Violence Against Women: An Artistic Intervention

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Violence Against Women: An Artistic Intervention

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A thesis presented to the Sam Fox School of Design and Visual Arts of Washington University in St. Louis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

We have many tools available to impede violence against women. Legislative circles, educational systems, and advocacy groups all work tirelessly to eradicate these heinous crimes and serve the victims of abuse. However violence against women is still described as “the most pervasive human rights challenge” in the world today.¹

For some it can be difficult to view socially engaged art making as an essential component of women’s advocacy compared to immediate housing, legal counsel, help hotlines, and the education of women. Blurring the lines between activism and art history, this relatively new art form is often embraced by marginalized societies who have utilized it to forge alternative pathways with the labyrinth of our cultural constructs.

Community based artworks counteract these systems and have crucial influence on how we perceive violence against women and therefore how we re-act in response. This thesis is an examination of the epidemic of violence against women, specifically it’s intersection with rurality and how a socially engaged art practice can act as a communal vehicle for advocacy, intervention, and healing.
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Biographical Insight (Introduction)

I was extremely privileged to grow up in a safe household with two parents. Both my mother and my father fostered my self-respect, particularly as an independent, self-assured woman. Then in my mid-twenties I experienced a time in my life where several friends and family members confided in me that they had been the victims of both domestic violence and sexual assaults. I was overwhelmed by these stories primarily because they contradicted my belief that I lived in a safe albeit rural community, from a collection of middle class families seemingly living happy lives that embodied the “American Dream”.

These revelations rocked my worldview. I began to wonder: if I came from such a “safe, happy community” and had so many friends who experienced violence at such young ages, then how prolific is the problem of violence against women? Culturally I was taught that violence of this magnitude occurred in developing countries and nations with malicious dictatorships, not in an advanced society such as democratic America.

I began my research in 2012 and quickly discovered not only does this violence happen in the U.S. but at staggering rates. I learned that violence against women has been named a major health problem by the Centers for Disease Control and the Bureau of Justice Statistics. This new information fostered in me a responsibility as a woman to address these insidious violations against my friends and family. I feel compelled to utilize my particular strengths as an artist to give voice to these victims, bring awareness of the common degradation of women, and hopefully change the systems and cultural constructs that perpetuate violence.

It is hard for people to approach the subject of interpersonal violence (IPV). It is an intense subject often fraught with feelings of shame and anger. Due to this I often utilize
subversion techniques to draw the viewer in and reinforce the insidious nature of IPV. In many cases I present the viewer with the façade of happiness we encounter in everyday life and then subvert it so that upon further inspection the viewer discovers the horrific conditions in which we live. One such series, Decoders (Figure 1), is a sequence of prints which utilizes the design of secret decoder messages. These decoders have been around for ages as parts of games or children's spy kits. They consist of a page of red static or red letters but when you hold up the magical red magnifying glass, a secret message appears underneath. I am using this concept as a way to draw a parallel between rape culture and physical realities of situation of rape. This culture is so overwhelmingly pervasive that there is a disconnect between the words and jokes we say and the actual physical violence against women. It is easy to dismiss rape jokes if you aren't a rapist without realizing they contribute to a greater community ignorance which not only permits violence against women, but fosters cultural permission and acceptance.

In response to these rape jokes I've printed a series of them in a red tint on white paper. Some pages contain only one rape joke while others contain an onslaught of jokes. Once the viewer picks up the red filtered spy glass they are able to read the blue text underneath which are written by survivors of rape. In some cases these women's words are what their attackers told them, such as "It's ok, I know you like it" and "The fear in your eyes turns me on." These words correlate to rape jokes which make light of women saying no and continuing to rape them anyway. Both messages have conflated on the page, the harsh red text of the violence and the soft blue of these women's experiences. But you can only discern the difference by choosing to pick up a decoder and look for yourself.
This same style is also incorporated in pieces dealing with domestic violence. This type of violence is pervasive in our communities but rarely discussed openly. Instead, women are taught to be ashamed of abuse and to present a false identity to the community. In these Decoder prints, the top layer consists of the silhouettes of homes, families, and pets. However, once you pick up the red magnifying glass you are able to read blue text underneath that speaks to the prevalence of family violence.

Overall my work tries to develop avenues for cultural intervention and systematic change through collaboration with women and advocacy centers. The design of these projects is heavily inspired by other artists who have paved the way through this new terrain of community art. Throughout this research I hope to address several key questions. Can an artist's practice disrupt these cultural and systemic conditions? How do we counteract physical violence in our communities? What tactics have been most successful and why?
An Examination of Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)

Ecological Systems Theory, also known as Human Ecology Theory, is often utilized by psychologists to examine each individual layer of societal interaction so we can better understand cause and effect on human behavior. This theory examines levels of societal factors which lead to partner abuse, including interaction between individual, community, and institutional levels. These layers consist of intimate levels such as family and peer relationships, community interactions like school systems and religious organizations, as well as broader societal influences such as the media and legislative bodies.

Analyzed through the lens of rurality Ecological Systems theory illustrates how women in agrarian or isolated communities are an at-risk population for increased incidence of intimate partner abuse, partner homicide and general brutality at the hands of men. When examining violence against women this theory can be particularly helpful because people who reside at the intimate level of interaction may commit these violent acts but societal stigmas and legislative resources heavily influence a woman’s ability to recognize abuse, seek help within her community, and develop a sustainable, independent lifestyle. These facts, which conflict with the common characterization of small towns as charming, safe environments, demonstrate that our cultural understanding of violence against women is blinded by prejudice and misconceptions, thereby encouraging the perpetuation of these crimes.

This research heavily influenced my series of photographs titled Weapons (Figure 2). These images, taken on a small family farm in rural Missouri, illustrate the idyllic nature of rural living with pictures of gardening, stone fireplaces, and baseball mitts. However, these photos also all contain objects used to batter women. There are baseball bats, shovels, cigarettes, and
coffee mugs. The juxtaposition of these concepts identifies how rural depictions can be perceived as safe when in reality it is one of the most dangerous settings for women. Not only do battered women in rural communities face more isolation from resources and family support but they also experience more aggressive and violent outbursts than their urban counterparts.  

When examining violence in rural settings Ecology Theory enables us to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the causation of violence, thereby enabling us to limit or counteract its effects. The individual level of Ecology Theory reveals that “women who witness interpersonal violence against women are more likely to have tolerant attitudes concerning abuse.” This, along with verbal and physical violence is used by abusers to manipulate and isolate their partners. Victims then become convinced they are helpless and powerless which when combined with the isolation from family, friends, and resources, leads to the disintegration of their belief in their value as a person and their overall self-esteem.

There have been multiple studies concerning the correlation between tolerating/perpetuating abuse and early childhood experiences. Both victims and perpetrators are likely to have witnessed or experienced abuse as children. According to a report by Swedish health scientists, women that witnessed interpersonal violence against women were more likely to have tolerant attitudes towards abuse and, therefore were more likely to experience sexual, emotional and spousal abuse.

An examination of violence at the community level was found to be particularly influential. “Community attitudes towards interpersonal violence against women were found to be one of the strongest predictors of exposure to abuse. Communities are important in shaping disparities in health as they shape individual opportunity and expose residents to multiple risks.
and resources over a woman’s life span. Understanding characteristics of interpersonal violence at the community level allows others to address the ties between violence and the communal living space. Using such understanding, communities could also address the mechanisms that connect people and groups within their culture and the means through which communal effects are transmitted to the individual residents.

The institutional level examines legislative and judicial factors that are responsible for the development of policy making and policy enforcement at local, state and national levels. Studies reveal that women in an abusive relationship experience episodes of violence far more frequently than previously thought in academic and legislative circles. A major influencing factor contributing to the underreporting was that in the previous national studies on intimate partner violence both partners were present for the questions. This technique afforded victims no privacy and highly affected their ability to communicate accurate information without fear of reprisal from their abuser. This interviewing flaw is one example of the multiple ways in which our systems of gathering data are not only inaccurate but blatantly disregard the people group it aims to serve.

Most legislation enacted for the protection of women was initiated in the 1970s and 1980s, culminating in 1994 at the creation of the Violence Against Women Act. However, this legislation is far from complete and most policies are ineffective in rural areas which have limited autonomy and are distinguished by their isolation. Abused women’s physical isolation from cities or police departments can foster a high level of invisibility among law enforcement. This, when combined with the low budgets often occurring in rural police departments creates a lack of rudimentary services for women in rural communities. A 2006 report found that police
departments in rural areas are less likely even to have written policies on the handling of
domestic disputes."\(^\text{12}\)

When comparing legal and protection services between rural and urban communities,
studies show an overall lack of response across the board from non-metropolitan areas. "A 2005
study comparing rural and urban counties in Kentucky found that between 55% and 91% of
restraining orders were not served in rural areas, whereas the urban rate of non service was
18.2%."\(^\text{13}\) The same study found that rural perpetrators violate protective orders three times as
often as all other domestic violence perpetrators. Even at the judicial level studies illustrate how
rural courts are less informed about domestic violence and less likely to grant a protective order
than an urban court.\(^\text{14}\)
Flaws in Data Gathering Systems

First, I believe it is important to recognize that having accurate data concerning domestic violence is an important tool. Because of the silent nature of the crime and the social stigmas involved, only an estimated fifty percent of victimized women actually report rape and domestic violence.¹⁵ Shaming and self-flagellation not only create further damage to a victimized person, but they increase the number of unreported rape and assault. Without reporting, women are unable to get the assistance they desperately need and the abusers go unnoticed and unpunished, free to continue to victimize women. “It is notoriously tough to figure out who the rapists are. Reporting and conviction rates for acquaintance rapes are so low as to be useless as a diagnostic tool.”¹⁶ When we analyze statistics drawn from official reports we are already examining a much narrower margin than actually exists. Therefore, if our systems for gathering this data are flawed, our margin of error increases even more dramatically. Such flawed data prevents our society from grasping the severity of the problem, thereby limiting the amount of monetary and judicial resources delegated to addressing violence against women.

In 2012, when I first began researching domestic violence in the state of Missouri, I turned to the State Highway Patrol as they collate all the information about violence in the state and publish annual reports. I found very limited information concerning domestic violence; the main report available was about the recidivistic rates of criminals charged with intimate partner abuse. The opening line of the 2011 report read “The characteristics of domestic violence and domestic violence offenders in Missouri are understudied. To date there have been no published studies on this topic in Missouri despite the fact that 11 percent of all homicides in 2008 were
domestic violence related.”17 This statement demonstrates the sheer lack of information and lack of police attention focused on this violence in Missouri.

As I continued my research I found even more problems with data collection. Almost all reports on domestic violence have been limited to urban areas. However, the few studies targeting rural communities have found that rural perpetrators of abuse are nearly twice as likely as their urban counterparts to inflict severe physical injuries, to use weapons, and to threaten to kill their victims. 18

Also the manner by which this information is gathered and entered into police databases is heavily skewed in many states. Domestic violence is any act of violence committed against an intimate partner. This wide description includes crimes such as harassment, assault, battery, rape and homicide. However, the only crimes that are labeled by police as domestic violence related are homicides. Battery, rape, etc. are categorized in police reports without any reference to its domestic nature. Compounding the problem is the delay in collating data in an efficient time frame. Therefore, when we try to gain a broader understanding of domestic violence against women in Missouri, the only statistics available are homicides from several years previous.

Initially, these discoveries enraged me. I found the lack of data and concern for this violence atrocious. The police and the media treated these murders as isolated events without addressing any larger issue of violence against women. The first work I made in response to this research was A Study of Domestic Violence in Missouri, (Figure 3). This piece was developed directly in reaction to the lack of data concerning the number of intimate partner murders and how the information is lumped in with homicide or assault data and not recognized in its own category. This combined with sensationalized media that doesn’t frame these stories as a pattern
but as isolated incidents leads to community and institutional ignorance about the murder of women. For *A Study of Domestic Violence in Missouri*, I investigated any reported homicides with female victims and male aggressors in 2012 in Missouri, then memorialized each date on a “found” cross-stitch. The base material was completed cross-stitches from antique stores and thrift shops across Missouri. They function as a common domestic art form which hangs in the many homes in the rural Midwest. Statistically, it is likely that many of these cross-stitches have been completed by women in abusive homes or at least have hung in abusive households. I also chose the cross-stitch because this needlework routinely idealizes the state of the home with phrases such as ‘Home Sweet Home’. Their idyllic concepts reiterate the nature of abuse in homes perceived by the community as happy. The installation of the modified cross-stitches are accompanied by a cross stitched QR code (Figure 4), which when scanned by a smart phone, takes the viewer to a victim advocacy website. Together, these twenty eight cross-stitches act as both a domestically themed, empathetic memorial and as a legitimate data set concerning intimate partner violence.
Normalization of Trauma and Violence

Normative social processes are the ideas and actions, which our society generally believes are normal and acceptable behavior. There are multiple factors which influence the way we understand violence as a culture, specifically in the media.

Media is a significant and controlling influence upon our cultural perceptions. Degradation and violence against women is made commonplace in the public sphere, frequently seen on television, heard in music, and evident in the news organizations. The news outlets, on which many rely for their everyday understanding of events and culture, contribute to the normalization of domestic violence. The news uses statistical data and selective reporting to highlight specific aspects of violence, creating news which is a product being marketed to consumers.¹⁹

"Most disturbing is the disproportionate coverage of sensationalized violence. Invariably, rape stories get far more coverage than domestic violence stories. In all likelihood, this is because rape stories usually focus on one individual woman. If she is attractive, and particularly if she is white, she is a very marketable victim."²⁰

Not only does this create an erroneous understanding of abuse, but it also over-saturates the viewer and begins to create a complacency where violence is natural and not in need of explanation.

In rural settings the lack of education and isolation from other sources of information create a reliance on basic media as a source of cultural identity.²¹ On the community and institutional levels, our identity is highly influenced if not completely constructed by media. One specific concern of women’s rights activists are the depictions of abuser and victim in our
culture. When discussing victims, the public often holds them personally responsible for the abuse. Victims are blamed for provoking the abuse or for not leaving a situation because they are too weak, not in control, or too passive. These explanations place the blame directly on the victim. However, when discussing the abusers, people use explanations - alcohol use and childhood abuse - that place the blame on factors external to the individual. This position perpetuates obstacles already inherent to ending domestic violence by encouraging victims to blame themselves and tough it out, as well as freeing the abuser from taking any responsibility for his actions. This media impacts the identity of the abuser in believing his actions are just, as well as psychologically substantiating the narrow view of gender roles enforced within isolated communities.

As previously stated, a community’s perception of violence has a significant impact on the actual occurrence of abuse. Yet communities have an appalling track record when it comes to awareness of the problem, the support of victims and the intolerance of violence. Both rural and urban communities tend to consider nonmetropolitan areas as quaint or idyllic, often as a superior location in which to raise a family. Spatiality, in conjunction with stereotypes encourage greater amounts of privacy and social spaces constructed in ways which limit agency and perpetuate isolation. The cultural standard of victim-blaming directly impacts a woman’s ability to leave an abuser. While victim-blaming occurs at a national level, rural settings are more likely to encourage women to stay in a “tough relationship” and work on their marital problems rather than considering divorce as a possible avenue. The community at large in non-metropolitan settings is less likely to encourage a single woman or single-mother lifestyle and to be less supportive of independence from a patriarchal structure.
The stigmatization of victims and the aggrandizing of collective data form attitudes of violence that miss the root problem of addressing male violence in communal and individual levels. The media sensationalizes cases the sexualized murder of women by men. They also express concern about violence seen in youth, video games, racist attacks and gun crime. What we don’t see are editorials addressing men’s behavior as it relates to violence, particularly male sexual violence, or questioning masculine cultures that generate, exonerate and celebrate violence. We see no policy concern over masculinity. Violence is fundamental to gender and by examining how power adheres to social relationships we can understand how dominance is maintained and reproduced. In his book, *Masculine Domination*, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu notes that the practice of domination is not an inherent attribute but one learned through socialization. When abuse is recognized as a perpetuation of social practices, those practices can then be further examined or eradicated within their relationship to rural or urban environments.23

When it comes to education about rape and the circumstances of abuse, we are educating women victims and not male abusers. There are very few programs which involve men speaking with men about violence against women. What is it saying that we are continually attempting to educate the victims and not the offenders? How do we even expect to see any changes if we don’t address the root of the problem with men? According to the director of an advocacy center in a rural community, the overall ideals of the public significantly affect the way individuals view domestic violence.

“The folks in my community generally feel that violence between intimate partners is wrong, but I have heard some community members say that they believe there are instances where women provoke their partners. Others in my community feel that
domestic violence does not happen that often in our community. They wonder how busy I really am at my agency... One of the reasons I have difficulty garnering community support are the stereotypes about who is affected by this problem. The ‘upstanding citizens’ in my community feel that this problem only affects the poor minorities who are on welfare and the growing number of Hispanics who are moving into the area. The public’s inability to accept the prevalence of domestic violence in rural communities without attaching qualifiers is thought to be a core component of rural culture.”

Our inability to comprehend the extensive amounts of abuse and how they permeate each level of our society reinforces cultural prejudices. It blinds us from the horrors that are occurring in our own families and neighborhoods. One of the first stories of violence I came across was about a young Jane Doe found in a basement in St. Louis in the eighties. She was savagely murdered, raped, and decapitated at about 10 years of age. Neither myself or the St. Louis community could understand how this little girl was left unidentified in this basement. Her nourished body and red fingernail polish seemed to identify that she was loved. She was someone’s daughter, granddaughter, friend, student, neighbor. How could no one be looking for her? Decades later, she remains unidentified.

Jane’s story led me to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), one of the governmental databases where I continued my research about St. Louis Jane Doe. While exploring their database I discovered over one hundred Jane Does, from all over the United States, all possibly under the age of 18. These girls have been found for years all over the United States and no one has claimed them, or been looking for them. Their bodies have been found but due to the decomposition or the type of assault, their faces were not photographable. In
most instances these women have been given composite identities based on their bone structure. Some have had pictures drawn simply based on their height or likely hair color. Occasionally they are only represented by their clothing, a specific ring or a type of sandal. All of them have been forgotten or hidden.

My time with these images of these girl’s composite identities has led to the creation of my work *Jane Doe* (Figure 5). It is the photographic documentation of these women’s images printed out and hung together. The photographs act as an informational set; you can see just how many little girls have been ruthlessly murdered and are left unidentified and lost. Hung together, they form a collective image that is far more overwhelming in scale than their small, virtual personas which only live online. These are not images of women from the fringes of our societies. In their faces, compiled from all kinds of photographs, you see the resemblance to your sixth grade classmate, your neighbor’s daughter, or the young woman who makes your coffee each morning. Their faces are haunting because these faces do not belong to the missing women, they are a mix of all of us, yet physically representative of none of us.
The Development of Relational Aesthetics

Artists have dealt with community violence through representation since the beginnings of art making. These works have lived in the public eye through every type of medium, whether it be cave drawings, book illustrations, or video. However, in the last forty years a “new genre” of public art has sought to transition from solely representative artwork into direct engagement with the community.\textsuperscript{26} This progression has enabled and legitimized dialogical components and a generative process designed to foster new cultural understandings which can shape every type of social sphere. Understanding the historical precedence for this community engaged art work not only helps us understand its place in art making but its effectiveness for advocacy.

It was only through profound changes in 20th century art theory that the conditions for community engagement began to emerge. Though various forms of instrumentalism existed before the nineteen hundreds, the majority of artwork was still based on traditional aesthetic theories of individuality. These ideas branch from the Cartesian philosophy of embracing formality and rejecting any human-nature connection.\textsuperscript{27} All value was placed on the aesthetics of the finished physical product until the postmodernism’s rejection of modernism.\textsuperscript{28} Relational aesthetic theorist Nicolas Bourriaud delineated this departure, writing,

“\textit{The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, at whatever scale chosen by the artist... instead of trying to reinvent the world (as historical lineage mandates) the goal is to find a better way to ‘inhabit’ the world.”}\textsuperscript{29}
The fundamental developments such as Happenings, the performative work of feminists, and the interventionist tactics were able to lay the foundation for a new artistic framework based on the intersection of the artist and the collaborator.

Artist and writer Suzanne Lacy explores this trajectory through the terminology of “new genre public art”. Lacy initially appropriated the term “new genre” from 1960s art theory which described the catchall of art deviating from traditional methods and boundaries of making. Lacy uses the term to describe art based on engagement and “uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives”.

Through their commitment to community dialogue artists like Lacy were creating meaning with participants who were actively throughout the project. The work no longer was about a brilliant, secluded artist in their studio but the transformation of fixed identities and cultural perceptions in a community.

“At the same time, they conceive of the relationship between the viewer and the work of art quite differently; not simply as an instantaneous, prediscursive insight, but as a decentering, a movement outside self (and self-interest) through dialogue extended over time. But a commitment to dialogue, no matter how self-reflexive, signals the reliance of these projects on some common system of meaning within which the various participants can speak, listen, and respond.”

One of Lacy’s most significant works, completed with collaborator Leslie Labowitz, was a performance named In Mourning and In Rage (1977) (Figure 6). In November of 1977 a string of sex murders captured the attention of the Los Angeles media and were dubbed the “Hillside
Strangler” case. Throughout the following weeks broadcasters scrutinized and speculated about the murders, placing most of their focus on the victims. They stitched together frenzied and fantastical hypotheses about these women that were in direct contradiction to the facts of the case and even released information known to be false in order to heighten suspense surrounding the case. Lacy writes

“Overlooking the obvious connection - each victim was a female in a sex-violent culture - reporters ransacked the pasts of the dead women, searching with the police for clues as to why these particular women had been singled out.” Lacy continues “Mistaking the similarities in each killing for causation, reporters inadvertently upheld the common myth that victims of sex violence are somehow culpable.”

Once it was discovered that two of the victims frequented Hollywood Boulevard, reporters latched onto the theory that these women either were or appeared to be prostitutes. “In telling this story the news media perpetuated the same images and attitudes, ironically appealing to the same prurient interests that created the social climate for the crime itself.”

Sickened by the media sensationalism Lacy and Labowitz took control through performative action. Their goals were to present the facts of the case through a feminist perspective and to create a ritual for women to express their outrage and demands for change. Co-opting the language of the media they created a dramatic, news-worthy event staged at the Los Angeles City Hall. Ten towering actresses cloaked in black and wearing elongated head coverings stepped out of a hearse at city hall and turned to face the collective media associations. On either side they were flanked by dozens of female mourners, a chorus who held banners reading “In Memory of Our Sisters, Women Fight Back.” One at a time they stepped before the
microphone sharing their rage, loss, and grief as they were wrapped in a red cloth and the chorus replied “In memory of our sisters, we fight back!” Concluding the ritual, Lacy read an explanation of their actions and the director of the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women read a list of demands to the media.36

In this performance Lacy and Labowitz co-opted the media outlets to criticize and condemn the media’s methods. In Mourning and In Rage was originally designed to inhabit a gallery space.37 Can you image how that would have diminished the power of the performance and limited the audience? Lacy says this work was able to live in the public due to the theories of Allan Kaprow, one of Lacy’s professors and a crucial figure in the development of dialogical art making.

In the fifties and sixties Allan Kaprow began to challenge the object centered nature of the gallery through experiential engagements know as Happenings. As opposed to using the studio, he utilized the real environment incorporating aspects like race, gender, politics, and ecology. His articulation of art challenged the art establishment and blurred the boundaries of art and life was profoundly impactful on feminist artists such as Lacy who used these theories to challenge public culture.38 Collaboration was a stimulating and compelling new practice which offered an endless array of possibility.

While Kaprow and performative artworks were influencing factors, Lacy also places much of the momentum upon those artists from marginalized communities who embraced these new opportunities as an avenue to take control of their identity in their own neighborhoods.

“It is my premise that the real heritage of the current moment in public art came from the discourses of largely marginalized artists. However visible the above cited ‘movements’
were, they were not linked to each other, to a centralized art discourse, or to public art itself until the late eighties.⁵³⁹

Community engaged artists continued to push boundaries and explore their new territory. In 1991 artist and art historian Suzie Gablik wrote about the necessity of injecting empathy into contemporary art practices in her book *The Reenchantment of Art*. Breaking from the history of a secluded brilliant artist, Gablik argues that we are encountering a societal imperative which requires the arts to not only address issues but also collaborate directly with the public to discover outlets for change. Art's long history of elevating design over subject matter has resulted in a disconnect and shallow aesthetic emotions. The image in its most basic, superficial qualities was all that mattered, but Gablik argues that to shift from detachment to relational aesthetics we must change our vision. Society must transition from separation into a responsiveness rooted in action, creating a community of active practice. She writes that when we approach art in a collaborative format with our community we have the power to cause real change. She champions these artists who answer an imperative call-to-arms, transcending the objective work of days past so that we may create a community where artist and social champion can coexist.⁴⁰

Art historian Grant Kester expands upon the necessity of empathy, stating that an empathetic insight is a pragmatic component to developing dialogical work which allows for discursive exchange in a plethora of situations. The artist, who may commonly function in the community as an outsider, must use empathy as a tool for working across identity boundaries and to enhance solidarity among collaborators and the community in challenging hegemonic systems.⁴¹
This history and framework describes a very different trajectory of art-making. The studio has shifted into the public spaces and places of cultural identity while the artist is no longer the center but more aptly described as the "catalyst".42
An Artist's Methodology: Krzysztof Wodiczko

Krzysztof Wodiczko is a Polish artist well known for his large-scale video projections of politically-charged images on architectural façades. His work is heavily influenced by his engineering background, it is grounded by well-executed designs which function both as community artwork and vehicles for advocacy. His projects focus on direct engagement with communities, policies and services in order to produce socially oriented art which educates the community and gives voice to the victims of trauma. Wodiczko champions the transition of the marginalized outsider into the confident citizen whose voice contributes to the local historical discourse of the community.

Wodiczko’s projections subvert the “history of the victors,” a perspective of history which details how the marginalized members of a given society are collectively silenced. He explains how our communal identity, in this case the identity of America, is all based on a history written from the viewpoint of the victors of battle. Our monuments and our collective identity as a nation is built on the pride of forefathers whose interpretation of events became our legitimate history and lived tradition. And while this history is a one of victory, it is also a legacy of destruction.

The marginalized citizens in our communities exist under many labels such as homeless or immigrant, but always as the outsider. Wodiczko transforms these façades of buildings and memorials by projecting the faces of outsiders in order to highlight the oppressive structure and its reflection of collective memory (Figure 7). Before the installation Wodiczko meets with members of the community and works collaboratively to develop the projections. During the installation these citizens faces or bodies are projected onto the building’s façade as they speak.
For a time the columns and walls no longer belong to the privileged victor. They are a chance for these men and women to speak out and share their story. This act transforms the public space by interjecting a radical new stream of thought, the memory of the nameless. 45

From 1987 to 1989 Wodiczko also utilized his design background to collaborate with the homeless citizens of New York. According to interviews with the artist, by the winter of 1987 “an estimated 70,000 people were homeless in New York City”.46 At the time there were mounting levels of violence occurring in the shelters leading to many homeless to choose to stay on the streets. In response, political officials began institutionalizing any homeless person who did not seek refuge in a city shelter, never caring to investigate the cause behind opposition to the shelters. The prison-like structures became dehumanizing monuments in the name of welfare. Citizens choosing to live on the streets faced the struggles of finding nourishment, keeping warm, and finding safety, none of which were being addressed by the city. Overcome by the expanding number of homeless, Wodiczko and collaborator David Lurie initiated Homeless Vehicle Project (Figure 8) as an advocacy program for “permanent, safe, and dignified shelter for all people”.47 These “vehicles” or carts addressed specific needs of the urban nomads. The artists collaborated directly with the homeless to create an emergency shelter, storage unit, and mobile cart all in one. Debuted still in its design phase, Homeless Vehicle Project, according to its creators, was created as a starting point for equality instead of a physical object for mobility.48

Taped conversations between Wodiczko and homeless people also played in the gallery throughout the project’s installation, drawing attention to the collaborative nature of the designs. The soundtrack also drew attention to the various obstacles and everyday needs encountered by
the homeless, such as maximizing visibility, providing protection and legitimizing the right of
the homeless to function as members of their community.49

This body of work addresses more than the result of a given problem. His work
challenges the policies and constructs which created the problem in the first place, the root cause.
He does this by employing a very deliberate set of tactics. These strategies champion the role of
the outsider and of the individual. Through his collaborations Wodiczko doesn’t speak for a
given community, he empowers those individuals to speak for themselves. His collaborations
don’t just identify of group of alienated people, it empowers each individual voice in the
community. Lastly each of the instruments he creates are collaboratively designed and based on
the needs of the individual. They facilitate survival, safety, communication, and function as
community conscious raising.

The power of this community work relies on Wodiczko as a facilitator. He identifies
oppressive systems of power and works collaboratively to return the power to the people. This is
the defining feature of community artwork, it goes beyond the walls of the gallery and empowers
people to counteract the domineering cultural construct.
The Role of Community Art

One of the strengths of community art is that it can address the root of the problem instead of curing its symptoms. Its collaborative and dialogical nature encourages the incorporation of multiple identities and viewpoints resulting in a more comprehensive and targeted project. While women definitely need support from legal counsel and advocacy centers, community art can act as an intervention to address the cultural norms of rape culture, victim shaming, battery, and the murder of women. Without this intervention the results of violence will continue to grow and demands for victim services will continue to expand.

Community engaged art can be specifically designed to address the root causes of violence in a myriad of ways and the tools by which they address these issues are termed tactics. "...projects are made to operate within various systems of power in the real world and they use the techniques of art to maneuver within it. Tactics can be thought of as a set of tools - a means for building and deconstructing a given situation. Interventionist tactics are informed both by art and (more importantly) by a broad range of lived visual, spatial and cultural experiences. They are a motley assemblage of methods for bringing political issues to an audience existing outside the art world’s insular doors."

One particular strength of effective community art programs is that tactics are specifically designed in collaboration with victims and advocates. Artists dedicated to these projects are determined to live within a community and create a foundation of dialogical interaction long before any work is visualized. This focus allows people to take part in the project, making it their own. This is an extremely important tactic for marginalized and victimized communities as it facilitates a healing process as well as giving a voice to and control back to the women.
**Strategies and Tactics of Dialogical Interactions**

One of the first steps is simply creating awareness and examining our understanding of rape culture - how we are "surrounded with images, language, laws, and other everyday phenomena that validate and perpetuate, rape". We can combat this systematic injustice through foundational education, by defining rape, addressing masculine stereotypes, providing resources to victims, and fostering community dialogue.

A very simple way of addressing rape culture is by bringing a common vocabulary to the forefront of our conversation. Saying things like "rape victim shaming" and other common phrases emphasizing how our culture uses those inappropriately can make a big impact. It allows us to clarify our terminology so we can better understand each other and the actions of violence. Creating proper terminology also gives power to victims by enabling them to name what happened.

Another significant problem in addressing violence is that people do not see the connection between jokes/shows/vernacular and the physical act of assault. Many men, when confronted with the problem of violence against women agree that the problem is bad, but as they aren't a rapist or an abuser they feel no moral necessity to change their behavior. They don't understand that it is scientifically proven that general vocabulary which denigrates women (especially jokes or humor-related material) creates a culture that tolerates sexual violence and excuses the behavior of violent men.

Prevalent are radio "shock jock" shows such as those heard on 105.7 The Point's morning radio show Woody and Rizzuto (WAR). They air a segment called "Drive By Whoring," teaching men that when a woman ends a relationship with them it is okay to publicly denigrate
the woman, publicly share intimate details about the relationship, place all blame for problems within the relationship on the woman, and invite other men to join in the verbal assault of another person. When our culture consistently believes that the woman is at fault, we raise women whose self-esteem has been so compromised they fall easy prey to abusive situations.

After hearing a few Drive By Whoring segments I created a new artwork with the goal of drawing connections between sexist media commentary and some of the physical abuse women endure. *Objects Used to Denigrate, Beat and Rape Women* is a piece designed to be activated by the viewer. At first glance it seems to be a series of objects painted black on a small platform. Once the viewer puts on a set of headphones then holds one of the objects (a beer bottle, a coffee mug, a knife handle) they will activate the black electroconductive paint on the surface of the object. This triggers an audio track of different sound bytes heard in mainstream media. One is an excerpt from a popular St. Louis radio show on 105.7 The Point. These pieces encourage the viewer to connect the things they hear or engage in with the physical repercussion of violence.

When we use humor to discuss elements of rape we are telling abusers that their acts of brutality and dominance are not only a common occurrence/cultural norm, it goes beyond simply exposing people to violence. It teaches us that these actions are light-hearted and funny. Therefore, men are less likely to identify themselves as rapists or even be able to identify what constitutes rape. When our culture generally considers the profile of an abuser, it generally consists of a dogmatic, sexist man who seems to disrespect, if not hate, women and forcibly or drunkenly rape them. However, according to recent studies

"The paradigmatic repeat rapist uses a set of tactics that work, and they go like this: push alcohol, test boundaries, physically isolate the target, and narrow the target's options."
The undetected rapists overwhelmingly use minimal or no force, rely mostly on alcohol and rape their acquaintances. They create situations where the culture will protect them by making excuses for them and questioning or denying their victims. Incarcerated rapists, I think, are just the ones who use the tactics that society is more willing to recognize as rape and less willing to make excuses for."53

An insidious and predominant contributor to this is our tolerance of a sexist vernacular. The bathroom installation series, #Rapejoke (Figure 9) and #Strongwomen, analyzes gendered microaggressions through their manifestation in language.

These installations reiterate twitter feeds on the walls of bathroom stalls. Like the graffiti we commonly encounter in public restrooms, the private and public psyche of American society begin to conflate. Here the viewers are enveloped by our words which commonly minimize the experience of the victim and edify the actions of the abuser. In the men’s restroom, #Rapejoke encompasses the viewer with the destructive force of their own words, but written and retold to them by hands of women. In the women’s bathroom, #Strongwomen surrounds them with encouraging twitter feedback as an empowering agency. Each bathroom also contains a small takeaway listing alternatives and resources on engaging the culture of rape.

In making these pieces I fully recognize that these topics go beyond the bounds of male/female cisgendered violence.54 However, I feel that this piece examines our own language and our complicit interaction in a society that perpetuates abuse so we can become a society that openly confronts it.

Strategic choices must be maintained during site specific community art installations in order to draw upon the intrinsic qualities of the materials and the poetic associations they
embodi. One of the most important strategies used in community work is the selection of site. The implications of the environment, history of the space and the demographic of its inhabitants is a key component for successful intervention. The targeted level of specificity in the message is directly related to the location of the installation, whether public or private. Any environment can be charged or impersonal, and this relationship will impact the translation of the piece by the viewer.

Site is an imperative factor in designing interventions for victims of abuse. One of the foremost concerns is reaching the private targeted audience, women in dangerous situations, without alerting the aggressor or provoking additional violence. Studies indicate that men are most likely to escalate from battery to homicide if they believe the woman is leaving the home because it threatens their power and control over the victim. Peggy Digg’s *The Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project* is extremely sensitive to this fact. Inspired by the battered women’s movement, Diggs extensively interviewed counselors, police, advocates, and incarcerated women to create a collaborative project about abuse. These conversations inspired *Milk Cartons* (Figure 10), a collaboration with a local dairy to print domestic violence information on milk cartons. This resulted in the delivery of important information into the homes of women on innocuous objects which women regularly bought. This wide-reaching project sought to both raise awareness of domestic violence and distribute a helpline to women in an intimate setting. Her other works are also constructed to live in the public, interactive, and often performative space. Digg’s work often appears in prisons, community centers, subway stations, and bars. She utilizes public space to speak about private atrocities and targets specific locations to initiate dialogue concerning difficult subjects.
While speaking with a volunteer coordinator, Pam, for Rape & Abuse Crisis Services (RACS) she mentioned how she often had trouble with business cards. She would go out into the community for small fairs and would set up a booth to speak with the passersby. This table always contained business cards for RACS, however, she would arrange them very messily on the table. As people came and spoke with her, many would attempt to straighten her cards for a nicer presentation, not realizing they were displayed this way so women could discreetly take a card off the table without anyone noticing. As the friendly organizer of cards left, Pam would mess them up again so they were ready for the next woman who needed one. Pam also spoke about the dangers of carrying an advocacy business card in your purse if you were in an abusive relationship. An escalation in the severity of the abuse can easily be triggered by any information which indicates a victim may be leaver an abuser. This information threatens the environment of control maintained by the abuser and is one of the most common triggers for an increase in abuse and homicides.54

*The Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project* heavily inspired *Business Cards* (Figure 11) as I decided to design a new way for advocacy centers to put their information directly and innocuously into the hands of women. I screen printed the advocacy name, phone number, and website onto the back of emery boards. The small nail files are predominately used by women, they can fit in a purse, the type is small and discreet and is unlikely to provoke violent behavior. They can also act as a functional giveaway so that many women carry them in their purses, use them, and then if discovering a friend or family member needs assistance, they have the information on them right away.
It is much harder to provide a targeted message without provoking the aggressor in a public setting. However, the advertising agency Grey Spain successfully designed a series of public billboards for the Spanish advocacy group Aid to Children and Adolescents At Risk in order to provide information to children of abuse. They created a series of billboards which utilizes lenticular lens technology to produce two separate messages on the same billboard. To those over four and a half feet tall the billboard appeared to be the face of a child, however, due to the serrated surface of the lens, those under four and a half feet tall likely children, the image of the child was covered in bruises and cuts and encouraged them to seek help if they were being abused.

Site also heavily impacts the strategies of intervention in an institutional installation, especially when dealing with violence. In October of 2013 I partnered with two women’s advocacy groups in rural Missouri to develop The Yarn Campaign (Figure 12) to raise awareness during Domestic Violence Awareness month. We worked with the city governments, businesses, and parks to select ten locations to install public yarn bombs. These colorful installations raised awareness concerning the issue, gave visibility to the advocacy groups and provided information for women in the community who may be victims of violence.

This installation series specifically incorporated the tactic of site. Yarn bombs have a long history of being implemented in a community anonymously and without permission. However, through working with the Coalition Against Rape & Domestic Violence (CARDV) and RACS we were able to secure permission for installation on specific sites. This included two county court houses where women go to receive orders of protection. As they walked into the court
house, the large, ominous, masculine building had a delicate, colorful, hand woven sign which declared ‘Expect Respect’.

When using yarn bombs to raise awareness concerning domestic violence awareness month, selectivity in our locations were key. One of the most important locations was the Cole County Court House. This location was highly charged due to the fact it is a governmental structure. By placing yarn bombs as advocacy identification signs we were able to translate the harsh exterior of an official building to a public building which advocates for women. The yarn bomb provided additional advocacy information to these women, an encouraging statement “Expect Respect”, and stood as a sign to the men who were served with restraining orders that the community stood with these women as opposed to the abusers.

Each of these installations also included knitted QR codes which link to the advocacy websites as well as listed phone numbers for crisis lines and the hashtags we were using for our social media campaign. We also targeted specific news and media outlets to talk about the installation and the meanings behind them. We were in three local newspapers and interviewed by a the local branch of National Public Radio.

*The Yarn Campaign* not only successfully connected victims with an advocacy group but forged new paths of communication between the cities and these organizations. It became such a powerful tool within the community that the organizations have made plans to continue the project independently in 2014.

The strategy of site is completely different when considering the gallery setting. Surrounded by white walls, seemingly innocuous, the charged space and history of the institutional critique heavily influence the way the art work is read as well as who interacts with
the space. To be effective, art work must transcend a fairly generic level of messaging and target the gallery’s audience. This audience is typically educated, from a higher socioeconomic status, and interacting with your work in a historically male dominated space.

This space presents a particularly interesting challenge for my work because cultural prejudices dictate sexual assault and domestic violence don’t occur in this class of people. Social constructs perpetuate the belief that nice homes with educated parents equal healthy children and a happy home. However, statistically this belief isn’t true. Violence occurs in affluent and impoverished areas. Domestic violence is an epidemic that impacts our neighbors, our friends, and our own homes. With this in mind, it is important to incorporate statistical data for these works while subverting expectations. By presenting gallery viewers with images which are associated with happy homes but then revealing the statistical facts, I am able to challenge their preconceived notions of violence in the community. Challenging these biased world views is an essential personal experience for the viewer.

Patricia Williams, a distinguished race theorist, argues that the incorporation of a first person narrative is the only way to include justice to the victims involved in violence. While Williams was speaking specifically about hate speech, it is not difficult to draw similar correlations to the recovery and awareness surrounding interpersonal violence against women. Anonymous was a project created to incorporate the first person narratives of rape survivors, allowing them to share their stories safely and anonymously. In these pieces women have shared their story of violence, how they feel about the community reaction, and how they recovered in an audio recording. These recordings are then attached to a platform which has been painted with these women’s hand prints. When the viewer places their hand on the woman’s palm they
activate the sound byte and, as long as they stay in contact, they hear the entirety of the woman’s message.

This strategy of personal narratives has had profound effects throughout every social sphere. One particular community art project, created without the collaboration of a practicing artist, emphasizing the first person narrative was the 1995 BOSH Quilt. Eight women convicted of committing felonies against their abusive partners made this quilt during their incarceration at Kentucky Correctional Institution. As part of their rehabilitation, the women formed the Battered Offenders Self-Help group (B.O.S.H.) and constructed the quilt. Each square of the quilt contained a drawing and story about the women and the abusive situation, that eventually resulted in their incarceration. Their creation carried such a powerfully persuasive message that it was displayed publicly to bring attention to the women’s situation.

Upon viewing the graphic images depicting the experiences of battered women, Kentucky Governor Brereton Jones was moved to tears and subsequently commuted the sentences of the quilt’s makers. The persuasive power of the quilt succeeded where legal briefs had failed. The women used the quilt to tell their stories of domestic violence, many for the first time. Working within a group, the “women could see that their experiences were not isolated events but part of a larger pattern of violence against women.” According to McElroy, “the quilt had a lot to do with rebuilding their self-confidence.... The women could not speak of their abuse. But once they got to putting their stories into the quilt blocks, their emotions started flowing.” According to McElroy, the women experienced guilt and remorse for killing their abusers. Working on the quilt helped them begin to forgive themselves. If the quilt had done nothing else for the women but to facilitate the process of rebuilding self-esteem and self-
confidence, the project would have been a success. Two years later, the governor reiterated how the experience of seeing the quilt had affected him: "Without the quilt, in honesty, I doubt [the women's parole] would have happened, because [the quilt] made [their plight] very clear... The quilt was so easy to focus on. Many things in our society— if they're visual and right there in front of you -- you grab them. If they're not visual, and if they're not readily attainable in a busy day, you may or may not be able to focus on them."58
When You Walk Away

Several months after I began my research into domestic violence I hit a wall. I could not read the story of another discarded girl. I could not look at another broken body. I could not bear it. I was trapped by the overwhelming brutality of this violence and frozen by my inability to change anything. The bitterness enveloped me.

I couldn’t figure out how to witness these atrocities and move forward in a meaningful way. Was it enough to simply grieve for these women? Should I compartmentalize and sensationalize this information like the news broadcasts? Or should I separate my self from cultural normalcy, engulfed in bitterness, refusing to watch the television or listen to the radio? Standing in front of such enormous and insidious problems I was paralyzed by my inability to change the situation.

The work of artists like Wodiczko, Lacy, and Diggs pulled me from my powerlessness. Their work gave me direction and enabled my first steps into socially engaged artwork. They reminded me that there is power in caring not only for the collective, but for the individual.

Throughout the project Anonymous, as I interviewed women who were abused beyond my comprehension. Throughout our conversations each woman would say, “I wish someone had listened. I wish someone had asked.” Their stories illuminated the importance of small acts around my family, friends, and neighbors. I may not be able to change the world but I can work with my community to counteract our daily façade and to replace our blindness and indifference with empathy and action.
Notes


4. Ibid.


8. Ibid.


12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.


20. Ibid.


22. Ibid.
29 Ibid.
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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
41 Kester, Grant H.. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*.
42 Bourriad, Nicholas. *Relational Aesthetics*.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
53 Cisgender is a term used to describe people who, for the most part, identify as the gender they were assigned at birth. (basicrights.org)


55 A QR code is a matrix bar code that is read by photographing it with the camera of a smartphone or other mobile device. (Webster’s Dictionary)


57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.
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Violence Against Women: An Artistic Intervention

Image Collection
Figure 1

Decoders

Kathryn Douglas

12" x 24"

Laser Print

2014
Figure 3
A Study of Domestic Violence in Missouri
Kathryn Douglas
60" x 78"
Cross-stitch
2013
Figure 4
Cross-stitched QR code
Kathryn Douglas
4" x 6"
Cross-stitch
2013
Figure 5
NCMEC
Kathryn Douglas
84” x 120”
Laser Prints
2014
Figure 6

In Mourning and In Rage
Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz Starus
Performance
1977
Figure 7
*The Tijuana Projections*
Krzysztof Wodiczko
Projection
2001
Figure 8
*Homeless Vehicle Project*
Krzysztof Wodiczko
72" x 92" x 40"
Aluminum, Lexan, Plywood, Plastic, Fabric, Steel, Rubber
1988 - 1999
Figure 9

#Rapejoke
Kathryn Douglas
Black Marker, Paper
2013
Figure 10
The Domestic Violence Milk Carton Project
Peggy Diggs
4" x 4" x 8"
Milk Carton
1992
Figure 11

*Business Cards*

Kathryn Douglas

.25” x 5”

Emery Board, Ink

2014
Figure 12
The Yarn Campaign
Kathryn Douglas
Yarn
2013