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A Conversation Unfinished

Revisiting Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May*

HATTIE SCHULTZ

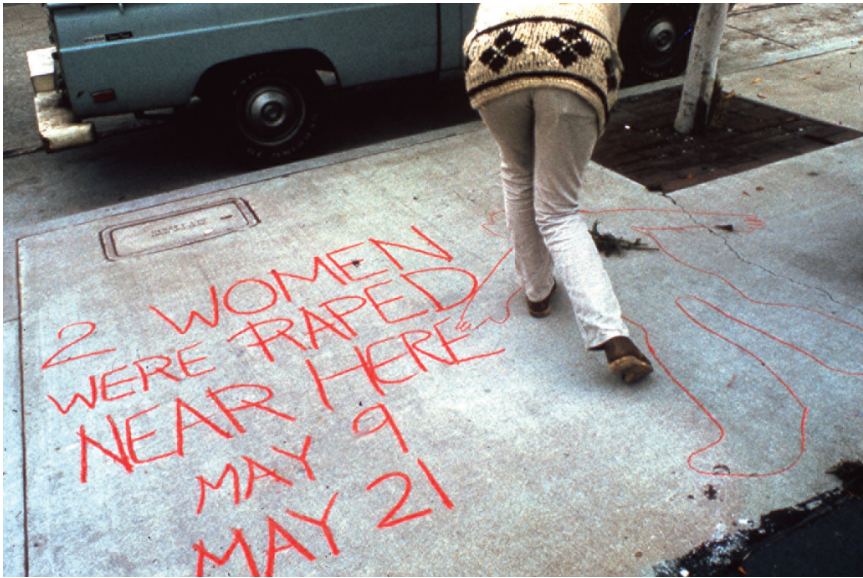


Fig. 1. Suzanne Lacy, *Guerilla Performance in Three Weeks in May*, 1977. Photo courtesy Suzanne Lacy Studio.

In May of 1977, Suzanne Lacy installed a large map of Los Angeles in front of the city's Police Department. Every day for three weeks, she obtained the previous day's rape reports from LAPD, then marked in red stencil the sites of these reports on the map. Though seemingly straightforward in concept, Lacy's seminal *Three Weeks in May* did so much more than expose the extent of reported rapes in Los Angeles.

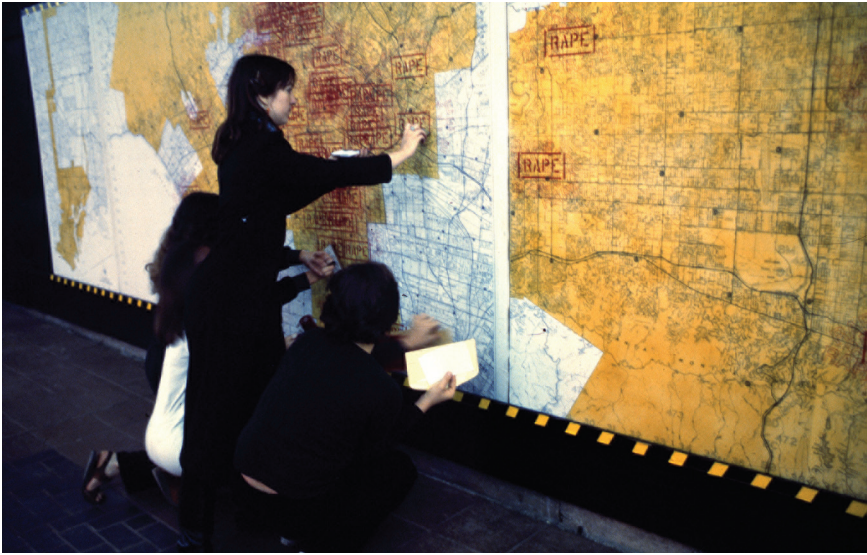


Fig. 2. Suzanne Lacy, *Three Weeks in May*, 1977. Photo courtesy Suzanne Lacy Studio.

The project marked the establishment of New Genre Public Art, “a socially engaged, interactive cultural practice that deploys a range of traditional and nontraditional media in public spaces for public audiences, intersecting activism, education, and theory.”¹ Demonstrating the political power of feminist art to a large public audience, *Three Weeks in May* was formally diverse, and included installations, speeches by politicians, interviews with hotline activists, self-defense demonstrations, speak-outs, media articles and programs, and performance art. The project gained significant media attention, and shouted a previously unspoken problem through a megaphone. In the span of three weeks, Lacy and her collaborators not only visualized the overwhelming number of reported rapes in Los Angeles, but also emphasized how awareness and education can protect and empower survivors, especially when they speak to each other. But for all that *Three Weeks in May* did, more work needed to be done.

Lacy’s more recent work puts greater emphasis on intersectional and interdisciplinary discourses, reflecting the continuous evolution of contemporary feminism in the United States. While older issues addressed by the second wave have yet to be resolved, new problems have emerged in recent years. The advancement of technology and social media has made misogynistic language and images practically unavoidable. “We have this unfortunate habit in this country of thinking that when you’ve seen something and it’s become a topic of conversation, it’s over,” says Lacy. “The real issues of violence against women

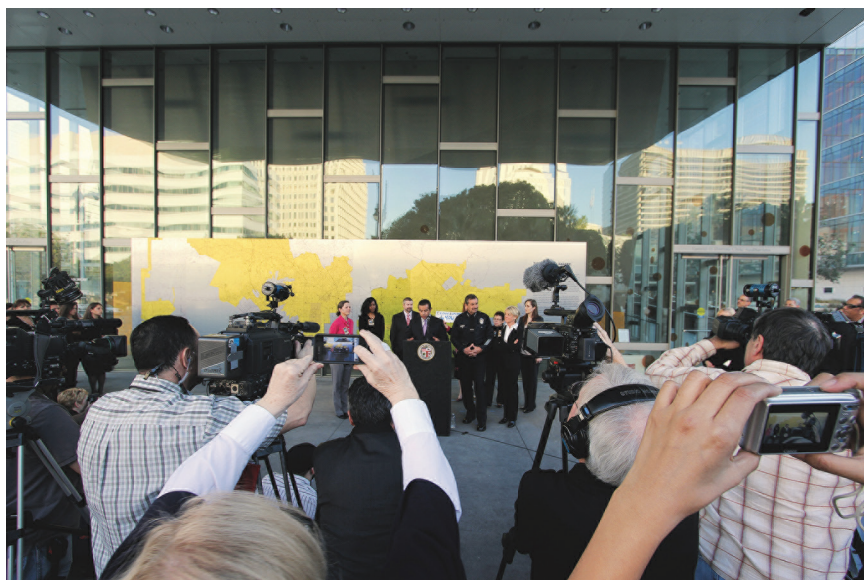


Fig. 3. Suzanne Lacy, *Three Weeks in January*, 2012. Photo by Neda Moridpour.

aren't over."² Lacy would revisit *Three Weeks in May* multiple times in her career, using her 1977 performance as a model and template to address the new issues feminists were speaking out on.

In 2012, Lacy was asked to participate in the Getty Research Institute's Pacific Standard Time Performance and Public Art Festival. While event organizers suggested she do a quasi-ritualistic performance about the Hillside Strangler, Lacy knew that furthering her anti-rape campaign was more urgent and timely.³ She chose to revisit *Three Weeks in May*, recreating key elements of the original project, though this time with a close focus on where Los Angeles stood nearly forty years into the anti-rape movement. In 1977, Los Angeles had been unofficially considered the "rape capital of the world"; while the city's reported rapes have reduced exponentially in recent decades, it remains a major issue, especially when considering all the crimes that go unreported. For this new iteration of her monumental project, titled *Three Weeks in January: End Rape in Los Angeles*, Lacy again installed a map of the city in front of the Police Department, once more using daily rape reports provided by LAPD to mark the specific locations of the crimes. Keeping collaboration and visibility as priorities, the project was the platform for fifty private and public events lead by activists, educators, media makers, politicians, and artists to address old issues as well as new ones, including sexual assaults on college campuses, rape in the military,



Fig. 4. Suzanne Lacy, *Storying Rape*, 2012. Photo by Kelly Akashi.

and rape as a strategic weapon in war. While there was extensive media coverage on *Three Weeks in January*, social media platforms like Twitter became a significant new tool and strategy for organizing. Lacy would continue to utilize social media's influence in her subsequent projects and campaigns.

In addition to recreating original performances, *Three Weeks in January* included two new works directed by Lacy. *Call to Action/Candlelight Vigil* transformed an activist rally into a collaborative performance that relied on audience participation for activation. The culminating performance, *Storying Rape*, took the form of a choreographed conversation at the top of Los Angeles City Hall. The central focus was the current state of rape narratives in the United States, and how narrative or rhetorical changes in existing stories might generate new insights on violence prevention. In a small conference room, nine leaders in activism, city politics, media, theory, service, and law enforcement discussed how the narratives describing the act of rape were being presented in various spheres, and how reframing these narratives might improve public understanding of the systemic violence against women. Witnessing the discussion was a handful of observers invited by Lacy, as well as fifteen social media reporters, who broadcasted the conversation to wider audiences through their individual platforms. Thinking critically about rape, the language surrounding it, and the action that can be taken up to prevent it, one individual from the forum commented, "I



Fig. 5. Suzanne Lacy with Megan Steinman, *Three Weeks in May Re-creation*, 2014, Pecci Museum. Photo by Zeno Zotti.

think what's happened in women's leadership has made possible a whole new conversation about these issues and services to victims and survivors."

Lacy extended the *Three Weeks in May* project for a third time in 2014, when her solo exhibition "Gender Agendas" opened at the Museo Pecci Milano. Now aiming to move decades-old conversations to new geographic terrain, Lacy did a partial reenactment of her original 1977 project, this time considering the sexual violence and gender relations in Italy, as well as Los Angeles. Over the course of three days, the Milanese iteration involved Italian feminists, art students, and museum guests marking new maps. On the first day, which correlated with the exhibition's opening, students from Nuova Accademia di Belle Arti Milano (NABA) marked approximately twenty rape locations on a map of Los Angeles while simultaneously reading aloud the 1977 police reports. Like the original performance, specific points were branded in red stencil, the mark-making now feeling like a ceremonial practice. In the evening of the second day, members from the museum audience, including men, women, and children, added more site marks to the map, again reading aloud police reports, but this time translated into Italian. This linguistic translation initiated what would soon become an intercontinental and intercultural dialogue, connecting women in the United States and Italy through shared experiences and sociopolitical val-



Fig. 6. Suzanne Lacy with Megan Steinman, *Three Weeks in May Re-creation*, 2014, Pecci Museum. Photo by Zeno Zotti.

ues. The connection was further strengthened on the third day, when Italian journalists, activist groups, and NABA students completed the map marking. What followed was a discussion on individual perceptions of and experiences with gender representation in Italian culture.

Outside of the Museo Pecci Milano, Lacy collaborated with Gianluigi Colin of Corriere della Sera's *La Lettura* magazine to further extend *Three Weeks in May*'s resonance in Italy. In a new performance, a list of femicide victim names from the past year throughout Italy was read aloud before an intimate audience at the Corriere's Milan headquarters.⁴ As the names were uttered, Lacy stamped indicators of the sites of these crimes across a map of Italy. This map would later be published as the cover image of *La Lettura* on occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

One of the more powerful elements of *Three Weeks in May* (1977)—and perhaps the most taken for granted—is that the project entailed women speaking *to each other*. In the late 1970s, men and women had completely opposite and conflicting attitudes towards rape and sexual assault, to the point where, despite Lacy's best efforts, most of *Three Weeks in May*'s male audience was unmoved. So women turned to each other. Experiences with gender violence were shared among supposed strangers, and in public spaces. Connections and common

beliefs evoked empathy and created community, paving the way for countless future artists, activists, educators, and movements. In 2017, #MeToo went viral on social media, using visual language to confront the world with the magnitude of sexual violence, much like Lacy had done in *Three Weeks in May*.⁵ More movements have followed, and will follow.

Suzanne Lacy's social practice asks us how we might continue, extend, and improve feminist activism to address present day issues. How can we put what we've learned to use? We've come a long way, but there are still new maps to be marked.

HATTIE SCHULTZ (b. 1998) is an independent curator and writer based in Los Angeles. She earned an MA in curatorial practices and the public sphere from the University of Southern California in 2024, and a BA in art history from Whittier College in 2020. Interested in the intersections of art, gender studies, literature, and psychology, Hattie's work centers feminist and queer history and theory, institutional critique, and decolonial museological practices. She has curated and co-curated three contemporary art exhibitions, and has lent her voice to numerous exhibition catalogs, wall texts, and zines for colleagues and friends.

NOTES

1. Vivien Green Fryd, "Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May*: Feminist Activist Performance Art as 'Expanded Public Pedagogy,'" *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 23.
2. Jori Finkel, "'Three Weeks' of Rapes, 35 Years Later," *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 2012.
3. Finkel, "'Three Weeks' of Rapes."
4. "Suzanne Lacy Con La 270ra: Corriere TV," Corriere TV, December 12, 2016, video, https://video.corriere.it/performance-suzanne-lacy/3a4a4cd4-7400-11e4-a443-fc65482eed13&refresh_ce-cp.
5. "Get to Know Us: History & Inception." *Me Too Movement*, July 16, 2020, <https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/>.

"THREE WEEKS IN MAY": SPEAKING OUT ON RAPE, A POLITICAL ART PIECE

Suzanne Lacy

[Editors' note: The following pages describe a unique project employing feminist art as a means of exposing and ending the rape of women. Artist Suzanne Lacy, in collaboration with other artists and performers, created a twenty-five by six-foot map of the Los Angeles area that was displayed in the downtown City Mall May 8-28, 1977. Every day, on the basis of rape statistics reported by the Los Angeles Police Department, Lacy stenciled "RAPE" in red letters on the map to designate sexual assaults reported the previous day. The map, viewed by countless shoppers, downtown workers, and tourists, was accompanied by a full schedule of public events--rallies, self-defense demonstrations, art performances, rape speakouts, readings, and panels. "Three Weeks in May," which was sponsored by the Studio Watts Workshop and the Women's Building, was designed by Lacy and her co-workers only in part as a graphic statement of women's victimization through rape; the project also focused strongly on a map of service organizations that help rape victims, as well as the large number of public activities sponsored by the agencies. Collaboration among the artists--Lacy, Barbara Cohen, Melissa Hoffman, Leslie Labowitz-Starus, and Jill Soderholm, and among community agencies, women's groups, and information systems created an unprecedented and powerful venture coming the arts and the "real world."

The following speech was given by Suzanne Lacy on May 25, 1977.]

Suzanne Lacy is an artist, teacher, and feminist activist who lives in Los Angeles. As an artist Lacy has dealt with the lives of women through books, photography, and performance art; and in 1972 she published a graphics book titled Rape Is, which describes the varieties of assaults on women stemming from attitudes about rape. Lacy has taught in feminist art programs in colleges and universities, including the University of California at San Diego and the University of California at Los Angeles Extension, and has been integrally connected with the West Coast feminist art movement since its inception. Lacy currently teaches at the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles and at the San Francisco Art Institute. In her work as a feminist educator she has been concerned with the personal as well as the artistic development of women within the context of a women's community.

—Dell Fitzgerald-Richards, *The Rape Journal*

is an art conception created to bring information to the public on rape in Los Angeles, a FEMINIST organizational activity, designed to share information on women moving out of victimization. From May 8 to May 28 a twenty-five foot map of the city will be installed in the City Mail, with daily demarcations of the location of the previous day's rapes as reported to the Los Angeles Police Department. Public presentations, performances, and media events will take place throughout the city during these three weeks to dramatize the issue and publicize the work of the various organizations engaged in rape preventive activities.

2:30 a.m. this morning
This incident occurred in a church parking lot in Devonshire, Granada Hills. Suspect jumped over a wall, grabbed victim by neck and stated "don't scream."

2:50 a.m. this morning
This incident occurred in the Venice area. Victim parked with date in car. Suspect approached with shotgun. Suspect threatened to kill victim with knife and shotgun.

4:00 a.m. this morning
This incident occurred in the Watts area. Victim was in bed in her apartment. Suspect pulled gun, ordered victim to get up and get dressed. Suspect began beating victim about head with gun. Suspect forced victim into vehicle.

5:55 a.m. this morning
This incident occurred in the Wilshire District. Victim was walking on sidewalk. Suspect approached from rear. Choked victim. Stated "be quiet or I'll blow your head off."

11:00 a.m. this morning
This incident occurred at the victim's residence in the southwest area of LA. Victim talked to suspect in liquor store. Suspect knocked on victim's door and victim let him in. Suspect stated he wanted some "Hanky panky." Victim refused. Suspect hit victim about face and head with fists. Victim possibly lost consciousness.

4:00 p.m. this afternoon
This incident occurred in San Pedro. Suspect no. 2 and victim previously engaged. Suspects gave victim a ride. Suspect no. 1 ordered victim to take off her pants. Suspect no. 1 forced victim to have sexual intercourse. Suspect no. 2 then forced victim to have sexual intercourse.

5:30 p.m. this afternoon
This incident occurred in the Venice area. Suspect grabbed victim in victim's yard. Suspect knocked victim to ground and jumped on top of her. Suspect hit victim. Victim blew whistle in suspect's ear and ran to her car.

7:30 p.m. this evening
This incident occurred in the downtown Los Angeles area. Suspect approached victim as victim was proceeding to bus stop. Suspect grabbed victim's arm and twisted it behind her . . .

Rape is such a paradoxical subject that it is seen by one sex as the most dreaded catastrophe of their lives (next to death itself), by the the other, as a joke. During these last weeks, men have approached the maps, over and over, with comments like, "Is this where the action is?" and "Now women know where to get their fun." What is being exposed here is the myth that women want to be raped. What is being shown is that men genuinely see the subject of rape is a manner diametrically opposed to the way that women see it.

What this map is about, what the whole project is about, is women speaking out to each other, sharing the reality of their experience. By exposing the facts of our rapes, the numbers of them, the events surrounding them, and the men who commit them, we begin to break down the myths that support the rape culture.

Since May 8 there have been eighty-six rapes and attempted rapes reported to the Los Angeles Police Department--over five a day. Estimates from crime statisticians suggest that the real number might be as high as fifty a day. Since Mother's Day, two-and-one-half weeks ago, eighty-six rapes have been reported.

The maps do not show you where to go and where not to go, what to do and what not to do. The truth is that no place is safe. Children are raped in their homes by their fathers; women are picked up off the streets in broad daylight, and are raped in their beds at night as well. It seems clear to say that women should not hitchhike: seventeen of the eighty-six were raped while accepting a ride or offering a ride to a stranger or an acquaintance. But twenty-one were raped at night in their own beds. Should we not stay at home either? We all know not to walk the streets late at night: thirteen of the eighty-six were raped while doing so--and twenty-three were picked up off the streets in broad daylight. One woman was raped by her bus driver when she fell asleep before the end of the route. Another was raped at five o'clock in the afternoon as she sat in her office. Women are offered help when their cars break down and are raped instead. Women are offered medicine when they are sick and are raped instead. Women go to parties with men they think are friends and end up being gang-raped instead. It's clear from the facts of the map, it's clear from the reality of women who speak out on their rapes, that there is no privileged or protected group of women. It's not who you don't know: 34 percent of rapists are known to their victims. It's not your age: four girls aged eleven and under, the youngest of whom was five, were raped this past two-and-one-half weeks; one elderly woman was raped and beaten. It's not where you are: two nights ago a woman was raped right here in the mall.

Rape is not sexual. Rape is an act of aggression of one class, men, against another, women. When women begin to recognize their identification with other women and to know that there is no woman free from the threat of sexual assault, when women recognize rape as an attempt to maintain the power imbalance between men and women, they will begin speaking out, fighting back, and changing attitudes and actions by showing one-half the world the reality of the other half.

[The wide variety of public activities in "Three Weeks in May" is shown in the schedule of events, which follows.]

"Three Weeks in May": Schedule of Events

May 9 12 noon	Installation ceremonies, with city officials, representatives from the Hotline Alliance, and sponsoring organizations. City Mall.
May 11 9:30 a.m.	Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women speaks to the Southern California Committee for International Women's Decade.
May 11 1:00 p.m.	Discussion with the Artists of "Three Weeks in May." City Mall.
May 14	Coalition on Battered Women presents "Battered Women: A Time for Action." University of Southern California.
May 16 11:45 a.m.	Readings from the Map, Suzanne Lacy on CLOSE Radio.
May 18, 19	Self-Defense Demonstration, Betty Brooks. Sponsored by "Women's Pursepower Jobs." Los Angeles Trade Technical School.
May 19 12:30 p.m.	Women Against Violence Against Women speak. Los Angeles Trade Technical School.
May 20 11:00 a.m.	Self-Defense Demonstration, Mary Conroy. ARCO Plaza.
May 20 11:00 a.m.	Talks by the Sheriff's Department, the East Los Angeles Hotline, and a Self-Defense Demonstration by Yvonne Beatty. Sponsored by Women in County Government.
May 20, 21 1-5 p.m.	Art Performance and Testmonial Event, Part 1, Suzanne Lacy. A private sharing for women only.
May 21 8-10 p.m.	Art Performance, Part 2, Suzanne Lacy. Installation open to the public, one night only. Garage Gallery.
May 22 2:00 p.m.	Rape Speakout. Public testimonial, workshops, self defense, music, and readings. Sponsored by the Alliance of Rape Crisis Hotlines. For women only. The Woman's Building.
May 23 12 noon	Street Performance, "Myths," Leslie Labowitz-Starus. Self-Defense Demonstration for Senior Citizens. City Mall.

May 23 8:30 p.m.	Gail Abarbanel speaks to the Studio City Parents Cooperative Preschool.
May 24 12 noon	Street Performance, "All Men Are Potential Rapists," Leslie Labowitz-Starus and the Los Angeles Men's Collective. Discussion following. City Mall.
May 24 12 noon	Women Against Violence Against Women speak at Pasadena City College.
May 25 12 noon	Street Performance, "All Men Are Potential Rapists," Leslie Labowitz-Starus and the Los Angeles Men's Collective. Discussion following. City Mall.
May 26 12 noon	Street Performance, "Women Fight Back," Leslie Labowitz-Starus. Self-Defense Demonstration, Cathy Barber. City Mall.
May 26 1:00 p.m.	Self-Defense Demonstration, Mary Conroy. ARCO Plaza.
May 27	Women Against Violence Against Women speak at the Association for Humanistic Psychology Conference.
May 28 2:00 p.m.	Panel on Feminist Social Art, Association of Humanistic Psychology Conference.
May 28 4:30-6:30	Reception, closing of the piece. City Mall.

Art activities for private audience: Cheri Gaulke and Barbara Smith, performance and banquet; Melissa Hoffman and Anne Gaulden, performance; Laurel Klick, activities at the sites of rape incidents.

Other participating organizations: City Attorney's Office, Commission on Public Works, Los Angeles County Commission on the Status of Women, East Los Angeles Hotline, Los Angeles Police Department, Sheriff's Department, Ocean Park Community Center Women's Shelter.

[This project was initially planned as a single map which would reflect the ongoing process of daily assault. This essentially visual image was expanded because of a series of political and aesthetic decisions resulting from the desire not to create a completely helpless portrait of the raped woman, and to extend further into the political sphere by using the media and public events to continue the direction of public awareness. Classical "fine art" performances were intermingled with street theatre, public addresses, and media presentations to create an expanded theatre with many forms of actors which addresses a mass audience.

After the closing of the City Mall show, the maps and documentation of the piece will travel to the Bologna Arts Fair, and to Paris and Amsterdam.

Lacy explains the rationale for art and politics in the presentation of rape.]

Feminist art is art created out of the unique consciousness of being female. That consciousness implies an awareness not only of the singular treatment afforded to one because of gender, but also an awareness of one's relatedness to other members of that group. It implies a knowledge of the history of women, of their treatment as a class, of their struggles to emerge from oppression. It further implies a belief in the strength and positivity of those characteristics to transform culture in the direction of equality for all.

Putting the consciousness into one's art means that this art will reflect a point of view which might at first be unrecognizable to the dominant male culture, since it is foreign to it. The forms the work assumes may or may not differ from those of current art, but the strongest of such work frequently begins to take on the forms particular to the perceptions, and hence they may be somewhat unexpected.

Strong feminist art might or might not be obviously political; by virtue of its expression of an oppressed cultural experience, it will always in fact be political. In the most directed of such art its purpose (and contrary to the myth of functionless art as high art, it does have a purpose) is to provide information about women's experience, invite an exchange with its audience on the issues raised, and ultimately to transform culture. Feminist art is always concerned with communication with its audience. It cannot rest on prior assumptions or conventions about the nature of art; it must create its own basis for audience understanding.

"Three Weeks in May" is directly political and feminist art. By displaying the reality of rape and by highlighting activities of women working in rape prevention, we recreate models for social change in an art experience, generate fuller viewer/audience participation, and direct action for meaningful change.