

WOMEN AGAINST VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN:
COLLABORATING WITH ARTISTS

Coming to work with Leslie, an artist, as a sister organizer was not anything I would have fore^eseen myself doing several years ago. At that time I was not an organizer. I was a student of media and communications and their social analysis, and of anthropology. Experience as a photographer in both "fine art" and commercial forms had made me quite aware that the trick to fine, clear, impactful expression was in the manipulation of design, lighting, focus, perspective, angle, tonal relationships, and content. I learned that point-of-view organized the contents and elements of a photograph or film footage and that technical expertise and an understanding of the interrelationship of the parts of compositions gave me the control I needed to communicate and recreate the semantics--meaning--of the experience I was portraying.

Yet, I wanted a more immediate, direct, and la^rger impact on society than I seemed able to achieve in these mediums. I changed my focus to organizing. Working in the United Farm Workers, I learned another set of communication skills that would complement, overlap, and expand the understanding and skills I acquired in my "communications" and cultural anthropology background.

It was not, however, until I had had personal experience with language and communications, images and media, in women's issues from a feminist perspective that I actually understood the investment of symbols with meaning and comprehended the experience of language and communication and their relationship to reality. I began to understand the effect of language and media on my experience, my interpretation, and my understanding of life. I saw its effect on my understanding^{and expression} of myself and of my relationship^h to both society and other individuals and to how I was treated by both.

The political implications of language became clear to me as did the meaning of "politics" and "policy" and their relationship to assumptions and to

to cultural givens (or definitions).

The dictionary tells us that "political" has to do with the policies or goals of government or with its organized structure and policy. "To govern" means to control actions or behavior; to guide or to make and administer public policy or to keep under control or to restrain. It also means to exercise political authority or influence.

I came to understand "politics" not only as government policies and practices but also as cultural policies and social policies--the social mores and attitudes and assumptions about the world that guide and influence our everyday lives and decisions, our relations to each other, our behavior, and how we treat each other. These are, of course, many of the same assumptions and policies that underpin our institutions and our government policies. For example: "A woman's place is in the house (no day care centers, only men are respected bread winners).....and in the senate (day care centers, men often parent as much as women).

With this understanding and my new awareness of the impact of language and images on my sense of the world, came increased sensitivity to the affect of mass media and its political implications. Mass media and its imagery are political because they convey policies and social attitudes to masses of people. In doing this they influence social and political policy.

Mass media not only allows us to reach masses of people. Its structure, economics, and development have enabled those who control and have access to it to focus the audience's attention, offering basically a narrow spectrum of points-of-view, definitions, and images.

At present it is primarily profit-making interests with strong economic resources that can support and therefore have access to (buy time) the technology of mass media and its distribution (which is big business in and of it-

itself).. Producers and advertizers like those behind "Snuff", "Mr. Goodbar", Hustler, and the Self-Defense face lotion ad, are trying to capitalize on the backlash to the woman's movement and on women's fear of rape by commercializing both vengeance--violence--against women and stereotype roles of women as victims and men as animals. Their images and graphics equate power with both physical and sexual violence, domination, and humiliation of women. "Snuff" is ^{just} one example of an array of fashions and fashion displays, of ads for stereos, auto parts, etc., and of men's entertainment magazines that capitalize on violence against women and on women as victims thereby promoting anti-woman propaganda and such myths as: women are happy, willing victims, they ask for it, they are amusing or "sexual" turn-ons as victims, they are responsible for their abuse.

Analysis of different forms of media (see footnote) show that, generally social policy and cultural assumption content varies little and that relationships and behavior of characters also varies little. The material is stereotyped and repetitive not only ^{within} but also across the boundaries of popular mass media forms (tv, magazines, comics, ads, books, movies, songs, billboards). This environment that focuses attention and exposure to a narrow spectrum of points-of-view and definitions is a basic element in media's impact and the very reason why we must affect it and use it.

Poor people, ethnic groups, radical groups, women, and other oppressed groups rarely receive coverage or sympathetic coverage in much of media, let alone have adequate, if any, access to its channels. The views and constructs of other worlds and experience are unknown to many, or they are manipulated and misrepresented (wittingly or unwittingly). For example, a world in which women are not subject to men is often portrayed or interpreted as one in which women dominate men. Not as one in which women and men

are equals. Many who ^{actually} share non-standard grids for interpreting life and society assume that they are unique. The political impact of this is that we remain divided, isolated, uniformed, and unorganized. We are unable to influence social policy.

WAVAW grew out of my own and other people's outrage at the exploitation of violence against women and at its promotion, at this attack, at this bigotry. Our understanding of the political character of language, communications, images and media made it ^emp^rative to work on the issue of violence against women used in media for entertainment and advertizing gimmicks. Such exploitation is a direct threat to our safety, to the status of women, and to our (shakey) civil rights.

COLD ABORATION

The collaboration between Leslie and WAVAW brought about the end of ^{my} frustration and began a new phase of both artistic and organizing development for me and for others who participated. This phase went beyond picketing, demonstrating, beyond art criticism, guerilla theatre and revolutionary posters. The collaboration met our respective goals and interests as artists and organizers, and was also an accurate and forceful representation of WAVAW's policies and philosophy.

Through process of mutual problem-solving and learning from each other, Leslie and the WAVAW coordinating committee created a new form offering the familiar but with an alternative set of images and social policy in an art and media content that would be entertaining to a mass audience of consumers and could be picked up by the evening news.

The piece used images WAVAW had used. It focused on the record industry. It showed women in a familiar ^{but} special way that women of different ethnic, political, and class backgrounds could identify with on a gut level, as well as on an intellectual one. We appealed to the activist part of the consumer ^{it} identity that the majority of Americans have of themselves. We avoided

rhetorical stereotypes of the capitalist pig and the amazon woman. A strategy of exposure was employed. Record company executives were portrayed as a combination of progressives, liberal, business-suited, casual sporty type: ^{executives} (derived from WEA promotional materials) ^{and cocks} handling blood(y) money, arrogantly strutting around. Information from sources respected by most tv viewer^s (was) (FBI Uniform Crime Reports) portrayed. Familiar symbols that clearly and directly related the economic-political goals and consciousness of the executives were used as props.

In short, we pooled all our knowledge, tools, experience, skills, and strategies for communication and politicizing from our respective disciplines in order to make the piece. The process was guided by WAVAW's knowledge of the industry and the audience and by Leslie's intensive study of the structure and content of tv news. (It is interesting to note that marketing and promotion techniques for corporations make use of a similar collaboration, except that the goal is to change or develop buying patterns and to organize the consumer's allegiance to a product or company--"Progress is our most important product." In this situation image manipulation^s and reference^s to social policies are designed to attract consumers or to shock them for high impact and memory of product.

The performance organized media coverage, putting public pressure on the companies and keeping the issue in the consciousness of hundreds of thousands of people. It brought to middle America an experience of non-hysterical, dignified, strong, and serious women with a legitimate gripe that was relevant to all viewers. Feedback indicated that artists and non-artists, participants and viewers became more politicized. We made an important statement about corporate politics at a time when pro-business sentiment seems to be obscuring^s the realities of their^r exploitativeness, ruthlessness, and irresponsibility towards women.

Media Event

Media Event

Los Angeles is the media center of the world. Ideas, images and current events are processed through this center, shaping and influencing attitudes in the society. Most of the media images of women demean and dehumanize them. It is essential for women to find a way to represent their point of view through mass media communication. I realized that by expanding my model for a political public art into the media I would be working in the most politically effective medium in terms of reaching and influencing a great number of people. This move into mass media transformed the public performances, done in the streets in Europe, to "media events." A media event is an activity that is taken into mass communication systems--television, press, radio--and processed for the public. Media events are actually created by the media themselves. Political figures understand this concept and use it for the benefit of their image or political strategy. In order to counteract the demeaning images of women used in advertising, entertainment and even news, women need to develop analytical tools and strategies to restructure the media's representation of them.

If we extend our definition of art to include all "visual communication" we open up the possibility to envision the development of analytic skills that criticize media images and simultaneously expand the definition of "art criticism". I see WAVAW functioning on the level of "art critic" in popular culture. Their slide show composed of offensive record covers and advertising that exploit sex violent images of women are analyzed in terms of design, composition, color, form, and content.

recognition of the broad public. WAWAW educates their audience in the development of critical skills toward media and images. After taking their audience through a slide show they allow them time for a collective expression of anger and disgust. Through this process the group is politicized and offered ways they can actively affect change. Conceptually WAWAW works very much like the model for a political art form I work with. I therefore found the collaboration an natural and important connection for both organization and artist. Most interesting to me was the close work with Julia during the preparation of the event. I saw her in the role of artist, and she saw me as an organizer. It was our collaboration of ideas that made this project feasible.

We decided on a media event that would be designed for television newscasters, because of television's audience size and the rapidity with which information could reach its viewers. This entailed analyzing what kinds of events might attract reporters, when would be the best time to stage an event, what would be our approach to the stations, etc.

With much help and support from women in the community we set up a date and location and proceeded to design an event. I realized that clarity in image and message were the priorities--the more "visual" the better, as we could not depend upon what the sound-over might be like. The visual material was designed to fit completely within the camera frame. Eight different actions within the set corresponded to eight different shot possibilities for camera crews. We estimated the media would stay for approximately 10-15 minutes.