

CONTESTING COMPLIANCE:
PERFORMATIVITY, CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING, PERFORMANCE ART, AND *DOIN' IT
IN PUBLIC*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in Art History and Visual Culture Studies.

Whitman College
2012

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Introduction

This thesis contends that it is necessary to reassess hierarchical divisions between feminisms, like the delineation drawn to position post-structural feminism as distinct from and more advanced than cultural feminism. Through visual representation, the exhibition *Doin' It In Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building* highlights the importance of questioning such divisions. I utilize the Los Angeles Woman's Building, a feminist art and education space which opened in 1973 and closed in 1991, as an example of cultural feminism and Judith Butler's theory of performativity, as outlined in *Gender Trouble*, as an example of post-structural theory. I argue that the assumption that the Woman's Building (WB) was a space of less developed, less radical feminism forecloses analytical possibilities, and I explore how applying Butler's theory of performativity to practices of consciousness-raising and performance art at the WB can reveal the complexity of the analysis occurring there. Judith Butler's theory of performativity can be used to address the politics of gendered life in these practices at the WB, effectively illustrating the common threads which run through these feminist projects. I argue that, despite their differences, post-structural feminisms today are contingent on and exist in relation to feminisms of the past, and it is important to consider the intricacies of these movements with all of the available tactics and tools.

What is at stake here is not only how the Woman's Building is remembered, but what its remembrance suggests about continuing dialogues about feminism in art. Chapter One examines *Doin' It In Public*, the accompanying exhibition catalogues, and the history of the Woman's Building so as to raise two important questions: Does *Doin' It In Public* critically engage with intergenerational thinking and reassessment of feminist histories? Does the exhibition challenge its viewers to think about the Woman's Building in relation to contemporary feminism? Chapter

Two connects Judith Butler's theory of performativity to group consciousness and deconstruction of consensus in consciousness-raising at the Woman's Building. Chapter Three illustrates how consciousness-raising is connected to performance art and uses Suzanne Lacy's multi-faceted performance piece *Three Weeks in May* as a case study to explore how Butler's articulation of gender, performativity, and compliance can be applied to feminist art of an earlier period. Even without a post-structural vocabulary, *Three Weeks in May* engages in analysis of social constructions of gender, as they are policed by rape and sexual assault.

Doin' It In Public is an opportunity to consider the way in which the Woman's Building is socially located within feminist histories and discourses¹. Part of the Getty Research Institute's year-long *Pacific Standard Time* project about art in Los Angeles between 1945 and 1980, *Doin' It In Public* displays and contextualizes art and ephemera from the Woman's Building, presenting the public with a history of feminist thought, artistic practice, resistance, and collaboration in the context of a particular place and time.² The exhibition brings this feminist history into dialogue with the present and makes it necessary to reject divisions between feminisms. Judith Butler theorizes gender as a series of repeated acts done in compliance with law, culture, and history; it is political, not biological. *Gender Trouble* exposes "the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions."³ Butler's work is often labeled post-structural to delineate it from earlier feminist scholarship and Butler sees her work as being distinct from much of the feminist tradition; however, performativity can be a tool for opening new avenues of discussion about older feminist artworks. Butler's theory illuminates how gender is always shared, coerced, and

¹ "Doin' It In Public: Art and Feminism at the Woman's Building," Otis College of Art and Design, Ben Maltz Gallery.

² "Doin' It In Public: Art and Feminism at the Woman's Building".

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), viii.

political. Consciousness-raising is a process which shifts away from an individual model of gender to an understanding of the shared, coerced, political nature of gendered life. Individuals verbally present their experiences to a group, so that the group may build consciousness of itself as such. This feminist political tool has a problematic relationship with the instability of the category of ‘women,’ but it also contains the possibility of revealing differences between women, and thus, combating essentialism. The importance of consciousness-raising to the Feminist Studio Workshop and the Woman’s Building illustrates a connecting thread between Butler’s work and the Woman’s Building. Suzanne Lacy’s multi-piece art work *Three Weeks in May* demonstrates both the connection between the practices of consciousness-raising and performance art, and the way in which both of these feminist practices need to be connected to post-structural theory. The delineations which separate Butler’s theory of performativity from the products of cultural feminism do a disservice to contemporary feminism. *Three Weeks in May* is a product of the Woman’s Building, and it displays a complex understanding of the social nature of gender and the coercion inherent in gendered life.

Doin’ It In Public presents artwork and ephemera from the Woman’s Building to showcase the unique contributions of the women who studied and worked there to education, politics, art, and the developing landscape of feminist thought in the United States. The exhibition brings the artifacts and ideas of the Woman’s Building out of the archives and into the gallery again, providing a renewed and important opportunity for dissemination, recognition, and consideration of how feminism has changed since 1973. However, contemplating these shifts toward different approaches should not obscure their association with the past. In this thesis, the term “post-structural” is used to describe the feminism of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, as well as to describe the contemporary body of scholarship which has followed

from her 1990 work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. This terminology, although imperfect, highlights the significant differences between the approaches of different generations of feminists.

Chapter One: *Doin' It In Public* Teaching the Woman's Building

Certainly, the project of *Doin' It In Public* is far-reaching. The exhibition seeks to present a history which has not been fully explored in art history, to contextualize a vast and varied archive of material, and to expose a new generation to a particular historical time frame. The Woman's Building served alternately as safe space, educational space, critical space, public space, social space, professional space, and nurturing space, and to capture all of these facets in one show is daunting. However, *Doin' It In Public* renews visibility for the Woman's Building, and in this way, creates a site for not only historical interpretation, but also questioning and reassessment. In his review of eleven *Pacific Standard Time* shows, artist and essayist Peter Plagens describes *Doin' It In Public* as one of "the learning shows."⁴ By this categorization he intends to highlight the value of informing an audience, which is one of the central goals of this show. In contrast to the Getty's centerpiece exhibition *Pacific Standard Time: Crosscurrents in L.A. Painting and Sculpture, 1950-1970*, *Doin' It In Public* is not motivated by the presence of famous art objects; rather, it engages with the Woman's Building archive in order to present a dynamic narrative. Plagens' framing of this show as being about "learning" is therefore helpful in considering its contributions to discussions about feminism. Within *Doin' It In Public*, the importance of conveying information cannot be overstated. However, this dissemination occurs in the context of larger discussions of contemporary feminism, meaning that the exhibition should be viewed as dynamic.

⁴ Peter Plagens, "Laying Claim to its Palce in the Sun," Wall Street Journal, October 12, 2011.

Commencing with posters and newspaper articles which present the history of the Feminist Art Program at Fresno State University in 1970, the exhibition moves through a number of thematically-related sections. The first section describes the beginning of feminist art in academic institutions in Southern California, which provides the backdrop for the founding of the Woman's Building. Next, the show devotes consideration to "The Visionaries," Judy Chicago, Sheila de Bretteville, and Arlene Raven, the three women who imagined the Woman's Building and then brought its creation to fruition. The next section narrates the beginning of the Building itself, the selection of the name, the renovation of the building, and the opening of "a public center for women's culture" in Los Angeles.⁵

The work presented, primarily posters, flyers, and videos documenting performances, clearly demonstrates the importance of collaboration and collectivity at the Woman's Building. This was a stated goal of the exhibition as well: "A major component of the exhibition is the WB's focus on developing, teaching and executing collaboration."⁶ The collaborative groups included are: Ariadne: A Social Art Network, *Chrysalis* magazine, Feminist Art Workers, Feminist Studio Workshop, The L.A. Women's Video Center, Madre Tierra Press, Mother Art, Sisters of Survival, The Waitresses, and the Women's Graphic Center.⁷ Additionally, videos and images from the works *In Mourning and In Rage*, *Record Companies Drag Their Feet*, and *Three Weeks in May* offer a glimpse into the large-scale performance projects for which the Woman's Building was so well known in Los Angeles and feminist art circles. *Three Weeks in May*, a collaboration between Suzanne Lacy, the Woman's Building, and other women's organizations throughout Los Angeles is discussed further in Chapter Three. *Doin' It In Public*

⁵ "Doin' It In Public: Art and Feminism at the Woman's Building".

⁶ Kathy MacPherson, "Otis College of Art and Design to Mount Exhibition 'Doin' It In Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman's Building' on view October 1, 2011 through January 28, 2011," Otis College of Art and Design, January 28, 2011, http://www.otis.edu/assets/user/Ben%20Maltz%20Gallery/WB_PR_Final_1-28.pdf.

⁷ MacPherson.

presents *Three Weeks in May* in seven photographs from different performances from the timespan of the project.⁸ The aim of the project, to visually chronicle rape reports and to supply information about rape prevention efforts, is explained in a wall text which summarizes Lacy's artist statement about the work.⁹ A video mounted on the wall shows film footage from Lacy's performance at the Los Angeles City Mall.¹⁰ Next to the images and video from *Three Weeks in May*, the wall is filled with a large black and white photo collage from the 1977 performance, *In Mourning and In Rage* by Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz.¹¹ The large scale of this collage and the sharp contrast in the photographs makes it the visual centerpiece of this portion of the exhibition. Throughout the exhibition, informational panels contextualize the works presented, by offering viewers a narrative of a separatist, activist, and creative space. The wall texts are primarily informational, although they also chronicle the personal views of women from the Woman's Building, which animates these stories with the memory of the women who were so actively involved in these works.¹²

The final section of the show reflects on the final years at the Woman's Building. During these years, the financial survival of the organization came to be the central concern of its functioning. However, despite candor about the difficulties that preceded the Building closing its doors, this final section also offers notes of hope. In the final text of the exhibition, Wolverton expresses her personal belief that, ultimately, the Woman's Building was a great success and that it fulfilled its mission. As Lucy Lippard points out in the exhibition catalogue, there are certainly

⁸ "Doin' It In Public: Art and Feminism at the Woman's Building".

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

gains worth celebrating.¹³ However, she also cautions against a sense of achievement which forecloses the possibility of forward momentum:

Today the notion of feminist community is far less powerful, more splintered—in part because of right-wing ascendancies, in part because postcolonial theory has highlighted the weaknesses of earlier ‘multiculturalism,’ and in part because the women’s movement did succeed in integrating women artists into the mainstream, a double-edged sword evident in the reactionary eighties, when populist activism was overwhelmed by less accessible (and less dangerous) theory.¹⁴

Thus, *Doin’ It In Public* does not wholeheartedly embrace the standard line about the progress of feminism over the past thirty years. It offers an opening for discussions about the effect of feminist histories on the feminist present, as well as thinking about how art, activism, and theory relate to one another in a complex framework of interdependencies.

In giving credit to the exhibition for creating space for this feminist history and considering how it might be related to contemporary issues, I do not wish to suggest that the show could not have done more to further discussion and audience involvement. The way in which the exhibition ends highlights this problem very clearly. Wolverton articulates her feeling that the Woman’s Building achieved what it needed to at the time, but neither her words nor the curator’s ask viewers to contemplate their own relationships to these issues. This might have been a space to ask viewers to critically consider the information presented and to question how they might continue to think about the history of the Woman’s Building within feminist history more broadly. What is at stake here is not only how *Doin’ In Public* remembers the Woman’s Building, but also how the show connects to broader discourses of feminism. Given the limitations of the exhibition in connecting its audience to these discourses, the exhibition

¹³ Lucy Lippard, “Going Around in Circles,” in *From Site to Vision*, ed. Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 12.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

publications are an important expansion of the scope of the project because they generate an influx of critical scholarship about the Woman's Building and questions of feminist politics.

Exhibition Publications

The exhibition catalogue for *Doin' It In Public* is a two-part set which contains a varied array of scholarly work on the many different facets of learning, debate, and cultural production at the Woman's Building from 1973 to 1991. These publications increase the critical scope of the show by expanding on the exhibited images and research. *From Site to Vision: The Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture* is a collection of essays on the history of the Woman's Building, which was published as an online book before being released in conjunction with the exhibition.¹⁵ Notably, this volume contains essays on consciousness-raising in feminist education, issues of racial and sexual difference, and questions for the future of feminisms. The diversity of the topics of these essays captures some of the multiplicity within the Building itself.

As Lippard explains in her 'Foreword,' most of the essays are written by women who experienced life at the Woman's Building, so there is remarkable honesty about the contested terrain of the community: ". . . women with profound connections to the space, the place, the principles, and the people—reveal that while externally the Building epitomized separatism, internally it was varied and contested."¹⁶ This interest in the "contested" interior of the Building is important because it demonstrates a willingness to challenge cohesive or universal narratives. Thus, as *From Site to Vision* exemplifies, the exhibition publications dispute the characterization of the Woman's Building as space of calcified essentialism. Moreover, the catalogues bring another layer of teaching to the exhibition, adding significantly to the body of academic work about the Woman's Building. Both personal narratives and scholarly research produce

¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

¹⁶ Ibid., 12.

information and reflection, work which seeks to reveal histories which have not been fully explored, histories which are, as interdisciplinary artist Theresa Chavez observes, “buried, misunderstood or romanticized.”¹⁷

In her essay, *Unburying Histories: The Future(s) of Feminist Art*, Chavez considers her positioning as a Latina woman and an artist within the context of Los Angeles and the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). Chavez worked at the Woman’s Building in the 1980s, and now teaches at CalArts¹⁸. Her experiences have led her to feel very connected to a history she describes as “the semi-buried history of feminist art practice at CalArts, which began with the founding of the Feminist Art Program by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in 1972, and its subsequent incarnation at the Woman’s Building.”¹⁹ Chavez contends that the story of “experimental, politically-motivated, socially passionate, and community-driven” feminist art has been obscured within the institution of CalArts, and she claims that this does a disservice to current students.²⁰ To explore and counteract this obfuscation, Chavez engages graduate and undergraduate women who studied at CalArts between 2000 and 2007 in email correspondence about their own understandings of feminism in art.²¹ A culmination of the dialogue spurred by her project, this essay reveals the complex relationships that women artists have with feminism, especially feminist history. For this reason, *From Site to Vision* contributes to the exhibition by bringing new kinds of critical engagement to scholarship about the Woman’s Building.

As Terry Wolverton, Executive Director of the Woman’s Building from 1987 to 1988, explains in her memoir *Insurgent Muse: Life and Art at the Woman’s Building*, the experiences

¹⁷ Theresa Chavez, “Unburying Histories: The Future(s) of Feminist Art” in *From Site to Vision*, ed. Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 387.

¹⁸ Chavez, “Unburying Histories,” 388.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 388.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 388.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 391.

of all women touched by the Woman's Building defy easy categorization: "No one could ever describe [it]. It would require a language of multiple dimensions, of texture, a language that could encompass the passage of time as well as contradictory points of view."²² Lacking this perfect language, *Doin' It In Public* can offer only a partial history from a particular curatorial perspective. However, considering the implications of this exhibition and its particular viewpoint for contemporary feminist debate is important and timely. The exhibition illustrates the necessity of an argument about the critical relationship between history, theory, and practice within feminist art. As Lippard notes, the dominant discussion of the Woman's Building has typically been to criticize it as the "capital of cultural feminism"²³ or "the proud epitome of dreaded 'essentialism,'"²⁴ meaning that it has been portrayed as a space of a less evolved, less radical brand of feminism, characterized by less developed understandings of race, sexual orientation, and class. It is important to question how this categorization has structured thoughts and writing about the Woman's Building, including *Doin' It In Public*. If these categorizations are destabilized, can analytical lens of contemporary feminism incite more engaged debate about the Woman's Building than simply labeling it 'essentialist'? This exhibition offers an opportunity to consider the critical relationship between Judith Butler's contemporary feminist theory and the feminist art practices of consciousness-raising and performance at the Woman's Building. In one of Butler's most eloquent summarizations of her own work, she writes that her intent is "to uncover the ways in which the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life is foreclosed by certain habitual and violent presumptions."²⁵ I argue that this was also the project of the consciousness-raising and performance at the Woman's Building. The presence of common ideas

²² Terry Wolverton, *Insurgent Muse*, (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2002), 4.

²³ Lucy Lippard, "Going Around in Circles," in *From Site to Vision*, ed. Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 12.

²⁴ Lippard, "Going Around in Circles," 14.

²⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, viii.

in separate projects supports the notion that critical analysis will benefit from disregarding categorical divisions.

History of the Woman's Building

The Woman's Building's was created to oppose the limits of the male-dominated art world and the conservatizing forces of traditional art education. However, it was also envisioned and formed in the context of a shift toward more openness to "new protagonists" and experimentation in art in California.²⁶ Los Angeles has often been characterized as a cultural backwater and a space devoid of intellectual stimulation, an unwelcoming and empty city. For women artists, this stereotype and the very real challenges it obscures have historically been even more pronounced, as they struggled to fit themselves into the very male art elite of the city. However, as Daniela Salvioni points out, the post-WWII years in California were characterized by a growth of the art world, a diffusion of new artistic practices, and a focus on education and experimentation: "California became a mecca for art students because of its wealth of excellent art schools and its tuition assistance programs. . . The schools encouraged the exploration of new artistic practices, rendering California an experimental hotbed populated by scores of young, ambitious artists."²⁷ These expansions, coupled with the way in which California, "epitomizes national and global trends" toward "ever greater diversity and complexity," make the city itself a particularly important context for the radical turn of feminist art. Even as the Woman's Building fought against the continuing discrimination against women, it also benefited from shifts that were beginning to take place in California.²⁸

²⁶ Daniela Salvioni, "Introduction: Art in Context," in *Art/Women/California 1950-2000*, ed. Dana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 4.

²⁷ Salvioni, "Introduction: Art in Context," 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

Trends within the national artistic climate of the postwar years still favored male artists well into the 1960s and 70s.²⁹ In the 1950s, the near-complete monopoly of men over art making and art institutions was fading, but “until the feminist art movement, the sociological profile of the artists, while broadened, was still staunchly European-American and male.”³⁰ Relatively well-known women artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Louise Nevelson, Lee Bontecou, Helen Frankenthaler, and Eva Hesse were still marginalized as addendums to official art histories or as lackluster, feminized attempts at real art.³¹ The feminist art movement in the 1970s slowly began to eradicate this marginalization based on the inclusion of more diverse voices. Salvioni describes women artists at the beginning of the feminist art movement as members of an onslaught of “new protagonists”: “The social changes that swept the nation in the postwar era introduced ‘new’ protagonists—women, peoples of color, gays and lesbians—onto the social stage.”³² According to Salvioni these social shifts were especially prominent in Los Angeles: The advent of the feminist explosion. . . was especially felt in California, particularly Los Angeles, which became a principal epicenter for a variety of feminist art practices, particularly performance.”³³ Thus, Los Angeles’s social, political, and artistic expansion occurred as broader, national shifts did, but with more rapidity and intensity. Los Angeles, as a microcosm of the U.S., demonstrates the tension between increased opportunities for women and minorities and continuing systems of discrimination and limitation.

In her autobiography, Judy Chicago, one of the three founders of the Woman’s Building, explains how her experiences as a woman artist in Los Angeles in the late 60s and early 70s created her desire for a feminist art institution that would support the kind of art she wanted to

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰ Ibid., 4.

³¹ Ibid., 4.

³² Ibid., 4.

³³ Ibid., 5.

make and the kind of teaching she wanted to do. Her story reflects the limitations of the advancements that had been made in art and art education, even in California. Chicago says that she was glad to have been in California, of all places, but that she still experienced the forces of sexism in her dealings with male artists and male-dominated art institutions.³⁴ She frames the issue as one of how communities were constructed at that point: “Men had constructed their community on the basis of their interests and needs as men. I realized that men (and women invested in that male community) *could not* respond to my work the way I wanted them to.”³⁵ Chicago experienced the male-based community as unwilling to recognize her experiences, ideas, or artwork as important enough to be deserving of their attention; she knew that the way to combat this was to create a new kind of women-centered community.³⁶

In 1970, Chicago began teaching full-time at Fresno State University. There, she intended to create an all-women art class where she could encourage women to engage in feminist art making from the beginning of their undergraduate careers.³⁷ Chicago’s ultimate goal was to be a “facilitator”, not a teacher for her students, so that she would build an empowering environment in which women would find their own artistic voices.³⁸ Fresno State did not meet Chicago’s expectations, and in 1971, she moved back to Los Angeles to create the Feminist Art Program at CalArts. Even in the liberal world of education in California, Chicago felt that these institutions were conservatizing forces against her ideas.³⁹ She believed that neither of these existing educational institutions would ever be able to fully support the feminist art community that she wanted to create.⁴⁰ She collaborated with Arlene Raven and Sheila de Bretteville to develop an

³⁴ Judy Chicago, *Beyond The Flower* (New York: Viking, 1996), 19.

³⁵ Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower* (New York: Anchor Books, 1975), 65.

³⁶ Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 66.

³⁷ Chicago, *Beyond The Flower*, 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

independent feminist art space, and in 1973, these three women founded the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW), which was “the first-ever independent (though unaccredited) Feminist Art institution.”⁴¹ This project was influenced by Chicago’s hopes for Fresno and CalArts, but was also intended to grow the role of art and women artists within the wider community.⁴² Chicago, Raven, and de Bretteville planned for the FSW to teach and support women artists, but to also politicize and publicize feminist art in Los Angeles.⁴³ They envisioned the Feminist Studio Workshop as the kind of space where figurative, narrative, personal, woman-made art could flourish. When Edie Gross, who became the first Woman’s Building manager in 1973, suggested that Womanspace, a gallery showing the work of women artists, rent space with the FSW, the vision of a feminist art community began to emerge as the Woman’s Building.⁴⁴ Gross, Chicago, Raven, and de Bretteville discussed the benefits of bringing together multiple female-oriented organizations that were already functioning in the city to establish “a rich environment that housed multiple points of view within a feminist context.”⁴⁵ The building was intended to be a safe place for expressing different perspectives, for education, and for exhibition.⁴⁶

On November 28, 1973, the Woman’s Building opened in a building formerly housing the Chouinard Art Institute, which had been renovated by Chicago, Raven, de Bretteville, and their FSW students.⁴⁷ At this time, the building was home to the FSW, Womanspace, Grandview, a women’s cooperative gallery, Gallery 707, a private gallery, the Sisterhood Bookstore, multiple performing groups, the Associated Women’s Press, and political groups like

⁴¹ Ibid., 35.

⁴² Ibid., 35.

⁴³ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁵ Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 201.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 201.

⁴⁷ Chicago, *Beyond The Flower*, 202

NOW and the Women's Liberation Union.⁴⁸ Whereas the educational program the FSW and the all-female galleries like Womanspace had before struggled in isolation because they "could not meet all the various needs of the female art community, while maintaining enough credibility as an art organization to affect aesthetic values,"⁴⁹ the Woman's Building brought together many disparate voices to stand collectively against the male domination of the art world. As Chicago articulated in her autobiography, she, Raven, and de Bretteville aspired to "an entire alternate art structure"⁵⁰ which was, at its inception, "a home for the female culture that was exploding all around us."⁵¹ The Woman's Building had a decidedly separatist leaning, but because it was made up of a coalition of different groups of women, it was deeply engaged with larger communities.

Although Chicago, Raven, and de Bretteville always intended the Woman's Building to be a place where all feminist voices would be heard, race was significantly divisive at the Woman's Building. Three white women founded the Woman's Building, and so from the beginning, the goals of the Woman's Building stemmed from a white, middle-class feminist perspective, which did not represent the political goals of all women. Differences within the student body, faculty of the FSW, and staff of the Woman's Building were not easy to overcome. Monica Mayer who attended classes at the Woman's Building in 1978, argues that the group was quite diverse: "Participants came from all over the US, from different social classes and different levels of education, from different racial and cultural backgrounds; they were of all sexual leanings, of all different ages, and some . . . came from abroad."⁵² However, racialized power dynamics and systems of privilege present in society at large were not negated within the

⁴⁸ Ibid., 202.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 201.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 200.

⁵¹ Ibid., 202.

⁵² Monica Mayer, "Art and Feminism: from Loving Education to Education through Osmosis," *paradoxa*, Vol. 26, 8.

Woman's Building. Many women of color felt that their white peers "tried to impose their own *narrow ideas* about the nature of feminism and feminist art without trying to understand the experiences and values of women from different cultural backgrounds."⁵³ As time passed and the awareness of racial tensions began to come to the fore, the Woman's Building did devote resources to exhibitions, classes, and readings targeting women of diverse backgrounds, as evidenced by Terry Wolverton's anti-racist consciousness-raising group discussed in the next chapter⁵⁴. However, these efforts did not change the predominant whiteness of the organization. Suzanne Shelton, hired in 1980, was the first African American executive director of the Building.⁵⁵ She worked during her tenure to cultivate openness to women of color, and to make the environment more welcoming to them and their needs.⁵⁶ However, throughout her tenure she had great difficulty integrating with the other leaders at the Woman's Building, many of whom had been there much longer than she had.⁵⁷ Shelton's discomfort was greatly motivated by her racial difference, meaning that when she left her post early, the history of whiteness of the Woman's Building was partially to blame.⁵⁸

The founding of the Woman's Building and its end are equally important in the way in which *Doin' It In Public* presents a narrative of feminist history. This is not to say that the Woman's Building's closure should overshadow its important achievements, but rather, that the difficulties the Building's leadership faced in its later years should not be ignored. There are a number of factors which influenced shifts in the 1980s. Firstly, the financial resources which the

⁵³ Laura Meyer, "Constructing a New Paradigm," in *Art/Women/California*, ed. Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 112, emphasis mine.

⁵⁴ Meyer "Constructing a New Paradigm", 112.

⁵⁵ Michelle Moravec and Sondra Hale, "'At Home' at the Woman's Building (But Who Gets a Room of Her Own?): Women of Color and Community," in *From Site to Vision*, ed. Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 172.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 170.

Woman's Building, and many other nonprofit organizations had relied on to support its activities were no longer available.⁵⁹ The budget of the National Endowment for the Arts was greatly reduced and the Woman's Building could no longer count on grants to support its exhibitions, educational series, or student scholarships.⁶⁰ CETA IV, an employment program subsidizing staff salaries, was cut from the Federal budget entirely.⁶¹ Additionally, Terry Wolverton claims that shifting educational trends directed artists into MBA programs instead of alternative art schools.⁶² This led the FSW to close in 1981, greatly limiting the Building's revenue.⁶³ However, these economic constraints were experienced simultaneously with other cultural shifts, which altered the way in which the Woman's Building related to larger social bodies. As Wolverton notes, the 1980s were characterized by a great deal of "post-Vietnam bitterness. . . racism, class contempt, women hating, and homophobia."⁶⁴ She also credits shifts in the terrain of feminism with altering how the Woman's Building fit into a larger movement; some women began talking about a "postfeminist" age, and other women started formulating academic ties, arguing for a new, post-structural critique of 1970s feminism, and both of these trends forced the Woman's Building to alter the way it viewed its own purpose.⁶⁵ As Wolverton argues, these generational shifts within feminism should be considered part of the story. This is not to say that post-structural feminism is responsible for the Woman's Building closing its doors, but instead, to suggest that these changes are ripe for discussion.

Amid an environment assumed by the art world in New York and Europe to be infertile and vapid, a group of feminist thinkers and artists created the Woman's Building in 1973 and

⁵⁹ Wolverton, *Insurgent Muse*, 170.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

sustained it until 1991. The myths of Los Angeles did not foreclose the possibility of mobilization, or as Lucy Lippard put it: “Los Angeles, by virtue of its relative isolation at the time, was freer to innovate than we were in the art capital [New York].”⁶⁶ The Woman’s Building was certainly not the first female-driven art project, but it had unprecedented scope and longevity. It certainly has the distinction of housing “the first-ever independent (though unaccredited) Feminist Art institution.”⁶⁷ Now, in a new century, the Woman’s Building does not exist as a physical space, but the contributions of the artists it nurtured, such as Suzanne Lacy, reverberate through the art world and in multiple realms of feminist thought and scholarship.

WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution: Precedential Exhibition

By depicting a very specific segment of feminist history, *Doin’ It In Public* aims to be the first exhibition to fully explore the Woman’s Building’s role as a major epicenter of feminist art over more than two decades.⁶⁸ The show participates in a tradition of feminist exhibitions at major art museums, but it is centered on a particular contextual moment. In this way, it is different from precedential exhibitions like *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, which took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2007, and was essentially a survey of feminist art. *WACK!* sought to address the imbalance between the general appreciation for the social progress of the feminist movement and the simultaneous lack of recognition for feminism in art.⁶⁹ Though the show emphasized the contributions of West Coast artists, *WACK!* was constructed around the notion of the “global phenomenon” of feminism in art and included 119 artists from 21 countries.⁷⁰ In the ‘Director’s Forward’ to the *WACK!* catalogue, Jeremy Strick

⁶⁶Lippard, “Going Around in Circles,” 11.

⁶⁷ Chicago, *Beyond the Flower*, 35.

⁶⁸ MacPherson.

⁶⁹ Jeremy Strick, “Director’s Forward,” in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007), 7.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

acknowledges the import of Los Angeles as a “locus” of feminist activity: “It is particularly apt that such an exhibition should emanate from a West Coast institution, given Los Angeles’s status as an important locus for early feminist discourse and the undeniable impact that feminism has had on artists and art-making here.”⁷¹ *Doin’ It In Public* pushes this project even further by arguing that Los Angeles and the Woman’s Building deserve more sustained attention. It utilizes *Pacific Standard Time* as an opportunity to present a history of feminist art specific to the Woman’s Building.

Additionally, *Doin’ It In Public* and *WACK!* share an interest in “revising and expanding the canon,”⁷² and in particular, they share an openness to expanding routes of “resistance and subversion.”⁷³ As art historian and curator Cornelia Butler explains in the *WACK!* catalogue, “I concluded that something about the subject of feminist art inspires a healthy sense of expansiveness, resistance, and subversion While *WACK!*’s inclusions and exclusions will surely be the subject of debate, it is my hope that the exhibition will lead to a more expansive consideration of feminism’s impact on art”⁷⁴ Cornelia Butler continues this line of argumentation by asserting that it is important to reconsider the multiplicity and changeability of feminisms:

. . . to deliver it from its nomenclatorial fixity and reconnect it to the verb ‘to move’—with all the restless possibility that word connotes . . . to assert that feminism constitutes an ideology of shifting criteria, one influenced and mediated by myriad other factors. . . . [F]eminism is a relatively open-ended system that has, throughout its history of engagement with visual art, sustained an unprecedented degree of internal critique and contained wildly divergent political ideologies and practices.⁷⁵

⁷¹ Ibid., 7.

⁷² Ibid., 7.

⁷³ Cornelia Butler, “Art and Feminism: An Ideology of Shifting Criteria,” in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, ed. Lisa Gabrielle Mark (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007), 23.

⁷⁴ Butler, “Art and Feminism,” 23.

⁷⁵ Butler, “Art and Feminism” 15.

Butler's explanation of feminism underlines the possibility and necessity of change, and thus, seems to be in accord with the kind of analysis which this thesis undertakes. If feminism is an "open-ended system," then it is important to reconsider the way that the movement has been compartmentalized and expand the reevaluation of how its component parts have been defined.

As demonstrated by the precedent of *WACK!*, it is valuable to be radically open to the complexities of feminism. It is beneficial to view feminisms as socially located on continuums or spectrums and to consider how the theories and practices of different periods can be revelatory of one another. Judith Butler's theory of performativity can be used to analyze consciousness-raising and performance art at the Woman's Building and to go beyond projects of labeling. I do not seek to write a grand narrative of feminism which connects all artists and thinkers into a chain of eventualities, but rather, I suggest that there are rich possibilities for interpretation and reinterpretation between generations. To suggest one interpretation that goes beyond essentialist labeling, I utilize Butler's theory to discuss the ways in which the consciousness-raising practices and performance art at the Woman's Building can be understood as critical engagements with questions of performativity and gendered norms within systems of power. Although *Gender Trouble* was written and published after the height of the Woman's Building's prominence, the interrelations between the two are important ground for comparison. What is at stake here is not only how a particular historical narrative is remembered, but what its remembrance suggests about broader cultural questions. *Doin' It In Public* should be considered a valuable venue for ongoing debate about what feminism means in the 21st century. In the next chapter, I discuss how Butler articulates an understanding of gender as socially constituted and explore how the shared process of consciousness-raising works to explore this social construction.

Chapter Two: Performativity, Gendered Life, and Consciousness-Raising

Becoming Compliant: What is Gender?

This section outlines my understanding of Butler's theory and explores how performativity can elucidate the process of consciousness-raising as examination of gender's social construction and enforcement. A discussion of Butler's theory of performativity and consciousness-raising at the Woman's Building in relation to one another is fertile and productive ground because both of these projects explore gender as a powerful mode of social meaning. Conceiving of feminism in historical perspective does not mean that progress moves in one direction toward an ever-better form of feminism; rather, it suggests that these two subfields can be revelatory of one another's unique contributions. Butler's theory of performativity, as outlined in her book *Gender Trouble* and furthered in *Bodies That Matter* and later essays, is an important framework for analysis of feminism, gender, and power, and for how theory can interact with artistic and political practice. *Gender Trouble* rejects the alignment of the meaning of gender with biological fact, and it refuses the primacy of the heterosexual matrix within dominant culture and feminist scholarship. These reassessments of what gender means, how gender is done, and what feminism's purposes might be, signal a shift toward post-structural feminism. *Gender Trouble* expands the possible ways of conceiving gender and its social significance, and in so doing, is an important point of reference for considering feminist projects like the Woman's Building.

Butler confronts systems which structure the discourses and lived experiences of gender. She argues that sex and gender are not biological facts which reside in the body, but rather products of power, knowledge, and discourse.⁷⁶ Notions of gender are central to the arrangement of meaning in society, but Butler seeks to denaturalize the assumptions that construct, arrange,

⁷⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxxi.

and impel gender. In order to engage in this kind of critique, she uses the idea of “genealogy” to critically investigate the meanings of sexes and genders: “To expose the foundational categories of sex, gender, and desire as effects of a specific formation of power requires a form of critical inquiry that Foucault designates ‘genealogy.’”⁷⁷ Butler’s genealogy does not seek a historical point of origin. Instead, it asks what kinds of power or privilege are to be gained by specifying such a point: “genealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin.”⁷⁸ Butler explains gender as a consequence of social forces, not a fact before these powers. Genealogy, then, illuminates the import and reach of these forces which organize categories of being. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler points to “phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality” as systems, which must be given specific attention in order to be questioned: “The task of this inquiry is to center on—and decenter—such defining institutions: phallogocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality.”⁷⁹ Butler’s articulation of gender as a construct aims not merely to analyze, but to question that power.

What is gender? What is it we talk about when we talk about gender? Gender is a binary scheme of delineation by which humans are categorized as being one thing or another thing. This means that masculine and feminine are defined by their opposition to one another. Butler contends that this differing occurs by default in systems of meaning: “Hence, one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair.”⁸⁰ The assumption that individuals fit into one of two sides of a dichotomy relies on dominant understandings of irrefutably, biologically sexed

⁷⁷ Ibid., xxxi.

⁷⁸ Ibid., xxxi.

⁷⁹ Ibid., xxxi.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 30.

bodies: “a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it.”⁸¹ In dominant discourse, including much feminist scholarship, gender is considered a natural result of the differences in sexual anatomy. In rejection of this, Butler advocates for a conceptualization of gender not as a result of biology, but as a project in a field defined by strict limitations on what is possible.

Butler points to Simone de Beauvoir’s oft-quoted assertion “one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman” to illuminate her claim, arguing that de Beauvoir has effectively delineated the notion of ‘woman’ as a social construct: “she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity. To be female is, according to that distinction a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of ‘woman.’”⁸² To conform is “to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project.”⁸³ However, as Butler points out, this “project” is always one undertaken as a necessity of social subsistence: “The notion of a ‘project,’ however, suggests the originating force of a radical will, and because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term ‘*strategy*’ better suggests the situation of duress under which gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences.”⁸⁴ Thus, gender, not as biology, but as social paradigm, is constituted through “becoming” in compliance with law, culture, and history, and this “becoming” has survival as its fundamental goal. Contemplating the feminist political implications of Butler’s work recognizes how high the stakes are.

⁸¹ Ibid., 9.

⁸² Judith, Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” in *The Performance Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Bial (New York: Routledge, 2004), 156-157.

⁸³ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 156-157.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 156-157.

A project of survival, becoming and doing gender, is always already ongoing; it is fundamentally delimited by powers and expectations which precede the individual. Gender is performative in that it is “an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*,”⁸⁵ “a sustained and repeated corporeal project.”⁸⁶ Returning to de Beauvoir, Butler argues that her assertion that one “*becomes* a woman” highlights this temporal dimension of gender: “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts process; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in *time*.”⁸⁷ The importance of this idea of stylized repetition in time is assembled in what Butler terms a “constituted social temporality”⁸⁸ or “a culturally sustained temporal duration.”⁸⁹

gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of a constituted *social temporality*.⁹⁰

This indicates that there is no “substantial model of identity,” no biological fact. Instead, repetition and stylized enactments inhabiting both time and social context create the significance of gender. Thus, social temporality connotes both the repetitive doing through time and the shared cultural norms which stylize the doing itself: “The act that gender is . . . is clearly not one’s act alone. Surely, there are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one’s gender, but *that* one does it, and that one does it in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter.”⁹¹ Gender, that which is personal, is also political, social, and shared.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 154

⁸⁶ Ibid., 156-157.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 154, emphasis mine.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 154.

⁸⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xv.

⁹⁰ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 154.

⁹¹ Ibid., 160.

Consciousness-Raising

No woman is alone in doing her gender in a world where sexual assault, gendered violence, and coercion are political realities which shape how they live. Although consciousness-raising at the Woman's Building preceded Butler's theorization of gender as a social temporality, it created space where women analyzed the social nature of their experiences of gender.

Consciousness-raising is a method which uses discussion to parse out how issues of personal experience are connected to gendered constructions, discourses, and systems of power. It highlights the political nature of gender as a social temporality: "The act that gender is, the act that embodied agents are inasmuch as they dramatically and actively embody and, indeed, *wear* certain cultural significations, is clearly not one's act alone. . . . is clearly not a fully individual matter."⁹² Consciousness-raising was not only a functional tool to bring women into discussion together, but also, a process through which recognition of what is shared about gender could challenge conceptions of it as a private, factual reality. Through recognition of shared oppression, consciousness-raising at the Woman's Building rejected the notion that gender existed for women independent of political forces.

These community conversations invested in the conceptualization and articulation of women's experiences as socially constituted. Instead of considering rape, sexual assault, workplace harassment, marriage, and motherhood as experiences isolated within individuals, consciousness-raising sought to address them as parts of larger political and social schema. This focus on shared experience reflects an understanding of gender not as biological determinism, but as something understood through systems and discourses of cultural norms. As gender is never an individual matter, to raise consciousness is to understand that women share experiences of doing gender in a terrain of violent constraints. It is a process which explores how history,

⁹² Butler, "Performative Acts," 160.

law, culture, and power frame gender, but also of how these frames shape people's everyday lives. Consciousness-raising asserts that gender is not only socially constituted, but also, socially relevant, important, and foundational to lived experience. In her autobiography, Judy Chicago claimed that her encounters with the sexism of the Los Angeles art world were largely motivated by the men around her not understanding her work as "important" because they did not view her experiences or viewpoints as legitimate.⁹³ Prior to the beginning of the feminist movement and the formulization of consciousness-raising "there was no frame of reference. . . to understand a woman's struggle, to value it, or to read and respond to imagery that grew out of it."⁹⁴ Thus, consciousness-raising was a framework wherein gender could be understood as socially and artistically significant.

Consciousness-raising was important to feminist art because it opened up possibilities for exploration of individual experiences, viewpoints, and political beliefs that could provide the chance for these explorations to be illuminated and legitimated by sharing with other women and the public more broadly. According to Lucy Lippard: "It is often said that feminist art is about content and communication. Lived experience and autobiography, which are not the same thing, were at the core of that content, which arrived at the gates of the art world during a period when American art critic Clement Greenberg was still railing against 'literary art.' Feminism gave all artists permission to consider . . . 'the unleashing of the self,' as a preface to social change."⁹⁵ Consciousness-raising set feminist art apart from dominant cultural production of the day because it sought personal and political content. Artists at the Woman's Building were encouraged to create work which dealt explicitly with their own social and political positions as women, with their artistic vision as women artists. Therefore, consciousness-raising was

⁹³ Judy Chicago, *Beyond The Flower*, 19.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹⁵ Lippard, "Going Around in Circles," 13.

foundational not only for the political community of the women's movement, but also for the political artwork of the Woman's Building.

Feminist Education

Consciousness-raising was the hallmark of feminist education at the Woman's Building. The activity of meeting with women in shared space to discuss life experiences, emotional narratives, and the intricacies of identity aimed to make concrete the feminist assertion that the personal is political. Thus, consciousness-raising structured the way in which education was undertaken as a community project. Cheri Gaulke, who enrolled in the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building in the fall of 1975, described consciousness-raising as a practice of shared intentionality: "although there were as many as fifty women enrolled in the program in the mid-seventies, they still took the time to sit in a circle and go around the group, allowing each person to speak to a chosen theme."⁹⁶ These shared circles were vital for creating anti-hierarchical, non-judgmental, and radically productive space. Although verbalizing experience was valuable in and of itself, the act of sharing together also contained within it the possibility of extending outward. Gaulke argues that this secondary goal was ". . . to theorize, to extrapolate from the personal to the political."⁹⁷ Thus, consciousness-raising was not a series of monologues, but rather, an exercise in shared politicization. Consciousness-raising was elemental to feminist education at the Woman's Building because it explored the ways that women share gendered life as a political reality. These consciousness-raising groups expanded what topics could be discussed in the educational setting and worked against the assumption that the personal had no place in public discourse. As Butler remarks: "The act that gender . . . is clearly not one's act alone. . . is clearly

⁹⁶ Betty Ann Brown, "Feminist Art Education at the Los Angeles Woman's Building in *From Site to Vision*, ed. Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 149.

⁹⁷ Brown, "Feminist Art Education," 149.

not a fully individual matter.”⁹⁸ The impact of consciousness-raising in feminist education stems from its revelation of the actuality that no woman is alone in doing gender.

Cataloguing the tenets of feminist education in 1977, multi-disciplinary artist Faith Wilding listed four primary principles: consciousness-raising, creating a female environment, recognizing female role models, and advocating for art based on women’s experiences.⁹⁹ Consciousness-raising is not only the first item on this list, but it is also intimately linked with each of the other three ideals, suggesting that consciousness-raising was foundational to feminist education. In a later articulation, Wilding added ‘collaborative and collective work’ to the list, further solidifying the importance of joint effort in the work of a feminist framework.¹⁰⁰ Bringing personal feelings and attitudes into group consciousness informed the kinds of collaboration and cooperation that occurred at the Woman’s Building, including classes, joint exhibitions, performances, and activist projects. Suzanne Lacy’s performance *Three Weeks in May* is one such work. Lacy was motivated by consciousness-raising about sexual assault to create a collaborative project which addressed individual women’s stories, as well as the shared political problem of sexual violence.

Group Consciousness

Consciousness-raising is a practice of verbal and auditory acknowledgment and identification; it is both narrative and political. According to visual artist and art critic Laura Cottingham, consciousness-raising first appeared in feminist circles in New York, where it was developed by feminist leader Kathie Sarachild and the New York Radical Women and Redstockings activist groups.¹⁰¹ Within consciousness-raising groups, women were given the

⁹⁸ Ibid., 160.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 152.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 152.

¹⁰¹ Laura Cottingham, *Seeing Through the Seventies* (New York: G+B International, 2000), 164.

opportunity to share their life experiences with other women, with the agreement that each individual would be given attention, respect, and compassion. As Jayne Wark argues in her discussion of feminist performance art in North America, consciousness-raising was an important method for formulating the personal as political “. . . as women shared stories about rape, abortion, sexuality, socially prescribed roles, and female subordination, they began to understand their discontent and anger as fundamentally political.”¹⁰² Consciousness-raising allowed women to articulate their experiences in ways that had previously been completely left out of public discourse. For this reason, consciousness-raising became a way for women to recognize their own group status.¹⁰³ Wark relates this to Marx’s ideas about the need for workers to recognize themselves as a group before they could engage in resistance, “. . . this process was analogous to Marx’s theory that, in order for a class to organize itself in the service of a future goal and act collectively on its own behalf, it must first become self-conscious of itself as a class.”¹⁰⁴ Consciousness-raising formulated an idea of shared experiences across women’s lives, not necessarily sameness, but the mutual politicization of each woman’s life perspectives.

At the Woman’s Building, consciousness-raising was used as a classroom and workshop technique. It was expected that students and teachers alike would participate in the groups to the best of their ability. For this reason, consciousness-raising was not an amorphous kind of sharing. It was institutionalized in particular ways to provide a fair and honest experience for as many women as possible. In the orientation packet from the Feminist Studio Workshop Summer Art Program from 1979, the description of consciousness-raising places emphasis on the formula that would be used, not to suggest that the process could not be flexible, but to outline the basic

¹⁰² Jayne Wark, *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 25.

¹⁰³ Wark, *Radical Gestures*, 25

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

precepts and goals. Consciousness-raising is defined in the orientation packet as “a process through which we raise our feelings and attitudes to a conscious level together,” with a specific structure, groups consisting of four to six women, with the time shared equally between all members.¹⁰⁵ Each session would have a particular topic within which each woman’s time could be used to express herself however she saw fit.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, the description of the process summarizes the expectations for creating safe, feminist space:

Speak from the personal. This is each woman’s time to look within herself with the support of others. The group goes around twice on a particular topic. This is the time to make the personal political—see what really is *our shared experience*. C-R is confidential. No woman’s material should be discussed outside of C-R unless that woman brings it up. This is to ensure the safety of the group. We are most likely to reveal ourselves unto ourselves if we can trust the space. . . . We support each other with our close attention. Sitting close together, hugs, rubs, etc. may be essential. It is important to speak from the ‘I’ such that our own judgments aren’t dumped on others. For example, ‘I am afraid of blondes’ may be more appropriate than, ‘Blondes are horrifying, they will kill you at the first opportunity.’ It’s good to finish off with some sort of jollity.¹⁰⁷

Consciousness-raising was a practice of ritualized self-expression. The detail provided in this description emphasizes that this was not simply a forum for airing complaints, but was rather a common space for articulating personal experiences as the basis of shared political concerns. Within consciousness-raising, the articulation of the personal as political was the extension of those things that had been obscured from public discourse by being ‘women’s issues’ into community conversations.

Deconstructing Consensus in Consciousness-Raising

As much as consciousness-raising contains within it the possibility of women working to recognize themselves as members of a group or class, it also includes opportunities for identifying important differences among women. For this reason, it is a potential method of

¹⁰⁵ Meg Linton, “Foreword,” in *Doin’ It In Public: Feminism and Art at the Woman’s Building*, ed. Meg Linton and Sue Maberry (Los Angeles: Otis College of Art and Design, 2011), 18.

¹⁰⁶ Linton, “Foreword,” 18.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 18, emphasis mine.

deconstructing consensus. The importance of questioning consensus is that it allows for recognition of the instability of identity and the category of “women.” There are significant disagreements within feminism about the idea of the subject. The cultural feminist framing of a category for “women” as a meaningful basis for theories of political power does not mesh well with Butler’s investment in the shakiness of identity: “There is a great deal of material that not only questions the viability of ‘the subject’ as the ultimate candidate for representation or, indeed, liberation, but there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes or ought to constitute, the category women.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, Butler contends that in feminism the ‘we’ is always a nebulous creation, which is perhaps pragmatic, but in no way accurately representative of complexity or diversity.¹⁰⁹ However, when this phantasmatic construction is understood as such, other possibilities of feminist politics become possible. Butler argues that it is viable to engage the “radical instability of the category” as a way of thinking and doing other formations of gender, feminism, and politics.¹¹⁰ The question then becomes, what can feminist politics be, if it does not have fixed identity to bind it together?¹¹¹ What can “radical inquiry” achieve if the debate is reformed around ideas of instability, regulation, and social construction?¹¹² These questions, continually unresolved in feminist discourse, ask for persistent destabilization of the subject of feminism. If one of the flaws of the Woman’s Building was “essentialism,” then it is all the more important as an object of analysis that seeks to break with reductive conceptions of subjectivity and consider a feminist politics beyond fixed identity.

In consciousness-raising groups, women encountered their commonalities as well as their importance diversities. The process created communal sharing, but it did not necessitate

¹⁰⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 2.

¹⁰⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 195.

¹¹⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 195.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, xxxii.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, xxxii.

consensus among women. Consciousness-raising was central to the feminist movement's formulation of itself as a recognizable group, but it was also a practice in which issues of difference could be discussed. In this way, consciousness-raising was one way in which the Woman's Building crafted itself as contested terrain where the particularities of women's lived experiences were vital to community and art making. Consciousness-raising was not a perfect implement for discussing difference; however, anti-racism groups demonstrate the important potential of consciousness-raising to resist consensus among women.

Wolverton's anti-racism efforts through consciousness-raising are one example of how the process could be used to discuss and analyze the instability of the category "women." Wolverton attended the FSW beginning in 1976 and she worked at the Woman's Building in various capacities, including as Executive Director from 1987 to 1988.¹¹³ In her memoir *Insurgent Muse*, published in 2002, she reflects on the role that consciousness-raising played in her feminist education, her coming-of-age as an artist, and the development of her understanding of herself as a woman. When Wolverton first enrolled in the FSW, she did not appreciate her assigned consciousness-raising group. She felt alienated from the other women and did not see the process as something that would be beneficial to her or her art making.¹¹⁴ However, over her time at the FSW and the Woman's Building, she came to understand consciousness-raising as central to her practice of feminist community and feminist art. In 1980, Wolverton organized an anti-racism consciousness-raising group called The White Women's Anti-Racism Consciousness-Raising Group which focused on the necessity of white women scrutinizing their own race and privilege.¹¹⁵ The group sought to move beyond articulation of their status as

¹¹³ Wolverton, *Insurgent Muse*, 45.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹⁵ Michelle Moravec and Sondra Hale, "'At Home' at the Woman's Building (But Who Gets a Room of Her Own?): Women of Color and Community", 172.

women to question how race impacted their interactions with systems of power. Additionally, the group pursued ways of moving from speech to action by asking women at the Woman's Building to make challenging racism part of their everyday work.¹¹⁶ Certainly, this was not enough to combat the long-standing effects of racial tension at the Woman's Building. As Lucy Lippard puts it, failing to incorporate women of color into feminist groups was ultimately one of the most tragic failures of feminism in the 70s: "'Add a woman of color and stir,' commented one sarcastic critic of tokenism. This remains the great failure of 'second-wave feminism.' . . . Despite a lot of hard work. . . conscious and unconscious racism plagued the Woman's Building, as it did virtually every other American feminist organization."¹¹⁷ The anti-racism group underscores the complicated relationship between consciousness-raising and questions of the subject of feminism. Consciousness-raising is not without radical potential for deconstructing consensus, as demonstrated by Wolverton's intent to critique assumptions about white privilege. However, the group was, as Lippard argues, "too little, too late" to affect dramatic change in race relations at the Woman's Building.

The exhibition catalogue *From Site to Vision* adds another layer of complexity to this discussion of the potential of consciousness-raising to engage with issues of difference. "*At Home*" at the Woman's Building (*But Who Gets a Room of Her Own?*): *Women of Color and Community*, an essay by Michelle Moravec and Sondra Hale, engages in an extension of the consciousness-raising process thirty years after its advent by reassessing the complex relationships between women of color and the Woman's Building. This essay moves beyond critique of the racism of women's movement of the 1970s and 80s generally and centers on the Woman's Building specifically. Moravec and Hale recount narratives of race relations, including

¹¹⁶ Moravic and Hale, "At Home," 175.

¹¹⁷ Lippard, "Going Around in Circles," 14.

special attention to the tensions surrounding the day-to-day interactions of women of color and white women who worked in close quarters at the Building. Hired in 1980, Suzanne Shelton was the first African American executive director of the Building.¹¹⁸ Shelton worked during her tenure to cultivate openness to women of color and to make the environment more welcoming to them and their needs.¹¹⁹ She had great difficulty integrating with the other leaders at the Woman's Building, many of whom had been there much longer than she had. Although the goals of the Woman's Building were not explicitly motivated by race, they stemmed from a white, middle-class feminist perspective which did not represent the political goals of all women. Moravec and Hale use this history, which has not previously been explored in depth, to discuss the ways in which race functioned within the institution to preclude easy coalition and collaboration between different groups of women. One of the major critiques of cultural feminism from post-structural theorists is its essentialism and underlying racism, which makes it especially painful to engage in meaningful discussion of intra-community failings. However, this essay suggests that destabilizing assumptions about what it means to be a woman in a women's movement can be a beneficial way of reconceiving consciousness-raising.

As the complexity of issues of difference at the Woman's Building demonstrates, consciousness-raising is not about creating consensus. Although consciousness-raising groups certainly aided women at the beginning of the feminist movement in thinking of themselves as a group, it could also be a space for critical disagreement and differentiation. The practice was grounded in the notion that it is important to explore political problems through shared experiences, but it was also used to challenge falsely monolithic views of women as the subject of feminism, as in the anti-racism consciousness-raising group at the Woman's Building. As

¹¹⁸ Moravec and Hale, "At Home," 170.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 170.

Judith Butler argues, the category of “women” is unstable as a basis for both theorization and political action, but this may not mean it is an entirely useless construction. Consciousness-raising seems to exist on this fine line between uniting women as a group with an understanding of the ways in which they share gendered life and working against myths of sameness among women. Moreover, this connection between Butler and consciousness-raising highlights the inadequacy of labeling the Woman’s Building essentialist without deeper analysis.

Consciousness-raising was intimately tied to the practice of performance art at the Woman’s Building. In many cases, consciousness-raising provided the information and ideas which stimulated the content of performances. Before creating *Three Weeks in May*, Suzanne Lacy gained an understanding of the pervasiveness of sexual assault in consciousness-raising groups, and she used this understanding of personal and political problems to motivate her performance work. These practices sought to bridge the gap that had been drawn in dominant discourses between the personal and the political, working to dismantle the idea that these two areas of life had nothing to do with one another. For this reason, both consciousness-raising and performance are modes of cultural criticism. As Catharine Belsey explicates, the work of criticism can foster alternative subjectivities and repetitions:

If culture is pervasive and constitutive for us, if it resides in the documents, objects and practices and surrounds us, if it circulates as the meanings and values we learn and reproduce as good citizens, how in these circumstances can we practice cultural *criticism*, where criticism implies a certain distance between the critic and the culture? The answer is that cultures are not homogenous; they are not even necessarily coherent. There are always other perspectives, so that cultures offer alternative positions for the subjects they also recruit. Moreover, we have a degree of power over the messages we reproduce.¹²⁰

Belsey calls attention to the way in which cultural criticism can be a way of imagining different ways of doing culture, even within a pervasive and constitutive environment. This vision of

¹²⁰Catherine Belsey, “General Editor’s Preface,” in *Performance Studies*, ed. Erin Striff (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), ix.

cultural criticism mirrors Judith Butler's theorization of cultural translation, which I discuss in the next chapter. These theories of the contestation of societal and cultural assumptions question the messages that we reproduce and how we comply with gendered demands, as consciousness-raising does. They explore the possibility of doing gendered life differently. In the following chapter, I argue that Suzanne Lacy's project *Three Weeks in May* reflected an understanding of gender as socially constituted, as well as an exploration of the radical possibilities of performativity and cultural translation for creating alternate opportunities for gendered life. I contend that *Three Weeks in May* and Butler's work both reject the outcomes they are induced to perform.

Chapter Three: Cultural Translation, Consciousness-Raising, and *Three Weeks in May*

Cultural Translation

Three Weeks in May engages in cultural translation because it explores how theorizations of the personal as political fostered in consciousness-raising can be enacted as performance. Suzanne Lacy created *Three Weeks in May* in 1977, after spending three years teaching performance at the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building.¹²¹ This work, a multi-piece performance, installation, and collaborative art project, serves as a case study for how Butler's theory of performativity can be applied to a performance artwork coming out of the context of the Woman's Building. I discuss how *Three Weeks in May* works within *Doin' It In Public*, as well as how Lacy's "RAPE" map performances identify rape and sexual assault as important, systemic issues of gendered life. Lacy created two bright yellow maps, each 25 feet long, which were installed at the City Hall Mall and served as a focal point for the project.¹²² In daily performances for the three weeks of the project, Lacy used a stencil stamp to mark "RAPE" in red letters for each rape reported to the Los Angeles Police Department, approximating the sprawl of cases across the geography of the city.¹²³ On the other map, she displayed information about anti-sexual assault resources in the city.¹²⁴ These performances were inspired by the stories of rape that Lacy collected through consciousness-raising and interviews with affected women as well as the legal language of the police reports.¹²⁵ Lacy worked to relocate rape in critical spaces where the dialogue was not expected. As Sharon Irish explicates in her book on Suzanne Lacy, the cultural and political climate of the time made discussions of rape and sexual assault infrequent and problematic, especially in public discourse: ". . . rape victims and victims

¹²¹ Sharon Irish, *Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 40.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 62.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

of violence in the home were largely invisible, with the media focused on them only when the violence or numbers were dramatic.”¹²⁶ Lacy intended to move discussions about sexual assault that were happening in feminist communities into public spaces. This relocation contests compliance with gendered norms because it publicly analyzes the political and personal violence of rape and sexual assault. By denaturalizing rape as a social given, *Three Weeks in May* refuses to fully conform to the way that gender is supposed to be done.

By analyzing, discussing, and making rape visible as a political force, Suzanne Lacy engaged with the idea that gender is constituted within a field of “habitual and violent presumptions.” Although Lacy did not have Butler’s post-structural vocabulary, her work concentrated on geography and the social environment of the city, so as to locate rape as a political matter, not a private one. Sexual violence is one of the most powerful and cruel forms of enforcing gendered compliance, and both Butler and Lacy’s works speak to the very real need to think of other possibilities for gendered life.

Lacy’s work visually defines the political problem of rape and sexual assault as constitutive of gendered life, but it also acknowledges that things might be done differently. It uses performance art as a method for questioning compliance. If theory is to be integrated into larger projects of social change, then it is necessary to consider new ways of using it. Locating theory within lived reality to interpret or transform it is what Butler calls cultural translation: “There is a new venue for theory, necessarily impure, where it emerges in and as the very event of cultural translation. . . . It is . . . the emergence of theory at the site where cultural horizons meet, where the demand for translation is acute and its promise of success, uncertain.”¹²⁷ This impure space where history, theory, practice, performance, and politics meet is the space of

¹²⁶ Ibid., 62.

¹²⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, x.

Three Weeks in May, as well as this thesis. In order to become worthwhile ways of challenging systems of power and violence, feminisms must investigate the places where cultural horizons meet; these sites which may be unreliable or ill-defined, and yet contain an oblique kind of hope. Especially in new venues, such as cultural translation, the systems are not fully determining.

Even on uncertain, subjective ground, Butler articulates a hope for the political possibility of performativity. She suggests that agency may exist, even in a domain of constraints, where power conditions all possible forms of agency.¹²⁸ Under systems of restriction, the iterability of performativity, and therefore gender, may yet contain some radical possibility: “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.”¹²⁹ Subversion, the prospect of transformation, is inherently political, and “cannot be isolated from the dynamics of power from which it is wrought”¹³⁰ however, the systems which constrain it are never fully determining. For Butler, theorizing performativity is not meant to foreclose the prospect of political acts, but rather to explore the tenuous spaces where they can occur, always conditioned by precedence, law, culture, and power. Theorizing the performative is analysis which leads to political realizations because questioning the repeated becoming of gender makes resistance possible: “In its very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status.”¹³¹ Thus, theory should not be isolated from its insights into politics, culture, and lived experience. The theorization of gender as a social construct which was explored in consciousness-raising groups at the Woman’s Building has very real

¹²⁸ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxv.

¹²⁹ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 155.

¹³⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xxv.

¹³¹ Butler, “Performative Acts,” 155.

ramifications, and *Three Weeks in May* demonstrates how cultural translation can use performance to disrupt systems of coercion in gendered life.

The Personal is Political

The dialogue about rape and sexual assault created by consciousness-raising groups was part of Lacy's inspiration for *Three Weeks in May*. Even before she joined the Woman's Building, Lacy was made aware of the prevalence of sexual assault through consciousness-raising:

While organizing consciousness-raising groups and teaching women's psychology as a graduate student in psychology, I heard experiences that hinted of a dark undercurrent from childhood, about cars, about strangers, about what happened to some other little girl from another town. Not long after I began listening deeply, I noticed it: every time a group of five or so women gathered, one of us had been raped. Or knew intimately someone who had.¹³²

The stories that Lacy heard during these consciousness-raising sessions helped her to understand rape as a systemic form of violence which affected all women. Thus, *Three Weeks in May*, as other projects at the Woman's Building, demonstrates the critical relationship between consciousness-raising and performance art. Women discussing their experiences of sexual violence led Lacy to understand the need to address the problem in a more public forum.

In order to achieve this relocation, Lacy focused on geography, collaboration, audiences, and the media to explore the larger political picture of the ubiquity of rape and sexual assault in Los Angeles.¹³³ The project was spread throughout the city and included public performances, women-only events, symposia, radio programs, and workshops all united by their devotion to the idea that rape needed to be addressed on a large scale.¹³⁴ Lacy used the city of Los Angeles as a spatial frame "with distributed nodes . . . that allowed for private and collective expressions,

¹³² Lacy, *Leaving Art*, 92.

¹³³ Suzanne Lacy, *Leaving Art*, (Duke University Press, 2010) 102, <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/penrose/docDetail.action?docID=10406921>.

¹³⁴ Irish, "Suzanne Lacy," 64.

small personal gestures . . . within a large urban network.”¹³⁵ The pervasiveness of violence against women was represented by the diffusion of these “nodes,” as Sharon Irish describes, “Moving among events around the city reinforced the idea that rape was widespread.”¹³⁶ The scale of the work calls attention to rape, not only as a social ill faced by individuals, but a political problem. This recognition of the political scope of the issue denaturalized deeply-embedded assumptions about gender and violence. Thus, reading together *Three Weeks in May* and *Gender Trouble* reveals consciousness-raising and performance as powerful acts of cultural translation, where theory can be employed to explicate and complicate the messages that culture produces.

Geography as Social Temporality

Three Weeks in May engaged the city as a geographical and social landscape where gendered life is instituted, bound, and reproduced. Among the various pieces spread throughout the city, two maps installed at the City Hall Mall served as a focal point. The maps were each 25 feet in length and dealt with the spatial reality of violence in Los Angeles. On one map, Lacy marked the incidences of rape reported to the Los Angeles Police Department with a red stamp that said ‘RAPE’ for each day of the three weeks, approximating the sprawl of the cases across the city. The second map showed the locations of and contact information for shelters, hotlines, treatment centers, and organizations which were working against the harmful effects of violence against women.¹³⁷ Lacy credits one of her mentors, Sheila de Bretteville, a graphic designer and faculty member at the Woman’s Building, with encouraging her to conceive of a work outside of the context of a gallery, to create something for a broad public audience.¹³⁸ By locating events

¹³⁵ Irish “Suzanne Lacy” 62.

¹³⁶ Irish, “Suzanne Lacy,” 66.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 62.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 63.

which are simultaneously personal and political on a map, Lacy addressed city dwellers in a geographically legible way.¹³⁹ The maps demonstrated the expanse of the city as a politicized space in which, as the ‘RAPE’ stamps invoked, violence is extensive, repetitive, and diffuse. Geography, as a spatial context, aided Lacy in visualizing rape as a persistent social power which has dramatic consequences for women. Susan Griffin discussed the ever-present threat of rape in *Ramparts* magazine in 1971: “From a very early age I, like most women, have thought of rape as part of my natural environment—something to be feared and prayed against like fire or lightning.”¹⁴⁰ Lacy’s maps mirror Griffin’s fear, illustrating the extent to which rape is a part of the landscape of the city.

This representation of rape communicates the way in which this kind of violence is a social and political problem which limits women’s ability to feel safe from aggression. As Butler theorizes it, gender is repetition constrained by social demands, and, as Lacy’s work makes visible, rape is a social demand, which in its extensiveness compels particular kinds of gender: repetition of heterosexuality, passivity, and fear. In *Three Weeks in May*, Lacy was assured of the need to subvert the persistent myth of the victimized woman, which she aimed to achieve through attention to politics: “Rather than focus on easily subverted personal narratives, it would focus on political solutions.”¹⁴¹ For this reason, the use of geography as a frame for the project was a tactic through which Lacy sought to reintegrate art within its social context. The city and its common spaces underline the way in which gender is shared among all people within a culturally, politically, stylistically defined space. In *Three Weeks in May*, Lacy’s approach to art making and the audience for art is related to Butler’s theorization of gender as a social construct because it pays attention to forces which precede the individual.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 62.

¹⁴⁰ Lacy, *Leaving Art*, 94.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 102.

Collaborators and Audiences

Three Weeks in May depended on a network of diverse collaborators in order to achieve its scale and impact. Lacy worked with individuals and groups from the Woman's Building, the Studio Watts Workshop, the City Attorney's Office, the Commission on Public Works, the Los Angeles Commission on the Status of Women, Women Against Violence Against Women, the East Los Angeles Hotline, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Los Angeles Police Department, the Sheriff's Department, and the Ocean Park Community Center Women's Shelter.¹⁴² By calling these groups together in alliance with her, Lacy activated the possibility of expanded discussion and cooperation. This is not to say that *Three Weeks in May* immediately created a new discourse surrounding rape, but it fostered connections that acknowledged the severity of the problem. Especially at the time, rape was infamously underreported and increasing communication between these groups had the potential to improve the safety net available to women.¹⁴³ Also calling on other feminist artists to create pieces for *Three Weeks in May*, Lacy eventually curated thirty pieces in addition to her own performances with the map.¹⁴⁴ As Sharon Irish notes, Lacy created a relatively flexible structure into which other artists could incorporate their own ideas, a powerfully feminist venture: "She invited women artists into her open structure, recognizing that they would take multiple approaches appropriate to different ways of being and different audiences. This was a feminist strategy to acknowledge the importance of specificity: there is no universal observer, no neutral space, no single artistic gesture that would suit everyone."¹⁴⁵ In addition to the women Lacy recruited to do pieces for the project, she also worked with Leslie Labowitz who she met earlier that year to create four

¹⁴² Ibid., 64.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 62.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 64.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 64.

performance pieces: *The Rape, Myths of Rape, Women Fight Back*, and *All Men Are Potential Rapists*.¹⁴⁶ Lacy's collaborators made *Three Weeks in May* multi-faceted and complex. In the face of widespread danger, violence, and injustice, collaboration greatly expanded what would have been possible if it were only the work of one artist or one agency.

In *Leaving Art*, her 2007 book on performance, politics, and publics, Lacy elucidates the need to create *Three Weeks in May* as a public work to tackle issues of violence in a way that could reach a broad audience. Creating something only for those art viewers who would go to a gallery was not enough: "What good did it do to decry violence inside a gallery when we still faced the same dangers once we left it?"¹⁴⁷ For Lacy, there was something critical about meeting people in their everyday lives and engaging with them in the actual space of the city. The maps, which were the central node of the project, were installed at City Hall Mall. This underground space with moderate pedestrian traffic was not Lacy's first choice, but its location drew many city employees: ". . . many city employees were drawn into the project who might not otherwise have been, and the project thus gained civic support and increased media access."¹⁴⁸ This site, although certainly structured by its location within the city and its capitalist purposes, was open to a far larger public than a gallery or the Woman's Building would have been. In addition to reaching a broader audience, it also had the benefit of interceding in a space that is associated with non-art uses. Pedestrians would not expect to enter the space of the Mall and be confronted with a political artwork; the maps intervened in a space of daily life in an unanticipated way. As in the other collaborative projects featured in *Doin' It In Public*, like *In Mourning and In Rage* and *Record Companies Drag Their Feet*, *Three Weeks in May* was very concerned with

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 65.

¹⁴⁷ Lacy, *Leaving Art*, 101.

¹⁴⁸ Irish, "Suzanne Lacy," 64.

considering and actively engaging its audience. These works were constructed around the idea that space could be used to get the public's attention.

Interacting with media exposure was a crucial facet of *Three Weeks in May*. News and commentary had been directed at issues of rape in damaging ways. In dominant media, rape and violence against women were discussed only in sensationalized ways, which obscured their ubiquity. Thus, Lacy intended her work to foster more responsible reporting as a way of nurturing sustained discussion. *Three Weeks in May* positioned artists as spokespeople against issues of violence against women.¹⁴⁹ *Three Weeks in May* was originally intended to be a single map, but Lacy expanded the work beyond this visual image so as to move “further into the political sphere. . . to continue the direction of public awareness.”¹⁵⁰ Lacy sought to communicate broad ideas in a straightforward way: “. . . to convey the ideas in a few images, with ‘a message that [could] be explained in thirty seconds by a reporter who may only invest a few minutes of her or his time at the event.’”¹⁵¹ Generating a legible message and engaging with the media increased the range of *Three Weeks in May* because it reached a swath of the public outside those who saw the work first-hand. Now, *Three Weeks in May* has a completely new public presence, in *Doin' It In Public*, as well as another Pacific Standard Time exhibition *Under the Big Black Sun*.

Three Weeks in May at Doin' It In Public and Pacific Standard Time

Although I hoped it would be, Lacy's “RAPE” map is not displayed at *Doin' It In Public*. To critically examine the contributions of *Doin' It In Public* to feminist projects, it is necessary to highlight how certain factors limit what is possible in the exhibition. In discussing Suzanne Lacy as an important figure at the Woman's Building and analyzing *Three Weeks in May* as an

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 65.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 69.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 65.

insight into gendered constraints, I do not wish to ignore the factors which shape the exhibit as a “learning show”. Otis did not have unfettered access to Lacy’s work that was not already in its archive. Therefore, the map is displayed at *Under the Big Black Sun* at the Los Angeles’ Museum of Contemporary Art, along with recordings of the contents of the rape reports from the period of Lacy’s performance.¹⁵² Thus, Lacy’s work is not contextualized within the feminist educational environment from which it emerged, but rather by other prominent Los Angeles artists like Ed Ruscha and Chris Burden.¹⁵³ Although *Doin’ It In Public* displays photographs from *Three Weeks in May*, it does not have the privilege of displaying the most prominent visual artifact from this work. This limits the ways in which *Three Weeks in May* can be interpreted as part of a feminist milieu. Additionally, it makes it difficult for *Doin’ It In Public’s* viewers to make sense of the scope and scale of Lacy’s project. The videos and wall texts which explain the work do not capture the visual impact of its social geography. This lack does not suggest that *Doin’ It In Public’s* failure to fully represent *Three Weeks in May* is fatal to its goals; rather it indicates the immense difficulty of doing this kind of curatorial work.

Another iteration of *Three Weeks in May* under the umbrella of *Pacific Standard Time* is *Three Weeks in January: End Rape in Los Angeles* at the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, part of *Los Angeles Goes Live: Performance Art in Southern California 1970-1983*.¹⁵⁴ *Three Weeks in January* quotes the framework of *Three Weeks in May* with a map on which is recorded daily rape reports and a series of performances which are based on those originally composed by Labowitz, but performed by young feminist artists. *Three Weeks in January* acknowledges the ongoing concerns regarding the prevalence of rape and violence against women in the specific

¹⁵² “Under the Big Black Sun,” http://www.moca.org/black_sun/, accessed February 10, 2012.

¹⁵³ “Under the Big Black Sun”.

¹⁵⁴ “Three Weeks in January: End Rape in Los Angeles.” <http://www.losangelesgoeslive.org/threeweeksinjanuary>, accessed January 30, 2012.

spatial context of the city of Los Angeles. In addition to remaking maps and performances from the 1970s, the work also connects with innovations in mass media, the internet, and social media. *Three Weeks in January* has a considerable internet presence, including a Facebook page and a Twitter stream, but also relies on feminist political and artistic conventions of *Three Weeks in May*, suggesting that it is firmly rooted at an intersection of past and present. This modification of a past performance in the context of a different time suggests that it is both necessary and fruitful to explore potential reinterpretations of feminist ideas. Feminisms should resist hierarchies and create space for performance, scholarship, and debate which investigates interrelationships between feminisms like those of the 70s.

Conclusion

This investigation of performativity, consciousness-raising, and *Three Weeks in May* asserts that bringing feminist theory to bear on performance is an important way of questioning how categorical boundaries have been drawn between feminisms. The important interrelationships between the Woman's Building and the theory of performativity reveal how necessary it is to challenge hierarchical divisions. Butler's theoretical framework, used as an incisive tool, complicates the image of the Woman's Building as a place of essentialism; it reveals that consciousness-raising and performance sought to elucidate the ways in which gender is constituted and impelled through shared cultural values, forces of political dominance, and forms of personal and political violence. To move between these generations of feminist thought requires rejecting categorical labeling.

This thesis is an exercise in cultural translation at the nexus of theory and politics: "the emergence of theory at the site where cultural horizons meet, where the demand for translation is

acute and its promise of success, uncertain.”¹⁵⁵ Cultural translation acknowledges that theory exists in contexts of violence, exclusion, and forceful forgetting, and that it should oppose the limitations set on what is possible. It exemplifies the unstable, and yet crucial, practice with which theory should be engaged if its revelations are to have functional significance. As evidenced by the exhibition *Doin’ It In Public*, there is an ongoing discussion of feminism, feminist history, and feminist art occurring in contemporary culture, and this discussion must be enriched by critical engagement with intergenerational thinking. To use contemporary theory to think about other feminisms is a way of pushing forward what is possible in feminist discourse. More importantly, it is a way to remember how discourse is connected to lived experience and the possibilities of social change. In a time when the phrase ‘post-feminist’ threatens to foreclose the possibility of an ongoing feminist movement, it is more important than ever to think critically about the visual culture that is produced in the retelling of histories. What is important here is not only how *Doin’ It In Public* remembers and historicizes the Woman’s Building, but how the exhibition connects to ongoing questions about feminisms and how they might resist systems of violence. *Doin’ It In Public*, though limited in its scope, offers the opportunity to consider the power of intergenerational thinking.

There is still much work to be done in the academic study of feminism, just as there is still much work to be done in the activist pursuit of a more equitable world. It is crucial that feminist histories be left open to reinterpretation and questioning as this fosters opportunities to envision new forms of scholarship. There is literature, research, and criticism focused on art and feminism at the Woman’s Building, but there is always space for more exploration, especially exploration which questions the way that the history has been written and fosters reassessments.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., x.

Within contemporary feminist debates, there must be openness to reassessing how the Woman's Building is socially located within larger spectrums of feminisms.

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