What Will Be the Legacy of Suzanne Lacy's Feminist Colloquy in NYC?

by Ben Davis
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(Photo © Ben Davis)

Suzanne Lacy's "Between the Door and the Street," which took place last Saturday in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, was an elaborately choreographed piece of non-theater, at once low-key and jumbo-sized. Starting at around 4:30 in the afternoon, close to 400 representatives from various women's organizations came together on one long, picturesque neighborhood block, engaging in small-group discussions about feminist issues for about an hour and a half. If this sounds simple, make no mistake — it was a very, very ambitious endeavor, the largest participatory artwork in the history of Creative Time, which co-sponsored the work with the Brooklyn Museum's Sackler Center for Feminist Art. A lot of skill goes into making something like that come off naturally, persuading the various groups to participate, scouting the location, corralling volunteers to make it happen, and so on. In a parallel way, the issues raised by this work appear initially simple but, scratching beneath the surface, become more and more complex.

The L.A.-based Lacy is known as a feminist art pioneer. She studied with Judy Chicago in the 1970s, and has made a career specializing in works that reframe political dialogue as performance art. At one time, such things would have been thought quite uncool. But recently, a bubbling backlash against the art market has made "social practice" an important genre all of its own (for the last month, I've been involved in a discussion with Creative Time curator Nato Thompson and a few others about the meaning of this trend on the new online publication *A Blade of Grass*, a dialogue I've found very enlightening). Contemporary artist-activists have discovered in Lacy's work a tradition to draw on, and she has become increasingly visible. Earlier this year at the Tate Modern, Lacy's performance, "Silver Action," brought together a variety of women over 60 who had been involved in feminist struggles for a free-wheeling public discussion of their experiences.

"Between the Door and the Street" represented Lacy's signature style on a particularly grand scale, a fact which created both opportunities and challenges. Entering the blocked-off street, what you found were representatives of some some 60 progressive women's groups, ranging from the Sex Workers Project to Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, and from the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights to the new feminist art magazine Girls Against God. Participants were identified by festive yellow scarves, and clustered on the stoops of various brownstones up and down the street. For the most part, they maintained the illusion of the fourth wall while chatting with one another, their conversations inspired by a list of prompts given by Lacy (the audience wasn't clued in, but the *Times* reported two: "Who is your family?" and "How do economics affect you?") They were also un-mic'd, so you really had to lean in to hear them over the rest of the crowd, which was frustrating but added to the strangeness of an event at once public and private, personal and political.

It was an admirably diverse gathering of women, promising to expose viewers to a multitude of voices. Curiously for a performance about political dialogue, however, participants were confined to discusions with peers from their own organizations, so it didn't really convey the sense of new linkages being formed. To an observer, the sheer volume of conversations happening encouraged you to dip in and out, engaging in a kind of feminist flânerie, sampling discussions rather than committing to one. The effect of walking up and down the street was like turning some massive radio dial, with snippets of important discussions flickering in and out of focus, about rape

culture, body image, immigrant and transgender rights, and being "worked to the bone by nonprofits."

A sharper way to put this would be to say that, while "Between the Door and the Street" advertised itself as being about encouraging real people to engage in real dialogue in real space, it mainly felt as if it was about creating *an image* — a spectacle that could symbolize a diverse and concentrated contemporary feminism. That's not a necessarily a bad thing, though — it's not as if contemporary feminist struggles get tons of coverage. We need all the symbols we can get!

In the immediate lead-up to the performance, one of the participants, Leina Bocar (plus two others who remained anonymous), put out an open letter in protest of the lack of compensation for performers and dearth of childcare options provided: "As feminists, we believe not paying the 350 women participants perpetuates labor inequality, devalues women's time and assumes that all women in this piece are financially able to volunteer time, energy, emotional and political content for free."

The organizers responded by noting that the project was based on a call for volunteers, in the spirit of a shared commitment to a good cause. For my part, I don't think the issue is totally clear-cut one way or another: Lacy's style of work inherently blurs the line between activism and performance, so it is actually bound to raise

these questions — particularly as it scales up and ceases to be a dissident, minor position.

It would seem more productive to reframe the question from, “Should they be paid?” to, “What would it mean to pay them?” Obviously, providing some kind of childcare would advance the meaning of the piece —one of Lacy’s prompts was supposedly *about* childcare issues, according to Whitney Kimball! *(Update: Two days after the event, Anne Pasternak, the president of Creative Time, told The New York Times's Carol Kino that the organization had provided volunteers with $25 childcare stipends.)* As for pay, since the performance is ostensibly about valuing women’s voices and time, it would also strengthen the work; Bocar makes the case that it would make it more inclusive too, by letting women who couldn't otherwise participate take part. On the other hand, looking at it sympathetically from the organizers’ point of view, even a modest stipend would have made a project on this scale unworkable, dramatically raising its cost. There is, it seems, a trade off here: You need to go big if you want to really try to make your point in the spectacular economy, but doing so makes it harder to maintain the purity of your message. This particular dialogue — about the dilemmas of art, feminism, activism, labor, and their intersections — has become a part of this work's meaning, but I think that can only enhance its legacy.