

About my life/writings/research in the 1960s-1970s, from "Exchanges: Moira Roth and Suzanne Lacy," in *Art/Women/California: Parallels and Intersections, 1950-2000*, edited by Diana Burgess Fuller and Daniela Salvioni, UC Press, 2002

The 1960s

In the spring of 1960, I moved from the East Coast to California, and a few years later entered the art history graduate program at the University of California, Berkeley. Thus, my experiences of the 1960s, including my encounters with early performance art (in which I participated), began here in the context of radical politics, student demonstrations and the counter culture of the Bay Area. Civil Rights and anti-war demonstrations were part of the daily scene on the U.C. campus, colliding with timid retreats, on my part and those of other graduates, into the library to read singularly formalist versions of art history.

From the start I saw Northern California performance art as something totally distinct from regular art history (e.g. European Dada theater) and the East Coast music and dance experiments in the Cage-Cunningham-Rauschenberg circles. For me these early events, often romantically staged in streets, on mountain tops and in studios, were vivid echoes--visual representations--of the epoch's moods and beliefs. I didn't then experience them as art, but rather as aspects of our turbulent contemporary life.

The 1970s

In the fall of 1970, age 38, I moved down from Berkeley in Los Angeles and it was here that I first encountered feminism.

I immediately plunged headlong into the Southern Californian feminist art world (and, to a lesser extent, into the New York one), meeting at Joyce Kozloff's house and breakfasting at June Wayne's to strategize the LA women's art movement.

Angered by the all-white, all-male Art and Technology Show at the LA County Museum of Art, we analyzed the museum's permanent collection (virtually all male) and, after extensive negotiations, the museum committed itself to produce a major historical survey of women artists, *Women Artists 1550-1950*, which opened in 1976.

I visited the Woman's Building and Judy Chicago's studio while she was creating *The Dinner Party*, participated in a consciousness-raising group with artists, read feminist literature as well as early feminist art history, followed feminist events around the country and abroad, and wrestled with my own art history training. At first in an awkwardly piecemeal fashion, I began to make space for women artists in Modernism, and later took on underlying questions about the construction of museums, collections, and art history itself. All the while I was dazzled by the passion and frenetic pace of feminist art, especially performance.

I taught at the University of California at San Diego, with Eleanor Antin, Helen Harrison and Patricia Patterson, and also with many visiting performance artists, you [Suzanne Lacy] among them indeed, that is where we first met. At UC San Diego, I ran the Mandeville Art Gallery for a couple of years, putting on one-person exhibitions of Jo Hanson, Miriam Schapiro and Barbara Smith.

There were many other key figures in the San Diego area at the time -- Martha Rosler, Kathy Acker, Norma Jean Deak, Mary Fish, Joyce Cutler Shaw, Pauline Oliveros, and Linda Montano. For years, I regularly drove into Los Angeles to see performances by, among others, Jerri Allyn, Nancy Angelo, Nancy Buchanan, Cheri Gaulke, Leslie Labowitz, Rachel Rosenthal, Barbara Smith, and the collectives of The Feminist Art Workers, The Sisters of Survival, and The Waitresses. I attended events at the Woman's Building. One of the most memorable was "The Oral Herstory of Lesbianism," directed by Terry Wolverton, in which we watched a shifting array of poignant and hilarious vignettes, including "Stalking the Great Orgasm," accompanied by prowling figures and climactic music.

Performances during this period in Southern California were inspired varyingly by anger, despair, hope, wit, desire, the urge to reveal painful past injuries, and by utopian visions for re-structuring society. Fictional characters appeared (Antin's King of Solano Beach and Lynn Hershman's Roberta Breitmore) and autobiographical recountings were presented (Nancy Buchanan's analysis of the life and politics of her physicist father and Rachel Rosenthal's reconstruction of her Parisian childhood). Frequently performer and audience member had experienced similar emotions, and the performances were cathartic for many. One of the key memories for me is the collective nature of the realities portrayed in these early feminist performances.

If during the 1960s performance art had been a refuge for me from my academic art history studies, in the 1970s it became a focus for my own contributions to contemporary art history and criticism. I was deeply convinced that performance could play a major role in inspiring

and sustaining feminist activism and visually and verbally capturing feminist issues. Engaging with feminism gave me a different sense of what could be done in history and criticism. I responded with documenting, mapping, interviewing, curating, writing, accumulating archives, and speculating endlessly with others. It was a giddy period one which I was later to name *The Amazing Decade* in my book by the same title on women's performance art of the 1970s --with its endless gatherings and conversations, celebrations and mourning rites, feuds and rivalries, and evolutions of lifelong friendships and alliances (both in California and elsewhere) between feminist artists, historians, curators and critics.