

Working Together

Suzanne Lacy discusses the role of research, in particular the interview, in feminist social practice, the complex art of co-creation, working collectively and, above all, equitably to influence public policy and bring about real change.

Suzanne Lacy interviewed by Larne Abse Gogarty



Stories of Women, *Work and Uncertain Futures*, 2024, video

Larne Abse Gogarty: Alongside working in Manchester, for close to a decade you have also produced projects in Moscow, Ireland, Pendle, Quito, Milan and elsewhere. I'm wondering how that works for you as an artist who becomes deeply involved with local communities for extended periods of time.

Suzanne Lacy: I think it sets up a different kind of practice, one where I deeply engage, over time, with groups of people in different locations. I think the long-term duration can give a project a kind of relational legitimacy. I return to communities over the years, like renewing a friendship. At the moment, I'm thinking about asking a man I worked with in Ecuador to work with me in Manchester. In a sense, these people become a kind of extended family; sometimes I feel more rooted to where I am working than where I live. It takes a lot out of me to travel and it is also financially costly. I don't make a living from my projects, I basically teach to make a living, and the project money goes to support local labour and produce the work.

Can you tell us about your process in recent projects?

I don't create alone, but rather engage in processes of co-creation with others. In projects outside where I live, I tell my producers, if you don't bring me over then we don't have a project. Institutions are used to commissioning artists who have an idea and go into a community to execute that idea - all driven by the artist's imaginary. In contrast, my work is driven by co-construction and co-creation. I usually don't know

what I am doing until I begin the process. This also serves me in terms of my character, because I'm completely fascinated by people, culture and how we talk to each other.

Can you describe the work you have been doing for Manchester Art Gallery (MAG) addressing women, work and ageing?

We started in the pandemic, and I was aware that my presentation on a screen was going to be off-putting. As well as casually asking about people's families, I rely a lot on the haptic. We were meeting weekly with our advisory group online, over Zoom, trying to understand the reality of women's work experiences over the age of 50. This was around the time the retirement age shifted for women in the UK.

Because of the social distancing at the time of the pandemic, I said to Ruth Edson, the learning manager for communities and my amazing partner at MAG, that we can only begin this project under the condition of being careful about who is part of the advisory group. We looked for leaders who worked at different levels, in different communities, on issues that pertained to our intersecting topics of women, work, migration, disability, ethnicity and so on. Ruth was joined by Sarah Campbell from Manchester Metropolitan University, and we held discussions with individuals who had experience of working with different populations in the city, but who also had lived experience of the issues we wanted to address. The advisory group was quite an empowered group of amazing women.

The complexity of co-creation requires that the first approach is often to introduce people to the idea of a social practice as art, or at least as the kind of art that I do. Often it is shared issues that pull people into the network that then produces the work. We ask, 'what is the territory we're mutually exploring?'. For this project we established a field of investigation over the first year, and ended with a rather comprehensive list of questions about what difficulties women over the age of 50 experienced in work, which of course greatly affects them as they age. The next thing we did was ask each of the women in the advisory group to choose roughly ten women to be interviewed, resulting in around 100 women that represented a real cross section of the city. Sarah was joined by another researcher from the University of Manchester, Elaine Dewhurst. They both care deeply about the issues under discussion, so together with the advisory group we constructed this area of investigation, and then we set up the first iteration of three sequential installations in the gallery. We created a room inside the gallery where we interviewed 100 women, opposite Ford Maddox Brown's painting *Work* from 1852-65. We transcribed the interviews and a sub-committee of women from the advisory group formed a research team with Sarah and Elaine. Over several months they mined the interviews for new findings. This research forms the basis for several publications and presentations, while the final set of policy recommendations are presented in the gallery, all drawn from the life experiences of approximately 100 richly diverse participants.

The project had other components, such as a subcommittee that produced work and skills workshops, and that, along with the city council, held presentations for organisations and the media, and even a 'Chai and Chat' programme inviting women in different neighbourhoods to get together and discuss their work lives and issues they faced resulting from work or lack of work. Members of the advisory group wanted to celebrate and thank the 100 women for the interviews, so we held a magnificent dinner in the gallery, where many people showed up in the dress of their countries of origin. The picture we took of them on the steps of the gallery was featured in the second gallery installation, which included a deconstruction of our lengthy work and organising process.

The third and final installation is the show that you see now, a consolidation of the policy and the research. This includes a documentary made with Ali Asadi, and Mark Thomas from Soup Collective, and a three-screen film installation, which I made and edited with Mark. Because I've done so much artwork on age discrimination, I kept thinking we were doing a project about women and ageing, but then one day Ruth said to me, you know, this is about women and work after 50. It's about labour.

How do you negotiate the relationships between all the different people and the numerous demands on a project like this - from the production of artworks to the production of policy?

I don't create alone, but rather engage in processes of co-creation with others. In projects outside where I live, I tell my producers, if you don't bring me over then we don't have a project.

The difficulty is how to navigate the line between the desire to create an idea or image - one that has implanted itself in your imagination - and the desire to care for, to be collaborative, to be equitable. I think that's a tension that you must be very conscious of in order for a project to work. I have to bring a lot of people along to create a shared image, one that might operate differently in each of us, and I have to make a lot of concessions to navigate that territory. Sometimes, though, there's a point where my aesthetic sensibility says, 'you know, I just don't want to put blue eyeballs with tears on a pink car'. Nevertheless, people simply don't stay the course if you can't negotiate differences.

The exhibition also describes the problems of the 'volunteer trap', and how women get stuck in unpaid roles. I wondered how you dealt with the issue of potentially reproducing this 'trap' in this project, whilst also ensuring that there is space for participating for reasons other than payment?

In our case we were pretty open with our extended group. Some people had payments from their jobs, others were volunteers. I received a fee, most of which was used up by the film. But the gallery team was adamant that the advisory group members were paid stipends - small ones, to be sure - that we raised from various funders. Everyone who worked on this project found it worth their effort, it was something that we all believed in.

Since the 1990s, your work has increasingly turned to address the impersonal forms of structural violence carried out by the state, rather than your earlier focus on sexual violence, where perpetrators might be singled out - although this, of course, also forms part of our culture of violence. This turn has been accompanied by an interest in working with policy and civic process. I am thinking about *The Oakland Projects*, 1991-2001, where you worked with young people over a decade and addressed issues such as schooling, the police and the media. This project in Manchester, which is similarly long in duration, has sought to address experiences of poverty, immigration and work/unemployment amongst older women. Firstly, how do you think about these different forms of violence?

Even with projects on rape and sexual assault, we were thinking about structures that supported such violence: the media, judicial policies, police practices and so on. With *In Mourning and in Rage*, 1977, made with my collaborator Leslie Labowitz, for instance, we directly challenged media conventions, suggesting that what was seen as an individual crime was actually upheld by a series of mythologies and cultural practices. So, I'd say that my early work was seeking structural change that, we naively thought, would naturally follow new understandings and perspectives from feminists such as ourselves. Our approach was the result of consciousness-raising and analysis. One of the changes is that we did not use the concept of violence as frequently as it is

used today. Whereas today you would say that the 'experiences of poverty, immigration, and work/unemployment amongst older women' is a form of violence, I think in that era, when I thought about those issues - and I did - I would have framed it as discrimination, not violence. That concept was specifically reserved, at least in my vocabulary, for physical aggression on a body. Semantics aside, I think that the notion of violence as a tool of enforcement where persuasion does not work always underlies discrimination.

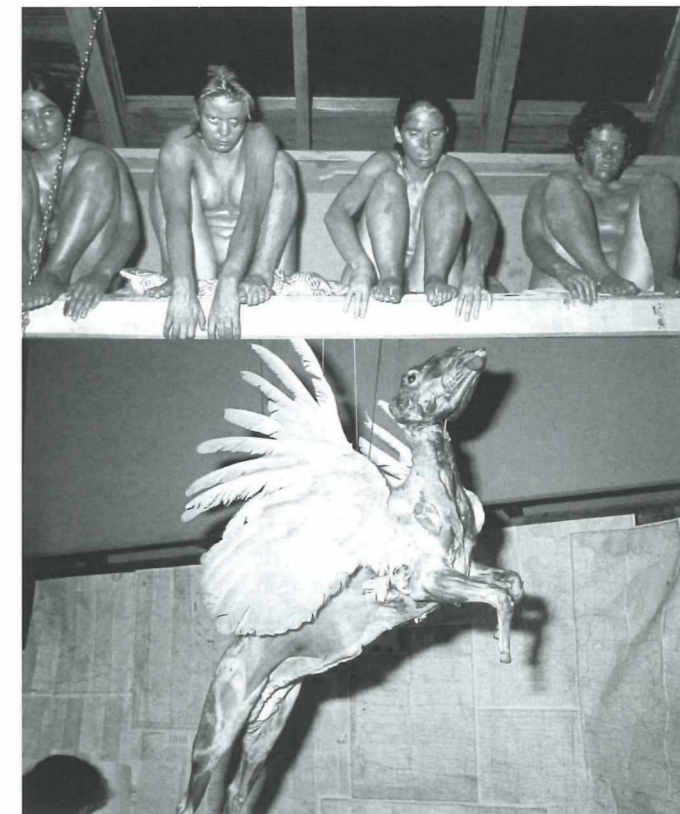
Secondly, how do you think about your artistic method in addressing these different subjects? For example, in a work like *She Who Would Fly*, 1977, the carcass of a lamb is installed amid the presentation of women's experiences of sexual violence. The performers were painted red, so the visual language of violence is used to address violence. In *The Oakland Projects* and the project in Manchester, as well as other works, you use some of the structures of the state, by making policy recommendations, to address its problems. I see a parallel in the method here.

My premedical studies in zoology influenced my engagement with carcasses, blood and entrails. I probably had less aversion to their impact on others because of this, and in fact I find such imagery, when used in non-violent ways, visually powerful. For example, Stan Brakhage's 1971 film *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* does not connote violence for me in the same way it might for others. Further, through feminism at that time, the body in performance became a politicised site. Many artists I was interested in focused on the condition of physicality that came along with consciousness, including Bruce Conner, Gina Pane and Terry Fox.

In using the symbols of violence and the structures of the state I'm taking advantage of the 'known' to challenge the unknown - for instance, using mass media in the 1970s to question the complete social silence on the subject of rape - and that includes policy work and critiquing the legal system via an artwork, since we are still governed through these methods. With *Uncertain Futures*, the results of our study were always targeted at Manchester City Council, local and national organisations, and, through the work of the researchers, toward policy change. The women on the advisory group remain committed to pushing our findings - which can be found in the gallery - on to governmental decision-makers and the public realm.

I am wondering how you persist with this kind of work, given that, over the duration of your career, many of the central issues of misogyny, poverty, racism and the abandonment by the state have arguably worsened on a global scale. How do you keep making work like this without feeling defeated?

I locate my political pessimism outside my work. Within the art project there is a lot of hope and optimism. I think of the old Antonio Gramsci saying: 'Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.' I feel that fundamentally the people I know and work with are good and want things to be better, not just for themselves but for others. This project in Manchester is a good example because, other than *The Oakland Projects*, it is probably one of the most sophisticated pieces of social practice I have been involved with. In fact, the difficulty here was finding the aesthetic forms



She Who Would Fly, 1977, performance

that could manifest this project in the art arena. As the advisory group can attest, the night before the shoot, we were still trying to figure out what the hell we were doing. But as somebody who has worked between activism and art and community organising for years, I know this particular participatory work, in art and research, is more than a symbolic one. For me, collaboration is a way of forming work through collective meaning-making, and part of our work has always been to form a supportive and expanding network around the intersecting issues of labour for women over 50.

The formal or aesthetic qualities of the interview format has a kind of pedigree within feminist art practice that complements and sometimes contradicts its associations with research, media, employment and legal processes. As well as in your own work, one could think of Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt and Mary Kelly's *Women and Work: A Document on the Division of Labour in Industry*, 1973-75, Mary Beth Edelson's *Story Gathering Boxes*, 1974-2014, or, more recently, the place of the interview in the work of Sharon Hayes. Can you reflect on the place of the interview as a feminist strategy and artistic form?

I think it's another form of multi-vocality. It has also operated as a means of historical recovery: for example, to expose the issue of rape, personal testimony was needed as people didn't know about the extent of rape then. They didn't really know the lived experience, because women didn't talk about it. While the interview today still has the potential to present multi-vocality, it might now have a different sort of function than that of exposure. I don't think that our role as artists is that of the intrepid journalist anymore, right? Because there are too many intrepid journalists running around the world, and so much social media doing that job. Anyway, exposure to new information does not guarantee a shift in people's thinking. Relying on

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the interview or testimonial as a way of exposing hidden reality no longer makes as much sense as it did when media didn't attend to women's issues.

So now the interview as an art methodology has shifted towards either a revelation of complexity or intersectionality or, as in social science, a substantiation of data, of the extent of the condition. That's why I worked with researchers from the University of Manchester and Manchester Metropolitan University: to collect lived experience but also to enter that data into the world of social science, politics and policy. In working with people from academia, we had to go through a lot of twists and turns to make the interview process comply with ethical standards, which are different from the ethical standards of an artwork.

As somebody working in a UK university, I am well acquainted with such processes of bureaucratisation, which often seek to ameliorate the way institutions continue to perpetuate forms of inequality and oppression. I wonder if you have any observations on the process of developing this project in partnership with a university-based research team.

I have always practised ethical standards in my interviews, including allowing participants editorial privileges, anonymity and gaining written consent. When Aviva Rahmani, Judy Chicago, Sandra Orgel and I did *Ablutions* in 1972, the soundtrack consisted of multiple first-person interviews of women who had been raped, most of them talking about it for the very first time. We simply did it – those codified research protocols were not then in place – we applied humane and empathic practices, because to take agency away from people who had already experienced such powerlessness was unethical in my book. In order to satisfy the professional researchers' institutional protocols for the project in Manchester, we had to work through what I thought was a tortuous process. For example, I remember our selection processes for interviewees didn't match that of one of the universities. Also,

the interviews took place in the public gallery, which did not exactly cohere with the ethics policy of a research project. Sarah Campbell did most of the work to negotiate the acceptance of our project by the two universities. The whole feminist movement in the 1970s is probably based on interviews that took place informally and were written about, without adhering to current standards. But remember, the ethics we developed were based on the sense that these were our stories. We were not distanced observers.

You have recreated or quoted some earlier works in more recent projects. *Silver Action* at Tate Modern in 2013 drew on aspects of *The Crystal Quilt, 1985–87*, and *Three weeks in January, 2012*, restaged elements of *Three Weeks in May, 1977*, as part of the Pacific Standard Time performance festival. Can you say something about what it means for you to return to these projects?

The original artworks *Silver Action* and *Three Weeks in January* responded to why I was invited by Tate Modern and Getty to do these new projects. In general, I'm not interested in recreating work, but I am interested in re-presenting installation or sculptural or video work that represents already created performances in more permanent ways. I used to think, if I had enough written, documented and filmed, that's all I would need to do for my work to remain visible. Then, with the rise of the art market in the 1990s, it became pretty apparent that I had to have some form of object or other physical representation to get things into museums; the current repositories of visual art. So one of the things I'm doing is substantiating projects that were smaller in scope, often pedagogic, like making an elegant little weeklong work in Ireland called the *School for Revolutionary Girls* into an exhibition for a show in Dundee curated by Sophia Hao. I'm doing that for several exhibitions, so I can have a say in how my earlier work is presented.



Silver Action, 2013, performance, Tate Modern



The Oakland Projects, 1991–2001



Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, *In Mourning and In Rage, 1977*

When I interviewed you around a decade ago, I asked about the formal considerations in your work and its attachment to pageantry as a template for making large-scale performances. There is a correspondence between political struggle and aesthetic form that you discussed which I found very compelling: 'those ideas that are drawn from a kind of radical perspective on oppression and class difference ... those ideas float around at key moments in time, and those ideas lend themselves to specific kinds of forms'. Do you feel we are in one of those 'key moments in time' now, and do you think this correspondence between politics and form still makes sense?

Yes, I think it is somewhat inevitable. Politics features significantly in our public and collective lives, and politics is one of the forms of cultural expression that influences artists. I do think artists are often prescient, though not necessarily articulate about the emergent cultural forms of expression and production. Today, art picks up information and new content and forms emerge. That our current condition is made of two uncontained wars, a fractured political discourse, widening income gaps and radical technological advances in the production of 'realities' is a key part of that process – one only has to go to a biennale to see this. The conflicts and the technology are on full display. In the US election right now, we are living through a contest over whether fear is more motivating than hope. I think bouncing between those poles is very disorienting for people. I am puzzled now about how to address this issue of fragmentation. I come from a community that was and still is very right wing, very Christian nationalist, so I probably understand the thinking of the white working class in the US more than most of the people I hang out with. But I still can't figure out what form of art project could actually impact these big social forces that are pulling us in two directions. What would that form be? Now you see a lot of artists focused on the issue of care. In the past, we might have framed them as equity issues, or respect issues, whereas today they might be seen as a form of 'care'. Certainly we discussed issues of care and expressed forms of care, quite broadly, in the *Uncertain Futures* project.

What do you think of this turn, particularly in relation to scale and scaling up, which I think has always been compelling to you, and why the pageant-performance form is so consistent in your practice?

I am attracted to scale aesthetically and I can turn myself over fairly readily to the experience of a spectacle. But my attachment to scale in my work in part comes from an intent to communicate to broader audiences about social ideas. You can make a very beautiful moving picture of three women over 50 talking about their work experience, but I am interested in what happens if you can get 100 women to discuss this same issue: how does scale impact the viewer differently? Scale in this piece in Manchester also operates through the time and duration of the project. The political goals of the piece create an expectation of an expanding sphere of knowledge, a larger audience.

You have been teaching for many years, and your practice is also centred on pedagogy. Can you say something about your commitment to pedagogy, and if this has changed at all?

I think if you are political, and I am, and you want things to be better in the world, which I do, you have to learn how to communicate clearly to many kinds of people. That's a form of public pedagogy that I relate to the work of people like Herb Kohl, Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, thinkers who pioneered the field of critical pedagogy. These theorists saw education as a platform that brought radical ideas to the public. I remain invested in critical pedagogy as well as having a long-term practice of teaching, not only in institutional settings but also within projects. I see these works as sites of mutual learning, for me as well as for those I work with.

I'm not sure what I would do if I didn't have oppression to deal with, I'm not sure I would be an artist. I'd probably do something else – not that I don't love making and love theatrical forms – but the meaning for me is in supporting, advocating and educating, and that probably goes back to why it's difficult for me to think about how to relate to the social division in the world right now because, at the root of it, it needs people being educated to each other's perspective. And I don't know what pedagogic art form could cross that divide, other than intimacy.

Suzanne Lacy's exhibition 'Uncertain Futures' continues at Manchester Art Gallery to 21 February.

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