

Representations of Sexual Violence in Performance

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BOOKS REVIEWED: Vivien Green Fryd, *Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art Since 1970*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019; Nancy Princenthal, *Unspeakable Acts: Women, Art, and Sexual Violence in the 1970s*. New York, NY: Thames and Hudson Inc., 2019.

Beautifully written and extensively researched, the two books under review have much in common. Both writers discuss the work of Suzanne Lacy, Leslie Labowitz-Starus, Anna Mendieta, Yoko Ono, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Kara Walker, and Naima Ramos-Chapman. Both writers acknowledge their debt to #MeToo, a movement started by Tarana Burke to reach out to fellow survivors of sexual assault that was revived in 2017. Then Alyssa Milano encouraged women to use #MeToo on Facebook in response to charges of sexual harassment and assault leveled against powerful men, such as President Donald Trump and film producer Harvey Weinstein. Both writers are quick to take on the culture of rape that ignores or even condones sexual assault, particularly in the art world where male artists have used women and their bodies with impunity. Both writers pay homage to Susan Brownmiller, the author of *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*.

Of the two books, *Against Our Will* is the most comprehensive and the easiest to follow. The book is meticulously researched with copious illustrations and full-color pages, courtesy of a publication grant from the Wyeth Foundation for American Art. Fryd begins her chronological account with a short history of American art and culture that demonstrates the pervasiveness of rape culture. Herself a survivor of rape, Fryd is particularly interested in how these artists used art and performance to represent and confront past sexual traumas, strategically retelling these stories to “reshape the discourse of sexual violence.” For Fryd, the act of witnessing is central to her project, and begins with the witnessing that Mendieta, Lacy, and Labowitz-Starus asked of their audience. Performance

is central to this exchange, and Fryd draws on the work of Amelia Jones and Meiling Cheng to argue that the public and private rituals of these performances unite the viewers and encourage political action.

Witnessing was particularly important for those recovering from incest, and Fryd's second chapter is devoted to two Los Angeles Women's Building exhibitions organized by *The Incest Awareness Project: Bedtime Stories* and *Equal Time in Equal Space*, both of which addressed the toxic link between patriarchy, incest, and women's subjugation. Fryd's book was over a decade in the making, which is evident from the care with which she has chosen her artists, responding to the shift in the definition of rape/assault that took place from second- to third-wave feminism. Particularly strong are the chapters on Faith Ringgold's cycle of twenty-one quilts that address the rape of black bodies during the transatlantic slave trade, the discussion of anti-rape exhibitions in the 1980s and early 1990s, and the inclusion of a chapter chronicling her experience producing a project by Judy Chicago and Donald Woodman at Vanderbilt University entitled *Evoke/Invoke/Provoke*. Fryd concludes the book with a discussion of *Mattress Performance: Carry That Weight*, Emma Sulkowicz's silent protest against her rape and the refusal of Columbia University to hold her rapist accountable.

The strength of *Against Our Will* lies in the clarity of the message, the observant discussion of the work, and the meticulous research. In comparison, Princenthal's *Unspeakable Acts* is more peripatetic, eschewing chronology in favor of a close reading of certain works of art as they played off against the culture in which they occurred. The strength of the book lies in Princenthal's willingness to do a close reading of the art and performance (informed by extensive interviews whenever possible) against primary source texts. She draws on Brownmiller, of course, but also on Simone de Beauvoir, Susan Griffin, Linda Nochlin, Robin Morgan, Elaine Brown, Audre Lorde, Cathy Wilkerson, Christopher Lasch, Michelle Wallace, Andrea Dworkin, Susan Sontag, Georges Bataille, Angela Carter, Elaine Showalter, Molly Haskell, and Katie Roiphe—writers who with a few exceptions are better known for popular best sellers than philosophical or theoretical writing. Princenthal sets the scene in her introduction by addressing the way in which early feminist texts such as Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and The Boston Women's Health Collective's *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, addressed—or rather did not address—rape culture. Rape was not a feminist issue until 1971 when Brownmiller published *Against Our Will* and made sexual violence a feminist issue. Prior to this publication, the prevailing belief, as evidenced by these texts as well as that of Menachem Amir, author of *Patterns in Forcible Rape* (1971), was that "girls" were often responsible for their own rapes or wanted to be raped to some degree.

Princenthal uses the popularity of Amir's text, along with the dearth of rape coverage in canonical feminist texts, to demonstrate why the art world only gradually came to acknowledge sexual violence. Princenthal reads Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* and Valie Export's *Touch Cinema* and *Genital Panic* against Vito Acconci's *Following Piece* and *Broad Jump 71* (where the audience could "jump for a broad" by beating Acconci's broad jump). The prize was two hours with a woman, one of whom was Kathy Dillon, Acconci's partner. Acconci was not alone in using women in a manner that bordered on predatory in the name of conceptual/performance art. Princenthal could just as easily have used a number of his contemporaries, such as Paul McCarthy or Chris Burden. In choosing Acconci, Princenthal makes clear how absolutely extraordinary were performances such as *Ablutions* (Rahmani, Orgel, Lacy, and Chicago), *3 Weeks in May* (Lacy and Labowitz-Starus), *Record Companies Drag Their Feet* (Labowitz-Starus), and *In Mourning and In Rage* (Lacy and Labowitz-Starus) when they appeared in the midst of a culture that advocated that the best women could do to prevent rape was learn how to defend themselves. These performances, along with Lacy's artist's book *Rape Is*, defined a culture in which catcalls, inappropriate touching, pornography, harassment, and non-consensual sex were part of a larger institution of rape culture that included violent sexual assault and, in some cases, homicide.

Princenthal, whose feminism was developed in the early nineties, admits to her discomfort upon first seeing *Rape Is*, a discomfort that she returns to in a later chapter. Acknowledging the importance of the sex positive, pro-porn performance as defined by Carol Vance and seen in the work of Annie Sprinkle or Ann Magnuson, Princenthal finds herself at odds with some of the anti-porn work done by Lacy and Labowitz-Starus, noting that it was "with reason" that the LGBTQ community resisted anti-porn activism and the regulation of sex and sex acts. Like Fryd, Princenthal concludes that what constitutes rape culture has changed considerably since the early 1970s, with an acknowledgement that there is no hard and fast definition of sexual assault, that women are not the only victims of rape, and that there is a continuum between harassment, discrimination, abuse, incest, and rape.

There are some omissions in both books. *Ablutions*, the first major performance about sexual assault, is at the center of both, yet not enough credit is given to Aviva Rahmani, who has recently gone on record as the artist who first conceptualized the performance. Rahmani was the only artist to have experienced sexual assault as well. Artists such as Christen Clifford, Micol Hebron, and Ayana Evans, all of whom have addressed rape culture and, in the case of Clifford and Hebron, the intersection of that culture with pornography, were not included in either book. Princenthal does not acknowledge important critical work

that informs our current understanding of the topic, including that of Rebecca Schneider, Amelia Jones, and Fryd (who has been presenting and publishing on this topic since 2007), nor does the book include a bibliography that might at least acknowledge this work.

Fryd and Princenthal have done important work, published on the eve of plague and protest. The Covid-19 pandemic and the protests sparked by the death of George Floyd made it apparent just how many people still have little access to the basic necessities of living, including good medical care, safe working condition, education, adequate housing, and enough food. Precarity facilitates sexual assault and it is important to understand how these current issues are interrelated with the #MeToo movement. In the wake of these new books centered on American art, the conversations that should be happening now can be found by looking at the work of artists such as Tania El Khoury, Alejandra Herrera Silva, Nalini Malani, and Regina José Galindo, all of whom address the nexus of repression, race, precarity, maternity, and vulnerability outside of the global north.

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