

Confronting Art About Rape

Emily Newman

Abstract

There are few artists today who tackle the subject of violence against women or rape. Those that do face dismissal, as many critics and curators hesitate to take on such a challenging subject. Yet, these works are important, necessary even. By examining the works of Ana Mendieta, Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, Sue Williams, Nancy Spero, Kiera Faber, Nan Goldin, and Donna Ferrato, we can see how their works challenge the rape culture that exists today in which rape, sexual assault, and violence against women are normalized and excused. While these works often center on the victim, I want to additionally emphasize the artists' critical approach to societal concerns. By taking on such a risky subject matter, one that could even threaten the artists' career, their works should be re-evaluated in terms of social commentary. These artists are not always referencing specific acts of rape, but rather, by drawing attention to the horrific nature of the crime itself they point to the systematic abuse and violation of women in society today. For example, Lacy counts the number of rapes that take place in Los Angeles over the course of three weeks, whereas Nan Goldin and Ana Mendieta use photography and performance to document wounded female bodies and recreated crime scenes. The shocking nature of this work is striking and appalling, fitting for the subject. But just because people do not want to talk about rape, does not mean we shouldn't. In fact, all the more reason these works need to be addressed and publicized.

Key Words: Rape, women, violence, sexual assault, visual arts, performance art.

“Some girls rape easy.”

- Roger Rivard, then Wisconsin State Representative, December 2011

“It seems to me, from what I understand from doctors, [pregnancy resulting from rape is] really rare. If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down.”

- Todd Akin, Missouri Senate Candidate, August 2012

“I think that even when life begins in that horrible situation of rape, that it is something that God intended to happen.”

- Richard Mourdock, Indiana Senate Candidate, October 2012

Recent results of the 2012 United States election campaigns have demonstrated that Republican candidates (often both white and male) who have attempted to define and discuss rape politically, have in fact made tremendous gaffes that undoubtedly contributed to the failure of their campaigns. These men were trying to negotiate a changing culture, which threatened their ultraconservative views. How does one reconcile a woman's desire to terminate a pregnancy that resulted from a sexual assault when one sees abortion as murder? For many, like senate nominee Todd Akin and vice-presidential nominee Paul Ryan, they feel the need to stress "legitimate" or "forcible" rape as one of their few exceptions to be able to have an abortion. The backlash was immense and immediate, and this "rape thing" became an issue that voters were unwilling to ignore.¹

Perhaps the persistent popularity of discussion concerning rape issue stems from the pervasiveness of rape culture in the United States. Characterized by the normalization of sexual violence against women, rape culture is perpetuated by the media through the objectification of women's bodies, the excusal of sexual violence, misogynistic language, among other discriminatory acts and statements. Over 200,000 people are raped each year in the United States, which figures out to be about one sexual assault every two seconds. Perhaps more disturbingly, less than half of incidents including rape are reported to police, and out of 100 rapes, only three of those rapist will spend a day in prison.² Describing the current climate, Emile Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher and Martha Roth elaborate, "Rape continues to be a pervasive fact of American life. . . . Both the victims and their attackers carry the fact of rape and sexual violence through their lives and, one can argue, through their families' lives as well. We will continue to live in a rape culture until our society understands these facts and chooses to eradicate the beliefs and practices that beget sexual violence in this country."³

The question then becomes, why do artists hope to achieve by consistently returning to rape and sexual violence of women as subject matter in their work? I want to argue that these women are utilizing their personal experiences and interactions to create a discussion that examines larger issues of sexual violence in American society. The artists might have different goals (to document the statistical prevalence of rape, to tell specific stories, or to exorcise personal demons), but these women want their work to draw attention to the severity and range of violent acts committed against women in a way that can hopefully spark change. The artworks differ from newspaper reports and are presented in entirely different contexts. It is important to also recognize that these works differ greatly from the depictions of the rape of Ganymede or of famous heroines like Lucretia who prefer suicide over living with the "dishonor" of rape.⁴ Rather, these works are rooted in the present, and can be read a symptomatic of the prevalent rape culture in the United States.

One of the first works to tackle the topic in contemporary art is *Three Weeks in May*, as presented by Suzanne Lacy (b. 1945) and Leslie Labowitz (b. 1946) in 1977. The enormously influential performance piece aggressively tackled these issues by documenting the incidences of rape and sexual violence in Los Angeles and making those facts public. For three weeks, various performances and events were staged throughout the city, promoting awareness as well as providing resources for women. The centerpiece of the project was a 25 x 6' map of the area that was displayed publicly downtown from May 8th-28th. Each day, Lacy stenciled "RAPE" in bright red on the map to designate the sexual assaults that had been reported to the Los Angeles Police Department the day prior. Towards the end of the project, Lacy gave a speech, proclaiming, "What this map is about, what the whole project is about, is women speaking out to each other, sharing the reality of their experience. By exposing the facts of our rapes, the numbers of them, the events surrounding them, and the men who commit them, we begin to break down the myths that support the rape culture."⁵

In her engagement of public space, speeches to the press, and clear presentation of factual information, Lacy uses art to effectively create awareness, inspiring change in the legal system, public attitude, media's presentation and discussion of women's bodies, and the work of her peers.⁶ Lacy powerfully explained the impact of political art, claiming that "The artist can use the power of images primarily to communicate information, emotion, and/or ideology; to critique popular culture; or to inspire her audience to action."⁷ For the mammoth Pacific Standard Time project, sponsored by the Getty Foundation, she revisited the project entitling it *Three Weeks in January* (2012). Like the original project, it involved the creation of a rape map, as well as numerous public events. The project, however, spawned a new follow-up piece, *Storying Rape: Shame Ends Here*, presented at the Liverpool Biennial 2012. This new project involved a large web presence, incorporating documentation and conversation from *Three Weeks in January*, combined with the extensive use of social media to engage people from all over the world directly. The successes of Lacy's works are dependent upon social interaction, with her intended outcomes of promoting education and awareness.

Lacy's works consistently utilize factual information to present a case, whereas Sue Williams (b. 1954) and Nancy Spero (b. 1926) using painting as an interpretive tool to convey the violence inflicted upon women. In her *Dessert* (1990), Williams shows a couple in her simple, graphic style with an emphasis on line. A couple is in the midst of an argument, as the text at the bottom of the painting emphasizes, "how much more constructive if he had expressed sympathy and suggested another dessert." The man looks to be in the act of hitting the woman, as the phrase "stupid cunt" comes out of his mouth.

While the violence and tension between these figures is clear, in works like *Are You Porn or Anti-Porn* (1992), there are a number of different scenes

taking place at once. At the top of the painting a woman is pulled apart by animals, whereas in *In Denial of the Shady Boner Motel* (1992), a man vomits on a woman. Williams shows scenes of sexual perversion on top of scenes of violence and uncomfortable situations. Williams' works are at once personal and universal, which she explains as she addresses the sense of anger in her work: "Do I want to instruct? I don't know. I think I'm pissed because I went through all this horrible shit, and I want to do something for other women who are going through that."⁸ To say Williams has experience extreme acts of violence is an understatement: she was shot by a date, violently raped and sodomized, and was involved in a severely abusive relationship. Her work, on one hand, is quite autobiographical, but Williams takes liberties, embellishes her narrative and makes the pain and suffering simultaneously more extreme and often more humorous.

Spero recalls Williams' exploration of women and pain, saying, "All women carry this inherent knowledge, that we can be raped, that we are in danger."⁹ Spero's works focus on figures twist and contort their bodies in physical manifestations of pain. Relevant to this discussion is her project, *Torture of Women* (1976), which is punctuated with haunting black figures, some have troubling lines (blood?) coming out of them, whereas many are moving with arms outstretched as if trying to flee or escape. Spero uses a dramatic scale; the fourteen panels of handmade paper are about twenty inches tall and a combined 125 feet long. Incorporating the testimony of women who had been through horrific situations, *Torture of Women* manages to both tell women's stories but also provide a space for witnesses - depicted in the work itself and as readers/viewers.

There is an historical element to the work, as she attempts to trace acts of violence perpetuated on women throughout time, beginning with classical gods and goddesses to Amnesty International reports.¹⁰ Unlike Williams' more personal references, Spero incorporates accounts of women from Turkish prisons in 1972, with tiny heads nearby to give the women a semblance of identity to go along with their voices. Diana Nemiroff articulated that women and men are often tortured similarly, but the effects of women can linger, affecting her more profoundly. By focusing on women exclusively in this project, Spero was acknowledging the way that women, by nature of the valuation of chastity and the potential for pregnancy, "may endure lingering shame and the open or unspoken disapproval of her community."¹¹ The painted interpretations allow a more universal, perhaps even more dramatic reading than photographs. On one hand, they might be more relatable. But like the first-hand accounts of Spero's torture victims, photographs personalize the violent events in a way that can amplify the horror as it serves to document a real event. The photographs that address these topics can be divided in three different ways: fictional events, reenactments, and documentation.

Creating a narrative that implies violence enacted on women allows for a fictional event to tell the story without naming names or incorporating survivors' stories. Kiera Faber's (b. 1974) ambiguous photographs allow multiple narratives

to be created by the viewer. In their lack of specificity, Faber's work relies on viewer intervention. Her recent series, *Completely Human* (2012), showcases Faber's nude body as she is being grasped, stepped on, or tied up. She is often shown crying, or abandoned outdoors amidst isolated construction sites or never-ending cornfields. It is her bound figures that are perhaps most unnerving, in which the artist is wrapped in red rope leaning against a tree (*Woods*, 2012) or covered and restrained by various clear tubes (*Tubes 2*, 20012). In her incapacitation, Faber ominously suggests the presence of another person, but more specifically, she implies the presence of another person who has restrained and/or violated the figure in the photograph. There is not enough information in the photographs to determine if the woman is complicit in the act shown, as Faber forces the viewer to question who is the audience for these photographs.

There is, however, a distance created by fictionalized accounts, in that the viewer can take comfort in the fact that these stories are not real. Because of that, the reenactments potentially have more power, in a similar manner to Nancy Spero's accounts in *Torture of Women*. *Untitled (Rape Scene)* was Ana Mendieta's 1973 attempt to come to terms with the rape and murder of Sara Ann Otten, a nursing student at the University of Iowa where Mendieta (1948-1985) was also studying. Her peers were told to come to her apartment to see the piece, where they discovered the door ajar and found Mendieta stripped from the waist down. Her bloodied body was tied over the table, as the apartment itself was in disarray. The details of the scene, including cigarette butts and broken dishes, were arranged according to the reports of Otten's homicide. She followed this work with *Rape Performance* (1973), where she again posed naked from the waist down and bloody, but this time she was outside, her body limply draped over a log.

At the same time as she was creating these performances, Mendieta was also creating little vignettes all over town. She left several objects in the alley next to her apartment building, including bloody jeans and bones. While she documented these works, she did not tell anyone about them and there is no record of who, if anyone, actually saw them.¹² Another similar but larger piece, *Bloody Mattresses* (1973) was actually reported to her class by her classmate as he stumbled upon the scene set up in an abandoned farmhouse near campus.¹³ The scene was grotesque; blood (red paint) was splattered on the walls and the mattress below. Papers, dirty clothes, and trash were everywhere. While her alley pieces and *Bloody Mattresses* were not direct reenactments, they were drawn from the media's continual discussion of violent acts against women (particularly Otten) but also should be seen in the context of her own experiences with domestic violence (then her sister's abusive relationship).¹⁴

While Mendieta are based in fact, the works are not. Nan Goldin (b. 1953) and Donna Ferrato (b. 1950) use photographs of actual women who have been beaten up and abused. Wanting to capture the fleetingness of life, Goldin's art of the 1980s and 1990s focused on her friends, her family, and even herself.¹⁵ Today

her piece, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1981-present), consists of over 600 slides, shown over the course of 45 minutes, with approximately 40 different songs accompanying the images.¹⁶ Often, Goldin appears frequently with her on-again-off-again boyfriend Brian. He beat her repeatedly, and in one of the most climatic moments of *The Ballad*, Goldin appears with a black eye. *Nan, One Month After Being Battered* (1984) is focused directly on Goldin, who has severe bruising on both her eyes. She looks out at the viewer with one eye, as the other eye is so swollen that it cannot be opened. Because of the experience, she decided to seek treatment and become sober after fifteen years of substance abuse.¹⁷

These violent moments appear in other guises in *The Ballad*. From crying to bruising and physical injury, these intimate moments become the most memorable and intense photographs from the entire project. Perhaps because they exude a painful reality, these photographs stay with the viewer long after the viewing of the slideshow. Similarly, the collected work of Donna Ferrato is haunting. After witnessing a man hit a woman, she became determined to document domestic violence, even if many people did not want to see the images. She claimed her book project, *Living with the Enemy* (1991) “was born out of frustration. . . because I felt powerless in the face of the violence I had seen, and. . . for a long time no magazine would publish the images.”¹⁸ In the section, “Lisa and Garth’s Story,” Ferrato shows up the breakdown of one relationship. Depicting the couple’s public façade, and the private battles. She often moved into the family’s house when documenting them, and she describes witnessing the violence:

When I first saw Garth hit Lisa, I couldn’t believe my eyes. Instinctively, I took a picture. But when he went to hit her again, I grabbed his arm and pleaded with him to stop. . . . Now, nine years later, I know that when a man is determined to beat his wife, he will do it in front of the children, or the neighbors, or even the police.¹⁹

The photographs that accompany this text are chilling and heartbreaking. Garth physically manipulates and abuses Lisa, as their kids are often in the background screaming and crying. While investigative and journalistic in nature, these pictures function successfully in a photobook because of their reliance on narrative. Ferrato, like Goldin, is presenting a complicated yet specific story, that relies on the visual for full impact.

Each of these artists has personally experienced or been affected by sexual violence. These works then need to be treated with an authority of sorts, as their voices speak to firsthand accounts. But their voices speak to so many others, and serve an important function in society to provide a visual counterpoint to statistics and facts. As art historian Anna Chave has articulated, and I would agree, that art and writing that addresses wrongdoings and violent acts against

women must continue to be made and written, because these acts continue to exist.²⁰ The visual is particularly powerful and impactful, and, by continuing to make works that create an intense reaction continue to exist, hopefully rape culture in the United States will cease to exist.

Notes

¹ “Rape thing” is a phrase that John Koster, Washington House Candidate, used in 2012. He stated, “But on the rape thing, it’s like, how does putting more violence onto a woman’s body and taking the life of an innocent child that’s a consequence of this crime - how does that make it better?” quoted in Mike Baker, “GOP Hopeful: ‘Rape thing’ not cause for abortion,” *Associated Press*, October 31, 2012, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/gop-hopeful-rape-thing-not-cause-abortion-0> (November 19, 2012).

² Statistics compiled by RAINN: Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network

² Statistics compiled by RAINN: Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network utilizing data from the United States Justice Department’s National Crime Victimization Survey. For more information see: <http://www.rainn.org/statistics> and <http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=dcdetail&iid=245#Questionnaires>.

³ Emile Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher and Martha Roth, “Are We Really Living in a Rape Culture?” in *Transforming a Rape Culture*, rev. ed., ed. Emile Buchwald, Pamela R. Fletcher and Martha Roth (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2005): 8.

⁴ For more information on these topics, see: Michael Preston Worley, “The Image of Ganymede in France, 1730-1820 The Survival of a Homoerotic Myth,” *The Art Bulletin* 76, no. 4 (December 1994): 630-643; Margarita Russell, “The Iconography of Rembrandt’s ‘Rape of Ganymede,’” *Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 9, no. 1 (1977): 5-18; A.W. Eaton, “Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet: Titian’s Rape of Europa,” *Hypatia* 18, no. 4 (Autumn-Winter 2003): 159-188; Diane Wolfthal, “‘A Hue and a Cry’: Medieval Rape Imagery and its Transformation,” *The Art Bulletin* 75, no. 1 (March 1993): 39-64; and Linda C. Hults, “Dürer’s ‘Lucretia’: Speaking the Silence of Women,” *Signs* 16, no. 2 (Winter 1991): 205-237.

⁵ Lacy’s speech is printed in full in Suzanne Lacy, “‘Three Weeks in May’: Speaking Out on Rape, a Political Art Piece,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1977): 64-70.

⁶ Vivien Green Fryd, “Suzanne Lacy’s *Three Weeks in May*: Feminist Activist Performance Art as ‘Expanded Public Pedagogy,’” *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (Spring): 23-38.

⁷ Suzanne Lacy, "In Mourning and In Rage (With Analysis Aforethought)," in *Leaving Art: Writings on Performance, Politics, and Publics 1974-2007* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 70.

⁸ Nancy Spero and Sue Williams, "Sue Williams," *BOMB*, no. 42 (Winter 1993): 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰ Christopher Lyon, *Nancy Spero: The Work* (New York: Prestel, 2010), 200-201.

¹¹ Diana Nemiroff, "Fourteen Meditations on *Torture of Women* by Nancy Spero," in *Torture of Women*, ed. Lisa Pearson (Los Angeles: Siglio Press, 2010), 119-120.

¹² Olga Viso, *Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta* (New York: Prestel, 2008), 23.

¹³ Charles Ray, her classmate, was the one who actually reported the scene to his classmates, telling them he was unsure if the scene was real or not. Julia P. Herzberg, "Ana Mendieta's Iowa Years, 1970-1980," in *Ana Mendieta: Earth Body, Sculpture and Performance 1972-1985*, ed. Olga M. Viso (Washington D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution and Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: HatjeCantz Verlag, 2004), 156.

¹⁴ Christine Redfern and Caro Caron, *Who is Ana Mendieta?* (New York: Feminist Press, 2011), 28.

¹⁵ Goldin's obsession with documenting life via photography stems from her fading memories of her sister who committed suicide in 1965. Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, ed. Marvin Heiferman, Mark Holborn, and Suzanne Fletcher (New York: Aperture Foundation, Inc., 1986), 9.

¹⁶ The series in its present form is closely related to Goldin's version when the Whitney Museum of American Art purchased the work in 1995, and even then Goldin made sure there was a clause in the contract that she could update the show if she ever desired.

¹⁷ Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, and Walter Keller, "On Acceptance: A Conversation" in *I'll Be Your Mirror*, eds. Nan Goldin, David Armstrong, and Hans Werner Holzwarth (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art and Zurich: Scalo Publishers, 1996), 448.

¹⁸ Donna Ferrato, *Living with the Enemy* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1991), 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

²⁰ Chave elaborated, "No matter how indispensable optimism has been feminism--including visions of a world where feminism truly could be extraneous--there is a difference between optimism and denial; and however women undertake to retheorize feminism, we must not deny its bedrock in the injuries done to women: wrongs and damage, that, however socially or culturally manifest, were and are always also sustained bodily." See Anna C. Chave, "'Normal Ills': On Embodiment, Victimization and the Origins of Feminist Art" in *Trauma and*

Visuality in Modernity, eds. Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2006), 137.

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