

LESBIAN ART: A PARTIAL INVENTORY

Terry Wolverton



Summer 1977

Two black-and-white photographs, eight-by-ten-inch glossies shot by a professional, portray a group of five women posing in a garden. We are the Natalie Barney Collective,¹ five women from the Feminist Studio Workshop² (FSW) who have come together to conduct the Lesbian Art Project (LAP), an endeavor consisting of equal parts art historical research, community building, activism, group therapy, heavy partying, and the kind of life-as-art performance sensibility inherited from the Fluxus³ artists and so prevalent in Southern California art of the seventies. This labor of love will define the next two years of my life.

The companion photos are a study in contrast, the subjects' attire, stances, and attitudes wildly variant from one image to the next. In the first shot, we scowl into the lens, each of our unrouged mouths a thin, strict line. On the far right, I am dressed in a pinstripe business suit—trousers, jacket, vest—a tie, a fedora on my head. My hand is clenched in a fist, my shoulders squared. Beside me stands Maya Sterling, hands on hips, pelvis forward. A black velvet shirt hangs open to the waist, baring the stripe of skin between her small breasts. In the center of this grouping, Sharon Immergluck is debonair in top hat and tails, black bow tie against a white shirt. One hand grips a pipe. Her expression bears a trace of amusement. Next to Sharon is Nancy Fried, the only one of us in a dress, but it's worn with the unyielding attitude of a dowager empress, a manner that suggests no softness. A long antique gown, armored by a broad-shouldered

Terry Wolverton dances with
Katja Beizanz at the publication
party for *Blue Moon*, 1977.
© E. K. Waller Photography.

jacket, a large floppy hat on her head. Her ample body lends the implacable air of Gertrude Stein. On the far left, Arlene Raven, founder of the LAP, leans against the wall, her long legs in black pants, black jacket snug on her lean frame.

This is our collective depiction of “butch.”

In the second image, we have transformed ourselves into “femme.” The picture is sunlit, a shag of palm leaves in the background. We are clustered together, two of us seated, our lips parted, smiling. We are all in dresses; many of us hold elaborate fans from Nancy’s collection. My gown is chiffon; Arlene’s is lace. Nancy is in satin, her cleavage visible. Maya and Sharon are in simpler dresses; Maya now sports Sharon’s top hat, awry on her mass of curls. We mostly face one another, interacting; only I look directly at the camera.

Arlene had imagined the LAP as an organized effort to further her investigation of a lesbian sensibility in art. The rest of us—current and former FSW students drawn by her invitation to participate—have concocted a project far beyond Arlene’s original intention to research the work of Romaine Brooks and other historical and contemporary lesbian artists. We are after nothing less than an exploration of the meaning(s) of “lesbian,”—an ambition consistent with Arlene’s approach to art history—and the manifestation of a culture in which those meanings can be expressed and amplified.

We envision the LAP as a context in which our own artwork can be produced and understood; I for one am already devising a performance project about a female future that I will produce under LAP’s auspices.

We imagine the LAP as a springboard from which to launch a reinvention of the lesbian community. Nancy and I concoct lavish events we will create and host. “Beautiful, elegant events,” Nancy muses with a dreamy expression, conjuring the lush environments she will, with her sculptor’s sensibility, fashion.

“Events that aren’t boring and depressing to attend,” I agree, grimacing at the memory of dark-lit lesbian bars, patrons camouflaged in flannel shirts and jeans, hard eyes and tight shoulders, the cramped and constricted body language of self-hatred.

“Events to which I could wear this!” Sharon beams, pirouetting in top hat and tails on the flagstone path of the garden. It is clear that we will not be content to merely study the aesthetics of lesbians; we are determined to wield our influence over them as well.

The Natalie Barney Collective is in the process of designing an educational program through which aspects of lesbian culture and experience can be studied. “There’s not another context in which you can learn anything positive about lesbians,” Arlene asserts. And in 1977, this is virtually true.

We’re planning a gay/straight dialogue, at Sharon’s suggestion, “So the heterosexual women in the FSW don’t freak out.” A therapist as well as a writer, Sharon is always attentive to group dynamics.



The Natalie Barney Collective butches up, 1977. (L to R) Maya Sterling, Sharon Immergluck, Arlene Raven, Nancy Fried, Terry Wolverton. © E.K. Waller Photography.



Femme version of the Natalie Barney Collective of the Lesbian Art Project, 1977. (Seated L to R) Nancy Fried, Arlene Raven. (Standing L to R) Maya Sterling, Sharon Immergluck, Terry Wolverton. © E.K. Waller Photography.

“And we need to network with other lesbian artists across the country and around the world,” Maya’s eyes glitter, anticipating an excuse to travel.

“And we have to get lots of media coverage,” I remind them, “to contradict all those horrible stereotypes about lesbians.”

“Right,” Maya quips, “like that we’re butch or femme!” We cackle with laughter until the photographer says, “Could you please hold still?” and we pose for another shot.

It is 1977, and feminist lesbians don’t officially believe in butch and femme. Feminist canon has labeled role-playing as “heterosexist” and declared “androgyny” the sought-after standard. If butch and femme are talked about at all, it is in an historical context, as a quaint custom left over from the fifties, the bad old days of the closet, when lesbians didn’t know any better than to mimic what men and women do together. Like every generation, we unthinkingly disrespect the generation that has come before.

The members of the Natalie Barney Collective believe we are being saucy and bold in daring to depict ourselves in these ancient roles, defying not only the conventions of heterosexual culture but also flouting the current standards of correctness within the lesbian community. In our thrift-store finery, a kind of hippie elegance, we push the butch/femme stereotypes until they warp and bend, make them into material for art. There is about this photo shoot, as with all of LAP’s activities, a determined element of crackpot.⁴

It is with a fervent sense of mission that I've immersed myself in the LAP, the first time since coming to the Woman's Building that I've felt confirmed in my decision to do so, the first time I've seen a clear focus for my considerable energies. The juxtaposition of "lesbian" and "artist" makes possible the integration of two central parts of my identity, creates more ground on which to stand. Thus named, I feel less crazy, less queer.⁵

At one of our earliest LAP meetings, Arlene had observed that, as a collective, we would need to use our own lives as a basis for this investigation; our own experiences as lesbians were the foundation of our theory. We accepted this premise, already well trained as feminists that "the personal is political." In 1977, we don't yet fully realize that our theory will be limited and circumscribed by the fact that we are six white women in our twenties and thirties. And we don't fully comprehend that looking at our lesbian experience through a magnifying glass will bring us face to face with the pain of our lesbian oppression.

Are any of us equipped to undertake this? Are we sufficiently honest with ourselves, do we have enough trust in one another? Are we capable of reading the content of our interactions at the same moment we are engaging in them? And if so, how does such studied observation alter the content of our behaviors?

On this sunny July afternoon in the garden behind Nancy's house, we don't know the answers to these questions, or even that such inquiries await us. We're not thinking about butch and femme, where each of us might fit on that spectrum of identity. We leave unspoken the fact that some of us look ill at ease in our dresses, others of us appear less convincingly butch.

We are playing dress-up, posing for pictures, engaging in performativity. Laughing and mugging for the camera, we are smoking joints, enjoying the California sunshine, grooving on being outrageous lesbians. We believe that in this way—our outright rejection of second-class status for lesbians, our refusal to accept anything less than a marvelous quality of life—the Natalie Barney Collective will change the world.

Fall 1977

A single sheet of thick paper, the prototype of a poster created by graphic designer Bia Lowe to represent the LAP. Never reproduced, it's a one-of-a-kind artwork.

Across the bottom of the page, the project's acronym: LAP. Above these letters, two line drawings scissored from children's workbooks, stacked one atop the other. The illustration style suggests the early sixties, the seat of nostalgia for my generation, a time when the world seemed hopeful and prosperous.

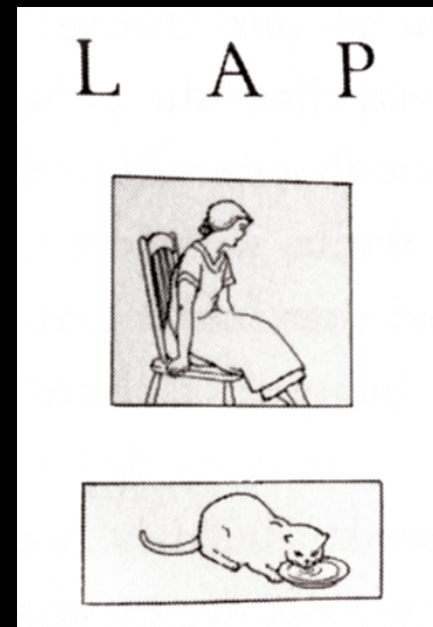
The top cutout depicts a woman seated. The viewer is aware of the bend in her hips, the drape of her dress over her thighs, the slight concavity of the dip between her thighs, a certain inviting space. Her lap.

Beneath this image, in the other cutout, a cat tongues milk from a bowl.

Within this juxtaposition, there is tension between the simple domesticity of the scenes, which bespeak comfort, even innocence, and the inescapable erotic inference created by their apposition: the lesbian, after all, is the one who laps at the lap.

The urge to render innocence to lesbian sexuality is not only characteristic of Lowe's work of the time. The organizers and students of LAP sought out the work of lesbian artists across the country; we read these images as mirror and blueprint, a reflection of our culture as it was and a guide to what we wished it to become. Many lesbian artists in the seventies set out to remythologize lesbianism, to redeem it from the images of depravity and evil that were common in both pornographic depiction and religious interpretation, to make it "good."

Thus, the "HERSHEKISSEHER" (1977) multiple, by the artist Clsuf, duplicates the signature wrapping of a Hershey's Kiss (what could be more innocent than a candy kiss?)—the same strip of white paper, the same blue type, playing with the language of the confectionery's brand name to suggest a different kind of sweetness. Or the bread dough sculptures of Nancy Fried (such a homey, non-threatening medium!), capturing scenes of domestic lesbian life—two women in the bath, one nude woman giving another a foot massage—and painted with the exquisite detail of a Fabergé egg. Or the solarized photos of artist Tee Corinne, explicit as they are in the portrayal of lesbian sexual practice, create a rosy glow, almost a halo, around their subjects that confers a benediction on their acts.



Bia Lowe, Lesbian Art Project—Noun + Verb
1977. Original flyer
offset poster, 14" x 8 1/2".
© Bia Lowe.



we need: jeans, t-shirts, jewelry, old postcards, tuxedos, sunglasses, birdbaths, shoes, scarves, buttons, costumes, pillows, dress dummies, leather jackets, pink flamingos...

WILL YOU HELP?

The Store at The Woman's Building 1727 North Spring Street Los Angeles, Calif. 90012

Will You Help?, 1977. Poster soliciting donations for the Store, a thrift store organized by Nancy Fried for the Woman's Building. © E.K. Waller Photography.

What is common to all of these images is their intention to disarm the viewer, and to make the strange familiar, even soothing. In the eighties and nineties, a subsequent generation of lesbians will come to challenge this strategy, charging that it robs lesbianism of its power to shock and inflame. This generation will glorify “bad girls,” bringing a punk sensibility, a calculated strategy of transgression, to the depiction of lesbian imagery. But in the seventies, to merely raise the issue of lesbianism is incendiary, and perhaps this more gentle assertion of lesbian sexuality serves to desensitize the art world, pave the way for the more confrontational work that is to come.

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Seven women stare out from the poster; all eyes confront the viewer. We are posed some seated, some standing—in a desolate corner of the Woman's Building: bare walls, ragged floor, poor lighting. We range in age from our twenties to our forties, our bodies tall or short, corpulent or thin, large breasted or small. We are all naked. In bold type, a headline demands, “WILL YOU HELP?” Smaller text goes on to specify, “We need: jeans, t-shirts, furniture, jewelry, plants, old postcards, toys, tuxedos, sunglasses, mirrors, birdbaths, shoes, scarves, umbrella stands, Christmas tree lights, beads, buttons, carpets or rugs, frames, dishes, dresses, costumes, pillows, dress dummies, leather jackets, pink flamingos.”

It is a poster soliciting donations for a new thrift store conceived by Fried and Valerie Angers as a fundraising strategy for the Woman's Building. While not strictly a LAP endeavor, The Store is fueled by the vision and energy of many lesbians (all but one of the women in the photograph identifies as such, or did so at that time) and is launched with the outrageous spirit to which LAP is dedicated.

Over the summer of 1977, a campaign to pass the country's first anti-gay rights ordinance has been waged and won in Dade County, Florida, with Anita Bryant as its celebrity spokesperson. In the fall, conservative California state senator John Briggs introduces a bill that would ban gay teachers in public schools. Rather than retreating in the face of these threats, the gay and lesbian communities are galvanized into founding a political movement, raising millions of dollars, being vocal about our cause in the media, and demanding accountability from elected officials.

The women of the Natalie Barney Collective, too, respond with flagrant defiance of those who would deny our right to exist. More than ever we are committed to being visible as lesbians in our personal and professional lives. We channel the fear and vulnerability we feel into increasingly raucous displays of lesbian sensibility, determined to celebrate ourselves.

The Store's opening is observed with a fashion show organized by LAP. Originally conceived as an opportunity to model the wares of the thrift shop, the occasion morphs into performance art as we give vent to personas that express our gender identities. Sharon returns in top hat and tails to act as Mistress of Ceremonies; Bia

sports elegant pajamas and robe; Holiday Jackson wears a glamorous fifties cocktail dress with a stuffed parrot on her shoulder. Madcap, with a ferocious undertone: *I am woman, hear me roar, dahling*.

The hostile political climate lends urgency to our Feminist/Lesbian Dialogue within the community of the FSW, the first time, according to Arlene, that this type of discussion has been formally held. Such events are always fraught: all feeling a little defensive, fearful of being made to feel like the Other, or even resentful of having to declare themselves. Lesbians historically carry this feeling of queerness and isolation from their experiences of oppression within heterosexist society, but at the Woman's Building, straight women also feel like a beleaguered minority, believing themselves judged as lesser feminists for being involved with men. LAP's dialogue does not resolve these issues, but does allow them to be aired, to become discussible, and further serves to create more visibility and presence for lesbian students in the FSW, something for which I had longed my first year there.

In addition to weekly planning meetings, LAP sponsors two additional public events that fall: one is an exhibit of Fried's bread dough sculptures. The opening reception is followed by a "Sizzling Disco" to intensify that spirit of festivity we wish to foster. The other is the first in a series of Lesbian Create·Hers Salons, highlighting significant creative work of lesbians. Our inaugural salon features architect Noel Phyllis Birkby.⁶ We also launch monthly worksharing groups in which lesbian artists can present their work to others for feedback and dialogue, and consciousness-raising groups around specifically lesbian topics within the FSW. And we plan a full roster of activities for the coming winter.

The first season of the LAP is an enormous success, as lesbians flock to our events. So, too, the "WILL YOU HELP?" poster is a hit; donations pour in from across the country to establish The Store. Aside from its marketing function, though, the piece is also noteworthy as an art image: Although nude, the women portrayed are not objectified, not sexualized, not coy. Each of us stares directly at the viewer without self-consciousness or apology. Even as we appeal for help, naked to the public eye, we do so not out of vulnerability or neediness. We have stripped ourselves of the trappings of identity handed down to us; we are starting from scratch, ready to re-clothe ourselves in another guise, poised to invent ourselves anew.

Winter 1978

They might be petroglyphs or runes, an ancient language of symbols. The six crudely rendered ideograms are my attempt to articulate a new vision of lesbian community, to define the roles apparent and necessary to further the work of the group.

Arlene Raven and I sit in my light-filled apartment in the hills of Echo Park. She and I are now the sole directors of the LAP. After a summer of feverish planning and a fall of breakneck producing, the Natalie Barney Collective has imploded and burned out.

It's more than exhaustion that has caused the group's dissolution. The tasks we have set—to hold ourselves up as public icons of an idealized lesbian culture, to interrogate our own conduct and motives as they are unfolding, and to reveal our findings to one another—bring us face to face with our core fears and personal weaknesses.

When one of us sends home a coming out letter and is disowned by her family in response, we must each confront our alienation and estrangement from our families of origin. When two others end their lovers' relationship, we each find ourselves probing our own fears of trust, our reluctance to bond with another woman. When Arlene resumes her love relationship with Cheryl Swannack, from whom I have recently parted with bad feelings, we are each required to consider how community can thrive despite fissures of jealousy and resentment.

To focus on lesbianism as a state of being could not help but evoke our own internalized homophobia, the fear and hatred of our own and others' queerness. To embrace that queerness is to embrace isolation, marginalization and exile. Committed as we are to living our vision—a world in which lesbians are celebrated, luxuriant and unrestrained—we discover our insides wired for self-loathing, scorn and shame.

The tension between the world we dream and the one in which we live creates skirmishes and misunderstandings, and ruptures long-standing friendships and burgeoning intimacies. It has sorely tested everyone's commitment and accountability to the work.

Nancy has expressed her intention to stay connected to LAP as an artist, but withdrawn from all administrative work. Sharon, Maya, and Kathleen have taken greater distance from the project. I can't imagine stopping the work we have begun; my identity as a lesbian artist is central to my being at this time, and in LAP I've found both mission and purpose.

Throughout the summer and fall, the collective had focused on how the LAP might serve the community. In shifting to a partnership structure, Arlene and I have prioritized those activities that will most satisfy us. "Women always think we have to be self-sacrificing," Arlene reminds me, "but that's the same old patriarchal model—and who needs it?" And she gives her signature dismissive laugh—"Ha!"—a throaty half-cackle, one beat, as if withdrawn abruptly.

Gone are the plans for aggressive grant writing to support salaried positions. Gone is the far-reaching media campaign. Gone is anything that requires a high level of administration. The Natalie Barney Collective had, Arlene and I decide, been seduced by a male notion of institution building—the bigger the better, impact measured by numbers served. We will instead trust that our work—on whatever scale—will create a shift in consciousness that transmits itself from woman to woman, a revolution from the inside out.

In letting go of our worldly ambitions, I ask myself now, were we truly forging a female model, one that assumed our influence would be psychic, cellular, would work

its way through an underground network of women's wisdom? Or were we unwittingly participating in our own marginalization, ensuring that our efforts would be buried, lost to history? Were we redefining power or giving up on it?

More than two decades later, I see a lesbian community that has more visibility and that expects much more for itself. Lesbian lives are depicted on TV, and explicit images of lesbian art hang in the collections of major museums. Young lesbian artists don't hesitate to flaunt their sexuality and politics. These circumstances exist in part because LAP existed. But few, if any, of these young artists have even heard about the LAP. Did our decision to work outside of mainstream culture ensure our erasure?

In the winter of 1978, what Arlene and I have retained of our plan for LAP are the art projects, some social and community events, Arlene's research on the life and work of painter Romaine Brooks and her contemporaries, and the planning for a Program of Sapphic Education. The program, inspired by the Greek poet's school at Mytilene, is conceptualized as a one-year, one-time-only project. Neither Arlene nor I want to create an institution for which the maintenance will be our responsibility.

We've adopted a model of seasonal education first developed by artist Jere Van Syoc and philosopher Linda Smith in the Women, World, and Wonder program at Thomas Jefferson College, wherein the activities of learning are geared to the mood or meaning of the time of year. Autumn is a time for gathering, the development of community, and for this season we've envisioned eight one-day workshops on Sunday afternoons; these are held at Arlene and Cheryl's home in order to create the atmosphere of a salon and provide a sense of safety and privacy. Arlene and I alternate or share responsibility to teach these workshops on subjects such as "Lesbian Relationships," "The Lesbian Body," and "I Dream in Female/Lesbian Consciousness as Non-Ordinary Reality."

Winter is the time for study and contemplation, focusing and conceptualizing. During these months we will offer a series of in-depth, eight-to-ten-week classes, including "Lesbian Art History," "Lesbian Writing," "Feminist Neology," "Feminist Astrology," and the workshop portion of the development of a new performance project, *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism*.

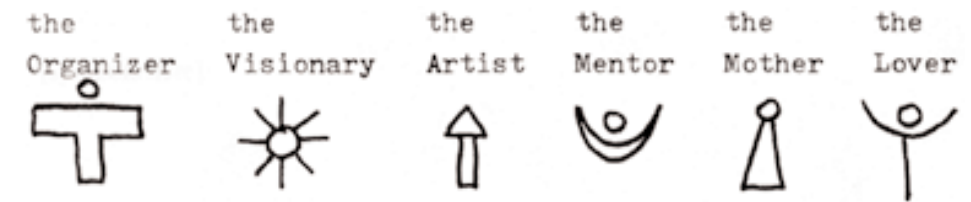
Spring is the time for blossoming, and into this season is scheduled the performance of *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism*, which will involve a large sampling of participants in LAP. Summer is envisioned as a time for travel, making connections with other lesbians across the country, expanding the impact of our work.

We intend our Program of Sapphic Education to not only inspire art making, but to build lesbian consciousness and community, and the six symbols are my attempt to identify the archetypal functions required to fulfill this vision.

"The Organizer" posits a small circle, perched like a human head atop a thick, broad-shouldered "T"; any resemblance to the cross of crucifixion is strictly a Freudian slip. Within the LAP, I am the organizer, the one who figures out schedules and budgets, plans events, and types the press releases. The one who worries.

Like the sun, "The Visionary" radiates from a central circle, illuminating previously unlit areas of consciousness. Arlene is the visionary, purveyor of brilliance.

"The Artist" is a pure arrow of intention, direction, and activity. Cheryl Swannack seems most like this symbol to me, in her tenacity, her will to do. Still, there are many artists in the LAP constellation. I admire the refined sophistication and philosophical thinking that graphic designer and writer Bia Lowe brings to her work. Nancy Fried is a ball of fierce energy whose sculptures will one day sell in New York galleries. When she came to the Woman's Building, the same year I did, she didn't think she was an artist, but she has blossomed with the attention and encouragement she's received. Clsuf, née Claudia Samson, is a former member of Rhode Island Feminist Theater now working in graphics and other ephemeral art, including food as art. And Jere Van Syoc is a creator of windmills and altarpieces—multimedia interactive sculpture—and mythmaker. Jere had been my instructor at Thomas Jefferson College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and has come to Los Angeles as a LAP artist-in-residence in 1978.



Both visionary and artist seem like exalted positions compared to mine; I harbor a secret dread that my tombstone will read, "She was a great organizer," my own creativity buried under layers of competence and responsibility, my own brilliance unrecognized, forgotten.

Arlene is also "The Mentor," depicted as an upturned crescent cradling a smaller circle. While she acknowledges this as her role, she is adamant that the mentorship be mutual, she and I each learning from the other. It is our declared feminist lesbian principle to unseat the hierarchy that has been traditionally inherent in the mentor/student role, but I secretly worry that this egalitarianism has no basis in reality. Other than my organizing skills, my ability to manifest ideas into practical applications, I cannot see what I might bring to her, although she insists she is inspired by my decidedly alternative vision, my metaphysical bent, and my fierce commitment to lesbianism. It will be many years later, after being a teacher and mentor myself, before I will fully understand her determination to stave off the isolation of that role, to subvert the objectification and projections that one receives when one is the mentor.

None of us wants to be "The Mother," this role so despised, so disempowered under patriarchy, although in truth we all want one. The glyph is an isosceles triangle supporting a small circle at its tip. As lesbians, we all feel like motherless girls; we want

to be taken care of, not tend to someone else. As teachers in the Program of Sapphic Education, Arlene and I are seen in this role, and not infrequently our students project onto us their disappointed expectations of their own mothers. We chafe against it.

And we all want to be “The Lover,” consider it an expression of our destiny as lesbians. The symbol resembles a young tree, fresh branches stretching in an inviting embrace. The unwritten history of the lesbian movement reveals how much is built upon the energy of lovers, with presses and bookstores, coffee houses and theater companies, political campaigns and art projects all fueled by sexual energy between women.

And this energy, gone sour, has at times undermined those same endeavors, led to their dissolution. There is, in our core group, spoken and unspoken tension. We are lovers and former lovers; former teachers and students; friends and estranged friends; women with spoken and unspoken attractions, and spoken and unspoken enmities.

Such details are the weft of the fabric of LAP. Our activities flow from the energy of these connections, our theories born from the attempts to wrestle with our difficulties and define our relative positions. Bereft of meaningful relationships with our biological families, we attempt to create an alternative family, a utopian community, born of our visions and dreams. The symbols and the roles they illustrate are my attempt to build a structure and find my place within it.



A heart-shaped pillow sheathed in pink lamé. One of the dozens that festoon the Woman's Building performance space for LAP's “Dyke of Your Dreams Day” dance, our own saucy retort to the rituals of Saint Valentine. Though we disdain the culture of heterosexuality, we still feel free to steal whatever seems useful and transform it as we see fit.

Nancy Fried designed those pillows and then enlisted Sue Maberry to sew them. An FSW student who was just starting her coming out process, Sue was more than glad to whip up three dozen stuffed pillow hearts if it meant getting to hang out with the women of LAP. Nancy has also corralled a group of us to join her at the Woman's Building the day before the dance to help with installation. This first meant reclining our bodies onto long strips of midnight blue photo backdrop paper onto which our outlines were traced in gold glitter. That was followed by hours spent on ladders suspending everything from the eighteen-foot ceiling—lamé hearts hung like plump moons and glittered panels with their diving female forms lined the perimeter of the dance floor. And twinkle lights blinked their tiny beams across the stretch of space. This is a far cry from the wood-paneled, darkly lit bars that are the customary habitués of lesbian socializing. We go to this effort because we believe lesbians deserve a beautiful environment for valentine courtship.

The next night, this space is filled with over three hundred women flirting with their bodies to Natalie Cole's “Sophisticated Lady,” the Pointer Sisters, and Gloria Gaynor's “I Will Survive”—the most female-affirmative disco we can assemble. Clsuf



Clusuf, *OVO*, 1978. Button created for the performance *FEMINA: An IntraSpace Voyage*. © Clsuf.

serves nonalcoholic beverages under a sign that reads, “Lick·Hers,” both advertisement and invitation.

And I, too, am on that dance floor, in a floor-length, black crepe dress from the forties—wide shoulders, narrow waist. I am shaking my hips, spinning around as flashes of glitter and pink lamé spark across my vision. Like the other women of LAP, I am tired of lesbian oppression, and tonight I want to be fabulous, transported, to dance homophobia into oblivion.

Spring 1978

The button has shiny silver print on a black background. “OVO,” it reads in neon script. A made-up word. Feminists of the period are always altering language; we alter the spelling of “wimmin” to take the “men” out, we rename the study of the past “herstory,” and some adopt new last names to subvert patrimony. The power to name is the power to confer meaning.

The button is part of the ephemera of *FEMINA: An IntraSpace Voyage*, the collaborative performance project I have originated as part of LAP. *FEMINA* is about a group of women who find life on Earth unbearable, and who make the decision to

journey together to another planet. Cheryl has joked that my next performance must be titled *Butchina*.

Clusuf made the buttons. The term "OVO" was invented by the play's codirector, Ann Shannon, who also defined the word's multiple meanings.

We were sitting in the brick-red Val's Cafe on the third floor of the Woman's Building early one evening before rehearsal, and she spelled it out on a scrap of notebook paper.

"OVO, see, it's used as a greeting, like 'hello.' But it's also an expression of approval, like 'Bravo!'" Ann bobbed her curly wedge of hair and gazed intently at me to see if I was following.

"So, like, 'Great rehearsal, women, OVO!'" I demonstrated, and she beamed.

"But, look," she continued, "it's a pictograph, too—see how it looks like the female reproductive system?" She turned the page around in case I might fail to catch the resemblance.

"And, it's also a *map* of our journey to *Femina*, see?" she pressed on. "How we start out in one space," she traces the first circle, "catapult through time and space," her pen slashes the V, "and end up in another dimension altogether!" She drew the final O, circling several times until the pen bled through the paper.

These were the years of *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. It made me mad: Why did only men get to project their visions of future? I considered myself a witch, and believed it when Z. Budapest insisted that "thought forms become material."⁷ If women didn't get busy imagining our destiny, I feared we would find ourselves stuck once more in someone else's vision of the future.

The women who were drawn to the creation of *FEMINA* were desperate to reinvent ourselves, to find a world in which our values were reflected and our strengths validated, a world wherein we did not feel crazy. The performance was a metaphor for the vision of LAP—the rejection of the world we'd been handed, the undertaking to build a new context, and to construct new selves untainted by oppression. Bonding with other women and summoning our inner power were the engines that would take us there. The scary journey from one self to another. The alchemy of transformation.

Summer 1978

The talking bead. A clay cylinder, less than an inch long, flecked with brushstrokes of black paint in an African pattern, the bisque of the clay darkened by the oils of my skin. I wear it on a strap of leather bound with a knot at my throat; I never take it off. Over the years the press of my larynx has worn an indent in its side. Arlene teases that this bead holds all my secrets, all the words I never say.

We are in my apartment for our weekly LAP meeting. Arlene sits in the bentwood rocker; I perch in a floral upholstered chair given to me by a friend. Between us is a table made from an upended wooden crate that I retrieved from the sidewalk in

Toronto's Chinatown, elegantly draped with a lace runner crocheted by my great grandmother. The lace is spotted with dripped candle wax, scorched with roach burns, cinders fallen from the countless joints passed back and forth across this table.

One of the most critical parts of Arlene's and my work together on the LAP is the examination of our working relationship. The seventies definition of "lesbian," at least among feminist lesbians, stretched to include any bond between women; neither erotic arousal nor genital contact was required. Although Arlene and I are not lovers, by this definition we are having a "lesbian relationship," and we are determined to study its every nuance for clues to further understand such connections. What we ask of ourselves is intimacy without sexuality, a willingness to open to one another in all ways but the physical.

This exploration lends our meetings—at her house or mine—a sweaty, claustrophobic, hallucinatory quality that is further enhanced by the dope we smoke at every gathering. We brew strong coffee, light candles—we share a more than casual interest in witchcraft—pass a joint back and forth and descend into a watery underworld of the psyche.

We both gravitate to the practice of magic; many cultural feminists in the seventies embraced witchcraft as an ancient form of women's power and healing. It is common for us to begin our meetings with a tarot spread, studying the imagery of the cards for clues to our interaction. We burn candles—green for healing, red for passion, purple for inspiration—and light incense. We tell one another our dreams. The practice of magic is not so different from the practice of art, with its aim to manifest what exists only in the mind, its close reading of symbols, the insistence on a realm beyond the literal. My encounters with Arlene take place in that unmapped territory, outside the ordinary boundaries of space and time as we attempt to plumb taboo subjects—sexual abuse, madness and isolation.

The intimacy of these meetings is fervid, an exploration of secrets, of dark corners of the self we have not previously revealed, an attempt to acknowledge emotions and perceptions that the outer world neither sees nor validates. We try to push ourselves to trust enough to make this journey together, to rely on one another to lead the way into this terrain, to guide us out again.

I am terrified by these sessions, but at age twenty-four I lack the inner awareness to even recognize my own fear. When I was a child, my parents' battles drowned out the canned laughter of the television on a nightly basis, and I have spent so many years afraid that I cannot even identify it, nor all that remains closed inside me in response to it.

I can't even see, at this point in my life, how much I fear my own authenticity, even as I hunger for it. I have rejected all of the received identities—my mother's daughter, the heterosexual woman, the would-be professional striving for the middle class—in search of that authentic self. Yet there remain doors inside me I can't pry

open, or that, when I try, slam shut and seal more tightly than before.

And there is much to fear between Arlene and myself. Arlene is nearly ten years older, the instructor and founder of the institution where I am a student, a credentialed professional in a mainstream art world in which I believe I can never be powerful. We are attempting to create a working partnership, which requires that I simultaneously acknowledge her mentorship and perform as her equal. Each role is challenging for me; on the one hand, I have little respect for or trust in authority, and on the other, it is a constant struggle to believe I bring qualities of equal value to our partnership.

Scariest yet, Arlene is Cheryl's lover. Cheryl is a forceful personality, and although I am well aware of her capacity for charm, the intelligence and resourcefulness that initially drew me, since our breakup, she has come to seem a kind of nemesis for me. I am still unnerved by how I allowed her to dominate our relationship, how spineless and enervated I felt by the end of it. Though I'd never admit it, I'm afraid of Cheryl. My work with Arlene pulls me closer to Cheryl's orb, makes our interaction inevitable.

I don't trust Arlene with regard to this issue. My mother never protected me from my stepfather's rage, his sexual advances, and I have no faith that Arlene will prove a more reliable shield. This issue is undiscussable between us; how can I speak badly about her lover, especially since her lover was once mine? How can I talk about trust with someone I do not trust?

At the age of twenty-four I have no foundation for the kind of honesty that Arlene and I ask of ourselves. In my family, lying and denial were the balms we used to soothe our festering wounds: no one had been hit, drinking was not a problem in the family, incest was not occurring under our roof. Where would I have learned trust?

Arlene is as afraid as I am, but I only see that in retrospect. She is taking a risk to love, to reveal herself to someone who may not be fully able to receive her. She tries to tell me about her terror, but because I won't admit my own, I can't allow hers to become real to me. Instead, we light another joint, and precariously step across the high wire of yet another topic. Today Arlene suggests we talk about the sexual energy between us. I am frozen. I think about my current girlfriend, and I think about Cheryl. If Cheryl knew about this conversation, she would be furious. And can I be certain that Arlene will not tell her?

I'm not aware of feeling any sexual energy between us, any physical desire for her. Is this something about which I'm in denial? My incest history has created some dislocation of my erotic impulses. My sexuality is often performative; I can't always identify authentic erotic desires. My draw to Arlene is profound, but has always seemed to be about her brain and her vision, the opportunity she has created for me. But I feel that she wants and expects something more, although I'm not completely clear what "more" might be. Still, I don't want to insult or disappoint her.

Does she feel more? Is she coming on to me? The room shrinks, its walls narrowing, and my vision dims.

I drink the dregs of coffee grounds, sharp and bitter on my tongue. I sputter something, "If I...uh...did feel...you know...anything, I...uh...wouldn't want to, you know, ...do anything about it...because of...uh...you know...our girlfriends..." I have stopped breathing.

She registers—what? amusement? hurt?—in her black eyes. "There are lots of reasons why this is frightening," she acknowledges. To my ears, she sounds so calm, her voice unbroken, her tone even. "Including that our lovers would be threatened. It would also be too emotionally intense."

It would? I don't know, but she is pointing a way out, and I am more than happy to concur. "And it might get in the way of our work," I add. Each reason is another step away from this nerve-racking possibility, and with every step I feel my lungs ease their constriction.

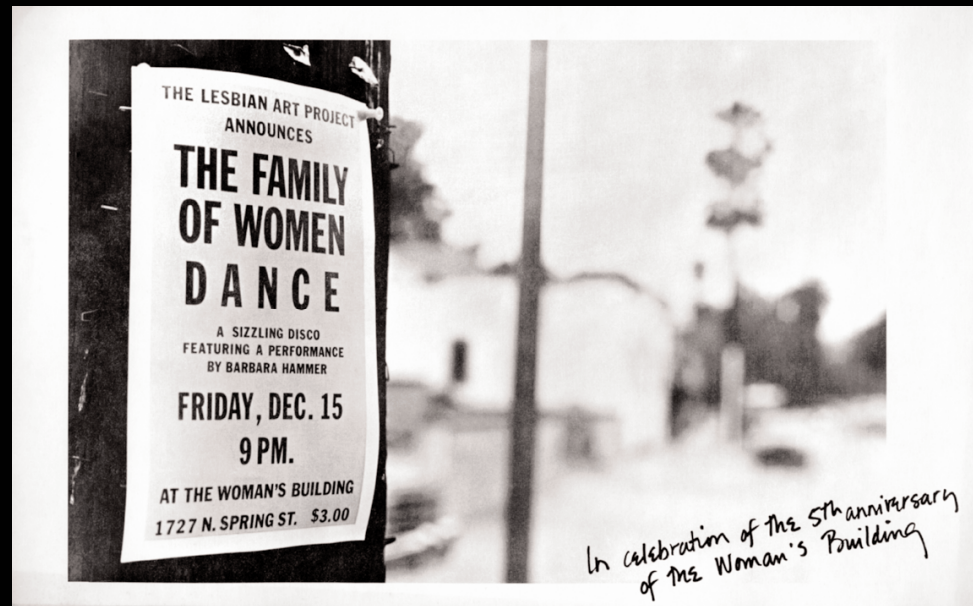
"Under patriarchy, there's so much pain around women's sexuality," Arlene continues, steering us into the safety of the theoretical. Her hands lightly rub the tops of her thighs, clad in green army surplus pants. "You were molested. I was raped. And the powerful taboo against women's intimacy, for which women have been killed."

So we construct a theory to lead us away from the source of threat. We envision a "sexual" energy abstracted from the body, consummated in our work together, expressed through the media of art and magic. And I am only too eager to embrace this theory.

There is a lull. Perhaps the meeting is over for today. Then she asks me, "Do you feel more unloved or unloving?"

I cannot know the motivation behind her question, but I assume it expresses her disappointment in me. Given my history, there is only one answer I can offer. "Unloved," I answer, and think I read in the grimace at one corner of her mouth that she believes the opposite. She wants something else from me, I understand this much, but am uncertain of what it is or how to offer it. I don't know whether I have it in me to give. Then I have an impulse that becomes action before it is even a thought. My fingers are at my neck; they grasp the rawhide band that circles there. They make a clumsy stab at loosening the knot, but sweat and time have melded the coiled strands into a solid mass. I say nothing to Arlene, but step over to my altar, pluck up the knife that rests there next to a hunk of crystal. I slip the blade between the band of leather and the delicate skin of my throat and pull. The blade slices, rawhide swings free; the bead tumbles into my palm. I feel it, light in the hollow of my hand, yet it seems to fairly pulse. I remember shoplifting it from a bead store in Ann Arbor when I was nineteen. This clay bead has nestled against my larynx for four years, absorbing the vibration of every sound that emanated from me, and every sound that I choked back.

I return to the living room, my chair across from Arlene. "I have something for you," I tell her, and place the bead in her hand. She stares at my throat, the white



The Lesbian Art Project Announces The Family of Dance, 1979. 8½" x 11". Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.

line, untanned, that cinctures my neck, and then down at the talking bead. She smiles and is pleased.

Winter 1979

The poster is a photograph of a poster tacked to a telephone pole on a palm-lined city street. With its block typography stacked in rows, this poster mimics the style of hundreds of placards that adorn lampposts and telephone poles all over town, in bright yellow or with rainbow backgrounds announcing dances and musical events—"RAUL RUBIO Y SU COMBO."

This poster, designed by Bia Lowe, announces The Family of Women Dance, sponsored by LAP. Family is a frequent topic within the LAP. Many of us feel estranged from our families of origin, but we hunger to belong to a unit. So we declare ourselves a family of women, will into being a mythical network of friends and lovers and ex-lovers bonded with all the ferocity of blood.

But there are problems. Some of us have ties, problematic as they might be, to our biological families, and this creates a conflict of allegiances. When, for example, my girlfriend wants to spend Thanksgiving with her mom and brothers, I feel deserted; the family of women dissolves into empty words. Will the bond between us always be secondary to the ties of blood, of history?

Too, the field of psychology has not yet offered up the model of the dysfunctional family. We assume our family problems are either political—the fault of patriarchy—or personal—our parents are just fucked up. We have yet to understand the roles we play within the family dynamic—the good child or the scapegoat, the responsible one or the troublemaker or the child who disappears—or that we are doomed to replicate those dynamics within our own utopia. I don't comprehend how Arlene and Cheryl have come to represent my mother and stepfather to me, how viewing them this way makes me complicit with my own powerlessness, how this will inevitably impact our work together. And who knows whom I represent to each of them?

In the meantime, we will name ourselves family and celebrate it. The poster was at first imagined by Bia as an exact replica of those displayed on major streets in the city—Sunset, Hollywood, and Olympic boulevards. Bia wanted to print thousands and enlist a gang of lesbians to go out after dark, dressed in dark clothing and armed with industrial staples and thumbtacks. It spoke to that desire for lesbian visibility, the hunger to claim our territory in the world.

But in 1979, this visibility is still not safe; we imagine a legion of creepy men flocking to the Woman's Building, invading its safety to ogle or wreak vengeance on the lesbians. So Bia creates a single prototype, and we drive to Echo Park and staple this poster to the splintered wood of a telephone pole. We photograph it, taking pains to reveal its bold display on the street, just as careful to take it down before we go.

From this photo, Bia creates another poster, to be sent discretely through the mail to a select list. Still, the poster invites the viewer to imagine a world in which "The Family of Women Dance" would be advertised on any busy street in the city of Los Angeles, a world in which we do not yet dwell.

Spring 1979

The color Polaroid doesn't do justice to the magic of that afternoon. Half a dozen women in shorts and tank tops lounging in a sunny backyard, surrounded by dozens of strips of vibrant pink cloth spread out on the grass, draped over shrubbery, hanging from clotheslines and tree branches. The photo obscures the purpose of our activity; neither does it reveal the delirium we feel—pleasantly stoned, the afternoon light on our skin, the explosion of shocking pink against the meticulous green of the lawn, the flush of communal spirit as we come together in our task.

We've gathered to dye 180 yards of white gauze to be used for the set of *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism*, a performance piece collaboratively created by thirteen lesbians at my inception and under my direction. Bia and cast member Cheri Gaulke conceived of the pink gauze set; they intend to completely enclose the performance space within this sheer drapery. The audience will feel like they are enclosed inside a big vagina. Viewed from the outside, the lighted interior will glow like a rosy lantern.

Neither Bia nor I have our own washing machines, and we'd already been

kicked out of more than one laundromat for trying to ply our Rit dye in their Kenmores. When we'd attempted a wash after midnight at one twenty-four hour establishment, figuring that the supervision would be lax to nonexistent, we'd encountered an old man in filth-encrusted jeans who'd unzipped them and flashed his penis at us before the first rinse cycle. We squealed in disgust and grabbed our dripping, half-dyed lengths of gauze, leaving the machines full of reddish suds. With only four weeks to go before the production opened, we are beginning to despair of ever getting all that fabric pink.

It is my friend Joanne Kerr who comes to the rescue, offering her large-capacity Maytag for our use; Joanne had, until recently, been married, and still owned many of the accoutrements of an Orange County housewife. She'd come to the Woman's Building as a PhD candidate in anthropology; her dissertation had to do with gift-giving rituals across cultures, and she wanted to study the practice of making art to be given as gift that was commonplace within the feminist art community. Since her arrival, she'd "gone native," experimenting with relationships with women, and immersing herself in the life of the community she'd set out to study.

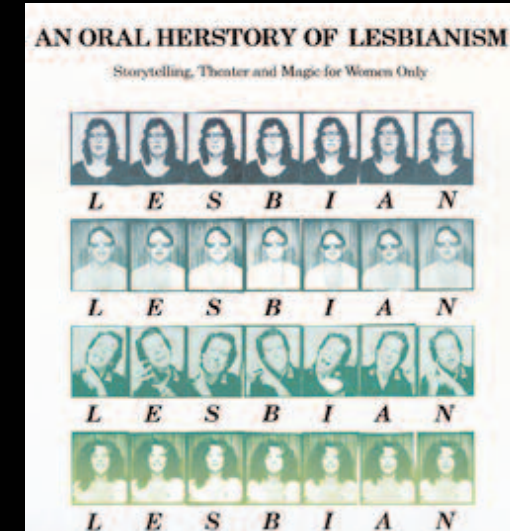
That very life is throbbing in the terraced backyard of her house in Franklin Hills this April afternoon, as women pull armloads of gauze from the washing machine and spread the impossibly pink yardage out to dry. Those in attendance today—Clsuf, Geraldine, and Paula, among others—are not all cast members in the production. The women who drape pink gauze across green grass are part of the community of artists at the Woman's Building who are always eager to support the efforts of another woman artist, knowing that they might well call on you to help with their next project.

Sister Sledge's "We Are Family" blasts from the stereo speakers into the spring air. We pass joints in a desultory fashion; sunbathe between loads of wash; feast on pita sandwiches stuffed with tuna or cheese, sprouts, tomatoes, roasted red peppers that Joanne graciously serves. Our labor seems ancient and tribal—the women of the village coming together on wash day, helping one another to hang and to fold, exchanging gossip and advice. At the same time the bright colors, sunshine, and music create a festival atmosphere. And there is too the element of pure crackpot—Rit Dyeing 180 yards of fabric in a single washing machine—certainly another entry in that long and varied list of "What I Did for Art."

It is a moment that embodies for me my aspirations for lesbian art in those days: sensual, celebratory, communal, crackpot. A conscious refutation of the depressed, oppressed, downwardly mobile or politically correct strains of lesbian life that seemed to dominate outside the realm of art. We are engaged in creating a myth of the lesbian as artist, and for that afternoon, giddy with the enormity and eccentricity and joy of our task, we are alive inside that myth.

The poster for *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism* is a long strip, a vertical column composed of successive rows of women's faces, seven frames across. Each row is a different color of the spectrum; each depicts one of the cast members of the performance.

Bia Lowe, *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism* (detail), 1979. Offset poster. © Bia Lowe.



Seven frames, and in each, the woman forms a distinct letter with her mouth. "L," the lips part, the tongue lodges behind the front teeth. "E," the open mouth stretches wide at the corners. "S," the teeth come together, while the lips still part. "B," the lips purse, almost pucker, before the "ee" sound blasts them apart. "I," the throat opens, the mouth stretches vertically. "A," a rounding of the mouth, teeth parted. "N," the tongue makes contact with the hard palate.

Hours spent in a photo booth in front of Woolworth's in Hollywood, plunking quarters into the machine, shooting strip after strip, trying to get the perfect visual representation of each letter. "L-E-S-B-I-A-N." Thirteen women articulating their identity.

The concept and design are Bia's; the offset printing is done by Cynthia Marsh—who is not a lesbian, although many a woman wishes she were—on the old printing press in the Women's Graphic Center at the Woman's Building.

Oral—as we have affectionately and lasciviously dubbed the performance, has been created through a three-month process of workshops that I conducted. These sessions utilized theater games, writing exercises, and consciousness-raising to explore our experience as lesbians.

There are the inevitable coming out stories, but one of our members, Brooke Hallock, has recounted her experience of coming out to—and being rejected by—her teenaged daughters rather than her parents. We explore community life in the bars, on the sports field, and—in a piece Arlene has written about the myriad attractions between women that often go unspoken—at a card table. We examine the challenges of relationship—finding, initiating, and maintaining an intimate connection. Chris Wong examines her identity as a Chinese lesbian, torn between the traditions of her culture

and the lure of an alternative lifestyle, using the form of the Chinese Ribbon Dance. From this wealth of stories we weave the performance with the hope of creating a new tapestry that reveals and expands the meaning of “lesbian.” It is clear to me that we do not represent all lesbians—we are all from approximately the same generation, and all white women, except for Chris and Brooke, who is Native American. It is, after all, *An Oral Herstory*. . . not *The Oral Herstory*. . .

Still, in seven frames, thirteen women face the camera, ready to spell out our identity, ready to offer the stories of our lives.



The scarf is blue and white, a long strand of chiffon. It comes from Paris, a place this working-class twenty-four-year-old can scarcely imagine. Arlene has given it to me, a gesture with resonance I have probably chosen to overlook, or am not equipped to receive, a token of our connection. I keep it on my altar.

It is scarcely possible that the two phone calls could have come in the same day, but they have conflated in my memory, two phone calls that shifted my foundations. Perhaps the whole month leading up to the opening of *Oral* has compressed in my mind into one long, nightmarish day.

The first call is from my mother, telling me that she's decided to marry for the third time, barely a year since her divorce from my stepfather. In that year I have tried, from 2500 miles away, to support her to be on her own, inundating her with my feminist cant, finding her a therapist, encouraging her to move when my stepfather started stalking her. I feel rejected by her decision to wed again, my puny efforts no substitute for having a man on whom to lean. It's small of me, but I am disappointed by her choice; I withhold my approval.

The second call is from Cheryl. It comes in the early afternoon, catches me off-guard. She's excited, her words spit like the rat-a-tat of a machine gun, and it takes me a while to sort their meaning. “Lesbian porn. . .Playboy funding. . .Lesbian Art Project. . .” It's a few moments before it comes clear.

When Cheryl and I were lovers we used to joke about a scam to make a lot of money marketing fake lesbian porn videos. We'd advertise our titles in the classified sections of *Hustler* or *Penthouse* and watch the cash flow in. “Lesbians Eat It Raw,” for example, would depict short-haired women eating sushi; “Black and White Pussies Lap It Up” would in fact portray our cats drinking milk. It was a perfect scheme, we thought, for “ripping off the patriarchy,” exploiting men's fantasies of lesbians but actually delivering normalized portraits of lesbian life. We congratulated ourselves on the political correctness of this scheme, though we did worry that the plan might backfire if our customers—frustrated at being so misled—decided to take out their ire on some unsuspecting lesbian.

Now it appears that Cheryl wants to pursue this project in earnest. She's had

the brainstorm that she might get funding from the Playboy Foundation to do it. In the seventies, the Playboy Foundation, under the direction of Christy Heffner, was eager to fund certain feminist activities, and this created bitter controversy in more than a few underfunded women's organizations. The Woman's Building board of directors has already voted decisively against going after Playboy money, and that's why Cheryl means to submit her proposal through the LAP. And to do so, she intends to become a formal partner with Arlene and me in LAP, something I imagine she has wanted for a long time.

My limbs go cold with dread. There isn't an aspect of her idea I feel inclined to support, yet I fear the consequences of opposing her. I try stalling for time. “I don't know, Cheryl, there's a lot to think about. . .”

She interrupts me. “There's no time to think,” she snaps, her tone insistent. “I need to know right now—are you going to support me or not?”

Here's the real issue, I think then, tasting the acid of fear on my tongue. “I need to talk to Arlene,” I say, as calmly as I can. Trying to push back a plummeting sensation of doom, I cling to a corner of the bookcase; my knees are in danger of collapsing.

Through the receiver I hear a muffled exchange of words between them. I stare dully out my window at the line of palm trees framed against the horizon. Eventually Arlene comes to the phone, but her voice, so strained and distant, is almost unrecognizable to me.

“Arlene,” I nearly plead, “I'm concerned about this. I mean, Playboy? And do we really want to change the whole structure of LAP?” *Rescue me, stand up for me*, a little girl inside me begs, but Arlene will never go against her lover to back me up.

She speaks to me as if we are strangers, as if she has no comprehension of my concerns. I have heard this tone in my mother's voice, years before, and again today when she announced her marriage plans. “I have no problems with what Cheryl is asking,” Arlene insists, “but if you do you'll just have to say so.”

Despite the blaze of sunshine out the window, the chill in my body intensifies. Like a bad dream from which I can't shake myself, I see there is no escape. It is a moment toward which I've been moving ever since I first met Cheryl, inexorable as in a dream, and now it has arrived. Too much is at stake. Both Cheryl and Arlene are in the cast of *Oral*, and it is so close to opening that to lose them will be catastrophic. Maybe Cheryl is counting on this as well.

Cheryl gets back on the phone.

“I can't decide right this minute,” I tell her, “We need to have a meeting. . .”

Again, she cuts me off. “No,” she insists, “I have to know right now.”

I exhale deeply. “If I have to tell you right this minute, if there can't even be any process about this, then my answer is no.”

Cheryl's anger is something I have always feared; unlike many women who learned to suppress their rage and power, turn it against themselves, or deflect it into

passive aggression, Cheryl allows it full expression. Now it breaks over me in a wave of furious verbiage. She has supported my efforts all of these years; how dare I withhold my support from her? She bangs the receiver into the cradle of the phone, and I am left to anticipate the aftermath.

Neither Cheryl nor Arlene quits the cast of *Oral*. Cheryl begins to woo the other members of the cast, paying them compliments, being extravagant with her attention, inviting them to parties after rehearsal, parties from which I am conspicuously excluded. She finds private funding for her video project and hires several cast members to work on it. The gossip that filters back leads me to suspect that she uses these occasions to voice doubts about the production and my competency to carry it to completion. No overt mutiny occurs; still, the cast—many of them heretofore friends and colleagues—grows unmistakably cooler toward me, less supportive of my artistic vision, more challenging of my leadership. The mutual support that characterized the workshop process has evaporated. I come to dread rehearsals, and more than once give serious thought to abandoning my own project. I take to spending the hours prior to rehearsal shaking with anxiety, pressed against my mattress to quiet my pounding heart, spinning fantasies of moving to another city and changing my name.

Then one afternoon, sitting on my bed in my apartment staring out at Echo Park Lake, an understanding stirs in me. I will never prevail, I know suddenly, by opposing Cheryl directly, scrapping to win back power in the eyes of my cast. I can only empower myself, I see with utter clarity, can only face my adversaries by becoming large enough to encompass them. The air in my apartment grows heavy, and I see myself expanding, not my body but the essence inside, swelling and widening, broadening its horizons. The animosity with which some members of the cast regard me will not threaten me if I am secure in my own authority. I can contain this dissonance, I decide; it need not define me or the art project.

In this moment something shifts in me that will never shift back. I learn a secret about power. I will be much older before I learn to apply it to my personal interactions, but it forever changes the way I approach my work with others. It will be still more years before I come to regard Cheryl with gratitude for being the agent of this lesson. It's a lesson about leadership, and also about the isolation inherent in this position.

I begin to reassert myself in rehearsal, taking the cast members' ideas and insisting that they push them further. I no longer look to the actors for validation, but become even more intently focused on the quality of the work. With just days to spare, the show takes shape and gels. It's good, and everyone knows it. The thirteen performances of *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism* come off without incident, and each night audiences of women thrill to the tension and transcendence generated within the pink gauze performance space.

Some days after that disastrous phone call from Cheryl, I receive another. "Because you have been so horribly unsupportive of me," she declares, "I want you to give back everything I ever gave you."

I don't argue or protest or plead my case. I don't resist or refuse. I do exactly as Cheryl asks. I am scrupulous in my sweep through my apartment. The big items are a bentwood rocker she'd bought me because I had no furniture, and the original drawing of my cat Ruby she'd made to illustrate an image from one of my poems. There is a little jewelry, the odd T-shirt, some record albums, notes she'd written to me, items from my altar. Exhaustive in the extreme, I even excavate an old toothbrush, bristles splayed and curled, that she'd once loaned me, and I add it to the pile.

Somehow, whether through an overzealous sense of thoroughness or because of unexamined resentments, the scarf Arlene had given me is also included in the heap of items to be returned. The blue and white chiffon scarf that Arlene had brought me from Paris.

A friend helps me haul everything to Cheryl and Arlene's house, the last time I ever visit that property. We pull into the driveway and quietly unload the items onto the porch, then we drive away. Perhaps some spell is finally broken.

My interaction with Arlene has been strained ever since I said no to Cheryl, and now she is even colder. I'm not sure why she's angry with me; perhaps it's the tension of mediating the estrangement between Cheryl and me. We stop having meetings of the LAP without ever formally deciding to do so. We had planned to spend our third and final year of LAP working on a book about the project, but it seems mutually understood that this will no longer be possible.

We do have one last meeting, about six weeks after the completion of *Oral*, at a Mexican restaurant not far from Arlene's house. It's a dark dive, a cool refuge from July blasting on the sidewalk outside. I scoop mouthful after mouthful of blistering salsa onto corn chips as Arlene and I enter the LAP.

Just as we are getting up to leave the restaurant she asks me, "Why did you give back the scarf?" and I can see that she is wounded. I can scarcely remember doing so; certainly it wasn't in my intention to reject her. "Your argument was with Cheryl," she insists, "not with me."

How can I explain the ways I'd felt betrayed by her, that I'd seen the two of them function as a unit, how I felt she'd set me up and let me down? How the family of women had too perilously replicated my own family?

I am sorry to have hurt her, and dumbfounded that I actually could. I have felt unloved, but now she tells me I have been unloving.

"I'm sorry," I say, lamely, "it was a mistake." And this is partially true. The rest remains unspoken, a story for the talking bead.

Spring 1980

XX chromosomes determine femaleness. The symbol XXX imagines the parthenogenic woman, she who creates from her own source—the lesbian artist.—"Great American Lesbian Art Show" poster

THE GREAT AMERICAN LESBIAN ART SHOW

What is Lesbian Art and Who are Lesbian Artists?
The Great American Lesbian Art Show (GALAS) wants to answer that question. We believe there is a uniquely lesbian sensibility that is informed by our lives, our visions and our love of women. Exploring the diversity of form and content in our creative work, we hope to more clearly reveal the nature of lesbian sensibility.

By creating a national network of lesbian art exhibits, we will be able to examine a number of factors which determine similarities and differences in our work (regional geography; urban or rural environment; age; race; feminist or non-feminist community.)

We invite you to participate in the Great American Lesbian Art Show, a national series of exhibits and events honoring lesbian creativity, beginning May 1, 1980. Co-sponsored by the Woman's Building and the Los Angeles Gay Community Services Center, the goals of GALAS are:

- to celebrate lesbian art, making it public, visible and accessible.
- to build a national network of lesbian artists and a permanent slide collection of lesbian art.
- to increase awareness of the power of lesbian vision and sensibility.

We invite you to organize exhibits of lesbian art in your own communities, in galleries and in non-traditional spaces (for example: your home; your garage; the campus of a nearby college or community college; your local women's center, bookstore, health center or bar.) These shows will occur at the same time all across the United States!

Concurrently, the Woman's Building will exhibit an invitational show curated by GALAS, which will honor eight artists whose work is visibly lesbian. Another part of this exhibit is a continuous slide presentation containing documentation of all the work exhibited nationally by you.

G A L A S



XX chromosomes determine femaleness. The symbol XXX imagines the parthenogenic woman - she who creates from her own source, the lesbian artist.

What is lesbian art? Some definitions include: art made by lesbians; art which explores lesbian content; art which is woman-identified. There's no strict definition—if you feel your creative work is lesbian in form or content, *please join us!*

We encourage work in all media and multi-media; lesbian culture is immensely rich and diverse. We also suggest creating lesbian art events (openings, celebrations, dinner parties—in L.A. we're trying to organize bus tours to visit all the local shows!) to enhance the spirit of these occasions.

How can you become part of GALAS?

- **Give Yourself a Show! Give Your Friends a Show!** If you are interested in exhibiting your work or the work of women that you know, contact us before January 15, 1980. Be as specific as possible when you write to us. Let us know: names of artists exhibiting, where you live, where you're showing, descriptions of work, etc. We also love gossip: the reactions of your friends and/or community to the GALAS project!
- **Meet Lesbian Artists!** Would you like to be a GALAS area coordinator for your city or region? If so, contact us before December 15, 1979.
- **Contribute!** We are relying on individual donations to cover the costs of this project. If you have dollars to spare, please send them to GALAS. If you have the means to make a large donation (\$100 or more, tax-deductible), contact Barbara Stopha at the project address.
- **Document!** If you're exhibiting work as part of GALAS, we'd like you to send us 3 slides of your work by April 15, 1980. Be sure to label them with your name, the title of the piece, materials used and date completed; also please indicate where you live and where the work is being shown. These slides are non-returnable. They will be shown in a presentation at the Woman's Building exhibit, and will be compiled in a permanent archive of lesbian art.

When we hear from you, we'll send you a brochure with further information on how to develop your GALAS participation, including tips on fundraising and publicity, ideas for alternative spaces, and a report on regional sponsors and coordinators.

Who we are—Tyaga, Lyricon Fire Jazzwomin, Barbara Stopha, Louise Moore, Bia Lowe, Kathleen Burg, Terry Wolverton, Betsy Irons, Elizabeth Canelake, Dara Robinson, and Linda Kahn. We are a loose collective of lesbian artists which has formed to create the GALAS project.

The Woman's Building is a public center for women's culture, whose programs include the Feminist Studio Workshop, the Community Galleries, and the Lesbian Art Project.

The Gay Community Services Center is a Los Angeles County-funded social services organization geared towards the needs of lesbians and gay men.

Write to:

GALAS
c/o GCSC
P.O. Box 38777
Hollywood, CA 90038

Bia Lowe, *Great American Lesbian Art Show (GALAS)*, 1980. Offset poster. © Bia Lowe.

We are painting the walls red. Not an elegant burgundy, or an understated rust. Matador red, waving our sexual cape at the furious bull of homophobia.

We are painting the walls of the Woman's Building gallery for the "Great American Lesbian Art Show" (GALAS) an unapologetic scarlet.

We grip the long extension poles, spreading color from floor to eighteen-foot ceiling, straining the muscles of our shoulders and backs. Our skin is splattered with flecks of red, like bright blood or an erotic flush. The walls soak up our crimson wash; they demand coat after coat. We paint for days. At night when I close my eyes, my vision is suffused with green, red's vibratory opposite.

GALAS is not simply this exhibit, but a yearlong project to bring national recognition to lesbian art and artists. It is the brainchild of the artist Tyaga, an open-faced blonde with a crew cut. She has assembled a collective of women to plan a national exhibition of lesbian art. Inspired, without question, by the LAP, GALAS sprang up in the wake of LAP's demise. I am still in shock from its dissolution; it feels on the one hand natural to be working on this lesbian art endeavor, and yet it also feels profoundly odd.

These red walls will be graced by the work of ten artists⁸ who've been visible as lesbians in their careers. We've chosen erotic line drawings by Kate Millett; wry, moody neons by Lili Lakich; an enormous wrapped sculpture—suggestive of a hungry mouth or a greedy vulva—by Harmony Hammond; the disarmingly domestic dough sculptures of Nancy Fried; and somber, brooding oils by Gloria Longval.

We've chafed under the limitations of budget and geography, and by the absence of scholarship and critical discussion about the work of contemporary lesbian artists. We can't claim to represent lesbian artists across the United States (let alone the Americas); all of the artists in the GALAS invitational reside in New York or Los Angeles.

So in addition to the Woman's Building show, we've also sent out a call—via the feminist press—urging lesbians to organize exhibits in their own communities and to send us documentation of these works. Over two hundred art shows and events are planned across the country, including nearly twenty satellite events in Los Angeles.⁹ Slides of work from these shows will be on continuous view as part of the GALAS exhibition at the Woman's Building.

The working process of the GALAS collective bears no similarity to that of the LAP. We haven't probed our personal histories or dissected our feelings; we haven't formulated theory. The group is task-focused and the tasks have been multiple: research, curating, fundraising, installation, and publicity. The GALAS Collective has made no attempt to bond as a family, which, after the turbulent years of LAP, I find to be a relief. Still, it is odd to work on a lesbian project without Arlene. She is curating her own exhibit—Woman·Woman·Works—which will be installed in the first floor gallery of the Woman's Building concurrently with GALAS. There is no interaction between us about these shows.

The almost yearlong process of organizing GALAS was a phenomenon in

itself, and included the organizing of several other events along the way. Dozens of local artists and writers flocked to “Amazon Ambrosia,” a daylong lesbian art worksharing with featured presentations by artist Harmony Hammond and Liza Cowan, former publisher of *Dyke* magazine. An upscale crowd of politically active lesbians and gay men were drawn to the benefit reading by Kate Millett and Paul Monette (in a display of co-gender cooperation uncharacteristic of the time), hosted by our organizational cosponsor, the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center. The crackpot element was in full force at “An Intimate Dinner for 150 Celebrating Eleanor Roosevelt and All Great Lesbians,” a performance art dinner I created, catered by Clsuf and Twolip Art, with appearances by The Waitresses and singer Silvia Kohan.

It is the spring of 1980, and we are flushed with bravado. The red walls signal the unabashed spirit of GALAS, our determination to claim territory, be visible, and revel in unsubtle beauty. They signal the breadth of our ambition, our insistence upon being public. We are rewarded with a feature article and review in the *Los Angeles Times*, and a review in *Artweek*, the first time lesbian art has received this level of mainstream recognition. The red walls speak of our intent to mythologize; our adoption of three X chromosomes—whimsical, dancing DNA—as our logo, is a bold assertion that lesbians are, as writer and philosopher Monique Wittig posited, “a third sex.”

We don't know that the world is about to change. It is May; we can't foresee the presidential election in November that will turn our revolution upside down. The disappearance of arts funding and the emergence of economic hard times will send the Woman's Building scrambling for the cover of mainstream respectability, making us think twice before using the word “feminist,” let alone “lesbian,” in grant proposals, brochures, or exhibitions.

In the spring of 1980, we think we've moved from the reinvention of ourselves as lesbians to taking over the planet with our mutant biology, our crackpot sensibility. We can almost taste the world we've conjured through our art: life-affirming, celebratory, erotic. So we paint the walls red, as if against the long chill we don't yet know is coming.

Postscript: Fall 1990

The banner—ten feet by eight feet—spills down the side of the three-story building on Industrial Street in the heart of the downtown arts district. Eyes gaze between open palms, and the text reads, “I feel what I want/I want what I feel.” Designed by artist Susan Silton, the banner announces the exhibition “All But the Obvious,” the first lesbian group show to be mounted in Los Angeles since GALAS, ten years earlier.

This exhibit takes place not at the Woman's Building, but at LACE (Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions); by this time the Woman's Building is no longer considered the center of contemporary feminist discourse. In fact, this next generation is not looking for a feminist center. The theoretical bases have shifted from the activism of a women's movement for social change to academy-based consideration of post-



Susan Silton, *i feel what i want i want what i feel*, 1990. Gelatin silver print. 10" x 8". © Susan Silton.

modern European philosophers—Foucault, Mann, Derrida, and women such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. Seventies feminism has been dissected, criticized, and summarily dismissed.

The work in “All But the Obvious” is made by a new generation¹⁰ of artists, and points up two distinct trends in lesbian art of the late eighties and early nineties: the-oretically based works such as *Disturbances*, by Millie Wilson, which embeds multiple layers of theoretical references, and post-punk “Bad Girl” art, such as S/M-laced photographs—*Be My Bitch* is one title—by Della Grace.

The curator of “All But the Obvious,” Pam Gregg, has no knowledge of the LAP or the “Great American Lesbian Art Show,” and expresses only mild interest when I approach her to talk about it.

A few months later, I am commissioned by *The Advocate* to write a feature about this new generation of lesbian artists. This gives me an excuse to call a dozen young women in Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, and Chicago; during my inter-views I ask them what they know of lesbian art in the seventies. I am stunned that almost none of them has any idea of her predecessors. One mentions Barbara Hammer, the lesbian filmmaker who's been working since the early seventies; at least two cite the avowedly heterosexual Judy Chicago. Perhaps Judy's name comes to mind because she used vaginal imagery?

I feel profound discouragement at my findings—it seems all of our work has been entirely erased. I have no doubt that these young artists can only make the work they are creating because of the pioneering efforts of LAP and GALAS a decade earlier. In this way, we were not ineffective; in this way, I see our legacy. But the artists and the-ories of LAP and GALAS are unknown to these women, rendered invisible or ridicu-lous. I am once more thrown back on my question—in so utterly rejecting the structures of the dominant culture, did we marginalize ourselves irredeemably? Or was it only in turning our backs on those dominant structures that we were able to spawn a next gen-eration, oblivious to us as they might be?

“I feel what I want/I want what I feel,” Silton's banner proclaims. It's a reso-nant statement, insistent on sensation and emotion, the body and the heart. In this postmodern, theory-driven time, it's almost subversive. Yet there is a collective vision—a social intention—that is absent from the work in this show, which speaks of personal gratification or weaves intricate webs of intellectualism. The walls of the gallery remain stark white.

Notes

1. The Natalie Barney Collective was named after the expatriate writer who lived in Paris in the twenties and gathered about her a community of artistic and independent women, many of them lesbians, that was known for its celebratory and iconoclastic spirit.
2. A sixth member, Kathleen Burg, did not attend the photo shoot that day.
3. Fluxus is an international network of artists named and loosely organized by George Maciunas in 1962, and noted for blending different artistic media and disciplines.
4. A former professor of mine at Thomas Jefferson College, the feminist philosopher Linda Smith, remarked that during the process of alchemical transformation, as one substance transmutes into another, the pot cracks. The old container is insufficient to house the new substance. Thus a “crackpot” may be someone undergoing just such a transformation of the self.
5. Within LAP, we explored and reclaimed the term “queer” more than ten years in advance of the political activists who in the nineties would call themselves Queer Nation. “Queer,” which had been used for decades to revile gays and lesbians, was an accurate reflection of the alienation we felt within heterosexist society, and the way we often internalized that alienation, the feeling of not belonging.
6. Later salons featured performance artist and filmmaker Barbara Hammer, witch/playwright/activist Zusanna Budapest, and artist and mythmaker Jere Van Syoc.
7. Zusanna Budapest is a former actress and practicing witch who, through her writings and public speaking, did much to popularize the notion of witchcraft as an ancient female art, the practice of which had led to great pun-ishment of women during the Inquisition and subsequently. Interest in witchcraft was widespread within cultur-al feminism of the seventies, in part as an effort to redefine the notion of power and to claim it for women. This quote is from a conversation with the author.
8. The ten artists were Lula Mae Blocton, Tee Corinne, Betsy Damon, Louise Fishman, Nancy Fried, Harmony Hammond, Debbie Jones, Lili Lakich, Gloria Longval, and Kate Millett.
9. In addition to expected locations such as New York, San Francisco, Boston, and Chicago, there were also shows in Bozeman, Montana; Winter Park, Florida; Lawrence, Kansas; Alexandria, Virginia; and Anchorage, Alaska.
10. When I speak of a “generation” here, I am not strictly speaking of the artists' chronological age, but rather of the point in time at which they came to art making and the social, political, and philosophical structures with which they are aligned.



By the Hand of the Father, original theater work cowritten and directed by Theresa Chavez with writers Oscar Garza, Eric Gutierrez, and Rose Portillo. Pictured actors: Rosa Portillo and Kevin Sifuentes, premiered Plaza de la Raza's Margo Albert Theater, Los Angeles, 2000. © Theresa Chavez.