

PART I. Learning to Look: The Seventies



Introduction

There was a distinct advantage to living in Southern California's nonmainstream venues during the seventies, where an experimental art grew up outside of critical scrutiny and commercial interests. Faculty from the region's numerous art schools—Allan Kaprow, John Baldessari, Judy Chicago, David Antin, Eleanor Antin, Newton and Helen Harrison, Moira Roth, and Arlene Raven, among others—provided significant and ongoing mentorship. Former art students flooded into cheap industrial buildings and formed mutually influencing friendships, among them Barbara Smith, Paul McCarthy, Susan Mogul, Chris Burden, Scott Grieger, Martha Rosler, Alan Sekula, Alexis Smith, Nancy Buchanan, Marsha Bailey, Allen Ruppersberg, Richard Newton, and Linda Burnham (who founded *High Performance Magazine*).

My writing and art of this era explored three themes: (1) identity as a consideration of the physical body, on the one hand, and specific conditions of women's lives, on the other; (2) mapping communities with respect to women's roles/experiences; and (3) popular culture/public spaces. While the content of my work ranged from the personal to the broadly social, storytelling and relationality first appeared as a result of consciousness-raising and continued to be relevant throughout the span of my career.

The concreteness of experience was communicated through one's narratives of self; personal stories were the foundation of second wave feminism, the territory we mined for its political implications. Artists and other cultural producers bore witness to previously unexplored realities. Memory was wrapped up with this, collective and individual memory, and alternate histories were constructed. The urgency to address very real injuries led to a desire to go public. Leslie Labowitz's and my work at this time made a significant contribution to cultural critique and media intervention by artists. Our work differed from that of other artists who worked within mass media—Ant Farm, for example, and Douglas Davis and Nam Jun Paik—because of our commitment to local activism.

Many performances initiated from concerns with the individual body of the performer—Chris Burden, Carolee Schneeman, Paul McCarthy, and Barbara Smith are good examples—but the political aspects of women's *particular and specific* bodies were hard to ignore in a climate of growing feminist

activism. The threat of physical violence expressed in many women's performances as vulnerability (for example, Yoko Ono, Barbara Smith, and Marina Abramovic) inspired, instead, activist performances at the hands of artists like Leslie Labowitz, the Feminist Art Workers, Jerri Allyn, Cheri Gaulke, and The Waitresses. Beneath what appeared to be two distinct types of work—that is, body-based “private” performance and large-scale public performance on violence against women—one could trace a single originating thread.