PART 2. **Political Performance Art: The Eighties**

Introduction

The often-polemic discourse that dominated the explosive days when feminist artists first struggled for recognition gave way to a more nuanced set of arguments on gender and culture influenced by continental and postcolonial theories; fractures appeared in the solidarity between women. I was interested in the aesthetics and strategies of practice *in the field*, refining a relational aesthetic of participation woven into the fabric of popular culture, exploring the borders between art and life.

My performances centralized individual storytelling within a social space of narrative. During that time they increased in scale, duration, cost, and numbers of people involved. The visual images were nested within a lengthy discursive period of preparation and social enactments. I adopted the *tableau vivant* as a theatrical form to accommodate differences through multivocal self-representation of, in one instance, over four hundred "performers." This single performative image represented the complicated development phase, with its diverse constituencies, goals, and motivations. A "performance" was a platform for temporary community, and within this community I fixed attention on essential human discourse: What, for example, are equal rights for women? How does perception of aging influence public policy? Do we outlaw victims?

By deeply engaging with people/collaborators who were neither makers nor connoisseurs of the arts, for whom the rules of the game were about social transformation, it was inevitable that I would wonder about practical and tangible, as well as aesthetic, results. The essays in this section explore political performance art, including media deconstruction, personal/political experiences, "results" of art, and differentiations from other practices such as local politics or anthropological research. In the context of an academic discourse — at that time a long way from art in communities — these essays offered ways to "read" alternative art practices and their strategies of intervention, advocacy, and collaboration. In the subsequent two decades, these practices would become part of mainstream art, but during the 1980s they were still highly contested.