

Women Artists and the Art of Social Engagement

Reading: The exhibit in our gallery this winter represents the work of the Racial Justice Action Team over the last two years or more to raise our consciousness about the interrelated social and moral problems we face as a society and about the responses that our members have made to them throughout the years right up to the present. One of the options built into the exhibit is the chance to use the pads of yellow sticky notes to add your own slogans, comments and questions. I hope you will take advantage of this opportunity. We don't care how messy the exhibit gets. We are much more interested in your responses than we are in a clean house.

With this in mind, I have decided to highlight one particular sign from the exhibit here this morning. It is Lynn Olson's revision of the AA "Serenity Prayer" which asks for the wisdom to know the difference between what we can and can't change. Lynn's revision goes like this: "I am no longer /accepting the things I/ cannot change. I am/ changing the things/ I cannot accept." Please hold this in your mind as we look together at some examples of art by American women artists.

Text: As you know, since this is my eleventh talk about women here, I want to accomplish several things at once in a very short time. **First**, I want to celebrate four terrific American women who have spent their lives making art to address social problems. I intend these remarks as profiles in imagination and courage. **Second**, I want to relate their work to the Protest exhibit in our gallery. They may even provide some models for us going forward. And **third**, I want to raise our consciousness of what art can DO when we have to protest--because much as we might want to step back from the problems our exhibit raises—the lack of respect for the human and civil rights of women and people of color, the specter of war, the degradation of our environment—we cannot step back and also be true to the principles of Unitarian Universalism.

The artists I will present all chose to break with prestigious art-making practices in their time. Although they were all eventually honored by the artworld, they chose to work in the public sphere, hoping to make a difference. In so doing, they have contributed in different ways to an extended sense of what art can DO. They call this art by different names: community art, feminist art, protest art, Black Art, public art and sustainable art to name a few terms. Their names are **Judy Baca, Suzanne Lacy, Faith Ringgold and Maya Lin** (I will also refer to work by

Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer). All are still living and working in the U.S. I am not actually going to say much about the specific images you will see, although I will explain the context in which they appear. We can look at them again in the talk-back after coffee, but for now, imagine you are passing them in a public space.

Judy Baca is famous for one of the longest walls of murals in the world: the Great Wall in Los Angeles. Baca was born in LA in 1946 and raised in Watts by a Mexican American family of women. In elementary school, Baca did not speak English, and her teacher encouraged her to paint to keep her occupied. She learned English and attended Cal State Northridge, earning a BA in 1969 before returning to her high school to teach. In 1970, however, she participated in a Chicano anti-war demonstration and lost her job, thereby beginning her career as an outsider in art. Her first job was in a summer program sponsored by the Los Angeles Parks and Recreation Department, working with Mexican American kids from different gangs! She noticed that they loved to use graffiti to mark their territories, and she decided to create a mural with them. She said at the time: **“I want to use public space to create a public voice for and a public consciousness for a people who are, in fact, the majority of the population but who are not represented in any way.”** This turned out to be her program for life. She began the Great Wall project when the Army Corps of Engineers hired her to help improve an area around a San Fernando Valley flood-control channel –essentially a ditch with a concrete retaining wall. Inspired by the great Mexican muralists, she decided to paint a history of California from the point of view of those who were not represented in traditional history books. The painting began in 1976, proceeding at the rate of about 350 feet per year; by 1984, it extended a half-mile in length, having provided employment and leadership opportunities for 400 people. The project has continued and there are plans to extend it to envision the future. It will run a full mile when it is done.

The panels are about 30 ft. long by 8-10 feet high. The images in the early panels are drawn from the history of southern California from prehistoric times to statehood with attention to the indigenous people and Mexican settlers. Later panels do not shy away from the troubles those people faced in American society, but they also present the histories of other groups—Chinese railroad workers and Dust Bowl settlers, for example—and the troubles caused for California by national figures like Sen. Joe McCarthy, who saw a potential Communist in anyone who differed from his model of human being.

Baca eventually went on to create a plan for “The World Wall: A Vision of the Future Without Fear” because the first step toward world peace is to imagine it! Now in her seventies, Baca is known as a pioneer in an art form that she made her own and for a rugged sensibility that does not whitewash history. The legacy she leaves us, however, is faith in the people themselves to speak through the techniques of art without being artists themselves. They are “artivists.”

Suzanne Lacy has worked in many media, including installation, performance and photography and has coined the term “new genre public art” for what she does. Lacy attended Cal State Fresno and was there when Judy Chicago founded her Feminist Art Program in 1970. She and 20 other graduate students participated in the makeover of an old house in LA by Chicago and Miriam Schapiro called “Woman House,” and Lacy took this work in a different direction throughout the 70s. Her first opportunity came when the Biltmore Hotel was renovated in LA, and the media proclaimed that “There may be life in the old girl yet.” Her two-day performance in the hotel lobby involved a complete makeover to turn her into an old woman, followed by performances and storytelling by older women from their lives “over sixty.”

One of Lacy’s most famous pieces, however, titled “Three Days in May,” addressed rape in Los Angeles in 1977. Involving a lot of community organizing, this event featured a giant yellow map of LA on the wall in city hall. Working with the police department, artists and volunteers recorded with a red stencil on the map all of the places where rapes were reported during the exhibit. Records were also made on the sidewalks in chalk. This project was refitted for performance in northern England, since the problem it addressed remains unresolved everywhere until this day—as we know from the #Me Too Movement.

Another famous project called the “Crystal Quilt” took place on Mother’s Day in 1987—this time in Minneapolis, with 430 “older” women, in the giant lobby of the new IDS Building. Lacy envisioned the blocks of a quilt in yellow, red and black, and then arranged tables to create an 82 sq. ft. tableau seen from above. While some tables remained empty to create the design, others were surrounded by four women, who engaged in conversation prompted by cards on their table. The whole scene was videographed and photographed to create an artistic image; the 3000 people who stood above the scene could hear the buzz of conversation but not the specific words. The event was broadcast live by PBS. Lacy was later asked to

repeat this work for the opening of The Tanks performance space at the Tate Modern in London, and a version of the work is part of its permanent collection.

The point of both of these installation/performance pieces is to address the problem of women's silences—caused by shame, bullying and ostracization in the first case, and by the refusal to honor the cumulative experience of older women in the second. Lacy also went on to write extensively about public art that focuses on the people for whom it is made and whose problems it seeks to remedy rather than on the artist or on art as separate from life, above it looking down.

The third artist I want to celebrate here is **Faith Ringgold**, an African American woman born in Harlem in 1930, whose life experience led her into art of social engagement in the 1970s. Her parents were part of the Great Migration from the south during the Harlem Renaissance of music, poetry, fiction and art that led to the Black Arts Movement at mid-century. Her mother was a fashion designer and her father a storyteller. Faith married a jazz pianist and had two daughters before she finished college at the City University of New York in 1955 with a major in art education. Although she wanted to be a painter. She taught art in public school until 1973, when she turned from painting to more public forms of art. Her work in the 60s had already shown the influence of the Civil Rights movement, but in the early 70s, she was commissioned by the Creative Artists Public Service Program to make a large-scale mural in the Women's Facility on Rikers Island depicting alternatives to incarceration. She went on to create several murals in her American People series such as "The Flag Is Bleeding."

Two trips to West Africa in the mid-70s led her to bring in materials from African sources to frame her paintings, and then it was not long before she began to create unique "story quilts" as an homage to women's work and African American women's history. The stories are intricate—perhaps harder to follow than Baca's larger format images and more personal in scale—but they are vivid and engaging. Her viewers want to know what the people are doing and saying and so they stop in front of the work for much longer than the 15 seconds they give to most museum pieces. These works break out of their museum/gallery space, demanding a different kind of attention. Ringgold did works like these for children (along with children's books), and she went on to make soft human-size dolls and masks that ask to be involved in performances. History is played out by human bodies of all ages, ethnicities and cultures. We all insist on being included, with or without our masks.

The fourth artist is **Maya Lin**, whom you all know because of her controversial but incredibly successful design for the Vietnam Memorial. She was still an undergraduate at Yale when she submitted her plan to the competition, and she is certain that she would not have won if the judges had known that she was a woman of Asian descent. Her proposal called for the memorial to be placed below the level ground so that visitors would walk down to it and come back up. In fact, she calls it an earthwork, because her intent was to overturn the idea of hierarchy and embrace the idea of balance and tension between the man-made and the natural worlds. After she was selected, there was such an uproar that the committee approved another design for an example of traditional public art to be placed nearby—four living soldiers with an American flag to balance the names of the dead. If you have been there, you know which memorial works to involve the visitor. Lin's work has called forth flowers, written memories, conversations, tears—all signs of mourning and healing. It is a form of protest often used in poetry to recall the names of those who have fallen in a circumscribed space as the main focus of attention. In traditional public art, the names are made subservient to a category or an image of heroism.

Lin was born in 1959 in Athens, Ohio, where her parents taught ceramics and literature at the Ohio University. Both were born in China to prominent families and came to the US after WWII. Lin has an older brother who is a poet, but she was a loner in Athens who focused on her studies and spent her free time casting bronzes. She graduated from Yale in 1981 and received a Master of Architecture degree in 1986. She presents herself, however, as a “designer” rather than as an architect. Because of the Vietnam Memorial, she has received several other commissions for memorials and homages such as the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, AL and a similar plate for women in front of the Sterling Library at Yale. But her strongest passion is for environmental works: earthworks that are beautiful to the eye but sustainable and that encourage people to interact with the land as this one at the University of Michigan: *Wave Field*. Occasionally, as in this piece, *Leaders*, she creates human figures out of materials that belong in the ground, presumably to emphasize the continuity of all forms of life. Our leaders are not only indebted to the people who went before them but to the earth itself—a powerful statement.

I want to add just a few words about two other artists because they provide some context for the signs that appear in our exhibit. Barbara Kruger is a well-known artist from a Jewish family, born in 1945, who usually works in white font on a red

background with photographs or collaged images, but primarily in words—a negative for visual artists until the Dada Movement came along at the beginning of the 20th century. Although her works have appeared in galleries and museum shows, they are best suited to public spaces. She has wrapped them around city buses, for example. Kruger came up through the magazine industry where she saw how we are manipulated by advertising. She has used the potential of conceptual art with acerbic wit to draw attention primarily to the ways that women in our culture are limited or limit themselves. These are techniques that appear in many of the signs in our exhibit. Kruger makes them on a larger scale, not just for specific events like the 1989 women’s march in Washington, but as a general cultural critique. This is American culture, she says. Is this what you really want? Her work is confrontational. It makes us think before engaging in business as usual.

And I can’t resist showing you a couple of images from **Jenny Holzer**, whose claim to fame is her large-scale work in neon shown in places like Times Square on skyscrapers, but she also does bronze plaques, posters, t-shirts, and so on. Like Kruger, she works in words but they tend to be declarative statements (“Fathers often use too much force,” from “Truisms”) or questions (“what urge will save us now that sex won’t”?) or instructions (“Go where people sleep and see if they’re safe), and they are often jarring—as in her “Survival” series: “Protect me from what I want.” Holzer was featured in a recent *Time* article as a cultural optimist, although she has spent her life pointing out what needs to be changed. The point is, she believes that we CAN change. So do those in our exhibit who march and go to vigils and create signs that express a point of view and break the silence that so many women have adopted.

The artists I have been showing today are some of my heroes precisely because they uncover truths in our collective history with courage, honesty and imagination. They encourage us all to use the techniques of art to find our voices in public. They encourage us to collaborate with others on behalf of a better world. Although they do not avoid confrontation, they are non-violent. Each in her own way supports the possibility that human beings can not only survive but can thrive—else why would they bother to create art?