

Reflections on *Stories of Work and Survival* (2007), by Suzanne Lacy, with Susan Barnett and Kelly Akashi.

Meiling Cheng, 8/6/2018

For Suzanne Lacy and Jean Graff, my soul sisters

Stories of Work and Survival took place during the Museum of Contemporary Art's exhibition of *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007), organized by curator Connie Butler to reframe the complex legacy of feminist artworks and activism from the mid-1960s through the 1970s four decades later. Echoing *Wack!*'s retrospective purview, Lacy's newly commissioned large-scale performance piece, *Stories of Work and Survival*, reassessed two past works: *Freeze Frame* (1982), from which she took the elements of performance tableaux and theme-based conversations among women from diverse backgrounds in race, ethnicity, class, age, and physical ability; and *Immigrants and Survivors* (1983), from which she added the group dinners as an occasion for communal sharing. *Stories of Work and Survival* demonstrated what had distinguished Lacy's feminist art practice, including integrating social justice activism into her art; building political coalition and temporary community among women across their differences; and creating a conceptually acute and visually appealing structural design to facilitate public performance activities among her participants.

Lacy's artist statement for *Stories of Work and Survival* reveals her awareness of discursive and visual representations in shaping, raising, and historicizing socio-cultural consciousness: "The project explored 'representation' of women and activism in four parts, inside and outside the museum: (1) conversations not witnessed, taking place in women's homes and workplaces; (2) group conversations seen but not heard, by visitors to the *Wack!* Exhibition; (3) these same conversations heard, via recordings, in a subsequent installation; and (4) conversation over dinner outside the doors of the museum, representing public voice"

(<http://www.suzannelacy.com/early-works/#/stories-of-work-and-survival/>).

This four-part structure elucidates not only the power of representation in historicizing feminist art and activism—a manifest goal of *Wack!*—but also the multicentric nature of how an audience receives information about feminist art and activism. Those "conversations not witnessed" suggest that activism is not necessarily a spectacular public activity; rather, it happens daily, consciously, through a social agent's choices and with her circles of affiliations. The "group conversations seen but not heard" grapples with visual representation, a common practice in documenting performance art. The audience visiting *Wack!* might observe the tableau of some women, in roughly "color-coded" clothing, exchanging conversations behind glass doors inside MOCA. These women's conversations were recorded and accessible to any interested viewer via installations in MOCA's library. Such a dispersal of clues regarding a performance artwork again reflects how one accesses historical performance art: via its multifaceted documentations. The dinner, well decorated with colorful balloon lanterns,

partaken by participants, and potentially witnessed by onsite or posterior viewers, offers a theatrical spectacle for the recording cameras and a public forum for the "conversational performers" to share their stories of work and survival.

Since *Stories of Work and Survival* recast two performance pieces that Lacy chose from her oeuvres produced in the early 1980s, the piece might conjure up one of the most heated debates raging in feminist theories from that decade: controversies regarding essentialism. "The central issues in feminist controversies over essentialism was whether there are any shared characteristics common to all women, which unified them as a group" (Stone 2004). Conversational participants in *Stories of Work and Survival* included only women, who were recruited by "leaders of 15 diverse women's groups from different workplaces and neighborhoods" (Lacy online). These 15 "leaders" had participated in a Leadership seminar taught by Dr. Janna Shadduck-Hernandez of UCLA's Labor Center. They then became the lead recruiters to find their own conversation partners from those who were engaged in the same occupations. Over the course of two weeks, these women convened, one small group after another, to hold conversations about their work, life, survival, joy, challenges, and rewards behind glass doors at MOCA.

The only potential fall-out that *Stories of Work and Survival* might have with vehement anti-essentialist feminists would be Lacy's choice to use gender-identity as a filtering system in casting her performers. She had recruited exclusively "women" leaders, who then recruited exclusively women friends and colleagues as their conversation partners. Yet, nowhere was there an insistence that these women exhibited commonality beyond their self-avowed gender identity. In other words, "gender identity" is taken as a social/personal given rather than interrogated by Lacy's piece, which emphasizes, as is customary for this artist, building coalitions among women with widely diverse social and biographical backgrounds.

If there is a sense of strategic essentialism in Lacy's interest in engaging with women as her main performers in *Stories of Work and Survival*, her type of essentialism approximates what Alison Stone advocates as "genealogical" antiessentialism, which argues that "each woman becomes located within a historical chain of women, a chain composed of all those who have successively engaged in reinterpreting the meaning of femininity" (Stone 2004: 150). "An understanding of women as having a genealogy thus entails that, instead of forming a unitary group, they are connected together in complex ways and to varying degrees, and, in particular, that they are linked by their partially and multiply overlapping interpretations of femininity" (Stone 2004: 150).

I had seen some women talking amongst themselves behind glass doors when I visited *Wack!* I also joined the closing dinner ceremony and received a free T-shirt, with the logo "I Shape Democracy," from one of my table-mates, who worked for a radio company. I no longer remember the stories shared on an actual platform, located somewhere among tables and colorful lanterns, during our dinner, but I remember how strongly—and funnily—some of those publicly shared stories had affected me. Essentialist or not, ephemeral or not, activist or not, *Stories of Work and Survival* provided a temporary convivial occasion for 250 people—women

and their male, female, or transgender dinner dates—to converge between MOCA's entrance door and parking lot, relating to one another as co-pilots for a plane called "Good Time in the United States," enabled by a feminist and her collaborators!

As Lacy recently commented about the role of a contemporary artist interested in social practice: today's artists are no longer needed for revealing issues, since a journalist might do this task better via print or social media; instead, they may practice, enable, and invent "forms of participation and citizenship" (Lacy and Czechowski 2016).

References:

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Stone, Alison (2004). "Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy," in *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 1.2: 135-153.