

## **From the feminist upheaval to public art The Far West of opportunities An open dialogue with Suzanne Lacy**

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### **Abstract**

In the last decades, women's artistic practices have questioned the places to create, contemplate and show art. Women have thus contributed substantially to the evolution of the concept of 'art' and its institutions.

Why is the feminist movement essential in the definition of today's public art? What were women artists looking for, what were they escaping from when they experimented with these new trends? What relation does feminist cyberart have with the proposals initiated in the 1970s? Why do artists in this field redefine the concept of authorship?

These are some of the questions that shaped the encounter between Toxic Lesbian and the American artist Suzanne Lacy on May 6, 2014, in conjunction with Intermediae Matadero, Madrid. Gloria G. Durán's and Lila Insúa's students, from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, participated in this encounter.

**Keywords:** new genre of public art, activist art, cyberfeminism, cyberactivism, collaborative art, process art, community art

**A**rt history is pointed out by some facts concerning women. Many of them have had to generate models of expression and recognition that bypass the traditional structures of the patriarchal art world, or else they would become invisible or, even worse, their artworks would be attributed to men artists. It is with this ambition that many women artists organize themselves as an artistic vanguard.

They ploughed through uncharted landscapes toward the Far West of opportunities. They questioned the places in which to create and contemplate art. They found their own bodies, the streets and neighbourhoods, the schools and the hospitals. They redefined the public spaces... and nowadays they look for themselves in the no-places, in the cloud, places where these cyberfeminist artists are safe from being engulfed by the traditional structures that are inherent in any organized system.

Suzanne Lacy<sup>1</sup> is only relatively interested in the term 'patriarchal'. Could it be a generational matter? Lacy was born in 1945 and today she is a consolidated veteran artist in the market system. She has spent the last decades negotiating with the main cultural institutions all over the world to place her art pieces in projects involving a gender perspective, at the very core of the legitimate fabric. This has allowed her to experiment with the different expanded layers of audience she mentioned in *Mapping the Terrain*<sup>2</sup> –a reference text on the 'New Genre of Public Art'<sup>3</sup>– which she has edited in collaboration with artists and art critics.

This 'New Genre' presupposes another place for art, a movement launched by feminist artists in the 1970s and more recently by cyberfeminists. There are numerous connections between them. Thanks to their experience in opening new places in public space, some of them relocate in cyberspace –a reference for their creation. Still others grew up with them but opted for digital works and the Internet. This is the case of Shu Lea Cheang<sup>4</sup>.

Her position among mainstream artists has helped Suzanne Lacy to strengthen her political perspective on problems concerning women. However, we will see that the use of mainstream communication channels to convey these topics has ceased to be of interest for cyberfeminist artists. On the contrary, part of their political discourse lies in eschewing them and in generating new models in other media –a tendency that is common to other social practices, tired, as we know, of the direct monopoly and the hidden manipulation by certain ‘elites’.

Decades have passed and the main paradigm proposed at the New Genre of Public Art has been ‘reached’ (?). Nevertheless, other artists working from a gender perspective will change its course. Perhaps Lacy’s stories about her experiences in her tour in this ‘Far West of opportunities’ can give us some clues.



Image A

Although the cultural institutions of the 1970s are no longer the same in the dawning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Lacy doesn’t make an optimistic reading of this change, as she explained in the cybermeeting<sup>5</sup> that took place at Matadero Madrid<sup>6</sup> [Images A-B] on May 6, 2014, organized by Toxic Lesbian<sup>7</sup> in collaboration with Gloria G. Durán<sup>8</sup> and Lila Insúa’s<sup>9</sup> students from the Fine Arts Faculty, Complutense University of Madrid. The American artist talks about this process as follows:

I think there has been a tram to transform the institutions. That is what has been going on for the past 30 years: the world has changed, institutions have tried to embrace performance art forms and, now, social practice forms. I think the greeting of real social practice is very difficult for institutions. I don’t think that they comprehend the engagement in any way other than in very small and intimate ways [...] this is a tendency, the separation between [the] Museum’s educational and [...] curatorial parts –curatorial is still prevalent, much more prioritized, in art institutions (Toxic Lesbian, 2014: p. 12)



Image B

These words speak of a strategic change within the museums, but not, however, in the sense that these 'Far West' artists would have liked (levelling their collaborative, horizontal projects about social problems projects, with the traditional single-piece -a very characteristic single-author works which is the 'artist' standard in the exhibition model). The changes were rather directed to extend the areas of activity of these institutions. The attitude implied in this appropriation on the part of the traditional structures is one of the reasons why cyberfeminist artists talk about a necessary principle of subversion.

Seen from the communicative intention of artistic creation, this topic is essential. In this sense, Suzanne Lacy's point of view is unconventional:

I am a community organizer [...] I have always been interested in ways to communicate with people, whether that would be to open the door, person to person, or news or media. In the 70s I became very interested in new media communication –Television and radio (Toxic Lesbian 2014: p. 2)

Lacy employs mass-media from the conventional perspective that replicates and enlarges a fact so as to broadcast it as widely as possible. She is not interested in changing this use, only in appropriating it to meet her own goals.

However, this mass communication paradigm has changed, and we find ourselves in the age of interpersonal communication. At this point, the Internet will play an essential part with the political perspective tackled, for example, by this artist. At

present, the patriarchal structures intrinsic to the mass media mode are still not consolidated in the web –where experimentation still makes the difference.

But Lacy takes this fact with caution. On one hand, she admires the medium of cyberspace:

I became interested in it as a communication device for community organizing. But it was not clear to me how effective it could be to organize the issues. So it was not until rather in 2008, 2009 or 2010 that I began to try to do communication through internet technology as a means of community organizing (Toxic Lesbian 2014: 2)

But at the same she admits that she is not a technological artist interested in technology as the focus of experimentation:

Toxic Lesbian uses electronic media in a highly experimental way. For me that is not different to Nam June Paik, who used video technologies in ways that were specifically about the technology.

When I used video in the 70s [...] I was not thinking about it as a technology itself; I was thinking about its relationship to organizing  
(Toxic Lesbian, 2014: p. 5,6)

Her doubts about the use of the Internet are quite common to many agents who need communication to attain their goals, whatever their fields. On one hand, she doubts if her collaborators, her 'expanded audiences' (in Lacy's terminology) have access to the web. On the other hand, if they have the technological skills needed to surf the net. In this sense, she points out:

I think there are two problems. One is that a lot of the people I work with, or I am concerned with, don't have access to the internet (Toxic Lesbian 2014: p. 7):

So the online communication, that web technology, meets the women who are trafficked? I doubt it! On the other hand, that information about trafficking reaches a global audience and because of that, action is taken to form organizations? Yes, I am sure of this (Toxic Lesbian 2014: p. 5)

As Lacy states, it is true that the promise of the Internet is not fulfilled for everybody in the same way. There is a part of the population that is unrelated to urban environment and is not plugged to Internet culture. This is a fact, even despite the wishes of the libertarian culture that underlies the foundations of cybercommunication. The range of influence and of decision making within the web is still determined by a certain sociological profile. Two important digital divides affect the potential users: the first is being poor; the second is being a woman. Both of these filters affect Lacy's audiences.

This is precisely another change of attitude for cyberfeminist artists. They foster the use of technologies and the web in their works, and regard it as a tool for empowerment and for a reversal of current trends. Clearly, we find ourselves before a change of cultural paradigm –the fruit of 40 years of political feminist activism and direct action within the public space.

Another question for Lacy is the level of communication and commitment the Internet can afford. This is a very important question, and we may not have enough experience to answer it as a web-based civilization:

It is more likely that women are going to online share their experiences of violence and psychologically process those experiences than in a direct embodied relationship (Toxic Lesbian 2014: p. 5)

[T]he second is the problem of ‘embodiness’ and its relationship to different groups [...] the other issue we have to think about is this issue of trust. And I think maybe the third is mobilizing through the web, like, right now, you can sign any day, like, hundreds of petitions on the web. Now, do those petitions make a difference? I think that they do but do they make sense now? Does my signing of a petition encourage a person? Do they do direct social action or do they encourage me and encourage my social action? (Toxic Lesbian 2014: p. 7)

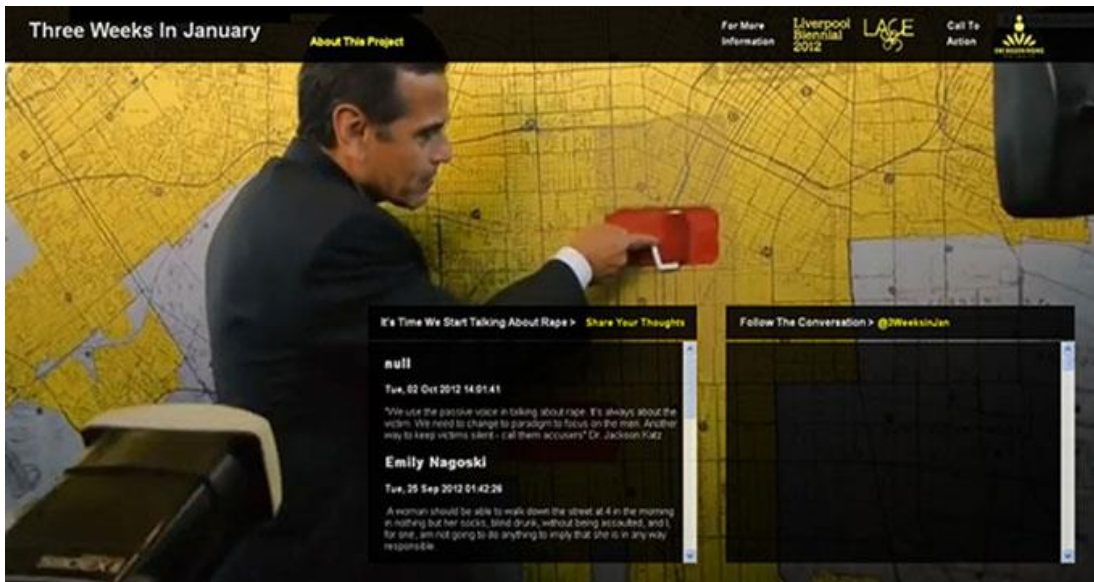


Image C



Image D

The American artist is aware of the importance of the use of social networks to connect with new generations of women. She explains the body matters concerning this topic in relation with one of her last pieces:

In *Three weeks in January* I started with the question about where I could organize women around the subject of violence and particularly rape [...], [I] got a person-to-person organizing, personal organization or online organizing [...] in the 70s, the awareness of violence against women came from small consciousness groups, groups sustaining women to get together, and they would talk about personal experiences [...] they would begin to reveal their secrets of what their experience was [...] there was a physical embodiment of the experience and people listening to their experiences, that is, groups were small and you could comfort each other, you could hold each other, you could cry (Toxic Lesbian 2014: p. 2)

The 'physical', non-digital experience seems crucial to Lacy's purposes. This implies, of course, a new handicap to incorporate the cyberspace in her art dynamics:

[T]he question I had was whether or not the embodiment of the original revelations of rape would carry through to the disembodiment of the web culture and would in a way provide a welcome ability for women to remain private while revealing personal issues or would it allow for actually less human contact and ultimately it would be less political despite the revelation of political experiences (p. 10).

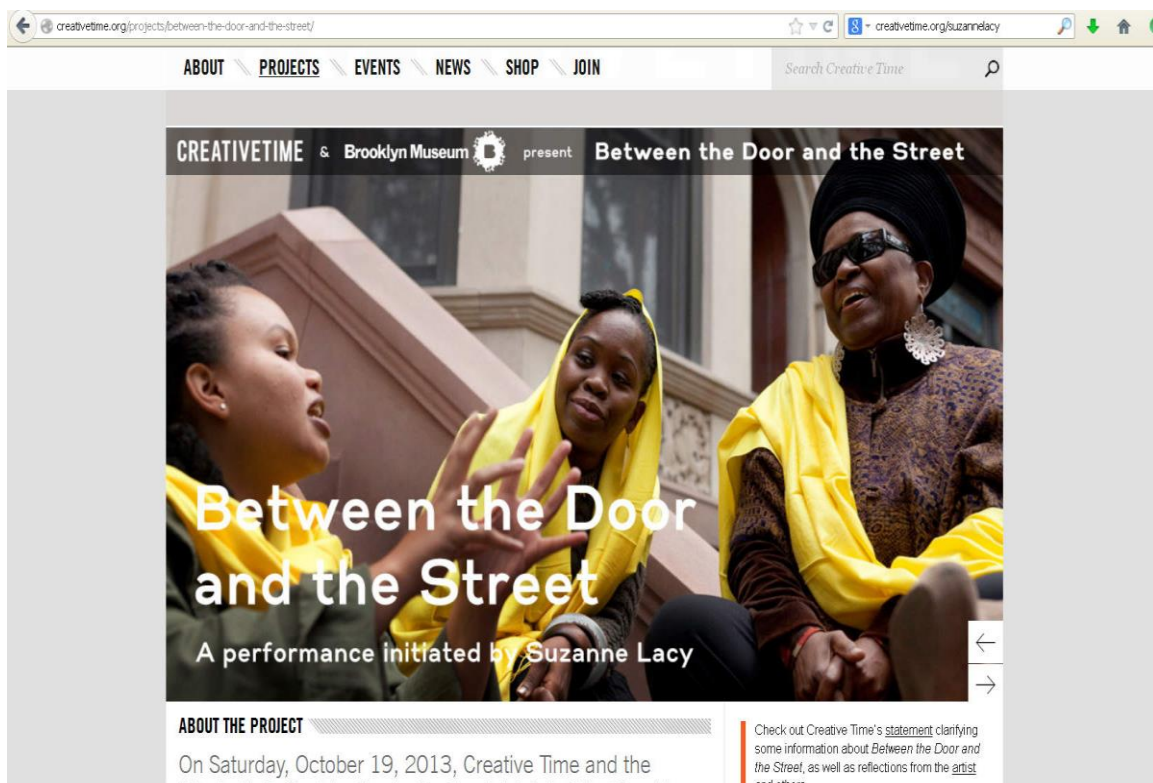


Image E



Image F

The fact is that, even though all these aspects did not fully convince Lacy, she decided to use social networks and the Internet for her last art piece *Between the Door and the Street*<sup>10</sup> [Images E-F], in November 2013, in New York City. For this purpose, she delegated this part of the project to other collectives or agents in charge. She explains it as follows:

[S]o that was the idea of that Hollaback<sup>11</sup> [Image G] project: create an online organizing [...] using that phrase and offline organizing with people communicating directly [...] to come to, or offer, a specific advice.

[T]hrough Facebook and Twitter we developed a campaign [...] that said: ‘I know someone who’s been raped, do you?’ So our campaign was: ‘I know someone, do you?’ [...] and I should invite people into the conversation without having to reveal the fact that they themselves had been raped” (Toxic Lesbian 2014: p. 3)<sup>12</sup>.

“So I cannot tell you much about the online community because all I know about it is what occurred [...] in either Twitter or Facebook [...] online community was not particularly available to me because it was not a ‘discursive environment’ (Toxic Lesbian 2014: p. 4).

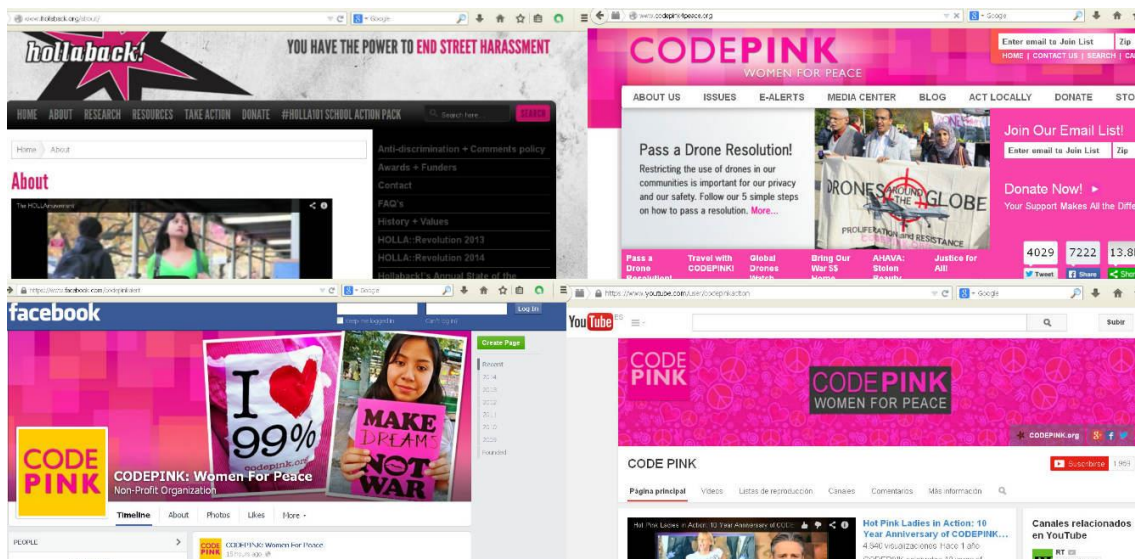


Image G

As we see, the discussion line of these artists is very far from the usual current topics of museums. Artist commonly working with museums don’t need to tackle these topics. They feel secure in the context and the reference where they are embedded –which is foreseeable. In this sense, they don’t need to question the pillars of the institution.

In 2010, during Lacy’s project *Tatoed Skeleton*<sup>13</sup> [Image H] at the Reina Sofía Museum, Toxic Lesbian produced the first or one of the first online performances at the institutional Museum web site. In this sense, the project intervention was digital, remote; there were no object exhibition or offline public. In that moment, the museum was completely ignorant of the resources or consequences this model could have on the audience.



In the same line, Lacy goes deeper explaining the change in her perspective when dealing with technologies during *Three Weeks in January*:

At the top of the City Hall in Los Angeles I convened the conversation between eight people [...] Around the outside of this group there was a group of 15 people who were online and they were communicating through blogs, through Twitter, through Facebook, and so on, about what they were hearing, so the general public actually could only access this performance through social media and that’s probably the closest to the kind of thing that Toxic Lesbian does which is, you know, to basically do a performance that took place in cyberspace (Toxic Lesbian, 2014: p. 6,7).



Image H

This example helps us see where we are, in regard to some institutions, in the construction of digital ‘no-places’, and to the Internet as a context for the creation and the acknowledgement of art works. More precisely, in the context of public art –not in the category of net-art– creating works of process art, collaborative and performed art, specifically for these contexts.

This means that categorization is still blurry because it breaks away from traditional standards. An example of this is Lacy’s explanation (transcribed below) of her distinctions between the on-line community (which creation she attributes to mediators) and the social groups she convened offline (performers, as she called them), following her usual project protocols:

**Toxic Lesbian:** you gathered [...] a group of community managers. I can imagine that, somehow, you had previous meetings with those community managers, because those community managers were talking to their followers from their own Twitter and Facebook accounts and with the communication style they were already used to use. They were somehow your vehicle, the mediation between you and the online community, right?

**Suzanne Lacy:** Particularly in *Between the Door and the Streets* we did not use electronic or online communications as an aspect of the work, as we got in *Three Weeks in January*; we only used advertisement and communication, but it was not centralized in the way Toxic Lesbian's work is, or in the way *Three Weeks in January* [...] I would communicate with a group of ten organizers who would each go out and communicate with ten organizations. So, in a sense, while communication with the performers was mediated through people, just like in *Three Weeks in January*, my communication between people involved in the project was mediated technologically.

[...]

**TL:** [...] as spectators, we do not perceive that it was not you who created –or did not– the online community. The fact is that the project actually generated the online community. You simply communicated your project to some mediators, doing the same as when you worked with leaders of the chosen groups, who are social mediators as well. It would be something similar; didn't you conceptualize it in a similar way?

**SL:** Yes, I think you are right [...] I like to have a physical body next to me, and that, in a sense, is an aspect of my generation as well as my personal character. The question for me is what forms of communication and what forms of organizing take place in different ways" (Toxic Lesbian 2014: p. 4).

Another aspect that influences how the project takes shape is the American artist worked with cultural and patronage institutions. In that sense, there is a qualitative leap regarding what the American culture offers in matter of communication services applied to the field of art. On one hand, *Between the Door and the Street* was developed at the Brooklyn Museum –which role seems unclear. But the second and essential partner, Creative Time<sup>14</sup>, changed some of Lacy's online process. She told us:

**TL:** In your last public art projects you worked with institutions like the Brooklyn Museum [...] such as Creative Time [...] do have their own voice in social media. Which role do these institutions have in your last projects, how do they intervene in your art pieces?

**SL:** [...] Since the 70s I invited institutions to collaborate but I remained the producer [...] When I am invited now by an institution (Tate Modern or even Reina Sofía), I remain just as the organizer [...] they provide funding, instead of me having to raise it, there are a lot of problems that arise that I didn't have to deal with earlier. And those problems have to do with pre-existing institutional protocols so when I spoke about the *Wild West*, that also was an aspect of my work that I could pretty much independently produce [...] Creative Time [...] come with the protocols, including an agenda [...] these relationships create a different set of practicalities, supports and influences to produce this kind of work. You are right that in producing a work with Creative Time then I am also operating within their media voice. In this project, Creative Time used electronic media mostly for advertising the piece [...] So in the contract, we had a group of organizers who would contact organizations and create leaders [...] and they would contact people from Creative Time. [...]

So I would call that an artwork within the art work and that was not the same thing as the advertising aspect of the media that Creative Time means (Toxic Lesbian 2014: 7)

As we have seen in these examples, the construction of no-places evolving at considerable speed, and the same applies to their political, cultural, economical and creative connotations. Of course, this diversification affects the very fabric of artists, institutions and cultural businesses, which take the lead and introduce terms, protocols and actions previously unknown to the art world. We are at the beginning of a path that will lead us to profound transformations.

In conclusion, now we could ask ourselves where is that Far West that those women artists set out to conquer 40 years ago. Some of them found it in the New Genre of Public Art: another 'land' to settle their art project, to create and to communicate.

In this line, we asked Suzanne Lacy this question during our cybermeeting. The American artist left us the point of view issued from her experience, transcribed as follows:

**TL:** You said public art was for female artists the Far West of opportunities [...] Do you think that somehow that the sensitivity of the Far West of opportunities is developing now through the internet in a parallel way to what you experienced in the 70s?

**SL:** [...] *The Far West* [...] I was obviously referring to the relationship California has with the rest of the United States as a place outside the mainstream institutions (that's not true anymore but it was very true in the 70s) [...] I think it is as true as never before, to talk about the internet as the 'Wild West of feminism'. I think we still have to resolve this issue: who has access to the internet? (Toxic Lesbian 2014: p. 7).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.suzannelacy.com/> The political upheavals and experimental tendencies in art during the 1960s and 70s, produced important changes at the avant-garde movements. The American artist Suzanne Lacy emerged during these changes. Basic aspects concerning creation were modified: the concept of art, art as object, the authorship, or considerations about the audience. A new utopia was born: art could be made in collaboration and dialogue in a deep relation with human life.

<sup>2</sup> *Mapping the terrain: New Genre Public Art* was edited in 1994 by Suzanne Lacy.

<sup>3</sup> In the first years of the 1990s, some artists and art critics laid the foundations for what would be called a New Genre of Public Art. This breakup bears a close relation to the feminist movement, insofar as it generated a reflection about everyday life, gender structures, social structures or people's equality. California was one of the places where the change started and this experimentation was perceived by many women looking for other models to create and show their art works.

<sup>4</sup> Shu Lea Cheang (1954) is an artist from Taiwan who develops art projects in the context of the new genre of public art. She adheres to the artistic and activist principles of cyberfeminism in relation to a re-defining of gender using and fostering empowerment through new technologies and web communication. Her piece '*Brandon*' (1998-99), bought by The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, is an example of this.

<sup>5</sup> This encounter (<http://www.mataderomadrid.org/ficha/3383/del-levantamiento-feminista-al-arte-publico.html>) is included in the Toxic Lesbian collaboration (2014-2016) with Intermediae Matadero Madrid. The research focuses on various artists that represent the new genre of public art, cyberfeminism and social and political perspectives in relation with new places to create and to show art works. It originates in the art project developed by Toxic Lesbian since 2005, which implies the same principles and models, synthesized in image A.

For this encounter, as well as for other open dialogues carried out by Toxic Lesbian in collaboration with other institutions, image B shows the media provided: digital media and live streaming by [www.toxiclesbian.org](http://www.toxiclesbian.org), and community management at Twitter (@toxiclesbian) Facebook (toxiclesbian) and YouTube (www.youtube.com/TOXICLESBIAN)

<sup>6</sup> Intermediae Matadero Madrid is a public cultural institution from the City Council of Madrid. <http://www.mataderomadrid.org/intermedi%C3%A6.html>

<sup>7</sup> Toxic Lesbian (2005) ([www.toxiclesbian.org](http://www.toxiclesbian.org)) is the name of public art projects about gender and sexual orientation, in collaboration with public institutions and social groups, copyleft, digitals and web broadcast.

<sup>8</sup> Gloria G. Durán (<http://gloriagduran.com/>) is a researcher and artist and holds a Ph.D. in Fine Arts (UPV).

<sup>9</sup> Lila Insúa teaches at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Complutense University, Madrid.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/suzanne\\_lacy/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/suzanne_lacy/) 'Between the door and the street' image at the Brooklyn Museum, Creative Time and Suzanne Lacy's web sites. Image E shows other sources. Different voices in Facebook in image F.

<sup>11</sup> Hollaback and Code Pink web-sites (<http://www.ihollaback.org/about/>)

<sup>12</sup> Suzanne Lacy interview by Toxic Lesbian. Retrieved June 8, 2014 from [http://www.toxiclesbian.org/id\\_eng/images/pdf/Lacy\\_6\\_5\\_2014\\_eng.pdf](http://www.toxiclesbian.org/id_eng/images/pdf/Lacy_6_5_2014_eng.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> *Tattooed Skeleton* (<http://www.museoreinasofia.es/actividades/suzanne-lacy-esqueleto-tatuado>) is a 2010 project by Suzanne Lacy for the MNCARS, in collaboration with feminist organizations, against gender violence, with the participation of the Spanish government (Ministry of Equality) and some artists like Toxic Lesbian, among others.

<sup>14</sup> Creative Time (<http://creativetime.org/>) is an international agent specialized in global cultural events production and communication, characterized by intense community management and online diffusion.

## Images

A: Toxic Lesbian (2013), C.C.3.0. Retrieved February 7, 2014 from [www.toxiclesbian.org](http://www.toxiclesbian.org)

B: Images from the cybermeeting in Matadero Madrid. Toxic Lesbian, 2014. [www.re-visiones.net](http://www.re-visiones.net)

C: Web 2.0 Suzanne Lacy's piece, "Three Weeks in January" (2012) Retrieved April 26, 2014 from <http://www.threeweeksinjanuary.org/>

D: Twitter "Three Weeks in January" (2012) @3WeeksInJan Retrieved April 26, 2014 from <https://twitter.com/3WeeksInJan>

E: Suzanne Lacy's web site, "Between the door and the street" (2013) with the Brooklyn Museum and Creative Time. Retrieved April 26, 2014 from <http://creativetime.org/projects/between-the-door-and-the-street/>

F: Facebook "Between the door and the street" (2013) Retrieved April 26, 2014 from <https://www.facebook.com/events/593494407363215/>

G: Feminist activist organisations webs and social networks Hollaback and Codepink. Retrieved June 15, 2014 from <http://www.ihollaback.org/about/> y <http://www.codepink4peace.org/>

H: Toxic Lesbian online performance on line through the Reina Sofia's Museum web site in 2010. Suzanne Lacy's Tatoed Skeleton. Retrieved November 25, 2010 from <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/actividades/suzanne-lacy-esqueleto-tatuado>

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