

LESLIE LABOWITZ SUZANNE LACY

MASS MEDIA, POPULAR CULTURE, AND FINE ART: images of violence against women

It is impossible to ignore the effects of mass communication on our social environment. For the first time in history millions of people commonly experience the same images and information. Within our "popular culture," we are constantly presented with images of women as victims. Along with feminist activists, women artists are exploring how these images effect our lives and how we can create alternatives.

While art in every form makes tangible some experience of the individual artist, our art focuses on those experiences which also have reference to one's political position in the culture. Educational in nature, it offers information on social issues and the possibility of individual and collective action. Our work combines performance and conceptual art ideas with community organization, political strategy, and media analysis. These performances involve not only artists but individuals from the community as performer/creators.

From this work we formed *Ariadne/ A Social Art Network*, an affiliation of women in the arts, media, government and feminist community. Together we have produced a series of collaborative events on specific social issues, such as rape, incest, and violent images of women in the media. These issues are particularly critical at a time when violence against women is dramatically on the increase.

This article describes our view of the relationship of mass media to the fine arts shown through the current use of violent images of women. Our opinions, as women who feel ourselves potential victims, are biased. What we hope to point out is that the creation of violent images by artists or media-makers reflects another bias; and that beyond either viewpoint there is an urgent need for artists to develop a political perspective on media and its relationship to their own work.

Images of Women in the Media

Images of women being physically abused are increasingly common. A woman's seductively exposed neck is encircled with a blood-red ribbon to simulate throat slashing in the wide spread advertisement for the movie, *Bloodline*. *Vogue* magazine published a set of photographs by Richard Avedon showing a man caressing, then beating, a woman who appeared to enjoy it. In Cambridge, The Camel's Hump Boutique displayed a mannequin dumped from a garbage can, blood running from her mouth and men's shoes on her head and neck. Record album advertisements and covers feature chained, raped and murdered women.

The causes of this increase in media sex-violence are complex. The vogue in violence is seen by some as a result of a demand for attention by media-makers who find their audiences increasingly hard to shock. Others feel such violent images serve as an outlet for many kinds of social and work-related tensions. Feminists see in these images a backlash to the shifting power

relationship between men and women: violence, whether implied through media symbols or acted out in rape, intimidates and controls women. Whatever the causes for these images, they present a current trend expressed through several media forms:

a. *Advertising* The female body has embodied the ideas, values and experiences of the artist throughout fine art history. Likewise, commercial art uses the images of women, in this case to make products desirable. Other media (television, film, even the news) ape the methods of advertising, using the research into the manipulation of consciousness which underlies the industry's financial success. Advertising does not purport to be an art, but reserves for itself the techniques of science: they want us to buy and they'll spend millions on empirical research to see what motivates us.

Since men own and control the media, the prevailing cultural notion of reality is based on male experience. Advertisers dig deeply into male mythology for images which create a powerful resonance with the viewer. Sexual images of women appear to motivate, so these have been manipulated extensively to create the novelty that attracts attention. More frequently now, the trend is toward images incorporating violence with sexuality.¹

The sophistication of the advertising industry makes its increased use of violence potentially devastating. In the past two decades, we have seen evolving images of women in media fit the mandate for visual novelty. From the slightly naughty bikini'd goddess to the large-bosomed sex queen to the completely nude libertine, each image was discarded when its value for attracting attention wore off. The female victim in today's advertising is yet another escalation to create a novel and attention-riveting shock. Violence is a valuable tool in the advertiser's arsenal, because the length of time needed to cause an impact on the viewer is small yet the result is powerful.

Violence in advertising is cheerfully explained by a recording industry publicity director, "If a group wants a gorilla on the cover, they get a gorilla on the cover, unless it's illegal or there's a marketing reason why gorillas aren't a good idea."² Violence against women is neither illegal nor ineffective in the market. Commercial artists and directors consistently rationalize these images with complete indifference to their content. One advertiser decided to bolster lagging sales in men's pants by creating an ad campaign depicting violence against men, explaining "I don't think women deserve to be beaten any more than men."³ Paradoxically and with the same apparent objectivity, this advertiser explained an earlier advertisement featuring violence to women, "We decided to develop a campaign men could really identify with. We really wanted to give it to women."⁴ Evidenced not in the advertisers' rationalizations but in the images themselves, woman-hating finds contemporary and influential expression in the desire to sell products. The entertainment and news industries follow suit, competing with advertising and each other for viewer attention.

b. *Entertainment: Television and Film* Images of women in television and film often appeal to the pornographic sensibility, i.e., the portrait of sexuality preoccupied with domination and power. Movie one-sheets and newspaper advertisements frequently depict the most violent images in the film, seeking to seduce the viewers interest by exploiting response patterns set up by product advertising. The entertainment industry manipulates not only brief violent flashes (as in advertising), but develops narratives that depend almost exclusively on violence. It is a formula followed by many producers and directors, justified as giving the public what it wants. It accomplishes a ceaseless indoctrination of media ideology, a survey of the possibilities for violent behavior. When these possibilities include an escalation of violence toward women (and, increasingly, children), it becomes impossible to ignore their effects in real life.

c. *The News Media* The news media, carrying a stamp of objectivity and reality, is itself part of the communication industry's portrayal of violence. As in entertainment and advertising, news depends upon strong, often sensational images to capture its audience. Front page photographs and television lead-ins are offered as enticements to the audience, following the prescription that we take for granted by now — violent drama sells, so use it.

Violence is presented as a series of fantastic events which happen without logical explanation (by implication we are powerless to stop it.) Social, economic, or political analysis is ignored as these would be counter to the sacred "objectivity" of the news.

Calling the images or information objective belies what every artist knows: how an image is framed, edited, manipulated and worded affects the viewer's perception of its message. A front page photo of a nude body on a hillside conveys much more than a simple reporting of the incident. It tells you what kind of people make plausible victims and demonstrates the potentially erotic elements in violence by its visual associations with both entertainment and pornography. News images, with more believability than entertainment, graphically demonstrate the realm of possibilities of human behavior.

b. *Artists are not independent of the shaping influence of the media.* Art education does not support an understanding of the politics of images. It does, however, provide analytical skills to dissect images and to observe the effects of these images on their viewers. It is with fascination that contemporary artists watch the sophisticated and purposeful manipulation of audience response by commercial image-makers, learning as they do so.

Once seen as the vanguard of society's cultural evolution, the heralders of innovation through the visual experience, today's artists appear ineffectual compared to the media power structure. Many artists have themselves become indoctrinated by that power structure, recreating images from the media in their own work without questioning either the inventiveness



Bloodline Sunset Blvd., 1979 Our visual environment shapes our social reality.

or the morality of their actions. Inviolable behind the myth that art is a unique and singular expression of the artist's personal vision (and therefore above moral or political judgment), some artists purport to be exploring their relationship to women through violent images. In fact, these images attract attention, are economically profitable, and create a notoriety that has little to do with the work itself.

Even among artists who decry social violence, incorporation of media's influence into their work produces reactions contrary to their intentions. In Chicago recently, Joy Poe staged her own rape in a surprise performance at Artemesia Gallery. Poe stated her purpose was to "change society's complacent attitude toward rape";⁶ in fact, she presented another, more immediate, picture of a woman inevitably victimized, reinforcing her audience's feelings of horror and helplessness.

Likewise Darryl Sapien, in *Crime in the Streets* (a performance in San Francisco's tenderloin district), attempted to critique social violence. His graphic images of that violence were far stronger than his solution, a "bridge of human kindness" that stretched across the alley. With both artists, their political analysis, informed perhaps by their own fear, helplessness or outrage, did not extend far enough to avoid recreating these feelings in their audience. In understanding how images of violence reinforce powerlessness, these artists might have concluded their works with a way for the audience to interact positively in creating solutions to the problems presented.

c. *The continued use of popular media images in fine art legitimates their existence outside of social or political criticism.* Helmut Newton is but one of many fashion photographers now recognized as an art figure. As early as 1975, his commercial displays in *Vogue* magazine included shots of a woman wincing in pain as a man bites her ear, a man hitting a woman in the breast, and, most revealing, a woman's head being forced into a toilet bowl. Four years later, similar work of Newton's was displayed in a San Francisco art gallery along with that of painter David Hockney. Critic Hal Fischer described his photographs of women as "allowing us to indulge ourselves in their imagery

Images of women as powerless victims and men as aggressors reinforce and legitimize violent behavior toward women.



Les Krims, photographer
The Incredible Stack O'Wheat Cake Murders

Krims' work trivializes the sexual violation and death of women. The introduction to this series states: "While immediate reaction may be utter disgust and repulsion there is still that 'aesthetic' attraction to witness displaced horror." For certain men this may be true. But for women there is nothing "aesthetic" about viewing the staged murder of a woman, elevated to art.

The underlying social message of this image tells us that beautiful women make exquisite corpses. Her provocative posture tells us that there was no struggle, but a seductive surrender to her killer. Krims has captured the sense of mystery, fascination, and exploitation of women that characterizes popular detective magazines. He has reached into the mass culture and taken the worst aspects to exalt. His audience, those who think themselves above the effect of popular imagery, are rewarded by intellectual games with a humorous twist, the height of which is his use of Hershey's chocolate in place of blood.

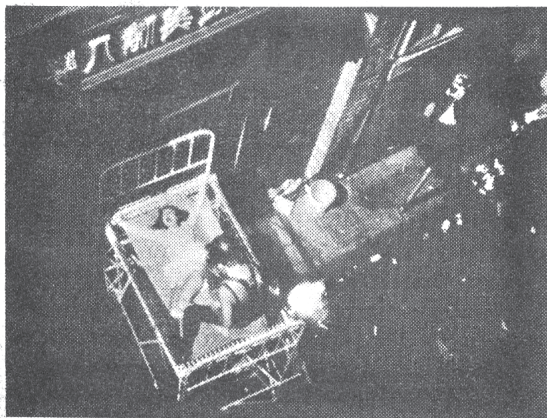
"Hillside Strangler" coverage, October-December, 1977
(MURDER/RAPIST — 13 L.A. WOMEN)

Front page headlines all over the world screamed: "Strangler Death Fight" or "Women looked for love, found Strangler." The news media played with these tragic killings that also involved sexual brutalization by turning the story into a frightening morality play. The message of the image represented here is that good women, women who are the property of good men, will stay inside, sheltered and protected. Women who do otherwise allow themselves to become victims. At a time when traditional male roles are under attack, these images glorify male power and domination. People believe news to be an objective portrayal of their reality. Women who continually see images of themselves as "victims" believe it to be as natural to woman as "grass is to green." A changed style of newscoverage demands a changed consciousness in newsrooms about the use of images that function as polite pornography for mass consumption.



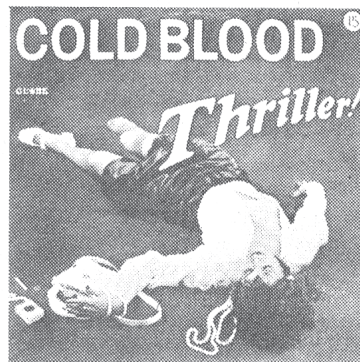
Darryl Sapien
A Crime In The Streets, a performance

This image tells us that women are safe, easy targets for brutal behavior. The artist attempted to make a social statement against several acts of violence against men and women. But he chose the image of a woman being sexually abused to use in his publicity. This image does not provide or even suggest a solution for social change. Stereotypical images of victimized women are deeply implanted into the collective psyches of our culture. It is imperative for artists making a political statement to realize that borrowing images from the popular culture reinforces the same values. These images do not create new or alternative values. Since 34% of actual rapes do occur in women's homes and often in their own beds, the image used here touches on this fear in all women. The effect of Sapien's image wouldn't be so paralyzing if the onlookers weren't voyeurs but took an active role to stop the violence, or if the woman fought the attacker off.



COLD BLOOD "Thriller," record album cover

Like all the images on this page, a young, attractive woman is depicted after an implied sexual attack and possible murder. Obviously, a victim, there are subtleties in the visualization that go unnoticed at first glance. The image appears to be taken out of a real-life situation. The woman is not bound or physically restricted as in hard-core pornography. It is insinuated by word-association that this assaulted, robbed, unconscious woman is a "Thriller." She has fallen in a seductive position, with her skirt-lifted. Her make-up is a "little too dark" implying that she asked for it. The physical image of someone who has been attacked is romanticized and the assault itself is legitimized by the cigarette package referring to her as a "Lucky Strike."



The similarity in art, advertising, and news images of women lies in the effects of these images on male/female relationships.

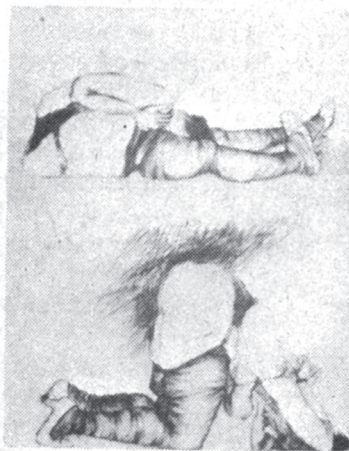
"Hard-Core" Pornography

There is no subtlety in this message. The crude unprofessional quality of the photo gives it a real-life, documentary feeling rather than that of a staged setting. The effect is more Peeping-Tom-like, more seductive, and more titillating. Men are aroused by this woman who is bound, gagged, and totally restrained. Her body is an instrument for their pleasure. She is wearing only stockings, a garter belt, and shoes. These fetishized elements make a difference as to how one experiences this image. They add sex to an image that would otherwise be taken as the torture of a prisoner of war. The ultimate charge in this fantasy and all hard-core is death; the ultimate victim, a woman. The title, *Slaughter of the Innocents*, makes that point.



Bindings, 1972 Adolf Frohner – painter and professor at art academy in Vienna.

There are significant parallels between bondage images in hard-core pornography and the women in these paintings. They are the fetishized shoes, garter belt, and stockings. In addition, the bindings leave the women's orifices in suggestive positions that are vulnerable to convenient sexual penetration. The artist states in an interview that although he uses porno photos as a resource, the basis of his painting is formal as well as being an argument against man's inhumanity to man. Frohner claims, "Deformation is not only the desire to inflict pain on someone but also an exercise in manipulating form." This makes man's inhumanity to women justifiable. While pornography is considered to be the dark shadow of sex, art such as this is held above moral judgment by the mythology surrounding "high art." Such images of degradation, particularly in art, validate attitudes that say it is normal for men to be sexually aggressive in a brutal and demeaning way towards women.

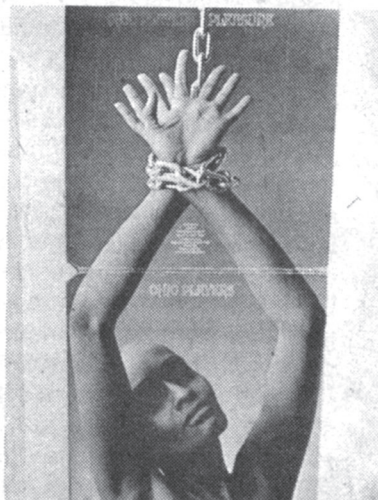


TALENT #2 – *The Magazine of Creative Services*, cover

This cover image of a trade magazine for commercial artists is a clear indication of how women-hating finds contemporary expression in the mainstream of popular culture. The creators of such images are the commercial artists, aided and abetted by graphic designers and photographers. They make up a network in the advertising world that support trends like "brutal chic" (said to have originated in the fashion world) of which this cover is an example. They know that beautiful, victimized women both entertain and sell. The sophistication in image-manipulation by these commercial artists makes their increased use potentially dangerous. This slick image of a woman has an aesthetic quality unlike the cruder hard-core. Here there is a calculated beauty in the pose, the coloring, and the physical characteristics of the victimized woman. Her balance creates an unsettling silence and passivity. If she moves even slightly, the pain is total and self-inflicted.



Ohio Players
"Pleasure," album cover
Mercury Records / Westbound



Images of violence to women, from enchainment to implied rape have been commonplace in record album marketing. They are created by those commercial artists who advertise in a magazine like *Talent*. The frequency with which such images appear trivialize the serious phenomena of rape and battered women. Rape is the highest rising crime in the U.S., rising 48% from 1970 to 1975, as evidenced by the statistics of the Federal Crime Index. The Ohio Players use variations of this image, even the same model on all their album covers. It teaches us that victimized women are attractive and sexually appealing. People associate this particular image with a crucifixion. Well-designed, this composition is reminiscent of El Greco's paintings of Christ; the elongated neck, tilted head, and strong arms bound at the wrists. In a less romanticized fashion her gaunt face, shaved head, and the chains rendered in tones of grey reflect a Nazi concentration camp. Here the association is with "pleasure." But for whom?

LESLIE LABOWITZ SUZANNE LACY

without feeling that we have completely dispersed with our own social consciousness."⁷

In a more revealing statement of the transformations brought about by the designation of fine art, he continues "In magazine form interspersed with fashion imagery, Newton's pictures have seemed one more tedious attempt at shock value. However, in the gallery format, larger and fewer in number, they operate with far more ambiguity and within a framework of eclectic antecedents."⁸ Meaning, now that it is *art*, its violence is no longer tedious but ambiguous.

Elevation of such images to "high art" serves the most insidious function of all: the support of values that appear as personal expression but which are actually derived from a programmed reality.

Outside the Myths: The Role of Artist in Contemporary Society

All images are political in that they portray a set of values and attitudes about how the world is or could be. It is not the content of any single image but rather the sum of these and their constancy which shapes their audience. Whether contending with or agreeing with the flow of media images, the artist in the technological society must be cognizant as never before of the way in which his or her visual product hits its audience.

Trained to analyze the structure and to manipulate the content of imagery, artists are a potentially radical force. We can restructure visual reality. By formulating and sharing information, artists can begin to demystify image-making, helping the mass audience to understand media's impact on their lives and identities. To learn how images are made, even to learn to make them oneself, can be a most powerful affirmation.

d. *Pornography* Pornography is experiencing a renaissance in popularity among media-makers and artists alike. In the violent fantasies that fill pornographic magazines, films and audiotapes, women and children's victimization is increasingly explicit.

Pornography expresses a clear and virulent hatred of women that has a demonstrable effect on viewers: it reinforces male bonding, arouses sexuality, and makes viewers more receptive to whatever they've just seen. Images of violence desensitize the audience, and sex and violence together condition a response of arousal. For anyone who has not seen hard core pornography during the last five years, a visit to a porn shop can enlighten you quickly: happy, tender sex is difficult to find. Violence is everywhere, and the market for such fantasies flourishes. A woman might be tied up in various painful and degrading postures (whole magazines are dedicated to various forms of knots and bindings); threatened with insects, animals or reptiles; gang raped; tortured; mutilated; disemboweled; and killed. Passion is curiously absent. It is left for the viewer to interpret his — and the audience is clearly male — visceral response as passion. Pornography serves as an affordable ego boost for those who can

own little from the array of power symbols in our culture. It is the desire to own, control, and destroy, encouraged by the advertising industry, which has been packaged as a model of possession itself.

Some argue that sex-violent images are only entertainment. But people spend a great deal of energy and money pursuing entertainment, suggesting it has a considerable motivating influence on our actions. Even so, this appears a rather thin argument when set in a climate of increasing violence against women. The rate of violent crimes involving rape and mutilation continues to climb rapidly, with Los Angeles, one of the media centers, leading in the United States.

It is no longer possible to ignore the influence of media violence on physical violence. Dozens of specific cases that substantiate this relationship have been cited.⁵ Victimization images establish the roles through which we perceive ourselves in relationship to others, making it normal to abuse women and children. Media is a powerful educational tool, teaching men how to kill and women how to be victims.

Social Relevance of Art in a Media Culture

It may appear ironic to include the fine art profession in a discussion of the effects of media images on the public, given that we don't often concern ourselves with that audience. But mass communication techniques have moved into the art profession, and the possibilities presented by this technology change the relationship of the artist to his/her culture.

Contrary to common myths about the differences between fine artists and commercial artists, there are significant parallels with respect to their depiction of women. Similar to media-makers, fine artists have stepped up their production of violent images. These images, distributed through the traditional art system of galleries, museums and art magazines, are finding their way into mainstream media as well. Conversely, one can observe artists borrowing *from* media images in the creation of their work. The interrelationship between art and media, particularly with respect to mutually-used representations of women, suggests art may be inadvertently in collusion with the goals and values of those who control the media. Three points seem crucial:

a. *Artists increasingly draw inspiration from mass media.* One trained in art skills inevitably recognizes the tremendous potential of mass media. Artists borrow from media, adopt those concepts and images that attract popular interest, and cloak these in art language. They experiment with detective stories, soap operas, documentary reporting, and news broadcasting. They get their videotapes on television, print their own books, make movies, publish posters, paint billboards, and even make the news.

Some artists appeal directly to the mass audience for support of their ideas. Judy Chicago created a media event around *The Dinner Party* to communicate feminist perceptions not accepted by an indifferent or

Myths, a media performance by Leslie Labowitz and students from the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. Performed in front of a billboard by Deborah Feldman, this event opened the 10 day project on rape in Las Vegas "From Reverence To Rape To Respect." Produced by Labowitz, Lacy, and Claudia King it integrated Community Organizing — self defense workshops, a conference by sociologists; Media Strategy — local talk shows and newscastings, press conferences, front-page and feature news articles, a documentary by the PBS station in Las Vegas; and Art Events — performances, video, and an art exhibition. This project was funded by the Nevada Humanities Committee.

These women pose an alternative image in the visual environment of Las Vegas. More common are the seductive uses of women's bodies on billboards to sell entertainment, hotels, etc.



even antagonistic art world. Others are intrigued with the forms of mass communication, as was Lowell Darling when he ran for Governor of California. Our work involves a critique of media applications, to put forth political ideas regarding social change. The net effect of this and other variously motivated activity has been to enhance the art profession's awareness of its potential contribution to a highly technologized visual environment.

Granted, to create images which reflect a reality different than that of our own media-derived consciousness is an arduous task. Alternatives are hard to develop and often not as interesting as those we have been trained to expect. Images of solutions are not likely to be popular among advocates who label art with an informed social consciousness as "propaganda." As we have seen, however, most art carries its propaganda; it is only when the ideas run dramatically counter to accepted reality that they are labeled as such.

We are not suggesting that artists run their images through a political system to come up with acceptable visual representations of a new social order. Rather, we would have members of the profession understand their work is not without social consequences, and that there exists a political value system behind the production of images in the media. We are suggesting, as well, that we regain our ability to think independently within the culture, to question what we read, see, or hear from mass media, and, most importantly, to formulate through our work our own visions of the future.

We see the questions one should ask of art are: Who (how many) will see it, and what will its effect on these viewers be? Does the structure of the work invite dialogue, exchange, and growth from its audience? What images of ourselves and our society does it

ultimately support? And finally, what is its vision of the future, and how does it support action in that direction?

In answering these questions, we open the discussion of new roles for artists in our highly technological society. Now artists exist, barely supported, on the fringes of that society. By looking at our relationship to the audience and the popular culture which that technology creates, artists can formulate a vital and responsible position within society.

1. Increased violence has stimulated sales even within a predominantly female market. Since most women do not question that social symbols are more controlled by one sex than the other, they are subject to the same conditioning as men, with one difference: they see themselves, reflected in the media, as the victims.

2. Quotes from advertising executives from "Really Socking It to Women," *Time Magazine*, February 7, 1977, p. 14.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*

5. Both individual incidents and sociological research demonstrate a direct link between media and actual violence.

A bizarre broomstick rape was shown on television, and shortly afterward a man copied this crime. In another of several examples, a woman was burned in Boston after television had graphically portrayed this crime.

Social scientists have demonstrated the instigative nature of media violence repeatedly over the past few years, seriously questioning the still widely-held catharsis hypothesis developed by psychoanalytic theory. "The implications of these research findings for the impact of television on its viewers is obvious. Given the salience of violence in commercial television . . . there is every reason to believe that this mass medium is playing a significant role in generating and maintaining a high level of violence in American society." Urie and Bronfenbrenner, *Two Worlds of Childhood: U.S. and USSR*, (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970), pp. 109-115.

6. Cindy Lyle, "Chicago Rape Performance," *Women Artists News*, June-Summer 1979.

7. Darryl Sapien, "Crime in the Streets," *High Performance*, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 39.

8. Hal Fischer, "A Taste of Decadence," *Artweek*, March 10, 1979, p. 11.

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