

Developing A Feminist Media Strategy

by Leslie Labowitz

A flow of destructive symbolic messages about women pervades the mass media which creates and controls our culture. Women are portrayed as sexual objects and willing victims. Women become targets for male aggression and extreme violence. A false connection between sexuality and violence is transmitted in virtually all forms of mass communication, from advertising and entertainment to news broadcasting. The media are controlled by men invested in the perpetuation of a patriarchal and capitalistic system. If feminists are to bring about permanent social and cultural change, it is crucial that we gain access to mass communication channels, alter the symbols that make up the old order, and replace them with new images imbued with a feminist consciousness.

As feminist artists who are particularly aware of the effects of images and symbols on individuals and mass consciousness, we have formed Ariadne—a communication/information-sharing network of women in the arts, politics, media and women's community. Ariadne sponsors and produces public events addressing social issues relevant to women's lives. Through Ariadne, we are developing a media strategy that is carefully planned, concrete, action-oriented and easily available to all women. For the past three years, we have collaboratively produced large-scale public performance events in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Las Vegas on the issues of rape and the violent images of women in record advertising, news and pornography. These events are based on intricate media and political strategies, community-organizing techniques and image-making processes. They are documented by videotapes, graphics and

handbooks. Ariadne's projects fall into two categories: (1) the "media performance" and (2) the "public informational campaign." The first is a one-time event designed specifically for TV newscasts and aimed at controlling the content of the event as it is distributed through the media. The second is a series of connected events taking place over about a three-week period. In *Three Weeks in May*, for instance, the events radiated out from a map of Los Angeles, placed in the City Hall Mall. Rapes were recorded daily, as they were reported to the police, by stamping the map with the word RAPE in bold red letters at the location where the rape occurred. During the three weeks, self-defense classes, street performances, a public speak-out, guerrilla actions and other art events occurred all over the city.

Such a campaign builds public interest; it educates and organizes the community. The media strategy involves radio interviews, talkshows, TV newscasts and feature articles in newspapers and magazines. Our audience, for both the media performances and public campaigns, is the broad public reached through the popular mass media. Our intention is to interrupt the consistent flow of media images and messages that perpetuate the myth of woman as victim. Yet a single event or even a few events is clearly not enough. Our strategy will gain in effectiveness when women everywhere begin to create a working media strategy. To help make this possible we have extracted the elements of a successful "media action." We urge you to use them and join us in the growing movement of feminist media-strategy workers/artists.

- 1 BEGIN WITH YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE** of the effect of violent images of women and believe in your right to speak out about them. Our identification with all women and our anger about images of victimization motivate us to work together toward change.
- 2 COME TOGETHER WITH WOMEN WHO FEEL AS YOU DO.** Several existing organizations deal directly with these issues, such as Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) and Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media. They have already proved their effectiveness and connecting with them will speed up your education about the impact of images. You will be aligning yourself with a strong network forming all over the country.
- 3 EXPAND YOUR ALLIANCES** with women outside the feminist community. Violence concerns *all women*, and they are eager to know what can be done about it. Create broad coalitions with women in the media system, in political office, in the art community and elsewhere. Alliances with women in media will prove particularly valuable as resources for information on how to get coverage. Although the professional stance of newsreporters in general is to remain "objective" and impartial, sympathetic women reporters can apply pressure to cover your events.

(Through our "media actions" we have developed an ongoing relationship with women on the city council of Los Angeles. They trust us to respect their public image and their official positions. It is important to understand the limits of professional women working in the system so as not to endanger their jobs.)

Leslie Labowitz is an artist/activist who has worked collaboratively with Suzanne Lacy in Los Angeles since 1977. She is now coordinating the "Incest Awareness Project" for Ariadne. ©1980 Leslie Labowitz

4 LEARN ABOUT IMAGES and how the messages one gets from them depend on the arrangement of color, form and content. Once you have demystified the image-making process, you will be able to respond more objectively and critically to the bombardment of visual media in your daily life. You will be able to control the images entering your psyche and how they affect you. *This is a crucial process.* It includes analysis of how sexual stereotypes of women are used to sell products, to entertain and to promote violence against women—even violence against men. An overview of woman's image throughout history helps us grasp the deep-rooted acceptance of women's victimization in this society.

(For example, 18th- and 19th-century American posters show blond young white women being attacked by Black men, or mothers and children being killed by Indians. From a contemporary viewpoint, the racism and violence promoted against Blacks and Native Americans are obvious. Yet even today it is difficult for our culture to recognize the sexism and misogyny inherent in these same images. The image of woman as victim is a "natural" element in entertainment and advertising, while it would be impossible to get away with, say, record covers showing lynchings or massacres.)

5 THINK ABOUT ACTION TO CHANGE THESE IMAGES. Know your opposition. Learn everything you can about radio and TV stations and the press in your community. Find out what their politics are, who funds them and how accessible they are to the public. Know the personal lives of those in control. (If, for example, the daughter of a TV executive has been raped, go directly to him or her.) Cable TV is usually a good place to gain experience and is more accessible than the major commercial networks.

6 USE EXISTING MEDIA FORMS in which women can speak out on issues—talkshows, radio interviews, women's columns. Use the alternative media systems. Create educational packets for schools, universities and community organizations. Slideshows, videotapes and even performances can find receptive audiences all over your community.

7 DOCUMENT YOUR ACTIONS with slides, photos, film or video so you can show issues and methodologies to other media-action groups. Some museums and cable stations provide free or low-cost public access to equipment. If there is no one in your group who can handle film or video, make contacts with a university broadcasting department, where there are often women who welcome a connection with a broader political network.

8 BEGIN TO PLAN THE ACTUAL EVENT OR CAMPAIGN. First, answer these questions: Have we chosen an issue that is currently being heavily publicized in the media? What do we want to say about it? Can we say it in language a broad audience will understand? Are our political goals appropriate to the action? What media form is our target? Is it best suited to our event? How much will it cost? What are our resources? Where can we raise funds? How can we expand participation to include women from the media, politics and art? Will it be a one-time "media performance" or a "public informational campaign"? When and where should it take place? Is the setting right? Time of day? What are the images we want to project?

9 SELECT THE KEY IMAGES AND MESSAGE in the coordinating committee of your group. At least one member should be an artist who can facilitate, design a format and create the visual images. Hold brainstorming sessions to come up with images that will accurately express the direct political and the more personal content. Your first images will probably reflect clichés we've all accumulated from popular culture. Keep exploring your consciousness until strong and original images begin to form that will profoundly affect your audience. If you need a push, look at mythological images of women in books. Find the ones that represent positive symbols for women, even though they may have acquired negative connotations in this culture, and research them thoroughly. These are the images we need to reclaim, to transform their meaning.

(For instance, in In Mourning and in Rage, we took the images of women as mourners, trivialized in this culture, and transformed them into powerful seven-foot tall figures demanding an end to violence against women. In another event, produced by the staff of the Woman's Building in Los Angeles, Kate Millett's sculpture Naked Lady—an image celebrating strength, women of large dimensions [even fat]—was raised to the roof of the Woman's Building and placed over the entrance as a protective and threatening goddess. Ariadne also designed a float for the "Take Back the Night" march in San Francisco [part of the 1978 Feminist National Conference on Pornography]. A richly dressed Madonna on the front side became, on the back side, the carcass of a lamb, spewing out pornographic images from Christian religious rituals, Greek mythology and medieval lore. The float visualized the split between the virgin and the whore, or the good girl/bad girl dichotomy we believe to be at the cultural roots of contemporary pornography.)

10 BE SURE YOU DO NOT MERELY CREATE A MEDIA GIMMICK. Superficial images that don't go deep into the cultural symbols of a society have less impact. Remember that by distributing your images through the mass media you are competing with sophisticated image-makers and with high-impact images—namely, those of women being attacked and violated. News media people react negatively to gimmicks or cute tricks designed to entertain and obtain coverage. The media can choose to manipulate, but they don't like to be manipulated. Gimmicks do not transform consciousness, and the ultimate goal of our actions is such a transformation. Events designed to express gut-level feelings and real community concerns do not come across as manipulative. A large amount of obvious preparation for an event is a sign of its seriousness. Participants in the action will experience a sense of collective and political expression. When this is communicated, the media will keep coming out, and your audience will grow.

11 CONTROL THE MEDIA'S INTERPRETATION of your images and information. The press release, the first step in informing the media of your plans, frames perception of your action. It is an art form in itself. It must be written simply, with enticing descriptions of the visuals and a clear political perspective on the issue addressed. It should include names of participating government officials and celebrities and must give the impression that your action is the most important event of the day.

(For example, the press release headline for the hoisting of The Naked Lady at the Woman's Building read: "The Naked Lady of L.A. Takes on a New Image." The contrast between the stereotypical image of a naked woman and our sculpture was so extreme that the event was covered by major network TV news and made the front page of the L.A. Times. This was a real coup for media action in Los Angeles.)

In a longer-lasting public informational campaign, the strategy is somewhat different. You need more detailed information—a press kit containing a general description, a schedule of events, press releases for each event and several photos. This information packet is sent out to contacts in the media, government and community six weeks before the project begins, providing material for feature articles. Separate press releases are sent out several days before each individual event to TV news desks, radio and newspapers. To ensure coverage, phone calls should be made on the day of an important action. If coverage is still not confirmed, ask to speak to the station manager. Persist until you know at least two news teams are coming out. If they don't show up, reconsider your strategy, then make complaints to stations by phone or letter.

12 TIMING IS VERY IMPORTANT in controlling the effectiveness of your action. It is infinitely easier to get coverage for a one-time event if it takes place at a time when the public is being consistently exposed to an issue concerning women. This almost always guarantees full coverage with little effort.

(In Mourning and in Rage took place during the Hillside Strangler rape/murders in L.A. The media's dramatization of the murders ensured coverage of our memorial performance by newscasters all over the country—even in France!—and we were asked to appear on TV talkshows to discuss our alternatives to the media's highly sensationalized coverage of the murders.)

The day of the week and the time of day are also important. In Los Angeles, early on a Tuesday or Wednesday is considered to be the best time to call an event or press conference. Weekend news has already broken and there is a better chance of getting on the evening news that same day. If you "study your opposition," you can find out the best times in your community.

13 PICK YOUR LOCATION STRATEGICALLY to enhance the impact of your images. Seemingly insignificant details to aid reporters—like parking spaces, electrical outlets and familiarity with the location—add to potential coverage.

(For instance, Record Companies Drag Their Feet, an event done with WAVAW in 1977, attempted to connect real-life violence against women with the images of women on record covers. It took place in a parking lot on Sunset Boulevard, in the heart of the recording industry, right under an offensive billboard of the rock group KISS. The media performance Myths About Rape, an event in the larger campaign called From Reverence to Rape to Respect, took place in the desert near the outskirts of Las Vegas, in front of a large billboard designed by a participating artist. The desolate area created an ominous atmosphere that contrasted dramatically with the neon, brassy quality of the town itself. The billboard backdrop had RAPE IS EVERYBODY'S CONCERN printed in large red letters on a black ground; the props and costumes for the performance were red, black and white. Los Angeles City Hall was chosen for In Mourning and in Rage because of its direct connection to the political demands we were presenting to members of the city council; we also knew the media would be covering the council's meeting that day.)

14 TAILOR YOUR EVENT TO MAKE NEWS COVERAGE EASY. Analyze TV newscasts: find out who the reporters are, how much time is allotted to women's issues and—most important—how they edit their news footage. How long is the average news slot? Does the newscaster stand in front of the image in a narrative format? What is the ratio of verbal to visual information? The success of media actions is determined by how well they are interpreted by the newsreporter. Keep records of the footage to analyze later. (All of our events are designed in the format of a newscast in order to control its coverage as much as possible.)

Keep several essential points in mind: The event shouldn't last longer than 20 minutes and it should have at least one high-impact visual image that is emblematic of your message. Both words and images should be in easily understood language. Anything ambiguous must be clarified by a speech in the performance or by the press release. The performance should be confined to a limited area so that the camera can frame the whole set without losing information. Its sequences should be broken down into eight to ten parts composed of elements containing enough information so that the whole message is clear in each sequence. Parts of it can and should be repeated like choruses. It is okay to make small mistakes, as they will be edited out by the news anyway. Make sure at least one speaker represents a feminist viewpoint. Her speech should be planned as an integral part of the event's structure so it is sure to be included in the newscast.

15 THE ACTION SHOULD HAVE TWO DIRECTORS: one for the performance and the other for the media. Since the performers in these events are usually not professional actresses, but concerned women, the director should be an artist who can supportively guide them through the entire piece. The media director greets reporters when they arrive, signs them in, hands out press kits and press statements, and gives shot sheets to the camerapeople. The press statement explains the symbolism of each image in the performance. The shot sheet is the sequences' breakdown in the order they occur. The media director is responsible for keeping the media at the site for the entire event. She does not give interviews until the press conference scheduled

after the performance. (In fact, it should be agreed upon by all participants not to give out information before the performance.) The media director also takes charge of documenting the action. This can include slides, black and white photos, video and, later, news footage taken from TV.

16 PEOPLE WHO GO ON RADIO AND TV SHOULD BE SUFFICIENTLY TRAINED IN PUBLIC SPEAKING and well prepared to present your point of view. In the public informational campaigns, talkshows, radio interviews and news features are an important part of the strategy. Moderators have many ways of steering a dialogue in their own direction. Your representative must also know how to control the situation. The best approach is to ask the moderator before the show what questions will be discussed and to prepare your answers. Prepare for negative as well as positive situations. Know what you want to say and say it. Turn every question to your advantage by knowing exactly what it is you want the public to know.

The feminist perspective is rarely aired and it is crucial to talk to the millions of isolated women watching in their homes in a language they will understand. Speaking publicly out of your experience as a woman is a very courageous act, and the women who do it need emotional support from the whole group. It is a good idea to go in pairs to these situations. Allow as many women as are willing to do these public interviews. This gives us a sense of personal power and avoids the media's tendency to create stars.

When these actions are successful, they become in effect mass public rituals. Since the beginning of the Women's Liberation Movement, feminist artists have been doing rituals, most of which have been private or enacted for a small community. Now that we are speaking out on issues important to all of our lives, public ritual offers a feminist approach to larger audiences. Positive and active images of women challenge existing images, which rarely portray real people positively interacting. A different attitude can be

communicated on the TV screen and can become a rich shared experience that creates dialogue, asks questions and demands change.

For more detailed information on the performance events executed by Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy, which form the basis for this article, see their "Evolution of a Feminist Art" in *Heresies* No. 6 (On Women and Violence), 1978, p. 78 ff.

BACKLASH

LASH BACK

PEOPLE'S ALLIANCE MOBE FOR SURVIVAL NEW AMERICAN MOVEMENT

ITEM: Liberalized abortion laws repealed; Hyde Amendment cuts Medicaid for abortions (abortions for the rich, sterilization for the poor = genocide); Right wing pushes new restrictions -- husbands fathers priests police doctors rapists win the Right to Choose.

ITEM: Anti-Gay hysteria mushrooms; Anita Bryant's Protect America's Children, John Birch Society, Richard A. Viguerie's Right to Work Committee; Briggs Amendment (Protect your children from People -- don't send them to school); Gays stopped at borders as "undesirables."

ITEM: ERA in trouble. States attempt to rescind ratification. Right organizes to criminalize NOW boycotts of non-ratified states. Opposition forces us to stretch our resources too thin on too many fronts.

ITEM: CUTBACKS: Social Security, CETA, food stamps, unemployment compensation, day care, health care, education, housing and other essential services; affirmative action attacked (Bakke, Weber).

ITEM: Repressive federal criminal code pushed through Congress to legalize CIA/FBI harassment, surveillance, police brutality, murder. Third-World, undocumented workers and people struggling for self-determination under attack. Klan and Nazis on the rise,

ITEM: Unemployment and inflation in dizzying spiral; massive plant cutdowns; shops Run Away in search of cheap labor; union busting.

ITEM: Cold War II moves; so-called "energy crisis" legitimizes draft and multinational paranoia. Macho war threats head US for oil wars and Nuclear Disaster.

NAT. TENANTS & HOSPITALS ORGANIZATION AIM WAVAW PUERTO RICAN SOCIALIST PARTY

ORGANIZE

in homes

ORGANIZE

in schools

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ORGANIZE

in streets

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in offices

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in prisons

ORGANIZE

in coalitions

ORGANIZE NOW

R-2 CARASA NAT. COALITION FOR LESBIAN & GAY RIGHTS