



PANORAMA

Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art

ISSN: 2471-6839

Cite this article: Anton Stuebner, review of *Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here*, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.2249>.

Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here

Curated by: Rudolf Frieling, Curator of Media Arts, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Lucia Sanromàn, Curator-at-Large, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts; and Dominic Wilsdon, Director of the Institute for Contemporary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University

Exhibition schedule: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, April 20–August 4, 2019

Exhibition catalogue: Rudolf Freiling, Lucia Sanromàn, and Dominic Wilsdon, eds., *Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here*, exh. cat. Munich: Prestel Publishing, 2019. 268 pp. Hardback \$50.00 (ISBN: 9783791358383)

Reviewed by: Anton Stuebner

As an early proponent of public practice and community engagement, Suzanne Lacy (b. 1945) built an arts career—if it can be delimited as such—that crossed disciplines such as performance, video, and installation to explore social structures that foster gender violence, human rights abuses, and income inequality. *Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here*, is the artist's first major retrospective, encompassing five decades of past and recent work and including new iterations of installation and performance-based actions, immersive video and sculpture, and ephemera/documentation from time- and site-specific projects. Co-organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) and Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA), the exhibition resulted from curatorial collaboration across various departments at both museums. Lacy defines her practice as deliberately multidisciplinary, but it is easy to imagine a retrospective exhibition devoted to only a single aspect of her work, such as her output in video and time-based media. In recognizing the breadth of Lacy's practice—and the potential for it to overwhelm an audience—the exhibition's curators (Rudolf Frieling, Lucia Sanromàn, and Dominic Wilsdon) focused on selected series from throughout Lacy's career, organized into discrete thematic categories. Although seemingly reductive at first, this organizational strategy helps to connect seemingly disparate projects by establishing central themes in the artist's output.

YBCA presented an in-depth survey of *The Oakland Projects* (1991–2001), a decade-long initiative in which Lacy collaborated with young residents in Oakland, California, to produce public programming, performances, workshops, and actions that addressed issues affecting urban youth, such as police violence, access to education, teen pregnancy, and community safety (fig. 1).¹ The focus of the YBCA was on a long-term, Bay Area-specific project that grounded *We Are Here* in a regional context where legacies of activism and social justice—from the Black Panthers to the Free Speech Movement—also have historically informed creative practices.

By comparison, the expansive presentation by SFMOMA provided audiences with a compendium of Lacy's most important actions and interventions from 1971 to the present. Encompassing the seventh-floor galleries, the segment of work in *We Are Here* at SFMOMA was organized into five thematic categories: Bodies and Personas; Violence against Women; Networks; Image and Dialogue; and Work and Class.

Although ostensibly distilled as sets with discrete critical concerns, many of the projects featured narratives that drew beyond single topics, as anticipated with Lacy's practice.



Fig. 1. Suzanne Lacy, Annice Jacoby, and Chris Johnson, *The Roof Is On Fire*, 1994, from *The Oakland Projects*, 1991–2001. Performance, June 4, 1994, City Center West Garage, Oakland; © Suzanne Lacy; photography by Gary Nakamoto

Prostitution Notes (1974), for example, comprises a set of ten collage and ink drawings rendered on uniform sheets of brown craft paper, each containing notes, observations, and drawings about the routines of sex workers in San Francisco and Los Angeles. Lacy conceived the project as an attempt to understand how women enter “the life” (a historical idiom for prostitution), relying on her network of friends and colleagues for introductions to particular sites and locales frequented by sex workers. Her drawings reflect her point of entry into a particular counter-public as they trace her contact with various sex workers, as well as her movements in proximity to their typical routes. Lacy, however, deliberately situates her project outside of a documentary or cultural anthropology, instead opting to trace her own particular journey through these sites as a means to understand her own political and social biases towards prostitution.

The exhibition categorized *Prostitution Notes* as part of Lacy's extended inquiry of Violence Towards Women, but the thematic relationships at play—between commerce and labor, between movement and geography—just as readily relate to her investigations of Networks and Work and Class. Lacy's free-form and occasionally

nonlinear observations evoke French theorist Guy Debord's experiments in psychogeography, a method for collecting knowledge about urban spaces and their rhythms through intuitive “drifting.” A sheet with the header “July 23: Miscommunications,” by comparison, saliently illustrates larger questions about labor, in particular the occupational costs incurred by sex workers. Following a visit to a Los Angeles bar at the corner of La Brea Avenue and Sunset Boulevard, Lacy accounts for the then-exorbitant expense of waiting for a john at a popular pick-up spot:

Expensive!!

Parking .75

Cover 2.50

Salad 2.00

Tonic 1.75

Lacy presents the outlay of money with humor; exclamation marks suggest a tone of exasperation. The message, nonetheless, is serious, for Lacy redresses ignorance about sex work by listing some of the costs of doing business. While she makes no statements about decriminalizing sex work, she also refrains from moralizing about it. *Prostitution Notes* offers an opportunity to consider stigmatized labor, and Lacy's impetus comes across as both generous and radical, even forty-plus years after the work was created.

Lacy's early performance-based photographs and videos exhibit a recurring dark humor. In the video and photo series *Anatomy Lesson #2: Learn Where the Meat Comes From* (1976), for example, Lacy stages herself in a test kitchen resembling a cooking-show set, guiding viewers through the anatomy of a lamb carcass. As the video progresses, Lacy delivers a monologue about butchers and bodies that becomes increasingly incoherent as Lacy inserts misshapen false teeth, then vampire fangs, into her mouth. Both absurdist and unsettling, Lacy's video turns the model of the cooking show—a form of entertainment meant to educate viewers, largely women, on domestic protocol—on its head, while raising trenchant questions about how women are forced to conform to domestic environments (like livestock). This comparison becomes painfully illustrated in a moment where Lacy instructs her viewers to “Get down on all fours and imagine you are a lamb,” a humorous but sinister turn that suggests a diabolical hybrid of Julia Child's *The French Chef* (1963–73) and Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975).

By comparison, Lacy's subsequent work on sexual violence eschews satire for sober urgency. Lacy's public interventions with *Ariadne* (1977–82), the collective she cofounded with Leslie Labowitz, remain startlingly powerful in their call for direct action. Initially founded to provide a platform for women to address images of gendered violence in media, *Ariadne* and its outreach became even more prescient in 1977 and 1978, following widespread news coverage of rapes and murders of women throughout Los Angeles that serialized and glamorized perpetrators such as the “Hillside Strangler” while often eliding the stories of the victims altogether. In response, Lacy and Labowitz staged public demonstrations and installations to “wake up” a general public that had become desensitized by mainstream reportage (fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, *In Mourning and Rage*, 1977. Performance, December 13, 1977, Los Angeles City Hall. © Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz; photography by Maria Karras

The six framed maps that compose Ariadne’s monumental *Three Weeks in May* (1977; Collection of Hammer Museum, Los Angeles), for example, demarcate the sites where women were raped across the greater Los Angeles area during a three-week period in May 1977. The maps were originally installed in the mall below Los Angeles City Hall, an occupation of civic space that immediately placed them within a public context. Throughout this duration, Lacy and Labowitz marked the map with a red “rape” stamp for every crime filed through the Los Angeles Police Department (fig. 3). Fainter stamps, as the exhibition curators noted, “symbolized the estimated nine additional rapes for every one reported.”² The final map is overwhelming, occupying a full wall at SFMOMA, with six panels at 96 x 48 inches each. Studying it closer, it is difficult to trace the familiar outline of Los Angeles County, the city borders barely legible through the red ink. As with *Prostitution Notes*, Lacy and Labowitz employ a deceptively simple visual strategy—an annotated rendering of a particular place—to provoke disquieting but necessary dialogue about sexual violence. In this cartography, each site is a wound, a blood-let, and a moral outrage.



Fig. 3. Suzanne Lacy, *Three Weeks in May*, 1977 (detail). Ink on printed maps, sound. 92 x 120 in. Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, purchased through the Board of Overseers Acquisition Fund with additional support from Dori Peterman Mostov, Susan Bay Nimoy, and Ruth Bloom; © Suzanne Lacy; photography by Grant Mumford

Lacy’s recent video work furthers these dialogues, most especially in *De tu puño y letra* (By Your Own Hand) (2014–15/2019). While traveling through Ecuador in 2014, Lacy collaborated with *Cartas de Mujeres*, a project to compile and preserve narratives by Ecuadorian women about violence and domestic abuse.³ In drawing from more than ten thousand letters describing these experiences, Lacy invited local men from Quito, Ecuador, to read from these narratives and film their oral accounts (fig. 4). The resulting video work, realized in 2019, is comprised of six video monitors arranged in a ring. As the viewer approaches the center, a group of men appear on the monitors, walking along the perimeter of a bullring. One by one, they approach the foreground, reading women’s self-reported narratives about sexual violence. The readers appear at nearly full size, and the proximity in scale to the viewer evokes the immediacy of a real-life encounter. At the end of each segment, the reader retreats to the ring’s edge while the next steps forward: another horrifying story begins. In structuring the video on a loop, Lacy reminds us that violence and trauma often redouble upon themselves, producing cycles that can seem impossible to

break. By situating her viewers in the center of the ring, Lacy forces us to listen and to recognize how violence perpetuates itself. As the screens go black, we face our own reflection, and in this moment, we have to ask ourselves: how will we make this right?



Fig. 4. Suzanne Lacy, *De tu puño y letra* (By Your Own Hand), 2015 (production still). Performance, November 25, 2015, Plaza de Toros Belmonte, Quito, Ecuador; © Suzanne Lacy; photography by Christopher Hirtz

Lacy's work often suggests how money impacts vulnerable populations. By illustrating the various expenses incurred by sex workers, for example, *Prostitution Notes* identifies an active workforce with occupational costs, but without the legal protections or opportunities for collective bargaining afforded to members of other professions. Lacy's work with *Ariadne*, by comparison, confronts how media outlets sensationalize reports about sexual violence against women as a strategy to sell more newspapers or attract larger audiences, a choice that highlights economic gain over ethical reportage. *De tu puño y letra*, in contrast, raised fundamental questions about access, by suggesting how speaking out often costs victims their financial stability or domestic security. This relationship between money and access is not only central to Lacy's work—it is arguably the dominant concern about the contemporary state of the arts in 2019.

This year, it has become more imperative than ever to “follow the money” in the art world, and to ask ourselves how far we might be willing to compromise our ethics in order to secure those last funds to launch a project or to mount a show. The controversy surrounding the 2019 Whitney Biennial—and the subsequent resignation of Safariland chairman Warren Kanders from the Whitney Museum of American Art board of trustees —provoked critical questions about the kinds of industries that support museum endowments: defense contractors, pharmaceutical companies, and sweatshop manufacturers. Kanders's resignation reminded us of the need to stand up for an ethical high ground, even at the risk of losing major benefactors to our civic institutions. But what's next? The Whitney Biennial continues, while the protests have largely ended. In their aftermath, we are forced to recognize the inevitable: that museums will never be fully divested of big money from questionable sources. The cycle repeats itself, and for every Kanders who steps down, there is another Sackler waiting in the wings. In order to gain headway, curators must hold space within museums where artists can critique these structures and reveal their ugly truths, so

that we can collectively reactivate our institutions as sites for social engagement and civic action.

Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here offers a relevant model for how institutions can host exhibitions and programming that provoke and encourage collective action. At the same time, however, there are lingering questions about what kinds of audiences were able to access or view Lacy's exhibition during its run. At the time of this review, an adult general admission ticket to SFMOMA cost twenty-five dollars, while a general admission ticket to YBCA cost ten dollars. In order to see Lacy's full exhibition, an adult visitor would need to spend thirty-five dollars across two institutions. Once you factor transportation costs and other expenses such as meals, the price of admission easily surpasses fifty dollars and becomes cost-prohibitive for prospective attendees. Admission at both museums is free for visitors eighteen and under, but there is no guarantee that youth audiences would visit Lacy's exhibition without an adult in attendance to provide transportation and other general access to these museums in the first place. So how do we break through? And how do we ensure that all communities and populations have access to the arts, unencumbered by economic barriers?

Lacy's work offers no easy solutions, and the artist does not let viewers off the ethical hook. By entering the space of the exhibition, Lacy forces us to confront our failure to protect vulnerable communities, while imploring us to address these problems individually and collectively. At the end of the day, Lacy suggests, it is our shared responsibility to become active citizens and to care for one another. The first step, then, is to think creatively but responsibly. Look past the vitrines and donor walls and auction tallies. Hold space for yourself and others. Find art in community. Above all, be present, and acknowledge that together, we are here.

Notes

¹ The artist's website includes an excellent survey of the various projects and initiatives that encompassed *The Oakland Projects*, (1991–2001), <http://www.suzannelacy.com/the-oakland-projects>.

² Rudolf Frieling, Lucia Sanromàn, and Dominic Wilsdon, eds., *Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here*, exh. cat. (Munich: Prestel, 2019), 95.

³ Frieling, Sanromàn, and Wilsdon, *Suzanne Lacy*, 118.