

Art

by Hunter Drohojowska

Transformation on the Beach

Suzanne Lacy

Performance art has become increasingly theatrical and oriented toward entertainment. So much so that the political roots of this genre sometimes seem lost in history. The school of Allen Kaprow — founder of the “happening” and advocate of everyday actions as performance activity — has lost ground to the school of Rachel Rosenthal, with her high drama, special effects, and autobiographical confessions. But political performance art still survives with the work of feminist Suzanne Lacy.

Feminists used performance as a tool in consciousness-raising groups of the 1970s, as women sought to understand their common identity and experience. Lacy was one who most successfully took the feminist issues to a larger public through her performance events using the mass media.

Two shining events of 1977 were Lacy’s “Three Weeks in May” and “In Mourning and in Rage.” Both dealt with the issue of violence against women. For the first, Lacy installed a large map of L.A. in City Hall and stamped “RAPE” in red ink, each day, over a location where one had occurred the day before. The map was soon covered with the bloody color, graphically describing the enormity of the problem.

Lacy collaborated with Leslie Labowitz later in the year, and their “In Mourning and in Rage” in front of City Hall featured women who appeared to be seven feet tall wearing black headresses and costumes, and mourning the victims of the Hillside Strangler and protesting the sensationalist news coverage of crimes against women. That event was covered by six TV

stations and numerous periodicals, thereby bringing the controversial feminist issue to a greater public.

One of Lacy’s most ambitious performances to date will take place at 11 a.m.

this Saturday. It’s called “Whisper, the Waves, the Wind,” and this time the feminist issue involves a different sort of violence: the aging process.

Lacy has selected 135 women, aged from



Claudia Kunin

65 to 100 years — black, Hispanic, Asian, white — who will dress in white clothing and sit down together at tables covered in white cloths on the beach in La Jolla. The audience — more than 1,000 are expected — will observe the piece from the cliffs above. They'll hear a composition by San Francisco composer Susan Stone of the women's pre-recorded voices mixed with the sounds of the waves and the wind. The women are responding to such questions as: "How old do you feel?" "How old do you think other people see you as being?" "What do you look forward to, or look back on, with regret, or pride, or eagerness?" "Has your need for physical affection changed?" "What does the phrase 'home before dark' mean to you?" "What do you have to say to younger women about the women's movement?"

Toward the end of the work, the women will depart, one by one, to be replaced by members of the audience, so a complete transformation occurs.

The *Weekly* interviewed Lacy, who is 38 years old, in her downtown L.A. loft. She's been preparing for this performance for more than a year.

Weekly: *What is this piece really about?*

Lacy: The piece is about cycles, that we're all aging and idiots not to recognize that in a few years we'll be there too. The questions are designed to cut through stereotypes we have of older people, particularly older women: that they are lost in memory, that their present reality is not interesting. I think that's one way we have of denying age. This performance is a portrait of older women and what they're feeling now. The subtext is honoring and acknowledging their accomplishments and continued capabilities.

Weekly: *This piece seems different, more romantic or softer than your earlier feminist performances.*

Lacy: It doesn't fit people's stereotypes of feminism: it's not strident, aggressive, angry. One of the things I learned working at the Woman's Building is that women who are writers, artists, who are deeply part of the female culture (and there is a

rich heritage of that in this country) lose their anger in a certain way because they aren't expending their energy fighting for people to believe in their sanity, or vision. They already have plenty of people who believe in that vision in the female culture. It doesn't matter if people don't like the work. I just go around them. Therefore, as I've matured, my work has taken on a less strident quality.

Weekly: *How does this connect to the earlier work?*

Lacy: When Leslie and I did those performances against rape, the radical feminist community took notice because it was an issue close to their hearts. As a woman, I was interested in it socially, and as an artist, I was interested metaphorically, as an impingement on my freedom of will, of body movement. This piece in San Diego is about a social issue, and it has metaphorical implications for me that have to do with accepting the cyclical nature of my life in relation to other lives. I'm looking at what the archetype of the aging woman means to me, and reclaiming or reinvesting power in a myth or image we all hold collectively. That's the profound implication of feminist art — the ability to recreate, depict, pull out from us what is deeply embedded in our collective history about the female and give power to those images. I think, socially, images of age have been progressively robbed of power. If you look at a "little old woman" in our society, she's either a nag or else dominant like that cartoon "Mama," or she's completely helpless.

This piece is very feminist structurally, as a collective piece, with the input, good will and effort of hundreds of people. Sharon Allen-Crampton, my assistant director, has devoted a year of her life to this project with no pay.

I think older women represent certain things to us, a disintegration of flesh, softening, changing, aging that is counter to what we are supposed to strive for — "Hardbodies."

Weekly: *And so we reject it. It's also a simple fear of our own morality.*

Lacy: The image of the "wise woman" doesn't have sufficient power in our society.

Weekly: *No, you think of "wise man," not the other.*

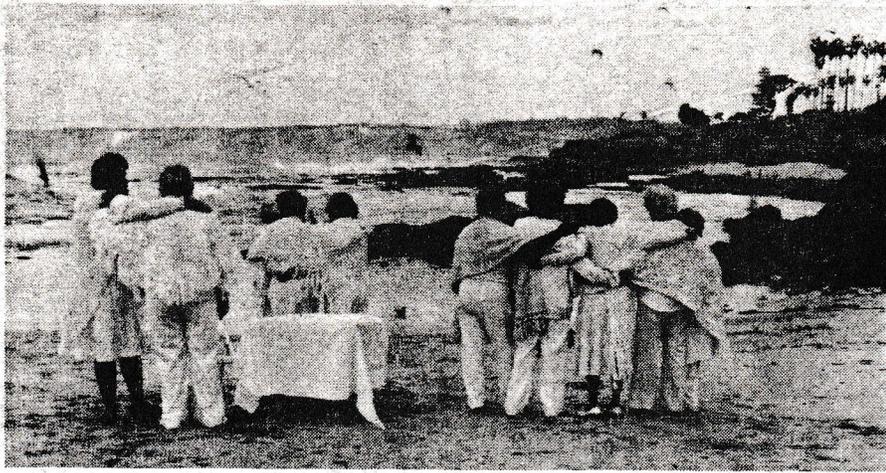
Lacy: Women in our society are not prepared for aging. I read that women should be prepared to spend the last years of their lives alone, and I was shocked. But it's true, women live longer than men.

Weekly: *You've done performances in the past that deal with aging. What does this subject mean to a 38-year-old "hardbody" like yourself?*

Lacy: I'm looking for a personally transformative experience to guide me into another stage in my life. Maybe that's the kind of perception that comes as you go through the transition of age. It has to do with the way you perceive yourself in relation to the rest of nature, how you're willing to let go of your distance from the life of nature and from the world, and understand that you're a part of it but not necessarily in control of it. That's the big thing I'm looking at — surrendering myself to a process that is life. As you age, you begin dealing with the way people see you differently, the loss of power and the loss of loved ones. I think that if we knew what that was like, we'd be able to accept it more quickly. I'm looking for the spiritual in aging, the wisdom.

Weekly: *How did you find these women?*

Lacy: Through networking — who knew whom from senior agencies and clubs —



John Warner and Edith Kodmur

"Whisper, the Waves, the Wind," a performance concerning the aging process.

we found a group of women who were interested. If you have preconceptions about aging these women would blow your mind.

Weekly: *Do they learn from the performance?*

Lacy: The performance has a didactic

function, and this is also intrinsically feminist. Feminist education has to do with building structures that empower the participants, as creators and helpers. It's a momentum of mentor and mentee that I really like, and that re-establishes the value of female wisdom.

Weekly: *This piece is more distinctly visual than many of your performances.*

Lacy: "Freeze Frame" in San Francisco was also visual, and it was a real breakthrough for me. [In this performance piece women of different races and ages sat on expensive sofas in a posh furniture showroom and discussed how they were surviving the 1980s.] It was visual, but also political. I used the same organizing techniques, the same coalition, the same ideas, but the real subject of that piece was engagement between women. It allowed the audience to be a voyeur of that intense experience that takes place between women, and gave presence and value to that. What happens in kitchens and at coffee tables is important experience — not to be belittled — profound things happen between women. I get resentment about that piece, but you always do when you exert your vision. ■

For information about "Whisper, the Waves, the Wind" call (619) 582-5303. The piece will take place at the Children's Pool in La Jolla.