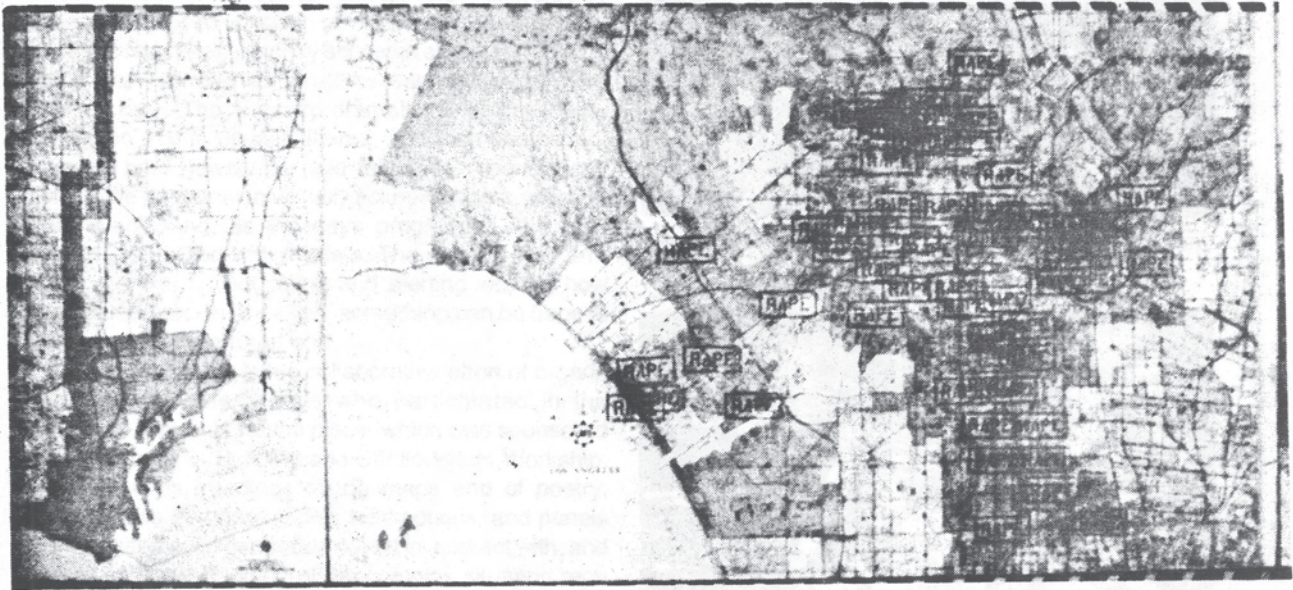


# On the Subject of Rape

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Installation photograph of Suzanne Lacy's maps for *Three Weeks in May*.

Mostly through the efforts of the Feminist Movement, the issue of rape has become a focal point of concern and women in a multitude of fields are working to find solutions to the problem. Suzanne Lacy is one of the few women artists directing her energy towards public awareness of the myths that surround this frightening subject. *Lacy's Three Weeks in May: Speaking out on rape, a political art piece* can be seen as an epic crusade against rape. It can, in a sense, be regarded solely as a political demonstration or feminist outcry. However, because the art community is somewhat sensitized to the discourse already, Lacy speaks more eloquently to her community of fellow artists than, perhaps, to the general female population. On one level, the artist has two audiences, two overlapping missions. One is to address society as a whole, to put her individual mark of fear and outrage toward unravelling and decoding a horrific social narrative. The other, through Lacy's psychological and visual commitments, is to make a portrait of the cultural myth called rape, bringing to the fore how it sets in motion the behavior of the sexes.

In his article "The Education of the Un-Artist" (*Art in America*, January-February, 1974, p. 85), Allan Kaprow succinctly outlined the terrain of Lacy's 'type' of artmaking:

The models for the experimental arts of this generation have been less the preceding arts than modern society itself, particularly how and what we communicate, what happens to us in the processes beyond society . . . What is essential is to look regularly for these ties to the real world, rather than to the art world, if the values of the new activities on any level are to be understood.

It is possible to augment to the role the 'experimental arts' of this sort cast for the artist the concept of stage manager, as in *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder (i.e., dealing with a narrative situation known to most Americans). The artist focuses our attention and orients us to what is going on, to what is there, or what *could* be there. Through her methodology and the issue of rape (thus far, unspeakable), Lacy accomplishes the connection Kaprow writes about. In her piece, she pointed out specific incidents of rape by stamping, in red, the word RAPE on maps which she located in a well trafficked shopping area. By mapping out the territory, literally and psychologically, she did in fact reach toward the demythification of a brutalizing social fact.

The concept of focusing is crucial to Lacy's purpose and process. Two fire department maps were used as a basis for a site-marking performance. For twenty-one consecutive days, the artist went to the Los Angeles Police Station, acquired reported occurrences and at-

tempt statistics on rapes for the previous day. She then crossed the street to the City Mall and stamped, with four inch red letters, the word RAPE over the location of the offences. Next to the map of offences, another map indicated the location of prevention centers, rape hot-lines, crisis and counseling centers. Two maps, side by side: one focused attention on what is taking place; that a woman has been violently accosted and/or raped. The other map informed women of the resources marshalled against rape. The first map dramatically presented information that is usually filtered, and thus abstracted, through brief newspaper and television reports. Lacy forces the passerby to visually acknowledge a series of real events and, as the days progressed, the map turned bloody red with the tale. The second map emphasized that by educating and alerting women how they can protect themselves, something can be done to bring this outrage to an end.

Important, too, is the collaborative effort of organizations and other artists who participated in the schedule of events for the piece, which was sponsored by the Woman's Building and Studio Watts Workshop. Performances, readings of the maps and of poetry, self-defense demonstrations, testimonials, and panels were organized to generate interest in, contact with, and finally an understanding of the complex situation rape has put us in. For those participating, it was clearly a rigorous inquiry to diagnose exactly what is taking place with this ugly problem. The method of locating each incident, repeating the fact over and over, both unravels the narrative and, at last, speaks it out loud.

One of the main characteristics of social narrative is its resemblance to folklore. Verbal and visual tales are repeated by one generation to the next, a tradition develops inextricably from the culture that is bound to the narrative. Although we are accustomed to folklore being positive, even beautiful, it also perpetuates dangerous superstition and myth that supply negative traditions. Rape is a poignant example of a menacing tradition. Codes of rape have been passed down through our history and, like stereotypes, are internalized by both sexes.

"To the victor go the spoils." Rape is equated with winning and surrender, victor and victim. Lacy's piece forcefully ascribes rape to the male domination of women, to rape being a tactic by men which circumscribes female behavior and mobility.

Clearly it is a confusion of genres to compare historical paintings with contemporary performance art since, in the final analysis, they are not formally comparable. Yet there is a long-standing tradition in painting that evokes the myths surrounding the issue of rape. It is precisely this mythologized view that Lacy attacks. Through her art, she replaces a destructive tradition with a positive one.

For those of us who have taken art history survey courses, slides of "famous rapes" are a familiar segment of the repertoire. For example, Rubens' *Rape of the Sabine Women* and Titian's *Rape of Europa* repre-



Peter Paul Rubens: *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, 1635.



Titian: *The Rape of Europa*, 1592

sent vivid images of rape. Their art historical venerability notwithstanding, such paintings signify and promote the injurious conceptions of rape that are with us today. They pose women in such a manner as to heroicize the rapist. Rubens' Sabine women are merely another item of plunder. They are voluptuous, erotic sex objects to be violated by the victorious Romans. Titian depicts Europa as passive, endorsing her fate. She lies restfully holding the horns of her abductor. It is these kinds of gross misrepresentations of women's attraction and submission to rape that Lacy condemns. Women do not deserve to be raped, do not want it, do not encourage it: they do not enjoy it, or think of rape as sex. Rape is a violent, aggressive act toward women; it is done to them by men.

Even recently within our generation are the reinforcements of rape as sex motif. Movies are the most conspicuous culprits, i.e., the Clark Gable and Humphrey Bogart syndrome: treating women with disdain and disrespect because "they love it." Songs in the fifties 'innocently' supported this notion of masculinity with such refrains as:

Johnny get angry, Johnny get mad;  
Give me the biggest lecture I've ever had.  
I want a brave man, I want a cave man;  
Johnny, show me that you care, really care for me.

Still another example, more threatening and pertinent to our geographical location, was the billboard on Sunset Boulevard which exhibited a bound, bruised and scantily clad woman with torn clothes portrayed next to the phrase, "I've been beaten by the Stones and I love it." Again, Lacy's "speak out" on rape ripped the very fiber of this mythologized 'logic.'

The artist herself has not been raped. But the idea that such a possibility may occur (one out of every three women in the United States are victims of either rape or attempted rape) forces her to succumb to a 'power' she has no say in. In one sense, her objectivity allows her a unique kind of passion and brooding anger; it puts an edge on the work that may never have come from a woman who has experienced rape. However, there is no hysteria, no fear of dealing with men, but calculated reprisal and controlled maneuvers to expose the act itself and force the denouement of the rape myth.

While throughout the twenty-one day duration of the piece different segments centered on vital aspects of the rape issue, the weekend of May 20-21 stood as the major component in the calendar of events. Throughout that weekend, Lacy directed a three-part performance entitled *She Who Would Fly*. The first part, "Talking to Women," was a series of private testimonials for women only; the second part, "Ceremonies and Constructions," was for performers only and closed to the public; the final part was a performance and installation open to all. Part One took place in the Garage Gallery on Museum Drive in Highland Park. The gallery, a tin garage construction built into a hillside, almost like a cave, was small and cramped. As one entered, Lacy, who led the talks, greeted newcomers: "We are discussing our personal experiences with having been molested or raped. If you have had any such experience, would you please tell us about it and write it down on this piece of paper for our map." Statements wallpapered the entire space; we were surrounded by them. All participants sat together in a circle on the floor; the testimonials lasted about four hours; women came and went, eight to ten remaining at all times. We were strangers but for being women, being scared and having something personal to share. The stories would spill out, unfolding nervously at first, then with horrifying detail and recall. Voices would get tense with anger and pain, hate and disgust. Perspective seemed to be maintained only by the arrival of a new participant and Lacy's gentle control of the situation. We cried; she let it happen. We hated; she let it happen. We talked about it in gruesome detail; she encouraged it. She never once let her sense of control disintegrate, never once let the heightened emotion give way to aimless hysteria.

We wrote down on paper our experience of rape. These papers were then pinned to a specific geographical position on the surrounding maps. We questioned: Why? How can we stop it? What to do if it happens again? Inherent was the idea of making that private, destructive force both public and locatable. It became a relief to know that those who have been raped are not

alone. We found that eight of the ten women participating were victims. We found that it was the fear of rape that constituted the principal reason, at least within our small group, for women to submit to male domination, to implore protection from their would be violators.

For Part Three, we stood outside the Garage Gallery, a congenial grouping and, again, mostly women. We were allowed inside, two and three at a time. A skinned lamb hung in the air, bound to the ceiling and floor by cords, "USDA Choice" stamped in its flesh. Large, white feathery wings were attached to its shoulders. It was in shackled flight, its rump at our noses. The stories we had confessed earlier were selected and pinned to their proper locations on the maps. We had to move about the ropes, around and under the carcass to see the testimonials, to locate the real (as opposed to the symbolized) narrative. Finally, we noticed the sound of breathing, not heavy but light, almost panting. Somehow the sound of it was just now audible, although it must have been going on the whole time. We couldn't tell where it was coming from. There was no other person around or a tape recorder in sight. Finally, looking up to a loft, we saw four women, stripped, painted red, crouched agonizingly above the lamb. The paint was thin enough to show the women's flesh. The paint seemed to symbolize blood as only women know it, cast their way, so to speak. Yet for society, the problem of rape remains unspeakable.

In *She Who Would Fly*, Lacy displays the new position sought by so many women on the rape issue. She integrates aesthetics with politics by forcing public acknowledgement and awareness of the problem. Rape should no longer be a whispered word that swirls about in the beer-drinking jokes of men at the same time that it is the ultimate humiliation for women. Both conditions are part of the myth Lacy works to dispel. Women who are able to speak about their rapes to other women will soon speak of them, with the same graphic recall, to men. Testimonials bring rape to public accountability. Once spoken of and openly revealed, the stories are seen less as fiction imbued with standardized mythology and more as sober reality.

*Three Weeks in May* was not so much a championing of a cause as it was a struggle to expose a condition of fear accepted by our entire society. It endeavors to exorcise the events that cause the activity and threat of the activity.

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