

Curating Differently

Curating Differently:

Feminisms, Exhibitions and Curatorial Spaces

Edited by

Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe

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PREFACE

Feminisms, Exhibitions, and Curatorial Spaces

Feminist theories and methodologies are by now well integrated into art historical research and artistic practices. In recent years, feminisms in art have been institutionalized in major art exhibitions, predominantly in Europe and North America, and have attracted vast attention. Some examples are *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles and touring), *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (the opening exhibition for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in New York), *REBELLE: Art & Feminism 1969–2009* (Arnhem), *Konstfeminism: Strategier och effekter i Sverige från 1970-talet till idag* (Helsingborg and touring), *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism* (Bilbao), *Goddesses* (Oslo), *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* (Vienna and Warsaw), *Gender Battle* (Santiago de Compostela), and *The Beginning Is Always Today: Contemporary Feminist Art in Scandinavia* (Kristiansand).

In addition, public art museums have shown a growing interest in working with feminist perspectives and gender equality in relation to museum collections (see e.g. the Second Museum of Our Wishes project, Moderna Museet, Stockholm and the Modern Women Project, Museum of Modern Art, New York). Obviously, feminist art curating, as a practice of art interpretation and a politics of display, intersects with the diverse area of feminist research and artistic practices. On the other hand, the institutionalization of feminisms, its relative success, or failure, is under debate.¹ Institutional critique has been a crucial feminist methodology and many interventions have taken place outside the institutional context of the white cube and have strategically targeted established art practices and ideologies. Indeed, as Hilary Robinson, with reference to Griselda Pollock, recently warned:

What is the effect of separating feminist aesthetic interventions from the larger political and cultural revolution that was feminism and feminist theory, and isolating works and artists within a relatively unaltered curatorial approach and exhibitionary model? *We might gain this work for art, but miss its significance in transforming art.* For feminism was never an art movement.²

Curatorial strategies ideologically frame the encounter between art and its publics. If we, as Reesa Greenberg proposes, understand exhibitions as discursive events, it becomes urgent to ask for a deeper understanding of feminist exhibitions and curatorial practices in relation to wider political, economic, and social structures in local and global contexts.³ It is only recently, however, that a theorization of feminist art curating and feminist exhibition histories as a specific field of knowledge have emerged.

A seminal publication was the “Curatorial Strategies” issue of *n.paradoxa* edited by Renee Baert and Katy Deepwell in 2006.⁴ Four years later, *Feminisms is Still Our Name: Seven Essays on Historiography and Curatorial Practices*, edited by Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, focusing on historiographical critique and the relation between academic and curatorial feminist practices, was published.⁵ The international research network Transnational perspectives on women’s art, feminism and curating, whose participants included scholars, curators and artists, arranged a number of workshop seminars and symposia between 2010 and 2012 devoted to this particular field of research.⁶ Related to this international collaboration is the volume on *Working with Feminism: Curating and Exhibitions in Eastern Europe*, edited by Katrin Kivimaa, which claims the emancipation of Eastern European perspectives in feminist thinking and curatorial practice.⁷

Further major contributions to the field are *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*, edited by Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, which investigates the impact of feminism on curatorial practice and exhibition cultures in Europe and North America, and *Women’s:Museum. Curatorial Politics in Feminism, Education, History, and Art*, edited by Elke Krasny, which offers a transnational historiography of feminist strategies and curatorial activism in and out of the museum.⁸ Another example of the growing research interest in feminism, art, and the politics of exhibitions is Monika Kaiser’s *Neubesitzungen des Kunst-Raumes: Feministische Kunstaustellungen und ihre Räume, 1972–1987*, which is an in-depth study of feminist exhibitions of women’s art with particular focus on spatial meaning production.

Research related to issues of feminist exhibitions, curatorial practices, and art museums’ collections has also been presented in publications concerning museum critique and cultural politics, e.g. Griselda Pollock’s *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive*, Griselda Pollock and Joyce Zemans’ (ed.), *Museum after Modernism: Strategies of Engagement*, and the Swedish Arts Council’s research report *Representation och regionalitet. Genusstrukturer i fyra svenska konstmuseisamlingar* edited by Anna Tellgren and Jeff Werner.⁹

Curating Differently

The essays in *Curating Differently: Feminisms, Exhibitions and Curatorial Spaces* present critical perspectives on and analyses of feminist art curating and exhibiting, its strategies, interventions and histories. The general objective of the volume is to present scholarly analyses and critical reflections on the diverse practices of feminist art curating and exhibition practices from the 1970s onward. The context is not limited to art museums and exhibitions alone, but includes alternative spaces for artistic and curatorial interventions. The essays included in the anthology depart from case studies that theorize diverse strategies and interventions in curatorial space and relate them to socio-political and national contexts as well as global economic structures. Moreover, they critically scrutinize feminist exhibitions and “gender equality” strategies in public art museums in recent years and present a specifically curatorial perspective on exhibition practices. Collectively, the essays contribute with historical perspectives on feminist exhibition practices and curatorial models, first-hand accounts of feminist interventions within the art museum as well as timely analyses of current intersections of feminisms within curating in the global art world.

The majority of the essays in the volume were presented in the “Feminisms and Curating” sessions, chaired by Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, at the *NORDIK X* art history conference in Stockholm in October 2012. “Feminisms and Curating” amounted to three sessions and was the largest session at the conference due to considerable national and international attention, hence substantiating the current scholarly interest in the transnational field of feminist curatorial and exhibition studies. The topical questions addressed in the sessions thus also form a framework for the essays in this book: How can the diverse practices feminist art curating and feminist exhibitions be theorized and historicized? Which feminist theories and methodologies have informed the strategies of feminist art curating?

Departing from the exhibitions *Women Artists: 1550–1950* (1976) and *Womanhouse* (1972), both held in Los Angeles, Eva Zetterman in her essay “Curatorial strategies on the art scene during the Feminist Movement: Los Angeles in the 1970s” explores the curatorial strategies within different sectors of the city’s art scenes during the 1970s by examining the mainstream and the alternative approaches, respectively. Los Angeles was a major site for both the Chicano Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement at the time, but as Zetterman highlights, white Anglo American feminists and brown Chicano feminists mainly organized in separate

networks, which resulted in different curatorial strategies and in a geographical separation of the alternative art scenes that paralleled the socio-spatial division of Los Angeles in the 1970s. Her discussion on Chicana artists' collaborative groups and Chicana/o alternative art spaces serves as a reminder of the feminist art movement's exclusion of non-white artists and calls attention to Chicana artists opposing intersecting structures of discrimination and marginalization and hence organizing into coalitions of greater diversity. Critically examining the mainstream art scene of Los Angeles in the 1970s, Zetterman shows how the Eurocentric selection criteria guiding feminist "landmark" exhibitions such as *Women Artists: 1550–1950* (1976) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art have been justified in retrospect, thus perpetuating the marginalisation of Chicanas in the historiography of the feminist art movement in the US.

The practices and strategies of two curators are at the centre of Osnat Zukerman Rechter's essay "Reformulating the Code: A Feminist Interpretation of the Curatorial Work of Sara Breitberg-Semel and Galia Bar Or During the 1980s and 1990s in Israel". In her in-depth account of their work, Zukerman Rechter traces the manner in which they attempted to redefine the boundaries of their curatorial roles within the institutional setting of the museum. She defines Sara Breitberg-Semel's curatorial strategy to resist the institution from within—a way of exploring and emphasizing the gap between the curator's individual action and the institutional apparatus of the museum to which she belonged—as a principle that aligns to a feminist consciousness, even though Breitberg-Semel herself never overtly declared a feminist position. In contrast, Galia Bar Or explicitly emphasized her curatorial model—based on values of solidarity and cooperation and a critical stance towards canonical and geographical centres and peripheries—as a feminist approach. In her analysis, Zukerman Rechter points out the separate courses that Breitberg-Semel and Bar Or have followed, but she also indicates a strategy of closeness as a common feminist denominator in their curatorial work.

In "Moments of contradictions: Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti, 1982–1983", Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe calls attention to juxtaposition and montage as curatorial strategies employed in the exhibition *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* that toured Europe and North America in 1982 and 1983. She locates the curatorial model of the exhibition within a specific intellectual framework of politically motivated cultural practices, fostered by a renewed interest in the theories and practices of the German poet, dramatist and director Bertolt Brecht within British cultural debates of the 1970s and 80s, and argues that the exhibition produced a critical space beyond the implicit or explicit generalizations inherent in survey

exhibitions of women's art and the strategic adaptation of mainstream art history's values and norms in the one woman show. Thus, despite the dilemma that the discursive framework of the exhibition might cause for today's feminists, Sjöholm Skrubbe maintains that its critical mode of juxtaposition and montage, and its disturbing effects, might still provide a curatorial model to build on for future feminist interventions in the art world.

In her essay "A short history of Women's Exhibitions from the 1970s to the 1990s—between feminist struggles and hegemonic appropriation", Doris Guth discusses "women's exhibitions", a phenomenon that since the 1970s has evoked critical debates along the contradictory positions pending between those who advocate exhibitions with women's art only as a necessary strategic act and those who question women's exhibitions as a curatorial model that risks ghettoizing women artists and reinforcing the hegemonic system of canonical art history. In a close reading of three women's exhibitions of the 1990s—*Women artists of the 20th Century* in Wiesbaden (1990), *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* in Kortrijk, London, Boston, Washington, and Perth (1994–1997), and *Bad Girls* in London and Glasgow (1993–1994)—Guth critically elaborates on some basic phenomena pertaining to the all-women-show as possible strategic act. Her analysis shows that good intentions and critical interventions in mainstream curatorial models might well end up as counterproductive, reifying essentialist concepts of identity or de-politicizing pertinent feminist issues in superficial analyses. Guth locates a more promising approach to the concept of the women's exhibition in *Vraiment. Féminisme et art*, shown in Grenoble in 1997, where the curator Laura Cottingham managed to negotiate female identity and feminist aesthetics in relation to actual socio-political conditions for artistic production and reception.

The ambition to enable "transformative encounters" between the curator, the art object and the public is at the core of Margareta Gynning's work as an art pedagogue, curator and feminist scholar at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. Departing from her many years of professional experiences, her contribution to this book "Transformative Encounters—prior and current strategies of a feminist pioneer" discusses the diverse feminist strategies that she has adopted in order to oppose the hegemony of canonical, modernist art history within the museum. Gynning's extensive feminist work includes publications, temporary exhibitions, interventions in the museum's permanent collections, art educational programs, and diverse collaborative projects. Her feminist strategies focus on pedagogical

and relational aspects, image awareness, the importance of dialog, and the use of body language, always with the role of the viewer at the centre. She hence strives to activate museum visitors and creating a laboratory space within the museum that fosters active engagement, sharing, and collaborative processes of interpretative work. Gynning's essay is a strong argument for the importance of doing feminist work from within large public institutions in order to be able to differentiate canon in the long term.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York's Modern Women Project (2005–2010), was a key contribution to the vast number of exhibitions, conferences, and projects on art and feminism that developed in the mid-2000s, particularly in Europe and North America. The Modern Women Project included, *inter alia*, a major scholarly publication on work by women artists in MoMA's permanent collection, two international symposia, a "Feminist Future Lecture Series", collaborations with Columbia University, and a series of exhibitions. The project's co-director Alexandra Schwartz in "MoMA's Modern Women's Project, Feminisms, and Curatorial Practice" offers a first-hand account of the development of the project and an analysis of this remarkable, and much debated, moment in the history of art and feminism. Schwartz perspicaciously expounds several societal, political, and art historical reasons for the resurgence of interest in art and feminism in the United States during the mid-2000s and elaborates on the effects of the Modern Women Project within and beyond MoMA, concluding that the project contributed to a fundamental shift in the general culture of gender at MoMA.

Among the many exhibitions and museum projects that elaborated on women's and/or feminist art in the 2000s, *elles@centrepompidou: Women artists in the collection of the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre de création industrielle*, presented at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2009–2010), gave rise to a particular set of questions as it was a display event that negotiated between the temporary exhibition and the presentation of permanent collections and, despite its being a display of women artists-only, claimed not to deal with either feminist issues or issues of gender. In her contribution to this book, Malin Hedlin Hayden thus departs from an interest in the difference between an exhibition and a re-arrangement of a museum's collection and the employment of the notions of "women", sex, and gender in the theoretical framework of *elles@centrepompidou*. In her analysis, she locates a crucial paradox in the event's curatorial model with regard to history as a narrative mode of understanding the past and astutely elucidates on the importance of national context in relation to how and what concepts such as *sex* and *gender* come to mean.

In her essay “Major global recurring art shows ‘doing feminist work’: A case study of the 18th Biennale of Sydney: *all our relations* (2012)”, Sibyl Fisher offers an insightful consideration of how the 18th Biennale of Sydney enacted a feminist ethos and/or politics. The theoretical and curatorial framework of the Biennale articulated an expanded concept of relationality—encompassing social, intercultural, trans-subjective, and trans-species relations—and the show thus dedicated itself to “inclusionary practices of generative thinking”. Employing the concept of feminist work, Fisher focuses on experiences of affect in the exhibition and offers a personalized and critical reflection on her ambivalent experiences of the Biennale. She asks what feminist work was made possible by the exhibition, through its performative and active potentialities, and prompts the question of whether the curators of the Biennale described relations or produced them, concluding that the curatorial framework pushed her into new considerations and thus expanded the idea of what feminist work might be and do.

Notes

¹ See e.g. Amelia Jones, “The Return of Feminism(s) and the Visual Arts, 1970-2009,” in *Feminisms is Still Our Name: Seven Essays on Historiography and Curatorial Practices*, eds. Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 11–56; Connie Butler, Amelia Jones, and Maura Reilly (in dialogue), “Feminist Curating and the ‘Return’ of Feminist Art,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 31–43; Hilary Robinson, “Feminism meets the Big Exhibition: Museum Survey Shows since 2005,” *Anglo Saxonica* 3, no. 6 (2013): 129–152.

http://www.ulices.org/images/site/publicacoes/anglo-saxonica/ASaxoIII-N6_2.pdf.

² Robinson, “Feminism meets the Big Exhibition,” 147. Italics in original.

³ Reesa Greenberg, “The Exhibition as Discursive Event,” in *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby* (Santa Fe: SITE Santa Fe, 1995), 118–125. Available online at:

http://www.yorku.ca/reerden/Publications/EXHIBITION/exhibition_discursive_event.html.

⁴ Renee Baert and Katy Deepwell, eds., *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, vol. 18, “Curatorial Strategies” (July 2008).

⁵ Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, eds., *Feminisms is Still Our Name: Seven Essays on Historiography and Curatorial Practices* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010).

⁶ The network participants were Lara Perry, University of Brighton, UK; Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK; Marko Daniel, Tate Modern, UK; Kristina Huneault, Concordia University, Canada; Nancy Proctor, Smithsonian,

USA. The documentation of the network's activities, e.g. webcasts and reports, is available online: University of Brighton: Arts and Humanities, "Transnational perspectives on women's art, feminism and curating," <http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/irn>.

⁷ Katrin Kivimaa, ed., *Working with Feminism: Curating and Exhibitions in Eastern Europe*, (Tallinn: Tallinn University Press, 2012).

⁸ Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, eds., *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); Elke Krasny and Frauenmuseum Meran, eds., *Women's: Museum. Curatorial Politics in Feminism, Education, History, and Art/Frauen: Museum. Politiken des Kuratorischen in Feminismus, Bildung, Geschichte und Kunst* (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 2013).

⁹ Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, space and the archive* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); Griselda Pollock and Joyce Zemans, eds., *Museums after Modernism: Strategies of Engagement* (Malden, USA, Oxford, UK, and Victoria, Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Anna Tellgren and Jeff Werner, eds., *Representation och regionalitet. Genusstrukturer i fyra svenska konstmuseisamlingar*, (Stockholm: Statens kulturråd, 2011). Available online:

http://www.kulturradet.se/Documents/publikationer/2011/representation_regionalitet_web.pdf.

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Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe
Stockholm August 2015

CHAPTER ONE

CURATORIAL STRATEGIES ON THE ART SCENE DURING THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT: LOS ANGELES IN THE 1970S

EVA ZETTERMAN

In the historiography of feminist art, the 1970s is recognised as the most important decade. Originating in the context of the social Civil Rights Movements in the 1960s and contemporary art activities during that decade addressing issues of race, gender and sexuality, feminism in the 1970s became a political movement, an aesthetic strategy and a pedagogical framework. In the geographical context of the USA, major sites for feminist art activities were the cities New York and Los Angeles. Los Angeles is the city in the USA with the largest concentration of Mexican Americans and Chicanas/os, and in the 1970s Los Angeles was a major site for the contemporary Chicano Civil Rights Movement. The art scene in Los Angeles in the 1970s has been described as misogynist, sexist and racist, with lines of contention characterised by race, gender and sexuality issues.¹ Two important feminist exhibitions were held in Los Angeles in the 1970s. One was *Women Artists: 1550–1950* (1976) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), the other was *Womanhouse* (1972) in a deserted mansion in the Hollywood district. Both of these exhibitions play important roles in the historiography regarding feminist artists and feminist art. Each of them has their own specific pre- and post-histories and represents different sectors of the Los Angeles art scene: the mainstream and the alternative. The curatorial strategies and manner in which these exhibitions met their audiences were also different. Departing from these two exhibitions, this essay investigates curatorial strategies on the alternative and mainstream art scenes during the feminist movement, with Los Angeles as a spatial framework and the 1970s as timeframe. Since Los Angeles was a major site in the 1970s for both the Chicano Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement, this essay

includes a documentation of the presence of Chicana/o artists on the alternative and mainstream feminist art scenes.

The feminist alternative art scene

Several artist-run and alternative feminist spaces were initiated throughout Los Angeles in the 1970s. The initial idea in 1971 for the feminist exhibition *Womanhouse* (1972) was Paula Harper's, an art historian at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia, where the Feminist Art Program led by artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro had started in 1971.² The Feminist Art Program established in Fresno by Chicago in 1970 was relocated to CalArts in 1971, where Shapiro had been awarded a professorship in 1970. Shapiro and Chicago engaged the twenty-one students in the women-only Feminist Art Program in role-playing and consciousness-raising sessions as pedagogical tools for the collaborative process that led to *Womanhouse*.³ In the exhibition, the students were granted the professional status of artists working among artists, not as trainees in an academic art programme.⁴ The abandoned building in Hollywood, lent to the project by the city of Los Angeles and later demolished, housed more than twenty spaces designed as separate environments with installations and staged performances by twenty-six artists in total, including the Los Angeles artists Wanda Westcott, Sherry Brody and Carol Edson Mitchell.⁵ According to Judy Chicago, *Womanhouse* was the first time that "female subject matter" was openly addressed in a public exhibition.⁶ During the month of the exhibition, from January 30 to February 28 in 1972, *Womanhouse* gained national press coverage and received approximately 10 000 visitors, its first day being only open to women.⁷

The following year, Judy Chicago, art historian Arlene Raven and graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, co-founded the Woman's Building (1973–1991) in a renovated two-story building that had housed the Chouinard Art School at Grandview Boulevard in Venice.⁸ When the building was sold in 1976, the Woman's Building moved to a house on North Spring Street located in the downtown area. The Woman's Building comprised various feminist activities, such as the Feminist Studio Workshop, the Center for Feminist Art Historical Studies, the Women's Graphic Centre, the Los Angeles Feminist Theatre, several Lesbian Art Projects, women-owned businesses, such as Sisterhood Bookstore and Associated Women's Press, and several art galleries, such as Gallery 707, Womenspace, Grandview I and Grandview II.⁹ Several individual performance artists and performance groups "connected, were nurtured and came of age" in the Woman's Building as a performance venue,



Fig. 1-1. Barbara T. Smith, *Nude Frieze* (1972), F-space, Santa Ana. Photograph by Boris Sojka. © Barbara T. Smith, courtesy of the artist.

including Barbara T. Smith, Rachel Rosenthal, Suzanne Lacy, Leslie Labowitz, Cheri Gaulke, Nancy Angelo, the Feminist Art Workers, Terry Wolverton and the Oral Herstory of Lesbianism, as well as Jerri Allyn and the Waitresses.¹⁰

Another performance venue was the F-Space Gallery (1969–72) in an industrial park in Santa Ana in the southern outskirts of Los Angeles, co-founded by performance artist Barbara T. Smith. Several experimental performances were held at F-Space Gallery, such as Smith's ritualistic performance *Nude Frieze* in 1972 (and Chris Burdens' shoot performance in 1971) (fig. 1-1).¹¹ Smith had already in the 1960s experimented with a Xerox machine installed in her dining room, creating multiple versions of replicated exposures of her nude body. With these prints she produced a series of bound "books", such as *Emergence* (1965) and *Coffin Books* (1965), followed by *The Letter* (1967), produced as a way to copyright her experimental methods with xerography, and mailed in various copies to colleagues in the art community "as an act of pissing on creative territory".¹² The performance artist Rachel Rosenthal was the founder of the improvisational space Instant Theatre (1955–65, 1976–1977), located in a variety of sites throughout Los Angeles in the 1970s. Rosenthal was also co-founder in 1972 of the Womanspace Gallery in western Los

Angeles with artist Linda Levi, in addition to her founding with the Grandview Gallery, a woman's art collective.¹³ When the Woman's Building opened in 1973, the Womanspace Gallery was relocated there before it closed in 1974. Rosenthal's studio at Robertson Boulevard in Hollywood later housed the exhibition space Doing by Doing, called Espace DbD (1980–83), showing performances by among others The Waitresses, Stellarc and Eleanor Antin, and works by graphic artist June Wayne.¹⁴ June Wayne was the founder of the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in her studio at Tamarind Avenue in 1960 in Hollywood. In 1971, Wayne organised a workshop in her Tamarind studio for women artists pursuing a career in the "male-dominated art world".¹⁵ The workshop, with the heading Business and Professional Problems of Women Artists, engaged the participants in role-playing and dealt with various aspects of "how to function effectively in the art world," from documenting and pricing works to negotiating with dealers and galleries.¹⁶

Performance artist Suzanne Lacy staged several of her early performances in the Woman's Building, and by 1974 she was teaching performance in the Feminist Studio Workshop.¹⁷ In a large studio in Venice, functioning as a "transition point" after *Womanhouse* was completed in 1972, and before the opening of the Woman's Building in 1973, Lacy participated with Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgen and Aviva Rahmani in the creation of the performance *Ablutions* (1972) that addressed rape and everyday violence against women.¹⁸ Together with Leslie Labowitz-Starus, Lacy brought performances addressing rape and violence against women into the public urban space of Los Angeles, thus making feminist activist art even more public. Appropriating the strategies by media reporters, the performance *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977) was staged with the intention of raising awareness of the taboo subject rape, while simultaneously deconstructing sexist patterns in media reporting on violence against women.¹⁹ In so doing, the performance reached an even larger audience than those present at the actual public site of the Los Angeles City Hall, where ten women dressed in black and in high-veiled hats entered the stairs. Lacy explains:

The performance, staged at City Hall as a media event for an audience of politicians and news reporters, was designed as a series of thirty-second shots that, when strung together in a two- to four-minute news clip, would tell the story we wanted told. We considered, for example, camera angles, reporter's use of voice-over, and the role of politicians in traditional reporting strategies.²⁰



Fig. 1-2. Suzanne Lacy, *A Woman Was Raped Here...*, sidewalk chalking, part of *Three Weeks in May* (1977). © Suzanne Lacy, courtesy of the artist.

The project *Three Weeks in May* (1977) by Lacy and Labowitz-Starus, together with Barbara Cohen, Melissa Hoffman and Jill Soderholm, was organised as a citywide project that lasted three weeks.²¹ During the three-week period close to thirty public art events took place across the city of Los Angeles, including sidewalk chalking of actual rape locations, self-defence workshops, rallies, educational lectures and ritual readings and performances (fig. 1-2).²² The project also included two monumental city maps of Los Angeles installed in a pedestrian shopping centre beneath the City Hall. One map had RAPE stamped in red on locations where women had been raped over a three-week period in May 1977, while the other had markers in black for rape crisis centres in Los Angeles, indicating routes to recovery.²³ Lacy and Labowitz also organised the carefully planned project *Record companies drag their feet* (1977) on Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood.²⁴ Staged as a media event, pre-identifying the mediated camera gaze of TV-reporter crews, activists in rooster costumes pantomimed record company executives beneath a massive billboard for the rock band Kiss, that “depicted scantily clad women at the feet of the

platform-heeled rockers”.²⁵ Developed in collaboration with Julia London from Women Against Violence Against Women and the National Organization for Women, the project was a kick-off for a national boycott announced by these groups of albums from three major record companies in objection to their use of sexually violent images of women in the selling records.²⁶ From these performances by Lacy and Labowitz-Starus in the mid-1970s grew the umbrella organisation *Ariadne: A Social Art Network* (1978–1980), a coalition of artists, activists, media reporters and politicians with the purpose of direct political action on violence against women.²⁷

Chicana artists on the feminist art scene

It has been claimed in retrospect that by 1970, “the women’s movement had grown to include radicals and conservatives; white, blacks and Chicanas”.²⁸ Very few Chicana artists, however, were included in the art programmes and art activities going on in the 1970s among white feminist artists in Los Angeles. In her historical account of Chicana/o art in California, Shifra Goldman argues:

Though both the Chicano political movement and the feminist movement were emerging in California at the same time, there was very little political contact. For the community at large, Mexicans and Chicanos were an invisible presence.²⁹

Despite diversity among Chicanas/os as a group with genealogical ties to Mexico and resistance to a normative social US identity as WASP (white-anglo-saxon-protestant), Chicana artists did not only oppose sexism and discrimination against women, but also intersecting structures of marginalisation and discrimination in terms of race (mixed Indian-Spanish), ethnicity (Mexican), skin colour (brown), religion (Catholicism), class (the working class poor), and language (Spanish).³⁰ Of the feminist movement in the 1970s, Chicana artist Yolanda Lopéz recounts:

Despite the many efforts and good intentions of white women in the arena of political art, racial separation and racism existed de facto within the feminist art movement from the beginning.³¹

The history of the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles includes several reported accounts of racism among white feminists.³² When looking at the large number of exhibitions held in the various galleries at the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles, the exclusion of non-white artists becomes

obvious.³³ During its Venice location (1973–1975), the names of only two Chicana artists appear: Olivia Sanchez, included in a juried exhibition at the Woman Space Gallery in 1973, and Rosalyn Mesquite invited to participate in a three-woman show.³⁴ After the Woman's Building moved to North Spring Street (1976–1991), only one exhibition was held with Chicana artists, *Venas de la Mujer* in 1976, a collaborative art installation created by a group calling themselves Las Chicanas, including Isabel Castro, Judith Hernández, Olga Muñiz, Josefina Quesada, and Judy Baca.³⁵

Even though sporadic contact existed between white Anglo American and brown Chicana feminist artists in Los Angeles, they organised in separate networking groups. Through its highway system, Los Angeles is a spatially divided city, and this division of the urban space is mirrored by a social segregation patterned along lines of race and ethnicity. In East Los Angeles and the unincorporated areas east of the Los Angeles River, are the areas with the lowest incomes and the highest percentage of households without a car:³⁶ the majority of inhabitants are Mexican Americans and Chicanas/os. This socio-spatial division of the city is reflected in a geographical separation of the alternative art scenes in Los Angeles in the 1970s, with the feminist alternative art scene concentrated in western Los Angeles while Chicana/o art activities primarily took place east of the Los Angeles River. Chicano scholar Chon Noriega explains: “the way in which [Chicana/o] artists navigated the city itself is intrinsically tied to the psychogeography of the built environment”, and for the Chicana/o community,

[...] a schematic of highways overlaid on top of existing neighbourhoods, a dead-end public housing system, and a perceived border formed by the Los Angeles River, combined with an inadequate public transit infrastructure, effectively limited mobility within the urban core.³⁷

Among Chicanas/os in East Los Angeles, mural painting was an important visual media. This activity of community-based street murals in the 1970s has, according to the amount of murals produced, been labelled a “mural movement”.³⁸ These street murals represent a form of public art that not only reached audiences constituted by diverse groups of people in urban street spaces, but also the spread of permanent visual art throughout neighbourhoods where visual art in public spaces was often scarce. Several mural groups were organised by Chicana artists in California in the 1970s, such as Las Mujeres Muralistas of San Francisco, Las Mujeres Muralistas of San Diego, Las Mujeres Muralistas of del Valle of Fresno, and Mujeres in the Grupo de Santa Ana.³⁹ In Los Angeles, several mural

projects were organised in the 1970s as part of educational youth programmes. These educational programmes include the mural projects led by Judy Baca as well as the mural projects in the East Los Angeles housing projects in Ramona Gardens (1973–1977) and in Estrada Courts (1973–1978), where eighty-two murals were produced by trained and untrained muralists in collaboration with young residents and gang members from the surrounding area.⁴⁰ With the feminist movement not only marginalising brown Chicanas, but also separating non-white women from non-white men, Chicana artists organised in networking alliances that included both women and men and in mixed-gendered mural groups active in East Los Angeles.

Chicana artists in collaborative groups

A Chicana artist active throughout the 1970s with murals was Judy Baca. In 1969, Baca was hired by the Los Angeles department of Recreation and Parks to teach art classes in public parks in Boyle Heights, East LA.⁴¹ In 1973, she was appointed the director of the East Los Angeles Mural Program, securing funds from the federal urban aid programme Model Cities Program. In 1974, the East Los Angeles Mural Program was expanded and became the Citywide Mural Program, producing more than four hundred murals throughout the Los Angeles area under Baca's direction. In 1976, the same year Baca participated with Las Chicanas in the exhibition at the Woman's Building, she co-founded the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) with filmmaker Donna Deitch and artist Christina Schlesinger. Schlesinger, a painter and muralist in the Citywide Mural Program led by Baca, was a student of Judy Chicago in the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building, while Deitch, a film maker, showed her work in the Woman's Building, including her UCLA thesis film, the feminist documentary *Woman to Woman: A Documentary about Hookers, Housewives, and Other Mothers* (1975). SPARC, located since 1977 in a two-storey Art Deco building on Venice Boulevard that has served as a jail, comprises workshop facilities, a gallery, mural archives and artist studios. SPARC engages community members in the collaborative development of cultural programmes and public murals, and Baca's first mural project through SPARC was the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1976–1983). Started in 1976, and executed with over four hundred youths and artists over the course of five summers between 1978 and 1983 in the Tujunga Flood Control Channel in the San Fernando Valley in the northern outskirts of Los Angeles, the *Great Wall* is considered the "longest mural in the world" with a visual narrative of



Fig. 1-3. Judy Baca, *The Great Wall of Los Angeles* (1976–1983), San Fernando Valley. Photograph by Eva Zetterman. © Eva Zetterman.

the history of California, told through the “ethnic groups underrepresented in history texts and public consciousness” (fig. 1-3).⁴² Baca, working as a mural artist in a male dominated visual media and active on the Chicana/o art scene that until the mid-1970s was “largely dominated by men”,⁴³ later recalled: “Activism in the 1970s had to do with me turning upside down the notion that the creation of monumental art was a male act”.⁴⁴

Among Chicana artists who worked with Baca on the *Great Wall of Los Angeles* were Judith Hernández, Olga Muñoz, Isabel Castro, Yreina Cervántez and Patssi Valdez.⁴⁵ Three of these artists, Hernández, Muñoz and Castro, were also members of the group Las Chicanas that including Judy Baca and Josefina Quesada held the exhibition *Venas de la Mujer* at Woman’s Building in 1976. Judith Hernández and Patssi Valdez also are examples of Chicana artists who were active on the Los Angeles art scene in mixed-gendered group in the 1970s. Hernández was from 1970 to 1974 a resident artist for the first five volumes of *Aztlán: Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and the Arts*, published by the UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center that had been established in 1969.⁴⁶ Apart from collaborating on Baca’s Great Wall, Hernández painted several murals in the 1970s together with Carlos Almaraz in the housing projects of Ramona Gardens. Almaraz was member of an art collective called Los Four, including Frank Romero, Roberto de la Rocha and Gilbert Luján, and in 1974, Hernández became the fifth member of the group Los Four, who during the 1970s and early 1980s worked in various media, including murals.⁴⁷

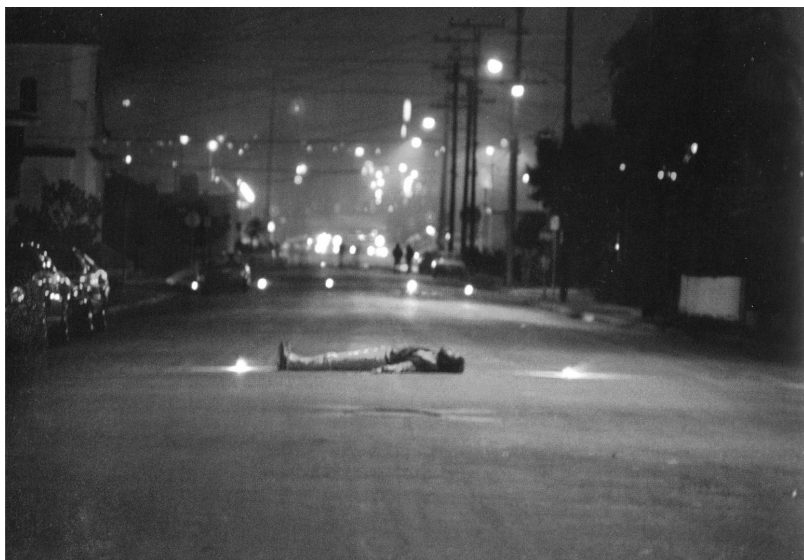


Fig. 1-4. Asco, *Decoy Gang War Victim* (1974) with Gronk. Photograph by Harry Gamboa, Jr. © Harry Gamboa, Jr., courtesy of the artist.

Patssi Valdez, who worked with Baca both with *Las Chicanas* and on the *Great Wall of Los Angeles*, was a member of the conceptual art group Asco (1972–1987) that in various constellations comprised a number of Chicana artists, including Diane Gamboa, Barbara Carrasco, Teresa Covarrubias, Sylvia Delgado, Consuelo Flores, Maria Elena Gaitán, Karen Gamboa, Linda Gamboa, Cindy Herrón, Sylvia Hidalgo, Marisela Norte, Lorraine Ordaz, Betty Salas, Debra Taren, Virginia Villegas, Dianne Vosoff, Kate Vosoff and Marisa Zains.⁴⁸ Starting with collaborative work for the local Chicano publication *Regeneración* in the early 1970s, the four original members of Asco—Patssi Valdez, Harry Gamboa, Jr, Willie Herrón and Gronk (aka Glugio Gronk Nicandro)—moved on to conceptual street performances. These include two Christmas Eve processions down Whittier Boulevard in East LA, *Stations of the Cross* (1971) and *Walking Mural* (1972); a Christmas Eve ritual sitting on a traffic island on Whittier Boulevard, *First Supper (after a Major Riot)* (1974); and two staged enactments, *Instant Mural* (1974) and *Asshole Mural* (1975). Asco's street performances, according to scholars Chon Noriega and Pilar Tompkins Rivas, “at once critiqued and engaged murals as a strategy of reclaiming public space, just as Gronk and Herrón’s own murals incorporated graffiti.”⁴⁹