



"The Crystal Quilt." Performance by Suzanne Lacy. Minneapolis, May 10, 1987. Photo: Peter Latner.

Mobilizing Communities for Change: Suzanne Lacy's Large-Scale Works

William Peterson

Like many feminist artists connected with the Los Angeles Woman's Building during the 1970s, Suzanne Lacy's early performance work was nurtured and initially received by a supportive, largely feminist community. Starting in 1977, Lacy began a series of large-scale, carefully planned collaborations which reached out to larger audiences. As she began to target non-art audiences, the scale of her pieces increased significantly. In addition, the nature of her collaborations also changed; whereas her earliest collaborators were drawn almost exclusively from the Los Angeles feminist art community, eventually they came to encompass wider communities of women.

Lacy's performance work defies rigid categorization; though her early pieces at the Woman's Building could be termed performance art, her large-scale works of the 1980s at first glance appear more closely aligned with the conceptual art tradition. Yet this label is also imperfect; unlike the work of most conceptual artists, Lacy creates performance pieces which work toward promoting social and political change. The "happenings" label also fails to adequately characterize her work; though the performers in her pieces do in fact often execute simple tasks as did participants in many happenings, her events are not focused on issues of "chance" and randomness. While she is interested in the division between life and art, obliterating such barriers is less important than interweaving public and private expression. The overt and calculated theatricality of many of Lacy's large-scale pieces also places her work outside the realm of happenings.

Lacy studied with Judy Chicago and Allan Kaprow at the California Institute for the Arts. In 1975 she joined the staff of the highly influential Feminist Studio Workshop at the Los Angeles Woman's Building which was created in 1973 by Chicago, Sheila de Bretteville, and Arlene Raven. The

William Peterson is a freelance writer who has published in *The Act, Performance Magazine, Theatre Insight*, and *Austin American Statesman*. He is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Texas at Austin.

Woman's Building sought to encourage the work of women artists in a collective, feminist environment while linking feminist theory with practice. Many of the pieces produced by West Coast feminist performance artists during this period were based on intensely personal explorations and included significant consciousness-raising components. In her book "The Amazing Decade" which chronicles the work of this period, Moira Roth notes that, "as early feminists recognized that what had previously been designated . . . as merely individual experience was, in actuality, an experience shared by many others, they developed the concept that 'the personal is the political'" (16). Lacy's earliest pieces, like those of many of her contemporaries, were either solo performances or they involved a few close collaborators who worked with her on a common theme. Collaboration, an integral part of much feminist work during this period, was viewed as one important way of bridging different communities of women.

During the late 1970s and into the 1980s, Lacy, along with many other feminists, began to examine the material conditions in society which are responsible for the repression of women. In 1979, Lacy observed:

At first we defined feminist art as art which reflects a women's consciousness, but as our politics evolved some of us chose stronger definitions. For me, now, feminist art must show a consciousness of women's social and economic position in the world. I also believe it demonstrates forms and perceptions that are drawn from a sense of spiritual kinship between women. (Roth, "Visions" 37)

These themes will be constants in the following discussion of two of Lacy's representative large-scale works: "In Mourning and in Rage" (1977) and "Crystal Quilt" (1987). Brief notice will be given to her most recent collaborative work, "The Road of Poems and Borders."

"In Mourning and in Rage" (1977), Lacy's most collaborative work, demonstrated the combined abilities of Lacy and collaborator Leslie Labowitz as they sought to manipulate the media while addressing a contemporary political and social issue. During 1977, the Los Angeles media focused attention on the rape and murder of women by the so-called "Hillside Strangler." Rather than reporting the event in a way that might bring women together and encourage them to learn how to defend themselves, the press singled out the most lurid, exploitative details, creating a climate of fear among Los Angeles area women.

As they prepared their piece, Lacy and Labowitz had four primary objectives: (1) to reach out to the entire city in an effort to subvert the media-enhanced image of women as victim; (2) to express the rage women felt over these acts of violence; (3) to provide help and support for women living in a climate of violence; and (4) to raise public consciousness about the unacceptable scale of violence perpetrated against women. In order to reach a larger

audience, Lacy and Labowitz designed the work with a television audience in mind, structuring the rigid choreography of the action into media-sized "bytes" of information to ensure television and press coverage.

The piece began when ten actresses dressed in black mourning clothes emerged from the Woman's Building and entered a hearse. The hearse, followed by twenty-two cars filled with women in black, circled City Hall twice and stopped in front of assembled members of the news media. Forming a procession three abreast, the mourners walked toward the City Hall steps while the women from the motorcade unfurled a banner which read "In Memory of Our Sisters, Women Fight Back." As soon as the media had positioned itself, the first mourner walked toward the microphone and in a loud, clear voice stated, "I am here for the ten women who have been raped and strangled between October 18 and November 29!" The chorus echoed her with, "In memory of our sisters, we fight back!" (Lacy, "In Mourning" 52). Each successive woman who stepped forward to speak widened the circle of those being mourned, adding the 4,033 who were raped in Los Angeles the previous year, and ultimately mourning all women whose lives are limited each day by violence. The piece ended with Holly Near singing a song which she had composed for the event.

Lacy later reflected on the contributions of the work: "We reclaimed before a television audience a function that women have possessed in more primitive cultures--the function of mourning. And we introduced rage as a legitimate reaction to violent crimes against women" (Roth, "Visions" 45). The event was not only covered on local television, but it also received some national attention as well.

Lacy elaborated upon her use of media techniques in an article later published in the *Performing Arts Journal*. She observes that "the closer performances become to life (or the popular notion of life we see on television), the more likely they will be successful in that medium" (60). Each of the short statements recited by the women in "In Mourning and in Rage" were ready-made for television; not one of the women spoke more than twenty words and the choral refrains consisted of a simple, but dramatic eight words: "In memory of our sisters, we fight back!" Any one of these ten to fifteen second bits of dramatic action could be easily incorporated into an evening television news program.

Like many of Lacy's subsequent pieces, this work started with meetings between the collaborators and a number of women's organizations. Together, they created a list of demands for the city government which included self-defense training in schools, a telephone emergency listing of rape hotline numbers, and funding for neighborhood protection programs. Several of these demands were met. After the event, Lacy and Labowitz also co-founded Ariadne: A Social Art Network, an organization devoted to exploring violence in society and art.

Lacy's largest work to date, "Crystal Quilt," took place on Mother's Day, 1987 before an audience of over three thousand in the vast Crystal Court of the IDS Tower in Minneapolis. Four hundred thirty women from around Minnesota, all between 60 and 100 years of age and representing a cross-section of the state's population, ceremoniously entered the court, accompanied by taped sounds and conversations from a soundtrack by Susan Stone. The crowd viewed the changing action from the mezzanine above as the women filled the lower level of the space. The women were arranged in groups of four around a table. Each group unfolded a black tablecloth on the table before them, revealing a red or yellow reverse side, creating a tricolored "living quilt" which was designed by Miriam Schapiro. At four specific moments, all of the women rearranged their hands on the table according to a pre-established sequence choreographed by Sage Cowles while the sound system merged pre-recorded conversations with live discussions from the seated women. The performance ended when audience members entered the space, presenting the performers with hand-painted scarves.

Especially important was the process behind the creation of "Crystal Quilt." Lacy believes that the piece begins "when I step foot in the area. The city is the studio, and our combined life activities toward the end of creating an artwork become part of the work" (telephone Interview, 7 December 1989). As with earlier pieces, prior community support was a requisite for the success of "Crystal Quilt." Lacy spent three years in residence in Minneapolis while creating the work, relying upon a large volunteer apparatus of about 1,500 women and an administrative staff of fifteen. Lacy's assistant director, Phyllis Jane Rose, Artistic Director of Minneapolis' Theatre at the Foot of the Mountain, was also important in helping to realize this complex piece.

Throughout the planning process, there was an expectation that an organization would be left behind to continue working on ageing issues after the piece was completed. The Whisper Minnesota Project, the principal volunteer organization that helped realize "Crystal Quilt," continued to function for one year after the event. About \$170,000 was raised to finance the work, a figure which does not include a salary for Lacy during the three year period she worked on the piece.

Critics such as Linda Burnham have suggested that the funds required to mount these large-scale works would be better spent for direct action.¹ When asked about this issue in a telephone interview, Lacy admitted that she thinks

that's a reasonable question to ask. It's certainly a dilemma that I think about, although I think about it less now because there are fairly demonstrable results from the work. Basically, in order to answer that question affirmatively you've got to believe in art. And you have to believe there's a relationship between popular culture, media, and people's attitudes. And then further, you have to assume

that changed attitudes lead to changed activities. (1 December 1989)

The real question, suggests Lacy, is whether or not one believes art has the potential to help people--both observers and participants--see reality differently.

Lacy feels that without a strong visual and theatrical presence, the piece and the issues behind it can be trivialized (Telephone Interview, 7 December 1989). She achieves this presence through organization, and though "Crystal Quilt" was highly structured, participants engaged in their own "real time" conversations while carrying out a completely natural sequence of physical actions.

Instructions were relatively simple, ranging from "walk to the corner of the quilt when you are signalled" to "sit down at the table and unfold the table cloth." At specific moments in the piece, participants spoke spontaneously to one another on pre-established topics such as their feelings about the future and their relationships with other women (Telephone Interview, 16 July 1990). She notes that if participation was completely without organization, "you have something that is not really a performance for observers but for the experiencers. 'The Crystal Quilt' was meant to be theatrical" (Telephone Interview 16 July 1990). Lacy believes that the framework she provides helps evoke a sense of latent spiritual unity between the participants while simultaneously providing the audience with a strong visual and aural experience to which they will hopefully respond on both a visceral and intellectual level.

The simultaneous layering of public and private acts by "Crystal Quilt" participants reflects the feminist theoretical position linking the personal and the political; each of the women had a personal history, recounted through conversations taking place in "real time," while these individual expressions together created a strong collective statement about the position of elderly women in our culture.

Lacy's large scale pieces executed over the last thirteen years have all reflected her commitment to activism. In 1978, at a time when most West Coast performance art was characterized by highly personal, autobiographical explorations, Lacy was one of the first to observe that the "politics is coming back into art" ("She Who Would Fly" 6). Ten years later, in 1988, she asserted that "Being an artist carries with it a great potential and a great obligation. For in making art we embark upon a process of self-creating and, simultaneously, world-creating" ("Statement" 51). Thus art-making, for Lacy, has gone beyond simply addressing political issues and into the realm of world-changing activism.

"In Mourning and In Rage" and "Crystal Quilt" both call attention to the misrepresentation or marginalization of women in our culture; just as rape and violence against women have been alternately sensationalized or ignored by the media, so have the needs and concerns of aging women also been traditionally

devalued or ignored. Both works received extensive television and newspaper coverage; thus Lacy relied upon the very medium which perpetuates distorted views of women--the media itself--in order to disseminate a view of reality which does not exclude women. Lacy remarks that her strategy with "Crystal Quilt" was "to establish visibility within a media environment in order to help shape a public agenda more favorable to the elderly" ("Whitewalls" 10).

The scale of Lacy's works is also noteworthy. Each successive large-scale work over the last decade has mobilized a greater number of women, involved a larger number of organizations, required a greater number of performers, more financial support, and a longer period for advance planning. Whereas "In Mourning and in Rage" was created over a number of days, "Crystal Quilt" took three years to execute. In responding to criticism that large-scale works lack substance, Lacy argues that spectacle "need not be hollow or deceptive," adding that

. . . scale can be a means to an end, expressing political values and personal ethics, and media technology can be artfully subverted. One's audience can be re-located along a continuum between passive observation and active participation depending on the artist's decisions. ("Skeptical" 18-19)

Lacy suggests that the media itself is not inherently evil; rather one must learn how to manipulate the media in order to create a more activist audience.

Many of Lacy's pieces either mobilized existing groups or created organizations which continued to function beyond the actual life of the work. Though none of the newly-created organizations survived more than a year beyond the final event, one can argue that the effect on people's lives can not be gauged by the number of formal organizations which an art work leaves in its wake. Lacy suggests that changing people's attitudes, something which is inherently difficult to quantify, is perhaps the ultimate contribution of art to the social agenda, rather than spawning a plethora of organizations.

Lacy recently returned from Finland where she worked on her largest project to date, "The Road of Poems and Borders," a multi-faceted performance event which mobilized an entire Finnish border town of 47,000 inhabitants over the period of one week in June, 1990. As part of the international Meeting of the Worlds Festival organized by Performers and Artists for Nuclear Disarmament, Lacy collaborated with artists such as Guillermo Gómez-Peña, Arthur Strimling, and Allan Kaprow from America, and Pirkko Kurikka, Tuire Hindikke, Petr Rehor and Ihva Aula from Finland, in a series of events, including an international blitz of postcards on the town of Joensuu, Finland; hourly readings by artists on the meanings of borders; a live radio conversation linking three elderly women in America, Finland, and the Soviet Union; a piece in which 214 teenagers in red shirts formed a border on a natural lagoon and jumped into the freezing water to swim to the center;

and finally, meetings of townspeople in the marketplace which were recorded by outlining their bodies on the market floor. These pieces represent a further expansion in terms of both the scale and the themes expressed in her work; by addressing the timely issue of borders while working with a multi-national contingent of artists, Lacy's most recent project casts an even wider net than her previous work. (See following project description by Lacy.)

Virtually all of Lacy's works actively seek social or political change. By moving from personal statements of rage within the context of the nurturing environment of the Woman's Building, out into the community, and ultimately into the world, the overall progression of Lacy's work has been that of reaching out to an ever expanding humanity. The urgency of the issues which activate Lacy in turn dictate the techniques she uses to communicate to a wider audience. Lacy's large-scale works also skillfully blend public and private discourse, demonstrating Moira Roth's observation that the feminist artists of Lacy's generation believed that "the personal is the political" (Amazing 16). While many artists make powerful statements which rarely if ever reach the eyes, ears, hearts, and minds of non-artists, Lacy has recognized that ultimately, political and social change through art necessitates going beyond the gallery walls.

San Diego State University

Note

1. For Burnham's discussion of this issue see "Running Commentary," *High Performance* 35 (1986): 8-9.

Works Cited

- Lacy, Suzanne and Leslie Labowitz-Starus, "In Mourning and In Rage." *Frontiers* 3 (Spring 1978): 52-55
- Lacy, Suzanne. Interview. "She Who Would Fly." By Richard Newton. *High Performance* 1 (1978) 4-7+.
- _____. "Made for TV." *Performing Arts Journal* 6.2 (1982): 52-61
- _____. "Skeptical of Spectacle." Unpublished Paper.
- _____. "Statement." *High Performance* 41-42 (1988): 51
- _____. Telephone Interview. 7 December 1989.
- _____. Telephone Interview. 16 July 1990.
- _____. "In the Shadows: An Analysis of the Dark Madonna." *White-walls*, Fall 1990.

Roth, Moira, ed. *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America*. Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983.

_____. "Visions and Re-Visions." *Artforum* Nov. 1980: 36-45.

Rothenberg, Diane. "Social Art/Social Action." *The Drama Review* 32 (1988): 61-70.

This paper was originally presented at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education Chicago Conference, August 1990.



"The Crystal Quilt." Performance by Suzanne Lacy. Minneapolis, May 10, 1987. Photo: Peter Latner.



Production still from performance planning for "Sinun Rajasi, Meeting at the Market," one of four events planned by Suzanne Lacy as part of *The Road of Poems and Borders*. Allan Kaprow is the collaborator for this event, along with Ihva Ahlo. Pictured: Ihva Ahlo and Suzanne Lacy.