaking, myself to do performance, and Ruth Iskin to teach art history. They took us on as faculty. And Deena Metzger. So it was Judy, Sheila, and Arlene and the rest of us. We became, for eight years or so, the staff of the Feminist Studio Workshop.

MOIRA ROTH: How much did you get paid? [laughs]

SUZANNE LACY: The first year it was something like ninety dollars a month, and then it slowly went up. The max we ever got, I believe, was maybe six thousand one year, working full-time. So, needless to say, none of us ever supported ourselves completely on that, although we were trying. I either did carpentry, or at one point, around '75 or so, I began working in a medical clinic as an emergency medical tech. They were able to train me because of my background. So I would work long shifts and basically do 48 hours of work from Friday night to Sunday night. It sure cut down on my social life.

MOIRA ROTH: [laughs]

SUZANNE LACY: But it allowed me to function as an artist-teacher the rest of the week, which I did.

MOIRA ROTH: What was the structure of the Woman's Building?

SUZANNE LACY: The Woman's Building was a grand experiment. It was located in the old Chouinard Art School, which we took over. The Feminist Studio Workshop was the core, the heart of the place, and it had thirty or forty students a year. There were also various galleries, plus Womanspace Gallery. Marge Goldwater was one of the early curators of Womanspace. We had, for a while, a printing press and sisterhood bookstore. Once again, we did a whole lot of carpentry, renovating the place. My skills increased.

MOIRA ROTH: There's a great photograph, it seems to me, in Faith Wilding's book, *By Our Own Hands*, that shows you as a carpenter.

SUZANNE LACY: With Ti-Grace, the dog. I led carpentry workshops for the students. I belonged to a cooperative gallery called Grandview Galleries, named after the street we were on. It would provide us with a one-woman show once every year or two. When mine came up, I did *One Woman Shows*, which was an expression of the women's community. The Woman's Building was becoming a community, a mixture of feminists, feminist artists, and artists who were not feminists. In its early days, the openings were crammed. Everybody in town would come to them, including all the male artists. Everybody would come and get roaringly drunk and dance; it was quite an event for a period of time. That slowly dissipated, and it became known as a woman's place. Then the openings were largely women and I remember a lot of complaints that some of the lesbians did not want men around. There was a constant struggle about what role men would play. Something happened in the west coast feminist art movement that I don't think was the case in the east coast movement. We had such a strong community sensibility and focused so intensely on our relationships with each other that, except for some slightly aggressive attitudes toward men by women who had been fairly seriously damaged by them, for the most part men were not central to our theorizing. Men were not central to our emotional lives with other women, even though most of us were living with and loving men.

MOIRA ROTH: Were you?

SUZANNE LACY: Yes. I lived for eight years with Robert Blalack, a filmmaker from Cal Arts. So rage, at least for me, dropped away fairly quickly. And the defensive posturing dropped away very quickly. What happened is we began to explore what indeed was a feminist—and woman's—sensibility. "Feminist" meaning a politicized version of a woman's sensibility, and politics being the evaluation of power and the attempt to distribute power equally, to reassess the nature of power. This caused some men, like John Duncan, to become exceedingly hostile—I think because of a feeling of being left out when what was really happening was he strongly identified with women. He subsequently went off and did some very weird performances. It was difficult, I think, for the men in our lives to make

adjustments to what had been happening with us those few years. They certainly had to go through a lot of changes in ways of relating.

MOIRA ROTH: You were going to talk more about the One Woman Shows exhibition.

SUZANNE LACY: Right. I was teaching performance. Education was important, and so was the very powerful sensibility of community. Arlene had come back from meeting Mary Daly for the first time and handed me *Beyond God the Father*, which I found to be a very transformative book. I began to understand that the kind of romantic sensibility I had about what was happening had a spiritual substance to it and could be translated through the framework of spirituality, as Mary Daly had done. In *One Woman Shows* I chose three women who had significance for me for whom I would create a performance. Then I asked them to choose two or three women for whom they would perform, and those people to choose two to three women for whom they would perform, and so on. We spent a month organizing this network. The idea was that I would work with my three women to enable them to perform if they didn't know much about performance, and that this would get carried on. I deliberately chose Arlene, an older woman librarian friend of mine [named Mary Holden—SL], and Laurel Klick. They were women who had great significance for me. The way the piece took place was that the audience came in and stood behind a rope in this rather long gallery. I did a single dramatic performance for the three women, who had come forward and were sitting in a line facing me. In my performance, I soaked my clothes in black paint and named myself the woman who was raped, the woman who was a prostitute, and the woman who loved women. While naming myself, I read rape reports from the L.A.P.D and slammed my body into the wall (I had developed this technique, probably the cause of my back problems, of leaping into a wall and twisting my hips aside, slamming very hard so that my whole body would imprint on the wall), and then I took blood out of my arm (a skill I'd developed as a medical assistant).

MOIRA ROTH: [chuckles]

SUZANNE LACY: I injected it into a grapefruit. Those three gestures were related to those three women. Then Arlene and Laurel and Mary Holden went to different parts of the room along with their audience, who sat and watched them do performances. Very quickly it went from a single activity to a proliferated carnival of activity which continued throughout the month. During the opening, you saw fifty people busily performing and engaging; then, throughout the month, people would perform for each other whenever they chose and leave remnants. This piece was called *One Woman Shows*, meaning one woman shows another woman.

MOIRA ROTH: That was the first time you'd really done very complex organizing, which obviously is a major aspect of your later work. That's different from doing something in a classroom situation, or a collaborative performance with three other people.

SUZANNE LACY: Yes, probably. It's so organic to me that it's hard to know when things shifted. We all used similar structures in our performances. They were a sort of linear stringing together of imagery connected by another layering of words. I was doing a project at the time called *Monster Series: Construction of a Novel Frankenstein*. The central metaphor was the Frankenstein story, the way Mary Shelley tells it in the book as opposed to the Hollywood version. I think it's a powerful metaphor about creativity and responsibility. In the book, the monster is rejected and abandoned by Dr. Frankenstein, who casts him out into the world of men who hate him. Slowly the monster comes to find out who created him; he begs Dr. Frankenstein to make him a woman Frankenstein, and they'll go away together and leave forever the spite of people. But just at the moment of giving life to the female monster, Dr. Frankenstein can't stand it and tears her up, causing the monster to go crazy. The monster spends the rest of his life pursuing the doctor to the end of the world. This is very different from the Hollywood story in which the monster is born weird and goes after Frankenstein immediately. I think that's a significant transformation of the metaphor. It leaves out the notion of responsibility for what you've made.

MOIRA ROTH: It seems to me you're very attracted to this maybe for another reason, which has to do with all the imagery of Frankenstein. There's the theme of moral responsibility, and then there's the theme of the. . . .

SUZANNE LACY: Body parts. The assembling and the disassembling of the body. It's not

unlike Allan's exploration, but more graphically biological. Like my piece, *Anatomy Lesson*, in which I sell my body parts. Legally, according to California laws, you had to buy and then designate. You could not buy and have. So on my death if you own my cornea, you could designate it anyplace you wanted. That would be your legal right.

MOIRA ROTH: How does this relate to your very long time interest in vampires?

SUZANNE LACY: Dracula is another monster metaphor. It is different from the kind of physicality of *Frankenstein*, but a more profound metaphor for good and evil. Both works have in them the desire to conquer death, which I think is very strong among artists. The various times I've used vampire metaphors, they've been related to blood. *Frankenstein*, if you notice, is devoid of blood. It's the parts that are assembled and ignited with electricity whereas the Dracula story is about blood coursing through the body. Bram Stoker's Dracula is more fascinating than the Hollywood derivations, in part because there's a lot of travel in it. His body is moved from place to place and goes through many transformations. He becomes a wolf at one point. He travels with these coffins that are spread throughout London so that he always has a place to rest during the day. It's the sense of bodies moving through space, being separate, being vulnerable, being immensely physical. I suppose I went into medicine because of a sensibility I've had since childhood, of being involved in a very vulnerable, unpredictable encasement. I'm constantly astounded by the way bodies have a life of their own, irrespective of our consciousness. [laughing] I suppose that's just the classical Western European division of mind from body. In medicine, I was interested in the reintegration through psychosomatic ideas. In art, I think one is able to explore the sensate quality of being in a body that plays tricks on you and ultimately kills you off—or dies with you inside of it—whoever "you" is. I remember discovering Lukas Samaras's book, *Auto Album*, at one point, and being very influenced by it. He did an auto interview and an autobiography. He talked about this messy quality of being inside a body and being born, being inside of a birth canal, being of flesh, and how problematic that was for certain kinds of consciousnesses. I think the integration of the mind and the body is one of the major projects of many of us in this culture. I do this through art—in particular, through these vampire and Dracula works. And through various other sorts of experimentations with inner and outer reality, such as *The Anatomy Lesson*. This was a series of pieces, including the body parts contract and several photographic series that featured such things as lying nude in a swimming pool with guts on top of me so that it looks like I'm being eviscerated; and a black and white photograph of me flying through the air nude, the photo ripped in half, with a color photo of guts coming through the body. One of the other things that affected me around that time was Stan Brackage's film *Autopsy*—the act of seeing with one's own eyes—where medicine and art come together. In the fifteen hundreds, the people who were carefully ferreting away bodies from graves and drawing and dissecting them, were simultaneously artists and medical people. They were investigating an interiority that they could only fantasize before. So vision and interiority were very key to that kind of concern.

MOIRA ROTH: I was suddenly struck by your present involvement with psychoanalysis, and that as long as I've known you, you've been very involved in health foods, exercise, with an enormous attentiveness to keeping your body in shape.

SUZANNE LACY: Keeping in shape is probably not only an offshoot of a curiosity about or kind of relationship to the body. In fact if I don't exercise I get depressed, and if I don't eat right, I get hypoglycemic. [laughs] But the analysis is different. And Zen. You didn't mention that. I do practice Zen, and what I have been encountering are moments in those two practices where you can move. . . .

Tape 2, side B (March 16, 1990 portion)

SUZANNE LACY: . . . your consciousness into a part of your body. At that point, an emotion, which is the contraction of the body, and the body are the same. I just recently finished writing an article where I tried to track down the psychological subthemes in my consciousness that were manifest in a work of art that, while apparently political, in its very structuring has to do with the way I perceive the world. At an even deeper level, it's not just my way of perceiving the world; it finally reduces to the energy rhythms in the body. Of course it's always dangerous to do an interpretation of your own psyche. But I'm trying to apply what I know now about myself and these sort of unconscious rhythms and energies, to what I can see in the structuring of my works. It's both familial and biological.

MOIRA ROTH: Do you think that this has to do with some kind of women's sensitivity?

SUZANNE LACY: In the late sixties and early part of the seventies, some of the best performance explorations that involved an investigation of the body were done by men, like Vito Acconci. But there were many more women. Everybody from Yvonne Rainer to Joan Jonas to Eleanor Antin. Performance gave them a way to engage with the intimacies and the physicality of their bodies—and of their experience. It was a less structured framework, a more direct translation of experience. You could enact characters, and all women knew how to act and put on a show, obviously. It's something we're trained in from birth. There were many women, such as Eleanor Antin and Lynn Hershman, who took on this form of exploration of the selves through characterization. Women's training probably allows the expression of these more than men's. Women go into therapy more. They go to doctors more. They just have a heightened degree of sensitivity to their body. And so I think women—not only from the early feminist art program in Fresno, but women across the country—began to move into performance as a way to express more subtle and sophisticated concerns than we could through the laborious practice of learning how to draw or paint. We taught performance as a major part of the curriculum at Feminist Studio Workshop. There was literature and writing, basically journal writing. There was art history, painting, drawing. There was print medium. Our notion that one's work, one's sensibility, should be moving out into the public made the offset press an important tool of the curriculum. And graphic design was part of that, as well as performance art. Performance art was one of the major parts of the program, and that's unusual in any art school, even now. The women all took it. It was accessible, it was immediate, it had an integrative function in their own self-learning. And as a result of its prioritization, many women performance artists did come out of that program. Also, we were attracting interest from a range of other performance artists across the country. We began to collect this women's performance energy, and held a couple of conferences a year apart. I remember Yvonne Rainer and Joan Jonas came, and Eleanor Antin did her first performance ever there. Helen Harrison performed with Newton for the first time. Bonnie Sherk took off her clothes, and aggravated everybody. And Lynn Hershman was there. Linda Montano met Pauline Oliveros and developed their long-term relationship there. Betsy Damon and Martha Wilson were there. Mary Beth Edelson didn't come to the conferences, but she was around. Nancy Buchanan and Barbara Smith were there. I had a very active involvement with these people. They were beginning to surface as a force on their own, and whoever was visible and out there in performance began to make journeys to the Woman's Building. It was the first time that this notion of women's performance, feminist performance, was ever put together. At one conference, we did a very nice exhibition that was wall documentation and installations. Sharon Shore's transvestite costume was exhibited with photographs of her as a man and as a woman. It was an important era. The students were Cheri Gaulke, Jerri Allyn, Terri Wolverton, and Nancy Angelo and Vanalyn Green—women who subsequently went on in one way or another to make significant performance contributions in their own right. I think there were aesthetic structural developments starting to take place as a result of the relationship Arlene, Sheila, myself, Deena, Ruth, and Helen Alm had with each other. We came from very different art forms, but were very closely aligned in terms of politics. We were all searching for ways in our discipline to integrate politics with emotional content and with form language. And we worked to develop educational methodology. We developed critiquing methodologies which were quite interesting in their relationship between surface presentation, the psyche or meaning and intention of the artist, and the message that the work eventually communicated. So there was a sort of tripartite analysis that went on during critique sessions. Sometimes critiques were with two faculty and one student, sometimes in groups. When Deena Metzger and I would get paired together, we were known as the tear jerkers. We would reduce them to tears immediately. Not because we were offensive, but because we would be able to penetrate the pain or the problems that they were coming up against in their work.

One interesting thing was how we encountered a lot of female rage. It was the first time I ever came up against it as a phenomenon. There was a lot of euphoria when the new group would come in September. Then, about six weeks later, we could count on covert rage, which would build and finally get expressed in one of our community meetings. It would often get focused on the curriculum, so we would change the curriculum, and then the next year the same thing would happen. We began to recognize there was a pattern going on. I think Judy, Arlene, and Sheila had actually come up against this in the very first year, because when they hired me, they said, "One thing you have to be aware of is that the students will try to divide us. They will do all kinds of manipulative things because this is how women have learned to take power. Some of them take the mode of rage as a kind of

channel to pass through. And if you're going to work with us, you have to be absolutely committed to not allowing divisiveness. That is, when a student comes to you and has a problem with another one of us, you tell her to go to that person." I thought at the time, "This is crazy," until, of course, I got into it and realized how intense an all-woman's environment, in fact, really is.

MOIRA ROTH: Speaking of that, at this point who was the audience mostly for either yours or other peoples' performances? Just women? Women and Men?

SUZANNE LACY: Women and men. Some of the early Womenspace performance audiences were largely women, but the ones at the Woman's Building, the Grandview Galleries, were still largely male and female.

MOIRA ROTH: What did you want from your audience? Or expect?

SUZANNE LACY: Quiet.

MOIRA ROTH: [chuckles]

SUZANNE LACY: There was one I had where they weren't quiet, and it was somewhat devastating. It was at the grand opening of the Woman's Building. I did a performance called Lamb Construction. It was a form of narrative, with linking images such as black and white mice running up and down a string suspended over the audience, and the reconstruction of a lamb on a sawhorse from its entrails. Men dressed as women and women dressed as men. . . .

MOIRA ROTH: And that didn't quieten them?

SUZANNE LACY: It didn't quieten them a bit. They were drunk, pounding on the door to get in when the room was jammed with people. The audience was quiet, but outside they were drunk and noisy. That was a big lesson about performing at openings—that you have to create a framework that will accommodate people's "social natures." Several months earlier at a quiet gallery with a large audience, the same performance was quite successful. But at one of the Woman's Building's blow-out openings it was a different situation entirely. What did I expect? I thought a lot about audiences. We all thought a lot about audiences.

MARCH 25, 1990

[Tape 2, side B; March 25, 1990 portion]

MOIRA ROTH: Last time, we left off our discussion when we'd begun to address the idea of audience, both for yourself and for other performance artists or other artists at the Women's Building.

SUZANNE LACY: Whether we were painters or performers, we were quite conscious of our work's effect on its audience. Probably much more than other artists at the time, we gave a great deal of consideration to who the audience is, what experience they would have, what they would take away with them, and how the work may or may not transform their life. Those kind of concerns came out of the fact that we believed that we were revealing some essential truths about our experience as women and that those truths were not revealed adequately or appropriately in the general culture, that popular culture in particular represented a kind of charade of what a woman was, a parody or a facade. And, of course, we didn't know what "a woman" was. We were barely finding out who we were. But we were clear that there was a big discrepancy between our own experience and what we saw in the media and popular culture. And as a result we were very concerned with the clarity of the communication to this larger audience. We hoped, perhaps naively—although, actually, experience has proven that, for feminists in general, it has not been a naive hope—hoped that we, through our collective self-representation, would change the way people viewed women. There were other reasons we were concerned with audiences. We talked a lot about the elitism of art, how art could come from a working-class experience, could come from the black experience, etc. The parallels between our condition and that of the working class and blacks did not escape us, of course, as was apparently true of many feminists in the past. Our analysis was not limited to women. It was extended to other areas of oppression. So the democratization of art, making the creative process itself along with the fruits of artists'

labors available to a broader audience, was very important. I remember my own natural progression in Three Weeks in May from thinking, "I want to talk about rape," to "Who do I want to talk about rape to?" "Well, I want artists to see it, but I also want it to become much more influential in the culture at large. Therefore it doesn't make any sense to put it in a gallery." At that point in time galleries were not particularly effective in the general audience realm. So we thought about moving out, not just into the streets, but onto the air waves, expanding our audience. We thought about, once we reached that audience, how they would respond.

I don't think it was so simplistic as wanting to control the audience. It was wanting to be clear, and wanting to support change, whatever that meant. And it meant different things to different people. As a result of those kinds of concerns, we began to explore what process an audience member would go through when confronted with what we knew to be very loaded material. For example, one of the most brilliant pieces I've ever seen was Nancy Angelo's video tape for the "Incest Awareness" project, an expanded artwork that she and Leslie Labowitz and several other women put together to explore, with artists, therapists, writers, children, and the public at large, the subject of incest. Nancy created a videotape by tape recording straight-on head shots of six women talking about their experiences of incest. She put these monitors at eye level in a circle of empty chairs. The monitors talked to each other so that you found you were sitting in the middle of a consciousness-raising group on incest. With the traditional art format—wall in a gallery—you would have confronted the material and gone away. But to view this work, you sat in a circle, so it created the form of a consciousness-raising group. After the tapes went off and the program was over, a person trained in incest counseling came out and worked with the audience. This strategy was based on knowing that at least a fourth of the people in the audience would have been incest victims and may never have talked about it. One had to take care of that audience if you wanted to do something other than just slap them in the face and say, "Isn't that interesting? Weren't you impressed by my work?"

I basically felt, and I suspect others did too, that unless you had taken certain steps on the voyage of healing yourself, you couldn't really deal effectively with the material for an audience. You not only had to know what the material was, you had to know how a person might respond to it, how they could accommodate it and transform. So we began to include the process for the audience's own transformation within the works of art. Since many of my later works had audience participation, the notion of the process an audience goes through in witnessing my work became a very important part of my developing aesthetic strategies.

MOIRA ROTH: What other theories were you discussing at that time in the Woman's Building?

SUZANNE LACY: Well, we were intuitively creating some things that I now think had an impact on the larger art environment. I remember with a sort of irony the day in the mid-seventies when I heard someone call Chris Burden a political artist. The irony was that, until that point in time, political art was a bad word in the art world at large. Yet because of our aspirations for change, we had all affirmatively embraced it and decided we were going to be political artists no matter what anybody thought. And then to hear Chris called a political artist, I thought, "Well, either his popularity is waning or somebody's changing the name of the game."

It's quite possible to look at some of the ideas going on now in public art, for example, and find a great deal of influence from early feminist art. The ecological movement, the Gaia movement, many of these ideas that are just now coming to the forefront in art, have origins in early feminist art theory as it came out of the west coast (which is what I'm familiar with). For example, the notion that art was communication, a link, a crossover mechanism, caused us to want to deal with people of different races, people of different ages. Collaboration also came out of the sensibility that if art was a communication, the process of making art and the communication that occurred between the artists was an important and integral part of the work itself. That was one idea. Another was about the body as primary site for art—the experience of the body and the physical body itself. Now definitely feminists were not alone in that. Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, many artists in the early seventies, were beginning to experiment directly with the body as site. And of course in previous decades people did as well. This evoked, for example, more "objective" works that I, Nancy Buchanan, and Martha Rosler did, which were almost self-objectifying. Remember Martha's Statistics of a Citizen Simply Obtained? I did several photographic pieces that nobody knows much about. In one, I measured men's penises, noses, thumbs, and foot sizes to make a comparison. It was called An Old Wives' Tale. Other series of photographs showed all these pseudo-scientific ways of analyzing the body. A lot of early feminist work used objective ways of viewing their own bodies and their roles. You even see that detachment in Cindy Sherman's work. I think it

came out of an attempt to make some sense out of the images of women we grew up with and how that relates or does not relate to subjectivity. The body as site also evoked a lot of other work such as Barbara Smith's work, which is about the infinitely imminent and subjective experience of the body. I think the discrepancy between social imagery and our own sense of ourselves led to everything from Eleanor Antin parading around Solano Beach as a king, to Judith Golden gracing the covers of *Mother Jones* and *Redbook* in fabricated pop culture imagery. This form of experimenting with self-imagery and character and role came out of that early period. As did also the organization Women Against Violence Against Women, with their analysis (and my own), of the ways images were constructed and the power relationship inherent in that construction. We were looking at people like Erving Goffman, George Gerbner, media theorists, and sociologists to extract information. We were doing what I think is basically very similar to what deconstructionists have been doing in the last few years, and calling it something different. I remember at a Society for Photographic Education conference a couple years ago in Houston I was quite amused to see a male theorist deliver a slide lecture on the pornographic iconography of the high heel. I thought, "This is very interesting, because in a very dispassionate way, he is saying the very same things that Women Against Violence Against Women said in a very passionate way when they dissected the high heel and other images in pornography. So the discrepancy between interior reality and culturally projected image was something that evoked very different kinds of work.

I think another thing we're just now beginning to see in public art is this sense of what it means to be public and what it means to be private as artists. You see that in the censorship debates. Much is made of Robert Mapplethorpe's being censored, but I think the key issue is, "What is the right of the public?" and "What is the right of the private self?" It's a very rich debate, if we can just frame it right. We were very conscious about the public and private debate. About the interior private self and its relationship to the audience, to the public, to self-representation, to group representation—about responsibility for collective representation. I remember Sheila de Bretteville talking a lot about couch and chair: The chair was the private, and the couch was the public or the collective, the collaborative or the communicative. This fundamental concern was one that we worked on very hard, in developing different art languages for different audiences.

We were also very concerned with—maybe this is parallel or maybe it's the same thing—inside and outside. And that had to do with power. Who was inside? It was very clear that ethnic, feminist, political, and Marxist artists were outside in the early seventies. There came a point in the mid-eighties when many of those people were inside, but in a way that for the more politically sophisticated included a good deal of skepticism about their ability to actually influence the art world. We were concerned with race and class. I worked in Watts with Evelina Newman, an older black woman, and her friends. She was a neighborhood organizer and we did several performance pieces together that had to do with class, with age, and with race. The work basically reframed the creativity of those women in the housing project within the context of a performance work. Group Material has subsequently done that. I believe many artists at that time experimented with this kind of reframing. Even Baldessari did. I think that, while certainly one wouldn't say Baldessari's came from a feminist impulse, that the kind of heart in that notion does come from feminist theory. It's a questioning of power. It's a questioning of the prioritization of images. Who is in the art world? Who has the right to make images? Who has the right to represent? Activism was an important aspect of the work. I think this has been ignored in recent discussions on feminism and the arts. The kind of radical base of even the Latino movement has been devastatingly cut off from what's happening with the so-called "Latino Boom." Judy Baca was saying just the other day that the real heart of Chicano art came from the movement in Chicano communities, connected to empowerment (people like Luis Valdez and Jose Montoya). With the "Latino Boom," there's an attempt to disconnect the radical activist base and focus on style. It's the same thing when Mary Boone lets Barbara Krueger in. Barbara Krueger's work is wonderful in many ways, but it is not grassroots activist work. This doesn't mean it's not feminist. I think what is happening is that instead of feminism, it's the activist community base that is being disconnected and disavowed. I was distressed, as were many people, at Thalia Gouma-Peterson's article.

MOIRA ROTH: In Art Bulletin?

SUZANNE LACY: Yes. It was a prodigious article and I appreciated the attempt to name and classify and bring out the issues. It was successful on many counts. But I think that what people came away with was a sense that in the seventies there were the "Essentialists" and in the eighties there was the "Second Generation." This was a very problematic division. It

certainly described what I think exists in many people's minds, but it's politically naive to do an article like that, if one is interested in politics, because what it does in fact is to frame and codify divisions that simply aren't accurate. The contribution of feminism to politics is, at the very least, to look at change and ideas as additive, cumulative—to connect with historical ideas of women rather than to constantly disassociate ourselves in order to gain attention.

MOIRA ROTH: In this context, would it be appropriate to talk about Three Weeks in May and then the beginning of your long-term association with Leslie Labowitz?

SUZANNE LACY: Well, Three Weeks in May was the piece in which I began to articulate many of the theories I've just been talking about. Sheila de Bretteville and Arlene Raven were influences, and earlier Judy Chicago. To a slightly lesser extent, Deena Metzger, Ruth Iskin, and Helen Alm were too. We were all working together as faculty at the Woman's Building. We had many discussions, of course, both around student's work and our own, that dealt with these kinds of theoretical concerns. In Three Weeks in May, I drew from that history and that present reality. Sheila de Bretteville, for example, was very influential in Three Weeks in May, in the decision to go out of the gallery and into the shopping center. My first initial impulse in this piece was to go to the police department every day, get the rape reports, go back and post them on white postcards on the wall of the gallery. It was not unlike Vito Acconci going to the gallery to receive his mail every day. Or Linda Montano living in a gallery she converted to a manger for two weeks at Christmas.

Tape 3, side A

SUZANNE LACY: There were a lot of things going on in the art world at the time, where people experimented with the gallery as a site for daily activity. This was my first idea for the image. But then I began to think, "Well this is kind of crazy. This information needs to reach a much broader audience than the people who are going to come into that gallery." So I decided to do the same thing on a huge bulletin board wall in the middle of a shopping center. I was concerned with the irony of the daily life of people shopping juxtaposed to the on-going tragedy of violence that was happening at the same time. It was Sheila who really supported not just the displacement of the site, but furthermore the transformation of the way in which the material was presented. She urged me to consider reframing the image so that it spoke to that broader audience, not in the kind of language of a gallery, but in a more populist language. Sheila's favorite colors at that time were street-sign yellow and black. She said, "Make it look like a road. Make it look like something that people travel through that's very much part of their experience." This led to the notion of locating things geographically on maps of Los Angeles. Arlene Raven had suggested earlier that my artwork should include a path for the audience to travel in understanding and coming to terms with violence—that which was done to them and/or that which they perpetrated. Arlene is an historian and critic, and Sheila is a graphic designer. While in very different fields, their ideas were both influential. I think we were each playing with each other's ideas and bringing them back to our own professions and working with them.

So, first I created one large map where rape reports were marked with a big red "RAPE" stamp. Then it occurred to me—and this again came out of theory—that good political art does not just show victimization. It awakes you to victimization, but it also shows a road to empowerment. So the second map, identical to the first map, showed where rape crisis centers and rape hotlines were located. And that led to the next step: using the actual fabric of the city as a grid upon which a series of events would occur that were educational, artistic, and ritualistic. These included both public media and government response. Something like thirty events took place over the three weeks during which the rapes were being recorded.

MOIRA ROTH: Let me interrupt for a second. Why three weeks?

SUZANNE LACY: It was probably purely aesthetic. I like threes. I was just realizing today I frequently do works in May. So something just personal, I guess, comes in there. Anyway, first I went to try to get a downtown mall to cooperate. But everybody I talked to was just horrified that I would want to do something like this in a mall. They were afraid rape reports would show up their location itself as dangerous and scare away shoppers. Helene Fried's father was the head of Los Angeles Public Works at the time. The man was incredibly supportive and let us use the City Hall mall, right under City Hall. This is where I learned that public work requires a problem solving that leads to an expansion of the work. Being

involved with the city was very fortuitous because it gave me access to the police department. I had access to city employees to help install. This in turn opened avenues for access to City Hall politicians. And that opened up access to the media. On one hand I was doing community organizing among all the rape hotline activists (who by and large thought I was crazy), and on the other hand I was opening up various avenues to the kind of systems that would take the piece into a larger arena. I remember, for example, approaching the city attorney to do a press conference with me, along with the deputy mayor. He did it partly because it was his job, but partly because he was going through a grilling in the media for shredding police files. I can't remember how much of this was calculated on our part, but him doing a press conference to announce the opening of the piece, given who he was, brought every media person in town. They wanted to see what this character, who they thought had shredded police files, was up to now. Ironically, they really focused on us. We got a lot of visibility out of that political turn of events. The politicians were very valuable in giving a kind of solidity and presence that the media thinks is respectable. I also worked with artists who did their own private, ritualistic works, such as the exorcising of rape experiences. I met Leslie Labowitz through Ellie Antin. She immediately began working with me, helping to produce *Three Weeks in May*, and doing several of her own more public pieces.

We remained good friends. One day, six months later, in December 1977, we were looking at the L.A. Times headlines about the tenth Hillside Strangler victim, when Leslie started complaining about the media coverage. Leslie is incredibly analytical and has a keen sense of media. We were talking about the way the media portrayed these events. At first we felt extremely depressed and helpless. But then we decided there was one thing we could do: We could make an art piece out of it. Leslie had watched how the media operated with *Three Weeks in May* and formulated from that the notion of the art/media event. (Ant Farm up in San Francisco was doing the same thing.) From this political base, Leslie began saying, "What if instead of what Suzanne is doing, which is to use the media in the service of the piece, we use the media as a performance venue? Why don't we just design a press event as a performance?" In August, with Women Against Violence Against Women and the National Organization of Women—who wanted to announce a national boycott of records because of sex-violent album covers—she planned a media event. She looked at how many shots the news covered of each news item, what kind of camera angles they used, and what they were likely to say. She scripted this whole thing out, doing a very slow, Brechtian kind of piece, one designed specifically so that this shot would be first, this shot second, this shot third, the announcer would stand here and say this, etc. She pretty much got them all to do that. She had done this in August. In early December, we decided to do a media event on the Hillside Strangler to critique the coverage. We called it *In Mourning and In Rage*.

MOIRA ROTH: This was after the piece you were describing that she did. . . .

SUZANNE LACY: Record Companies Drag Their Feet?

MOIRA ROTH: Right.

SUZANNE LACY: Yes. We worked for two weeks straight, around the clock, designing and creating this work. We had to do it very fast before the strangler killed somebody else. We really needed to work within what was happening in the media framework. We knew that there would be a great deal of coverage, and indeed that was the case. It was all very well choreographed. The event itself took place on December 13. We got a funeral hearse, a motorcycle cop, and sixty women in black in a processional. We got ten actresses who were six feet tall.

MOIRA ROTH: With shoes and headdresses?

SUZANNE LACY: They were six foot tall, but they ended up being about seven feet tall by the time we put shoes and headdresses on them. We paraded around City Hall in this funeral processional, and out of the hearse came these ten women, who lined up for a presentation to the media. While I was working with the actresses, circling City Hall and directing that part of the performance, Leslie was at City Hall working with the media, making sure they didn't find out what was going on and leave early. In fact, it was a very well covered event. It reached, I think, statewide television, and its repercussions were even larger in the art world. I think the piece served as a model for a kind of political intervention into media. Much was made of the actual resulting changes that happened in Los Angeles, such as the reward money being donated to self-defense. City Hall also started a self-defense program for its

employees as a direct result of the piece. All these city politicians got up and pledged things that they would do, because we'd invited them to be part of the artwork. The phone company had previously been stalling about doing emergency listings for rape hotline numbers, but when one of the reporters enterprisingly went right from our performance to the phone company, they said they would just love to do emergency listing for rape hotline numbers. (They subsequently de-listed a year later.) Anyway, a variety of things happened, but then that night the Hillside Strangler killed another woman. It was after the news coverage, which hit every single news channel in town as a lead-off story. The media was so pumped up about the Hillside Strangler, they would cover anything on the subject, especially since they thought we were enraged feminists who were going to storm City Hall. That's literally what they thought. So they were all down there with their cameras—every camera in town. Leslie and I were invited to several talk shows to talk about our position, which was basically that the media was sensationalizing the crimes in the same form that television entertainment sensationalizes sex-violent crimes. It's quite clear that those kinds of cases are treated almost as if they were fictional narrative themselves. There is a very good book on that, on the Hillside Strangler, which talks about the media's and the reporters' response to the whole situation.

MOIRA ROTH: That was built into the text when the ten women each spoke very briefly, emphasizing going from the specifics of the Hillside Strangler to the effect of imagery on TV, etc.

SUZANNE LACY: Yes. The philosophical or political representation in the piece was meant to transform the media's tendency to isolate and particularize violent crimes, mythologizing them. We wanted to create a sense of how this happens to women as a group or a class, not because Joan was standing on a street corner at five in the morning and she happened to have a sister who was a hooker—the way the media likes to treat these crimes. Within the text of the piece, there was embodied a media critique. We talked and wrote extensively about this after the piece.

MOIRA ROTH: Could I just go back to one thing which has always interested me?

SUZANNE LACY: Yes.

MOIRA ROTH: There was a lot of self-critique while you were doing the piece because originally it was more in rage and less in mourning—less of a ritual, as far as I remembered.

SUZANNE LACY: I think it was the opposite.

MOIRA ROTH: Okay.

SUZANNE LACY: It was more in mourning and not in rage.

MOIRA ROTH: But then you talked it over with a number of people from the Woman's Building.

SUZANNE LACY: We had an open forum with women who had been raped, where we presented the plan. They said that the mourning, the funereal appearance of the whole thing, was not an activist enough stance and didn't underscore the rage that they felt. So that was how it got transformed into *In Mourning and In Rage*, with the tenth woman not in black but in red. It was she who cloaked each woman as she performed with a red cape symbolizing rage and self-defense. The symbols became much more active as a result. The other interesting thing that happened was that the so-called radical feminist community, as a result of this piece, got much more positive about the work that we were doing. By and large they had been quite skeptical of the feminists at the Woman's Building, who occasionally wore nail polish, and who made mistakes like me. One I made when I was directing all the performers that day: I said, "ladies" to introduce them. [both chuckle] That was a kind of political faux pas that we lovingly embraced at the Woman's Building. I got hissed from the back of the room, which I thought was pretty funny. Subsequently, I had phone calls to borrow the black capes from another feminist group that wanted to go to City Hall. In fact, over the years, I've had a lot of feminists use the models and even the imagery of my pieces to their own specifically political ends, which is fine with me.

MOIRA ROTH: So, at that point, did it seem obvious to you and Leslie that you would begin

systematically working together? What happened next?

SUZANNE LACY: Well, then Las Vegas presented itself. I was asked to do a piece like Three Weeks in May in Las Vegas, and I invited Leslie to collaborate.

MOIRA ROTH: Which was?

SUZANNE LACY: It was called Reverence To Rape To Respect, drawn with permission from the film critic Molly Haskell's book. So we did a work similar to Three Weeks in May, but it was a little problematic, with traveling and balancing our relationship so that we would be more equal-appearing in the eyes of the world. And then we were invited again to do something by Women Against Violence and Pornography in the Media in San Francisco. Lynn Campbell, an amazing organizer who subsequently died of cancer, was one of the editors of the book, Take Back the Night. This was the first Take Back the Night anti-pornography conference held. We got Holly Near to sing "Fight Back," the song she made up the night before the Hillside Strangler piece. She had performed it for the first time a cappella there in L.A. in quite a moving closing. We asked her to do it again in the San Francisco Take Back the Night performance.

That piece was a real disaster, not for Leslie, but for me. We worked very hard on preparing a float. The march was to take place from the conference, three miles over the hill and onto the Broadway strip, which in San Francisco is the Honky Tonk district. Strippers and live sex acts and that sort of thing. We had this idea of pulling a float down the middle of the street, with women clearing the path and ululating on either side. We knew that we had to create an image that would be more powerful and yet related to that incredible neon barrage and the sounds of the strip. We must have worked on this float for a week or two. On the front, we built a virgin figure that was based on an image Leslie had been very impressed with in Spain during the Santa Semana celebrations, where a virgin is carried with candles through the streets. On the backside of our virgin was the whore. And the whore was Hecate-inspired, a three-headed lamb carcass with pornography spewing out of its guts. So it was an image of reverence to rape, of the dual images of women that occur in pornography. This was all very well and good, but what happened was a real lesson for me. Leslie and I got increasingly out of contact emotionally during the construction of the work. She was working on the front half, the Madonna half, and knew exactly what she wanted. But I was tortured by not knowing how to begin dealing with the back half. The difference was partly that her research involved candles whereas mine involved going to porn shops. I hung out in porn shops. I had men masturbating in front of me. It was really painful to get the material I needed for that float. We didn't realize it at the time, but I think it was also my fear of getting enmeshed in the image. Leslie was much more comfortable just immersing herself in the image. So we got very far apart.

I was having to deal with how to get the candlelights to work on the truck and other logistics. Leslie was less concerned with logistics, so she went off to the strip and prepared stuff there while I stood in front of the 3,000 conference attendees and directed people on how they could perform in the performance. They were to march down on either side of us, clear the cars by lining the streets and blocking them physically, then ululate so that the whole sound of three thousand women would take over the space. Into the space would come our float, followed by marching women in black. Holly Near would sing, search lights would go on; it would be a spectacle drama. But what happened was, I got down there, briefed the women, and then came with the float, creeping up a side street to Broadway. Leslie was up there already, was going to signal me when the marchers arrived. It wasn't until I got to the corner (after dealing with policemen trying to get us out of there) that I realized the problem. How I thought I could have seen a signal that Leslie was going to give me two or three blocks away, at night, on Broadway with cars crowding the street, was just phenomenal! Talk about a major symbol that you've lost communication with someone. [chuckles] And in fact we had lost aesthetic communication. That was the key issue. So I just figured, "Well, what the hell. Let the float go." And I signaled them when to go. Well, the women weren't there yet. In fact, they were up on the hill. As soon as they saw the float, they took off running, ululating at the top of their lungs, three thousand women flooding onto Broadway. In the meantime, the traffic flow, creeping in the other direction, was brought to an almost dead halt.

MOIRA ROTH: [laughs]

SUZANNE LACY: And Leslie, up on the bandstand with Holly Near, was just fascinated with it all. She just thought it was the most entertaining thing she had ever seen in her life.

MOIRA ROTH: [laughing]

SUZANNE LACY: I, however, was down with the cop explaining why we had to let the float go. I didn't see a thing. I just knew that it wasn't working the way I thought it was going to work. And then, the women got all excited and started smashing windows, and running into bars, and all kinds of things. The march dissolved into a general chaos around the float. And yet, bravely, the float continued, the performers continued, and they ripped pornography off of the thing like they were supposed to. But it took me weeks to recover.

MOIRA ROTH: What was the aftermath in terms of your collaboration with Leslie?

SUZANNE LACY: Well, it didn't damage our relationship in the long run. We just had lots of talks about it, because she was quite satisfied, while I was personally devastated. We had wanted and expected and got different things from the performance. One of the things I learned is never do a performance without a walkie-talkie. The other thing I learned is get up high, wherever you are, and look down on it all—get a good perspective on the “stage.”

MOIRA ROTH: When did the concept of Ariadne start?

SUZANNE LACY: Around that time, Leslie and I had done enough of this work to realize that there was a great deal of interest in it. It was of interest theoretically because we had paired with Women Against Violence Against Women with their theory and their organizing tactics. Julia London, a farm worker organizer, had come to the Woman's Building as my student in performance. Using her organizing skills plus what she was learning about art, she founded Women Against Violence Against Women. And they were doing what we were doing. We were looking at media. We were looking at images. We were looking at pornography. We were looking at narratives and how they constructed images of women in terms of sex-violence—news narratives, for example. So Ariadne developed as a kind of theory/art nexus, a social art network.

MOIRA ROTH: And it was named after?

SUZANNE LACY: From the Greek myth of Ariadne. It was a network, and that's why we used the spider weaving the web. It was to sponsor events and write articles. It was a context out of which we would generate our works, we would support and advise other people in doing works, and we would write articles on what we were doing. It's similar to what I'm doing with City Sites. It's a way to create a context which generates theory and practice. We did one event that has never been written about that was quite amusing in a variety of ways and, I think, indicative of our practice. We decided to sponsor a film screening of Hardcore, with George C. Scott—the Paul Schrader film. I had a friend at Columbia Studios who was in charge of doing special screenings for the public, something the studios routinely do with a film. They'll invite selected publics in to view a film before it's released or at the time it's released. For some reason this woman was able to convince her employers that a screening for feminists might provide the media attention Hardcore needed. Hardcore is a film about George C. Scott's teenaged daughter, who gets spirited away into the underground of prostitution, and he goes after her. It's what he finds out about that world that's of interest. It's problematic because it's told from a man's point of view. He's basically an abusing father, and the woman is kind of a nonentity. It's about “the Life” and the drama of this man finding out its secrets, rather than the destruction of his daughter. On the other hand, it was good that this material was being revealed. So I didn't have a clearcut, hardline analysis. But I figured there were women that would. We asked Lois Lee, a woman I'd worked with on the Prostitute Notes many years earlier, to cosponsor it with us. She was the head of CAT—California Advocacy for Trollops, basically the L.A. branch of COYOTE, a hooker organization. She and I would lead the discussion after the screening, and we would invite the people. So we stacked the deck with activists and theorists. One hundred fifty people or so showed up, mostly women. We also invited every media camera in town, and got some amazing coverage. We got two TV news coverages, one of them live, on the spot. Everybody expected fireworks. So we did the screening. We led a very lively discussion. The studio execs were in the back of the room, nervous as hell. We tried to get Scott and Schrader to show up, but the studio wouldn't let them because they were afraid of what was going to happen and wanted to keep this potential advantage of theirs under control. Two things happened. We did a very good interview with a woman, I think her name was June Blum. She did a very sensitive spot that ran the next day. And Larry Carroll, from another station, came down and did live coverage. He did what the media always does—the opposite of what we

wanted. He grabbed Lois, who is quite glamorous, and did a glitzy little piece, live, about prostitution—"Isn't this sexy and isn't the movie sexy?" And Lois, who is very bright in other ways, but not the greatest political strategist, just kind of fell into it. [chuckling] Leslie and I sat there, three rows away, watching in horror, saying to ourselves, "Should we? Shouldn't we?" Should we dash over there and leap into the middle of the camera and create a fray? We realized that we didn't have the nerve; that wasn't the kind of image we wanted to portray. So that event was fifty-fifty. It was split, as media coverage, right down the middle in terms of what we wanted and what we didn't want.

MOIRA ROTH: What other pieces did you do together?

SUZANNE LACY: We wrote a lot together. Painfully. One large article for *Hereses*. We worked with politicians and reporters. We gave out awards to people exposing and dealing with violence against women. The next thing that happened was that Leslie began working on the Incest Awareness Project. I was doing a project called Making It Safe, a community organizing project in Ocean Park. So we were doing separate works at that time, but they were both considered Ariadne works, and we collaborated some on that. The Incest Awareness Project was a very interesting piece. It was basically a similar kind of organizing to what we had been doing: It had an exhibition, Nancy Angelo's video tape, news articles, readings, and events, and it provided academic theoretical information and artistic information.

Tape 3, side B

SUZANNE LACY: My project Making It Safe involved grass-roots community organizing, almost door-to-door, in a small neighborhood called Ocean Park in Santa Monica. It was on violence in homes, for a rent-control group, with a Law Enforcement Assistance Association grant. It was basically a series of events in the neighborhood that ended with a huge dinner in a park with hundreds of women. The dinner was quite lovely but the piece wasn't particularly exciting theoretically or conceptually. It was pretty much going over old territory. I realized it lacked a major linking image and that this was critical. The image could be visual or it could be conceptual, but this piece didn't have it. So I never thought it was much of an artwork.

MOIRA ROTH: But in the meantime, you were also doing single performances like *The Life and Times of Donaldina Cameron*, *The Bag Lady*. . . .

SUZANNE LACY: Well, I guess I'd see it as two other kinds of work I was doing simultaneous to these large-scale organizing events. One of them was character explorations. *Donaldina Cameron*, *The Bag Lady*, and *Inevitable Associations* basically involved moving inside a character who represented social status and condition rather than a specific person. Eleanor Antin was a model for that work. She really developed individual characters, personas, whereas I was more interested in a character representing a social condition. So I did *The Bag Lady* in 1978 because of the phenomenon of homelessness and women on the streets. I did *Inevitable Associations* in '76 because of the way in which older women are used symbolically in the culture but overlooked in actuality. I did *Donaldina Cameron*, a turn-of-the-century missionary, as a metaphor for the attempt as an artist to work with people of other races. I did *Crime, Quilts and Arts* with Evalina Newman as an actual bridging with older women in Watts. Those works all involved moving inside of another social experience, linking it to my own. *Crime, Quilts and Art*—the piece with Evalina Newman—is one I like quite a bit, conceptually. She was an older black woman who befriended me when I first went to work in Watts in a small housing complex. Her house became a real refuge. When you go to Watts, one thing you'll see is there's no refuge. You don't stop by a little coffee house to have coffee and write some notes. There's no place to go. You've either got a home when you go there or you don't. If you're black and you live there, there's a few meeting grounds—at the corner store, etc.—but not for me as a white person. So Evalina's home became literally my refuge; I hung out there a lot and we talked. She was an illiterate woman, couldn't read or write. She was in her late fifties, and disabled from working with chemicals as a janitor most of her life. She had asthma and a heart condition. She was an organizer and understood organizing innately. She organized people around her incessantly. She had a group going where she convinced all these older women in her housing complex to make lap quilts for the even older people in nearby nursing homes. They did a whole series of creative things together. She was a quilter. And she knew what I was talking about with performance and community art. We collaborated quite happily on everything we did.

We just had a really lovely relationship. I did a series of quilts that were photographs of the women and Watts and material sewn together, which I displayed with their quilts, pipe cleaner dolls, and other crafts. We did a big exhibition, all of us together. All my quilts had themes, and one of them was called Evalina and I. Evalina and I went to the grocery store together. We went to her doctors together. We took all these urban voyages together, in which I photographed her and she photographed me. I fixed her salads, and she fixed me greens and cornbread. And I was there when her house was robbed. The kids were always trying to break into her house; they didn't like her because she wasn't cowed by them. She caught one kid trying to break into her window once with her gun. All those older women had guns. I sat with her after the first time her house was broken into while she had a heart attack. The cops didn't show up for something like three hours. So when she caught this kid a few months later trying to break into her house, she called the cops up and said, "I've just shot someone." They were there just like that.

So she's a very smart woman. We did a piece together one night that went like this: In advance I called her and asked her if she'd like to go with me to a downtown gallery. I wanted to ride the bus on Saturday night from Watts to the Gallery—as the piece. And she said, "I can't. My heart really wouldn't allow that, but you could start from here and I'll support you in it." So I took that conversation and played it in the gallery at eight o'clock at the start of the performance. I went to Evalina's, and I called Nancy Buchanan who was at the gallery and said, "I'm going to begin the piece now." Nancy hung up the phone and said, "Suzanne's beginning. She'll be coming on these buses from Watts to here." There were slides behind her, a tape of mine and Evalina's phone conversation and the phone call.

These were the visual parts of the piece. The rest of it was the journey that I took as other performances took place in the gallery. Evalina put her gun in her pocket and walked me to the corner where we waited for the bus. I hopped on the bus, made three transfers, and finally arrived at the gallery. It took me about an hour to get down there. Though it was largely conceptual art, she understood what we were doing. We collaborated several times over a couple of years. [My last piece with her was a memorial installation, after she died. I recreated her living room with our photos, her artwork, and a sewing machine in perpetual motion. Her friends in Watts came to the opening and spoke in tribute.—SL]

In the case of the missionary piece, *The Life and Times of Donaldina Cameron*, the process of working within a community happened very differently. I was invited by Lynn Hershman to help create the "female" addenda to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art environmental show, which did not have any women. Lynn curated a series of works by women on Angel Island. In spending time there, I found out it had an abandoned immigration station. So I researched the history of Asian immigration, and began trying to make contact with various people in San Francisco. The person I finally collaborated with was a woman named Kathleen Chang who was an actress and a performer. I had an image of a boat filled with Asian women that would circle the island and never land. It would represent the fact that Chinese women were brought here illegally for wives, for slavery, for servants, and so on since the exclusionary laws prevented legal immigration. Americans didn't want to build up populations of various cultures brought here to work on the railroad, so they made it difficult to start families. An illegal trade in Chinese women developed. Kathleen and I were trying to do this image. But we ran into resistance from the Asian women's community who were frightened that if a white feminist came in and portrayed Asian women and their problems, it would provide yet another opportunity to look down upon Asians in general and particularly Asian men. There has always been this division between feminism and people working on race oppression, and I think it still exists. Kathleen called me one day and said, "We're getting frozen out." There were a few women in the Chinese community who had been interested in the idea, but suddenly we were out the door—probably for the reasons I've just mentioned. I was upset. I remember running downstairs after talking to Kathleen. My car wouldn't work, and I tried to push start it myself, to push it down a busy street and leap into the cab and start the car somehow. In the middle of doing this I thought, "Wait a minute! This is really crazy." And this image came in my head, *The Life and Times of Donaldina Cameron*.

I'd been reading about a missionary woman who was actually Australian, of Scottish and Welsh descent—very similar to my background. She looked like one of my grandmothers. I realized that the problems here were that I was a white woman trying to be involved with another ethnic community, not unlike the position the missionary found herself in. I called up Kathleen and she said, "Great. Let's do that." So we worked out a piece that involved an image of two women—a missionary and a turn-of-the-century Chinese woman—and then we represented these two polar points of view dramatically in readings. We sailed on a schooner onto Angel Island and an audience followed us up a hill to see the piece. The Chinese woman spoke about being subsumed by imperialist culture and the white woman

spoke about her service to the women of that community and her connection to all women. It turned out that both Kathleen and I were terrified that the audience would think we were politically incorrect. And yet we felt compelled to show the two sides of this very complex situation. The third part of the piece was the recounting of our personal relationship and the problems we encountered in creating the piece. It sort of transformed into a tea party where we discussed the process of formulating the piece and the difficulties of inter-racial art and organizing. I think there were aesthetic problems with that work that hinged on the fact that we had an uneasy alliance between performance and acting. She was an actress and wanted to push in the area of drama, and I, as a performance artist, wanted no drama at all. So I think the compromise was not conducive to a great work. But the conceptual and political aspects were very sound.

MOIRA ROTH: I remember that piece. I was there. And I remember being dazzled by the image: the two of you on the boat. I was equally dazzled, but much more moved by the conversation at the end. I was somewhat critical of the acting section, part two. So I felt the first and the third parts were singularly successful, and the second part not particularly successful.

SUZANNE LACY: I actually think it worked quite well as a magazine article, which we did later, because it was a very conceptual work with a strong visual image. It was very hard to make the historical linking to the present evident in a performative piece. In fact, they weren't completely integrated in the written piece, but just put next to each other.

MOIRA ROTH: But the conversation was very rich—both the public one and the conversations between women who were in the audience. It certainly affected me a lot.

SUZANNE LACY: After that, I did several pieces where I became an old woman. The first and I think primary one was *Inevitable Associations*, which I did in '76, and which actually predated all the other public pieces. I was asked to do a performance by the American Theater Association Conference at the Biltmore Hotel. That's where I first met Lynn Hershman, by the way. It was a series put together by David Antin and Frantocek Deak. On surveying the site in downtown L.A., I noticed two things: One, there were a lot of old women that I would have never noticed had I not been very specifically looking at such things. In fact, I was shocked by how much I didn't notice old women in public settings. They were almost invisible. The second thing was I began looking at news articles about the Biltmore and noticing that it was constantly compared to an old woman. The Biltmore was undergoing a renovation and there would be headlines, "Grand Lady Biltmore Gets a Facelift," "There's Still Some Life in the Old Girl Yet." So I thought, "Isn't this interesting the way people will inevitably associate aging buildings with aging women?" I constructed the piece, which took place in the lobby, as three stations. They looked like demonstration stations during a conference registration. The first was a before/after look at the Biltmore. It had articles very specifically selected for this kind of body-aging metaphor. I had a woman, Cheri Gaulke, passing out literature about the renovation so that it looked like it was done by the hotel. The second station was a woman talking about plastic surgery before and after; she was, in fact, a plastic-surgeon consultant. This also could have been a display booth. The third was me getting a slow, three-hour, prosthetic makeover by a Hollywood makeup artist. It was quite a good job. Across from me were ten or twelve red velvet chairs, and one at a time, over the course of a couple of hours, old women came in, looked around, waited until somebody got up and then sat down in these chairs. Toward the end there were ten women in a row, facing me, all in black and all old. At that point the audience began to be suspicious that something was happening. When my makeup job was finished, there was a pause, and then the ten women stood up as one and walked toward me. These were women that I recruited for that event. It was quite interesting because, once again, I ran into some resistance that transformed the piece. This has happened to me repeatedly. I have learned to pay attention to that resistance, because it can cause transformations. I'll tell you about that in a second, but I just wanted to say that when these women got up and walked toward me, I could not have anticipated my personal experience. I felt like somebody had slugged me in the stomach. I was shocked at the intensity of my feeling about these women. They must have sensed that because they were very tender as they surrounded me, pulled black clothes out of their bags, and helped dress me. I was very shaken. And then, fully transformed, I moved back and sat with them in the one empty chair that was left. We sat for a few minutes, and then we all left independently. After the performance, we went downstairs and had food together, me being an old woman, and playing the role—one I found quite humorous.

I met some resistance when I was looking for a group of older women. I talked to a seventy-year-old woman on the phone at length who was furious with me. She thought it was the stupidest thing she ever heard, that I should not have these women in black, that I was representing death, and this was the way the culture represented older women. You should represent them doing yoga and being active and in bright colors. I had to take her seriously because I knew her to be a very intelligent, highly respected woman. The intensity of her reaction was quite upsetting to me.

So I thought about it at length and decided that what I was doing was right, as right as I could know at the time, but that the performance needed another part. So part one was *Inevitable Association: What is Seen*, and part two took place two nights later. People came into a large room at the Biltmore. There were three circles of about thirty chairs each, with one red chair in each circle. Slides came on and one slide said, "I know what I know at thirty," or whatever age I was. "I know about aging from the outside." And then I put *This is Part II: What Is Experienced* on the screen. And these three old women—who had come in in the meantime, and sat down, one in each circle—began to talk about their lives since they were sixty-five, in an exchange with the audience. At the end, I collected each of them and we left, and that was the end of the piece. So it went from a theatrical image to a conversation, which is a structure in much of my work.

So those were the character pieces. Another theme was a more private, personal kind of exploration of bodies: the anatomy lessons, monster series, *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*. We talked a little bit about those earlier. I think I mentioned the sets of photographs; Julia Child's videotape called *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*; and later, probably the last work in that particular genre, *The Last Throes of Artistic Vision*. Those were all experiments in various ways with either characters from literature that represented strong body consciousness, or with the body itself from a kind of medical sensibility. I did a book called *Falling Apart* that was very important for me. I think it was probably one of the best books I've ever done—an edition of twenty. I'm very attached to those works. But they're very different than my public work.

[Interruption in taping]

SUZANNE LACY: There were these three kinds of work: very private explorations; character explorations, which were sort of an extension of the private into the political; and then these very large-scale political organizing works. Somewhere along the way, I think about 1978, it began to occur to me that what I was learning in my work on violence—and in all the work women were doing on violence—was not so much about violence, but about women's community. The kind of power that happened when we came together to deal with this pain was pretty incredible. Susan Griffin talked about it in one of her books—I think *On Rape*—where she says that what was powerful was the community consciousness that grew out of this movement. In fact, as a result of that recognition (and perhaps drawing also from *One Woman Shows*, which was much earlier), I began doing pieces that were purely about organizing. That theme kind of carried over into the early eighties. Pieces like the *International Dinner Party* in '79.

It was a gift performance. Judy Chicago had been doing such incredible work on *The Dinner Party*, and it was such an important work. The *Dinner Party* was opening and I wanted to do a gift for her, so I created a mail art performance for women all over the world. The instructions were to have dinner on *The Dinner Party* opening night with women in their community, to honor women in their lives. It would take place over twenty-four hours because of the time difference, and they would all send me telegrams. I made a huge black and white map of the world and put it in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. On the opening night, in great suspense, I waited to see if I would receive any telegrams. Every telegram received was put in a book and a red triangle was placed on this map. It turned out that about two thousand women participated—200 dinners in various sizes. It was a lovely event. I got photographs, tablecloths, artworks—all kinds of things that I've still got packed away in a box somewhere, sent by all these women.

I did other transitional works that were in this vein, like the one in New Orleans around 1980. I was invited to the Women's Caucus for Art national conference. I had spoken at their Washington conference, and some of the officers were excited about *In Mourning and In Rage*. LeeAnn Miller and Mary Jane Jacob asked, "Would you consider doing an event like this in New Orleans?" They were in a real jam because the College Art Association had already made a commitment to go to New Orleans, and the Women's Caucus was committed to go with them even though New Orleans was a non-ratified ERA state under a boycott. Their dilemma was whether to withdraw and have a conference somewhere else, or go. And the problem was, Southern women were furious with the fact that WCA might not come because they needed visibility and support. So they didn't know what to do, and thought

maybe if I did a performance it'd be okay politically. I said, "I won't do a single performance. I'll do the whole conference design as a performance itself. Women will stay in Southern women's homes and they will eat food prepared only by women entrepreneurs, and not otherwise spend money in New Orleans. They will go as a boycott." LeeAnn and Mary Jane were very imaginative and that went over very well with them. We also put on a performance exhibition which I believe you and Mary Jane did?

MOIRA ROTH: Yes. I also remember staying with a carpenter. Wanda Corn and I stayed with a woman carpenter and ate "politically correctly."

SUZANNE LACY: [chuckles] In the meantime, the WCA splintered and had another conference in Washington, D.C., which ironically drew on my rationale, to create something that was against what we were doing in the South. It was very, very funny. I went back and looked at what Leslie and I had written over the years and realized that in writing from the position of the collective "we" (which was a political stance, as if to suggest there was a Performance Movement afoot). [We set ourselves up to have our ideas lifted, accredited to an entire movement. Ordinarily that was okay, part of the politics of the time, but I didn't like them being used against me.—SL] A faction of the WCA, a group of women in Washington, simply lifted our rhetoric and said, "While the performance in New Orleans is politically incorrect, we are doing a conference as a performance." They actually did the same thing, or tried to. [laughs] I was flabbergasted.

At any rate, the performance conference—which I later wrote about in *High Performance* in an article called "The Battle of New Orleans"—was really a wonderful experience for me. In being there, I became a Southerner for a while. I worked with Jean Nathan, Laverne Dunn, Betty Constant, and a team of other women, and we basically organized the whole conference as a performance frame. We started it off with a big event called *River Meetings: Lives of Women in the Delta*. It was held at the New Mint in the French Quarter, which just opened. We orchestrated a five-hundred-woman potluck dinner. It was the culmination of a network of dinner-parties. The dinner was a metaphor for bringing women together. I did several of them, including one a few years later (in the early eighties) called *Immigrants and Survivors*, about racism and immigration in Los Angeles. Each dinner had a specific theme, but each one capitalized on the experience of sharing food and life stories. [Interruption in taping]

SUZANNE LACY: So, coming out of these works into the early eighties, I drew a big artistic blank. I ran up against some fundamental issues in the work that I wasn't able to resolve, mainly that there was very little visually that could communicate the works, particularly the dinner parties. It presented many problems in terms of exhibitions, but this wasn't my major concern. The spiritual quality of the connection was very important, but ultimately was not enough for me. I needed to move on, but I didn't know how to reconcile the lack of visual sensation with the very powerful emotional experience that was taking place in the work. Three Weeks in May had the central image of the maps. By the time I got to *Making It Safe*, there only the big dinner party at the end to represent the nine months of conceptual/political activity.

For some reason, I didn't move in another direction. I wanted to deal with this problem of the visual in sociopolitical performance. So I began to write. And I wrote and I wrote. I also did a couple of small pieces like *Trees* (the piece in Ithaca), which was an attempt to see how short a time you could spend in a community for how long a result. I became real interested in measuring efficacy: what happens after you leave? In the case of the New Orleans piece, how many times does the ERA show up in the newspaper? Developing strategies for measurements. I was tired of people saying, "Everybody just loved it. They cried." This is no real measure of a work's power in the culture. So for at least six months, I set about trying to figure out how to measure that power. Ultimately I decided sociometric devices weren't very effective. One of the things I was questioning, particularly looking at Judy Baca's work, was the staying power and the building power of being in one community over time. I wondered, how long does someone have to be there—an artist, an organizer, an instigator—in order to create change; and what was change, and did we care if there was change, and how did you measure it if there was? And then there was the problem with the visual. I was perplexed by all this, and so I began writing, and tried to write a book. I figured it was time to assess.

MOIRA ROTH: I remember. [both laughs]

SUZANNE LACY: I did get a few articles out of it, but not a book. At the end of this year-long.

...
SEPTEMBER 27, 1990
Tape 4, side A

SUZANNE LACY: At the end of this year-long period of writing, I broke up with the man I'd been living with for eight years. As a result of this personal disruption, I was catapulted out of my artistic hiatus. I think the grief, the disorganization, and the attempt to reorganize through art were all profoundly therapeutic. I somehow discovered the notion of the tableau vivant, and began exploring a very different kind of work, which I have been exploring up until the present.

MOIRA ROTH: You left off last time just beginning to explore the subject of Freeze Frame. Maybe you could give the date and place.

SUZANNE LACY: Freeze Frame took place San Francisco, as part of the International Theater Conference in August of 1982, and was cosponsored by the International Sculpture Conference held in Oakland that year. I did the piece in the Roche-Bobois furniture showroom. I believe it was on Friday the thirteenth of August, in the evening.

MOIRA ROTH: I remember it being a Friday, and that it involved your coming up a lot from Los Angeles. You were coming up to conceptualize the piece, choose the individual groups, and then work on what they would and wouldn't say in public. Maybe you could talk a little about that.

SUZANNE LACY: You knew that piece very well because you were reporting on it for a special supplement of the Village Voice; you made it a point to be a kind of chronicler of the process of the piece. I knew I wanted to express an image that I'd had in my head for a long time, one that started out as a sort of ironic comment on the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Arts' new space, which was formerly some kind of architectural design firm and looked for all the world like a furniture showroom. I had always envisioned this sort of performance: placing furniture groupings, then arranging all different kinds of women on them, as a sort of ironic gesture about LAICA's lack of representation of women. I thought it would be funny to combine furniture groupings with women, as a work of art. As with all these things, what started out one way—ironic—ended up having a very different emotional quality, one of great emotional connection.

I would fly up to San Francisco, act like an artist, then fly back to Los Angeles and be very distressed over the disruption in my life caused by my breakup. So I was very interested in how women of different ages, races, occupations, and classes perceived the issue of survival, what they thought were some of the salient problems for women. I wanted to know where I would get the strength to survive. The women in the piece inspired me.

I met up again with Julia London again, who was an organizer and one of the women who had studied at the Woman's Building. She had been an organizer for the United Farm Workers who came to the Woman's Building, learned performance, developed an organization called Women Against Violence Against Women, and by the time she left for San Francisco was still doing feminist organizing. We joined forces on this piece; she assisted in conceptualizing the organizational strategy for implementing it, and was basically my partner up until the end, where a lot more directing and artistic skills were required. We worked very well together. We targeted several kinds of groups of women that one could find in San Francisco, from nuns to prostitutes, old women to pregnant women. And we sculpted from this ecology images of four to eight women in different groups who would get together and talk. We talked with them in their communities about the concept of the piece, and worked with them to establish some kind of object to represent their identity. We also talked to them about what kind of clothing they would wear. The idea was not to create artificial costumes, but to create a visual impact with their presence. Clothing, furniture groupings, beds or couches, leatherette, plexiglass, steel or chrome, were all considered part of the image.

There was a big drama about finding a furniture showroom, a drama that included many anecdotes which I think are interesting in terms of developing the strategy for public works. For example, we first decided to find a furniture store in the Mission District. But one thing that got clarified for me had to do with the idea of class and ethnicity and comfort level. Would Hispanic and lower income women be comfortable in a toney, high-quality showroom like one in the Market District, or would they be more comfortable in the Mission? I was

really attracted to the ones in the Market Place area, but thought that maybe the women would be more comfortable in an environment closer to their homes and lifestyle.

[chuckling] But when Judy Baca came up to visit, she said to me this was basically an idea that a white, middle-class person would have. Why wouldn't women of color feel that their lives were worthy of being honored in a very elegant place? Of course they would.

I used the same rationale a couple of years later for the location of La Jolla in Whisper, the Waves, the Wind—as opposed to some beach in South San Diego. [The older black women in San Diego advised me they would feel quite comfortable on a beach in La Jolla despite its upper middle class white population.—SL] So Baca's perception turned out to be accurate in San Francisco as well.

We had problem after problem finding a showroom. But one day, almost on a lark, I just walked in to one I hadn't looked at, the Roche-Bobois. It was startling. It looked like a series of mini-stages the way it was appointed. And I thought this was a perfect setting, although rather large. As it turned out, an ex-San Francisco Art Institute graduate worked there and he introduced me to the manager. The next thing I knew I had the place.

There is much that can be said about how one locates a work within a public arena—a lot of strategy, a lot of learning, planning, and so on. But to leave that aside, we found the place.

We found the women. The theme of the work—survival—developed out of a combination of my own personal experiences and those of the women that we talked to. And from these small groups we created three questions that they would ask each other in the performance.

We set up a piece that was a very simple tableau vivant. The audience walked in and were confronted by about seventeen arrangements of women frozen in time, silent. As the first audience members walked through the space, one group of performers began talking, and then another and another. As the piece progressed for the next hour, the women discussed these questions among themselves, with the audience as very intimate voyeurs. What we had hoped for indeed occurred—which was that the discussions would be intimate and real. Real time and relevant to the women themselves. And that the women would maintain a distance from the audience, so that physical proximity would be balanced by a kind of barrier created by the intimate relationships of the women to each other. They did not talk to the audience. They didn't relate to them.

That was meant to allow the audience to get even closer. It was also meant to create a kind of aesthetic framing. The arrangements were quite beautiful. Women in wheelchairs around a chrome table talking about survival. Prostitutes with an evening bag with hundred dollar bills sticking out of their bag, and a mask. Nuns talking of being in Chile, in Latin America. Bridge players. That was the first piece I think that my mother was in. She brought her Saturday night bridge game.

I remember that the real [desperate, disparate] problems of the piece had to do with organizing and support and ability to get the women involved. Just three weeks before the event I had no idea if there was going to be anybody at all in it, even though it was all scheduled and ready to go. People kept signing up and falling out. The sex workers were a very difficult group to organize because half of them were illegal and there's a hierarchy among prostitutes that makes them not like get together. The women who had been in mental institutions had a lot of political problems with feminists, who they felt had ripped them off by coming in and taking their stories and leaving again. They were distrustful.

Pregnant women were having babies. People were coming in and out at a rapid rate. I remember calling my mother and saying, "Mom, I want you to come and play bridge as one of the groups." She was at first reluctant. I said to her, "If I can't get my own mother to, who can I get?" She finally said, "All right, I'll do it, but you'll have to find me some bridge players." And I said, "No, I want you to bring your Friday night bridge game." So she did. It was actually quite wonderful. My sister came from Chico with her colleagues at work, and all these really lovely tableaus were set up.

Three weeks before the event, the groups were not yet set up, and I remember going dejectedly to an organizing meeting where nobody showed up, and I just thought this is really the end of it. But then I looked up, and here comes Ungo walking down the street with her daughter, and a few minutes later here comes Natalia. They just started slowly coming, and more and more women came. And that night we really engaged with the issues of survival. These kinds of tableaus always walk on the edge of happening and not happening because of the nature of the participation.

MOIRA ROTH: I'll tell you two things I remember very clearly in Freeze Frame. One was that the audience was as diverse as the participants, since each group had brought in its own audience. That was very striking. And that the audience didn't necessarily gravitate to whatever group invited them.

The other thing I remember because it was so dramatic, was how you had a rehearsal the

night before during which, after a lot of negotiating, you decided to change the end rather dramatically. You had wanted the groups to stay separate, because from a visual point of view, you liked the density of each group. But then at the end, they wanted to mix with one another. So there was a very interesting negotiation between you and some hundred women about the ending.

SUZANNE LACY: I remember that. At the very end of the piece, the groups fell silent one after another and then walked through the space and formed a "portrait" of women against the back of the largest room. First they spoke at the same time, creating a babble of voices, then fell silent; spoke at the same time again, and fell silent; and then the last time—I think it was three times—one woman spoke out alone and then another and another. It was a free form speak-out; they spoke about what their involvement with each other and the project meant to them.

There was, as I recall, some controversy that came out. I don't remember the details, but it had to do with my vision. Some women had the notion that I was somehow making money on this, that it was a big event, that I was exploiting them—although they still found value in participating. Ultimately a lot of it may have been around issues of race. I think that the tensions between people of different races with a white woman directing was very real. Two or three women were most vocal. I think it was also the function of a piece that asked women to sit as a group and to identify as that group. I think that one's identification with one's group when that group is oppressed is very problematic—it's filled with both pride and rage. For the older black women it wasn't an issue. For the young Latina women it was a very big issue.

MOIRA ROTH: I remember singling out something different, which is that several people, not even angrily, but very sadly, said, "Here we are, we've had this symbolic moment of coming together, but the fact is that in the streets outside, the world outside, we'll be separate." That's one of the things I remember, which didn't have to do with race; it had to do with the idealistic, symbolic aspect of the performance, as opposed to differences in class, race, age, et cetera.

SUZANNE LACY: Yes, the responses from the women were diverse, as diverse as they were. I don't mean to imply that questioning my motivations was the major part of that dialogue. There was a much larger contingent that addressed the politics of being a woman, a black, a prostitute—as a symbol and as a living person. I think that was very eloquently expressed by the disabled women. I remember the woman who couldn't talk very clearly who was just so moving. She said, "You look at me now as a human being, but what happens when we go outside?"

There was a lot of pain in those various groupings of people. And they had different ways of addressing that pain—with anger, with suspicion, with compassion, even with religion. Some of them came with great reservations about me, about the performance, about the idea of the performance, and yet they still came—which I found very compelling. They didn't come grudgingly, either. They participated because there was a contradiction between the pain and the love and pride they felt.

MOIRA ROTH: I remember you were writing what I thought was a fascinating critique of the piece, published in the New Art Examiner. In it, you questioned whether you could instigate permanent groups that would work on change long after the performance, or whether its continuity would depend on your personal presence. And after that?

SUZANNE LACY: I don't know if I talked about a smaller piece I did in Ithaca called Tree. I think I did that right after. It was part of an exhibition at Cornell at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum. I believe you were involved with that.

MOIRA ROTH: I was.

SUZANNE LACY: We all went there for a week. As a result of that New Art Examiner article looking at political effectiveness of art, I set up an intellectual problem for myself: How short a time could I spend in a community and have any kind of results? What results could you really expect from an artwork? So I planned a piece in which I did a lot of preliminary organizing through the mail and over the phone, a piece that would take place in the town of Ithaca during one week. I went there, and within a couple of days I found the image. It was fall, the leaves were all turning, and I came upon the notion of names written on roots and in branches. So a big tree was drawn on the wall of a local gallery, and all the women in town

were invited to come in and write the names of themselves and their ancestors. This image was one that I could use to talk about race relations in Ithaca. An article on Helen Washington, the great grand-niece of Harriet Tubman, had appeared in a local newspaper, so I arranged to be introduced to her. The image of the piece centered around two old women: a granddaughter of a white suffragist and Helen Washington. We then proceeded to invite women to a dinner in their honor. I believe it was at that dinner that we created some kind of quilt or montage on the wall, something that had to do with writing their names. I think about a hundred women came. They were split right down the middle: old black women and young white women. It was quite fascinating. The reason was because it was a college town and some of those older black women worked in various capacities in the school attended by the younger white women. Each woman made a testimonial. We went around the entire room and it was very moving.

After that evening, which was quite lovely, I stayed in touch with the major organizers about various projects, including the photographic documentation and a video they were doing. That contact lasted for a while. We had plans for them to do other things—just like in New Orleans—plans to create extended activities, but once again, after a certain period of time, those plans died out.

I think, in reflection, it's because the post-planning was not charged with a particular kind of vision, and that it needs somebody to carry that vision. Unless it's somebody's vested interest in creating an image, then it's hard to get a group of people to continue it. They're not invested in it the way an artist is who has another reason for liking it besides the political issue itself.

After Tree, came Whisper, the Waves, the Wind, which took a year and a half to create. I started out thinking it would take only six months. It ended up costing a lot of money—my own money. It was a quantum leap in expense, in scale, in time. I had been used to pieces taking up to three months and, in the case of Freeze Frame, costing around \$7,000. Some of it I'd raised, and some of it was from the Sculpture Conference, and so on. Just the filming of Whisper, the Waves, the Wind, itself cost \$10,000. Part of the escalation in expense had to do with trying to film it [but the scale and length of preparation time increased the cost of the piece itself—SL]. I think we must have raised an additional forty or fifty thousand dollars for that piece.

MOIRA ROTH: What was it spent on in addition to the filming?

SUZANNE LACY: Well, things like renting tables, building speakers, and paying for Susan Stone, the soundtrack composer, to fly down from San Francisco. It was not spent on fees. Nobody received money for it, including me. I was in San Diego for a period of a year and a half. I started with a friend who was a former student of mine, a woman my own age named Sharon Allen who lived in San Diego. The university invited me to do a piece for Center for Music Experiment, with four thousand bucks of NEA funding. The genesis for the piece was with you, in the rose garden. Remember?

MOIRA ROTH: No.

SUZANNE LACY: You were writing the Freeze Frame report for the Village Voice, and I was writing the New Art Examiner piece. You were being very solicitous because I was also still going through a separation with Robbie [Blalack—Ed.], so we would have long breakfasts in your rose garden before we would go off to our different typewriters to write. You were telling me at one point that Rose, your mother's friend from England who was eighty-something at the time, was coming to visit. And I said, "Well, why don't we do a performance for Rose? We'll put her on the beach in white." It was a haunting almost surreal or Fellini-esque image. That's how the piece started.

MOIRA ROTH: And then a year and a half later, after rented tables, sound studios, an incredible amount of very, very successful community organizing. . . .

SUZANNE LACY: . . . and working with this team of older women, who I was very close to. There were about ten of them, six in particular, who remain incredibly dear friends. We created the performance. Once again, we didn't know how many performers would show up. But sure enough, on the day of the performance, a hundred and fifty older women, all dressed in white, showed up. There are many wonderful stories about putting this together. They all showed up in downtown La Jolla, and then were shuttled to Casa de Manana, the beautiful, elegant retirement community overlooking the La Jolla Coves. Meanwhile, the residents had started a rumor at Casa de Manana that these were all prostitutes. When I had

spoken there the year before, I mentioned that I worked with prostitutes in one piece, and they connected the two somehow. [laughs] So they figured a hundred and fifty older retired prostitutes dressed in white were appearing on their doorstep, to their dismay. (This is only one of many wonderful stories.)

The women went into Casa de Manana, checked their little purses, and were oriented to the performance yet another time after having rehearsed it. Then the sound system, which involved nine speakers or so, played a beautiful haunting melody of foghorns and whale sounds that Susan Stone created as a processional. This announced the women's arrival to the thousand or so people gathered along the cliffs. They came out two abreast and marched in a line. The audience was very moved I think. I was on top of the lifeguard station directing, connected to a crew of fifty by walkie talkies. By this time, I'd grown more sophisticated in communications technology for the performance and we had rehearsed like drill sergeants. There were four or five people as set director, performance directors, the film director, and so on. We were all hooked together by these different communication devices. I remember the feeling I had had when the women came out in the processional, and everything seemed to be working. I was just overwhelmed with how supported I felt by the fifty or so volunteers working that day and the people I'd worked with for a year and a half, and the fact that we had all come together in such a coordinated effort. It was probably my second or third taste of a real high while directing. It's a great feeling of being "one" with a lot of people. The women went down onto two beaches, side by side, sat at tables, and began to talk to each other. The audience could hear facsimiles of what sounded like their actual conversations through the loudspeakers. Actually, they were prerecorded.

Tape 4, side B

SUZANNE LACY: In reality, these were prerecorded conversations between older women on the same topics that the women were discussing live. Then, at a certain point, the audience was invited down to talk with the women close-up. The point was not to recreate the distance which had already been created by physical distance between the cliffs and the shore below, but to allow the audience and the women to interact, which they did quite happily. The performance ended with the women leaving and the audience staying on the beach, applauding their departure.

MOIRA ROTH: When you created the film, you had a small group of the organizers return again later and have a conversation about their lives and the piece itself. I think it was a very poetic way of not documenting, but making a new piece on film.

SUZANNE LACY: The film was always very important to the concept of the whole piece for all of us who worked on it. We wanted it to be filmed. But it took going to Minnesota and finding an incredible editor, who worked for love of the project, because I couldn't pay her at that point. I had just barely managed to get it in the can with everybody's donated labor, cameramen and all. It took funding in Minnesota from a heart pacemaker corporation, Medtronic, Inc., to complete the film. A few other organizations and foundations chipped in money at various points. So we finally finished it and premiered it in Minnesota where I was working on the second whisper project called The Crystal Quilt.

MOIRA ROTH: Okay. While you were beginning to work in Minnesota on The Crystal Quilt, you were also commuting back to Los Angeles to do this very large artwork called The Dark Madonna. Was that not true?

SUZANNE LACY: Yes, during the last few weeks of the Whisper, the Waves, the Wind production, I was approached by Ron Dahl at Minneapolis College of Art and Design to teach there for a semester and produce a work. Ron had brought a lot of artists to Minnesota and provided an environment for them to do very expansive work. At the same time, Edith Tonelli from the Wight Gallery at UCLA approached me and asked if I would do a piece for the Franklin Murphy Sculpture Garden. So I went back and forth between Minneapolis and Los Angeles between 1985 and May 1986 when we completed the piece. Earlier I had done a work called Immigrants and Survivors based on immigration to Los Angeles, the racism expressed toward immigration, and the problems people were starting to recognize nationally in the reaction to the large influx of people into this country. Over a period of three months or so, a small group of women organized within different ethnic groups, with disabled women, and so on, like the women who performed in the Freeze Frame performance. This was done as a dinner party rather than a tableau. It was a participatory event for the people who attended. There was no audience. We had some planned speakers

and several unplanned ones from the participants. It ended up almost like a tent revival. It was a very emotional, connected evening of women talking to each other on the themes of immigration and survival.

MOIRA ROTH: With all the different foods symbolizing all the different backgrounds.

SUZANNE LACY: Yes. It was a small event, but it took some time to do because we had a series of events that led up to it—dinners in my studio where we discussed issues of race, racism, and immigration. Some of these pieces, particularly the ones involving dinners, have been easy to justify emotionally but harder to justify aesthetically. I think they're less interesting as individual events and more as a kind of approach to community through art. Sometimes it was not clear when artists provided the guiding vision, or when it was from political people. I've done several works that dip into the community arena where it's not clear whether it's art or not. Maybe they were simply ways for me to increase skills in various areas, but I think they were more than that. I think over a period of ten or fifteen years, those kinds of works were manifestations of the emotional dynamic within the community of women, ways to come together across normal divisions of race and class. It was this kind of "heartfulness" that would inform a more visually and aesthetically oriented piece like *The Dark Madonna*.

Maybe coming out of the Immigrants and Survivors experience, or indeed a lot of past work, I decided to confront the issue of race head on in the UCLA piece. It was perhaps the first time I said, "Let's do a piece about race and racism." I had worked with a lot of older black women in Watts, and then a younger black group for a period of three years or so before I went to San Diego. In those projects we talked not about racism per se—except among ourselves as we worked together—but about the effects of racism—stereotyping, poverty, crime, etc.

In the UCLA piece, I wanted to do a theatrical work that tackled the relationship between women of different races. At first, it was to be about black and white women. An article by Adrienne Rich had a powerful influence on focusing some of my feelings about black women. At that point in time, it was hard to talk about an emotional bond that might exist between black and white women because the national consciousness of racism made our approaches as white women to women of color quite circumspect. We were often paralyzed by fears of our own racism and guilt about our built-in privilege. I remember Ungo Spencer in the *Freeze Frame* piece asking me once, "Would you have a relationship with me if I wasn't black?" And I said, "It's not that I like you in spite of the fact that you're black or because you're black, but I am very drawn toward a quality that you have that comes out of your experience as a black woman."

Adrienne Rich addressed that in her article. She talked about how, even from childhood, some white women had black housekeepers, substitute mothers, and how later that translated into a longing for more connection with black women. I didn't have a black housekeeper—we were working class—but there are certain ethnicities, in particular black, that are extremely attractive by virtue of some shared qualities. I find black women incredibly mothering, strong, and wise. There's something particularly powerful about older black women. Their ability to survive and their love is rather phenomenal. I also had many dear friends that I wanted to do this piece as an homage to, including Avis Johnson and Leanna Thompson, who were part of the leadership group in *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*. *The Dark Madonna* was also conceived of as an ironic work. The Franklin Murphy Sculpture Garden is, above all else, a display case for European white male artists. There are approximately seventy-six artists represented, seventy-two of whom are men.

MOIRA ROTH: But lots of portraits of women by men.

SUZANNE LACY: Exactly. You have this tradition of portraits of so-called primitive women, for example, sculpted in bronze—white men looking at women of color. And so I thought, "Wouldn't it be funny, in this high art setting, to do something that was both ironic and slightly kitsch? Putting women on pedestals, for example. Images of women done by themselves just by standing still in a kind of turn of the century tableau vivant.

In spite of its ironic undertones, *The Dark Madonna* was first and foremost meant to be a piece about race. As I began to talk to women of different races, they immediately started confronting me about the title *The BLACK Madonna* (which was my original title) as representing black women, but not Hispanic, Asian, and other ethnicities. The black women understood what I wanted to do, but the Asian and Hispanic women wanted a title that included them. We asked the Center for the Study of Women at UCLA to become a cosponsor, since there was much to be explored through academic approaches to both the

“shadow” and the dark madonna in various cultures. In fact, the first part of the three-part work was a conference on The Dark Madonna that CSW sponsored.

So I went off to Minnesota, and continued to return to California over a year and a half period of time to create this work. I had a lot of support. I had three organizers—Willow Young, who worked at the Folk and Craft Art Museum and organized in the community, Carol Heepka, who worked at the Wight Gallery as Director of Education and helped do the administrative organization on the project, and Ann Bray who organized the technical aspects of the production. So together we produced the work, along with the Center for the Study of Women, which produced the symposium six months before the performance.

MOIRA ROTH: Which was such a rich and emotional symposium that I don’t think of it as being academic. But it was very scholarly.

SUZANNE LACY: It was scholarly, but loaded with emotions—like when we got confronted the first night with a massive audience reaction to racism. The most unbelievably unfortunate planning was that the first night of the symposium had only white speakers. Although a lot of people of color were speaking, they were all scheduled for Saturday, so the audience was confronted with an all-white panel on Friday night.

SUZANNE LACY: To make matters worse, one woman was going to talk about black women’s clubs and theatrical organizations at the turn of the century, but changed her mind at the last minute. The panel was meant to be an exploration of the history of the tableau vivant and current expressions of it—a preparation for the performance in May. It ended up being just you and I really that talked about women of color at all. The audience was outraged. I remember you and I looking at each other and wondering how we had gotten ourselves into this situation—we didn’t plan the panels. So after we spoke there was this silence and then Esther Broner raised her hand and all hell broke loose. I think we handled it well, though Karen Rowe from CSW really took a beating. But I think all this enlivened the situation the next day, and that the audience actually left that night feeling fairly empowered.

MOIRA ROTH: Oh, I do, too. Some left after Friday evening, but the people who stayed at the symposium were very pleased.

SUZANNE LACY: During the next six months, I kept returning to do the second phase of the project, what I thought was a community organizing project to develop groups where women came together first on the basis of similarities, and then met with groups that were different from them. We planned to culminate this with a series of groups who would come to a radio station and tape-record conversations that would become the basis for the sound track of the performance. I remember flying in the first Saturday to record and finding that the mixed-diversity groups that showed up consisted of, for example, a Hungarian, a Greek, and a German woman. I think there was one with an Egyptian woman. But there were no black women and no Hispanic women, so I said, “What is going on here? This is not what I call diversity.” I remember directing one group when they were all talking about their ethnic differences and how wonderful it was. At one point I said, “You know, there’s something that just doesn’t make sense to me here.” To the Hungarian woman, I said, “You’re Jewish, right?” And she said, “Yeah.” And I said, “Well, she’s German, right? And your mother was in Hungary at the time that this woman was in Germany during the war. Have you ever talked about that?” No, they’d never talked about that. And they didn’t want to talk about it then either, as a matter of fact. At the end of the day I concluded something was very wrong with what I had thought was a healthy community organizing process.

This was pretty upsetting as we wanted, for the sake of our production schedule, to complete the taping in one day. But I said we simply could not create the sound track from the women represented that day. I was troubled that something was very wrong with the process that I thought, from reports, had been going smoothly.

So I went back to Minnesota, got on the phone, and called every woman of color I could think of that had been contacted originally about this piece. For the next week, I talked and talked and talked late into the night. I found out things were in fact not good at all. One group of black women that was very enthused had met down in Watts, and then gone up to South Pasadena to meet with the white women there. The next move was that the white women were going to come down to Watts to meet with them, and guess what? They didn’t show up. They just had excuses, but weren’t addressing the real issue, that they were afraid to drive their fancy cars to Watts, as one black woman said.

So I flew back out to L.A. and I went to their homes. There was one particular woman, Dona Evans, and I talked with her and a group of women she had arranged. We talked and talked,

and finally began to break through some of the communication problems and deal with the idea of the piece, which was in fact racism. I met with Linda Vallejo and other women. There was a lot to be done to convince people of the sincerity of my intentions and that there was some meaning to be had here. That Saturday we had another taping session which did have a good ethnic balance and I felt the piece could go forward with integrity. Susan Stone, again, created a very incredible audio tape.

In May, I came to Los Angeles to spend the last three weeks working on the performance production. There was still a considerable amount of organizing to be done. Again, there was a problem of not knowing who would show up, complicated by the fact that we didn't even know what the performance was going to be. Several of us worked and talked and finally the image resolved itself. It was probably one of the most painful pieces I've ever done.

MOIRA ROTH: It was also probably one of the most beautiful series of images. Maybe you could describe the images.

SUZANNE LACY: There were to be about fifty women dressed in white for the pedestals, and about a hundred sixty women in black for the second image. The piece was created as two tableaux, a white tableau that happened in the day, and a black tableau that happened at night. It was meant to take place at dusk so we calculated as close as we could and created the performance timing around the time the sun would set, according to the weather bureau.

The audience didn't have an exact time, so they just sort of started arriving and, surprisingly, brought chairs. I assumed they would wander from one vantage point of the sculpture garden to another. They were kept out of the garden itself, but they could move along the perimeter of the huge square that must have been two city blocks in size. The garden consisted of green grassy hills and valleys with all these sculptures in it. The women in black were hidden in the bushes, more or less out of sight, and the performers on their pedestals were set up all over the garden among the real sculptures. They were gorgeous. The white was very striking against the green. The sun slowly set and the tape began. It was a series of conversations by women about painful encounters having to do with race. Forty speakers were hidden within the trees bordering the garden.

The audience could wander between vantage points watching the tableau and looking at the different images: The two Fridas—two twin sisters from Chile holding hands—and the K, the Kollwitz-inspired image with four older black women back to back featured prominently on the hill. And a woman in a metal wheelchair next to a George Rickey sculpture. All the poses and configurations of women were carefully choreographed through discussion with them and review of the all-white costumes they chose to wear.

The women were motionless as the piece began, and stayed motionless for an incredible length of time. Later, I had wonderful reports from them about their experiences during the thirty minutes or more of the white tableau. Many fell into a very still meditative space as the sun went down. It's very hard to stand perfectly still for a half hour for a nonprofessional. There were even children in the piece who stood still.

Then at sunset, or my best calculation of sunset, there was a silence in the soundtrack, and out of the bushes darted ten women (dancers) in black. They dashed through the space and flung black cloaks over several of the women on pedestals. Other women on pedestals removed white outer garments, revealing black clothes underneath. Within about thirty seconds, everything went black. The light quality was such that the white clothing held the last rays of light, and then it went black all at once. And the night was there. At that point, the other tape began, with women talking about healing, what the dark madonna meant to them, a sense of community with other women, and hope for some kind of resolution. Out of the bushes came these women, small groups of six or so, also in black with flashlights. Because it was almost dark, you could just see the flashlights circling the garden. More and more came, and finally all hundred and sixty women sat down in their small groups as if over a campfire and were joined by the women on the pedestals.

Then they began a conversation about race in Los Angeles, based on a series of predesigned questions. The audience, some of whom had brought their own flashlights, others of whom were given flashlights, were then invited into the garden. I was afraid they wouldn't go in, but they just rushed in—to the point where I was quite worried about the comfort level of the women sitting in the groups. And then as the lights in the garden slowly came on (the soundtrack had been replaced by the real-time discussions), some of the groups stopped. Other groups continued to talk. When I went home a couple of hours later after we'd had a reception and cleaned up, there was still one group sitting and going at it in the garden. So that was that piece, which to that time was probably the most visually beautiful thing I've done. Ultimately it had very little to do with me. While directing the performance I was quite

transfixed by the fact that out of all that pain and chaos, it just seemed to come together. I don't know how.

MOIRA ROTH: Then you had a very different community experience in Minneapolis. There, probably more than in any other community, you had this wonderful sense of a lot of people supporting one another as well as supporting you over a considerable period of time.

SUZANNE LACY: Yes, The Crystal Quilt took two and a half years to put together, and another half year to clean up afterwards. The whole project was called the Whisper Minnesota Project. I went there in January 1985. It took a couple of months to come up with a place, and the image developed over a longer time. I knew it was going to be about aging. I had been thinking a lot about how you made an impact with an issue. In American culture you have to repeat things. That's how people begin to get a message. They see it on TV, then they see it in the paper—maybe they see it three or four times altogether. So I thought, what would it mean to repeat an artwork? Instead of staying in one place, which I couldn't bear to do, I could at least do a piece on the same theme. I also wanted to explore some of the groundwork that was laid out in the Whisper, the Waves, the Wind project, such as strategies dealing with the city, institutions, the media, and organizing. What were the aesthetic questions—that sort of thing.

So I set about to do the Whisper Minnesota Project, which carried over the name Whisper, yet identified the new project with a place. Like the Whisper project in San Diego, this too would have a signature performance event within the larger process of organizing and consciousness-raising. Together, process and performance constituted the Whisper Minnesota Project. The Crystal Quilt identified the performance.

I identified the three contributing interests: art, which was represented by the Minneapolis College of Art and Design; aging, which was represented by the Minnesota Board on Aging; and public policy, represented by the Reflective Leadership Program of the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute for Public Policy of the University of Minnesota.

I met some people early on that were very influential in the development and success of the piece. One of them was Sharon Roe Anderson, who was the associate director of the Reflective Leadership Program. She, like many people in Minnesota, has an incredible openness to ideas—not a superficial one like in Los Angeles, but one that is very connected to their sense of ethics and values. The Scandinavian influence and the liberal political history made Minnesota a very interesting place to work. Plus the fact that it is still largely a rural state with all the healthy aspects of a rural mentality. Older women live in their communities until they die, for the most part, and are usually very long-lived and very healthy.

I taught at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design. I had several classes that revolved around this work—not just performance classes, but a class in public policy, media, and aging, for example. I taught a class at Carleton College as well with students who worked with older women in the community doing performances together. Everything I did during that three years sort of wrapped together. Early on, I met Nancy Dennis, an administrator with substantial fundraising and administrative abilities, who wanted to do something different. She could have gotten a much better job but she became the longest and most paid employee. My first commitment was to get money to pay her, but it wasn't much. It was a subsistence living but she did it for three years because she believed in the project. We were partners—she the administrative director and I the artistic director.

We developed public policy language with one of the scholars at the Humphrey to explain why we were doing this art project. This involved thinking through the linkage between public policy and art. Sharon [Roe Anderson—SL] developed a leadership seminar for older women—heresy for some of the Humphrey academicians—that brought thirty-five women from around the state to meet monthly at the Humphrey for eight months. Out of that, a group of about ten or fifteen older women maintained a connection to the Whisper Minnesota Project and assisted in planning The Crystal Quilt, including recruiting performers. We had a donated office, first at the Humphrey, then later at the IDS building. And we fundraised, fundraised, and fundraised. We had an advisory board made up of people like the president of the college—people who didn't just serve in name, but really believed in and put out energy for the project. It consisted of both men and women. The Minnesota Board on Aging linked us nationally with the National Council on Aging and the Gerontological Society of America. We went to conferences and presented papers on leadership education and aging in art.

When we finished the film, we brought four women from the Whisper Project in San Diego to the premiere in Minnesota to meet with the older women organizers and kind of jazz each other—a group of people experienced in putting on such a performance who came to relay

their information. In Minnesota, besides the leadership seminar, we had many projects, exhibitions, public appearances, and events leading up to the performance. This included classes, art, mass media, and community organizing. It was the community aspect of the project out of which the performance grew. It also allowed us to involve a very large and diverse number of people and organizations in the project. The Wilder Foundation held a retreat, for example, where fifty people working on the project talked about some of the issues that were coming up about press and policy and visibility. There were a lot of scholars involved as well. Over a three-year period of time, we counted over a thousand volunteers working on the project.

MOIRA ROTH: Amazing.

Tape 5, side A

SUZANNE LACY: After the Leadership Seminar, and after we had done enough fundraising to know we could do the piece, we moved into production. In the last nine months, we had a small volunteer staff that worked at the office. We also had a core group that met, oh, every six weeks or so, each of whom had assumed responsibility for an aspect of the whole. One woman, Phyllis Burns, was the team leader for the volunteer press group; one woman, Patrice Koelsch, was the team leader for the documentation; one woman, the leader for the community organizing for the performers; and so on. We raised a lot of money—maybe a hundred and fifty thousand, I don't actually remember. The exact figures are written in Diane Rothenberg's article in the Drama Review. We had in-kind donations of at least double that—in terms of office space, people's time, and all kinds of things that were given to the project. That money basically paid for props, and it paid salaries for Nancy, an assistant, and a part-time secretary. (Again, I didn't get paid.) It also paid for the production crew, which came on board for about nine months toward the end of the project, when we worked like crazy. Phyllis Jane Rose from At the Foot of the Mountain Theater was the assistant director, and we had a series of other people working as stage manager, technical director, sound engineer, and so on. Susan Stone came from San Francisco to tape-record women across the state for her soundtrack. I also did a project in Duluth with two artists up there: Gloria DeFilips Brush, a photographer, and Leif Brush, a sound composer. I worked with at least fifteen artists from across the country, everything from film and video makers to textile artists and photographers. Miriam Schapiro designed the pattern for the quilt; Larry Fink did a photographic series commissioned by First Bank; other local photographers got involved; Tom Arndt, a photographer, flew in from Chicago; Edith Kodmur came from San Diego to shoot; and Julie Arnoff, a textile artist in Los Angeles, created the 600 hand-painted scarfs worn by the older women. All of these artists participated during this production period, along with a production crew of about fifteen people, most of whom were paid during the last nine months of the performance. We also had an 82-by-82-foot rug made to match Schapiro's design, and imported 600 chairs from Tennessee—much to the horror of the donations person, who so eloquently said, "I've been begging for bagels for the 400 performers all week long and you're gonna spend \$5,000 on chairs!" But this was one time I really put my foot down, because we had tried everything with free or rented chairs, from crepe papering them to painting them. It was just too tacky for words, and I knew that the image required those new chairs. And then the sound system had to be installed, all seventy speakers. We were dealing with the complexities of sound in a glass-surfaced space—it bounces and echoes terribly.

MOIRA ROTH: You haven't really mentioned the space, the Johnson Building.

SUZANNE LACY: It was in a Philip Johnson-designed building called the IDS Building. The performance was in a pavilion called the Crystal Court. It had an incredibly beautiful crystalline-like ceiling which reflected the sky down onto the floor. There was a balcony around three sides with an escalator going down onto the floor. In the middle of the court were a lot of small business kiosks which we managed to get moved, for the most part.

MOIRA ROTH: Even though it was Mother's Day.

SUZANNE LACY: [chuckles] Even though it was Mother's Day. Many issues came up during production, like when Miriam and I decided to use black as the major color. We tried other colors because everybody assured us that there's no way we could ever get older women to wear black in Minnesota on Mother's Day at the beginning of spring. So we tried green, white, pink—we tried everything one day at the Crystal Court, laying out these colored

papers on the floor. The next morning, Miriam and I got up, went to breakfast, looked at each other, and said, "It's got to be black." We said to Phyllis Jane Rose, who was in charge of organizing, recruiting, and directing the women, "Well, I guess we have a job here, to convince them that black is indeed a color of dignity and not mourning."

Other things about the way the piece was designed resulted from that decision. Elva Walker, the head of the Minnesota Board on Aging and one of our board members—a very important leader in the whole project—said to me, "You cannot have those women in black come through the crowd in a processional and descend into the space like you did in San Diego. It won't work, because they will look at first sight like a funeral processional and that image will carry over throughout the performance." Of course I heeded her advice and developed an entry onto the quilt that was different than a processional.

Elva counseled us on other key aspects of the project one of which put Susan Stone through struggles. In the first draft of her soundtrack, Susan created a very beautiful tape that was a young woman's vision of old women—thinking about dying and what it means. It was about grappling with those issues that we're all concerned with, ones we found out later the old women were not as concerned with. Elva listened to the tape and said, "That's a very interesting tape, but if you do that, you will have defeated everything we've done for the last two years to build the political aspect of the work as a message about older women's ability to participate in the public sector, to set public agenda, and to be leaders. You're going to make the whole theme of the performance 'women afraid of dying'." We went through many challenges like that to come to the final performance, as well as many negotiations with the city and all of the shop owners. It would take an hour just to talk about the scope of that work.

Finally it happened on Mother's Day. Four hundred and thirty performers showed up, bussed in from other parts of the state. Some were put up free at expensive hotels. Some were brought there by their children on Mother's Day. Others drove themselves to parking lots and were shuttle-bused. Others walked. We had to plan where and what they would eat, where they would go to the bathroom, and how to do our last-minute rehearsals. Even the rehearsal process itself was incredibly elaborate. We sent out audio tapes that rehearsed women all over the state in small groups of four. In key cities like Duluth, we got the fours together in larger groups to rehearse them ourselves. And we had one large rehearsal at Crystal Court with 130 or so women. We had to adopt a variety of approaches because there was no way to direct them once they got onto the quilt. They couldn't be communicated with from there—we could never get them all together at one time—so we developed a plan that relied on their memorizing simple cues. We created elaborate safety precautions for how to deal with someone fainting without either interrupting the piece or endangering the person. We had ambulances standing by with volunteer doctors and nurses in black clothes so as not to be too conspicuous.

The performance itself had about three thousand people in the audience, with a VIP booth upstairs. It was live broadcast by five cameras on the local PBS affiliate, which put a lot of pressure on me and the performance. Not only did it have to be done well, but I wanted it entirely recorded, so we had to conform to the exact one-hour time slot allotted to us. We weren't sure how long it would take 430 women to even get up the escalator, let alone get onto the floor and into the performance. It had to begin at two o'clock, the time when the program went live. The women took 30 minutes to get up on the floor of The Crystal Quilt. It took another 30 minutes for them to sit down four at a time at a table, unwrap the black tablecloth, exposing the red or yellow handsewn tablecloths designed by the organization, The Minnesota Quilters. And then the piece itself began, another 30 minutes. During that time, the sound tape of women talking played, and you would hear the performers talking about various subjects, like in the Whisper piece. Every eight minutes this was interrupted by a loud sound that rang out through the space, like a cuckoo clock striking or a loon crying, and that cued the women to change hand positions. Their movement changed the pattern of the quilt. At the end of the piece a name litany could be heard throughout the space, culminating in Meridel LeSeuer's comment, "I'm not aging I'm ripening." Audience and performers applauded, and the audience entered the space to beer barrel polka music. The music infuriated one of my colleagues, but I thought it was quite gay and appropriately Minnesota. Scarves were bestowed upon the performers, who talked animatedly with the audience. The reporters rushed in with their cameras. We interviewed several of the women afterwards, and they were just so high. They loved the experience. They understood that they were being honored, that they were special, and there was a deep connection to each other they expressed. I remember one of the Native American women saying to me in the interview afterwards that there was something very powerful about the spirituality of women—that she felt it very palpably in that space. So that was the end of the performance. There were many wrap-up events, such as two exhibitions sponsored by banks. I have yet to finish

the videotape, although the PBS special still circulates and apparently won an award in New York recently. Susan's sound tape still circulates and has won an award.

MOIRA ROTH: I guess the most recent thing we should talk about is what happened last summer in Finland. Let's also talk about the City Sites project—a very successful hybrid creature of both lectures and performance installations that uses the city of Oakland—to discuss a new definition of public art.

SUZANNE LACY: The City Sites project was first a lecture series with people like Mierle Laderman Ukeles and John Malpede, who work with social problems in an urban environment. I selected ten artists whose work had a form language that was unique to the issue itself, one that comes out of the concerns in the community they address. I wanted to look at the works of these artists together. I also wanted to encourage critics to look at this kind of work to see if we can develop a language for describing it that goes beyond performance, conceptual art, painting, or murals. People are becoming more and more interested in social art. It's my belief that there is now a group of artists who have been working for ten-plus years, and who have—out of the political necessity of their work—created a fairly sophisticated structural language and set of strategies. When taken together, this represents a large body of information on how to negotiate within the public arena while making art. When you think about the way public artists address the community through, for example, holding community meetings to get people to “buy into” a sculpture for the front of their library, you realize that's a fairly unsophisticated relationship to audience. There are artists like Judy Baca, for example, who have a very sophisticated notion of audience, and have the skills and strategies to address multiple audiences in a variety of ways. There's a lot of information that exists within the field of performance art and large-scale events that is pertinent to this dialogue about audience. The only way we talk about it now is, “Isn't it great? Judy Baca does good,” or “Isn't it interesting what Hans Haacke does. . . ?” They are considered as unique artists, but I think that Hans Haacke does things like Judy Baca does things like Adrian Piper does things like Helen Harrison. So City Sites: Artists and Urban Strategies was a lecture series where these ten artists spoke from sites scattered throughout Oakland that related to the subject matter of their art—garages, waterfronts, old-age homes, etc. They spoke to audiences that were mixed, including both their constituents and the art world. They also “consulted” for the City of Oakland by doing something tangible for those same constituents. A year later we held a public forum and a three-day retreat for thirty public artists, administrators, and critics. Now I'm attempting to develop a book on these ideas.

About Finland—I worked for a year there developing a piece. I didn't live there, but I probably was there a total of about three months. I saw Finland in every season. I worked with the Performers and Artists for Nuclear Disarmament and Arthur Strimling to create a series of four performances that would take place during an international music festival. These performances were on the theme of border, because Joensuu, the small town in eastern Finland where the festival was held, is right on the Russian border. This region, called Karelia, had lost half of itself through Russian annexation after 1940. Joensuu's sister city, Sortevala, had been under Russian rule for many years, and this festival culminated in a train ride for 1,600 people to visit that town, many for the first time since the Russians took it over. The Festival was called “The Meeting of the Worlds,” and was on world peace. I was invited to do a participatory event that would include the Joensuu townspeople in the entire festival. I did four events that took place over a five-day period. I worked with a team of Finnish artists, writers, and theatrical directors. They were incredible people, as good and wholesome and wonderful and intellectual as the people in Minnesota. I count some of them among my dear friends now. Arthur and I and Pirkko Kurikka—a theatrical writer and director—really coauthored the whole piece. We worked in individual ways, too, taking charge with others of the specific events. Arthur and Tuire Hindikke directed the Rajatonte Postia, which was a postal card event. We sent out 6,000 post cards in six languages and got 600 back in many different languages. And we read those postcards—stories of borders—on street corners and in restaurants all throughout the festival. We had twenty readers a day each reading one every hour wherever they were. We posted their responses in the post office as an exhibition, which was then donated to Postitele, the national communications company. A catalog is now being made of the whole event that includes these letters.

The second piece was directed by myself, Timo Ventola, Peter Rehor, and Riku Malinen. We worked to recruit 214 teenaged swimmers, who would leap with red T-shirts into a freezing horseshoe-shaped lagoon and swim to the center. The whole piece was very well choreographed and very visual. People watched from the banks of the river and the bridge while a line of red dots—the students—appeared on the horizon accompanied by a sound

track by a Finnish composer. The performers, carrying flags, raised their hands simultaneously when they had reached the ends of the horseshoe lagoon, so that there was a sudden red line that circumscribed the lagoon. Then on cue they all threw the flags in the air, and leapt into the water, swam to the center. There they rang the bell and then swam back. We have photographs that captured it from an airplane overhead, and you can see how the dotted line becomes a circle then dissolves into a dot in the middle of the water. The photographs are just stunning. There's also a film being made by a Finnish filmmaker, so I think we'll be able to see even more from that.

Meanwhile, people on the banks were having a great theoretical debate about what was the meaning of this with respect to borders. The students themselves—thirteen was the youngest and probably sixteen was the oldest—had their ideas about it. One of them said to me, "I'm doing this because I don't want to use passports when I grow up." For me it was about including teens and relating visually to the place.

The third piece on the third day was about three older women—one in Finland, one in America, and one in Russia—all of whom spoke Finnish and were Finnish by ethnic origin. This was on public radio and was directed by Pirkko and I and Juoko Blomberg, a very well known radio documentarian in Finland. We had prerecorded interviews with the three women that were woven together into a kind of introductory half-hour, and then they went live and met for the first time over the air in a long-distance communication broadcast. It was quite moving for a period, but kind of wore down. Part of the problem was that the communication was so difficult. What was aggravating about it was that we were not able to marshal the level of resources we needed to pull it off to perfection. It was still good. It was a real-time event, and for me the most emotional event of the whole project. But it was frustrating not to be able to direct it the way Pirkko and I had really prepared. We had simultaneous translation going, and I was going to direct these three women in three countries in a different language, which would have been great fun.

In the meantime, we had a listening event organized in the local park. About one hundred and fifty people brought their radios and sat in the park and listened to the broadcast together. The last piece, the meeting at the market, took place on Thursday. It was created by Allan Kaprow, myself, and Ihva Aula, with a group of Finnish artists. They got hundreds of people to come to the market place all day long on Thursday and have meetings. People would meet, they would lie down on the ground, somebody would draw the outline of their bodies and take a photograph of it. An hour later, the developed photograph would appear on a board which grew and grew and grew until there were about five hundred photographs. As the fruit and vegetable stands went up, there were meetings, and as the stands went down in the late afternoon, there were more meetings, which continued well into the long summer evening. At the end, there was a large drawing of all these bodies on the asphalt, when nothing else was left. Then at eleven o'clock at night, forty sweepers in white came from all corners, lined up, and swept the drawing away. Or tried to—they swept all the debris off but the drawing remained. For several days, you could still see traces of these meetings. Allan had come up with a really beautiful idea, which unfortunately didn't work real well. It had to do with Allan's great delight in playing with perceptions of reality. He had wanted various people to create myths and rumors about the meeting activity: an anthropologist to perhaps create an interpretation of this strange ritual, a reporter to speculate on it as a newsworthy event, etc. People could lie and make things up—he didn't care. These sorts of rumors and messages did in fact appear in one column of the local newspaper, and the photographer who was included in our small group of "reporters" definitely produced her photographs. And so things indeed were reported in various ways, but not to any great extent.

The end result of that whole project was that Arthur and I stayed for a week and continued to meet with our collaborators to sift through what had happened. We tried to make sense of what had happened and why we did what we did and what it meant politically and personally. The most we could come up with at that point was that this was really a piece about our relationship with each other and our international collaboration. By the way, Guillermo Gomez Peña created a piece for the project as well. He sent a very big, 8-foot-by-8-foot postal message, which we also played in the post office. [Judy Baca also premiered *The World Wall* that week.—SL]

We're still pondering. I don't really know at this point whether this was just a transitional piece, or a retrospective piece with different formal elements of previous works of mine, or if it has some other kind of connection and meaning in terms of my own aesthetic development. I don't think any of us know at this point. I do know that we wanted to involve the entire town, and we did.

MOIRA ROTH: As is typical of most of your events, there's a lot of resonance and resolutions

and rethinkings, both on your side and certainly on the side of the participants, and—if there's a distinction—on the part of the audience.

SUZANNE LACY: I'm still in communication with the Finns. I continue to return to various places I've worked. I was just in Minnesota last week, specifically to visit with women that I had worked with there and to honor Meridel LeSeuer. She was wheeled in her wheelchair to dedicate one of Karen Bacig's sculptures. She said, "You know, somebody said, 'We're so pleased to have you here, Meridel!' Well, I'm pleased, too. In fact, it's a bloody miracle I'm here, at ninety!" It's going to be hard to maintain that kind of connection with people from Finland. But I intend to try to see them this summer. And we're doing a catalog together long distance by writing each other letters. And that's it. Now can we go eat?

MOIRA ROTH: [laughs] On behalf of the Archives of American Art, many, many thanks.

END OF INTERVIEW

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