English Version

C.C. 3.0. Toxic Lesbian

Interview with Suzanne Lacy by Toxic Lesbian and Gloria G. Duran about New Genre of Public Art and gender identity (May, 2012). This transcription only includes the dialogued answers of Suzanne Lacy to Toxic Lesbian and Gloria G. Duran.

SUZANNE LACY.— There is a lot of interest now in social practices and those practices in its interaction. Although the current wave of social practice show up all over the world in different points and times, I think has its origins in the work of the 1970's and some but not all of that, was feminist. Some of it as I saw it in America and the United Kingdom was also a push to what they call: 'democratized art'.

So there was a push to expand audiences at that time. There were also, particularly in California, many people of color and working class people moving through the university system for the first time. As those people acceded they were making art that reflected their sensibility.

I would say that from that crystalized moment when art was dematerialized, people questioned the nature of art making: people considered expanding outside the walls of the museum, people talked about feminism, context of ethnicity and cultural and national identities. Art became less universal and more specific, audience became less generic and elitist and more general. At the same time, museums were pushing to expand the ideas; they needed to expand their audience base.

All of this happened around the same time but it is that feminism was not a small part of that, it was a large part of that general trust and as a result I would say: yes, the art world has adopted the ways of working that I have written about since the 70's but no, it has not and if you look at the economic reward structures of the art world they are still predominantly masculine. In other words, the people, the prices for work are still largely male, even though there are more women in the art world now than there were before. Those women are still taken and given, in particular the number of women in art schools and the number of women who have made their exhibitions out of art school and succeed in their careers. There is a huge discrepancy between those two facts. So I would say both yes, mainstream art has adopted mainstream ideas, but no, it has not implicated them in the economic and reward structure of the art world.

I was looking at your question and I think it was very interesting. I was passing all over it because I have been thinking so much about economics lately that the relationship between economics and patriarchy is not clear to me. Obviously it is more often men that will seek to gain economic ascendency, the economic power. You could say, in one sense, that men are smart and able to gain economic advantage and certainly the international cooperations, if you thought of it in that way would be rather masculine in their gendering. But can women do that? Yes. They do not; they are not able to do it. If

they were given equal access, would they do it? So that is one substantial question to me, how do Economics and gender relate?

You know that women are more often poor, you know that women less often control economic resources —although they do, but less often— but the question to me is: is there a direct one-to-one relationship? Would women, given the opportunity, claim economic ascendency as men have done? I do not know about that. Then I started thinking about instances of patriarchal power that are not connected to economic advantage and, of course, there are; you see this, in particular in the area of violence against women. In a group of men and women, at least has been demonstrated historically, violence against women will take place. Is it because of a stronger physical power? Is it because of the different construction of sexuality? Is it because women are property? Is it because women give birth to children and therefore economically disadvantaged people?

I do not know, really. I am sure there are theories that work about that but at the moment I would say that I do not see the Art world's patriarchal structure. I was going to say I do not see it manifest in forms of working, but that is really not true, you can see examples, particularly historically, of women challenging ways of working that might be considered masculine or feminine. The problem with doing that is that you keep saying that: 'because Allan Kaprow uses relationality and settled engagement between people, he was there for feminine', and 'because Nikki de Saint-Phalle dealt with shooting painting at a canvas with a gun, she was therefore interested, or expressing, masculinity'. I think we would have to prove much deeper, to really give you a strong answer on that.

I think you, living in Spain, have a different sense about censorship in your country. I would say that in my country, and in my context, censorship is not so much a governmental effort to close down ideas (although certainly there have been historical instances like with Robert Mapplethorpe, where there is a curve in the art, and there are many examples of that). By censorship I think more about the slow repression, the quiet deprivation of recognition, that takes place around ideas —and of course those would be gender, political, economic ideas—. The way in which in our country the illusion of freedom is perpetuated, is not by lack of censorship per se, but by a collaboration of so many ideas that it is an enforced consciousness politically paid forward by people who would like to manipulate consciousness. Usually that takes place either around economics or around politics in our country. If you look, for example, at the raids of the Tea Party, there is a way in which ideas from the right are been massively perpetuated and have supported political campaigns and by secret paid groups, donations and so on. The structure of American politics has changed now economically and therefore that economic power will enforce certain kind of values. So censorship, in my experiences —particularly in the arts—, it is only occasionally about actual censorship it is more often about the quiet deprivation of recognition.

Ironically in our country I do not think that homosexual artists are less advantaged. Again, David Wojnarowicz he was clearly censored. But if you look at Glenn Logan, he

is not censored in fact is quite visible; if you look at Gilbert and George, they are highly visible; Catherine Opie is highly visible. So I think ethnic women and homosexual artists are not particularly censored. They can be mainstreamed in American (and even in international) art; in different cultures, for example Spain, censorship may operate quite differently, I do not know.

However with women it is not just censorship. If you look just as Guerrilla Girls had, women are not shown as often as men anywhere except maybe, Arakis, who made the point of showing fifty per cent women, fifty per cent men. But around the world that is not the case, he is quite unusual in that.

I do not have that problem of been censored; I would say that the ways, the topics and the strategies I work with, were always accepted when I worked with institutions, and even outside of institutions. However within institutions the resources are more limited. Over the years I have been quoted as an under-recognized artist, which means that I have not had the opportunities to do the works. So in my case it would not be people trying to change the way I work, but they would be people just not showing the work or when I mean a position of showing in a gallery with people, there were many times where I have not had the same resources as a male colleague would have had.

So they do not try to change your artwork. That is how it goes back to economics again, how much of this is respecting male ideas, and how much of this is respecting the marketplace in which men fare much better than women? Men do better economically in the art world than women and you have more resources when you do better economically. That is just the bottom line.

So the only way you can make a case on censorship I think it is not in terms of strategies but in terms of the market. If you say women's ideas are not accepted is very difficult to prove that but I think if you say: How many women are offered major exhibitions vs. men and how much money do they get to do those exhibitions vs. men? Then I think the picture emerges very clearly. Just like, for example, in the issue of violence against women: you can have a woman like myself (for women who live middle or upper middle class lives), who might say: 'violence against women is not a problem' because we have not experienced it in any significant way. Nevertheless the issue politically is not to look at the personal experience, but to look collectively at the statistics on violence against women. Once you do that, you see very clearly that there is an inequity. The same happens in the art world. You do not have to do an individual case —like the experience or what I experienced. I have been fairly lucky in been able to do a lot of what I wanted to do, even though sexism exists, and I know how to work my way around individual sexist men that I ran into when I do projects. But the problem is not really evidenced by my individual experience; the problem is manifested by simply looking at major exhibitions, collections or how much money is given to what kind of projects. If there is a gender discrepancy, it emerges immediately and it will emerge.

I think 'patriarchy' is an intellectual construct you are making and I think it is viable as any other construct —in other words, this is a metaphor that you create which allows people to think in certain ways about the system. I do not think about patriarchy in the same way than you do. I do not have that kind of father; I do not have that kind of patriarchal family. My mother was more ascendant, I have a very different relationship than most people do to their families. I had a lovely family and a really strong interpersonal relationship. My father was quite artistic and quite feminine. That notion of patriarchy is invested in a family system, which I personally would not identify with. That concept is viable as any other construct, I mean it is a viable, economic construct and at the moment I would certainly look more closely at the economics of the art world. That is what I have been looking at strongly in the last several years.

If we talk about 'female masculinities', I am not sure about that this entire concept. It is a nice way to mix things up but it runs very close to having to define what a masculinity is, and what a feminity is. Is feminine receptive and masculine aggressive? Or is feminine aggressive and masculine receptive? So when you are playing with this idea, 'female masculinities', I think it is interesting to get us thinking but I am not that sure in the end that really depends upon how you define 'female masculinities'. Do you mean women acting in ways that are traditionally ascribed to men? That is culturally different, as you probably know: what is masculine in England is different than what is masculine in America; you can see that by watching television. There are some underlining factors.

Then, on top of this grid I would say you have to lay a couple of other sorts, or ways, of thinking; one is economic: you have to look at the differences of working class, poor, middle class and upper-middle class and privileged women, and men, and how those might be enacting differently (actually, upper class men in England would have been fairly considered having some aspects of feminine behavior in America). So that is another grid.

Now, if we take that complicated picture and lay on 'the art world' I would say that successful women in the art world do have to construct their identity, like all artists, but quite deliberately. Particularly performance artists, like me, construct their identity over time in connection with the context that they are rewarded within. What I mean by that is: performance artists were always seen as slightly crazy and idiosyncratic, out-of-the-box, going to extremes, narcissistic… So, some of those characteristics (that developed early on in the performance scene) stacked to performance artists.

Another thing that was very much implied as performance emerged, in the 70's, was gender, because there were many more women in performance art than there were (at least represented) in other fields. If you had a painting exhibition you had many less women than men but if you had a performance exhibition you might well have fifty per cent of women. That was the way the field operated early on and a lot of women went to performance because it was kind of 'the Wild West of opportunity'.

However, women constructed their identities in complex ways, because their body was the conveyor of their artwork. If you look at primary examples, like Eleanor Antin, Hannah Wilke, Annette Messager or Ulrike Rosenbach, all of these women, and myself included, we constructed our identities with respect to how it both reflected our own work and our own ideas —which were often very gendered, particularly in that moment, when to paint something pink was a gender challenge—. We constructed our identities in that moment and for me, and maybe for all of these women (maybe if you look at Marina Abramovic), all of this had a very strong masculine kind of component to our construction of our identity. For me that operated more psychodynamically because I was thinking of gender so much I could enter a gendered behavior. I understood to be adopting certain characteristics I could behave in ways that were traditionally ascribed to men. I used to dress in a certain way. I used to wear, for example, working boots and skinny Levi's in performance. Hammering and nailing and doing construction work in my performances was an example of a kind of re-gendering of my persona. Whereas, if you look at somebody like Hannah Wilke, Ulrike Rosenbach and Barbara T. Smith, they were very much more interesting because their presence was much more female, 'femocentric'. To some degrees they adopted different positions of being subject of the male gaze, both in enticing and in empowering in masculine ways, so they were very much playing with these concepts.

When I started thinking about re-doing in 'Three weeks in January', it was not clear to me if there was even a reason to re-do it. So I had the first look at the public sphere and people who were working here in violence against women to see if there was a need for such a project in this moment and time politically. That is important if you are going to gather engagement, essentially, and if you are going to work on something that has importance in the social realm.

As I talked to people that worked on violence, it seemed that it was eager to participate in something that would explore their collective experiences and bring them back together and it was true that there was still a very strong need for more visibility because there was still a strong incidence of violence against women in the city. So one of the questions that we posed once we decided to do it was: whether or not organizing in a grassroots level, which is the way I approached 'Three weeks in May' (1977), whether that was still viable and how it related to organizing electronically.

So we had parallel campaigns: one was a kind of underground person-to-person organizing through organizations by sending out teams of women to hundreds of organizations and bring them together within the group break of the project; and the other was a social media campaign. As we thought of developing the social media campaign we looked at what is been successful and what is not being successful in organizing online. There are obviously some cases in the Arab Spring and Iran and other places where online organizing has been extremely productive. In terms of violence against women, there are networks like RAIN, many in Spain, which collect stories, provide resources. We worked on that as well, but to what extent do those networks impact awareness, action and get cessation of violence? I really do not know.

So in 'Three weeks in January' we observed that, even among the women we worked with, if you have been raped, you are deeply ashamed of it. Even though there is more visibility, even though the city, the police, the many organizations were more mobilized about violence against women, nevertheless women were still ashamed. And, as long as that shame exists, there is a way where the crime is put at the feet of the victim. We also felt that is there is probably not as much reporting because of the rise in rape of college women. College women were not coming forward because they were raped by dates, in social situations, in situations where they did not want to deal with that, they did not want to admit it as a rape and just went unreported.

We saw that women, because of the shame, would still not come out and say I was raped, we did not want to put women in that situation. So we decided to start a campaign. Our campaign was built around the idea: 'I know someone who was raped, do you?' In this way you could be that 'someone' or you could simply know that 'someone' but we knew that pretty much every woman could know somebody who was raped, at least in younger generations. The hashtag of what we did was: 'Rape is here'. The question was: 'I know someone, do you?' and then we got some key figures like Jane Fonda and Eve Ensler to tweet that out to their social networks. We partnered with Cold Pink and Judy Evans and we have started a Facebook page where we would introduce issues and topics. I think all that exists some place online that I can send you if you want.

The idea was to have our live organizing (we organized fifty different events within the three weeks), and then we had this online campaign. We did not create a conclusion that one was different or better than the other but I think we opened up the issue of how the internet works with emerging a topic where women are still very ashamed of. What is their personal engagement? Is it easier to disclose on the internet or is it easier to disclose when you are looking at somebody in the face? Is it easier to organize women, can women being organized against rape?

We had a lot of bloggers who engaged in performances. This was probably in part influenced by the work of Toxic Lesbian. We did a performance where people were talking at the top of the city hall and the only audience was bloggers and they blogged what they saw as the people talked. There was this live transmission of the major, the police chief, Francesca Pollera (that woman I used as a literary resource for our project). It was very beautiful that all of this people sat around of this table and they talked while there was a ring of people around them who blogged it. It is a very nice piece, I think. Right after that, we did an activist piece where right across the street — where all the women who were activists in the town came and they participated in this performance. There was a really direct person-to-person as opposed to an internet-mediated experience. That is the piece that we did.

Did those actions/pieces reach the citizenship? Nice idea! I do not know how it places out. I guess there are people who are much more specialized, inclined to come into that —such as Toxic Lesbian, for example. I would ask this question to Toxic Lesbian, and I

actually asked her when we were working together: How many people actually see it? The question of internet and engagement is: What is the scale of the audience?

One of the questions that one has to ask, when one considers citizenship, is: Who is actually looking, who has access? I think the question or idea will become much more permanent in the future when more people have access. But right now we are in an in-between period. The internet has demonstrated its effectiveness and its problems (e. g. the rights of internet pornography, its facilitation of international trafficking — obviously another kind of key issue one has to consider when one thinks about activating citizenship) but I do not think we have digital citizenship nor digital audiences for art to any significant degree yet. But, like you say, and to say the last word on it, both are growing.

I do not like internet art. I mean, I appreciate it intellectually. There is a kind of intellectual structure that I appreciate about the web, for example Toxic Elena's work. However there is not much that physical or tactile or even practical, emotional aspect. I appreciate it intellectually, if that makes sense. I appreciate the idea of connectivity that is manifest and, to name it, the kind of symbol. I appreciate the context of the work. I mean, I really like your work, Elena, and Toxic Lesbian's work. But my appreciation of it is not the same as if I stood in front of a gorgeous, very large, photograph. Those are very different kinds of appreciations for me. One is more intellectual and structural and the other is more physical. When you are sitting in a small group of women and you are talking and, in one moment, one is revealing something she has not revealed before, there is a kind of an emotional beauty of that, that I do not see online or through internet or through this mediation we have with the screen in front of us —or at least in front of me (although I really appreciate seeing you, it is a very nice camera).

So the question is: Do we need the physical? And how much do we need the physical? I think we need the physical! I think we will always need it. It is part of art but I also have very much, have always appreciated the structure, the beauty of the structure which is where conceptual art comes in. You do not really find a Laurence Weiner or an Allan Kaprow piece visually beautiful, you find them beautiful with their intellectual coherency and the originality of the idea and the way pieces fit together. I think the web is very good (particularly in the way you have explored it, Elena) for manifesting kinds of connectivities, there are part of the aesthetic of social practice. Whether it really captures the direct engagement and that has the quality of sitting in front of another person and having a kind of an emotional or physical or psychological connection? Those are very different things so far.

I really prefer those so far because as we become more capable of doing three-dimensional projection and emerging technologies (where you actually put on gloves and you can feel things) that might all change. I do believe that there'll be still a difference between biological and electronic matter and information will be sort of dissolved over time, I do not know.

I have to ask who is listening. The web is predominantly used to get voice; it is less used to receive voice (in my experience, which is not very deep). I suspect what is going to happen is that political actors will more and more take over and they will explore the ways that actually engage and activate a broader public. That is what happened in the Arab Spring and it will be as true in presidential elections as well in uprisings as we progress generationally. It is even obvious that Obama uses the web more than his opponents. As we progress and people become more digitally sophisticated they kind of manipulators of public consciousness who care about such things as elections, in some way I think expands that use of the web as an activation site.

Right now make the voice to those who do not have a public space it looks like a democratic space but the issue to me is not what you say but is the same with art: I can make all the art I want in my studio but I give the exhibition or the publication or the television interview, it remains in my studio. So, if I sit in front of my computer and I sing at my voice no one is listening, it is irrelevant. So I think the issue and it goes back to your first question about engagement, I think we have to more closely interrogate what we mean by engagement. I do not have the answer but I think this might be a really viable question. One of the main concerns is engagement, how do we manage the engagement on the web and what do we mean by engagement. In a sense that might be what we want to think about it. There are many more sophisticated people than me doing this all over the world.