



Faith Wilding,
*Crocheted
Environment*, 1972,
mixed media and
fibres. Installation
view, 'Womanhouse',
Los Angeles, 1972.
Courtesy the artist

Rupture and Continuity in Feminist Re-performance

– Audrey Chan, Alexandra Grant
and Elana Mann

In 2007, 'WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution' became the first museum retrospective to explore the legacy of international feminist art made between 1965 and 1980.¹ The fact that this project was initiated at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles is no coincidence, since feminist art flourished within Southern California schools and artistic communities in the early 1970s.² By now the exhibition has become a landmark of the recent impulse to re-examine Los Angeles's post-War artistic legacy, and its feminist roots in particular. The project 'Pacific Standard Time: Art in L.A. 1945–1980' can be understood in the wake of such institutional and critical reassessment.³ Unfolding from October 2011 until March 2012 in over sixty cultural institutions across Southern California, 'Pacific Standard Time' was based upon the premise that art movements that thrived in Los Angeles — such as feminist art, Chicano art, African-American art, Light and Space, LA Pop and post-Minimalism — have been neglected within the canon of modern art from the US, which has been predominantly focused on the New York art scene. Although canonisation may not have been a primary motivation for these artists, 'Pacific Standard Time' tacitly acknowledged that the only alternative to historicisation is historical erasure.

In an effort to re-activate a large archive of performance and ephemeral works, a number of artists were invited to restage and reinterpret past performances for 'Pacific Standard Time', amongst whom were Alexandra Grant, Elana Mann and myself, Audrey Chan. Mann and I collaborated with artist-activists Leslie Labowitz-Starus and Suzanne Lacy to re-create Labowitz-Starus's *Myths of Rape* (1977), originally performed as part of Lacy's 'Three Weeks in May' (1977), a project that 'employ[ed] feminist art as a means of

exposing and ending the rape of women'.⁴ Labowitz-Starus's original performance took place at the Los Angeles City Mall and featured six blindfolded female performers carrying handmade protest signs featuring rape statistics. Our 2012 re-creation took place at the Los Angeles Convention Center, during the opening night gala of the 2012 LA Art Show, a commercial art fair. Thirty performers, diverse in age, race and gender, wore presentation boards on their

Looking back at their re-creation of 1960s and 70s feminist works for the 2012 festival 'Pacific Standard Time', artists Audrey Chan, Alexandra Grant and Elana Mann discuss the value of re-performance as a means of producing an embodied relationship with the past.

bodies that featured some of the original myths and facts about rape, as well as current ones. They performed choreographed movements and walked freely amongst the crowd, prompting interactions with members of the audience.

1 'WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution', curated by Cornelia Butler, was first shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (4 March–16 July 2007), and then toured to the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC (21 September–16 December 2007); PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Museum of Modern Art, New York (17 February–12 May 2008); and Vancouver Art Gallery (4 October 2008–11 January 2009). See C. Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mark (ed.), *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (exh. cat.), Los Angeles, Cambridge, MA and London: Museum of Contemporary Art and The MIT Press, 2007.

2 Examples include Judy Chicago's Feminist Art Program at California State College, Fresno, from 1970 until 1971, which was later co-led with Miriam Schapiro at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), Valencia, from 1971 until 1973; the Feminist Design Program at CalArts, founded by Sheila de Bretteville in 1972; and the Woman's Building in downtown Los Angeles, which operated from 1973 until 1991.

3 The initiative began in 2002 and grew out of the work conducted by the Getty Research Institute to preserve a record of Los Angeles's post-War art scene in the form of oral histories and archives. The Getty Foundation provided over 11 million dollars in grants to museums, galleries, universities and cultural institutions to research, exhibit, catalogue and host symposia and events featuring the art of this period. For more information on the project, see <http://www.getty.edu/foundation/funding/access/current/pst.html> (last accessed on 5 March 2013).

4 Suzanne Lacy, "'Three Weeks in May': Speaking Out on Rape, a Political Art Piece', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol.2, no.1, Spring 1977, p.64.

Alexandra Grant collaborated with textile artist Channing Hansen to create the *Womb-Womb Room* (2011) at Night Gallery in Los Angeles, after Faith Wilding's *Crocheted Environment* (also known as *Womb Room*). Originally installed in 1972 at 'Womanhouse' in Hollywood, Wilding's installation was made out of what she calls 'women's work', referring to a gendered division of labour. Grant's collaboration with Hansen, a male artist who uses knitting in his own practice, sought to reflect upon the meaning of feminist art today and to challenge the currency of the term 'women's work'. Grant also participated in 'Tirs: Reloaded', an event in which twelve artists were invited to recreate Niki de Saint Phalle's *Tirs*, or shooting paintings — a series of paintings made by literally firing at pigment-filled, plaster-covered tubes attached to a plate, and which she performed in Los Angeles, amongst other places, in 1962.⁵ Grant's piece was a large, white orb, covered in animal bones and bladders full of paint, and suspended from two white ladders. On the evening of the performance, Grant invited her partner to shoot at it, watching as it exploded with colour.

This three-way conversation emerged as a means to expand our understanding of the feminist works that we restaged for 'Pacific Standard Time' beyond the binaries of past/present and original/copy and towards an embodied relationship with the past. The three of us came of age during the 1980s and 90s, a period of political and cultural backlash against the progressive social movements that preceded them and their artistic forms. Today we are interested in thinking about why art associated with second-wave feminism has only recently been granted serious reappraisal by artists, scholars and institutions; and we would like to reclaim some of the artistic strategies associated with that movement for the younger generation of artists to which we belong.

This discussion began at Alexandra Grant's studio in Los Angeles on 19 February 2012 and continued in person and by email over the following year.

Alexandra Grant: We are all interested in how to think about feminism, specifically 1970s feminism, today. We each participated in 'Pacific Standard Time' projects — on your side re-creating Leslie Labowitz-Starus's *Myths of Rape*, and on mine reimagining Faith Wilding's *Crocheted Environment* and Niki de Saint Phalle's *Tirs*. I would like to discuss the projects both within the context of our practices and in the light of current discussions around re-enactments, re-creations and re-performances.

Elana Mann: There is a great deal of attention right now in the US on notions of performance re-creation, following major exhibitions of historical performance works over the last ten years.⁶ Such interest has prompted arguments against the re-creation of historical performances, which suggest that it is best to leave them to the past. For example, Jenni Sorkin claims that

*restaging is actually a form of sublimation: a purposeful forgetting of the initial intentions of an entire generation [...] and as well, a simulation of an anti-commercial, pre-consumerist culture. And what is simulation but a kind of yearning for simultaneity — the nostalgia of wanting to have experienced it firsthand?*⁷

But while institutions have just recently started wrapping their heads around how to present past and present performance works, artists have always been grappling with

5 Invited to California by gallerist Virginia Dwan, Saint Phalle realised her *Tirs* in front of a crowd that included John Cage, Ed Ruscha, Leo Castelli and the artist's partner, Jean Tinguely. 'Tirs: Reloaded' took place on 22 January 2012, at Angeles Shooting Ranges in Lake View Terrace, California, and included work by Alex Becerra, Liz Craft, Karon Davis, Noah Davis, Alexandra Grant, Noah Kienholz, Lipschutz & Lipschutz, Matthew Monahan, Lara Schnitger, Henry Taylor, Jennifer West and Brigitte Zieger. See <http://pacificstandardtimefestival.org/events/tirs-reloaded-by-niki-de-saint-phalle/> (last accessed on 4 March 2013).

6 Alongside 'Pacific Standard Time', these include 'Marina Abramović: Seven Easy Pieces', Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York (9–15 November 2005) and 'Allan Kaprow - Art as Life', The Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (23 March–30 June 2008). There have been similar attempts elsewhere, such as 'Art in Action' at the Tate Tanks, London (18 July–28 October 2012).

7 Jenni Sorkin, 'Mythology and the Remake: The Culture of Re-performance and Strategies of Simulation', *East of Borneo* [online journal], 13 October 2010, available at <http://eastofborneo.org/articles/mythology-and-the-remake-the-culture-of-re-performance-and-strategies-of-simulation> (last accessed on 4 March 2013).



Alexandra Grant and Channing Hansen, *Womb-Womb Room*, 2011, yarn, thread and wire in installation, dimensions variable. Installation view, Night Gallery, Los Angeles, 2012. Courtesy the artists

issues of documentation and the archive. I would argue that, on the contrary, many artists working today seek to offer responses that go beyond nostalgia for the past or the desire to create a consumerist spectacle for the present. I believe that there are many things to be gained from investigating past performances through an experiential, context-driven and embodied approach. History is cyclical and re-performance is an expression of that.

Audrey Chan: I think that the question of re-performance is related to how we understand the transmission of material and ideological knowledge between generations

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of artists. In his essay ‘Shall We Kill Daddy?’ (1997), on ageism in the critical reception of Douglas Huebler’s practice, Mike Kelley wrote with chagrin that ‘we still expect artists to conform to some clearly constructed time line of progressive art-historical development’.⁸ In this construct, youth and avant-gardism are allied in a perpetual march forward in which the radical is defined in opposition to what came before. But could a different metric of radicalism be applied to feminism and feminist art? The movement’s lack of continuity and subsequent generations’ disavowal led feminism to be branded as an ‘f-word’; both derogatory and defiantly ironic uses of the term persist. Given the lack of a linear development of feminist art, I would like to think that its recent re-creation by a younger generation of artists may represent a model for radical continuity.

AG: One of the elements missing from the recent discourse on performance is the material aspect of these re-creations and their presentness. Seeing the images of your re-creation

⁸ Mike Kelley, ‘Shall We Kill Daddy?’, in Marianne van Leeuw and Anne Pontégnie (ed.), *Origin and Destination: Alighiero e Boetti, Douglas Huebler* (exh. cat.), Brussels: La Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts du Bruxelles, 1997, pp.155–71. Available at <http://strikingdistance.com/c3inov/kelley.html> (last accessed on 4 March 2013).



of *Myths of Rape* it was clear to me that the material choices you made were deliberate. You changed the location of the performance, introduced the use of the voice and used women and men as performers. You also chose to make the signs themselves colourful and spray-painted rather than handwritten. All these elements made the piece a present-day action rather than simply a reconstruction of the original, thus adding to the piece the claim that politics of gender remain significant today.

AC: Another difference from the original performance was that our signs opened and closed. When closed, only the text of the myth would be visible (e.g. ‘Myth: Rape only happens to women’). When open, the fact would be revealed against a colour-gradient background (‘Fact: Rape victims can be male or female and of any age, physical type or demeanor’). We adapted the myths and facts from the original signs, but also wrote texts based on current research about attitudes towards rape. In contrast with the 1977 piece, we declined to report statistics because rape is one of the most under-reported crimes throughout the world. During the event, several performers were asked, ‘Is this a protest?’ Others described being approached by individuals who recounted their own experience of rape or that of someone close to them. Psychological barriers were broken between performer and audience.

AG: This is in strong contrast to the critique that re-creating a piece for commercial reasons somehow neuters it, or removes its inherent danger or risk.

EM: Martha Rosler made a similar critique of market-based re-performance in her article ‘The Second Time as Farce’ (2011).⁹ She speaks of the recent surge of institutional interest in re-performances as a commodification of resistance. But there are many instances where new power can be gained from a complex layering of history and context through re-performance. For example, in 2003 Yoko Ono re-created her own *Cut Piece* (originally performed in 1964, at the time of the Vietnam War) as a response to the shifts in culture and

Audrey Chan and Elana Mann, *Myths of Rape*, 2012, performance; a reinterpretation of Leslie Labowitz-Starus’s *Myths of Rape* (1977). Photograph: Neda Moridpour. Courtesy the artists

⁹ Martha Rosler, ‘The Second Time as Farce’, *IDIOM* [online magazine], 21 February 2011, available at <http://idiommag.com/2011/02/the-second-time-as-farce/> (last accessed on 4 March 2013).

¹⁰ Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* was first performed on 20 July 1964 at Yamaichi Concert Hall in Kyoto. It was performed again by the artist at Theatre Le Ranelagh in Paris on 15 September 2003. See Kevin Concannon, ‘Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*: From Text to Performance and Back Again’, *PAS: A Journal of Performance and Art*, September 2008, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 81–93.

understated in comparison to her more well-known *Nanas*.¹¹ It was interesting to me that as an artist I could contribute to the re-evaluation of another artist's work. In the case of the *Womb-Womb Room*, Hansen and I weren't strictly recreating Wilding's original, but using it as a stepping-off point for our own work. Its location at the Night Gallery — a woman-run, she-gallery, open only after dark — was the syntactic shift away from the original that allowed us to make it our own, insofar as setting it within a very different context of display. In 1972, Wilding's *Crocheted Environment* was a response to a male-dominated art world that spoke fluent Minimalism, and eschewed the idea of craft materials as high-art materials. In 2012, in large part because of artists like Wilding, craft materials and so-called 'women's work' are part of a material language available to any artists to work with. Why do you think re-creations and re-enactments were such a big part of 'Pacific Standard Time'? Are these re-creations important to maintain the legacies of these artists?

EM: Yes, although much depends on who is building the legacy and who is benefitting from it — i.e. the original authors, their estates, contemporary artists, gallerists, the different audiences... For example, Barbara T. Smith was included in several 'Pacific Standard Time' exhibitions, yet her work has rarely been acquired by the institutions exhibiting it. What really interests me as an artist is exploring the embodied affect of these performances. Besides a few oral histories, there is almost no information about the experience of the audience, the participants or the performers of any given performance. Attempting to re-create a performance serves as research into both art history and contemporary society. I view the version of *Myths of Rape* Audrey and I created as a reincarnation: the performance is born again in new bodies, a new time and context, but still maintains the affective charge of the work.

AC: Obviously not all re-performance is done out of a sense of respect or duty towards an original work. I am thinking of Susan Mogul's take on Vito Acconci. In his video *Undertone* (1972), Acconci talks repetitively to himself and the camera about a girl under the table, stroking his thighs. In *Take Off* (1974), Mogul inverted the gender dynamics of his video: her vibrator — constantly in need of fresh batteries — stands in for his imaginary girl, while her candid and friendly banter with the viewer replaces Acconci's meditative incantations of desire. It's a satire, but it's also a great example of how an artist might loosely wear another's gestures while asserting her or his own subjectivity. In contrast, the fact that we were concerned about inheriting a feminist legacy informed the way we approached our projects. We now consider ourselves stewards of this work.

EM: But not everyone wants a steward and some artists try to keep a very tight control on their legacy. Chris Burden famously refused to allow Marina Abramović to re-perform his pieces for her 'Seven Easy Pieces' at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2005, because he claimed that his work was too connected to the subjectivity of his particular body at the time in which it was created.¹² However, ideas of authorship, ownership and originality are continuously shifting due to cultural, social and technological changes, so why should historical performances exist in untouchable bubbles?

AG: We are talking now about the power of the person who is writing history, he or she who is keeping the past alive, and how that act of telling results in authorship. How did you credit your project? Is it by Chan and Mann after Lacy and Labowitz-Starus?

AC: You would really have to draw a Venn diagram to represent the layers of collaboration. Finally, we agreed upon: *Myths of Rape* (2012), performance by Audrey Chan and Elana Mann, a reinterpretation of Leslie Labowitz-Starus's *Myths of Rape* (1977), part of Suzanne Lacy's "Three Weeks in May" (1977). The production was presented by Los

11 *Nanas* was the sculptures series Niki de Saint Phalle started making in the mid-1960s, right after *Tirs*. They are archetypal female forms made out of papier-mâché and often painted in bright colours.

12 Marina Abramović re-created seven performance works from the 1960s and 70s at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York on seven consecutive nights (9–5 November 2005). The first five nights featured works by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, VALIE EXPORT, Gina Pane and Joseph Beuys, with two final nights of re-performances of her own work. See <http://pastexhibitions.guggenheim.org/abramovic/> (last accessed on 4 March 2013).



Leslie Labowitz-Starus, *Myths of Rape*, 1977, performance. Installation view, Los Angeles City Mall, part of Suzanne Lacy's 'Three Weeks in May', 1977. Photograph: Suzanne Lacy. Courtesy the artist

Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) for Lacy's "Three Weeks in January" (2012) as part of the Getty Pacific Standard Time Performance Festival.'

EM: The process of agreeing on a caption was in some ways just as valuable and complicated as figuring out the performance itself.

AC: 'Pacific Standard Time' created all these interesting time-collapse conundrums and opportunities to engage with art made in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 70s, which claimed to be starting from scratch, rejecting both Western European and New York models. Founded in 1970, CalArts played a big role as the educational embodiment of that zeitgeist – an art school that claimed rebellion as its starting point. While this is a seductive narrative, while a graduate student there in the late 2000s I realised that the institution was effectively replacing one canon with another, but still neglecting its own feminist past. I distinctly remember that talking about one's personal experience in relation to an artwork was not considered a legitimate mode of critical conversation. This is part of the reason why I was interested in feminism: I saw that there was another way of engaging with art and life that made sense on an intuitive, experiential level.

EM: I would say that our education was couched in language rather than embodied experience. Feminist art, by contrast, nods to both language and the body without privileging one over the other. When I was at CalArts, it was refreshing for me to see feminist artists of prior generations who were unafraid to take a stand and be criticised rather than hide behind the safety of taking no position at all. While working on the performance, Leslie Labowitz-Starus and Suzanne Lacy taught us a great deal about the relationship of women to the power they were claiming and how they claimed their power in a positive way.

AC: And we claimed our power with their power.