



[Home](#) | [Seminars](#) | [Speakers' Profiles](#) | [Core Participants](#) | [Programme Structure](#) | [PDF List](#) | [Bibliography](#) | [About us](#)

## **Working in public seminar series: Art, Practice and Policy**

### **Seminar 2: Representation and Power**

#### **23 May 2007, Morning Lecture**

**Anne Douglas** Good morning, everybody and welcome back. This morning's session is going to take a slightly different form from last night. Tom gave us a great deal to think about. Suzanne is now going to talk about one of the projects within the Oakland series. This project particularly speaks to the issues of power and representation. A dialogue between Tom and Suzanne will follow to explore some of the issues that are raised by the project and that you raised last night. Then we will have a question and answer session.

We would like to change the dynamic of the room and make a semi-circle to encourage more discussion.

Before I hand over to Suzanne, I just want to point to the team that is behind *Working in Public*. An initiative like this is dependent upon some very special and important people. Professor Carole Gray is the Research Professor at Gray's School of Art. Reiko Goto-Collins is an environmental artist and also the project manager for *Working in Public*. Jonathan Claxton, Sarah Males and Lois Carson are also part of the Gray's team. Fiona Dean is here representing the Public Art Resource+Research, Scotland on behalf of the Scottish Arts Council. We also have a steering group that includes Chris Fremantle and Tim Collins. I would just like to thank all of those people.

#### **The Oakland Projects: Teen pregnancy**

**Suzanne Lacy** I am really excited to be here. I am a recent convert to Anne Douglas' thinking on the seminar series. She (I thought at the time rather tediously) presented me with a transcript of our last conversation and, on reading it, I discovered some incredibly interesting questions raised by the core group. I began to get a sense of how this dialogic practice will work for me. I was very interested and excited about chewing on some of those questions. I am still very much in the process and look forward to our conversation today.

I am going to show you one of the Oakland Projects today, and then Tom and I will entertain questions for each other. I have some issues I am really interested in asking him about. We will also address your questions. Last night these questions began to bubble to the surface in an exciting moment. I feel we are going to have a really great conversation and I am looking forward to the chance to learn from it.

For those of you who do not know, the Oakland Projects took place over the course of ten years, 1990-2000. They involved some nine major performance installations and a series of other kinds of activities from public policy decisions to education programmes. I am going to talk about the one that is the least visible – probably for reasons of representation, although, paradoxically, it is the one that did end up in an art gallery. This project is called *Expectations 1997*.

Teen pregnancy is an obvious issue that impacts the young people in Oakland. I could see when I was working in the school system that when a young woman got pregnant, she very often dropped out of public school. Even though there were no overt laws or rules at that time against pregnant teenagers being in school, they nevertheless ended up dropping out. Pregnant teenagers in Oakland in California were centralised in several public policy debates – some overt and some covert. I will talk a little bit about those.

The real reason that I began to explore teen pregnancy was because, in *Roof is on Fire* 1993-4, several young people (particularly the women) began to talk about it as one of the key issues for them. It revolved around, among other things, coercion and the kind of environment they found themselves in – but also education. After pregnancy and after they had a child, they began to bring forward lots of issues about the school system.

I am going to start by showing two film clips from *Roof is on Fire*. These are very short, about three minutes each. These clips will demonstrate the issue as it began to come up with the young women. It will show one of the young women planners from that group of youth leaders, Randy Thomas, who will talk about her experience as a young mother. I will use these clips as a preface for talking about *Expectations*.

#### **Teens Talking**

**Brandy**

**Suzanne Lacy** You see some of the level of the discourse that goes on among young people and the competing forces that exist within Oakland. Cultural values are part of it. The role of motherhood is held differently in different cultures: in a Latino culture, in African-American culture and in White culture, and across different social classes. It is a very contested area. Added to that, there is no substantial sex education in public schools, certainly nothing that goes above the mechanical. Now with right-wing forces (right-wing religion), even those kinds of conversations are being short-cut in schools.

Despite that the young people are extremely sophisticated. In Oakland there are a lot of studies and speculation that, because of hormones and foods, young people – particularly in lower income groups – mature quicker, menstruate earlier. So there is that territory of the biological. There is, in addition, the cultural surround with rap music and entertainment that brings the issue of sexuality to the foreground - the male position on sexuality and the female as a counter position. Culture effectively becomes more sexualised.

A couple of facts that are relevant: in teenage life, there is a higher incidence of sexual abuse now than when I was growing up. They say that, in America, one out of eight teenage girls will have been beaten by her boyfriend before she gets out of high school. Mike Males, the sociologist, suggests that sexuality as it relates to race and reproduction as it relates to culture are extremely loaded. The image of pregnant teenagers operates politically in a variety of ways that are worth analysing.

The other statistic is that the teen pregnancy rate was higher in 1950 than it is today (in America) but the unwed pregnancy rate is higher today than it was in 1970. What are the influential factors? In the 70s feminism made it more acceptable for women to have babies outside of wedlock, on their own. In 1950 soldiers came home from the war. Teen mothers were having more babies at that time within marriage. The incidence of unwed pregnancy, I think, was higher in the age group 35 to 45. There are strange statistics that give lie to the mythology.

My favourite statistic from this whole field of enquiry is that most teenage girls who are pregnant in the environment of Oakland had their first sexual experience with an adult male. By 'adult' I mean over 18. That does not necessarily mean that she got pregnant. As Mike Males said, you could look at teen pregnancy as an issue of female promiscuity or you could look at it as an issue of adult predation on non-adult girls. It depends on how you play the statistics. This is one field of operation for this project, and the second field of operation is schools.

[<back to menu](#)

#### **The issue of authority**

Throughout the Oakland Projects, my feet were held at the fire repeatedly by the young people I worked with. What I mean by that is that I had to incorporate the very weighty responsibility of youth development within every project. There was no way the young people I worked with were going to allow me to develop a project where I came in, worked with the top, worked with the issues and re-represented it if they did not get something out of it. The question was always, 'What are we getting out of it?'. This was not an easy situation, nor was it a capitulation to either youth development or art production. It is a continuing negotiation and a constantly evolving set of questions that could always come up around the issue of power.

While representation is an issue, I think at bottom, one of the things that we are getting excited about in this conversation, is power. So, let me start with the project.

[<back to menu](#)

#### **Expectations: the educational programme**

In 1997, I was still working with Sheila Jordan, an educator who had become a City politician in Alameda County Office of Education, which is the county-wide umbrella for education. They had a small programme called Comprehensive Team Pregnancy and Parenting Program. It was not working very well in many of the schools. The high drop-out rate was significant. I suggested to Sheila, 'Why don't we have an education programme that is also a work of art? It will be a performance, and we will design a curriculum based on art that will work with these young women.'

There was a whole team of us. Leuckessia Hirsh from *Roof is on Fire* became a teacher in this project along with Amana Harris. Unique Holland (who I might have pointed out in one of these projects) was with me in all the projects and became a co-author of the final project. Unique was a teacher. She developed video diaries of these young women.

We found a site at the YWCA. We raised money and created a two-course summer programme that was accredited within the High School system. We had meals brought in so the young women had food. We raised transportation money so they did not have that expense. We created our very own day-care centre downstairs (which was probably a mistake in terms of my own energy). Everyday, 36 teenagers, either pregnant or parenting, all below the age of 18 (the youngest 13), came for six weeks straight to a summer art program or class. They brought their babies and we housed them downstairs. The class was a very enriched curriculum (fig1 and fig 2).

There were artists, architects and poets involved including a woman from England and a woman from Chicago apart from the others I have already mentioned. There were about six in the team teaching. Now, you may wonder why you need six teachers for 36 women – but if you have got some sense of the quality of conversation going on in those cars in *Roof is on Fire*, you will begin to understand why we needed six teachers for 36 women. Of the 36 who enrolled, 32 completed. This was a remarkably high rate for this endeavour.

Each week we started with the body because we found that young women did not talk about their bodies and the changes that were happening to their bodies. They talked about sexuality, the baby and the social condition that young women lived in. From the time she got pregnant the young woman became the bearer of the baby and in a sense her life was dramatically transformed. Imagine that you are 13 or 15 and a young woman going through puberty. Imagine on top of that, your body is expanding because you are pregnant. The hormonal fluctuations, obviously, are fairly profound. We had them writing. We had them reading texts on teen pregnancy, on literature and so on. We had them doing

exercises. Physical exercise was very important to them. Throughout this course of six weeks we got them to do large life-size drawings of their body and of their relationships. The very big, drawings were reduced to a smaller scale and ended up in the installation. Two or three of them worked with a poet who selected writing from their journals. Working with a graphic designer, we made a document that at the end of the project was sent to legislators and politicians across the State.

Every girl got to develop a video diary of her experience of her body, which they completed each week supported by Unique.

Each week there was a different theme, starting with them and their bodies. The next week was about relationships with the baby's father, all of the issues within that relationship and their feelings about it. Throughout this process they developed a series of drawings about the chaos in their lives, their desire to eat food and so on. These drawings are pretty incredible.

The next week was about their relationships with their family systems. The following week was about the various social services they intersected with - primarily, obviously, the health system. The final week was about their relationships with the public sector and they looked at things like policies (to the degree that we could get them to).

Policies were being formulated around welfare with teen pregnancy at the centre of it. The young women came with a lot of sophisticated experience and observations. They did not necessarily put the whole thing together. They certainly did understand when people turned around and looked at a girl with a big belly on a bus. They understood the permission that members of the public gave themselves to touch the young woman's belly or to comment on her state. Those people would often be white and the girl often, though not exclusively, would be black. That was something that they talked about repeatedly. It shows an awareness of the way their image operated on a local level.

[<back to menu](#)

### **Expectations: the exhibition**

Finally, at the end of the six weeks, they developed an exhibition. They put a lot of artwork into baby cribs. All through the floor of this YWCA they had their installation. They brought their families. I think about 100 people came and watched them go through this graduation ceremony (fig 3). You may know of Barbara Lee of the State Congress of anti-war fame as the only woman who stood up to Bush in Congress. She wrote a certificate that was given out. We had graduation speakers. This woman, Richonne, was one of the graduation speakers. They performed a dance that Unique worked with them on. The ceremony was then the end of what I would call Part 1.

Part 2 was an additional eight weeks and took the form of an installation at Capp Street Gallery, San Francisco. Now Capp Street Gallery functions like Tramway here. Maybe it is not as extensive in terms of media, but it is the gallery for avant garde art installation in San Francisco. I had been asked, two years prior, to do a project and this is the one I selected.

We were faced with the issue of how to represent the young women in a context of engaging them in the installation in some way. This was not taking the work to New York or to Los Angeles, but working with it in San Francisco, which is adjacent to Oakland. We used it as an opportunity to bring the young women, and engage them in a variety of ways in both the opening and, for about 15 of them, the actual production of the work.

We worked with an architect who designed a giant crib (fig 4). Unique as a sound video designer developed a series of sound tracks from the young women's video diaries including very graphic descriptions of the body and the pregnancy. We used their drawings reduced from a very large scale. The 15 who continued to work with us created unfired clay sculptures that were embedded in the exhibition (fig 5). All of them came to a symposium where their experience was centralised along with Health Care. The symposium was moderated by Arnold Perkins, the Head of Public Health and politicians. The discourse was developed through the mixture that we always brought in, which is institutional, political, service providers and the young women themselves.

At Capp Street we had that conference followed by an opening. This opening was in an auxiliary gallery - a big park surrounded by dot.com enterprises and consequently very 'trafficked' during lunch hour. In the Garage Gallery, as it was called, we built a crib that fitted the size of the gallery to the exclusion of anything else. The Garage Gallery has a glass door and when the door was rolled down we had phrases from the young women's writings in vinyl letters so the audience peered through their writings into the space. From outside the gallery as you looked through, you could see the giant crib and hear Pete Wilson (who was the Governor of California's State of the State) repeating a section of a speech over and over again. Pete Wilson is saying, 'And of course, as unwed motherhood increases, so does the rate of ...' and then he listed the litany of prison building, crime, mental health problems - pretty much everything that was going on socially in California at the time. This speech is made in the middle of the debate concerned with the dismantling of welfare in the United States.

Unique then made a video tape depicting Pete Wilson talking in slow motion but without the actual sound. His voice could only be heard from the outside, disconnected from any imagery. You could only get into the gallery through the back so you could still hear Pete Wilson's voice projected from outside. During the day the glass doors were rolled up and you could walk right in off the street. You heard Pete talking - over and over.

On either side of the giant crib, you were forced into a very constricted space (fig 6). It evoked an overwhelming sense of child-bearing. As you went along you could face the crib (which was not very interesting), or you could face a collective narrative that started with 'My date out and how I met Harry' and went to 'When Harry and I first made love'. The narrative then continues at the back on a green chalk board with a chalk board railing.

What I loved about this piece was the imagery. The collective statement was pretty powerful. Everything from the image of a young woman's water breaking, to several scenes of child-birth which are, I think, incredibly gorgeous. Some of them were more graphic than others (fig 7).

At the back at the chalk board, you had the ability to climb inside the crib. The inside was chaos (fig 8). It took the shape of a schoolroom, its desks in disarray. Presiding at the front was Pete Wilson talking out of synch and all the legislators applauding out of synch. It was a kind of slow motion, so you got a weird experience of him at the head of the classroom, visually dominating as the teacher would, but his voice was coming from outside. It did not quite connect with the image. Inside, there was one small television set - that was the only sound that you heard in this space. It is one of the young women, Asha Zitani, who is reading a letter to Pete Wilson. It was actually pretty funny. She said, among other things, 'Dear Pete Wilson, You call us illegitimate, but what about all those politicians who are up there having affairs?' In the earphones were collective narratives (or sound tracks) on individual topics. Unique developed these. Then you could see the schools, the child-bearing, the judicial system, and so on, as unfired clay sculptures.

We invited some of the young women to come in and graffiti the school desks. As you went back outside, Blanca Rodrigo's narrative ended, 'Oh my God, I finished school' (fig 9).

That is pretty much the project. There were a lot of aspects to it, but I do not want to go into too many of them. I think what we should do now is entertain two or three questions about the structure of the project or other issues. Then let us launch into inviting Tom up and having a conversation.

[<back to menu](#)

### **Adult Involvement in Expectations**

**Speaker** How were adults involved in the project?

**Suzanne Lacy** There were a lot of ways. We always try to involve parents. Frankly, some of the staff needed more emotional support than the young girls for a variety of reasons and not all were to do with the project. Some had personal reasons. We not only had a very enriched teaching staff but we also had access to a lot of facilities including Mental Health. The girls were broken down into small groups so they were core groups with a core mentor.

The question is critical. Frankly, there is no way that an art system in this environment can create adequate and appropriate support for the children. I ended up doing things like going to hospitals. We ended up hiding a girl when her

abusive boyfriend came by and taking a kid to the hospital when she had bladder infection that had not been tended to. The people working on the project as staff took care of those kinds of issues. The real truth is, the systems do not exist for them and an art project is not going to suddenly create them.

There is a human ethical responsibility: when you work with people, you know them and care for them. That is a normal relationship.

[<back to menu](#)

#### **Curatorial Dynamics of *Expectations***

**Monica Vykoukal** (core group) I was curious about the curatorial dynamics of the project. Was it left entirely to the teen mothers or was it headed by the team mentors?

**Suzanne Lacy** Do you mean the construction of the first part of the project or the installation ?

**Monica Vykoukal** The installation.



**Suzanne Lacy** OK. I'm pointing that out, because neither was. While it was participatory education, the teachers authored the programme in their role as educators. Those teachers were carefully selected to be people that represented the young women and included individuals I had worked with before. So the authors of the education programme were a mixed group of people: mixed race, mixed age, mixed social position – but all educators in one way or the other.

Both teachers got pregnant during the course of this project. Maybe it is like menstruation. When women work together, they menstruate together. One was happily wed. The other was not.

For the art project it was the same. There were young people representing the young women. There were young people from prior projects that had become quite accomplished in their ability to critique, to challenge and to formulate imagery. There were people of all races. There were people of different art media, from architecture to performance to visual art and so on. The installation was authored by artists and the educational programme was authored by educators. Everything used in the work was approved by the individual involved. Every young woman's drawing and every audio voice was approved by that young woman. The young women created the drawings and the clay sculptures. Did they design the crib? No. Did they have an input into it? Yes.

These are very complex negotiations, which is why I am going into detail about it. They are not one-liners. I think this is really key to the issue of power: I can satisfy you in some way by figuring out what it was you were really looking for, but the truth of the matter is, not everybody will be satisfied by any practice. It is really important to lay out the complexities of these negotiations.

[<back to menu](#)

#### **Capp Street as a venue**

**Tom O' Sullivan** What was the response of the art community to the second part to the installation, considering the kind of space that Capp Street is as an important gallery?

**Suzanne Lacy** There was not a lot of response. I think social practice saw Capp Street in 1997 (when the project was done) as pretty acceptable. There was not a lot of critical discourse. I do not think it was seen as much by the art world as it would have been had it been, for example, in the Museum of Modern Art. Our choice of location was a choice that took the work a little bit out of a strictly art venue to populate the audience. We did not seek art coverage particularly. It was not bad if it happened, but in that instance, at that time, whether it featured in the arts section in the San Francisco Chronicle, was not a huge issue.

[<back to menu](#)

#### **The Legacy of the Oakland projects**



**Kerstin Mey**, (core group) How has the memory of that practice been preserved?

**Suzanne Lacy** In Oakland?

**Kerstin Mey** Yes, in Oakland and in general.

**Suzanne Lacy** In general, I could not tell you. I think, in general, those artists (who were many) who participated over those ten years, carry the legacy in some way in their own working practice. There is a kind of mythic legacy to the work. For example the phrase *Roof is on Fire* is a catch phrase among activists around Oakland referring both to the particular project in 1993-4 and also youth voice in public. This is largely because a documentary film was made locally and it was broadcast several times on television.

*Code 33* (the project was 1998-2000) is a also catch phrase. I was approached by a group who said, we want to do a *Code 33* with our teachers. We want you to help us to do that performance.

That local level, which is not grand, is just what exists in the memory of the community. We were funded locally. It was very interesting that the most radical funding agency (one of them) that was not located in the community did not fund us. They were worried about our exploitation of youth. The other one, which was the one embedded in the community and a very radical agency, gave us five times the amount that the other one did. I felt an honour to receive that funding. It was really a validation of 'we understand your work in this community'.

The interesting memory is the one that resides in people's heads. I still get emails. I got an email from Delilah Dimes a year ago who said, 'My boyfriend of 15 years who was my fiancée of 15 years, died in a shoot-out. I know that when I was a sophomore in high school, the two of us were in *Roof is on Fire* and I wonder if you have any video footage.' I began to have conversations with Delilah and I went back and interviewed her for this thesis project. It was very interesting the way it lived in her memory: not as some big momentous experience, but an experience that she was glad she participated in and she understood why we did it.

One year I was driving down in Oakland and Richonne was standing on a notorious corner where all the drug dealers hung out. I immediately stopped my car in the middle of the street (which you can do in a ghetto), jumped out and went over to the sidewalk and said, 'What are you doing on this corner? I haven't seen you *forever*. How are you doing? Did you have any more babies?' Then, 'Why are you on this street corner, Richonne? This is not the street corner you should be on – you know that. What's going on?' We were re-establishing the contact.

Unique and I were talking just before I came here, 'Where is Kessia now? What's going on with her?' Leuckessia was the teacher in *Expectations*. Just before I left I got a phone call from Unique as she was walking around the park in Oakland. She says, 'Guess who is on the other line', and she hands me the phone and it is Leuckessia. So, in that small community, that memory of the projects live as a series of relationships. What we, in the relationship did, is almost second to that. It is not that the work lives, it is that the relationships live.

I think we should go on now and shift this to the conversation to all of you.

It occurred to me, looking at your questions in the last seminar, that it was very profitable to allow you to lay down a topic. In the last seminar Grant and I responded after the questions and it seemed to work well. I do not know if you want to do it right now from the get-go or if you want to move in when Tom and I have explored our questions with each other. I really do not want this to be a conversation where you and I are in constant dialogue back and forth, but one where we lay out a territory. I think there are some exciting, critical and loaded issues that this group of people could be very instrumental in thinking through.

[<back to menu](#)

### **The gallery as a venue for *Expectations***

**Tom Trevor** Can I start then with a simple basic question? Why did you want to present the project in a gallery?

**Suzanne Lacy** Because I love making visual things. I am very visually oriented. I would make that work in any gallery space – but that particular gallery space, and that particular location, continue to operate within the field of politics that I had set up, both the mass cultural politics and the specifically local.

In this work, *Expectations*, you opened the door, and there was the artwork as a walk through. You did not go through a portal like here at the CCA. The artwork was quite visible from the street. I would probably have also done this in the Museum of Modern Art. The reason that it was ok for me to work in the gallery was because the girls were part of that process, of the opening and setting up. In other words, they inhabited the space.

Somebody asked about PR. There was a load of local media, not art media. The girls were the ones that talked. The whole gallery piece was for them to go to San Francisco, to make the journey to become verbal in front of a conference, to speak before the media. It was an act of taking charge of their experience.

For me, there were other agendas. A lot of them had to do with the ability to make that giant crib. I spent hours reducing those xeroxes and just loving the way the drawings looked, putting them together, thinking about the body experience inside the space. I found those very exciting things to think about. We could have made the work outside of a gallery but, in this case, it was better done inside a gallery.

You could have put it in a mall. That would have been interesting.



**Tom Trevor** In a sense, you have got a set of relationships, and the dialogues that came out of that. But then, it seems a very different activity, the word was substantive, to have an object in a gallery space. Would it have been a weaker project without the gallery manifestation?

**Suzanne Lacy** You know, it is unusual – in all of the series of Oakland projects, *Expectations* is the only one that *did* take place in a gallery. In the afterglow, I see it almost like two projects that are deeply linked - the one drawing more on the resources of the research than the other.

We did one other project. We were invited to go to Japan. We could have done anything, but decided to do *No Blood, no Foul*, the basketball project that originally happened in Oakland 1995-6. In Japan on 1996 it was in the middle of a huge warehouse space. It consisted of a number of interactive projects brought together in Tokyo as part of an attempt to introduce this form of practice to Tokyo and to Tokyo artists. We developed a huge basketball court – probably like this room: big fences along both sides. Embedded were video monitors with police and youth talking about their experiences on the streets in Oakland but they were all talking in Japanese. We had Japanese voice-over. There were basketball hoops on either end. Unique, Annice Jacoby and Mike Shah who were part of the *No Blood, No Foul* project, came with me. They organised a discussion with local youth.

It was not what I would call 'big engagement', but it brought local youth to the site. It was part of re-presenting Oakland culture. Other than those two, all the Oakland projects were not in gallery spaces.

I find this issue of the art space intriguing and complicated. I think one of the issues of power that arises, is how the experience of people who are not in the art world, is treated within that venue. There are a very problematic set of issues around power. I have seen things that I find highly visually compelling – we have talked about them. They are also very disturbing in terms of what human dynamics are being presented and the way people are being represented. It is not that I am critical per sé. It is that I find them disturbing and something really worth us thinking about, worth *me* thinking about. I do not feel it is the space of the gallery that is problematic. I feel the problems we have as artists is the entire system. How do we as practitioners in public, as temporal, ephemeral, experience-makers, relate to a world that is structured predominantly in visual terms?

**Tom Trevor** By visual, do you mean ...?

**Suzanne Lacy** In the terms of visual representation, visual display – particularly now. That is a question I have for you. I have been really curious if this observation is accurate, or to what degree it is accurate.

I did so much work in the Oakland community. I was very engaged there so I was not spending a lot of time in London and travelling elsewhere. I have since discovered that there is a whole field of practice with a level of spectacle that I find quite interesting.

It seems to me that artists have in the past ten years begun to adopt a lot of resources and mechanisms that they were not available to them before. Part of that is because money has flown into the art world. In particular, there are a lot of resources to produce new work. So what do you get to produce? You have the opportunity to produce at a fairly high level of visual display, using cinematic technologies and materials, advertising technologies and materials and digital technology.

With the resources available to artists practising in museums and galleries, it seems to me there is a convention of visual display that is part of what is considered the quality of art now. Do you think that is the case in your ten years of working this field?

**Tom Trevor** Yes. I hope we are at a moment of change. I think the system that you are describing, as I said yesterday, is really about supporting the monologue of the artist. In a sense, I am an embodiment of a kind of contradiction because I want to try to find a way for the institution to open up to more dialogic processes. Maybe it does not make sense to do so. Maybe it is an old mould or maybe different kinds of practices can live alongside each other.

**Suzanne Lacy** But it is true, do you think, that in the past ten to 15 years, the quality of visual display (particularly for ephemeral processes) has become radically transformed and, if so, in what direction? Why? How?

**Tom Trevor** There has been a general professionalisation of all areas of the visual arts. For example, the lottery money that is coming into our facilities has transformed places like CCA and Arnolfini. But with money comes a whole set of issues. I think what was arising yesterday was that, in some ways, money is what institutionalises and, in many ways, disempowers an organisation.

**Suzanne Lacy** But you are talking about an organisation. What about the practice? What if I were Gilbert and George, and I gain access to certain kinds of money? Does that shift the quality of the visual nature of my display? Is lack of access to those resources and related display part of why I (Suzanne) did not do the show at Tate Modern? Do you see what I am saying?

I am wondering if our visual (and audio and everything else) sense of aesthetics is changing and the work is changing in response? or is the work leading to that changing sense of aesthetics?

There are so many works you go into and you see people from outside the gallery re-presented in large-screen projections. Maybe the film-maker (the artist) had a very deep relationship with that person. Maybe they did not. Who knows? Is representation in the gallery the priority of those in this area of practice? I think a lot of this has to do with the shift in photography and video.

**Tom Trevor** The strength of arts discourse is its self-questioning and through this, the way it refreshes itself constantly. It might be that we have got to a point that the conventions of display have become so professionalised and so well-funded that we actually need to rethink that. This is why it is really important to bring this area of socially engaged practice into that space.

Of course, in the last 15 years there has been a lot of money going into contemporary art, into display. But does that mean that the quality of the ideas are any stronger? A lot of what I have seen in the last 15 years has been what you call a 'reprisal' – a regurgitation of ideas from the late '60s, early '70s, but somehow polished up for the market.

**Suzanne Lacy** Really polished, yes.

**Tom Trevor** It looks polished. But it is the ideas that are important and the embodied experience of those ideas as well. Now, the issue of aesthetics in a relational practice is a really interesting question. The veneer of display can be a kind of

trap.

**Suzanne Lacy** [*a whispered aside*] But that is not an answer!

[<back to menu](#)

#### Documentation: for whom?

**Janey Hunt, core group** I was thinking about the issue of display and its connection to the current preoccupation in art education with documentation. There are a set of connections here between the scale of a project, the use of good documentation in order to prove your outcomes to funders to secure funding for the next project and one's ambition for the work. Ambition and scale are measured through the existing systems, which are about display and documentation.

**Tom Trevor** Do you mean just purely in terms of meeting the funders' requirements?

**Janey Hunt** Well, yes.

**Suzanne Lacy** Not meeting *anybody's* requirements. Modes of display are context specific. If the context is TV, they meet TV requirements. If the context is a gallery, they meet a gallery's requirements.

**Tom Trevor** Yes, but in terms of making meaning, this is my fundamental question - Do you need that gallery system? What you are talking about in your work is a different set of relationships.

[<back to menu](#)

#### Creating different points of meaning



**Tom O' Sullivan** It seems to me there were some politics in the way you were developing the exhibition, whether you want to call it the politics of representation or not. I understand there were different points of meaning going on in the projects. There was a point of meaning at the first stage, in the actual situation. I find an equally interesting and meaningful point at the second stage, in the actual exhibition in that particular art gallery, that is precisely to do with the politics of display linked with the politics of image. There is something about those particular images reduced down, the particular kind of drawings, the way the drawings are articulated on the paper, the experience of the viewer going up to them and walking down the side of the crib, walking through the space and the experience of seeing the chairs. For me, that could be an equally meaningful experience and equally political.

That is why there seems to be real value in having these two parts to a project. The first part has a way of engaging political meaning in a certain sort of situation, but then you take it somewhere else as well, and it creates another politically engaged situation in that second place. That seems to me very crucial.

**Suzanne Lacy** One of the big questions for me is - Where does the art take place? I think this might hinge on this issue of display and museums and biennales. Does the art occur in one place? Is it then possible to recreate or re-present it in another? Art has always been documented but the question - where is the art? - is very important.

[<back to menu](#)

#### Authorship, Experience and Power



**Vanda Pollock, core group** Following on from some of the comments already made, I have been taking some of the discussions you have been having back to my students and talking to them about it. They were looking at *Roof is on Fire*.

We discussed issues of authorship and the kind of power relationship that was played out in that project.

To cut a very long discussion short, they decided that the key moment of the project was in the unpredictability of the encounter and the kinds of experiences that were shown on the DVD that you gave us such as the people who had come to see the performance. The power was actually in the experience, in its unpredictability and that was heightened by the location. Then I said, 'Well you are watching this in a classroom. Let's imagine this as a gallery. How would that change?' They agreed that, yes, it still does have a meaning, but that meaning is altered fundamentally from the context in which you experience the work. That is how a gallery is structured. Yes, you can have that bodily experience you were talking about with walking through by the crib, but because of the baggage of the institution, you walk in expecting to have certain kinds of experiences. You expect certain kinds of meaning to be conveyed. They argued that the kind of power that you have from the unpredictability of the encounter is reduced in the gallery. The experience is fundamentally changed by being in the gallery. It was a curated, more organised, more articulated message than in the whole *Roof is on Fire* experience.

**Tom Trevor** That was a weakness, was it?

**Venda Pollock** Well, it was not a weakness, it was a difference.

**Suzanne Lacy** It was an observation, yes.

**Venda Pollock** Do you think there is a sense that you almost need to de-institutionalise the experience or somehow fundamentally change the space within the gallery to convey that unpredictable quality. Looking at *Roof is on Fire* the students put that unpredictable moment down to when you parked the final car and opened the doors. Who knows?

**Suzanne Lacy** No, but that is not an accurate observation, although I take the point.

**Venda Pollock** Yes, that is a bit naïve.

**Suzanne Lacy** I was directing everything with walky-talkies behind the scene.

**Venda Pollock** Yes, but people walked into that, not knowing what to expect.

**Suzanne Lacy** That is true.

**Venda Pollock** In terms of the conversations and the way people moved physically around the space, what was going to happen? You could go from one car to another, whereas what happened in the gallery is more directed. It is a more curated experience. In terms of power, I think that is a very interesting play. Can you cultivate spaces in different ways to recreate the experience you might have outwith the gallery space, but within it?

**Suzanne Lacy** Well, I do think it is something that is – well, I am not going to respond. Let us hear from two or three people.

[<back to menu](#)

#### Encountering the unexpected

**Chris Fremantle** I am just thinking a little bit about that because by implication one of the challenges that faces the contemporary art institution is that people walk into it actually knowing what to expect. Putting work in the gallery comes within a framework of expectations which are somewhat driven by, perhaps an over-exposure to, the avant-garde. I am thinking back to your analogy about the '70s and the idea that when you went to the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the ICA in the '70s, you would see a guy beating shit out of a piano and the fire brigade turning up. At that point the experience within the institution of the gallery was perhaps closer to going onto the roof in Oakland. You had no idea what to expect. But now, we are so used to being challenged by these institutions that, in effect, the gallery has somehow lost its ability to present the unexpected because it has presented so many unexpected things.

[<back to menu](#)

#### Analytical frameworks: affirmative and transformative politics



**Damian Killeen** I have been listening to this discussion of yesterday and today from a different position of other issues, other areas of politics in society and trying to understand - Where does this debate fit in? I am wondering whether some of the political/philosophical thinking of somebody like Nancy Fraser is not helpful here. She is a person who currently in my mind. Her thinking is very sophisticated. Fraser distinguishes between the politics of recognition (and misrecognition) and the politics of distribution (and acquisition). In separating them out analytically, she also recognises that in the real world these are bound up with each other and complex. Recognition or identity of minorities can lead to the displacement of those minorities through reification. Therefore recognition needs to be considered alongside notions of redistribution (of wealth or resources).

I think this was coming through our speakers the last couple of days. How do I deal with issues of recognition and also deal with the fact that I am apparently in charge of this plant, this resource, or whatever it is?

I feel this discussion needs some framework like that of Nancy Fraser to help us break down what kind of political interaction we are actually talking about at the moment and how it relates to other kinds of political interactions, at some point to turn that round to *intent*. To say, 'what do we intend?'

Another distinction that Nancy Fraser makes is between affirmative politics and transformative politics. Essentially, affirmative politics, however exciting it appears at the time, ends up not changing anything in the system because it is not fundamentally about change, whereas transformative politics is about attempting to change something in the system.

I would throw that back as a question to Suzanne and others. When you are exposing some of the systemic issues (like these issues about teenage mothers, the relationship with school and so on), to what extent is this simply (I do not mean that derogatively) an exposition of what is happening, and to what extent does it become engaged with issues about the social justice? How can art practice help promote change?

[<back to menu](#)

### Imagine a culture where contemporary art is not particularly respected

**Ruth Barker** (core group) People talked quite a bit about the power inherent in the idea of an institution – whether that is an art gallery or an art school or whatever. I think what has been quite clear is that that power manifests itself in two different ways: an instrumental power to get things to happen through money or networks and a symbolic power where the gallery is almost like a plinth. It isolates and elevates things.

I think, given that discussion, my question may or may not be as devil's advocate. I guess if we imagine a culture where contemporary art is not particularly respected – let us imagine that it does not get taught in schools, and that the media is not that keen on it, and people make fun of it quite a lot.

**Suzanne Lacy** Well, that would be America!

**Ruth Barker** Let us imagine this crazy world in which the only moment when people talk about contemporary art it is to complain about art being given money. The question is whether in that hypothetical reality the art institution still has power, and what it might mean to talk about power. The flipside of it is that actually institutions are some of the very rare places where art is given a bit of space and a bit of respect, a bit of time and a bit of that moment to go, 'Actually, it is worthwhile to make things. It is worthwhile to think about things in that way'. I just wondered if that was a legitimate position or where you might stand on that.

**Suzanne Lacy** That is great, Ruth.

I know, it is a hard practice, isn't it?

[<back to menu](#)

### Going back to first principles

**Deidre McMann** I thought we are coming back to some key issues that I think Tom articulated quite well last night in relation to a centre of gravity. In conversation later we were suggesting that perhaps we need to think about more than one centre of gravity. An institution or an organisation that is promoting the arts needs to be centred. In our ideal world – in the world that we are trying to tease out at the moment, the relationships within that institution need to be based around good working relationships, good dialogue and conversations. At the same time, the relationship between the institution and potential artists who might actually enhance that dialogue could really do with a focus. Artists too need a centre of gravity to be artists. Suzanne is a great example of that.

I question if all artists do think through in a deep personal way why they are making work and why they would go to work in a community before they find themselves in an engaged practice. Sometimes, practice follows funding and practice can follow funding in institutions too. I really think that those are big issues to start talking about.

[<back to menu](#)

### Alliances across diverse practices

**Jean Cameron** (core group): I am still thinking and feeling my way through this. This is an observation, rather than a question. I went home last night and in my Inbox there was a new report, *Towards a Healthy Ecology of the Arts and Culture*, Missions, Models, Money 2007. Reading that, Winston Churchill was quoted in terms of talking about how we shape our buildings, and afterwards how our buildings shape us. Thinking about these issues, I have a very different experience, coming from a live art and dance background to both CCA (where I have been the dance performance programmer) and also an ongoing relationship with the Arnolfini. I think you have an incredibly rich set of practitioners and thinkers in terms of that area of practice within Bristol.

How do we align ourselves with other people as part of our own ecology, whether that be our private ecologies outside of the institution or the different voices within the institutions? How do we align ourselves more successfully with people engaged with different practice publicly?

[<back to menu](#)

### Power and ecology



**Reiko Goto** I was thinking about our discussion yesterday and why the concern with museums or galleries. Of course, as an artist, we have to show in museums and big galleries. We dream of doing so every day. But, let's put that aside for a moment.

Why do we become involved in socially, critically and environmentally engaged art practice?

One artist showed flower arranging in the gallery and through that created an interaction. I would say, 'yes, that is one way, and that is fine'. But I would like to also see some artists saying, 'Flowers flower for themselves'. Flowers do not speak so somebody has to speak for them. It does not matter if it is accepted or not, but it is important that it is said.

You used the language: 'subordination', 'domination' – we should never become dominant. We are always small.

[<back to menu](#)

### Power and the tyranny of engagement

**Heather Lynch** I am interested in some of the comments made last night and today about how power is produced. Some of the comments seem to assume that power is a quality that is latent and not produced as a dynamic process. In relation to that, I think about some of the work that you did, Suzanne, links very much to community development and ideas of recognition and subjectivity.

Within community development there is a huge critical voice which links with the tyranny of participation, that is participatory projects that are effectively rolling out government agendas. I wondered, with the project that you named, those young people appeared to me to be constructed in deficit because they were in need of education.

**Suzanne Lacy** No, certainly not.

**Heather Lynch** In deficit – in deficit roles – as in need of education and therefore there is a power issue. There is a power issue impregnated within that work.

Also, from both of your conversations, Tom and Suzanne's, you seemed to put the expert on a platform. Within educational discourse, there is a huge conversation about the cult of experts and the educators that create and curate the educational space. The artist curates and creates the artist's space. There is also a relation of power impregnated within that. What I am talking about is the rhetorical production of power and how those young people are immediately placed in recipient deficit roles. Art has the potential to enable people to own their own subjectivity and recognise their own subjectivity, thereby becoming more powerful and more aware of their own power. However, those rhetorical situations can actually make them subject to yet another agenda.

In relation to that, I am thinking about places where people have taken control of their own subjectivity in terms of identity politics within the area of work done by the disabled community, where community groups have actually taken charge of their own cultural representations in ways that have not been engineered by outside experts or government agents.

[<back to menu](#)

### Inhabiting the City and building constituencies

**Ed Carroll** I just have three questions.

What is our responsibility in terms of young emerging practitioners? How do we bring them into this debate? It seems to me that this is a very important area. How do young practitioners find the north, south, east and west, in terms of how they inhabit this very complex world full of debris and full of history? By young practitioners, I would also think about that axis between what might be termed the artist practitioner or the community development practitioner or the youth work practitioner or the young person practitioner.

My second question is - How do we find certain principles in terms of how, as an artist or an art organisation, you inhabit your space – be it the city or another place. I am thinking about the drama or the trauma of a city today, be it in terms of regeneration; be it in terms of justice policing – you know, 24/7. I see on the posters in the underground or the metro here the trauma of migration/immigration, of dislocation. How does an arts organisation or an artist inhabit or respond to those situations? How do you try to find a space where, instead of responding to a situation, you are actually listening in order to understand that situation?

The final question is around the idea of constituency. We are in a different context in that we are a small organisation in terms of a big city like Dublin. One thing I suppose you feel in your gut without knowing why you feel it, is that, unless you try and find a way of building your constituency, then you have nobody to talk to. You send signals out, but there is nobody. In some ways, how do you, in this very complex compressed world that we live in – where nobody has time – how do you find ways where you build your constituency? How can your centre of gravity be another – or *the* other – rather than your own obsession with yourself and your 'When are we getting funding?' and 'When are we going to fill this application in?'

[<back to menu](#)

### Responses: Tom Trevor and Suzanne Lacy

**Tom Trevor** Well, those were the same questions as I was posing. I was asked here but I really wanted to *be* here because I want to see what we can take from existing structures and how we can change them. I really do think that power relations can be produced. I do not want to own a situation, but I want to see how we can get the best out of it. That is about listening.

In terms of emerging artists: a lot of time they want to use the status or prestige of a gallery to move ahead, to get a platform, a profile. It is not right just to abandon all that stuff if it is useful for people. But, what I really need to know from you, is how I can help to change that space, to make it more useful, to belong to socially-engaged art practice. Francis is doing this at the moment as well through Creative Commons and Open Source as ways of bringing a bigger conversation together. The more traditional idea of the gallery space is also still useful otherwise you would not be referring to it.

I do think the idea of the centre of gravity, for me, is key because I see a lot of participation practice represented in the gallery and that is really where the centre of gravity is for some practitioners. To me it means the work is reduced. It has become an illustration. It has been sapped of any real meaning.

I think of Venn diagrams. You can exist in different places. You can make meaning in different discourses. You can have a centre of gravity in different places.

Perhaps, with the project we saw earlier, it could be represented in an entirely different forum and have nothing to do with art practice at all. I do not think that is a problem.

**Suzanne Lacy** Well, it was in different forms. It was in multiple forms. Forms invaded each other. In other words, the political discussion invaded the gallery, and the gallery was invaded by the girls. It was basically intersecting systems. I am curious: I do not want this phrase 'centre of gravity' to become a catch-phrase where we all love the turn of phrase. What do you mean by 'centre of gravity'?

**Tom Trevor** I think it is about intention. It is about what you really want from a project.

**Suzanne Lacy** What if you want two things? I came out of a time when this work was not permissible in art. Never did you see a mention of menstruation. I was actually disqualified as the highest candidate for a UCLA position that was subsequently given to Chris Burden. I was disqualified because my work on rape frightened the male audience committee. Just the topic was a problem. I come from a very different time when we tried to align ourselves as artists with Artaud, Beuys, Kaprow, the Situationists, Dadaists – within that trajectory. Having come from a background of politics and community organising, I decided I wanted to talk there too. I did not want to give up the community. I did not want to give up my 'centre of gravity'. But I also had another 'centre of gravity' or 'intention'. Instead of becoming a doctor or a psychoanalyst, I consciously chose at the age of 26 to become an artist. So I *chose* the discourse, and I have always taken that discourse quite seriously.

I am not sure everybody doing social practice, at this point, cares in the same way about that discourse. I think it is quite possible they do not. Then my question is, what is it we are doing as artists in community? I am always very clear that obviously we produce power to address Heather's issue. It was a really important question. I have read Freire and I have participated in the development of feminist education. Perhaps you have noticed the technique of not letting (including myself, the speaker) respond to every person. This is a feminist educational strategy derived from consciousness-raising groups. I understand those subtleties and complexities with the issue of education. I also happen to believe those young women need an education, not in terms of life experience but in terms of books, in terms of needing a high school credential.

But Freire is really talking about something different from, 'They do not need an education'. He is talking about education being a dialogic process where people bring different expertise and experiences to the table. In the case of *Expectations*, that education was a motivation for the girls. They wanted the two credentials. They could have chosen to participate in the programme and not get the credentials (the credits).

The other issue is that the process was dialogic and based on their experience. Those young women said very clearly and forcefully in ways that I occasionally found aggravating: 'We don't care what you have to say if you have not had a baby'. I was not the teacher in that programme. Other people were the teachers. I structured the whole and worked with the group and I occasionally talked to them about certain issues of art. But they were talking about many issues and in many I was certainly not the authority, nor was the system the authority.

To me that issue is a relevant question. Grant said last time that you keep your contradictions up front with the people you are working with, and that includes in the art world. When I asked you this question of display, it is because I am struggling with it. I am confused about it.

It is not hard to go into a gallery and figure out some of the visual strategies being employed now. Imagine a pregnant teenager with a very large belly talking about the kind of information I have access to on a very big television monitor in a very dark room. That works. It is also massively exploitative and I would not do that. I have seen artists that do that, and maybe even do it (*probably* even do it) with the permission of the massively pregnant teenager. I would not do it because I think there are issues of body, and whose body, that are both political and aesthetic.

It is not so hard to find those conventions. The issue is to keep your contradictions in front of you and ask - Where do you draw what line? We were also talking about the fact that all the three presenters with me are men and not women, and what that means. I can tell you from my position that I am completely comfortable with it. My practice - the major subjects of my work, my hiring practices - the people I work with, all include men. *Expectations* is an exception. No men were involved with that project. Men are rarely positioned in the leadership roles. It just happens that way.

Basically I come from such a femi-centric position. It would occur to me to think about their men but it would not occur to me to restrict my conversation.

On the other hand, I am clearly aware of the contradiction that has been established by there being mostly females in this project. We all talked in the selection of participants. Very few men applied.

At any rate, that is a contradiction. That bears discourse. All of these things bear discourse. I only have my position within the discourse, and there are many people (even in Oakland) who did not like what I was doing. That is the bottom line.

I do not think it is every pure. I think it is only intriguing to look at, to think about; or so massively exploitative that it should not be there. I draw that line.

**Tom Trevor** The real strength of the art discourse is that self-questioning, putting the contradictions at the front. It is perhaps as a result of the discourse throughout the '70s - that is why we got to this point, now. Are you worried that when the big museums come and want to represent your practice that that is perhaps absorbing you into the mainstream? You seem to be suggesting that when you talk about this kind of managerialisation or this professionalisation of display?

**Suzanne Lacy** There are very few women my age that are worried about that particular issue. I do not feel that a conversation with you is going to overwhelm my economy and authority.

**Tom Trevor** Oh, I did not mean that! [Laughter]

**Suzanne Lacy** I know you did not! I mean here, today, in this seminar, although I recognise it might, because of gender, or because of position with some people. Nor do I feel my involvement with Tate Modern is going to compromise my practice.

My allegiance is to art, which means my allegiance is to going where my nose takes me and my sense of experimentation. I could become a photographer tomorrow. Given my background and my politics, it is unlikely, that I would, but I *could*. I think that freedom is part of why one is an artist. Having been on a medical track and chosen, specifically at the rather old age of 25, that I was going to be an artist, I made it as a very conscious decision. It is because of the freedom inherent in art to continually challenge yourself, reconstruct yourself, question yourself.

**Tom Trevor** It is interesting. Let me put it like this- Suzanne has been using a term 'reprisal'. I referred to 're-enactment'. And to me 'reprisal' is really interesting because it somehow has connotations of revenge of some kind.

**Suzanne Lacy** That is a British/American thing.

**Tom Trevor** Yes, it is. 'Reprisal' is interesting in terms of your practice, which is very much about relationships. There is a concept behind that set of relationships where to actually 'reprise' as a simulation seems to me almost like art history containing the practice.

**Suzanne Lacy** We can talk about a project I am doing now in Los Angeles which is a re-enactment of sorts - a rethinking - of two projects. The *Wack! Exhibition* is the feminist art exhibition by Connie Butler at MOCA. It frames feminism in a very particular way. Feminism was a big part of my practice and I knew most of the practitioners. It is very international in scope. From England is, I think, Margaret Harrison and Cosey Fanni Tutti are both represented.

In this context I began discussions with the curator and with the education department (which was interesting) about framing a contemporary project that re-enacted some of my participatory works from the '80s in LA. There are two projects, *Freeze-Frame: Room for a Living Room* 1982 in a furniture show room and *Immigrants and Survivors*, 1982 which was a giant dinner for 150 women of different cultures. That is all it was. Then there were testifying and testimonials. In that era it was remarkable because feminists did not talk cross race, and this project had every complexion of LA, every age of LA, every ability or disability - disabled women in wheelchairs and so on - all of whom were representing their experience.

How do I rethink these projects in terms of today's practice where those are now issues that people struggle with in very deep and integral ways? This was just the tip of the iceberg, building on conversations between women. I did it as an educational project. I did it with a group of young public arts administrator graduate students at USC and then a group of others that are just my former students and friends - all happen to be women (I think there is one man in this group).

We went out and located groups of women that were working class. There was a problem (and that is a problem inherent in all of this work). There is a level of stereotyping that goes on when you select people based on social profession, condition, gender, occupation, and so on. One of the ways we deal with for individuals to label themselves. Nevertheless, people began to come forward, cleaning women from Wahaca that do not speak English, Iranian middle class refugees or policewomen.

We began to locate and organise these groups. We brought them into the museum. They had discussions with each other as consciousness-raising groups in this setting inside the museum, in the library, with little furniture and behind glass doors. People could come to the museum and they could look in there. Outside there was a Madame Defarge Knitting a coloured pillow that matched their colour of clothing. The groups had selected the colour of clothing for themselves. These women had conversations with each other.

Now, in a couple of weeks I am going back, and they are going to have a giant dinner. Part of it will be a live performance with women talking about work because one of the things that is very clear in LA is that there is a massive class divide. Down-town it is business suits in the day, and then at night another population comes in, filled with issues of immigration, poverty, sexual violence and so on. That is the territory of the discourse, and we are 'reprising' or 're-enacting' it in contemporary terms as a way of rethinking some of the difficulties with that practice in terms of today and some of the ways in which it may, or may not, continue to be relevant. Personally, for me, in terms of thinking about where I have come from and where I am going, it is an evaluation period.

In that context, MOCA has not remotely reclaimed my identity or subverted my message. Actually, the museum staff have not been able to figure out how to deal with the project. For example, they do not know whether to advertise it because

other people can not come.

Going into the gallery system is a problem when you are 21, or maybe even 30. I see a lot of young activists now doing so. The problem is that their practice gets structured at that age. When Martha Rosler started showing at the Biennales as a mature practitioner, there was no issue. I am glad that her work is in Biennales.

**Tom Trevor** I did not really mean that. For example, with a lot of Fluxus' projects you would have a rule that would be the basic starting point for a project. To re-enact that project, you re-apply the rule in a different way and whatever comes out of it – however it manifests itself – is particular to this moment, rather than a simulation of what happened previously. You were describing actually having put in so much work in a project ...

**Suzanne Lacy** You are referring to another project, the *Crystal Quilt* (1985-7). It is very visual. I am considering whether it makes sense to re-enact it. In a way the reason I would always talk to the art world is the same reason I would write a book, which is to try to get the politics and the mechanisms of this practice into the discourse.

**Tom Trevor** It is just interesting that the mainstream wants to see it visually within its territory. But, for you it is important because there was so much work in the original project that you could not actually properly re-enact it as concept, but you want to simulate it for legacy.

**Suzanne Lacy** You *can* re-enact portions. There is no way I would hire 430 women over the age of 60 (which is the only way you can get them if they did not have a buy-in) by saying 'I am hiring you. Show up. You are an extra in a project. That makes no sense!

I am saying that that project took me three years and all of my life efforts for three years – completely. So, I will not do that again. I will not do 'Code 33' again.

**Tom Trevor** The reason I am asking is because, obviously, I am looking to this area of practice to re-invent my organisation. I need to know what we can hold on to that is useful, and what we can change. I am conscious that, in some ways, what I represent (the kind of contradiction that I embody) could be actually a threat. You used that word earlier on. It could be about the mainstream re-absorbing you and disempowering your practice.

**Suzanne Lacy** I think a lot of these discussions we have are very hypothetical and I think we get really lost in theoretical hypotheses. It is something we have to have a longer conversation about.

Here is a case in point: I was doing a project in a prison in upstate New York on violence against women - *Doing Time New York* 1993. The women were in there for eight years to life imprisonment. They were part of a consciousness-raising group and they had an on-going relationship with each other and with the group leader who was a former prisoner, now a social worker. They were called the 'Family Violence Group'.

We began a discourse about doing a project and there was a point at which the imagery that they were suggesting was, I felt, not imagery. The way they wanted to manifest the imagery, the drawings, whatever, was not going to be very powerful, visually. So I said, 'Ok. Let's lay it on the table. We can do one of two things. We can go in the direction of, 'This is a participatory workshop and I will work with you to implement every one of your ideas.' That is almost the approach I take when I am 'teaching' in a school system. I will take your interesting idea about blue eyeballs on a hubcap with tears coming out of them, and I will work with that, and we will do it to the very best that you can make (even though you are an African American woman and I don't know why they are blue).'

So at a certain point I said, 'We can do that, and I will do that with you. I will contribute my time and we will do that together as a respect for you and where you are at. Or, we can struggle it out on the image level – and I will be really frank with you about what I think about the blue eyeball, and we will struggle with it together and make something that I feel is going to be a whole lot stronger aesthetically and then we will take your cars and send them out.' Obviously you are not going to take their cars and send them out unless they want them out. There was a very clear discussion about what level of their information they wanted revealed.

That could look as if I am being a very arrogant artist. But I said, for me, there is an aesthetic issue. It is only *my* aesthetic. Another person would have a different aesthetic and another would have a different one again.

They made a decision and then we worked it through and their reason was absolutely, massively, valid. They said, 'Suzanne, people are always telling us who we are and what our experience is'. And I said, 'Yeah, I get it'. So we had to go back to the drawing board and find the image that communicated well according to my and about five other people's aesthetic.

You do not do it that way if you do not want to. That is the one thing that I feel that underlines all this conversation that often comes out of people who do not practise in community. As an artist, you do not convince masses of people who are intelligent to do things they do not ultimately want to do. And believe me, no way could I have convinced these women in prison. They had no reason whatsoever to follow this little white girl. None. There was no advantage to them. They did it because they bought into it.

**Jean Grant** I was fascinated listening to your discussion about the Capp Street project because I am looking at the idea of institution and power. Capp Street was started by a person in his house. It was an open house.

**Suzanne Lacy** Two people: David Ireland and Anne Hunt.

**Jean Grant** I do not know it terribly well, but I am trying to précis. We are dealing in England with a Victorian idea of institution, museum and gallery, and condescension. I was then moving on, as you kept pleading for advice – very touchingly – to think, in Dublin they sold their gallery and I think that was a very performative act. I am not too sure how the performance has gone. It has not maybe remained public in quite the same way. I am wondering whether we actually do need to repeat that performance a couple of times?

**Tom Trevor** So, perhaps CCA and Arnolfini?

**Suzanne Lacy** Can be sold.

**Jean Grant** I am trying to get out of this Victorian idea and could we talk about it slightly wider?

**Suzanne Lacy** We have to stop. Let us have the last word go to Tom.

**Tom Trevor** Recently I was invited by the British Council to go to China. So, I said, 'yes, absolutely'. There was a mix – there were small organisations, but mostly museums and galleries. As you know (well, I do not know if you know it), they are building 150 new contemporary art museums in China at the moment. In order to waive my airfare, I agreed to give a talk at a seminar at the National Art Museum of China to hundreds of new curators to populate these new museums. The speakers from Britain were asked to give presentations around issues of audience and engagement. For the Chinese contributors to this seminar, this was completely irrelevant. They were not interested at all. They thought it was incidental, a detail. As you know, at the moment there are incredible amounts of money going into the art market in China. There is a very, vibrant scene that is basically around commerce. We were asked at the end of this symposium a question by Lu Jie, a curator, who said, 'you are all public-funded organisations, so do you do what the government tells you to do?' We were there as emissaries of the British Government, effectively. But were we all self-policing advocates of this policy of engaging audiences and what has become known as 'instrumentalism'?

**Suzanne Lacy** Aye. That's it.

[<back to menu](#)