

Evolution of a Feminist Art Working with WAVAW

Women Against Violence Against Women grew out of our realization that the way to eliminate the promotion of violence against women via the media was not through censorship, but through public education and consciousness-raising. Our work with Leslie has been part of an overall strategy to change social attitudes, to mobilize people and to pressure companies to adopt policies reflecting corporate responsibility. In August 1977, we needed powerful press-coverage-type exposure of the record industry's position regarding advertising exploiting violence against women and we needed generally to increase public awareness and understanding of the issue.

Leslie and I evolved a similar understanding of the political implications of images in mass media and the need to create a media strategy that incorporates the strengths and tools of the political and the artistic. Imagery is political because it contains and creates our society's assumptions about the world, e.g., sex-role stereotypes, who rules the world. Mass media (TV, radio, magazines, billboards) disseminate these images to masses of people, providing most of the information they get today, beginning at a very young age.

Recognizing the power of mass media to affect public opinion and cultural stereotypes that in turn affect public policy and our everyday lives, Leslie and WAVAW tapped this power. Leslie is more adept and experienced than us at manipulating forms and physical components to convey messages. WAVAW has an organization, an established action program, and has developed a public awareness and concern, that is, a constituency. WAVAW's campaign provided the news. The artists contributed skills to develop a powerful image and an event that would move people both emotionally and politically.

Together, in *Record Companies Drag Their Feet*, we created images of strong, dignified women of various ages fighting back. In the face of overwhelming rape statistics, they, *as a group*, confronted the record industry's exploitation of violence against women. They talked to the leaders, protested and rallied support for a boycott. The performance and the press conference which followed each enhanced the effect of the other. This was a logical and potent counterforce to the images, definitions and political analyses of women's concerns usually provided for the

consumer and audience by advertising, news, entertainment and other popular information sources.

Leslie, the artists and WAVAW tried to set up a collective working relationship based on mutual problem-solving. We integrated the CR (consciousness-raising) process and feminist consciousness into *both* the piece itself and the process for developing and producing the event. WAVAW's close participation was required in production so that the piece accurately portrayed our positions and image, information about the industry (executives' image, symbols of power and prestige, albums, etc.), and the images of women that we wanted. The artists learned about the structure and goals of the industry, strategies for change and how all this affects them as artists and as women. In other words, they were politicized.

The piece was effective. It provided a form that made our position accessible to a news program format. The format itself reinforced the feeling (and reality) of immediacy and authenticity that we need to bolster. Our preparations for the press plus the tone of the event increased our credibility with reporters and their respect for us. A videotape documentation (suitable for broadcast) will further the outreach of the initial performance. It was a highly successful synthesis of P.R., organizing and art, a new form for politicizing people and gaining popular support.

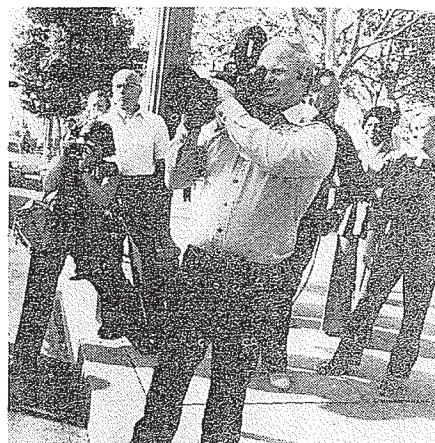
However, while industry publications carried good coverage of the event, none of the companies we were boycotting responded. Without a more sophisticated, long-term strategy around the event its effect was limited.

The potential for building a community around the project was great. A shortage of time for preparing the event (one and a half months), however, resulted in WAVAW people doing basic overall strategy, site selection and concept with Leslie, press conference, fund-raising, and some production work. Leslie did production work and other political, community outreach. Most of the participants were artists from the L.A. women's community. Only one person from WAVAW had ongoing contact with the artists. Nonetheless, the "political" people exposed to the event now have a high appreciation for what can be done.

Access to and control of mass media is generally limited to those with the economic resources to support its technology.

Therefore, a relatively tiny group of interests has extraordinary political power. Now, more than ever before, feminist organizing means organizing the power of the media to convey feminist images. The collaboration developed a model for feminists to control and obtain cheap access to the media.

—Julia London
—Joan Howarth



Development of a feminist media strategy

A media strategy to gain control of and accessibility to mass media is particularly vital to women. The feminist perspective is unrepresented in the media of popular culture. At this time, when violence against women is used by the media in exploitative and sensationalized ways that degrade and dehumanize women, it is essential that we find a way to present alternative images by ourselves in the media. This can be done in various ways: by creating alternative media outside the system or by demanding that existing media present different perspectives. Another approach is to make the public aware of the power of images, media manipulation through images and the attitudes perpetuated about women. This necessitates the development of a concrete media politics with a full understanding of the role of economics in the structure of media. As women we cannot develop a feminist political perspective in this contemporary society without including a media analysis. I see WAVAW functioning with this perspective. In a certain sense WAVAW operates on the level of "art critic" in popular culture. Its slide show is composed of offensive record covers and advertising that exploit violent images of women. The covers are analyzed during slide presentations in terms of content based on design, composition, color

and form. Techniques of manipulation in advertising are taught to a general public. WAVAW's audience extends over all class, race and age barriers. WAVAW educates the viewers to develop critical skills toward media and images. After taking them through the slide show WAVAW allows the audience a collective expression of anger or disgust or pain. The issue of "corporate responsibility" and economic pressure of a boycott are discussed as action, as is letter writing. The group is offered ways they can collectively or individually affect change.

I found the collaboration with WAVAW a natural and important one for myself as both artist and activist. It seems to me that the area of media is where artists can best work politically as their skills in image-making can work to criticize the media criticism as well as to create new images. Since L.A. is the media capital of the world and ideas, images and current events pass through this center to reach out internationally, it seemed logical to expand my own definition of art in that direction.

After the media exposure brought about in *Three Weeks in May* it was evident that TV was a most effective stage for my performances. To be able to use mass media for putting out images and information from a feminist perspective I saw that they would have to become "media events." A media event from my analysis is an activity that enables itself to be taken in by media-makers and their technology and then be filtered through them. Media events are created by the media itself. There is usually no control of what, how or when the media will use information. As feminists, to learn to control the material that is given out about women would put us in a very powerful position.

WAVAW and I decided on a media event that would be specifically designed for TV newscasts. WAVAW needed public attention to be restimulated on their issues (boycott of Warner, Elektra, Atlantic Record Company). This entailed a thorough media analysis as to what kinds of events might attract reporters, when the best time would be, what image we were trying to project, who would participate. Determining the look of the event was a long and intensive process involving WAVAW and myself. It took researching the way actual executive offices looked, how executives themselves dressed, and

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In this issue, there are few visuals made by artists: art that sets out to explore and demonstrate violence often presents an ambiguous message. Much of the art sent to us would have remained ambiguous even within the context of this issue.

In America today, artworld art has a greater economic than social function. The question of a work's monetary possibilities supersedes any political, emotional, spiritual, or intellectual intentionality. Where a work appears, how much it costs, who made it, who wrote/said what about it are all part of that work's context. The meaning of a work, depending on its context, can be the opposite of the artist's intention.

Any strictly formalist analysis places a work in a tradition of modernism where art refers only to itself, progressing within an autonomous history by virtue of the risk-taking breakthroughs of the avant-garde. Art that is not grounded in principled social theory can as easily lend itself to a metaphysical, religious, purist interpretation as to a materialist one. Artists' statements on their work, and much art criticism, looking only at the relation between artists and their materials, do not provide us with an avenue of inquiry into the complex relations between culture and ideology.

All forms of representation—artworld art, advertising art, TV, movies—provide a standard by which to evaluate experience. At the same time they either confirm or negate our daily experiences. The assumed neutrality of representational forms allows the ideological function of all art to pass unnoticed and unquestioned.

The social position of women in any given culture and the depiction of women within that culture are dialectically related

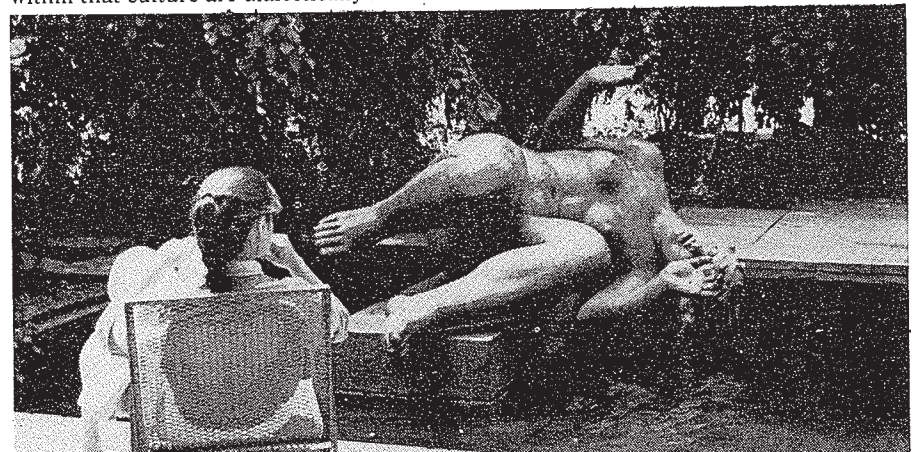
—that is to say, that the representation of women is influenced by their social position but also that the effect of these representations is to maintain women's status.

Media and commercial art (because of the magnitude and ubiquity of their images) have today largely supplanted traditional art's role of transmitting ideology. It is Vogue/Hustler's images more than, say, Picasso's images that tell us who we are or should be. Advertising art sells a way of life in which commodities are increasingly humanized while people are increasingly commodified.

Advertising presents women as commodities. This both reflects the real condition of women's subordination to men and also serves to strengthen it by making women's submission appear glamorous. We see images of elegantly dressed high fashion models, happy, middle-class families contrasting with *our* daily lives. These images are meant to inspire envy. Advertising art capitalizes on the misogyny which it helps to reinforce. The most recent example is the vogue for S/M ads in which violence against women is marketed as "upfront" and "liberating." Commercial art functions to adjust us to our own repression by making repression seem natural, even pleasurable.

The visuals in this issue incorporate images from daily life: snapshots, newspapers, posters, graffiti, ads, packaging, TV. Their ordinariness, their seeming naturalness is one key to any understanding of ideology and social control. Images, decisions about typeface, paper, layout, design, the dialectic set up between images and written text are all integral to the argument we are presenting.

Rather than challenge the concept of fine art by attempting to "democratize" it through the inclusion of craftspeople, Third World, working class, women artists, we have tried to make evident the fundamental connections of all visual representations with ideology and social control.



Evolution

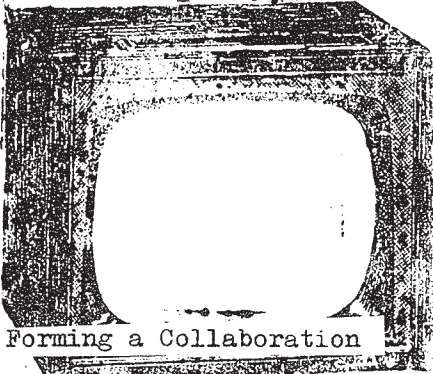
how we could portray women in images that were strong and active without being unrealistic. After working on this with WAVAW for about two weeks, I then took the information and designed a piece around it. The event took six weeks to produce. The final aesthetic decisions in an event such as this are of utmost importance and demand a sophisticated knowledge of images in popular culture as well as art images to be successful. Every part of this event was controlled, even the press conference. Because the audience was so broad we wanted as many women from diversified groups as possible to take part in the collective statement at the end. After about a month of contacting different communities I found that most ethnic groups did not want to connect politically or publicly with the concerns of white middle-class women. What I recognized was the aversion and fear being shown in the media and the real need for the organizing of women from different racial or ethnic backgrounds to come out of the community itself. The community I wanted to represent was the Mexican-American one because of the high rate of wife battering. Once Chicana woman did participate and carried a sign written in Spanish but the piece did not focus on that issue.

The event turned out to be both a performance and press conference. It was estimated the media would stay about 15 minutes, they stayed a half-hour. Eight different images were set up to correspond to eight shot possibilities for the camera crews. Most images were repeated at least four times so that the media could come and go and still not miss an image. We had our own media representative at the site to hand out a press kit and shot sheet to cameramen.

Record Companies Drag Their Feet was covered by all local stations, pretty much in the format I designed. The media reporters responded extremely positively to the visualizations and made an effort to understand the meaning of the images so that they could present it accurately. One newscaster, Felicia Jeter of CBS, became a kind of participant in the event. She narrated it as it took place, using the images to make her points during the newscast.

The effects of this kind of political activity are often long-term or hard to measure. The concrete effects were ones that helped set the supportive and positive relationship we now have to L.A. media, the women's community and the art com-

munity. A long-term effect was to place different images of women in the public consciousness. On a personal level, for me as an artist, I feel an important gap is beginning to be bridged between women artists and their political community. I know WAVAW has opened itself up to the possibility and recognized the importance of future collaborations with artists.



Forming a Collaboration
Future Directions

After the strangler piece we retreated, nursing the personal effect that working with such devastatingly violent material had on us. As we supported each other through this period, we began to think of continuing our collaborative relationship. We felt that the expanded arena into which our political and aesthetic perspective was taking us necessitated a strong support system, psychologically and physically. The work alone was more than any one individual could handle.

While we did expand our energy, concepts and image resources we certainly were not without painful conflict. Many times one of us has felt herself losing power to the other, feeling overwhelmed, projecting authority resentments. We have been troubled by the difficulty of receiving equal recognition in a system that prefers to see single authorship. These are the same problems that come up when working with larger groups and communities. We are working out our personal and aesthetic conflicts through dialogue, as preparation for expanded work in which artists, feminists, people in political office and journalists collaborate on works to end violence against women.

This year we are initiating *Ariadne: A Social Art Network*, a three-year project created out of the models of our past work. Our goals are to sponsor the creation of art work directed toward ending all violence against women and to provide the context in the art community for a viable and effective political art. To achieve these goals a communication/information exchange and an action/production network

with artists, politicians, feminists and journalists are being formed which can function as a pressure group for the representation of a feminist perspective in the media. In this embryonic stage of our planning, we have isolated three components to address various needs of such a project.

The Education component is housed in, the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles. *Ariadne* will offer classes, lectures and training programs for women to learn the skills of production and the historical and political analyses underlying the development of feminist political performance art. The Vision and Theory component will be an open forum for women to discuss issues of violence in a setting disconnected from immediate action. It will serve as the first connection for women from various communities who would like to begin the discussion of violence and its relationship to personal lives, social groups and the entire class of women. We will be seeking out a variety of participants from women of all classes and races in an effort to forge a coherent political perspective which will inform our art. Vision and Theory will encourage critical writing on the subjects of violence toward women and the art forms being evolved out of our socio-political consciousness. The Project component will serve as a consultant to community groups wishing to plan their own art actions, will support those women already working on violence through art and will carry out projects designed specifically to fulfill *Ariadne's* goals. One of the first projects will be a handbook on how to produce multilevel informational art events at a grass roots level. A documentary on our latest performance event in Las Vegas, *From Reverence to Rape to Respect*, is now being prepared by a PBS station there. As well, *Ariadne* has three documentary videotapes in production which will be completed this year.

As we have begun the process of organizing *Ariadne*, we have found a tremendous and eager response, one which reveals the need women have to act on the issue of violence. We know there will be times when direct political intervention, be it lobbying or marching in the streets, will be more effective than even political art events. We recognize and support the existence of political action on every level; the action we have personally chosen is through art—performance, graphics, video and mass media—as we work toward the creation of effective models for the radical intervention of artists in society.