EVER PRESENT, NEVER PRESENTED: SUZANNE LACY, FEMINISM AND QUILTING

by

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Abstract

Seated at tables of four, over four hundred women aged 55-95 years old unfold tablecloths of yellow, red, and black. With their choreographed and synchronized gesturing hands, they mimic traditional Euro-American quilt patterns. This performance, titled The Crystal Quilt, was produced by Los Angeles-based artist Suzanne Lacy in 1987 as the culminating work to the two-year long, statewide initiative Whisper Minnesota (1985-1987). There is a continued resonance of the quilt in Lacy’s oeuvre, as The Crystal Quilt was the third project to reference quilts and quilt making. The first project, Evalina and I: Crimes, Quilts, Art (1975-78), and a smaller commemorative project (1980), employed tactile quilting projects instead of the conceptual quilt arrangement that Lacy would incorporate in 1987. The formal and historical attributes of this textile practice have been largely ignored in contemporary scholarship on the artist, thus raising the question of how this very specific medium encouraged her artistic and activist agenda.

The primary focus of this thesis is an exploration of how Lacy mediates these two approaches, one of feminism and the other inspired by conceptual artist Allan Kaprow, through the medium of the quilt. Neither Lacy’s quilt works nor the use of craft during the second wave feminist movement has been sufficiently analyzed within craft scholarship. The thesis thus centers on the historical labor of quilting, its pedagogical and political aspects, the cross generational connection of feminism since 1987, and finally, the impact it currently has on quilt scholarship.
Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Jacqueline Witkowski.
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1. Introduction

Over four hundred women, aged 55-95 years old, with their hands connected to one another, descend from escalators and sit at tables of four. As they unfold the tablecloths of yellow, red, and black, their choreographed and synchronized gesturing hands mimic traditional Euro-American quilt patterns of sunbursts, stars, triangles, and crosses. This performance, titled The Crystal Quilt, was produced by Los Angeles-based artist Suzanne Lacy in 1987 as the culminating work to the two-year long, statewide initiative Whisper Minnesota (1985-1987). A video of the event, exhibited at the Tate Modern in London in 2012, was projected onto a wall near an adjacent, tactile quilt of similarly coloured, yellow and red squares on a black background, created by long-time collaborator, artist Miriam Schapiro (Figure 1). There is a continued resonance of the quilt in Lacy’s oeuvre, as The Crystal Quilt was the third project to reference quilts and quilt making. The first project, Evalina and I: Crimes, Quilts, Art (1975-78), and a smaller commemorative project (1980), employed tactile quilting projects instead of the conceptual quilt arrangement that Lacy would incorporate in 1987. The formal and historical attributes of this textile practice have been largely ignored in contemporary scholarship on the artist, thus raising the question of how this very specific medium encouraged her artistic and activist agenda.

1.1 Suzanne Lacy

Suzanne Lacy (b. 1945) is known for encouraging conversation and dialogue on challenging topics, such as rape and violence against women, among the participants in her works. The Crystal Quilt was no different as she opened up questions concerning the role of aging women in
society. Her work spans the period from 1968 to the present and most recently, in October 2013, the artist collaborated with Creative Time—an activist art institution raising awareness of various sociopolitical issues over the past forty years—sparking a dialogue on gender politics at the Brooklyn Museum of Art. This project, titled *Between the Door and the Street*, showcased Lacy’s continued commitment to political action. As an artist, educator, and activist, Lacy has thought deeply about the intersection between community and public art practices that embrace cultural politics, performance art, and the boundary of aesthetics and politics and she furthermore maintains a vested interest in the feminist politics that brought together many women artists, particularly in 1960s southern California. There is a political resonance in her earlier projects but the scholarship on Lacy’s education under Allan Kaprow and Judy Chicago fails to recognize how their sociopolitical influence contributed to the two quilt performances in the 1970s and the larger Whisper Minnesota project.

On the one hand, Lacy’s artistic practice was initially entrenched in the feminist movement that developed the Womanhouse project. She was friends with Faith Wilding and a part of the Fresno State Feminist Art Project, and she emerged as a key leader invested in creating awareness and conversations surrounding the imbalances between class, race, and gender. Her projects have often garnered media attention, further exposing injustices to the general public rather than discussing these often-personal stories inside the apparently secluded circles of second wave feminism, known as consciousness-raising circles (or CR circles). On the other hand, Lacy began her career working closely with artist Allan Kaprow, known for his Happenings, and therefore was engaged with his controlled and empirical positioning. Following on the heels of abstract expressionism, Kaprow had, by 1969, established a reputation for his cross between theatre and
performance art, or, as art historian Judith Rodenbeck has put it, as a “progeny of, on the one hand, action painting, and on the other, negatively, of staged events.”\(^1\) In creating a performance in which the audience and participants come together in a moment that is unable to be replicated, she employed a Kaprow-like approach; yet her discourse and the manner that she publicly highlights the invisibility aging women face speaks to her commitment to feminism and social change more broadly.

It is in her specific connection to both an academic and activist feminism that Lacy found herself placed. As academic feminism first aligned itself with *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan, it ignored the inherent and ongoing racism and homophobic throughout the United States and rather encouraged an essentialist unity among “all women.” Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago further pushed a biological exploration of what it means to be a woman in Womanhouse as they “theorized a central core imagery that [...] aim[ed] to establish a certain universalizing formal iconography for women, and whose potential scope could be demonstrated in the recurrence of centralized forms in women’s art.”\(^2\) In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a growing number of scholars pushed back against this essentialist heresy, and the writings of Audre Lorde and bell hooks exemplify how *both* men and women suffer under multiple systems of prejudice, from race and class to issues of mental and physical health. This intersectional and activist feminism aligned with postmodernism as artists and scholars sought to bypass essentialist notions of the second wave. In studying with both Kaprow and the Feminist Art


Program, Lacy maneuvered through a practice that encouraged an intersectional approach. She aimed to represent feminist issues, while simultaneously engaging with participatory practices that allowed her to examine the ways that oppression occurs across multiple biological and social vectors. *The Crystal Quilt* and *Evalina and I* both celebrate the legacy of aging women while offering multiple perspectives on socioeconomic status, race, and geographical location.

The primary focus of this thesis is an exploration of how Lacy mediates these two approaches, one of feminism and the other inspired by Kaprow, through the medium of the quilt. The thesis asks: Why, and to what ends, did Lacy turn to the figure of the quilt repeatedly in her practice? Does the medium of quilting relate to her genealogy as an artist? With the employment of the quilt, how has Lacy associated herself within the feminist discourse? And in what manner does her approach to process-based and performance art have a larger connection to the matriculation of the quilt in her work? Neither Lacy’s quilt works nor the use of craft during the second wave feminist movement has been sufficiently analyzed within craft scholarship. In addition to thinking through the community-based activism and pedagogical import of Lacy’s works, I will focus on the formal qualities and implications of calling up the quilt design, as it has been largely ignored. The thesis thus centers on the historical labor of quilting, its pedagogical and political aspects, the cross-generational connection of feminism since 1987, and finally, the impact it currently has on the hierarchy of quilt scholarship.

### 1.2 Art, Craft, Quilts, and Feminism

The questions provoked here consider how Lacy, who is known for her pedagogic and collaborative projects, utilizes the same methods that have been historically intertwined with
craft-based media—and in order to narrow the definition of craft—more particularly those seen in the practice of quilting. Considering the intersections between women’s writing and quilt making, literary critic Elaine Showalter asserts: “a knowledge of piecing, the technique of assembling fragments into an intricate and ingenious design, can provide the contexts in which we can interpret and understand the forms, meanings, and narrative traditions of American women’s writing.”\(^3\) In its most basic understanding, a quilt is a series of layered fabric: a top and bottom layer that envelops an insulating middle section, all of which are then combined via stitching. The intricate designs and piecing featured on the top layer, which require deft skills as a quilter, are commonly chosen based on events or imbued meanings. But the quilt is also a record of a specific, social circumstance: created within intimate, female communities, quilts have long functioned as pedagogical tools in matrilineal methods of knowledge—as patterns, for example, became the traditional tool for mathematical learning.\(^4\) Thus, the quilt acts as a site of pedagogic and collaborative potential. There is a duality in quilting that arrives in the personal and the collective: each participant brings to the quilt a certain material and experience, yet with the final product, an image or pattern manifests because of collaborative action. To present this as a metaphor for 1970s feminist praxis seems fitting considering the factions of feminist groups throughout both North America and abroad who sought to unite together their factioned circles. In fact, the quilt’s egalitarian composition points to the reflection on the social within the DIY and craft movements, a specific reliance and reflection on cohesiveness that is lost with a focus


on the mere use value of the object. The community, and more specifically, the local, becomes a powerful tool.

Indeed, just as Lacy is keen to explore political consciousness, pedagogy, collaboration, participation, and the involvement of the audience outside the performance, such strategies have been used historically during quilting bees, in which a predominantly female group comes together to create both a quilt as well as a shared space of conversation. At the same time, it “served to assist each woman in the completion of her quilt, but its greater value lay in the opportunity it afforded women for getting together to exchange news, recipes, home remedies, fabric scraps and patterns, to discuss political issues and personal problems, to learn new skills from one another, and to teach the basic skills to their daughters, all in a mutually supportive way.”\(^5\) Lacy’s projects are similarly focused on pedagogy and participation, though she invites two forms of participants. Here is where there is a separation between participant and audience. On the one hand, there exists the group that acts as the performers and is engaged directly in the task of educating the public through their performance; they are the direct motivation for Lacy’s project. On the other hand, the audience benefits from this performance in that they engage with the participants’ demographic but have little direct influence in the form that the project takes up. Additionally, there are multiple levels of planning and organization surrounding the collaborative efforts and endeavors undertaken by Lacy and other feminist artists in the 1970s, which resemble the particular cooperation that was once required to stitch quilts before the employment of the sewing machine. Like a quilting bee, each member contributes either direct support or action to the larger group. Insofar as craft, and quilting especially, remain underwritten and caught in a

\(^5\) Dewhurst, MacDowell, and MacDowell, “Beyond Expectations,” in *Artists in Aprons: Folk Art by American Women*, 47.
high/low dichotomy, growing research in this area demonstrates renewed interest in interrogating issues of women’s labor, participatory engagement, and historically disregarded creative practices. Therefore, I argue that Lacy’s own personal brand of social activism ties to the manner in which the quilt historically was created insofar as it clearly demonstrates pedagogical and political import.

Although feminist scholars explicitly cite the historical quilting bee as a precursor to the consciousness-raising circles, scholarship on this connection within Lacy’s work has yet to be addressed. Susan Irish, author of the first major monograph on the artist, Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between (2010), does not provide any lengthy consideration of why Lacy chose to bring together individuals under the guise of quilting and how this performance is steeped in its own historical implications. Irish’s analysis offers a detailed discussion of Lacy’s commitment to feminism but does not consider the feminist connection to the fiber arts. So while Irish deconstructs the broader consequences of Lacy’s performances and how they enact social change, her monograph fails to acknowledge how the specific legacy of craft in the feminist circle affected her earlier project, Evalina and I; but more importantly, it does not address how this 1975 project later impacted the rhetoric around The Crystal Quilt. As Irish notes about the Women of Watts project, “Lacy was interested in creating spaces…where everyone’s creative output could be valued without placing it in a hierarchy of artistic quality.”

The interaction between Lacy and the women, Irish argues, was non-hierarchical in that “her aesthetic interests coexisted alongside those of others” despite the fact that Lacy claimed authorship of the project. Yet, Irish does not

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6 Susan Irish, Suzanne Lacy: Spaces Between (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 20.
7 Ibid.
address how collaboration and authorship are particularly relevant when in concert with the quilting projects.

Although there is a lacuna in the literature to situate Lacy in conversation with quilting, the burgeoning scholarship on craft permits a closer study of the reclamation of fiber arts for feminist artists throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Art historians Elissa Auther, Julia Bryan-Wilson, and Maria Elena Buszek each offer rigorous and fundamental research into modern and contemporary employments of the under-theorized practices of the fiber arts and craft, and more specifically, each explores why craft was employed by second wave feminist artists. These authors’ books and articles, published over the past decade on fiber art and the handicraft tradition within high art practices, have been invaluable to the study of craft and activism and their evolving contemporary positions. 8 Thus, they enable a way to build on Irish’s analysis such that the revival of craft can become a main concern. These positions, therefore, must be taken into consideration but also critically re-examined, as they tend to sidestep the political associations that quilting had within Euro-American women’s history, particularly before the 1970s.

A few texts by Bryan-Wilson and Auther intersect with Lacy’s practice in that they bring in key moments that have defined the craft/art divide. For example, Julia Bryan-Wilson’s recent

discussions of craft address the slogan “the personal is political”—so well known to the second wave era—while also tackling the concerns surrounding the collective approach. Bryan-Wilson ultimately argues that “feminist craft in the 1970s involved collective projects, distributed authorship social practice and what Nicolas Bourriaud calls relational aesthetics, well before those terms were invented.”

Although this thesis seeks to address the aspects of public pedagogy and social practice in terms of quilting specifically, Bryan-Wilson’s scholarship on artist Harmony Hammond’s work with braided fabric pieces offers insight into the contentious relationships between queer communities and the labour surrounding the production of fiber arts. Bryan-Wilson additionally approaches questions concerning the gendered relationship to the vertical and horizontal dyad that begins to be blurred through the artistic use of traditional textile practices. The deep historical and political connections to craft, in Bryan-Wilson’s text, focus on the years in which Hammond’s work was being completed. The quilt’s physical presence in *The Crystal Quilt*, as it is created by Miriam Schapiro, and its subsequent conceptual presence within the women’s performance, requires an examination of the vertical and horizontal approach to art and craft. Therefore, Bryan-Wilson provides a framework for an analysis of Lacy’s textile-based work.

Hammond’s and Lacy’s artistic work hold a myriad of differences, but what Bryan-Wilson evokes in her essay conjures up how the art/craft hierarchy is situated across this vertical-horizontal dyad. First introduced by critic and art historian Leo Steinberg, in his essay “The Flatbed Picture Plane” (1972), he remarked on the shift in subject matter from nature to culture,

stating how the flatbed picture plane is a receptor surface on which “objects are scattered, on
which data in entered, on which information may be received, printed, impressed—whether
to coherently or in confusion.” He further elaborates on the neo-Dada practice:

Perhaps [Robert] Rauschenberg’s profoundest symbolic gesture came in 1955
when he seized his own bed, smeared paint on its pillow and quilt coverlet, and
uprighted it against the wall. There, in the vertical posture of ‘art,’ it continues to
work in the imagination as the eternal companion of our other resource, our
horizontality, the flat bedding in which we do our begetting, conceiving, and
dreaming. The horizontality of the bed relates to ‘making’ as the vertical of the
Renaissance picture plane related to seeing.11

Steinberg ultimately opposed neo-Dadaism to Abstract Expressionists, claiming that the latter
still followed in the painterly tradition of relating to the “columnar body,” in which the approach
to seeing was an activity centered on the vertical position of the viewer.12 Still, however radical
Steinberg’s analysis was, it only benefited the promotion of certain artists; craft seen as feminine,
remained relegated to the floor, while “fine art” of Rauschenberg and others continued to
flourish as it was ultimately hung vertically on the wall. Thus, feminist artists working in quilting
and other fiber-based media were the first attempt to integrate quilting into a high-art dynamic
and to push the practice more fully into discourse as they responded to male appropriation. In
terms of quilting, art historian Patricia Mainardi noted just how much Rauschenberg’s Combine,
with its horizontal nature, degraded how the quilt was seen (Figure 2). She stated, “Bed [1955]
reflected accurately the place women’s traditional arts held before the feminist movement of the
1960s. It is as raw material or support for the ‘art,’ namely Rauschenberg’s painting, that the Log

10 Steinberg’s essay has its origins in a lecture at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in March 1968.
Leo Steinberg, Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art (London: University of Oxford
Press, 1972), 84.

11 Ibid., 89-90.

12 Ibid., 84.
Cabin quilt in his work is used, transformed, and destroyed. The precedence of male over female, high art over low, is graphically illustrated."  

13 Both Mainardi’s and Bryan-Wilson’s discussions of this dyad acknowledge just how the verticality of the object negated its utility and use-value. Furthermore, Mainardi emphasizes how Bed was never meant to be placed on the ground, in spite of the fact that Steinberg situates it as the space of dreaming and begetting.

If Bryan-Wilson addresses the horizontality that occurs within craft as it enters the “high” art world, then Elissa Auther expands on the “definition of art and its historical relation to craft” in *String, Felt, Thread: The Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art* (2010).  

14 Auther’s approach is useful to the discussion of Lacy in that she uses examples of how major art institutions have marginalized quilting unless the designs appear to mimic the Abstract Expressionists and Colorfield painters. The infamous exhibition that first ignored the historical precedence in quilting was the Whitney’s 1971 “Abstract Design in American Quilts,” a topic discussed in the next chapter. The relationship between craft and feminism is key in Auther’s study as she examines how craft was used by the second wave to undermine a hierarchy motivated by the art/craft divide. Given Lacy’s own interest in raising awareness of systems of oppression and patriarchal ideals, Auther’s argument in *String, Felt, Thread* complements the connections between craft and politics.


Although Auther’s study is crucial to understanding the fraught characterization of the hierarchical position between art and craft, her focus revolves around independent artists rather than collective practices. She omits much of the collaborative potential happening within the feminist art movement. One example provided in *String, Felt, Thread* is Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party* (1974-79) (Figure 3). Established as a collaborative effort by ceramicists, textile artists, and others, Chicago’s *Dinner Party* is deemed as a “fascinating case study of the intersection, or collision, of different art worlds brokered through the feminist critique of the hierarchy of art and craft.”\(^\text{15}\) Situating Chicago as an artist interested in the textile and porcelain arts neglects the longstanding critiques on how Chicago denied recognition to the numerous women whose labour was central to the *Dinner Party*’s fruition. Although Auther points to the cultural appropriation and erasure of textiles throughout the 1960s and 70s, she fails to consider the problematic appropriation of other’s work. Indeed, this tension between the appropriation of labour and culture needs to be further assessed, particularly as it does not provide adequate support to sustain how Lacy remains consistently aware of how her projects rely on the overall participation and interest of her audience.\(^\text{16}\)

The final vehicle of the fiber medium in Lacy’s trajectory is that of political awareness, discussion, and social change. Lacy restores the quilt as a space for discussion, a tactic that remains fully in line with its historical collaborative function. The analysis in *String Felt Thread* provides a way to understand how certain feminist artists appropriated and laid claim to materials

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 148.

\(^\text{16}\) See Jane F. Gerhard, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2013) for interviews with those who were part of the textile and ceramic production and felt their labour was exploited.
and mediums that were already considered works of art, and how these artists needed to negotiate this reality. But Aurther does not provide why the quilt, in its historical and pedagogical importance, offered to feminist artists an encounter with collective practice both conceptually and materially. For Lacy, the quilt became significant because it could engage with the public and offer collaborative potential, thus it ties in more closely to the term *craftivism* that emerged throughout the 1980s. Those texts addressing textile arts consistently refer to specific artists of the 1960s and 1970s working under the auspices of second wave feminism—artists such as Harmony Hammond, Faith Wilding, Faith Ringgold, and Miriam Schapiro. Craftivism thus links discursively to the movement when considering the ongoing social awareness happening in southern California with Womanhouse and the Fresno State Program—two sites that integrated the aforementioned styles of textile-based practices and both personal and public consciousness-raising. More importantly, two sites in which Suzanne Lacy first engaged with the population to highlight the injustices towards women and other minority populations.

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17 The genesis of the term “craftivism” tied to artist Betty Greer in early 2000 is not the first manifestation of the term. Craftivism took hold with crochet, knitting, and quilting, among other media and Greer specifically argues how “the resurgence of knitting is a response to the destruction of communities wrought by technologies of communication.” One can only imagine the concept of knit bombing, in which various items found in the streets are covered in knitted yarn: trees, fire hydrants, posts, even bicycles are obscured in multi-colored swatches. These “tags,” as theorist Stephanie Springgay notes, become “a re-examination of mundane objects as signifiers for sensory information, knowledge, and memory while highlighting the interwoven nature of our perception and the interplay between art and life.” In 1981, a knitting group—known as the Revolutionary Knitters—began their twenty year occupation that reached its height when nearly 30,000 members sat outside Greenham Common Royal Air Force Base in England as part of an anti-nuclear protest—using knitted materials to surround the gate. Radical knitters in Prague, Calgary, and Quebec enact these same tactics as they attempt to stymie and challenge the destruction of communities under contemporary capitalism. Buszek included Betsy Greer’s essay, “Craftivist History” in *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, ed. Maria Elena Buszek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 175-183.
1.3 Examining Lacy’s Praxis

Chapter one of the thesis discusses how the quilt was treated by the artist Robert Rauschenberg in *Bed* (1959), and it additionally explores the treatment of the quilt in the Whitney exhibition curated by Gail van der Hoof and Jonathon Holstein. Each instance denied the quilt its historical connections to the women who made and utilized them, and furthermore, established a new system to value specific quilts based on certain designs and color motifs rather than the labour, the authorship, or the historical implications the quilts possessed. Artists who later worked with quilts, such as Lacy, now had to work against preconceived aesthetic notions of how a quilt should appear in order to be valued by high art institutions. Finally, the section focuses on the space of quilting organized by Suzanne Lacy in the projects, *The Crystal Quilt and Evalina and I: Crimes, Quilts, Art*. I highlight how the peripheral medium of quilting in these performances is both a physical medium and a conceptual armature—a method for thinking through participation, a creative practice that expanded throughout the later part of the 20th century, and even today fuels debates around relational and social practice.

The second chapter of the thesis is deeply indebted to the historicity and connections to the Feminist Art Program at Fresno State, Womenhouse at CalArts, and the pedagogical interests of Allan Kaprow in his famed Happenings. While there is a focused literature on these programs, it is necessary to understand Lacy’s own position within the second wave feminist movement to outline the integration of “female” art forms in her work, but more importantly, the approach to participation. Moreover, the method Lacy takes up in her performances and social activism readily adopts the tactics of Kaprow’s Happenings, even as hers were far more politically charged. Within this context, Lacy, as both a student of Kaprow and intimately connected to the
feminist community at CalArts and Fresno State, exploited quilting as a means to investigate distinct methodological frameworks, from Happenings and community-based practices to body art and its exploration of female subjectivity.

This chapter also focuses on how the quilt operates as an organic space of conversation, historically connected to activism and political engagement. The space of quilting acts with the community as they engage the conference and participation of the public, and I detail this relationship to Lacy’s practice and the organizational diagrams she employs. I approach the issues of access and the networks of collaboration that happen in her quilting performances as a way to analyze the hierarchy of participation as well as the connections to pedagogy and cross-generational discourse.

The objectives of this thesis are twofold. I aim to connect Lacy’s projects to the larger discourse surrounding the representation of quilting in the art world in the 1970s, and how the feminist and traditional use of the quilt connected to women’s historical and contemporaneous roles as pedagogues and politically-engaged. This builds on the art/craft dialogue that overlooks Lacy’s conceptual relationship to the quilt and pays specific attention to the manner in which quilting is deployed historically, socially, and theoretically in her work. Secondly, I provide a focused intergenerational understanding of the appropriation and integration of textile practices: from the use of the traditional quilt and the changing pattern names to its role as a participatory art form. This specifically concerns the manner in which Lacy’s projects evolved from the 1975 deployment in the context of the second wave feminist movement to the 1987 performance
culminating her larger Whisper Minnesota project, a moment that opened to the third wave of feminism.
2. Quilting and Lacy

2.1 Traditional Quilts and the Modernist Elevation

At the same time the quilt medium gained prominence in Lacy’s praxis, there was a simultaneous revival of it in museum exhibitions. However, this celebration of the quilt was qualified only by the formal qualities as they referenced and became embedded within modernist paintings. Quilting’s import within women’s history was denied by Rauschenberg’s glib statement, “When I did Bed [1955], I had literally run out of things to paint on. There was a quilt that I didn’t need and I thought it would be good.”¹⁸ The counter to his dismissal of the fabric he so violently painted on is the following statement by artist Dorothea Rockburne, the quilt’s original owner. She recalled, “[The quilt] was kind of special to me because I had it at the time my daughter Christine was born, and she used to spend a lot of time on it. I didn’t actually give Bob the quilt: it just sort of appeared in the work one day.”¹⁹ These divergent readings of the Log Cabin quilt in Bed call attention to the manner in which the appropriation by Rauschenberg communicated to feminists that the quilt—with its functional use and domestic placement—could not be regarded as a legitimate art without mediation. Its value was only cemented when its utility was negated, and it was combined with an abstract, seemingly gestural mark. In response, feminist scholars and artists vehemently refuted how institutions valued and exhibited these specific quilts. In 1973, Mainardi poignantly argued that “quilts have been underrated precisely for the same reason that jazz, the great American music, was also for so long underrated—because the ‘wrong’ people were making it, and because these people, for sexist and racist reasons, have not


¹⁹ Susan E. Bernick, “A Quilt is an Art Object when It Stands Up like a Man,” in Quilt Culture, eds. Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 149.
been allowed to represent or define American culture.”\textsuperscript{20} The first appearance of the quilting medium in Lacy’s work occurs at a moment when this textile practice was firmly grounded in a debate regarding its formal and aesthetic possibilities, and within an art-craft dichotomy in which quilting was relegated to the horizontal surface of beds, while fine art was set vertically on the wall.

Meanwhile, just as feminist scholars and artists responded vehemently to the violence done to the medium in Rauschenberg’s \textit{Bed}, the Whitney Museum’s 1971 “Abstract Design in American Quilts” exhibition garnered attention for removing information regarding its makers, who happened to be predominantly women. The curators, Jonathon Holstein and Gail van der Hoof were accused by both traditional quilters and the feminist community for wrongly positioning art quilts as non-artists, unattributed collaborators, very much counter to the celebrated makers of Colorfield and Abstract Expressionist paintings.\textsuperscript{21} Holstein argued for the abstracted and geometric forms within the chosen quilts stating, “The emphasis on the visual aspects [of quilts] over their intrinsic qualities…was a necessary step in freeing [them] from the bedsprea/d/craft/mythology baggage” (Figure 4).\textsuperscript{22} Yet, what was lost here was an emphasis on craftsmanship and the history behind the quilts—a history of women’s artistic innovation, as well as their labour. In this way, quilting as a practice was stripped of its political and collaborative


\textsuperscript{21} The exhibition itself was dedicated to Abstract Expressionist painter, Barnett Newman. Ibid., 344.

\textsuperscript{22} Jonathan Holstein, cited in Bernick, “A Quilt is an Art Object,” 137.
possibilities, reduced by the “high” art institution to an autonomous, if also anonymous, work of art.\textsuperscript{23}

It comes as no surprise that feminists dismissed the positions of both Rauschenberg and Holstein, as a male appropriation of what was considered a \textit{female} craft. With the Whitney exhibition creating an inevitably skewed vision of how quilting should be valued, feminist artists and scholars needed to underscore the history of the quilt. Miriam Schapiro, Faith Ringgold, and Lucy Lippard, argued instead for an acknowledgment of the history, the politics, and the patterns found in quilts. Quilting bears a significant trajectory within a variety of communities alienated from the dominant culture, including the African American community Lacy worked with in \textit{Evalina and I}. Quilts, through strategic design and labour, manifest as tools of meaning in their own right and operate devoid of the appropriation by Lacy and others. Yet, highlighting certain patterns because of their color use and abstraction further delimits the function these quilts offered that connected to their aesthetic qualities. The value systems of the political moment in which a quilt is sewn are understood by the way the quilter employs patterns; to redact the quilts from these historical conjunctures limit its importance as art. There needs to be an acknowledgement of how the textile offered a voice and political position when they were allowed very little of either, particularly during women’s suffrage. Design names for quilts, like Lincoln’s Platform and the Union Star, which were developed during the U.S. Civil War of the mid-nineteenth century, further reflect political leanings. The events that inspired these designs far preceded Lacy’s projects in the 1970s and 80s, and the patterns’ meanings span over time and

\textsuperscript{23} Mainardi, Auther, and Bernick all highlight in their texts how Holstein presented the quilts as completed collectively by women and without names or dates on the quilts. However, many of the quilts in the exhibition had been both signed and dated but were not recognized.
became molded to adapt to shifting ideologies and situations. For example, “a pattern called *Jacob’s Ladder* before the American Revolution was later called *Stepping Stones* in New England and Virginia, *The Tail of Benjamin’s Kite* in Philadelphia, the *Underground Railroad* in the Western Reserve, *The Trail of the Covered Wagon* in Mississippi and, after the first commercial railroad (1830), an unknown woman included a striped railroad symbol and called it *Railroad Crossing*.”

With the political import of the patterns that are utilized in quilting, it is pertinent to discuss these associations, as Lacy is an artist interested in the sociopolitical situation of women and in educating the greater public on the forms of injustice.

For Lacy, her adaptation of a Kaprow-like approach of incorporating public involvement in the work expanded both the formal, as well as the historical, potential of quilting. The pedagogical aspect, while inarguably significant to her praxis, remains under-theorized in relation to her quilted form. Form and content/context, specifically in *The Crystal Quilt*, do not fall together in the same rhetoric; typically Lacy’s work is regarded simply as community-based, falling under the labels of pedagogical or public art, the latter defined by Lacy as “visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly related to their lives.”

While the performances of *The Crystal Quilt* and *Evalina and I* contend with the social practice rhetoric, what formally separates them is just how much the pedagogical import of the quilt enriches the collectivity. There is an established community that develops between the cross-cultural and cross-generational

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relationships of the performers. It is pertinent to think through performance art pedagogy, the celebration and discussion of aging rather than its suppression as a private affair, but The Crystal Quilt also utilizes tropes of quilting that have yet to be considered. In this performance, two levels of movement occur: first as the women interact with each other through sharing and conversation, only furthered when the general public begins to interact with the performers; and secondly, as the women embody the quilt itself by enacting the simultaneously choreographed hand gestures. They both form and inform the work. The quilt is not the intended outcome; rather it is the process of piecing and working together that Lacy focuses on as she makes visible the process of aging. With the bodies as medium, the individuals are ever more important to the final performance as they harbor the interpersonal relationships through their discussions and communal collaboration. Women’s visibility is therefore contingent on reconsidering the way Lacy manifests the quilting bee as an art form and what lies in the historical importance of the quilt.

2.2 The Crystal Quilt (1985-87)

The Crystal Quilt unfolded on Mother’s Day in 1987 in downtown Minneapolis (Figure 5). As the larger Whisper Minnesota project came to a close, Lacy chose the centrally located IDS Center for the final performance—a space that housed offices and retail fronts. Additionally, the IDS building possessed a glass ceiling atrium known as the Crystal Court. Lacy invited 430 women between the ages of 55 and 95 from around the state of Minnesota to participate in the


27 IDS center, a shopping and office building that had been finished in 1972 and held the title as tallest structure in Minneapolis until 1992.
performance. Upon entering the Crystal Court, the women descended from the escalators on the second floor and made their way to an 82 square foot black rug that had temporarily filled up the former food court. With tables and chairs carefully distributed around the black base, the women moved inward at the corners of the fabric in order to reach the tables. As they stood at the designated four top tables, waiting for the other participants to enter, the women blended in to the backdrop as they too, were wearing loosely draped black clothing. Thus, the tables, the material underneath them, and the women, were all monochromatic. As the performance progressed the dark atmosphere slowly transformed into a live tableau.28

As the women sat, sounds echoed throughout the atrium. Slowly and to the music’s rhythm, the women unfolded the dark tablecloths to uncover a red and yellow material underneath, consequently transforming the entire tableau into distinctly made out patterns, seen particularly well from the audience standing on the second floor of the atrium from where the women entered. While the music played on, a distinct natural din from the Minnesota wilderness could be heard—wolves howling and birds singing, all alongside a Native American song and melodic music meant to signal to the women when to alter their hand positioning. But as the performance progressed, women’s voices began to punctuate these sounds with their feelings on a range of topics. All pre-recorded, these voices belonged to those and others who participated in discussions with Lacy, and the conversations ranged from the perception and placement of women’s role in society, fears, sadness and joys around aging and death, and taboo topics such

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as sex. Such questions invoked were, “Is getting older what you expected it would be? Is being older better or worse, or just different? What is positive about being older? What are the new pleasures? How has your perspective of the world changed? How do you feel about death? Has your idea of death changed since you were young?” The culled stories were heard in the multilingual performance—including Spanish, English, and Native American languages. One such voice comes on to detail her experience as she ages,

I think a lot of senility comes from the fact that nobody asks you anything. Nobody can include you in the social ceremonials. Nobody asks you to speak and soon you lose your memory… or nobody listens. I suffer a lot from people not listening to me. It’s like not having a great aged tree to sit under to protect you or to look at or to feel. I think it is a great cultural loss.

From above, the voices echoed around them and the women below simultaneously moved their hands in a choreographed manner, simulating what appeared to be changing stitches for the patterns created by the constantly moving color palette. This “quilt” was enhanced not by these colorfully appearing designs, but by the interconnectedness of the women as they linked, folded and unfolded their hands in synchrony and as they chatted with familiarity. Finally, the performance concluded as the women raised their hands, began to clap joyously, and were handed scarves by aids in the audience (Figure 6). As their families and other onlookers descended to join the women around the fully finished quilt, the scarves were passed around, further connecting the audience to the performers.

29 As Koelsch notes in her review, it was in the fall of 1985 that a booth was set up at the Minnesota State Fair “to videotape interviews with older women about the experience of aging. This also served as an initial attempt to communicate the project to women living throughout the state.” Patrice Koelsch. “The Crystal Quilt.” Heresies 23 vol. 6, no. 3 (1998): 27.


While the performance itself lasted approximately forty-five minutes, the preparation required was extensive. As scholar Patrice Clark Koelsch notes, “*The Crystal Quilt* was the most visible component of the Whisper Minnesota Project, a multigenerational coalition of artists, policy-makers, service providers, and community activists organized to challenge public perceptions about women and aging.”

Lacy completed this nearly three-year collaborative project while an artist-in-residence at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design in 1984. It was reminiscent of an earlier work *Whisper, the Wind, the Waves*, in which 150 women dressed in white descended upon a beach in La Jolla, California. The two performances, *Whisper, the Wind, the Waves* and *The Crystal Quilt*, were meant to spur collaboration with state initiatives to increase the recruitment of urban, rural, lower-, and middle-class older women into leadership groups while also pushing for the mobilization of a communication network to link older women and provide an outlet for their concerns. These initiatives were to have a life both during and after the formal completion project.

Koelsch offers an insightful review of the *Whisper Minnesota* initiative, including just how Lacy decided to postpone it for over a year in order to secure fundraising and recruiting for the final performance of *The Crystal Quilt*, as well as commenting on how Minnesota’s generally progressive attitudes and “its penchant for consensus-style politics, and the prevalence of volunteerism” were “especially suitable for the kind of organization effort the Project required.”

Minnesota thus offered Lacy a safe and well-situated space to project women’s voices and concerns.


Lacy worked alongside many other performers in the Minneapolis scene, including dancer Sage Cowles and music composer Susan Stone. Furthermore, feminist artist and longtime friend, Miriam Schapiro, designed the final iteration of the quilt (Figure 6). The color choices reflected a somber event versus the seemingly celebratory performance in La Jolla. Each of these women contributed, alongside the myriad of organizations throughout the state of Minnesota, to the intimately planned and organized Whisper Minnesota project. Cowles, who worked with the Martha Graham Company and was a longtime friend of Merce Cunningham, choreographed the shifting shapes—the sunbursts, stars, triangles, and crosses that constituted the design as the women’s hand moved together to manipulate the material on the tables. The soundtrack, composed by Stone, signaled to the participants which gestures and movements to create and additionally incorporated the natural sounds, the stories, and the songs that were featured. The symbolized music reinforced the mythical quality of the event, a somewhat ritual-like interplay as the sound of rural Minnesota life was overlaid with the specified motions of the women. For Suzanne Lacy, the goal of increasing the visibility and leadership of older women is essentially tied to the commemorative event. She states: “The idea is to create mythic or celebratory events around the process of aging, because we don’t have those rituals to distinguish our passage into old age… I’m interested in aging because I feel in a certain sense we’ve been robbed [as women] of dignified, competent and beautiful models or images of aging.”\textsuperscript{35} Therefore, each component to the project was a deliberate attempt to signify the manner in which aging women had been denied a space in the public’s visibility. This mystical/mythical quality of the performance traces

\textsuperscript{34} Koelsch, “The Crystal Quilt,” 28.

\textsuperscript{35} Irish, Suzanne Lacy, 97.
its roots to the second wave feminist movement—wherein artists began to invoke a return to inner female power, using terms such as the “goddess” and incorporating “feminine” art forms.\textsuperscript{36} To enhance this ownership of visibility, \textit{The Crystal Quilt} was purposely unveiled on Mother’s Day in 1987.

Despite the nearly 3,000 viewers who filled the Crystal Court to see the performance unfold, Lacy additionally secured live television coverage of the event and offered those who were unable to participate, or make their way to Minneapolis, the opportunity to watch it on public television. This tactic extended the visibility of older women into a larger sphere, and also solidified the event as not temporally bound, but one that had the possibility to be repeated via the recording (and later via an installation). The repetition of images, in both the advertising of the event and on the news, increased the public awareness over the course of two years and “kept the leadership of older women in the public consciousness for several years” within the Minneapolis community.\textsuperscript{37} While this visual form that Lacy provided to women’s contributions to public life were steeped in mythological undertones, they were furthermore built on a culture, 

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Gloria Fenman Orenstein discusses how the reclamation of the term Goddess was meant to “be embedded both within a larger “herstory” of women’s historical critique of patriarchal religions and within a pre-patriarchal herstorical context of women’s artistic creativity through representations of powerful female figures in nature, on stone, in caves, and in clay…” Thus, the meaning of these early Goddess works by women artists of the 1970s must be read against the Western herstorical background of a powerful tradition of women mystics, heretics, and visionaries, as well as contextualized within a movement that for the first time directed its energy and power toward self-consciously creating an art that would reimagine what it might have been like to be female, and to experience one’s body, mind, spirit, and soul free of all the fetters imposed upon women by Western patriarchal religions.” Orenstein separates the use of the term “goddess” in both temporal and spatial terms: “In California, the Goddess art movement explored ancient Goddess civilizations via history and archaeology…” “Recovering Her Story: Feminist Artists Reclaim the Great Goddess” in \textit{The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact}, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1994), 174-189.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{36} Irish, \textit{Suzanne Lacy}, 99.
inspired by quilting bees, that was decidedly pedagogical in that it had older, experienced women passing on knowledge to their younger peers. Irish argues how Lacy’s Minnesota activities “produced a tangible, visible, audible result in May 1987 but also many intangible effects among organizers, performers, and audience members. Involving a number of leading Minnesotans, the quilt literally envisioned diverse individuals together in a single image.” These interconnections between aging and quilting are plentiful, both in the way that the textile practice became bound in a skill-based hierarchy where older women pass down both techniques and designs to others and in that specific life events were marked with the making of a quilt.

**2.3 Evalina and I: Crimes, Quilts, Art (1975-78)**

Lacy’s use of the quilt combined with activism in her 1987 *Crystal Quilt* project can be traced further back. Two earlier collaborative projects that focused on quilting were initiated with a small group of women in the Watts neighborhood of southern Los Angeles throughout the late 1970s. While working under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), Lacy took a position as an artist-in-residence at the Guy Miller Homes, an urban housing project for the elderly funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The homes were located in the Watts neighborhood, an area that already suffered from economic and racial

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38 Ibid., 100.

39 In 1973, President Richard Nixon signed the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, a nationwide law aimed to train workers with marketable skills and provide them with public service employment for up to two years. It localized funding to on-the-job training, classroom training, and public service employment. CETA was an extension of the Works Progress Administration and after nine years, it was superseded by Ronald Reagan’s Job Training Partnership Act after questions of its effectiveness arose. For more information, see Grace A. Franklin and Ranall B. Ripley’s *CETA: Politics and Policy, 1973-1982*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984.

segregation but suffered further after the riots of 1965, a civil rights rebellion that lasted over the course of six days. The effects from automobile arson and looting of grocery stores, liquor stores, department stores and pawnshops, along with the arrest of over four thousand people and the death of 34 citizens could still be felt, according to the artist. Years later, Lacy recounted her experience: “I felt a gathering depression, a sense of placelessness in the withering heat. Here there was no retreat outside of one’s home—no park, no corner café, no supermarket, no mall or civic center. In post-riot Watts, there was virtually no safe, shared public space.” 41 The sentiments Lacy evokes were undoubtedly felt throughout the Watts area after 1965. While rioters tended to focus on the places of business such as supermarkets, liquor stores, clothing and department stores, and pawnshops, the damage done to schools, churches and private residences was minimal but not absent. Additionally, of the over 600 buildings that were damaged by burning and looting, nearly 200 were completely destroyed by fire. 42 Re-building of the fired structures was slow to start and in an area of two square miles overrun by gang activity, Watts was considered largely unsafe due to an increasing amount of armed robberies.

It was in the Guy Miller homes where Lacy befriended Evalina Newman, a childless retiree in her mid-fifties who had extensive damage to her lungs due to solvents from a long career in the cleaning services industry. In the room, Lacy and Newman engaged with the neighbors through creating quilts for nearby senior homes. As they talked with each other and with Lacy, they simultaneously worked on varying craft items including a quilt (Figure 8). Their first exhibition

41 Ibid.

featured a photo-quilt series, a type of photomontage embedded in cloth, portraying the friendship between Lacy and Newman; other objects on view were the women’s quilts, crocheted potholders, and covers for tissue boxes (Figure 9). Displayed in the residents’ recreation hall, the quilts were meant to garner attention from the media, specifically through Lacy’s contact with and recruiting of politicians, police representatives, artists from the greater Los Angeles area, and local activists. Furthermore, Lacy began to integrate the smaller exhibitions into a larger collaborative performance with Newman in order to help improve the relationship with the community and manifest a safer space. Lacy noted how she “wanted to explore with a single community how performance might combine with their self interests and how it might, as well, enable that community to interface with other communities.”

Over the course of the three-year partnership with Newman, Lacy utilized happening-like approaches gleaned from Kaprow’s influence. Irish argues that with Lacy’s aesthetic sensibility and Newman’s deep ties to the community, the two were able to form a collaboration that sought to bring neighbors into the apartment in order to express the fears and anxieties around living in the community. The aging population was ever more afraid of the dominating presence of youth violence in the complex that had been particularly targeted at these women and which Newman herself had experienced direct violence. In 1980, after Newman’s death, Lacy celebrated her friend in a memorial installation, featuring the re-creation of Newman’s living room, which included a quilt and the steady sound from a humming sewing machine, calling attention to the absence of Newman, but more broadly women’s voices and experiences in the unsettled circumstances of the post-riot Watts area.

Lacy, Leaving Art, 270.

Ibid., 19.
3. Education and Collaboration

3.1 From Fresno State to CalArts

As previously noted in the introduction, from 1968-1970 southern California saw a renewed turn toward craft and a DIY aesthetic. Scholar Glenn Adamson has described it as a retreat to the countryside by artists and young activists seeking to establish a holistic counterculture and to avoid the seemingly hollow idealism that grew out of what was considered a failed political movement. During the time that “the personal is political” turned into the popular feminist refrain in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the United States’ escalated efforts in Vietnam incited student strikes, there was a tension between politics and the return to craft. There was a return to the practice of the handmade in the attempt to spark a revolution at the personal level rather than at the government level. Craft and DIY, with its emphasis on the individual and moreover, the hand, was what fell to the level of the personal. The disillusionment of this post-68 moment encouraged artists to reimagine how revolution could manifest through working with the local publics rather than attempting to overthrow government apparatuses.

At this moment, the California Institute of the Arts was opening its doors, with a stringent admissions process meant to draw only the most skilled artists. Yet who arrived to the new university were a somewhat unkempt and vanguard group of students and faculty. Lacy came

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46 The faculty included Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, Arlene Raven, Roy Lichtenstein, Alison Knowles, Peter Van Riper, and Allan Kaprow in the School of Art; Dick Higgins in the School of Design; Emmett Williams in the School of Critical Studies; James Tenney in the School of Music and Nam June Paik in the School of Film. A recent article has been published in the online magazine East of Borneo (dedicated to art-related events in Los Angeles) by Janet Sarbanes, “A Community of Artists: Radical Pedagogy at CalArts, 1969-72. East of Borneo. June 5, 2014. http://www.eastofborneo.org/articles/a-
to CalArts at the encouragement of artist Faith Wilding, after the two became friends while studying at Fresno State College. As a graduate student at CalArts in the seventies, Lacy later noted the influence and effect that Allan Kaprow’s Happenings had on her burgeoning practice when Kaprow moved from New York to take a position at the college in 1969. Her interest in art was encouraged by Wilding when they began to form the feminist consciousness-raising conversations first happening at Fresno State and then later with CalArts, as part of the Feminist Art Program and Womanhouse—projects materialized by Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago in 1970 and 1972, respectively. The famed consciousness-raising circles that offered a more personal and safe space to define (specific) women’s experiences were a significant part of the Womanhouse project, and moreover were appropriated by Kaprow in order to discuss the viewers’ responses to the Happenings. Sheila de Bretteville, the director of the Feminist Design Program at CalArts, encouraged Lacy to pursue conceptual art, while Kaprow, who was known for his “loosely scripted Happenings involving multiple participants in a collective experience that unfolded over a set period of time,” promoted this integration of art into everyday life. It is imperative to recognize the specifically different sociopolitical moments that Lacy worked under


47 Fresno State College officially changed its name to California State University-Fresno in 1972, but is widely referred to as Fresno State.

48 Suzanne Lacy: “The second year at Cal Arts is when I did Ablutions and a variety of other things that began to establish my interest in performance. I worked with Allan Kaprow. I think Allan and Sheila and Judy formed three kinds of very important influences, with Arlene Raven and Deena Metzger being other influences. But the three of them, theoretically, the way they thought, was so different and yet I managed to merge some of their forms of thinking and take what I needed from each of them.” Oral history Interview with Suzanne Lacy, 1990 Mar. 16-Sept. 27, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

49 Laura Meyer, A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment (Fresno: California State University Press, 2009), 8.
in regards to her quilting projects. This revived interest in craft and the DIY aesthetic was on the upsurge in southern California—where Lacy was working in 1975. From 1968-1972, The Whole Earth Catalog had published regularly out of Menlo Park, California, near San Francisco. It encouraged the “rugged individualism and back-to-the-land movements of the Sixties counterculture.”

3.2 Between Chicago and Kaprow

In her monograph on Lacy’s practice, Irish positions the artist as having a “both/and” approach. This methodology that Irish posits is one that showcases Lacy’s “training in zoology, psychology, dance, visual art, and community organizing [providing] her with skills and concepts to perform in a rapidly shifting social milieu” and therefore, for Irish, Lacy moves “between science and art, between ideas and enacted forms, and between adaptive behavior and resisting actions.” This “betweenness” needs elaboration when considering Lacy’s education at CalArts with both Judy Chicago and Allan Kaprow. Lacy undoubtedly moves through multiple spaces and spheres of science, art, political activism, and psychology in order to enact social change that she sees as tied to art production, and this “both/and” approach is indeed an accurate description. But Irish’s writing does not broach Lacy’s relationship with Kaprow during his tenure at the California Institute of the Arts and the pivotal development of the second wave feminist movement happening in southern California, two moments central to how Lacy worked in an aesthetic and activist sphere. Therefore, this section builds on Irish and her “both/and”

51 Irish, Suzanne Lacy, 20.
approach but focuses on the ways Lacy has integrated the two methodologies put forth by Kaprow and Chicago.

The turn toward reclamation of materials addressed as feminine or decorative, the integration of scripted and unscripted performance, and her pedagogical impulse played a part in the formation of *The Crystal Quilt* and more importantly, Lacy’s distinctive methodology. She is situated between Kaprow and Chicago in the sense that each of their art forms is honored and subsumed in her performances and participatory works. Kaprow’s politics did not center on the author or the audience; rather he pushed a moment in time and space that was not replicable and furthered the possibilities of an action that could not be defined a priori. Lacy elaborates on this amalgamation of the practices:

> During the 1970s, I was intrigued with ideas that combined Allan Kaprow’s notions of art’s close proximity with and resemblance to “real life,” with the ideas of Judy Chicago, Sheila de Bretteville and Arlene Raven—colleagues at the Women’s Building in Los Angeles—who suggested art could recreate women’s reality form the point of view of women themselves. The line that divides the creation of the imagination from the daily life of common people was beginning to interest some theoreticians in the art world. At the California Institute of the Arts, where I was a graduate student, I worked with Kaprow and found his ideas had great potential politically. If the making of art was not reserved exclusively for the white male artists currently in power, then the ‘democratization’ of art might include ideas from women, from ethnic minorities, from the working class.\(^5^2\)

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\(^5^2\) Koelsch, *The Crystal Quilt*, footnote 3. Additionally, Laura Meyer highlights why specifically this group of artist teachers were important to the program. They began the Feminist Art Program at Fresno State because CalArts was uninterested in having a “feminist” department. Laura Meyer states: “After Womanhouse closed and the feminist program took up residence on the CalArts campus, many students found that their professors from outside the program refused to support their work. Chicago herself was so disgusted that her male colleagues’ lack of cooperation, that she left CalArts at the end of her second year there, along with two other members of the faculty, designer Sheila de Bretteville and art historian Arlene Raven, to establish the first fully accredited all-women’s art education program, the Feminist Studio Workshop. Meyer, *A Studio of Their Own*, 5.
With Lacy’s own political interests and questions culled from the burgeoning women’s movement and the legacy of Allan Kaprow’s Happenings, this section will unveil how the influence of these programs set in motion Lacy’s practice and will help contextualize the use of choreography in the *Crystal Quilt* performance.

As the second wave of feminism in southern California was taking root, there were tensions among practitioners. As Laura Meyer highlights in the catalogue for the seminal exhibition on the Fresno State Feminist Art Program:

> it is remarkable […] the degree to which the small circle of the Fresno feminist experiment was itself riven by differences and conflict. While Chicago’s goal was presumably to create a safe environment in which all participants could identify and articulate their life challenges, fears, frustrations, and desires, and address them in their artwork, participants did not always feel safe or supported within the group. In retrospect, many of them remember feeling painfully aware that there was an ‘in group’ that enjoyed Chicago’s favor and an ‘out group’ that did not.

Judy Chicago exerted leadership over the two influential feminist endeavors, but collaborative factions of students formed outside of the main haul—artists Suzanne Lacy and Faith Wilding

\[53\] Gerhard discusses how feminism was perceived in Chicago’s circle: “Chicago’s students, active in a different moment of feminism, measured equality through the relationship between women as much as through relationships between men and women. Equality in women-only groups idealized a notion of sisterhood stripped of rank and hierarchy. It was gender communalism, a world of sisters (not mothers) who collectively exercised power and control, liberating all their voices from the tyranny of hierarchy and history. Ideally, this view of sisterhood stripped of rank was a way to move past unavoidable differences in education, confidence, and privilege among women. In theory, if everyone had an equal voice, then no one was silenced. In practice, not every woman felt that her voice was heard, much less valued. Infamously, sisterly communalism made consensus a matter of endurance.” Gerhard, *The Dinner Party*, 45.

\[54\] Meyer, *A Studio of Their Own*, 15-16; Meyer further discusses Judy Chicago’s push towards an all encompassing feminist practice, expecting her prodigies to devote themselves 100% to art, while she would devote herself to the students. Her demanding presence led students to do radical acts. For instance, Meyer highlights an incident where student Cheryl Zurilgen cut off her waist length hair to nearly her scalp after Chicago accused her of using her long blonde hair to get favors from men. Students Shawnee Wollenman and Nancy Youdelman followed suit in the days after, thus highlighting Chicago’s pressure and the peer pressure experienced by those part of the Feminist Art Project.
led these initiatives in that Lacy began to work within the immediate community and Wilding formed subRosa, a feminist collective.\textsuperscript{55} Wilding and Lacy formed their first consciousness-raising group in late fall of 1969, just before Judy Chicago arrived and began to interview undergraduate students to be a part of her courses with questions such as “Do you want to be an artist? What are your goals? Do you want to achieve something with your life?”\textsuperscript{56} Lacy turned the table on Chicago during her admission interview when Lacy questioned Chicago’s own “psychological methods and expertise.” Therefore, despite Lacy’s lack of background in the arts, it was her overall interestedness in women’s experiences and degree in psychology that secured her space.\textsuperscript{57}

While at Fresno State and before working with Chicago, Lacy pursued a master’s degree in psychology. In forming some of the first consciousness-raising circles with Wilding, she was

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 21. subRosa does not attribute authorship to a single person. Later, Lacy would go on to work with artist Leslie Labowitz and help found Ariadne, a Social Art Network, a coalition of women in the arts, media, and government interested in intervening in the physical and social spaces of the city.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 85. Furthermore in the interview with Moira Roth, Lacy stated: “The consciousness-raising was interesting because it borrowed from—this was the late sixties, early seventies—from the intensity of the Gestalt therapy movement. People all over the country were sequestering themselves away in little rooms and screaming at each other in the service of changing their psyches. [laughs] That was not much different than what we did, and at times that aspect of the program made me nervous. I would back out of it. Part of it was my psychological training. Some of it was quite good. People went through a lot of changes. Some of it I thought was a little destructive, though not any more so than any of the other encounter groups that I had participated in during that era. You know, in the sixties in California we were always mucking around in each other’s psyches—experimenting in psychology. \textit{Oral history Interview with Suzanne Lacy.}"

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 86. Faith Wilding was present during this interview and recalls how Chicago became suspicious of Lacy and believed her to be a spy for the FBI. In Lacy’s interview with Schapiro, Lacy recalled on Chicago’s hesitation to invite Lacy into the Feminist Art Program at Fresno: “She [Chicago] said, ‘You are on the career track for psychology, and I’m only interested in working with women who will become professional artists.’ I didn’t know what on earth she was talking about, but I did know I really wanted in that program.” \textit{Oral history Interview with Suzanne Lacy.}
indeed centered on pushing forward women’s issues, and the integration of Kaprow’s praxis allowed her to move beyond this “personal” or insular narrative. In other words, Lacy took the circles and expanded their reach, offering more than just a safe space to speak for women, but a platform to encourage a theatrical-like event with political implications. Her objective to reach the greater body politic grew from these small, intimate circles happening both at Fresno and CalArts and the work was expanded to branch outwards rather than continue to speak to the intimate feminist art groups. Evalina and I, with the close relationship between Lacy and the women, was intended to cull awareness to women living in fear in the Watts neighborhood; just a few years later, Lacy took to the streets in Three Weeks in May and In Mourning and in Rage (each 1977) and highlighted, through media attention, the rape and violence towards women in southern Los Angeles. Kaprow provided Lacy with theatrical techniques that would be utilized in the projects and later combined with the private stories, thus pushing the consciousness-raising circle into a public sphere. The Crystal Quilt endeavor utilized vast public coverage through the intimate discussion on the fears that came with aging, such as issues of retiring, loss of loves, and the possibility of depending on children. The work oscillates between a feminist-identified politic, or a more personal activism, and a participatory art practice. Through this weaving together of praxes, she offers an effectual pedagogical work that incites feminist concerns of women’s visibility with a time-based social performance. As the second wave came under scrutiny for its hierarchical fractioning, Lacy’s practice of calling attention to issues of race, socioeconomic class, all alongside gender, sought to protest against the underrepresentation of women and artists of color. In their 1971 newsletter, the organization West-East Bag called for a more coherent feminist alliance. They stated, “Enemies of women’s liberation in the art world must be met with a more coherent front. A group that is locally effective can be doubly powerful
if it synchronizes its actions with those of other groups across the country. We can gain from each other’s experiences and make more headway together if we are aware of each other’s activism.”

The integrations with the design, theatre, and studio departments motivated Lacy’s practice and encouraged her to work with multiple influences such as Kaprow. Rather than dismissing the creator of the Happenings, Chicago’s position on feminism advocated for her students to work alongside and with their male colleagues rather than to disrupt and break away. Lacy worked with both of these artists, gleaning techniques that when integrated, initiated powerful projects. However, it was Lacy’s interest in conceptualism that led her away from Chicago’s praxis of emotional and experiential subject matter and more towards a performance and time-based practice; as Lacy recalled, the performances that the feminist program partook in were more of “skits” and less conceptual than she would have liked. Therefore, the students in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts, who saw their practices as more conceptual, gravitated toward Kaprow, as his legacy of the Happening was widely known both in New York and later at the university.

Lacy points to Chicago’s dismissal of conceptual art in the early 1970s since there was yet to be


59 Interview with Lacy: “People turned to performance almost intuitively. It wasn’t as ‘sophisticated’ as some of the Conceptual performance works at the time. For the most part, we didn’t know anything about that work, and I don’t think Judy knew a lot about it either. We were doing what I’d call skits. She intentionally steered us away from anything that was Conceptual that was removed from a direct engagement with our feelings. We made art of our experience.” Oral history Interview with Suzanne Lacy.

60 Jeff Kelley notes that Kaprow was slow to incorporate this new group of CalArt students into his Happenings, as he felt that it was simply sensationalizing the event. Therefore, he called this first Happening with CalArts students, Publicity (1970). Jeff Kelley, Childsplay: The Art of Allan Kaprow (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 148-49.
a “feminist emotive consciousness” and conceptualism related more to being “distanced, aloof, and abstract.”

Within art historical literature, many scholars have debated the underpinnings of the happening, often associated with many Fluxus artists such as John Cage, Merce Cunningham, but more concordantly with Allan Kaprow. He became known for free-forming and free will execution of the Happening. Kaprow seems to support this lore that the happening unfolds by chance, rather than through carefully planned or scripted text. In his 1961 “Happenings in the New York Art Scene,” he wrote,

Happenings are events that, put simply, happen. Though the best of them have a decided impact—that is, we feel, “here is something important”—they appear to go nowhere and do not make any particularly literary point. In contrast to the arts of the past, they have no structured beginning, middle or end. Their form is open-ended and fluid; nothing obvious is sought and therefore nothing is won, except the certainty of a number of occurrences to which we are more than normally attentive.

Yet there is a contradiction in his untitled handwritten score of 1959, where Kaprow instead engages with controlled behavior versus a freeform movement. He writes,

Male dancer dressed in white shirt with red arm band & ducks & sneakers/emerges from doorway stands 10 secs./walks measuredly to stool. Sits on it perfectly still for a while/Nude Female (who walks out beforehand while crowd is being seated and who sits still on bench) gets up and walks around “posing” in a solemn, stylish way (single poses). Then lies down back on the floor…

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61 Lacy recounted a time when Arlene Raven commented that she might be a “budding conceptual artist,” only to have Chicago “go into a fit about it.” Oral history Interview with Suzanne Lacy.


63 Kelley, Childsplay, 23.
As art historian Johanna Drucker argues, the happening focused on collaboration without an object; in other words it operated, “without a preconceived goal or a resulting product.”

Scholar Jeff Kelley points out that these actions were real, “but they were not ordinary…they were formal, stylized and measured.” Furthermore, his drawn out diagrams from his most famous Happenings, *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts* (1959), demonstrates his eagerness to outline the gestures and movements that followed and kept precise time (Figure 10). The audience and participants who moved through the happening were advised how to approach the performance and the cues that would signal them to continue through, but the aspect of this “non-performance” that needs to be highlighted is the manner in which there was a blurring of the audience/participant/artist that later came to fruition in Lacy’s work.

Similarly to Kaprow, Lacy’s own work is never far from scripted, but rather each moment is controlled. The topics, the situations the audience finds themselves in, are part of larger performance with the interest in calling attention to broader issues that affect minority populations. While she adapted Chicago’s interest in formalism and Kaprow’s time-based events, Lacy employed craft didactically as she worked with this historically implicated medium. The impeccably planned and thought-out public performances are no doubt done in the vain of a Kaprow-like happening, there is a notion of free-will given to the audience, or at least a moment to contemplate the integration of art into life, into acting on one’s own initiative. Additionally, in *Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts*, Kaprow “listed its ‘artists’ participants by name and according to their designated task…directed to move and sit alternately, these ‘participants’ were

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most expressly collaborators and not, for Kaprow, mere audience.”

Drucker uses this to point to the way that the audience is the work, much in the manner that Lacy has a vested interest in both her audience and her participants. Yet what makes Lacy’s work unique and socially inclined are the topics of conversation, and in the case of The Crystal Quilt, the ritual-like performance that identified aging women’s struggles or for both her quilting projects, the use of a traditional gathering of women to come together under a historical precipice of discussion, gossip, and camaraderie. Kaprow argued that experiences are conceived indirectly through the television and in “Education of the Un-Artist, Part II (1972)” he wrote on this solitary participation, “it’s been observed often enough that nowadays we have no sacred rituals left that have even the remotest representational, and therefore, propitiative, function that anyone can observe, much less feel.”

The way in which Lacy incorporates representational play in that her work is not necessarily intent on making a final tangible quilt for display, but instead is focused on movements and the enjoyment in the didactic interplay between the players in her performance.

3.3 Pedagogical Discourse

People see you as you see yourself because that’s the picture you present and if you think you’re too old to do something, you show it. If you think you can do it and want to do it, they will see you then as a woman who can do it and is capable of doing it and wants to do it. So I try to hold my shoulders back a little higher and strut in a little more as I come into places now.


I think it’s true that we have a vocabulary that describes our beautiful young women, but that we don’t have as good a vocabulary for our older citizens to describe what it is we think is beautiful about them.\(^6\)

As in her other work that explores the prejudices of certain groups, Lacy’s Whisper Minnesota participants were aware of the negative depictions surrounding their aging bodies. Given the dialogue that arises from the questions asked about aging at the beginning of the initiative, the answers speak to the way that the women attempted to redress prejudices about their elderly bodies and minds. To acquire these answers and a larger involvement throughout Minnesota, Lacy employed diagrams to map out the effects of participation. This method of organization, utilizing flow charts and illustrations, has been a part of her practice since the 1970s, with multiple performances focusing on outlining discussions and notes between her and the participating audience. There are additional diagrams that were not shown in conjunction with the performance but are illustrated in Lacy’s writings, particularly the anthology, *Mapping the Terrain: Genre Public Art* (1995) and *Leaving Art: Writings on Performance, Politics, and Publics 1974-2007* (2010).

The multilayered aspects of her diagrams reproduced in her writing speak to the approaches Lacy takes with communities that complicate the role of a sole creator and undermines a top-down approach to organizing—an objective of 1970s feminism to eradicate patriarchal and hierarchical infrastructures. Lacy reproduced a diagram that features concentric circles, with each one building off the other: the center, or “origination and responsibility,” affect projects in their entirety as each supplementary aspect of the performance is supported from the previous layer (Figure 11). As the circles build, “collaboration and codevelopment” sustain the growing

“immediate audience” and the “media audience.” With the completion of the projects and performances, each component establishes the audience of memory—for example, how the work is remembered and recalled. This approach of public responsibility associated with Lacy’s praxis is well documented both within her own writing, as well as within the articles addressing her performances. *Mapping the Terrain: Genre Public Art* is an anthology by Lacy that sought to map out the approach of public artists with essays from artists and art historians such as Allan Kaprow, Lucy Lippard, and Jeff Kelley. In her essay, “Debated Territory: Toward a Critical Language for Public Art,” Lacy discusses these diagrams and their delineations between each circle, writing that

Such divisions are somewhat arbitrary and used for the sake of clarifying our thinking about audience. In reality, those in the center and in the first concentric ring are not always so clearly defined, and, more important, in an actively functioning participatory work, movement between levels of engagement is designed into the system. The more responsibility assumed, the more central the participants’ role in the generation of the work. Collaborative partners become more or less central as the work finds it shape.\(^70\)

Calling attention to the audience-turned-participants further enabled and facilitated a new kind of interaction, one where there was “a greater reliance on the intermediary skills of the public arts administrator,” as Lacy argued, “since social interaction was neither the forte nor the particular aesthetic interest of many established public artists.”\(^71\) Here, Lacy draws on the problem within social art that does not favor collaboration and fluidity in the artist/audience boundary as the two roles shift back and forth throughout the projects.


The larger Whisper Minnesota project took over two years to organize, as Lacy amassed interviews with women for their stories and set out to secure funding and smaller initiatives to promote Whisper Minnesota outside of the quilt performance. Lacy planned out the project using a diagram that displayed the outcomes of each participant’s role in Whisper Minnesota, although this was not the first time the artist had employed diagrams as a way to detail the results of her work. The contributors ranged from larger companies and universities to smaller internships, potlucks, and community theatre programs. The maps from Lacy’s projects call attention to the import of those who offer assistance to the project and provide a pedagogical model as each aspect builds off one another. She avoids a hierarchical relationship, as there is no singular entity that promotes Whisper Minnesota; rather, it is a collective endeavor that encourages the goal of teaching the general public about women’s leadership in their greater community. Education scholar Charles R. Garoian highlights this egalitarian approach to the community. He notes that Lacy’s pedagogical strategies and curricular outcomes are contingent on collaboration by teaching “civic responsibility and critical citizenship.”72 These models and diagrams allow participants to engage with more than one perspective, since each aspect builds off the other and is equally supported by the previous layer.

Her role is further defined through these layered nuances of participation, seen through one specific, compelling model that aesthetically resembles the pattern of a patchwork quilt, albeit one that maps social relationships of the project (Figure 12). Each committee, person, performance is dedicated to a specific role as they piece together to partake in a statewide

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initiative that explored how the media portrayed aging and the role it plays in the public sphere. The diagram systematically illustrated the collaboration between independent bookstores to large-scale corporations. For example, in Whisper Minnesota, the model begins with “Source Initiation,” where Lacy outlines the three key aspects of Education, Art, and Public Policy behind the project’s conception. The diagram expands to the right with multiple squares that contain the various names of the partnerships connected to the larger Whisper Minnesota project. Delineated underneath the pattern are the words, “Community Development” and “Leadership Development,” as they expand only to end with five blank squares. These represent the “Continuing Development,” or the points in which the pedagogical consequence of The Crystal Quilt can persist both within and outside of Minnesota after its conclusion. The particular diagram for Whisper Minnesota was employed for the purposes of organization and were not seen in conjunction with the final events or installed with exhibitions. Reproduced in Irish’s monograph, the chart, which strongly resembles a patchwork quilt, becomes a physical index of the effort necessary to produce Whisper Minnesota in its entirety. At the same time, the diagram interweaves with the organization required for quilting bees and calls to mind both the collaborative efforts that were historically garnered and currently sustain Lacy’s projects.

Specifically, while participant and leader roles becomes blurred, or education happens at multiple angles versus from an authority, there is still a strong delineation that points to Lacy as the organizer of these interactions. The projects, however, are completely dependent on the choreography and the women’s willingness to contribute their time and personal history. Yet from the moment The Crystal Quilt performance materializes, there is an aesthetic approach to pedagogy in that the intention does not supersede the evaluation or the outcome. The aesthetic
endeavor is significant to the work, but Lacy is neither the leader nor the manager of anonymous labour. Rather, the women maintain an agency as their stories can be heard in iterations of the performance exhibited at the Tate Modern in London or even as the performance is streamed online. The effectiveness and the intentions of participatory art change, not only for the artist but also for the communities that welcome the work. Lacy instead focuses on how the audience’s own intentions become a part of the overall success of the work. What do these women hope to gain from their stories being told and why incorporate Minneapolis College of Art and Design? In the end, the narrative does not revolve around the name on the project but rather the women who participate. There is a complexity to the relationship between the artist and the participants as Lacy encourages a broad distribution of the performance with media outlets. She constantly interjects aesthetic details throughout Whisper Minnesota, even as the performance concludes, the scarves are handed out, and the focus is on the agency provided to the participating women. Recalling Kaprow’s approach to the Happenings, in which those participating became the collaborators rather than a mere audience, Lacy approaches her public in a similar manner. However, similarly to the Happenings, her performances also rely “upon the techniques of an orchestrated collaboration to stage a self-conscious condition for relations among individuals to be experienced as such.” 73 Lacy builds on the legacy of Allan Kaprow and the Feminist Art Project in that the approach to the performances is nuanced enough to seek the close and intimate stories that bolster social change. At the same time, these performances possess established and outlined plans that, while deviating somewhat, are never derailed from the set track. Although there is not a dividing line between the two artistic styles, Lacy’s Whisper Minnesota (and more specifically, The Crystal Quilt) exemplifies just how she had manipulated different praxes in

order to sustain a larger stylized performance that dealt specifically with a sociopolitical endeavor aligned with women’s roles in the public sphere. Additionally, Lacy moves outside the artistic elite, whereas, Kaprow only awarded access to those from the New York art scene. Scholars and critics alike frequently admonish contemporary iterations of social practice for its unequivocal lack of accessibility to the general public.\textsuperscript{74} It is this mediation between the two realms, with one that pushes feminist interests such as an open and public dialogue on aging, but in a manner that promotes a controlled and scripted approach seen in the Happenings of Kaprow, that needs to be understood as a tactical methodology. Here, Lacy differentiates herself from other artists in that her goals of intervention through public art stem from the relationship to feminism. Her work is also highly strategic, as she both controls all aspects of the performance and the leadership administration required to complete the project; personal discussions may occur, but there is an interesting play between the scripted and unscripted conversations.

In reading Lacy’s work through the formal and material descriptions of quilt making, there is an evident link between quilting techniques and the political motivation behind these forms. The feminine task of piecing and sewing, and even miming these movements and conversations, turns into an activist strategy used to emphasize women’s historical art traditions. Therefore, the pertinence of Lacy’s work lies in rethinking the projects to analyze their collaborative and pedagogical practices, alongside the historical implications of a quilt practice. These projects have the capacity to negotiate political issues in a way that both speak to the personal narrative as much as it does the collective body. Poignancy comes to fruition in the way the craft is utilized to subvert dominant ideologies.

\textsuperscript{74} In \textit{Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts}, the “general public” who participated was a who’s who of the art world. Kaprow sent invitations to John Cage, George Brecht, Claes Oldenberg, Jim Dine, Jasper Johns, Leo Castelli, Dan Flavin, Meyer Schapiro, as well as to writers from various magazines. As Kelley notes, “it was kind of an art-world coming-out.” Kelley, \textit{Childsplay}, 34.
Both the 19th and early 20th centuries saw a rise in literature produced by women, a moment that also saw a proliferation of quilting in North America. Recalling scholar Elaine Showalter’s connection to quilting and literature, the second wave of feminism in the 1960s played a significant role in the return of quilting as an elevated art form and therefore, to women’s increased visibility in writing. She consequently argues how the nonhierarchical structure and decentered narrative of many canonical stories is exemplified by the practice of piecing together a quilt. Because of the aforementioned three-tier process of combining the pieced pattern, the insulating layer, and the third and final bottom layer, it can also function as a way to understand Lacy’s collaboration in regard to her quilting project. From the practice of piecing together fabric to create the pattern, the patchwork that forms from the geometric shapes coming together, and the final stitching of the design on to the heavy backing, the stages closely align with the way Lacy began her project in regard to the various phases of planning, the layers of activism involved, and finally the apt stage of quilting intertwined throughout. Recalling the diagrams and the multilayered approaches, it becomes evident that the work leading up to her performance is fully integrated with her object/from and her approach to the subject are entirely appropriate to the manifestation of the performances.

While the Crystal Quilt was actively documented from its conception to its finitude, the performance with Evalina Newman and Suzanne Lacy has few public documents. In one photograph featuring the pair, they stand together holding dolls dressed in crocheted and sewn costumes with a large quilt featuring a variation of what is called a “flying geese” pattern just behind them (Figure 13). Historically touted as a design with a rumored connection to the
Underground Railroad, the flying geese motif signified moving north to escape slavery. Yet this quilt, with its traditional and historical patterns, has not been relegated to the floor; it is the backdrop and the product of the collaboration with Newman. Scholarship has ignored the significance quilting brought to the consciousness-raising circle: stories were shared as women lived the experience of piecing together the quilt, a labour not intended to be outsourced. As in the *Crystal Quilt* installation at the Tate Modern in 2012, in which Lacy highlighted the textile by Miriam Schapiro, the artist tackles the feminist concerns of the invisibility or the destruction of the quilt, and her collaboration underscores how she traverses the realm of feminist interests as well as the complicated politics of participatory art.

Outside of its traditional utilitarian function, the quilt became a representative for the abolition of slavery, women’s suffrage, and the civil rights movement. Thus, they would have been read accordingly and known only to specific groups in order to manufacture unknowing resistance. As Mainardi states, “I don’t think it was coincidental that the Seneca Falls Conference of 1848, which marked the beginning of an organized American Women’s Liberation Movement, came at the virtual height of the quilt-making period, nor is it coincidental that the size of the quilting party (8-16 women) coincides exactly with the size of modern consciousness-raising groups.”

Within the African American community, the names of patterns were changed to reflect the emancipatory claims they conveyed within the work. Mainardi further highlights how piecing


76 There is a long-standing discussion on the validity of these claims regarding the use of the quilt in denoting safe houses in the Underground Railroad. Many argue that there was a secret language imbued in the quilts. However, because quilting and historical patterns were done and kept by women who were often illiterate, written facts may not entirely present the whole historical precedence that these quilts sustained and rather, the oral history around the quilt should be considered.
and patchwork have been widely understood as models for a feminist aesthetic. Since quilt making has historically been deemed a women’s art, many scholars have attempted to clarify the questions of “feminine sensibility, of originality and tradition, of individuality versus collectivity, of content and values in art.” While Lacy herself adapts the techniques in The Crystal Quilt, using the women’s gestures to depict the changing designs, she and the Women on Watts enact a traditional quilting bee circle. The women converse as they hand stitch the quilt together. Thus, Lacy, in working with these points made by Mainardi, simultaneously rethinks the individual’s presence as both a member of a collective society and as an individual with a unique personal story, and in particular, a story that roots itself in the issues that aging generations of women face.

3.4 Cross Generational Dialogue and Critique

In thinking about the way that Lacy attempts to bring together the first and second waves of feminism (the women who participated in the 1987 performance would have been either a legacy of the first wave, or at least seen the effects of women’s leadership during the Second World War), feminism tends to separate itself into waves as a way to delineate struggles. Thus generational relationships form, or metaphors of parenting occur. Through uniting these two bodies, particularly the aging body in a moment that sees the rise of the sexually more explicit and empowered third wave body that begins in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the Riot Grrl

77 Showalter, “Piecing and Writing,” 159.

78 Davis Basting relies heavily on critiquing the way that the Italian feminists (particularly Sylvia Evangelista) have evoked a mother-daughter relationship in feminism and argues there must be a different cultural understanding of these (sometimes) tense familial bonds. However, what comes of this discussion is the encouragement of a horizontal relationship to women versus the hierarchical and matriarchal vertical approach. Davis Basting, The Stages of Age, 210.
movement, there comes a pedagogical engagement that connects the older with the younger—or the mother with the daughter. While \textit{The Crystal Quilt} draws attention to the older body, it is connected to the younger generation as a tool to unite and educate women. Knowledge on quilting practices and patterns were simultaneously passed from generation to generation, where women of all ages united in a quilting bee to work under the auspices of one women’s pattern. Just as Lacy points to the traditional tactics where this craft was used as an educational tool, Showalter states,

> Early art, writing, and mathematical exercises taught to little girls emphasized geometric principles of organization, and such lessons were applied practically to the design of quilts...obsessive repetition of the same small block pattern comprised the entire quilt, which was in essence a grid system, and emphasis on structure and organization. Often a little girl was encourage to finish a small quilt in time for a fifth birthday, and the event was celebrated by a quilting bee...\textsuperscript{79}

These complex principles, taught through the practice of quilting, were hardly a facile domestic pastime. The participants inform and form the work as they offer a historical tie to the quilting bee, where personal stories were shared, and simultaneously lend to it a performative manner as they create the patterns and changing colors.

\textit{The Crystal Quilt} can be taken further as a way to critique the various waves and separations of feminism, especially in the pivotal moment of the so-called culture wars following the rise of the third-wave. Rather than simply considering the history that came before, \textit{The Crystal Quilt} acknowledges progress and refuses to simply point to the problems of “second-wavers.” The work becomes successful when it manages to capture the legacy of earlier feminism in 1987–a moment when the legitimacy of 1970s’ feminist thought was being reconsidered. Without first reclaiming the history of the quilt, the myth of aging and manifesting a safe space for these

\textsuperscript{79} Showalter, “Piecing and Writing,” 158.
women would not be able to materialize. It is both through the manner in which the women create the quilt with their bodies, along with the pivotal history of this medium and feminism that enables its success.

Returning once more to the year of 1987 when *The Crystal Quilt* was created by Lacy, a moment that sees the demise of second wave feminism, it could be asked, once again: why does Lacy return to the quilt? In developing a complicated politics around social practice, one centered in this horizontal structuring seen in quilting that I have outlined, I argue that Lacy attempts to develop an egalitarian art practice through the manifestation and piecing of the quilt. Each component of the textile relies on the other and this return in 1987 to the local community parallels the similar moment of 1975—a turn to cohesiveness, to a united vision of what feminism was considered to be—versus the fractioning and criticism it had come under in the early 1980s. Helen Molesworth and other scholars have broached this topic on the intergenerational politics and assignments that occurred between the codified second and third wave movements. Throughout the 1970s, feminists responded to the male appropriation and the newly established hierarchy of quilt designs. But for Lacy, the 1980s brought forth changing feminist ideologies and approaches to art and scholarship; thus, her appropriation of the quilt became a method to respond to these shifts, and to repair ruptures within feminist circles. In this sense, the work intervened in the discourse of feminism as much as it did in the worlds of art, society and women’s everyday lives.
4. Conclusion

The success of *The Crystal Quilt* relies on Suzanne Lacy’s involvement in the feminist community and the pedagogical role that quilting takes on. Lacy is understood as an activist/political artist who uses images and generates dialogue in order to spur changes or, at the very least, to make visible these issues to the greater public. Through an analysis of both the modernist elevation of the quilt, alongside the feminist revival and the historical implication, *The Crystal Quilt* engages with the rhetoric of aging. This notion is only emphasized further when dealing with an iconic American medium, one that readily relied on the maker’s age and skill. However, the abstraction of quilting in order to have it fit the parameters of the high art paradigm are quickly subsumed when utilizing the aging female body. Lacy regards the 1970s discourse to revalue what should be considered “high” and “low.” The quilt becomes the vehicle in which participation occurs and the project can fully materialize through initiating dialogue and engaging with the greater community. To the rich history of quilting in the United States, and the various ways it has been used to subvert patriarchal ideals, *The Crystal Quilt* adds another layer.
Figures

Figure 1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 1. An installation view of The Crystal Quilt, 1985-87. Video, documentary, sound and a quilt are shown in one of the spaces in the Tanks. Bloomberg.com. Screen grab of www.bloomberg.com, with search terms ‘The Tanks, Crystal Quilt.’ Accessed August 11, 2014.

Figure 2 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 2. Robert Rauschenberg, Bed, 1955. Oil and pencil on pillow, quilt, and sheet on wood supports, 6’ 3 ¼” x 31 ½” x 8 inches.

Figure 3 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 3. Judy Chicago, The Dinner Party, 1974-79. Ceramic, porcelain, textile, 576 x 576 inches.

Figure 4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.


Figure 5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.


Figure 6 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.


Figure 7 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 7. Physical quilt by Miriam Schapiro for the installation of The Crystal Quilt at the Tate Modern, July 18, 2012–January 20, 2013.
Figure 8 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.


Figure 9 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.


Figure 10 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 10. Movement score for Eighteen Happenings in Six Parts, 1959. Photo: Jeff Kelley.

Figure 11 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.


Figure 12 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 12. Organizational chart for Whisper Minnesota, 1985-87.

Figure 13 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 13. Photograph of Evalina Newmann and Suzanne Lacy, 1977. Photo by Suzanne Lacy.
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