

In Mourning and In Rage, with Analysis Aforethought

IKON Magazine & LEAVING ART Book by Suzanne Lacy

This article analyzes news reporting on rape murders, using the example of the Hillside Strangler Case. This analysis, developed by Leslie Labowitz and myself, with the inspiration of Julia London and Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW), underlies the performance, "In Mourning and In Rage..." performed for local media on the steps of Los Angeles City Hall on December 13, 1977. This article was first published in 1978 in Ikon Magazine. Later it was reproduced in *Femicide: The Politics of Women Killing*.¹

In Mourning and in Rage (With Analysis Aforethought)

"We are here because we want you to know that we know that these ten women are not isolated cases of random unexplainable violence; that this violence is not different, except perhaps in degree and detail, from all of the daily reports in the news media, from fictionalized mutilations in our entertainment industries, and from the countless unreported cases of brutalization of our relatives, friends and loved ones who are women..." Suzanne Lacy, Statement to the press during *In Mourning and In Rage...*

Fact and Fantasy

In early November 1977, the second of what was to become a string of sex murders broke into the Los Angeles media. Two weeks earlier the discovery of the nude and strangled body of Yolanda Washington passed essentially unnoticed by the press—violence was commonplace in the lives of prostitutes. But when Judith Miller, a fifteen year old who frequented Hollywood Boulevard, was found strangled the day after Halloween, newsmen questioned the relationship between the crimes. As one after another lifeless body was discovered during that month (ten by December 1), the "Hillside Strangler Case" was born. No one knew who invented the phrase, police or press, but its graphic description of the crime scenes made it a crucial element in the media coverage.

During those winter months in Los Angeles, the Hillside Strangler Case was constructed as a literal entity through the exchange between police and reporters and the communication of that interaction to the public. The murders, of course, *did* actually occur, as tangible as the abandoned bodies of women found scattered around the city, as real as the grief expressed by their loved ones; and they were linked to the same killer or killers through painstakingly gathered evidence. But the public's *awareness* of the Hillside Strangler case was the providence of the local news industry, and as soon as rudiments of the story were in, reporters set out on the trail of what would eventually become the biggest story to hit the city in years. "I was living this television fantasy," admitted one columnist. "I'd known guys to get calls from criminals who were afraid of the police and wanted to turn themselves in to a reporter...I got to admit, I got so caught up in my own fantasies that I even left numbers where I could be reached 24 hours a day."² The fantasy involvement of reporters, mostly male, in the drama of the Hillside Strangler murders was transmitted to their audience. Throughout the city, men's jokes, innuendos, and veiled threats ("I might be the Strangler, you know") revealed an identification that was at the very least fueled by reporters' enthusiasm, if not generated by it.

In one incident after another, reporters' zeal, public pressure on the police, and the antagonisms between police and news people accounted for an elaborate series of reporting inaccuracies. One reporter formulated a theory of bizarre ritual torture based on the placement of the victim's bodies; he withheld the details of this theory at police request, although the police knew all along that the body position was a reflection only of how it had been carried. "We tried to help the press as little as possible," said a Sheriff's department investigator. "An erroneous conclusion on a reporter's part was encouraged... (for) if the real killer ever confessed, he or she would mention details that had not been read,"³ thus verifying the authenticity of the confession. At least twice confessions known to both police and reporters to be false were released or allowed to remain uncorrected in the media to heighten suspense.

Within this complicated panorama of fact, fictionalization, and deliberate falsehood, one has to ask, what is the purpose of reporting such crimes? How do they serve their chroniclers and affect their audiences? Reporters maintained that each detail gave women more information to protect themselves. The effect, however, of explicit descriptions of locations where bodies were discovered and veiled hints of ritualistic sexual murder fed women's hysteria. Their responses were then duly reported: women carried kitchen knives and police whistles, bought out lock supplies in hardware stores and began to severely curtail their movement throughout the city.

If the end result of such "media events" is the intimidation and terrorizing the female population, then news reporting might profitably be subjected to a feminist analysis along the lines of that applied to entertainment and pornographic media. This analysis is complicated by a rationale used by entertainment barons but perhaps more applicable here: the public has a right to know what is happening in their environment, and it is the role of media to (objectively) represent that information. Of course, the lie here is that real objectivity is, or can be, maintained in symbolic representations. But, believing that it can, viewers regularly confuse the account of an incident with the incident itself.

To state the obvious, news reporting in a large urban environment is actually the interface between the real event and the public's perception of it. What is not so obvious is *how* so called "facts" are selected and construed to reinforce or shape audience belief systems. Hand in hand with police working on a case, the media creates a crime series from isolated incidents, fabricating a construct the public will recognize over and over. That construct, in the case of violent sex crimes, is often as close to a murder mystery fiction as any T.V. detective program or film could ever hope to get. Facts, framed according to the myths about rape and sexual violence that are preserved in much of our fiction, create a reality contextualized not by the social forces and conditions that are casual to such violence, but, curiously, by the entertainment industry. Hence, in unraveling just how news reporting might serve the hidden social purpose of intimidating and containing women (in the manner of pornography, for example), we must look at the forms and themes embedded in it.

Constructing a News Story

What are the makings of a good story, a thriller that will keep readers buying newspapers, television audiences coming back for news updates? Reporters, competing with Hollywood for viewers, and influenced themselves as audience, arrange their stories to reflect the elements of drama: a recognizable theme, coherent plot, antagonists you can hate and protagonists with whom you can identify. Throughout fiction certain themes recur, their appeal rising and falling with variables in the social climate. Consider this scenario: a maniacal killer stalks young, beautiful and helpless women. He is caught in the end, but not before a good deal of graphic violence has been accomplished for the satisfaction of the audience. Given the current appeal of such themes in popular entertainment, it should not surprise us to see the Hillside Strangler news coverage following this paradigm.

The first necessary ingredient to selling a new story over a period of time is to reinforce a familiar theme with a recognizable image. Coining the phrase "Hillside Strangler" fixed the series of crimes in the public imagination. It had all the makings of a good title. It was evocative of sexual violence and it dramatized one of the peculiarities of

the case that seemed most horrible in the absence of other specifics: people discovered corpses in vacant lots of populated hillside neighborhoods. Discretion on the part of major newspapers and T.V. channels prohibited actual portrayal of these bodies in the fields where they were found (although other sources, not so delicate, revealed obscenely objective photographs of the dead women in situ); but photographs of officers bending over a concealed body served the same purpose, as viewers completed the picture in their own minds with images borrowed from entertainment and art. Variations on a constantly repeated verbal description, "the nude, spread-eagled body of a woman was found strangled today on the side of a hill" was the constructed image through which the narrative progressed.

The plotline, which revealed itself sporadically in police news releases, false confessions, and continuing murders, could not advance toward a conclusion faster than actual events would allow. So to expand the narrative, reporters constructed a past tense by investigating the lives of each victim. Visuals established who the victim's family and friends were, what their homes looked like, where their bodies were discovered, and, of course, the appearances of the victims themselves.

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. Mistaking the similarities in each killing for causation, reporters inadvertently upheld the common myth that victims of sex violence are somehow culpable, if only in their choices of action. If they could just uncover some commonly held fatal mistake, readers would be able to protect themselves! Thus, when it was discovered that the first two women were frequenters of Hollywood Boulevard, reporters fell eagerly on the information. Here was a possible cause: the women were either prostitutes or had been mistaken for prostitutes by the killer. This clue neatly satisfied the notion that assault victims are promiscuous (until recently a victim's sexual history could be used against her in California courts). Though the prostitution theory was soon proven unfounded the taint of it remained. Undaunted, reporters continued to create, soap opera fashion, such stories as "She Looked For Love, Found Strangler."⁴

The fear-motivated actions of women through the city (all potential victims!) heightened the suspense and embellished the basic storyline. Self defense was put forward in several feature articles, although the visual message frequently demonstrated the most ineffectual, rather than powerful, moments--a woman crying from the mace sprayed in her face by an instructor, another revealing a small paring knife hidden in her purse as she stood in front of a Safeway market. In one television special for women, the lead segment featured a woman's feet walking at night with anonymous male feet stalking her. Following the sensationalist style of crime fiction, many images reinforced the idea of women's helplessness.

In the absence of real information, the killer's possible motivations were largely culled from popular mythology. Psychologists in the media speculated that his mother was dominating, perhaps erratically cruel and seductive; that she may have been a woman of easy virtue (especially popular during the time of the prostitution theory); and that his father was absent. A sex killer is assumed to be driven by rage toward women, but his hatred is explained by hateful women. After the confessed killer was caught, one author again adhered to this version of reality, describing Kenneth Bianchi's vacillating and neurotically aggressive mother, his dead father, and his deceitful first wife. (Interestingly, while the author noted Bianchi's intense interest in pornography from the early teens onward, he makes no attempt to ascribe this detail to a motivational construct.)⁵

While the similarities in the history of some sex killers (where these are in fact found) may be part of a portrait of personal distress, they do not explain *why* this stress is enacted in sexual violence, or how violence is nurtured by aspects of our culture. Unfortunately, the analysis and contextualization needed to understand how sex violent crimes occur and what we can do about them is rarely part of hard news coverage. The Hillside Strangler case,

as detective story par excellence, galvanized an entire city, gluing its citizens each night to their television sets. It sold newspapers, locks, guns and dogs; became the subject matter of jokes and nightmares; was responsible for destroying marriages and careers. In telling this story the news media perpetuated the same images and attitudes, ironically appealed to the same prurient interests, that created the social climate for the crime itself.

What Was To Be Done?

Early one morning in December, Leslie Labowitz and I sat over coffee looking at the morning newspaper, sickened by the headlines. The Strangler had killed another woman, his tenth, and the body had just been discovered. In sharing our own pain and feelings of powerlessness, we decided to throw our energy into a performance, a personal expression but one which would also fulfill two important goals: to create a public ritual for women in Los Angeles to express their grief, their rage, and their demands for concrete action, and to present, within the media, a feminist perspective of the case. We would use the media's own language of high drama and intriguing visuals to create a newsworthy event as a performance. Our design would fit the form of a news broadcast. For the next thirteen days we worked with Bia Lowe and other members of the Woman's Building to produce "In Mourning and in Rage..."

Seventy women gathered at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles and received instructions for the event. Ten actresses in black mourning garb climbed into the back of a hearse. The hearse and its motorcycle escorts departed, followed by twenty-two cars filled with women. Each car had its lights on and displayed two stickers: "Funeral" and "Stop Violence Against Women." The motorcade circled City Hall twice and stopped in front of the assembled news media of Los Angeles.

One at a time, nine seven-foot-tall veiled mourners emerged from the hearse and stood in a line on the sidewalk. The tenth figure was a tall athletic woman clothed in scarlet. The mourners faced the street as the women from the motorcade procession drove slowly past. Forming a procession three abreast, the mourners walked toward the City Hall steps.

Women from the motorcade arrived and positioned themselves on either side of the steps forming a chorus. As the performance began, they unfurled a banner that read "In Memory of Our Sisters, Women Fight Back," designed to fit a horizontal camera frame. The media positioned itself to record this second act—one of three orchestrated scenes.

The first mourner walked toward the microphone and in a loud, clear voice said "I am here for the ten women who have been raped and strangled between October 18 and November 29!" The chorus echoed her statement with the chant, "In memory of our sisters, we fight back!" Then the speaker was wrapped with a brilliant red scarf by the red-clothed woman as she returned to her place on the steps. Each of the nine women made her statement that connected this seemingly random incident of violence in Los Angeles with the greater picture of nationwide violence toward women; each received her red cloak; and each was greeted by the choral response. Finally the woman in red approached the microphone. Unveiled, speaking directly and powerfully, she declared "I am here for the *rage* of all women. I am here for women fighting back!"

The ten women on the steps, the chorus of 100 women, and the banner itself served as a background against which the remainder of the performance unfolded. Suzanne Lacy read a short statement to the press, explaining their media critique in lay terms, an "explanation" that would be sought by news reporters and fit into their broadcasts. The director of the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women read a prepared list of demands including free self-defense training in recreation centers. City Council members spoke and the performance concluded with a song, written the night before and sung a *capella* by Holly Near. The audience formed a spontaneous circle dance as the artists, organizers, and politicians answered questions from the press.

Conclusion

Political art can have many overlapping functions. The artist can use her understanding of the power of images primarily to communicate information, emotion, and/or ideology. She may provide us with a critique of popular culture. Sometimes her work can inspire her audience toward action in the service of a cause. Or the artwork might function best as a model for other artists or activists. These varied possibilities lend themselves to several ways to assess a political artwork's success.

As to direct results of "In Mourning and In Rage," how it affected immediate action, those we know of can be listed simply. Following the event, one reporter confronted a telephone company representative in his office. Although they had been stalling on the emergency listing of hotline numbers, sought by feminist activists for over a year, he assured the reporter that favorable action was pending. Shortly afterward the phone company did indeed list rape hotlines in the front of the phone book, though they were removed the subsequent year.

The \$100,000 reward money that had been offered by the county information on the Strangler was converted into funding for free self defense workshops throughout the city, an action that was started prior to our event by the County Commission on the Status of Women, but one which received a favorable boost as a result of our publicity. Two self-defense workshops for city employees, offered by Councilwoman Joy Picus, and a Saturday session sponsored by the rape hotlines, were instigated as a result of the performance.

In terms of audience attitude changes, a much more difficult area to assess, we can only report that the media coverage of the performance was consistent with our design and our strategy. The performance was featured that evening on most major television newscasts in the area and received some national air play. Leslie Labowitz supervised a PBS follow-up program—students at the Woman's Building discussing sensationalist news coverage—and appeared on talk shows and in meetings with reporters to discuss issues raised by the performance. As to the general television audience we had very little feedback on the effectiveness of the newsclip in changing anyone's perspective about the Strangler case or its coverage, but we received a lot of warm response from the Los Angeles feminist community at large (in sharp contrast to the suspicion and disinterest with which artists were previously greeted.) It's fair to suggest that this performance, its coverage, and the word of mouth report of it considerably enhanced future interaction between artists and feminist activists in the city.

Although the empowerment we felt by successfully realizing our intentions is not to be underrated, it is important not to count heavily on a single three to four minute television "interruption" to change a steady flow of counter information. Our victory may ultimately be most important in demonstrating a strategy for artists' contribution to public critique and social change. For the past three decades the path of visual art in this country has diverged from that of social reform and political protest. A generation of feminist leftists has grown up distrusting the elitism of visual art. Although a few committed leftist artists have for years featured political critique in their art, the rise of feminism during the seventies gave a significant boost to the visibility and potential for activist political art. As we enter the eighties and increasing repression demonstrates the necessity of coalition building, it is imperative that activists embrace the models developed by artists over the past ten years, exploring as they do so how artists can play an active role in the politics of social change.

Notes, Chapter 8

1. Radford, Jill, and Russell, Diana H., Eds., *Femicide: The Politics of Women Killing* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992. A photo of this performance is on the cover of this book, as well as that of Lippard, Lucy. *Get the Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change*. New York: E.F. Dutton, 1984. Later photographic documentation was used in *Vogue Magazine* relating current design to signal artworks of the 70s. Katherine Betts and Steven Meisel. "Some Nerve." *Vogue Magazine* (September 1998) 615-625
2. *The Hillside Strangler*, Ted Schwartz, Doubleday, 1981, pg. 83
3. *The Hillside Strangler*, Ted Schwartz, Doubleday, 1981, pg. 61
4. *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, December 18, 1977, pg. 30 pt. I
5. *The Hillside Strangler*, Ted Schwartz, Doubleday, 1981, pg. 147