

## ART PAPERS

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### ANDREA BOWERS + SUZANNE LACY RIVERSIDE, CA

Andrea Bowers' and Suzanne Lacy's exhibition *Your Donations Do Our Work* unexpectedly provided an occasion to reflect upon the impact of feminism on the art world: in particular, the movement's relationship to public art and grassroots struggle [Sweeney Art Gallery, UC Riverside; January 31—March 28, 2009]. Although feminist exhibitions have proliferated in recent years, few have looked explicitly at these important early connections, narrowing the understanding of feminism into a more or less isolated phenomenon. By contrast, Lacy's and Bowers' efforts remind us that it was—and remains—part of a vast matrix of initiatives bent on profound social change.

Although not billed as a feminist show, *Your Donations Do Our Work* was an intergenerational collaboration between two artists with strong ties to the feminist movement. Suzanne Lacy was a student in Judy Chicago's groundbreaking Feminist Art Program in the 1970s and is best known for her large-scale, collaborative performances addressing such issues as aging, racial profiling, and violence against women. A self-described feminist—despite being from the "post-feminist" generation—Andrea Bowers has focused on women's roles in struggles over nuclear arms, reproductive rights, and immigration in videos, drawings, and installations.

Playing on the notion of women's work, Lacy and Bowers transformed the gallery into a collection and processing center for donations of clothing and small household items. Several of the artists' earlier individual works—many of which employed or referred to fabric and sewing—were interspersed in the gallery with a functioning washer, dryer, sewing machine, ironing board, and worktables in a diffuse but surprisingly har-

monious installation. A team of volunteers "performed" in the space during several public events, cleaning and repairing the donated items. Displayed on shelves or hanging from racks, the rehabilitated wares were destined for the farming town of Laton, where the artists worked with MFA students from Otis College of Art and Design to establish a "free store." Here, in exchange for community service, residents of the economically-depressed town received coupons that could be redeemed for items at the store.

Simultaneously exhibition, thrift store, and workshop, the installation blurred the lines between art, economics, and the traditionally female role of nurturance. By presenting washing, mending, ironing, and other forms of caretaking as works of art, Lacy and Bowers framed them as worthy of attention, redressing their typically invisible status on the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder. In turn, by displaying their own works alongside these activities, they suggested that art making could be a similarly enabling or restorative endeavor.

The project's public reach reinforced this concept. Although it took place within a traditional gallery space, the exhibition's influence actually extended well beyond its walls, making connections between the donations of local visitors, the labor of numerous student and community volunteers, and the residents of Laton, over two hundred miles to the north in the San Joaquin Valley. In effect, it became a public artwork that sought to foster a sense of community among disparate groups of people.

As such, it astutely distilled a feminist ethos that embraces collective engagement, dialogue, and class struggle as women's issues, recalling feminism's emer-

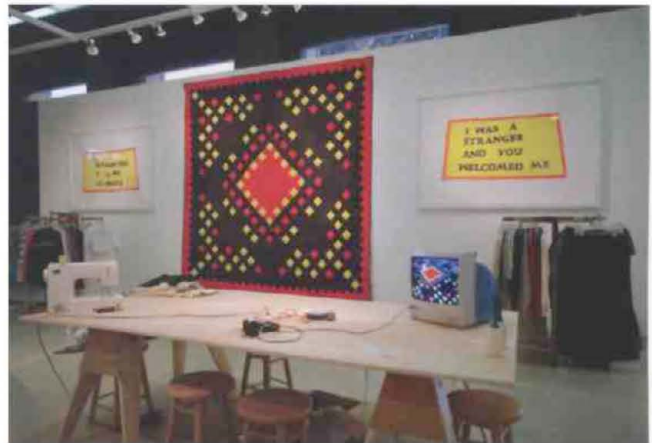
gence alongside the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s. Although feminism originally stemmed from the concerns of white, middle-class women, it did share causes and tactics with other movements for social and political equality. Yet this inclusive attitude has become increasingly rare in the art world, where in the last few years, feminism has achieved a certain vogue.

Beginning with the influential 2007 exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* at Los Angeles' Museum of Contemporary Art, the relationship between feminism and artistic practice has been undergoing a much-needed reassessment. That wide-ranging, ambitious show, and the many smaller satellite efforts it inspired, demonstrated how certain tenets of feminism—namely, the politics of the body, the malleability of gender identity, the outspoken embrace of sexuality—have been thoroughly absorbed into the mainstream art world. Yet this reckoning also revealed how other ideas—notably feminism's imbrication with labor, race, and community organizing—have received less attention or disappeared entirely from the discourse around feminism and visual art.

One prominent example is the public art initiative *Women in the City*, which took place in the spring of 2008—almost one year after *WACK!*—in various outdoor locations around Los Angeles. Organized by Italian gallerist Emi Fontana under the auspices of her L.A.-based nonprofit, West of Rome, with the support of the Broad Art Foundation and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), among others, *Women in the City* featured works by four established artists who came to prominence in the 1980s: Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, and Cindy

PAGE 1: Andrea Bowers + Suzanne Lacy, installation view of *Your Donations Do Our Work*, 2009, collection point / ABOVE: Andrea Bowers, installation view of *From Mouth to Ear—Nothing Short of the Softest Word*, 2002, single-channel video, color, sound, looped lail images courtesy of the artists and UCR Sweeney Art Gallery, Riverside, CA

# Captain Petzel



Sherman. Unlike Lacy's and Bowers' exhibition, *Women in the City* was bombastically public: it included traditional and electronic billboards, street posters, a movie screening, and an outdoor sound installation. It also wore its latter-day feminism on its sleeve: the title being a not-so-subtle reference to the fabulously liberated, if brand-obsessed, denizens of *Sex and the City*.

*Women in the City* was a straightforward celebration of the fact that women artists have arrived: as famous, important, and successful as their male counterparts—which begs the question as to why they still require a separate, gender-specific show, but that's another discussion. And certainly, success is one of feminism's most visible legacies, bringing greater exposure for women artists and enabling the preservation and recirculation of their canonical works. Notably, all of the works in *Women in the City*—with the excep-

tion of Kruger's video and Lawler's movie screening—were gallery pieces from the 1980s reformatted for public settings.

Yet, *Women in the City* was a missed opportunity. Seeking maximum attention for the artists, it chose the familiar language of advertising, with the paradoxical result that it became nearly invisible amid the cacophony of the Los Angeles landscape—essentially an ad for itself. And, in its zeal to assert equality with men, it papered over the fact that feminism's greater contribution is a richer insight into what it means to be a human being—not just a woman.

By contrast, Lacy's and Bowers' collaboration, with its much quieter, grassroots emphasis on collective endeavors and reciprocity, reflected an understanding of public practice in which working *with* the public to address a given situation is more important than simply pressing art upon them in unexpected places.

What's more, their project went beyond asserting that "women's work" is equal to that of men; it suggested a reframing of *everyone's* work within a discourse of empathy and generosity that has traditionally been the province of women. This idea—that women's experiences might reshape not just the face, but the structure of social relations—has been sadly neglected in the resurgence of interest in feminism, which has tended to focus more on expanding the art historical canon. *Your Donations Do Our Work* reminds us that women's lib requires more than simply achieving parity with men; it asks for nothing less than a transformation of the criteria by which we understand equality.

—Sharon Mizota

ABOVE, TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: Suzanne Lacy, with Susanne Cockrell and Britta Kathmeyer, installation view of *Alterations*, 1994, dimensions variable; Suzanne Lacy, installation view of *Crystal Quilt*, 1987, cloth, 120 x 120 inches; BELOW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Andrea Bowers, installation view of *Continual Maintenance and Mending*, 2007, video installation: DVD, DVD-player, video projector, and handmade quilt, dimensions variable; Andrea Bowers + Suzanne Lacy, detail *Your Donations Do Our Work*, 2009