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### Résumé de l'article

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# The Feminist Consciousness Raising Circle as Pedagogical Form in Suzanne Lacy and Julia London's *Freeze Frame* (1982)

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Cet article analyse un projet de pratique sociale, *Freeze Frame: Room for Living Room* (1982), par rapport à sa situation pédagogique. Pour la performance culminant dans un magasin de meubles, Suzanne Lacy et Julia London ont réparti, en dix-sept cercles, cent-vingt participantes qui étaient initialement «figées», pour passer au mode de la conversation à leur signal. Le projet se proposait de surmonter l'aliénation du public face aux stéréotypes sur les femmes, mais les dynamiques de pouvoir étaient telles que le principal axe pédagogique du projet reposait sur les groupes en conversation, qui ont été modélisés d'après les interventions féministes éveillant les consciences dans les années 1970. En étudiant ses projets subséquents, on peut voir comment Lacy a intégré cette forme de pédagogie féministe dans son développement du «new genre public art». *Freeze Frame* doit être considéré comme un exemple clé du rôle de la pédagogie féministe dans l'histoire de l'art pédagogique.

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On August 13, 1982, 120 women participant-performers came together before an audience of several hundred members of the public in the San Francisco Roche-Bobois Furniture showroom for a community theatre performance, *Freeze Frame: Room for Living Room*. Artist Suzanne Lacy conceived and directed the project in close collaboration with feminist activist Julia London, who led community organizing for the project. Along with a team of collaborators, Lacy and London organized the women into seventeen demographic groups, some of which included, per the artists' labels: professionals, sex workers, Asian women, young Black women, Black women elders, young Anglos (white women), Jewish elders, and disabled women. The groups sat in the model room displays of upscale furniture, initially "frozen" in tableau vivants, with props and costumes chosen by the participant-performers to represent their experiences with identity and self-representation. During these frozen minutes, audience members filed in. On a cue, the groups of women began to speak amongst themselves on the planned topic of survival, while the audience strolled through or paused to listen. The performance concluded with a final conversation amongst all the groups together in a large space at the back of the showroom.

One of Lacy and London's main goals in *Freeze Frame* was to disrupt the tableaux that may have appeared stereotypical to the audience with discussions that might foster solidarity between participant-performers and audience.<sup>1</sup> As curator Rudolf Frieling described in a catalog essay on Lacy's work, the artists wanted to create a situation that was initially alienating and then overturn it to awaken the audience.<sup>2</sup> But, as the power dynamics played out between participant-performers and the viewing public, something new emerged, producing a complicated relationship between performers and spectators, but fostering closeness amongst the participant-performers. Key to understanding these dynamics is an evaluation of the project's pedagogical approach. The juxtaposition of tableau vivants and lively discussions was not just a shift in display modes, but also a display of different modes of learning and knowledge—from passive reception of an image to active listening in dialogue. The artists privileged the unscripted discussion, which entailed shifting the power of knowledge-making to their subjects. In the process, Lacy and London's project also began to complicate who this type of artwork was for. *Freeze Frame* would come to be a model format for Lacy's

1. Sharon Irish and Suzanne Lacy, *Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 86.

2. Rudolf Frieeling, "The Text is Active," in *Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here*, eds. Rudolf Frieeling, Lucia Sanromán, and Dominic Willson, exh. cat. (San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Munich; London; New York: DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2019), 29. See also: Bertolt Brecht, "The Street Scene: A Basic Model for an Epic Theatre" [ca. 1938, 1950], in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 125–26.

3. Suzanne Lacy, "Introduction: Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys," in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 19.

4. See: Claire Bishop, "Pedagogic Projects: 'How do you bring a classroom to life as if it were a work of art?'," in *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), 241–74; Mashinka Firunts, "Staging Professionalization: Lecture-performances and para-institutional pedagogies, from the postwar to the present," *Performance Research* 21, no. 6 (2016): 19–25; Matthew Teti, "Occupying UCI: Chris Burden's Five Day Locker Piece as Institutional Critique," *RACAR* 43, no. 1 (2018): 39–52; and Jacquelyn Ardum, "On Not Teaching Art: Baldessari, Pedagogy, and Conceptualism," *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 1 (January 2018): 143–71.

5. See: Claire Bishop, "Pedagogic Projects: 'How do you bring a classroom to life as if it were a work of art?'," 241–74; and Patricia Milder, "Teaching as Art: The Contemporary Lecture-Performance," *PAJ* 97 (2011): 13–27.

6. Judith Rodenbeck, "Working to Learn Together: Failure as Tactic," in *Globalization and Contemporary Art*, ed. Jonathan Harris (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 163. On Fluxus, see also: Hannah Higgins, "Teaching and Learning as Art Forms: Toward a Fluxus-Inspired Pedagogy," in *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 187–208. On Kaprow, see also: Judith F. Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011). On Clark, see also: Ana María León, "Lygia Clark: Between Spectator and Participant," *thresholds* 39 (2011): 45–53.

7. See for example, Clélia Barbut, "Abécédaires domestiques chez Martha Rosler et Suzanne Lacy: Pédagogies féministes et

developing participatory, public, pedagogical social practice work, a form she would call "new genre public art."<sup>3</sup>

Pedagogical art, as a subset of social practice, performance art, and institutional critique, refers to the set of practices that use teaching and learning as forms, including alternative schools, lecture-performances, and workshops.<sup>4</sup> Histories of pedagogical art practices often find origins in the work of German artist Joseph Beuys, including his Free International University (1973–88) and his various lecture series, such as *Energy Plan for the Western Man* (1974).<sup>5</sup> Somewhat more inclusively, scholars look to the 1960s to observe the key role of Fluxus artists and their interest in philosopher John Dewey's theories of art experience, the experimental teaching of US Happenings artist and educator Allan Kaprow, and the therapeutic and participatory works of Brazilian artist Lygia Clark.<sup>6</sup> Pedagogical concerns surfaced in experimental art of the 1980s and 1990s through developing interests in participatory practices that extended and wove together earlier concerns about performance and audience as well as ongoing developments in institutional critique. At this time, and especially in the United States, a weakened social safety net and fractious debates about public art and public goods provided fertile ground for the development of community-based and dialogical art practices, including Lacy's new genre public art. To these lineages, we should add the importance of feminist pedagogy, including the impact of works like *Freeze Frame*, and the forms of learning it proposes.<sup>7</sup>

In this essay, I look at the staging, epistemology, and impact of *Freeze Frame*. The semi-public space of the furniture showroom provided a complex ground for both stereotypical tableaux and conversations witnessed by a browsing public. Within this space, consciousness-raising (CR) circles, a pedagogical form drawn from feminist activism, were an important part of the work's choreography and were key to enabling the production of intimate knowledge. This form was key to the project and would become essential in Lacy's developing body of work. I argue that this project thus provides a key early example of the critical importance of feminist pedagogical form to new genre public art and likewise the history of pedagogical art. *Freeze Frame* also raises significant questions about the role of the audience in pedagogical art that have persisted until today. Examining it more closely allows us to see the merits of attending to small group learning in a performance that, while public, operated on different registers for various members of the public.

### "Room for Living Room"

Lacy and London wanted to present the project in a space that was simultaneously public and conveyed the intimacy of domestic space. They selected a furniture showroom, which could foster support and comfort for participant-performers while also providing room for a crowd to watch. However, as the performance transpired, seated participants and browsing audience encountered the space very differently. Roche-Bobois Furniture avoided the potential alienation (for both participants and audience) of a white-walled



Figure 1. Suzanne Lacy with the support of Julia London, *Freeze Frame: Room for Living Room*, 1982. Photo courtesy of Suzanne Lacy.

gallery, but a showroom is a nevertheless a space of consumption, not domesticity. During the “freeze frame” of the performance, the women were as much on display as the sofas and chairs they sat on. Grouping women in domestic-like spaces in *Freeze Frame* rhymed with mass media and advertising displays of women in this period. This particular retail store primarily served a high-end clientele, so its communication of “comfort” may have been more symbolic to the audience than actual for most of the participants.

Photographs documenting the tableaux, either in rehearsal or before the audience entered, show a mix of reservedness and uncomfortable amusement. Taken to document the artists’ process and that of the participant-performers, photographs like this one help us understand staging, and can provide a glimpse of how the tableaux vivants likely appeared to the audience upon arrival. In one, a seated Asian woman wearing tinted glasses glares softly at the camera with her face turned slightly, while a woman to her right leans forwards and rests her head on her hands, eyes closed. In another, a Black woman in an orange dress clutches her knees as if to help her hold still; both she and the woman next to her holding an instruction card glance at the camera and smile softly. | fig. 1 | There is some demonstrated awkwardness to being put on display like this, whether the subject is posing for a camera or holding still for fifteen minutes as an audience fills the space.

During a rehearsal for the performance, the women were asked to choose props characteristic of their identity groups, giving them a modicum of agency and distributing the production of knowledge to the participants. Lacy and London were facilitator-type educators in this way, inviting the participant-performers to reflect on their personal experiences by choosing and displaying their own identity markers. Art historian Sharon Irish describes these props as follows:

sex workers displayed a mask and an open black satin purse spilling three \$100 bills; former mental patients sat near an overturned bottle of pills and a syringe

that represented forced medication. Teenagers dressed in leotards and leg warmers, women from San Francisco's Mission District wore red and white dresses with gardenias in their hair, and nuns appeared in modernized habits.<sup>8</sup>

Most of the props were simple and common, easily assembled for the performance and meant to be easily interpreted by the audience. The decorative space of the showroom provided a natural ground for that interpretation.

Within the furniture showroom participants-performers were grouped by identity. Some groups—like representatives from the sex worker community—knew each other in advance, while others had been organized in the two weeks just prior to the event. Their groupings somewhat cut across multiple types of identity—so that, for example, there were women of colour included within the group of women with disabilities. Nevertheless, each group predominantly represented a single social type. This approach to identity was generally consistent with the multiculturalism taking shape in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with interest in differences of experiences across markers of identity, but without yet having the clear language and theory to articulate how those identities intersected. Lacy was influenced by the work on coalition-building by Black feminist and civil rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon. The concepts of identity politics and intersectionality were explored in the late 1970s by Black feminist activists of the Combahee River Collective, but the terminology would evolve somewhat later, with “intersectionality” first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.<sup>9</sup> Concurrent with these developments, white feminist sociologists like Dorothy E. Smith were formulating ideas about the situatedness of knowledge that would later in the 1980s be formalized as feminist standpoint theory.<sup>10</sup> Standpoint theory provided an account of how identity and personal experience shaped epistemology. This resonates with the way groups were formed to foster discussion based on commonality in *Freeze Frame*. Yet, for the audience, in the spaces of the sectioned-off furniture showroom, these groups appeared as social types.

All of the complexities of this arrangement were were designed to generate a reaction against cultural norms, an effect reinforced by their situation within a space of retail display. As Lacy wrote in her notes shortly after the piece:

The tableaux are stereotypical, there's no getting around it. And I am arranging the women with the studied presence of objects on display in a museum. The distance inherent in this arrangement is great, and the audience's potential alienation is reinforced by the role of voyeur I am forcing upon them. Some of our participants are asking “Aren't we reinforcing social stereotypes by replicating them here?”

It's complicated, and I don't have the answer. I suspect that's what makes it art rather than political action. Driven by an image, an intuition or feeling, I try to polish it until its reality becomes one with that of my audience—a reality that hopefully is also a political consciousness raising. But it's almost as if the imagery has its own life, and I'm running along behind trying to clarify and explain and make it reasonably responsible to its constituency. The truth is I'm driven to do this image, with its experience of alienation and otherness. I guess I'm excited by the challenge of turning alienation into responsiveness, caricature into empathy.<sup>11</sup>

déraillements,” *Ligeia* 153–156 (2017): 203–11;

8. Sharon Irish and Suzanne Lacy, *Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between*, 86.

9. [Combahee River Collective], “The Combahee River Collective Statement” [1977], reprinted in *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, ed. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2017), 19. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–67.

10. Dorothy E. Smith, “Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology,” in *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra G. Harding (New York: Routledge, 2004), 21–34.

11. Rudolf Frieling, Lucía Sanromán, and Dominic Willson, eds., *Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here*, 146. This text was displayed on a card attached to a sofa (amongst other sofas with attached documentary cards) in an installation inspired by *Freeze Frame* for the *At Home* exhibition, Long Beach Museum of Art, California, September 4–November 6, 1983.



As she describes it, Lacy's main concern here is to make a living image for an audience. It is telling that some participants questioned her motivations. Her objective seemingly instrumentalizes the participants, an effect amplified by the setting, which in turn complicates how the rupture of that image could produce empathy for the spectator. Lacy has elsewhere theorized the tableau form as an essential aspect of a spectacle society, writing, "The framed picture of reality represented in the tableau is reinforced by the processional of meaning that surrounds the media event, and by this performance it is commemorated into our current notion of history."<sup>12</sup> In her analysis, media images end up sustaining the myths they visualize as truths. Lacy's usage of the disrupted tableau vivant form in the performance constitutes an effort to allow *viewers* to break free from images that constrain how individuals in those images are represented, but it does not guarantee transformation of the relationship between viewer and performer.

Preparatory notes for the project also document Julia London's interest in disrupting stereotypes. She wanted to juxtapose representations of feminist unity and the realities of women's different life experiences—a critique of both how movements are themselves subject to media representations that seek to minimize their impact and internal movement politics that minimize dissent or difference for short-term political expediency. London had encountered similar tensions elsewhere as a community organizer in the New Left and labour movements and as co-founder of the radical feminist group Women Against Violence Against Women, who took direct action against images of sexual violence in mainstream media and advertising.<sup>13</sup> She hoped that the "freeze frame" giving way to discussion would bring out "invisible images" to create a new future.<sup>14</sup> Even as London imagined a situation ripe with potential for political unity, she still conceptualized the participants in terms of their status as images for a public.

While *Freeze Frame* may have appeared to instrumentalize the participants to address the audience's alienation and support their political consciousness, the project was more successful in supporting the political consciousness of the seventeen groups of women. As detailed in her journal of preparatory notes, part of Lacy's goal in the project was to counter the alienation of women in society generally through solidarity: "looking for personal support on an individual level—never enough" and "sense of a lot there, but no comfort."<sup>15</sup> Placing the women amidst living room furniture was key to creating a space of comfort and support, as was arranging them by shared social experiences for intimate conversations. The soft couches and pillows that are the piece's literal supports faintly echo the radical open-plan classrooms of the 1960s and 1970s that were designed to disrupt hierarchies of power in traditional education.<sup>16</sup> It was an approach that aimed to value personal knowledge. At a rehearsal on the night before the performance, the participant-performers helped to decide where and how they would position themselves within the showroom. This was an effort to make having difficult conversations a bit easier, and was key to the project's pedagogical effects.

12. Suzanne Lacy, "Fractured Space," [1988] in *Art in the Public Interest*, ed. Arlene Raven (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989), 293.

13. Carolyn Bronstein, "No More Black and Blue: Women Against Violence Against Women and the Warner Communications Boycott, 1976–1979," *Violence Against Women* 14, no. 4 (April 2008), 424.

14. Suzanne Lacy, unpublished notes for *Freeze Frame: Room for Living Room* [1982].

15. *Ibid.*

16. See: Larry Cuban, "The Open Classroom," *Education Next* 4, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 68–71; and Neville Bennett and Terry Hyland, "Open Plan: Open Education?" *British Educational Research Journal* 5, no. 2 (1979): 159–66.

When Lacy gave the green card signal for the tableaux vivants to come to life, the initial “frozen” stillness of these groups, alienating in different ways to both participants and audience, gave way to animated discussion amongst participant-performers, still seated in close circles. Their stillness and close gaze, while situated in quasi-domestic “rooms” in *Freeze Frame*, helped them learn from each other. Meanwhile, the more distant, hovering gazes of spectators perambulating a showroom made for a more complicated learning situation. The choreography of *Freeze Frame* specified the movements, or lack thereof, of the participant-performers, but left the movements of the public audience mostly open-ended—they were invited to observe, but also free to walk away. Some arrangements of participants precluded a view from behind, while others made it quite easy and natural, as can be seen in a planning diagram for the event. | **fig. 2** | This curtailed the potential for empathetic witnessing by the audience, who were permitted instead to engage in a mode of witnessing that more closely resembled browsing and eavesdropping. This complexity is clear from looking at one of the photographic documents of the performance, where the group of Jewish elders are seated in a semicircle while two women look down at them from behind. | **fig. 3** | The seated women look directly at one another, leaning into smaller, tighter groupings in order to hear each other better in a large, crowded space. Behind them, a younger woman in a purple dress has her arms folded; she looks at the backs of their heads as she listens, signalling both physical and psychological distance from the conversation. In the context of the furniture showroom, her posture approaches that of someone scrutinizing merchandise. To the right of the image, another woman stands relaxed and seemingly more engaged in witnessing the conversation below her. That the seventeen groups were situated in place for the performance was helpful *within* the groups as much as it was unhelpful to establishing a broader solidarity across those groups or between participants and audience.

In a 2018 education study, researcher Carol A. Taylor traced the paths and patterns of students and teachers in six different pedagogical situations to develop a theory of emergent “bodies-spaces” as powerful for learning.<sup>17</sup> Taylor describes, for example, the “micro-space” of a teacher positioning his chair relative to a student for a one-on-one Film Studies tutorial, the flow of students’ bodies through stations of library research and consultation with the stationary instructor in a Sociology classroom, and other choreographies of learning. How and when bodies move within the pedagogical situation, she argues, shapes how those bodies produce knowledge. While Lacy and London imagined in advance that the pedagogical thrust of the project laid in the transformation of the audience or a reconciliation between audience and participants, there were also, and perhaps more potently, these micro-spaces of vibrant learning within each small group, where the women participating found common ground with one another.

17. Carol A. Taylor, “What Can Bodies Do? En/gendering body-space choreographies of stillness, movement and flow in post-16 pedagogic encounters,” *International Journal of Educational Research* 88 (2018): 156–65. See also: Derek P. McCormack, *Refrains for Moving Bodies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

Figure 2. Suzanne Lacy, Diagram of groups and their planned positions in the showroom, 1982. Courtesy of Suzanne Lacy.

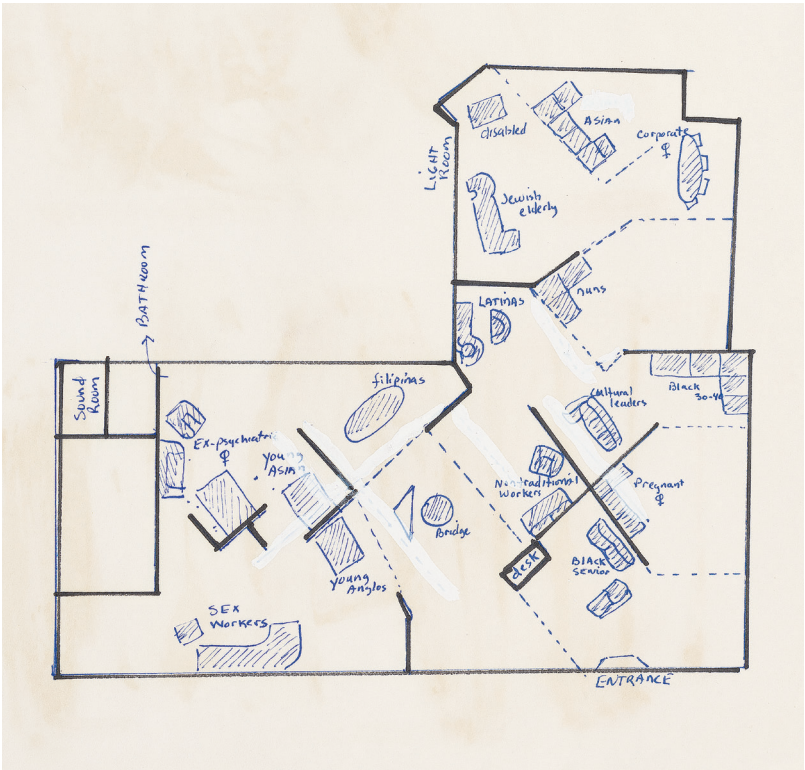


Figure 3. Suzanne Lacy with the support of Julia London, Freeze Frame: Room for Living Room, 1982. Photo courtesy of Suzanne Lacy.



An important source for Lacy and London's arrangement of each group in the showroom was the circular seating of consciousness-raising meetings associated with feminist movement activism of the late 1960s and 1970s. Women would gather in private homes and share their personal experiences with sexism, their sexuality, violence and trauma, and other aspects of lived experience. The feminist movement grew in these years through sharing these personal testimonials and the awareness that seemingly private experiences in fact reflected structural conditions of women's lives. Both Lacy and London were involved with feminist activism in the 1970s, which provided inspiration for bringing this form into *Freeze Frame*; beyond the performance night, they shared a larger ambition to engage the women who participated in ongoing activism.

Lacy developed consciousness-raising in an art context with fellow student Faith Wilding at Fresno State University and also witnessed it in the practice of Judy Chicago there and at California Institute for the Arts.<sup>18</sup> Chicago has described her pedagogy in the Feminist Art Program as "content-based," in contradistinction to the normative technique-based approach of studio art education.<sup>19</sup> Chicago's teaching drew upon and emphasized the personal experiences and feelings of students, pulling out this content through students' self-presentations in CR sessions.

Although Chicago has stressed that the CR format was somewhat incidental, as she privileged the art products over the process, her mentee Suzanne Lacy was more interested in the process, perhaps due to Lacy's graduate studies in psychology.<sup>20</sup> Writing in 1991, Lacy described her experience with Chicago's teaching as both personal and collective:

...at the feminist art programs at the California Institute of the Arts, and later at the Feminist Studio Workshop of the Woman's Building, we began to develop a political art that was participatory, egalitarian, and reflective of both the personal and collective truth of women's experiences. We wanted art that made changes, either in its maker or its audience. It was well understood that, in order to create an art of action, one must see as clearly as possible the present nature of things; so it followed, of course, that analysis was a part of our practice.<sup>21</sup>

Her attention to "personal and collective truth of women's experiences" is significant, signalling an interest in sharing knowledge in the "participatory, egalitarian" manner of CR circles. From personal, tacit knowledge came transformation through analysis.

Curator Géraldine Gourbe describes the pedagogy of CR groups in the Feminist Art Program as explicitly linked to another important development in education in the 1960s and 1970s, the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. She writes:

Chicago thus encouraged her students to introduce themselves to each other without limiting their account to a first name, and invited them to situate themselves within the collective from a detailed presentation of their identity, in all its complexity. The exercise constituted the first step toward transforming the classroom into a laboratory of *consciousness*, a device borrowed from the methodology of the Brazilian Marxist pedagogue Paulo Freire.<sup>22</sup>

18. Moira Roth, "Suzanne Lacy on the Feminist Program at Fresno State and CalArts," *East of Borneo*, December 15, 2011, <https://eastofborneo.org/articles/suzanne-lacy-on-the-feminist-program-at-fresno-state-and-calarts/>. See also: Jill Fields, ed., *Entering the Picture: Judy Chicago, The Fresno Feminist Art Program, and the Collective Visions of Women Artists* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

19. Karen Keifer-Boyd, "From Content to Form: Judy Chicago's Pedagogy with Reflections by Judy Chicago," *Studies in Art Education* 48, no. 2 (Winter 2007): 137.

20. *Ibid.*, 144.

21. Suzanne Lacy, "The Name of the Game," *Art Journal* 50, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 64.

22. Géraldine Gourbe, "The Pedagogy of Art as Agency: Or the Influence of a West Coast Feminist Art Program on an East Coast Pioneering Reflection on Performance Art," in *Composing Differences: Imagining New Models for Knowledge Production and Exchange*, ed. Virginie Bobin (Dijon, France: Les Presses du Réel, 2015).

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in English in 1970, Freire critiques traditional lecture-style teaching, focusing on the power dynamics between teachers and learners; he promotes a dialogical approach, as a strategy where students and teachers learn together how overcome alienation and confront their own oppression.<sup>23</sup> For Freire, dialogue expresses a different way of knowing, one rooted in understanding of knowledge as inherently social.<sup>24</sup> In CR groups of the 1970s, the arrangement of bodies was designed to facilitate discussion between individuals who can look each other in the face and witness each other's truths. Such recognition prompts more intimate learning, and the knowledge created is both informal and deeply personal. This actually goes beyond or somewhat differs from Freire's critical pedagogy to constitute a specifically feminist pedagogy. Later in the 1980s, sociologists like Elizabeth Ellsworth would critique critical pedagogy, at least as practiced in the US at that time, on the grounds that its dependence on rational argument and privileged forms of knowledge empties out any potential empowerment and minimizes diversity.<sup>25</sup> For Ellsworth and others, a feminist pedagogy could use dialogue, but also shift the type of knowledge that is valorized in learning to include personal and emotional knowledges.

Lacy had tried out CR group discussions previously, most notably in *Three Weeks in May* (1977, with performances by Leslie Labowitz, Barbara T. Smith, Cheri Gaulke and others), where they were one type of workshop offered in the multiform public activist project designed to expose and eradicate the prevalence of sexual violence towards women in Los Angeles. As part of that project, the "Talking to Women" workshop involved gallery visitors coming and going from a seated circle on the floor where they shared stories of sexual abuse over a period of four hours; art historian Vivien Green Fryd has described this workshop as using "circle-based pedagogy that enabled viewers to remember and speak out about the silent past of sexual abuse."<sup>26</sup> Fryd contextualizes this influential feminist strategy as one of several approaches which, along with the blurring of boundaries between art and life in the participatory practice of Allan Kaprow, another former teacher of Lacy, and the growth of West Coast body-based performance art, served as key sources for Lacy's development of "expanded public pedagogy."<sup>27</sup> Education scholar Charles Garoian also draws attention to both the importance of *Three Weeks in May* and the impact of Kaprow's pedagogical style to Lacy's work in the 1980s and after. Stressing particularly the role of participation, he describes her approach as overwhelmingly "curricular," by which he means embodied learning "created in collaboration with teachers, students, and citizens who are enabled to voice their concerns about issues in their communities from the perspectives of personal experience, memory, and cultural history."<sup>28</sup> Without question, Lacy's collaborative process and emphasis on community learning have these origins, but neither discussion of her 1977 project nor the influence of Kaprow's participatory happenings fully accounts for the centrality of the small group discussion in Lacy's work and the lasting legacy of her use of that form for pedagogical art. But Lacy's own writing on the

23. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (London and New York: Continuum, 2005).

24. Donaldo Macedo, introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 17.

25. Elizabeth Ellsworth, "Why Doesn't This Feel Empowering? Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy," *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3 (August 1989): 297–324.

26. Vivien Green Fryd, "Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May*: Feminist Activist Performance Art as 'Expanded Public Pedagogy,'" *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 30.

27. *Ibid.*, 23–25.

28. Charles R. Garoian, "Understanding Performance Art as Curriculum Text: The Community-based Pedagogy of Suzanne Lacy," in *Performing Pedagogy: Toward an Art of Politics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 132.



Figure 4. Suzanne Lacy with the support of Julia London, *Freeze Frame: Room for Living Room*, 1982. Photo courtesy of Suzanne Lacy.

pedagogical dimensions of new genre public art illustrates her concern for the specific choreography of learning:

Often such art puts forth specific information or content to substantiate its pedagogical claims, but we may also ask what learning results from the interactive forms of the work, and whether the very structure, including artist and audience roles, predicts the success of the educational intention.<sup>29</sup>

She makes clear here that the formal design of social interaction is a tool to shape learning in a work of art.

Unlike her work in the late 1970s, *Freeze Frame* now situated the consciousness-raising circle as the central pedagogical form in the project. And the knowledge created in the performance arose from that formal structure. That knowledge was personal and became collective, based on lived experience imprinted on the women's bodies, held in their memories. The project's staging and choreography deliberately if imperfectly aimed to support that knowledge by keeping the women participant-performers gathered together, sitting still and facing each other. Even as this knowledge was simultaneously also made public for a viewing audience, it was more clearly the participants who witnessed and understood each other.

In photographs of the performance, we see most clearly the seated women engaging with each other, and can sometimes observe some disconnect between these conversations and the reactions of the audience hovering above and in the background. Consider another photo document of the performance, in which the group of women with disabilities are gathered around a table, while a small crowd watches behind them. | **fig. 4** | Some audience members are demonstrably engaged by what they are witnessing, including a woman in blue with her arms folded who looks intently at the speaker in red. But others are chatting amongst themselves, leaning on each other, or looking off in the distance. While it would be difficult to ascertain engagement conclusively from candid images from the

performance, this photograph and many others from the night show marked difference between the circles of participant-performers and their audiences. A number of these photographs also show the way that the staging of the performance fostered an imbalance of power between these groups.

After the CR conversations, participant-performers and audience retreated to the rear of the furniture showroom to sum up. The twenty-two-minute documentary video *SOFA*, produced from the performance, focuses mostly on this discussion, in which the participant-performers evaluated their participation in the whole process, noting both shared experiences and challenges within and across their different groupings.<sup>30</sup> Multiple participant-performers, including several women with disabilities, described realizing a shared lack of respect in their everyday lives from women with greater privilege. Others agreed that while there was much more to be done in terms of liberation, they were hopeful that the present conversation might prompt some change. In both cases, the women were responding to and reflecting on their intimate sharing within the small groups earlier in the evening. Now, the audience was asked to be still and quietly witness the participants' formative collectivity.

*Freeze Frame* thus entailed complex power dynamics between the participants and the public audience that were difficult for the artist-organizers to foresee. Lacy and London's efforts to use tableau vivants springing to life as a way to critique stereotypes in media images did, as the participants observed, end up reinforcing those stereotypes to some extent. Their choreography, planned in collaboration with San Francisco-based choreographer Joya Cory, did not in a clear way operate as intended to create a rupture of understanding or empathy amongst the audience. This can be attributed to a real difference between the vulnerability of the participant-performers and that of the audience in that choreography. While the CR circles privileged the voices and ideas of the women speaking, there were two types of witnessing in action, and they were not quite equitable. After the performance, some women of colour participants remarked that they felt "on display" and disempowered in a performance directed by a white woman.<sup>31</sup> Observations from the perspective of the audience, meanwhile, expressed sympathy for rather than empathy with the participants: critic Moira Roth wrote how powerful it was to "witness the spilling out of secret, often painful experiences."<sup>32</sup>

In a debriefing session a month after *Freeze Frame*, Lacy, London, and their collaborators agreed on some shortcomings as they brainstormed future work. They had witnessed a disconnect between participant-performers and audience, and between members of different discussion groups. And they appreciated the empathy produced within each discussion group as much as they were disappointed with the public's more distanced engagement. Joya Cory put it this way, as recorded in Lacy's notes: "strategy for survival was learned, but strategy for coalition was not learned."<sup>33</sup> Once again, it is clear that the principal knowledge-making within the project was wrapped up in the small CR group discussions.

29. Suzanne Lacy, "Debated Territory," 180.

30. Suzanne Lacy and Julia London, *Sofa: Freeze Frame; Room for living room*, directed by Steve Hirsch (1982; Chicago: Video Data Bank, 1984), DVD-R.

31. Sharon Irish and Suzanne Lacy, *Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between*, 87.

32. Moira Roth, "Suzanne Lacy: Social Reformer and Witch," *TDR* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 57.

33. Suzanne Lacy, unpublished notes for *Freeze Frame: Room for Living Room* [page dated September 19, 1982].

34. See: Stephanie Arnold, "Suzanne Lacy's 'Whisper, the Waves, the Wind,'" *The Drama Review: TDR* 29, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 126–130.

35. See: Meiling Chen, "Engendering Other/Selves," in *In Other Los Angeles: Multicentric Performance Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 121–33.





Figure 5. Suzanne Lacy and Sharon Allen, *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind*, 1983–84. Photo by Barbara T. Smith.

### Learning and Witnessing Learning in Pedagogical Art

With *Freeze Frame*, Lacy established the intimate discussion as key pedagogical form, but it was not until after finishing *Freeze Frame* that she demonstrated understanding of how that pedagogical situation benefits from care and separation from a viewing public. Lacy's more well-known projects from the 1980s, *Whisper, the Waves, the Wind* (1983–84), *The Dark Madonna* (1985–86), and *The Crystal Quilt* (1985–87), have points of commonality with *Freeze Frame*, as all of these mixed public pedagogy and feminist activism. But these later works showed the artist learning from her earlier project, including more substantial community-building beforehand and reconfigurations of participant-audience spatial relations during the performances.

For *Whisper*, groups of women elders dressed in all white were brought to La Jolla beach in southern California and arranged in groups of four at small dinner tables on the sand to discuss personal experiences with aging. | fig. 5 | Onlookers were kept at a considerable distance for the first hour and then invited to come closer, which both produced reverence for the women participants and allowed them to speak more freely without being so intimately on display.<sup>34</sup> *Dark Madonna* explored intersections of race and gender in Los Angeles. After organizing a symposium on the history of the "Black Madonna" at UCLA in 1985 and conducting private discussions in and across several communities, Lacy developed a culminating tableau vivant performance in the university sculpture garden.<sup>35</sup> Like *Freeze Frame*, the performance began with women posed as still figures, this time dressed in white and on pedestals, while a soundtrack played stories of racist events and encounters; as night fell, the soundtrack switched to stories of healing and women dressed in black entered from the margins to listen to the wisdom of those on pedestals, ending with seated groups discussing issues of racial injustice and strategies for healing while illuminated by flashlights.

This choreography had clearer constraints, delineating roles of witness-participants versus storyteller-participants, which had the effect of creating a more equitable learning between them. *Crystal Quilt* took place in Minneapolis, with a culminating performance in a shopping mall central court where women elders were arranged at colored tables to form a quilt-like pattern. The final performance again fostered privacy for the participants. Their arm and hand movements during the performance signalled different parts of the conversations, which were inaudible to the spectators who viewed from distant sidelines or a second-floor balcony. This time, even more emphasis was placed on developing lasting networks of support beforehand amongst the women elders who participated.<sup>36</sup>

Notably, each of these projects involved small group discussion for participants, particularly evident in the *Whisper* and *Crystal Quilt* projects. This became a model format for Lacy, one that she would pick up repeatedly in later projects too, including most strikingly in *Stories of Work and Survival* (2007) and *Between the Door and the Street* (2013). The former “revisited” the *Freeze Frame* concept with multiple stages of small-group conversations amongst women in similar professions in Los Angeles; while the work was designed for a public audience, most of the discussions didn’t happen through live performance, but through images and audio recording which afforded the women more privacy as they again spoke about survival. In *Between the Door and the Street*, Lacy worked for months with hundreds of women and a few men from activist groups in the New York City area, culminating in a public performance of prompted conversations on a block of brownstones stoops in Brooklyn. Members of the general public gathered around the small conversations; mostly, they looked up at the women speaking. In each of these examples, Lacy improved upon the model in *Freeze Frame* by engaging in sustained community organizing to prepare participants or by choreographing performances that provided more privacy for intimate small group discussions.

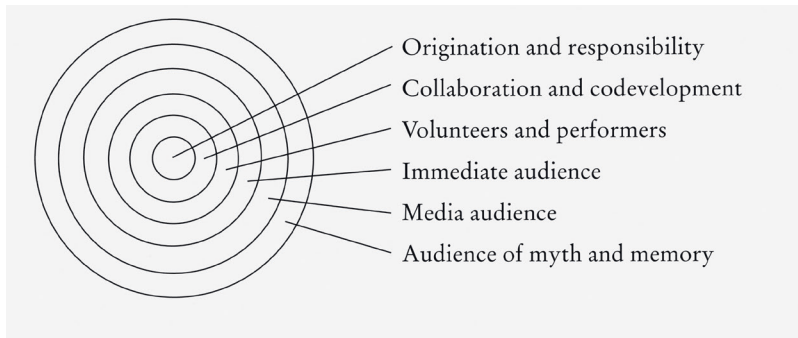
Throughout her practice, though, the performance components of her projects have been imagined for a public audience of witnesses. In an article first published in 1992, Lacy diagrammed different roles and responsibilities for audiences and artists: at the center of six concentric circles is the artwork and, implicitly, the artist(s), whose “origination and responsibility” creates and cares for the work; then, in successive circles, this is followed by collaborators; those who perform or volunteer; the live audience; those who witness mediated versions of the work; and, finally, the “audience of myth and memory.”<sup>37</sup> | **fig. 6** | Lacy clarifies that these circles are not rigid, so that different individuals might pass between them over the course of a project.<sup>38</sup> In her introduction to *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, she writes about the shifting role of audience for this new art:

This indeterminacy [of the public] has developed as a major theme in new genre public art. The nature of audience—in traditional art taken to be just about everyone—is now being rigorously investigated in practice and theory. Is “public” a qualifying description of place, ownership, or access? Is

36. See: Moira Roth, “Suzanne Lacy: Social Reformer and Witch.”

37. Suzanne Lacy, “Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art,” [1992] in *Mapping the Terrain*, 178.

38. *Ibid.*, 180.



**Figure 6.** Suzanne Lacy, diagram of degrees of engagement, from *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art*, 1995. Courtesy of Suzanne Lacy.

it a subject, or a characteristic of the particular audience? Does it explain the intentions of the artist or the interests of the audience? The inclusion of the public connects theories of art to the broader population: what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may *itself* become the artwork.<sup>39</sup>

Sharon Irish has described the position of witnesses in Suzanne Lacy's 1980s performances as one of "participatory reception."<sup>40</sup> But it's complicated: the degree to which witnesses participate varies widely. This formulation exemplifies the messiness of how audience was and is imagined in pedagogical art more broadly. In *Asking the Audience*, Adair Rounthwaite devotes a chapter to the pedagogical dimensions of the project *Democracy*, by New York-based art collective Group Material; she writes,

Not only does pedagogical-art-practice-as-open-ended-communication resist measurement in terms of concrete outcomes, but the participatory artwork explicitly collapses any distinction between the work itself and how it feels to participants. ... [it] thus faces the paradoxical task of having to delineate a sense of political and social trajectory that the unpredictability of experience can constantly undermine.<sup>41</sup>

Rounthwaite uses the artists' engagement with critical pedagogy and foregrounding of education as subject matter in the "Education and Democracy" installation of their 1988 Dia Art exhibition *Democracy* to examine how artistic subjectivity operates in participatory art. She argues that education is performative in this part of the exhibition, and that the artists of Group Material (at the time, Doug Ashford, Julie Ault, and Félix González-Torres) framed their own roles as learners in order to help reconcile the messiness of participation in the project. Learning situations in art present real challenges in terms of the role of the audience. Should the audience learn and, if so, how can one account for that learning? Or should the audience witness others learning and, if so, what are the ethics of such an encounter? If the learning of both participants and audience is desired, then the ethical encounter between them needs to be carefully planned, with attention to how each group is situated spatially, who is stationary and who can move, and when and how speech happens.

In *Freeze Frame* we see the beginnings of sustained consideration of different types of learning and knowledge across the different degrees of

39. Suzanne Lacy, "Introduction Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys," in *Mapping the Terrain*, 20.

40. Sharon Irish and Suzanne Lacy, *Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between*, 13–15.

41. Adair Rounthwaite, "The Pedagogical Subject of Participation," in *Asking the Audience: Participatory Art in 1980s New York* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 96.

participation that members of the public experience. Through the form of the consciousness-raising circle, personal knowledge is prioritized and the participant-performer's learning is foregrounded. Witnesses can learn from watching this learning, but their construction of knowledge and their empathy are not guaranteed. From the success of Lacy's projects after *Freeze Frame*, we learn how valuable it is to support and build relationships with participants, arranging their learning situations with care. Pedagogical art that does so can be impactful for a broader audience too and, through its revaluation of types of knowledge not normally privileged in society, beneficial to the public good as well. ¶

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