

2012

Radical Possibilities: Independent Media Production and Contemporary Reproductive Justice Activism

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***Radical Possibilities: Independent Media Production and Contemporary
Reproductive Justice Activism***

Anna Justine Weick

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the
Prerequisite for Honors
in American Studies
Wellesley College

May 2012

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Preface & Acknowledgements

As a reproductive justice activist myself, I offer this thesis as a measure of my gratitude and reverence for activists of the past and present. I undertook this thesis as a more academic means of practicing my own activism through the process of historicizing contemporary protest. With activists too busy making change to highlight their own successes, I wanted to write a thesis that reflected the importance of their daily work. In activist, feminist, independent art, or radical political communities, some of the most meaningful thoughts and ideas are never recorded, and their valuable organizing strategies remain hidden from the mainstream. I hope that each new study of activist art will lead to further documentation of this rich and evolving body of work.

I want to thank the activists and artists who spoke with me directly for interviews: Heather Ault, Nuala Cabral, Jane Cawthorne, Cindy Cooper, Heather Freeman, Steph Herold, Megan Smith, and Martha Solomon. In addition to the precious time they spent speaking with me, these participants helped shape my personal understandings of reproductive justice activism. I am still touched by their humor, humility, and genuine desire to support my thesis. My thanks also go to the countless other activists whose work greatly inspired my project.

I am appreciative of the support I've received from faculty, staff, and academic departments (American Studies and Women's and Gender Studies) this past year. This project would not exist without the guidance of my passionate honors advisor, Professor Susan Reverby. Finally, thanks to the activists, artists, friends, and family members who have taught me everything I know about feminism: you inspire me with your kindness and love every day.

Chapter One

Introduction: Battleground of 2012

In 2012, mainstream feminist and pro-choice organizations across the United States are facing intense resistance. From threats of defunding Planned Parenthood and arguments over the extent of healthcare coverage for abortion, to decisions about birth control and Plan B, there were many issues regarding women's health that captured the nation's attention this past year. As hundreds of new pieces of legislation were announced on the state and federal levels, local and national forces joined to fight back; however, with so many disparate battles, a larger picture often eluded individual activists. In the midst of "pro-life" propaganda leaflets, posters, and billboards of bloody fetuses, women's health activists continue to look for a visual focal point that speaks to their work and struggles in a world where abortion seems less like a given right.

It is now generally accepted that 2011 was a "record-setting year for anti-choice legislation," with 68% of new reproductive health related provisions directly restricting abortion access, according to the Guttmacher Institute.¹ Guttmacher provides a graph contextualizing this recent trend on a timeline starting in 1985 (Fig. 1), representing a more general look into the increasing magnitude of restrictions.² Guttmacher also explains the different manifestations of these restrictions, from bans (Mississippi's rejection of the proposed "Personhood" Amendment, which sought to define embryos as legally human), waiting periods (South Dakota's proposed 72-hour period between abortion counseling and the procedure), mandatory ultrasounds (NC, TX, and more recently, Virginia), insurance coverage (some states allowing insurance to require individuals to cover abortion on their own), clinic regulations (building code regulations

¹ "States Enact a Record Number of Abortion Restrictions in 2011." *Guttmacher Media Center*
<<http://www.guttmacher.org/media/inthenews/2012/01/05/endofyear.html>>

² Ibid.

unrelated to health services), to medication abortion (preventing women from obtaining medication abortion over-the-phone).³ Assaults on women's reproductive health have increased in frequency and intensity with a range of new tactics on multiple political and socio-cultural levels.

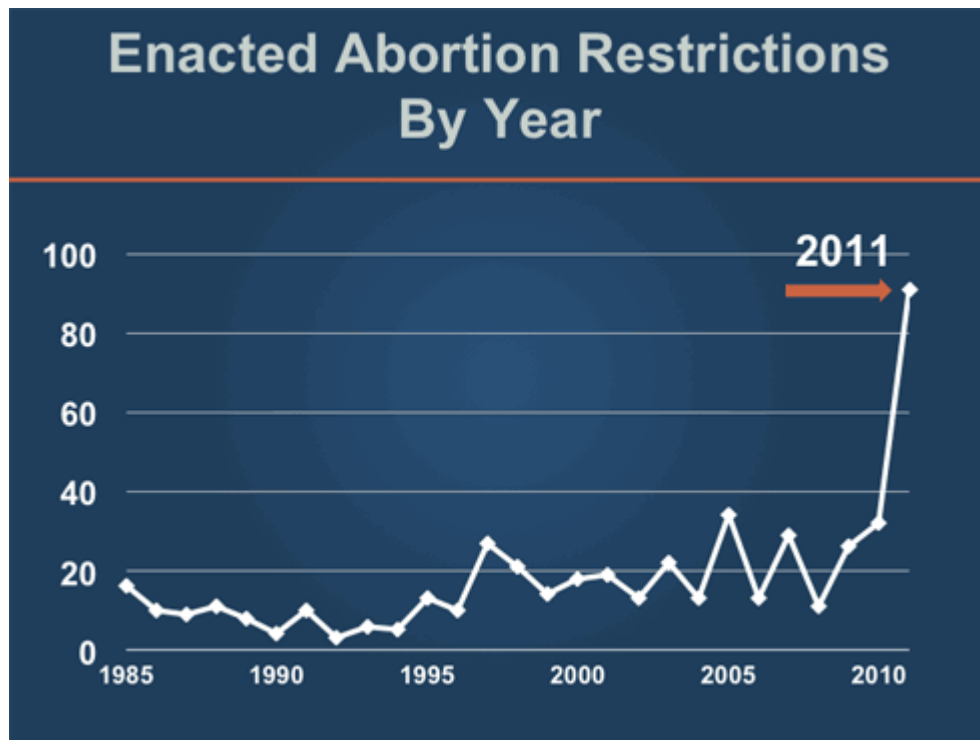


Figure 1: Guttmacher's Enacted Abortion Restrictions by Year, 1/5/12

Women's health activists also saw their bodily autonomy attacked on fronts other than abortion but broadly connected to reproductive healthcare, opening up the framing of abortion rights as one of many interconnected issues. This field of activism encompasses a variety of people working on a range of issues and self-identified with a number of terms: "pro-choice" is a term which has existed for years and is often used by mainstream feminist organizations such as NARAL and NOW; sometimes "pro-choice" activists working specifically within healthcare advocacy rather than activism use the terms "reproductive health"; "reproductive rights" broadened the pro-choice scope and is often used to refer specifically to the legal battles

³ Ibid.

connected to women's health autonomy; and "reproductive justice" is a newer term which looks at abortion within a larger, interconnected web of health and justice.

The recently established activist framework of reproductive justice looks into the web of interconnected factors affecting a woman's ability to choose to have (or not have) children and parent them in a safe and healthy environment. Elizabeth Nash of Guttmacher references assaults on sexual and reproductive health generally within the category of "reproductive rights," from the Guttmacher Institute and printed in *Reproductive Health (RH) Reality Check*. Much of her coverage focuses on the increasing political action taken against family planning services and access. Nash also reports that the only changes in state sexual education policies moved in the direction of abstinence, showing a more conservative trend barring access to family planning services more generally.⁴



Figure 2: "Pro-Life" Protestor at 2010 Demonstration against Abortion Provider Dr. Leroy Cahart

⁴ Nash, Elizabeth. "Losing Ground on Women's Rights: In 2011, Sex Ed, Contraception, Abortion Rights All Under Seige." 5 Jan 2012. *RH Reality Check* 1 April 2012. <<http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/article/2012/01/05/losing-ground-on-womens-rights-in-2011-sex-ed-contraception-abortion-rights-all-u>>. For example, "A new requirement enacted in North Dakota mandates that the health education provided in the state includes information on the benefits of abstinence 'until and within marriage.'"

Dominating many cultural spaces of public and private discourse with powerful rhetorical and visual strategies is a vital strength for anti-choice media and “pro-life” activists, working in concert with the rise in legislated restrictions on reproductive health and abortion access. Sexist, racist, xenophobic, classist, and homophobic assaults on reproductive justice in the past years have extended beyond individual laws, violence against clinics and abortion doctors, and picketing into a complex web of cultural and media messages, images, and voices. For example, *Ms. Magazine* blogger Annie Shields notes the anti-choice efforts at dominating “public space” and media during the past year, including (but not limited to) some states’ *Choose Life* license plates and the array of inflammatory (and particularly racist) billboards (Fig. 4 and 5 show two examples).⁵ This violation of public space with inflammatory anti-abortion rhetoric extends to the topic of clinic-targeted violence campaigns that have not shown any sign of ceasing. Within this current climate of cultural bullying and violence campaigns by anti-choice forces, there is no “notion of women as corporeal beings and no sense of the efficacy of abortion,” according to author Rosemary Candelario in the UCLA’s *Center for the Study of Women* March 2012 update.⁶ Candelario also identifies recent legislative and cultural techniques with rhetoric “reduc[ing]” women “to a passageway.”⁷

⁵“‘Choose Life’ License Plates.” *Guttmacher Institute: State Policies in Brief*. 1 April 2012. Web. 1 April 2012. <http://www.guttmacher.org/statecenter/spibs/spib_CLLP.pdf>

Solomon, Akiba. “Nine Reasons to Hate Anti-Abortion Billboards that Target Black Women.” *Colorlines*. 25 Feb 2011. Web. 1 April 2012. <http://colorlines.com/archives/2011/02/nine_reasons_to_hate_anti-abortion_billboards_that_target_black_women--and_one_reason_to_feel_the_lo.html>

⁶ Candelario, Rosemary. Abortion Performance and Politics. *UC Los Angeles: UCLA Center for the Study of Women*. 3 March 2012. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/7sv5h22215>>

⁷ Ibid.



Figure 3: "Pro-Life" Protestors in Knoxville Taking Action Against Planned Parenthood



Figure 4: "Pro-Life" Billboard from 2010



Figure 5: “Too Many Aborted” billboard from 2010

In the middle of this turmoil, there are numerous political, activist, and grassroots nonprofits and organizations working for abortion rights with divergent views and goals. Mainstream feminist organizations (NOW, Feminist Majority, NARAL, and others) are the best-funded opposition to right wing attacks. In addition to being the most visible, these organizations must also be the most restricted in terms of both the content and medium of their activist image, materials, and projects. Because of this funding relationship, NOW, NARAL, Planned Parenthood and others can only exist if they do not disrupt or offend pre-established contemporary political norms.

Journalist Sunsara Taylor gives an example of this extreme pro-choice bending to resistance from conservative forces in her “Report from DC on Roe v. Wade Anniversary”: “Go...and look at NARAL’s homepage and you can’t find the word abortion anywhere on the front page!” She continues, explaining how and why she sees this process impacting pro-choice supporters: “The mainstream pro-choice movement...[has] gone along with distancing itself from an unapologetic defense of abortion AND has stopped mobilizing people to really fight for

abortion rights and instead mobilizes them to vote and give money to elections.”⁸ Taylor’s description of the mainstream pro-choice political climate highlights the limited possible scope of mainstream feminist organizations.

Mainstream pro-choice groups organized cohesive and immediate (mainly digitally-based) responses to the most recent assaults on reproductive freedoms, but their results seemed to only keep violence at bay rather than maintaining a powerful and active presence advocating for women’s health. Delineating this grave landscape is not to undermine the resilience and strength of reproductive justice activists but to propose a conscious examination of the strategies and organizational goals when individuals participate in larger actions organized by mainstream pro-choice groups.

In the eyes of some grassroots activists, mainstream pro-choice organizations have failed: to stop the onslaught of political attacks, to keep diverse activist and feminist communities strong and cohesive, and to remain, as a movement, fiercely committed to abortion rights in rhetoric as well as in ground-level action. If current mainstream, pro-choice media campaigns and projects are not sufficient to fight the right wing in its present form, activists must identify and work towards clear goals to foster community and locally based activism. Where were the radical, immediate, and creative responses to these right-wing attacks? Where were the people who could speak in response without careful consideration for political position, non-polarizing language, and appealing to funding sources? Where are our images of hope for the future?

Other grassroots activists similarly bemoan the lack of rhetorical and visual innovation within the materials of mainstream pro-choice organizations. Some start out as artists and later

⁸ Taylor, Sunsara. “Report from DC on Roe v. Wade Anniversary: Taking on the ‘March for Forced Motherhood!’” *The World Can’t Wait*. 23 Jan 2012. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.worldcantwait.net/index.php/features-mainmenu-220/reproductive-rights/7587-report-from-dc-on-roe-v-wade-anniversary-taking-on-the-march-for-forced-motherhood>>

become involved in feminist activist communities; others make media as a response to their previous feminist activist experiences. Although these media-makers approach their art from completely different genres, views, and life positions, their frustration with the current political climate and their desire to change the course of women's health activism unites their otherwise distinct work.

From this, I have undertaken a study principally focused on different forms of contemporary, independent arts and media activism related to reproductive justice in order to document the people producing this media and to analyze some common themes and methods of production. I conducted this research within a long and rich (but often forgotten) history of feminist alternative arts and media about abortion. Sociologists Deana Rohlinger and Jesse Klein address the grave lack of information and research conducted on the visual representations of the abortion rights struggle within mainstream culture.⁹ With media that fails to address even mainstream abortion-rights news and politics, sharing the work and activism of underground and independent artists becomes even more compelling and important. My own research methodology included identifying these artists, researching their work and activism, and choosing selected artists and organizers relevant and/or available for interviewing through a feminist oral history lens. I also analyzed separate art and media pieces in conjunction with these interview narratives. 'Zines – self-published magazines – will also be explored as a primary resource of non-mainstream arts protest with reproductive justice and feminist aims.

I also seek to place these reproductive justice activists within a context of American feminist media and organizing history. Examining independent reproductive justice media activism within the contexts of feminist art history, the pro-choice/reproductive justice

⁹ Rohlinger, Deana A. and Jesse Klein. "Visual Landscapes and the Abortion Issue." *American Behavioral Scientist*. 2011/2012: 172.

movement's evolution, and recent patterns of media consolidation in America, the work of these media-makers becomes even more compelling. Synthesized together with feminist, critical media, anti-racist, and zine theory, these voices represent a movement towards the celebration of more ephemeral, alternative protest methods, especially when representing a subject as multi-faceted and potentially polarizing as reproductive justice. Located within the cultural history of alternative art making and activism in regard to reproductive justice they demonstrate new media's strong connections with localized, grassroots media protest methods of the '70s and '80s (further discussed in Ch 2). Media studies expert Alexandra Juhasz elaborates on this simultaneous disconnection from and re-entering into historical activist modes: "The future of feminist media scholarship begins with a return: a homecoming to the feminist media community and movement from whence it was born," while still ensuring that "nostalgia" does not "obscur[e] the feminist organizing and media work that is happening now."¹⁰

What are the strengths of these independent and D.I.Y. (do-it-yourself) modes of media-making? My thesis demonstrates that these non-mainstream modes of media production allow for greater freedom for the artist, more flexible and adaptable modes of creation, and a refuge from the chronic political pressures of funding. Beyond the art making itself, these activists strive to create open, collaborative, and localized spaces for community building and organizing. This community building is seen by many as a fundamental part of their reproductive justice activism, a stance that defines activism beyond the protest effort itself.

The artistic direction of reproductive justice activism has not figured prominently in the policies and political strategies of mainstream pro-choice organizations. This project takes the stance that a thoughtful, adaptable, nuanced, and cohesive visual rhetorical strategy is

¹⁰ Juhasz, Alexandra. "The Future was Then: Reinvesting in Feminist Media Practice and Politics." *Camera Obscura*. Vol 61. 2006. 53

fundamentally important to the present and future success of the abortion-rights movement and should be a part of the pro-choice political efforts. Even without going as far as to suggest the mainstream pro-choice groups should be completely replaced by other modes of activism, the events of the past year especially indicate a need for a revised and reformulated strategy. In looking for these new strategies, one must keep in mind the “fluid” identity of social movements and individuals within them, broadening our considerations of what constitutes “activism,” “social movements,” and “social movement organizations,” as described by Suzanne Staggenborg in “Social Movement Communities and Cycles of Protest: The Emergence and Maintenance of a Local Women’s Movement.”¹¹ Perhaps a careful attention to the meaningful and flexible visual language of activism can be the tool we need to seriously change the course of this battle.

New methods of activist communication, mobilization, and artistic expression not only can combat “pro-life” extremism but can more adequately address the needs and experiences of younger generations raised on digital technologies. If Planned Parenthood and NOW have nationally-publicized awareness campaigns, and if the onslaughts and attacks keep coming, how can we say that these strategies alone are effective? Reproductive justice scholar Laurie Shrage also interrogates this lack of new visual and narrative rhetoric, specifically within the legacies of feminist activist scholarship:

For more than a decade now, feminist scholars have studied the cultural weapons of the anti-abortion movement, although this scholarship has yet to lead to new forms of rhetoric or activism in defense of abortion...I...provide an overview of feminist scholarship on the “pro-life” movement’s visual propaganda, which has culminated in the issuing of calls for new cultural interventions...I...analyze why these calls for actions have not yet been answered.¹²

¹¹ Staggenborg, Suzanne. “Social Movement Communities and Cycles of Protest: The Emergence and Maintenance of a Local Women’s Movement.” *Social Problems* Vol. 45, No. 2. May 1998.

¹² Shrage, Laurie. “From Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Barbie: Post-Porn Modernism and Abortion.” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1. (Spring, 2002). 63.

Rather than a failure on the part of mainstream pro-choice organizations, I see this as an opportunity for contemporary and future organizing on the local level. By realizing that current strategies are not enough to arm feminists with the “Third Wave” technique of reflexivity within an organization, and with an understanding of where our movement can be improved, we can strengthen local communities from within. One practical and nearly immediate way to accomplish this could be through the feminist academic and theoretical understanding and re-evaluation of the arts/media as political protest and resistance. Although arts and media have always been an important part of feminist social movements (as will be analyzed in Ch 2), at this specific moment in time, the arts and media context could have the power to arm activists with the nuanced and multiple approaches needed to succeed in long-term, meaningful ways. Simultaneously, activists could focus equally on supporting and building the movement’s members from within the group itself. Social justice journalist Michael Shank recognizes some of the limitations of deeply politicized activist media, instead calling for more creative approaches:

Activists frequently feel that they have exhausted the tools in their toolboxes...Most likely, these activists have exercised a range of cognitive approaches that include indisputable facts and figures, buttressed by convincing arguments, delivered passionately and eloquently. Baffling though as it may seem, this cognitive approach fails to impregnate a person’s emotional pathway or worldview – a perspective deeply influenced by and entrenched in religion, culture, tradition, and identity.¹³

With some voices working within this contemporary arts movement, I hope to re-imagine spaces and frameworks of abortion and reproductive health-related activism. Although this thesis discusses reproductive justice activist collective identity as a cohesive and identifiable quality, social movement theorists Francesca Polletta and James M. Jasper maintain that the process of forming one’s collective activist identity “is fluid and relational, emerging out of interactions with a number of different audiences, rather than fixed,” reminding us of the

¹³ Shank, Michael. “Re-defining the Movement: Art Activism.” *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*. Vol. 3, Issue 2 (Spring/Summer). 2005.

contextual and ever-evolving nature of such imposed social categories.¹⁴ Even so, in these re-imaginings, contemporary reproductive justice battles are strengthened and enriched by the incorporation of independent, localized, community-based protest modes. Additionally, contemporary modes of reproductive justice activism will place a fundamental importance on the visual and creative rhetoric and presentations of a group's positions and ethos.

Separated from the pressures and requirements of mainstream funding sources and audience scrutiny, the independent artists and zines I surveyed largely relished in the pleasure of freedom. They appreciated the privilege of being able to create art in their free time, and they poured any extra possible resources into the success of the art. Collective, locally-based, and community-focused protest methods similarly can transform activist spaces and re-invigorate activist networks. They can use digital technologies to their feminist advantages, and diverse and inter-medium methods of art-making can arise out of alternative art's goals. With a more holistic and community-building approach, individuals can be supported and nurtured in their activism and image-making while still participating in a larger, national movement.

To make this argument, I will first provide a cultural, historical, and art historical background for feminist activist art in the past forty years; this will contextualize the efforts of the artists and activists discussed in order to better understand the legacies they are working within and against. This history will include a look into feminist art practices and theory, the shifting of the pro-choice to reproductive justice framework, and the changing nature of media consolidation in America. Following this historical context, Chapter Three will discuss the feminist methodologies used to construct this project, carry out the interview-based research, and interpret and represent the results. Next, this study will provide some first-hand accounts from

¹⁴ Polletta, Francesca and James M. Jasper. "Collective Identity and Social Movements." *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol 27. (2001). 298

activists and artists describing the effective strategies and guiding principles of their art and media organizing in Chapter Four. Finally, Chapter Five will synthesize these first-hand lessons within a larger framework of contemporary reproductive justice activism, ultimately seeking to establish some successful and important strategies for future activist art projects.

Chapter Two

The Cultural Context for Contemporary Activism

Three main strands of historical and sociological background are necessary to analyze contemporary artistic activist projects. These strands include: the rise of feminist arts and political media; the shift from pro-choice to a reproductive justice framework; and the increased corporate consolidation of American media over time.

“NOT FOR SALE”: Feminist Politics & Media in the ‘70s to the Present

Contemporary activism can be contextualized within past modes of feminist protest and movement-building in order to see its historical legacies. Some of these historical legacies will be obvious in the responses of my interview participants; however, other legacies are discussed here to more generally contextualize an artists’ work based on some historical trends of media-making, feminist organizing, and abortion politics.

This historical legacy of feminist and anti-oppression political media-making can be understood within a few different spheres most relevant to the questions of reproductive justice activism’s future. Surveying interdisciplinary source materials (both academic and underground), contemporary artistic protest projects are framed within the histories of radical women’s collectives, feminist art making, and women of color organizing from the ‘70s to the late ‘80s. After outlining that foundation, the exploration of some ‘90s activism and the proliferation of an active feminist zine scene will provide a deeper understanding of the more recent roots of some contemporary projects. These various legacies combine to explain some motivations behind the collective, community-based, reflexive, anti-capitalist, and expansive qualities of contemporary independent activist reproductive justice projects.

Feminist art production and activism has moved out of the streets (and galleries) into colleges and libraries; a handful of the most famous (in terms of mainstream success) feminist-identified artists from the '70s-'80s now occupy space in textbooks and class syllabi next to Warhol and Johns.¹⁵ Given the time frame, geographic locations of U.S. artists, techniques and methods of creation, and artists' association with or separation from mainstream feminist activism, it can be daunting to construct even a loose definition of American feminist art production. In 2007's WACK: Art and the Feminist Revolution, one of the most extensive and comprehensive written and visual accounts of this time period (roughly up until the mid-'80s), Cornelia Butler offers one kind of definition of how feminism and art in America can be currently understood:

I want to assert that feminism constitutes an ideology of shifting criteria, one influenced and mediated by myriad other factors. Whereas art movements traditionally defined by charismatic individuals tended to be explicated and debated through manifestos and other writings, feminism is a relatively open-ended system that has, throughout its history of engagement with visual art, sustained an unprecedented degree of internal critique and contained wildly divergent political ideologies and practices.¹⁶

Butler continues discussing her motivations behind organizing the WACK book:

I had hoped to invoke feminist art's lofty and romantic striving for nothing less than a complete reorganization of cultural hierarchies. Rather than apologize for certain practices that are more ephemeral, less influential, or more qualitatively uneven, I chose instead to exalt the ways in which different women artists positioned themselves.¹⁷

Butler's choice to represent this history as such reflects her commitment to these classically invisible stories and projects despite the potential implications associated with her selections.¹⁸

She produces a fuller picture of the art organizing by acknowledging projects and pieces beyond those in textbooks and galleries. Her definition underlines the evolving and elusive meaning

¹⁵ See: Helena Rackitt and Peggy Phelan's Art and Feminism; Feminist art critic Lucy Lippard's work; the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A Sackler Center for Feminist Art; the Feminist Art Project at Rutgers University; among many other noteworthy and acclaimed histories and textbooks about feminist and women's movement art.

¹⁶ Butler, Cornelia, organizer, and Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed. WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, LA, 2007. 15

¹⁷ Ibid. 21

¹⁸ Ibid. 21

behind the term “feminist art” and the difficulties inherent in describing the movement in any general terms. Understanding the expansive meaning of “feminist art” helps keep feminist history under a constant cycle scrutiny and reflection as it is infused with the perspectives of younger activists, much like the pro-choice movement itself.

Feminists in the ‘70s women’s movement saw arts and media not only as a method of protest but as a means of transforming power relations. They did this by increasing attention paid to the process of art production and the sexist, racist, classist, and heterosexist processes dominating the academic and canonized art world. Emerging out of the rich alternative arts forums of the ‘60s (including street theatre, conceptual art “happenings,” pamphlet/independent publishing, and many more), some artists in the ‘70s morphed older practices with their experiences in women’s movement organizing. In addition, activists took advantage of the proliferation of new technologies, including political consciousness-raising through television and film.¹⁹ Art historian Linda Nochlin’s landmark 1971 article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” articulated the frustrations many in the women’s movement experienced and their convictions that arts should be recognized as a priority for future feminist theory and organizing.²⁰

In working to meet these goals of increasing feminist-centric media production, artists and activists skillfully inserted their voices in a variety of venues and levels of communication. For example, artistic expression gave “Second Wave” feminists a space available for voicing consciousness-raising concerns. These art efforts changed the dynamics of feminist art production in three main ways, as seen in feminist art and theory: some feminist artists reached

¹⁹ For more, refer to Todd Gitlin’s The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles: 2003.

²⁰ Nochlin, Linda. “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays. Westview Press: 1971.

mainstream-levels of success and attained an almost celebrity status; techniques and mediums for political art-making diversified; and art-making's relationship to the structure of mainstream media was made more visible.



Figure 6: “Womanhouse Kitchen,” by Judy Chicago. Getty Center Archive

First, the women's movement gave the abstract notion of “feminist art” some recognizable faces, names, and images by which the efforts could be identified in mainstream media and art history analysis. Some of these names, many of which still carry the measure of fame and importance they did in the '70s, serve as an introduction to feminist art-making or the factor that sustained the interest of a mainstream American audience. Judy Chicago's “Womanhouse” project (1972)

and the infamous “Dinner Party” exhibition (1979) were notable art endeavors that combined feminist politics and a mainstream art world appeal.²¹

Along with Chicago, Nancy Spero, Cindy Sherman, Yoko Ono, Kiki Smith, Faith Ringgold, and others achieved both recognition and lucrative sales. These efforts in the ‘70s and into the ‘80s to legitimize and recognize the potential genius in feminist and women-centric art offer a useful foundation for understanding the initial appeal of feminist art as well as its potential futures. Although these artists all self-identified their own aesthetics and politics very differently, their work can be viewed together through its resistance to the dominant visual and art-world hierarchies strongly favoring white, heterosexual, middle-class male artists.

Second Wave feminist artists also employed the use of a diverse range of art-making methods to communicate their message and increase the likelihood of its reception. In addition to creatively constructed pieces within gallery spaces (such as “Dinner Party”), feminist artists exploded into a fury of interconnected techniques and conceptual ideas yet to be fully explored by the mainstream art world. Art on a canvas could employ the use of a variety of previously de-legitimized materials or methods. Galleries increased the number of feminist films being shown within their spaces, and some art-makers strove to reclaim the medium of film itself.²² For example, lesbian activist filmmaker Barbara Hammer infused the genre with radical, body and sex-focused pieces, such as “Menses” (1974), “Multiple Orgasm” (1976), and “Women I Love” (1976).²³

²¹“Feminist Art Timeline.” *Brooklyn Museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art*. Web. 1 April 2012. <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_timeline/plain_text.php>

²² Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” *Screen* 16 no. 3, London (Autumn 1975) 6-18. Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood. *Art in Theory* Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA: 2008

²³ Butler, Cornelia, organizer, and Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed. WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, LA, 2007. 146.



Figure 7: A Youtube Still of Yoko Ono's "Cut Piece" performance, *Parsons Urban Research Tool*

Art was also frequently seen divorced from the canvas and/or gallery setting altogether, instead inhabiting the streets, collectives, and activist circles. Performance and conceptual artists such as Yoko Ono (Fig. 7: "Cut Piece," 1964) and Carolee Schneemann (Fig 9: "Scroll I," 1975) experimented with art based around female bodies. Many of these new art mediums required viewer's participation, such as Tee Corinne's Cunt Coloring Book from 1975 (Fig. 8).²⁴

Figure 8: Tee Corinne, "labia drawing" from The Cunt Coloring Book, *Leslie-Lohman Gallery*



²⁴ Ibid. 87.



Figure 9: Carolee Schneemann's "Interior Scroll" from 1975, *Brooklyn Museum*

Performance art, street theatre, and public body art all relied on the disruption of public space by feminist political gestures. Flier arts, stickers, and postering covered cities and

underworlds with a mix of artistic and activist visuals and information. These different techniques can be observed in the film “Not for Sale,” documenting some independent feminist art performances, films, and pieces in the ‘70s.²⁵ Filmmaker Laura Cottingham writes about the making of “Not for Sale” and her attempts at providing historical examples of independent art modes influencing contemporary artists; with the film, she hopes to historicize current art activism within a long legacy:

Many contemporary artistic strategies and modes of production...are taken for granted in the 1990s – including video and performance works, activist-based practices, collective art efforts, sculpture and painting that incorporate matter and processes previously dismissed as craft, autobiography as subject, archival-based installations and explorations in identity politics.²⁶

Seventies-era feminist art activism can also be understood in relation to funding, independent art-making, and the barriers to women’s participation in male-dominated mainstream art world production. Some of this foundation came from academic considerations of feminist art production, while other aspects of this stance arose more organically from the artists themselves. As certain artists rose in popularity, more radical and political artists were forced to question their relationship to funding and audience within the context of their overall activist aims. The attention paid to the funding of political art also influenced the historical process of documenting and remembering the feminist art movement. Cottingham notes this challenge to her research in creating “Not for Sale”: “Because so few women had commercial support for their art during the 1970s, a sizable amount of the art works I located had been reproduced and preserved according to substandard technical conditions.”²⁷ Thus, although mainstream “feminist art” may be remembered with figures such as Chicago, the productions and

²⁵ Cottingham, Laura. *Not for Sale: Feminism and Art in the USA during the 1970s*. VHS, 90 minutes. 1992.

²⁶ Cottingham, Laura. “Not For Sale: Feminism and Art in the USA during the 1970s.” *Apex Art* brochure for video essay, *Not For Sale*. 1998. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.haussite.net/haus.0/SCRIPT/txt1999/09/saleng.html>>

²⁷ Ibid.

the artists themselves have left a full and rich history outside of mainstream art and academic cultural memory.

The legacy of the art from the women's movement of the '70s and beyond is crucial to understanding the history behind contemporary political feminist art-making, but without the specific consideration of women of color organizing and art-making narratives, the story remains offensively incomplete. Further, the exclusion or omission of women of color artists from academic and art world institutions reproduces the very racist, heteropatriarchal power dynamics that feminist art movements had, at that time, sought to deconstruct. Because of the racism inherent in the structure and organization of mainstream feminist groups during the women's movement, coupled with the even stronger refusal of the mainstream art world to represent or recognize female and queer artists of color, much of the protest art by women of color around this time is harder to find and has never risen to the levels of fame as have white feminist artists (besides a few classic - *token* - exceptions). The contributions by women of color to the study of feminist activist protest arts come threefold: new directions in art-making techniques, new possibilities for organizing activists, and a transformation of traditional women's movement feminist theory into a more intersectional and race-conscious effort. Many women of color art activists pushed alternative media worlds into uncomfortable, radically divergent genres, forms, and techniques of art-making through these new directions.

Women of color artists in the in the '70s and '80s were not only influenced by artist and literary statements, but they were influenced by a variety of women of color feminist theory. Gloria Anzaldua presents her art as a hybrid form able to transgress racist, sexist norms, as in the case of her autobiographical, historical, and feminist piece Borderlands/La Frontera, a book which many scholars now see as a prime literary example of the subversive and intersectional

articulations of feminist identity for women of color in America and challenging restrictive norms for cultural production.²⁸

~~SIX~~ BLACK WOMEN
87 WHY DID
THEY DIE?



—This pamphlet was prepared by the Combahee
River Collective, a Boston Black Feminist
Organization.

Figure 10: Combahee River Collective Pamphlet, from Ms. Magazine

The Combahee River Collective's (active in Boston from 1974-1980) statement on their Black feminist politics provided some useful groundwork for some anti-racist, non-mainstream activist frameworks which some contemporary artists recall in their work. "We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice."²⁹ Their statement emphasized the values of collectivity, communality, power-sharing, and reflexivity,

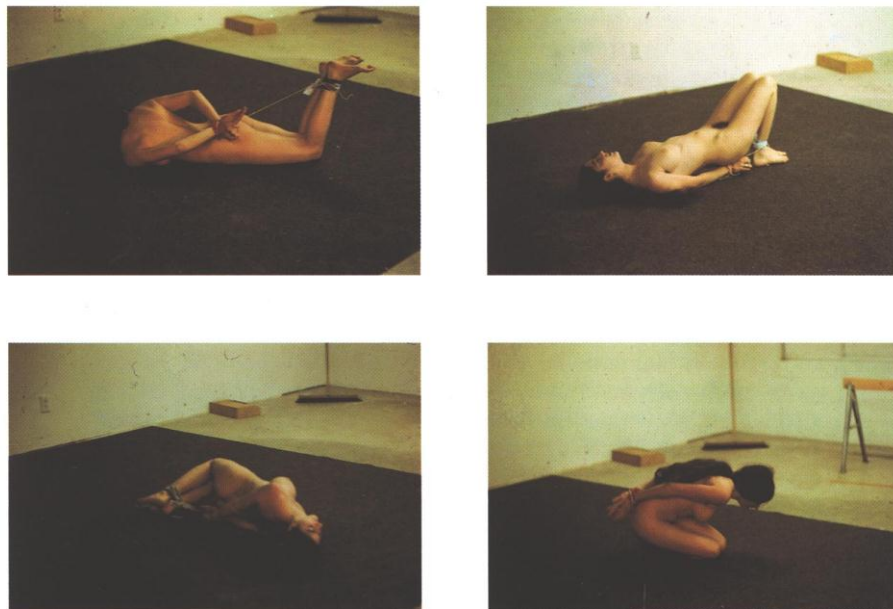
²⁸ Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

²⁹ Eisenstein, Zillah. "The Combahee River Collective Statement." *The Combahee River Collective*. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>>

some of the key guiding principles to more contemporary art activism. These strategies reflect a building and mounting strategy of artists and media-makers resistant to misogynistic and racist politics.

Cuban-American visual and nature/body artist Ana Mendieta describes her otherness as a woman of color artist in the '70s and its incorporation into her work as a means for survival and pride:

I feel the very fact that you are here today is proof that there is another culture aside from ruling class culture. You know, the greatest comfort that great works of art give to me is not only my experience of them, but also the fact that they were created and that they exist. Now I'm sure that a lot of them were created in adverse conditions as what we have today. And so that's proof, you know, that we will survive. And so the question of integrity in aesthetics is coming up again historically. It is a personal question which each artist faces. It is a constant struggle. Hard times are coming, but I believe we who are artists will continue making our work. We will be ignored but we will be here.³⁰



45-48. *Tied-Up Woman*, University of Iowa, Iowa, 1973. [cat. 6]

Figure 11: Mendieta's "Tied-Up Woman"

³⁰ Mendieta, Ana. "Art and Politics." 1982. Harrison, Charles and Paul Wood. *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*. Blackwell Publishing, Malden MA: 1992. 1065.

The use of her body in her pieces articulates this struggle, including “Untitled (Glass on Body)” from 1972 and “Untitled (Blood Sign #2/Body Tracks)” from 1974.³¹ Mendieta’s continuing to make her art despite its position outside mainstream feminist art-making circles is one example of the role of intersectional politics in the formation of a feminist aesthetic beyond that of white, middle-class women.

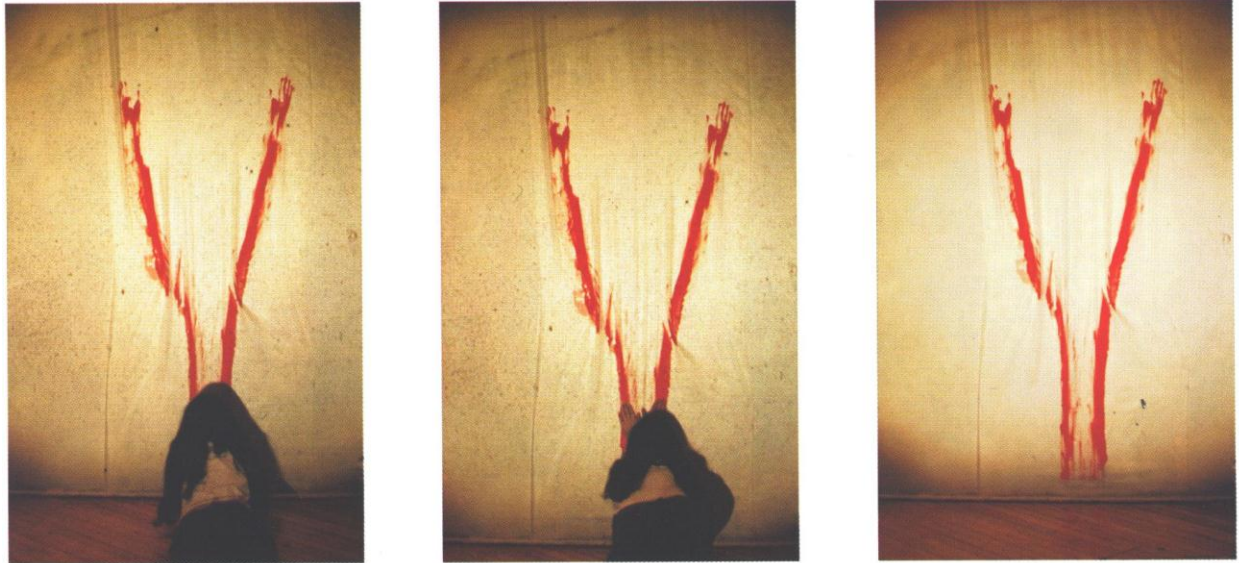


Figure 12: Ana Mendieta “Body Tracks” (1974)

Another radical thread running through the both mainstream women’s movement art making and women of color art-makers is that of collective organizing. Many of these collective-oriented activist groups employed important strategies of visual rhetoric that can be analyzed as part of their community-oriented approach. What women’s movement scholars such as Lee Banaszak consider “Second Wave” feminist meetings were typically leftist women who formed “relatively small, local, and collectivist” groups to employ the community-oriented language of the New Left without the erasure of women’s voices.³² That said, some larger organizations also

³¹ Butler, Cornelia, organizer, and Lisa Gabrielle Mark, ed. WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, LA, 2007. 176-177

³² Banaszak, Lee Ann, ed. The U.S. Women’s Movement in Global Perspective. Rowand and Littlefield Publishers: Sept 2005. 48

focused explicitly on developing activist praxis rooted in collectivity. The *Our Bodies Ourselves* Boston Women's Health Collective and the Chicago Women's Liberation Union mixed radical organizing techniques with feminist art and media production to communicate their ideas. These radical communities also provided a context for later departures from mainstream politics into local, collective protests. For example, the Chicago Women's Liberation Union used a varied approach to their feminist activism, including a strong appreciation for the power of music and arts in protest.³³ The CWLU with the Liberation School worked to forward goals of collective skill-sharing, support of the arts, and empowering individual women in their health education.³⁴



Figure 13: CWLU graphic from the CWLU Herstory Website

³³ "Analysis of the Chicago Women's Liberation School." *Chicago Women's Liberation Union*. Baxandall, Rosalyn and Linda Gordon, ed. Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women's Liberation Movement. Basic Books, NY: 2000. 82

³⁴ *Ibid.* 82

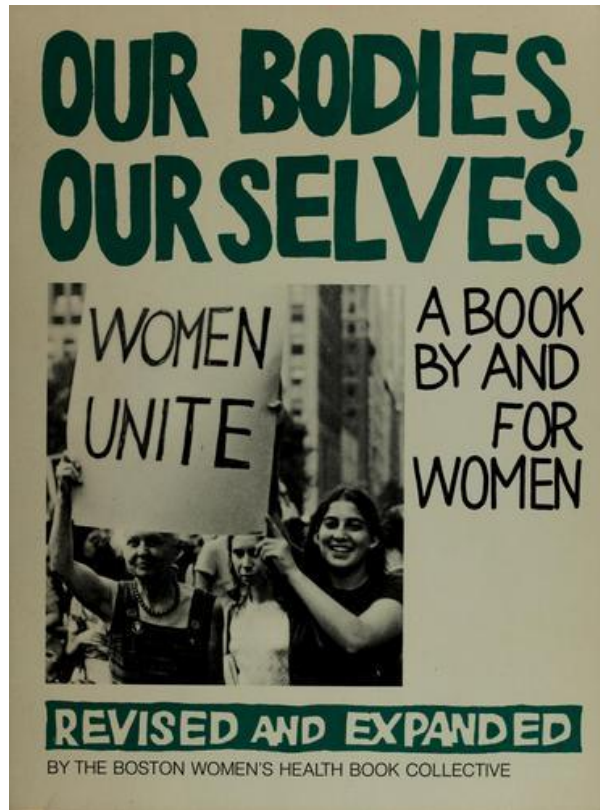


Figure 14: 2nd Edition of “Our Bodies, Ourselves” by the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective (1979)

The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective offered another model and example of collective-oriented feminist health organizing. The group describes the process of dismantling male health authority figures and turning to community-based organizing solutions in 1970: “We wanted to share both the excitement and the material we were learning with our sisters. We saw ourselves differently and our lives began to change.”³⁵ The crux of their model relies on adaptability and flexibility: “[These papers] are not final. They are not static. They are meant to be used by our sisters to increase consciousness about ourselves as women, to build a movement, to begin to struggle collectively for adequate health care...They should be viewed as a tool which stimulates discussion and action, which allows for new ideas and for change.”³⁶

³⁵ The Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, “The Origins of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.” Baxandall, Rosalyn and Linda Gordon, ed. Dear Sisters: Dispatches from the Women’s Liberation Movement. Basic Books, NY: 2000. 121

³⁶ Ibid. 121

Thus, the collective's methods of organizing, publicizing their efforts, and using media campaigns to communicate their feminist ideals serve as a model which strives to encourage the growth and development of other similar institutions while still recognizing the diverse needs of individual communities.³⁷

Collectives and community-based feminisms of the '70s and '80s also built upon the "second wave" notion of consciousness-raising as a primary activist technique. In "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," Kathie Sarachild describes the strength of such activist projects in fighting for expanded notions of women's bodily autonomy: "studying the whole gamut of women's lives, starting with the full reality of one's own -- would also be a way of keeping the movement radical by preventing it from getting sidetracked into single issue reforms and single issue organizing."³⁸ With legacies of early consciousness-raising, feminisms developed a model based on more local, personal issues and geographies, often attempting to combine discussions of larger, structural issues of inequality within society alongside explorations of injustice in daily life.

While consciousness-raising and woman-focused art collectives and exhibitions are markers of what is typically known as "second wave" feminist art efforts, another movement theme influencing contemporary arts comes from protests in the 1990s. Radical, music and arts-based, youth-oriented feminist activist protests during this time are commonly referred to within the umbrella term of the "third wave" of feminism. The Riot Grrrl feminist subculture and its immediate legacies also contextualize the work of some contemporary reproductive justice independent media artists. Originating in the Pacific Northwest in the early 1990s, but quickly

³⁷ Ibid. 121

³⁸ Sarachild, Kathie. "Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon," in Feminist Revolution, New York: Random House, 1978. 144-150.

spreading across the country and globe through their media campaigns, Riot Grrrl included a multiplicity of art forms and protest methods (recorded punk music; zines, political fanzines and pamphlets; films; and live concerts). The subculture placed central importance around the creation and maintenance of girl-focused creative spaces, using their new media methods to connect girls to each other.³⁹ Unlike the “second wave” which had critiqued the use of the word “girl,” Riot Grrrl culture embraced “girlness” not as infantilizing but empowering. Bands such as Bikini Kill and Bratmobile emphasized explicitly feminist political positions through their lyrics, interviews/stage presence, and publications (such as zines and CD liner notes).⁴⁰

The main topics covered by many of the Riot Grrrl-labeled and affiliated figures, for the most part left out of mainstream media, include: sexual assault, rape, and incest; abortion and reproductive rights; racism, police violence, and racial profiling; queer issues and lesbianism; and sexism in music/art scenes.⁴¹ Despite the scene’s brief golden years, it stands as an example for contemporary artists as one re-imagining of feminist, women’s-health and bodily autonomy-focused spaces. In addition, the impact of zines and zine culture on feminist organizing and activist art can be recognized in the lasting success and legacy of many ‘90s-based zines, in addition to an in-depth and growing dedication to zines within feminist scholarship, as evidenced by the NYU Fales Collection zine materials archive and the other academic, scholarly archives for zines and similar materials.⁴²

³⁹ Monem, Nadine, ed. *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!* Black Dog Publishing, London. 2007. 7

⁴⁰ Ibid. 7

⁴¹ Ibid. 1

⁴² “The Riot Grrrl Collection,” *NYU Fales Library and Special Collections*. Web. 1 April 2012.
<<http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/riotgrrrltest.html>>

RIOT GRRRL MANIFESTO

BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways.

BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other's work so that we can share strategies and criticize-applaud each other.

BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings.

BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how what we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status quo.

BECAUSE we recognize fantasies of Instant Macho Gun Revolution as impractical lies meant to keep us simply dreaming instead of becoming our dreams AND THUS seek to create revolution in our own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit christian capitalist way of doing things.

BECAUSE we want and need to encourage and be encouraged in the face of all our own insecurities, in the face of beergutboyrock that tells us we can't play our instruments, in the face of "authorities" who say our bands/zines/etc are the worst in the US and



Figure 15: Riot Grrrl Manifesto from Riot Grrl Zine



Figure 16: Feminist Zine display at the NY Art Book Fair, 2010

Riot Grrrl's limitations for radical feminist re-imaginings can also help contextualize contemporary art organizing. The subculture's predominately white and middle-class makeup privileges the "scene" and its artistic productions, challenging future white and/or middle-class activists to resist falling into similar traps of assumptions and privilege.⁴³ This tendency of the typical zinester image to be of a white middle-class person is not to diminish the agency or art of the many zinesters of color but to acknowledge the racial dynamics within the production and distribution of this form of feminist media production.⁴⁴

⁴³ Piepmeier, Alison. "'We Are Not All One': Intersectional Identities in Grrrl Zines." *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*. NY University Press, NY: 2009.

⁴⁴ Please refer to some incredible materials focused on the dynamics of race within '90s zine culture into the present-day: the *People of Color (POC) Zine Project*; the Women of Color Zine Symposium (Portland); Sarah Banet-Weiser's "What's Your Flava? Race and Postfeminism in Media Culture" (2007); zinesters Mimi Nguyen, Chandra Ray, Sabrina Margarite Alcantara-Tan, among many others.

The Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous activist group founded in 1985, serve as another example of what some academics associate with “third wave” feminist protest methods. Their attention to immediate, direct-action campaigns (such as shaming sexist gallery owners and curators for their lack of representation of women artists) and their collective, community-oriented responses connect them to Riot Grrrl and other “third wave” ideas and legacies.⁴⁵

In addition, their use of historical feminist artists as their adopted pseudonyms (such as Frida Kahlo, Lee Krasner, Alice Neel, and Ana Mendieta) evokes the struggle of feminist artists to document their history as legitimate and valuable despite a mainstream culture that neglects them and their impact.⁴⁶

Republicans do believe in a woman's right to control her own body



Figure 17: Guerrilla Girls Poster, 1992 & 1995

⁴⁵“An Interview” *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls*. 1995. Web. 1 April 2012.
<<http://www.guerrillagirls.com/interview/faq.shtml>>

⁴⁶ Ibid.

GUERRILLA GIRLS DEMAND A RETURN TO TRADITIONAL VALUES ON ABORTION.

Before the mid-19th century, abortion in the first few months of pregnancy was legal. Even the Catholic Church did not forbid it until 1869.*

*Carl. N. Flanders, *Abortion*, Library in a Book, 1991

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM **GUERRILLA GIRLS** 532 LA GUARDIA PL #237, NY 10012

Copyright © 1992, 1995 by Guerrilla Girls, Inc.

Figure 18: Guerrilla Girls Poster, 1992 & 1995

From Pro-Choice to Reproductive Justice: Shifting the Framework

Contemporary art about women's health, abortion rights, and bodily autonomy is rooted not only in legacies of feminist art production but in shifting definitions and conceptions of abortion rights activism. Abortion was one of the central issues of second-wave, mainstream feminist protest, and although it remains a central issue today, certain activist communities, especially in youth and women of color activist communities, have undergone a deliberate re-framing of these issues.

Ninia Baehr's zine "Abortion Without Apology: a radical history for the 1990s" gives an expanded and comprehensive beginning of a definition of expansive reproductive justice:

A reproductive freedom agenda requires that women have the right to express themselves sexually; live free from the threat of sexual harassment or violence; become parents; abstain from parenting; use safe, effective contraception; obtain abortions; be free from forced sterilization; enjoy quality medical care; have access to good childcare; work and live in safe environments; and receive quality sex education. It demands these things for all women; therefore it requires that each woman be free from oppression.⁴⁷

This framework of reproductive justice arises out of historical tensions from mainstream pro-choice politics and radical abortion-rights activism and the need to address women's sexual politics holistically within a broader context of bodily autonomy and justice. Historians such as Rebecca Kluchin have documented the extensive abuses against low-income and women of color through the process of sterilization and the subsequent lack of attention paid to sterilization victims from mainstream pro-choice groups.⁴⁸ Similarly, political scientist and reproductive rights activist Rosalind Petchesky provides a historical account of the tensions between reproductive "needs" versus "rights" and the importance of looking at "reproductive health rights as a series of concentric circles," showing the connections between specifically health-related needs and a larger framework of reproductive justice.⁴⁹

Today, there is a conscious effort among many women's health activists, especially younger activists and women of color activists, to shift the terms and framing of abortion rights to a more expansive view of women's lives and the daily threats they face. "Rights"-based discourse, some argue, obscures the reality that rights (or "choices") are meaningless without equal access to resources. The most prominent and articulate voice for this framework is activist

⁴⁷ Baehr, Ninia. "Abortion Without Apology: A Radical History for the 1990s." South End Press. 6

⁴⁸ Kluchin, Rebecca. Fit to be Tied: Sterilization and Reproductive Rights in America. 1950-1980. NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009.

⁴⁹ Petchesky, Rosalind "Rights and Needs: Rethinking the Connections in Debates over Reproductive and Sexual Rights." *Health and Human Rights*. Harvard College, 2009. Web. 1 April 2012.
<<http://www.hhrjournal.org/archives-pdf/4065194.pdf.banned.pdf>>

Loretta Ross, the founder of *SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective*. Ross has written extensively on the subject of reproductive justice, and her expertise and knowledge of the many angles of the issue shine through especially in her “Understanding Reproductive Justice: Transforming the Pro-Choice Movement,” printed in the feminist newspaper *off our backs* in 2007. Critiquing the limits of even the reproductive rights activists, she asserts that “a multi-pronged approach is needed,” combining “service delivery” of reproductive health, legal advocacy for reproductive rights, and “reproductive justice, which focuses on movement building.”⁵⁰ Ross emphasizes the framework’s focus on “structural power inequalities” and its commitment to battling multiple forms of oppression through activist “organizing [of] women, girls and their communities.”⁵¹ In addition, Ross later adds that the reproductive justice framework, specifically within her organization SisterSong, “must infuse the movement with creativity, innovation, and vision.”⁵² SisterSong’s tagline highlights the community-focused activist approach crucial to fighting today’s battles: “doing collectively what we cannot do individually.”⁵³

Following SisterSong’s lead, other vocal reproductive justice-oriented organizations and theorists also participated in this movement shift. One outspoken voice for the deconstruction of pro-choice versus pro-life rhetoric is feminist author and anti-violence activist Andrea Smith. In “Beyond Pro-Choice Versus Pro-Life: Women of Color and Reproductive Justice,” she addresses a variety of ways in which she believes mainstream pro-choice organizations have neglected

⁵⁰ Ross, Loretta. “Understanding Reproductive Justice: Transforming the Pro-Choice Movement.” *Off our backs* 36.4. 14.

⁵¹ Ibid. 14.

⁵² Ibid. 19.

⁵³ Ibid.

vulnerable communities of marginalized people.⁵⁴ She explains the hypocrisy within the platforms of organizations such as Planned Parenthood and NARAL that ignore the drastic negatives associated with criminalization and the prison-industrial complex (structures which disproportionally effect women of color).⁵⁵ In addition, Smith quotes ‘70s radical Rickie Solinger discussing the connections between “choice” rhetoric and classism, with “‘choice’ [as]...a symbol of middle-class women’s arrival as independent consumers.”⁵⁶

This recent movement history also contextualizes the rhetorical shift in mainstream pro-choice organizations’ visual and communications materials as responses grounded deeply in the political climate of the time. Sociologists C.E. Joffe, T.A. Weitz, and C.L. Stacey discuss the changing dynamics of pro-choice organizations and their activism in historical context of movement goals. They describe the origination of pro-choice political rhetoric within the 1960s as related to the health collectives described previously in this chapter: “the women’s health movement was concerned with the demystification of medical knowledge, bringing healthcare as much as possible under the control of patients, and changing the physician-patient relationship.”⁵⁷ Joffe, Weitz, and Stacey continue, describing “feminist activists in the field of abortion” who “worked simultaneously on two fronts: making abortion legal, and helping women gain access to safe illegal abortions in the meantime” (similar to the *Jane* collective and others).⁵⁸ These activists’ ventures in the early days of American pro-choice organizing embody this collectivist, localized, creative and multiplicity of responses approach.

⁵⁴ Smith, Andrea. “Beyond Pro-Choice Versus Pro-Life: Women of Color and Reproductive Justice.” *NWSA Journal* 17.1: 2005, 119-140. 53.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 127.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 128.

⁵⁷ Joffe, C.E., T.A. Weitz, and C.L. Stacey. “Uneasy allies: pro-choice physicians, feminist health activists, and the struggle for abortion rights.” *Sociology of Health and Illness* Vol. 26 No. 6. 2004. Web. 1 April 2012. < <http://bixbycenter.ucsf.edu/resources/files/Joffe.UneasyAllies.pdf>>. 785.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 786.

Joffe, Weitz, and Stacey document a shift within the pro-choice movement in the '80s, when, as they describe, “like the larger women’s movement of which it was a part, the feminist abortion rights movement gradually changed from being primarily a collection of local grass roots activist groups to coalescing into several larger social movement organizations.”⁵⁹ They continue, explaining the difference between the approaches of ‘60s and ‘70s activists versus those fighting strong right wing political forces post-Roe v. Wade in the ‘80s: “In contrast to the earlier generation, who engaged in civil disobedience and other forms of direct action, these new recruits are often assigned administrative tasks.”⁶⁰ Through the chronicling of this history, these sociologists demonstrate the changing dynamics of mainstream and grassroots pro-choice organizations. Even further, they then demonstrate how these changing political pressures affect the rhetorical and visual messaging strategies utilized by mainstream organizations: “abortions are largely absent from contemporary abortion rights circles.”⁶¹ Thus, mainstream pro-choice organizations neglect to discuss abortion rights explicitly and without a larger, broader context of economic and social justice.

Similarly, researcher Deana Rohlinger notes the shifting rhetoric surrounding reproductive justice from Planned Parenthood, examining how an organization like Planned Parenthood tactically responds to and creates media with careful attention to mainstream standards and levels of acceptable messaging. In examining the relationship between Planned Parenthood and the media, Rohlinger notes that “publically, Planned Parenthood often distances itself from the abortion debate,” with past media campaigns that “stressed the average rather than

⁵⁹ Ibid. 789.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 789.

⁶¹ Ibid. 790.

the activist face of pro-choice America,” effectively de-politicizing and de-contextualizing the activism.⁶²

Recently, as Kimala Price discusses in her article “What is Reproductive Justice? How Women of Color Activists are Redefining the Pro-Choice Paradigm,” the term ‘reproductive justice’ has been slowly adopted into some more mainstream pro-choice organizations, bringing with it specific methodologies and demands. Price’s methodology values the activist practice of “storytelling...as a pedagogical tool for consciousness-raising within their respective communities.”⁶³ Particularly within reproductive justice communities, “the purpose of continually retelling this and similar stories is not only to relate the founding of the collective, but also to remember and honor the ‘herstory’ of the foremothers of the movement. These stories dispel the serious misconception that pro-choice politics are dominated by white women activists and that women of color have not been involved in this type of activism.”⁶⁴ In terms of specific issues of importance to many reproductive justice communities, but often largely ignored by mainstream pro-choice media, one of Price’s clearest examples is the lack of continued attention from mainstream groups on the Hyde Amendment.⁶⁵ Feminist author and anti-violence activist Andrea Smith agrees with this assessment, looking towards a future where “we will have a march for women’s lives in which the main issues addressed and reported will include: (1) repealing the Hyde Amendment; (2) stopping the promotion of dangerous contraceptives; (3) decriminalizing women who are pregnant and have addictions; and (4) ending

⁶² Rohlinger, D. “Friends and Foes: Media, Politics, and Tactics in the Abortion War.” *Social Problems* Vol. 53, No. 4. November 2006. Web. 1 April 2012. <http://www.sociology.fsu.edu/people/rohlinger/social_problem_article.pdf>

⁶³ Price, Kimala. “What is Reproductive Justice? How Women of Color Activists are Redefining the Pro-Choice Paradigm.” *Meridians: Feminism, race, transnationalism* 10.2 (2010): 42-65. *Academic Source Complete*. 21 September 2011. 44.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 52.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 46.

welfare policies that punish women, in addition to other issues that speak to the intersections of gender, race, and class in reproductive rights policies.”⁶⁶

Activist resistance to the rhetoric, strategies, and top-down approaches used by many mainstream pro-choice organizations serves to ultimately strengthen and advance, rather than harm or undermine, goals of abortion rights and bodily autonomy. The changing values and frameworks used by the pro-choice/reproductive justice communities reflect different attempts at strengthening the movement locally and nationally. The rapid advances in recent digital technologies have contributed significantly to these changing values and have influenced how reproductive justice organizing looks today. In an age of democratized, yet increasingly consolidated technology production, can activism use new tools to enact its goals while still resisting the restrictions of dominant forms of media?

Media Consolidation and a Turn to the Independents

Contemporary grassroots and independent forms of feminist activism also exist within a rapidly-changing landscape of media in the United States, where corporate ownership and consolidation keep dissenting and radical voices tightly controlled. Journalist Ben Bagdikian discusses these shifts and trends of media consolidation and corporatization in the past 30 years in his book The New Media Monopoly. Bagdikian addresses the potential consequences to democracy from the increasing consolidation and effects of the Big Five media conglomerates in America – Time Warner, Disney, News Corporation, Viacom, and Bertelsmann.⁶⁷ He goes on to address the Big Five’s growing political power, undermining any non-mainstream voices: “[these corporations] have power that media in past history did not, power created by new technology,

⁶⁶ Smith, Andrea. “Beyond Pro-Choice Versus Pro-Life: Women of Color and Reproductive Justice.” *NWSA Journal* 17.1: 2005, 119-140. 135.

⁶⁷ Bagdikian, Ben H. The New Media Monopoly. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004. 11.

and the near uniformity of their political goals.”⁶⁸ *Free Press*’ “Save the News” campaign further explains how consolidation shuts out voices resisting these limitations:

Fifty-one percent of the U.S. population is female, yet women own only 6 percent of all radio and TV station licenses. People of color make up 36 percent of the population, but own just 7 percent of radio licenses and 3 percent of TV licenses. Media ownership matters. If you’re tired of TV shows where women are degraded and people of color are stereotyped — if they appear at all — look no further than the absence of diversity among media owners.⁶⁹

Media consolidation and corporatization, thus, restricts mainstream media access, production, and representation of oppressed and marginalized people. This cultural and political media landscape helps contextualize some possible motivations behind independent, D.I.Y., subversive, underground, or otherwise non-mainstream arts/media production.

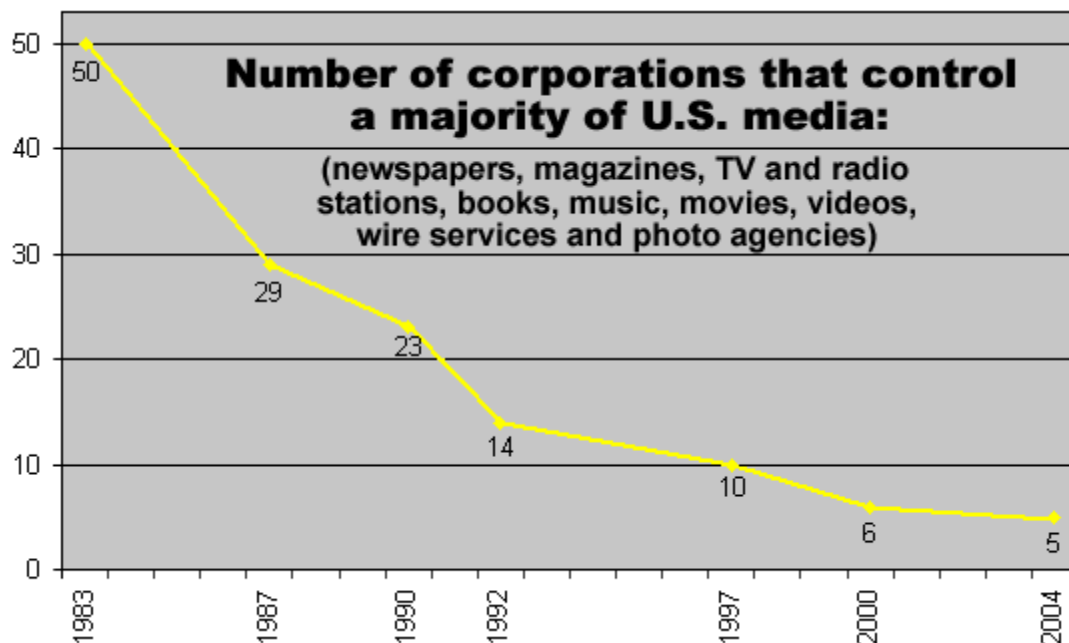


Figure 19: Media Consolidation Chart, Media Reform Information Center

Another important shift in the past 30 years of media-making is the introduction of the internet and what some would argue as “democratized technologies” available to anyone with

⁶⁸ Smith, Andrea. “Beyond Pro-Choice Versus Pro-Life: Women of Color and Reproductive Justice.” *NWSA Journal* 17.1: 2005, 119-140. 11.

⁶⁹ “Who Owns the Media” *Save The News*. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.savethenews.org/consolidation/who-owns-the-media>>

computer/internet access. These technologies changed some crucially important aspects of artists' entire process, including the formation of ideas and collaboration before production; editing/revising through digital communities; sharing resources instantaneously and over large expanses of space; and a forum where free publicity is possible and can even be targeted towards specific audiences of particular interest.

Media consolidation has a specifically harmful effect on the production and distribution of feminist and woman-focused media, especially with media addressing reproductive justice and abortion access, making feminist media production a crucial concern for contemporary activists. It is widely acknowledged by feminist media critics and many others that the media is a particularly harmful arena of women's representation and experiences.⁷⁰ This dynamic plays out in many different ways, as documented by feminist media scholar Deborah Rhode in "Media Images, Feminist Issues."⁷¹ In order to explore and document this media climate, Rhode addresses a few key issues, including: "the absence of women," their issues in the media, and their presence in "positions of influence."⁷² Rhode continues with not only how media attacks individual feminists but also how "press coverage can demonize, trivialize, and unduly personalize feminist struggles" more broadly.⁷³ These dynamics limit the productive dialogue and discourse possible within arenas of the press and larger media sources, effectively disconnecting women from mainstream media outlets as well as from each other and feminist organizing.

In addition to print, television, radio, and digital media generally attacking or neglecting women, their stories, their issues, and their activism, women face an equally toxic and

⁷⁰ Rhode, Deborah. "Media Images, Feminist Issues." *Signs*. Vol. 20 No. 3, Spring 1995. University of Chicago Press. Web. 1 April 2012. JSTOR. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3174839>>

⁷¹ Ibid. 685.

⁷² Ibid. 685.

⁷³ Ibid. 686.

unwelcoming environment within the art world. Feminist art scholar Peg Brand discusses these factors that women artists face as they create and distribute their work; she concludes that at all possible levels, female artists are subtly or explicitly barred from participation or entry into the art world.⁷⁴ Starting with education, access to art resources and technologies, and trainings, Brand asserts, women are kept out of art production circles, “establish[ing] an institutionalized bias against women” and ensuring that “women’s achievements have been minimized and marginalized.”⁷⁵ These mechanisms of sexist control of the art world are also enforced by “numerous and influential male theorists, critics, aestheticians, and philosophers of art.”⁷⁶

Summarizing these collective hindrances to women’s art success, Brand asserts:

When men dominate the creative realm, the discourse about art, and the pedagogy that influences succeeding generations, it is inevitable that a system of aesthetic evaluation that privileges male creativity, originality, and attendant critical reasoning skills serves to maintain the status quo of patriarchal domination.⁷⁷

Taken together, we can see different historical and more recent threads of thought, action, and specific political conditions that have influenced contemporary media protests around reproductive justice. Not only are activists working with changes within specific reproductive justice/ abortion provider communities, but they are negotiating ideas and using images from earlier radical and mainstream women’s movement art, collectives, and organizing theory. Further contextualized with recent media consolidation and corporatization, the efforts and projects of contemporary media activists adopt a more complex set of meanings. In the next chapter, I will explain the research methods I used in order to conduct my primary research interviews in order to contextualize my own research within these historical legacies.

⁷⁴ Brand, Peg. “Feminist Art Epistemologies: Understanding Feminist Art.” *Hypatia*. Vol. 21, No. 3. Summer 2006. Web. 1 April 2012. JSTOR. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810957>>

⁷⁵ Ibid. 170.

⁷⁶ Ibid. 170.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 170.

Chapter Three

Feminist Research Methods & Aims

*“I employ the feminist method of engagement with, not detachment from, the object of research.”*⁷⁸ – Christine Mason Sutherland

Methods were never simply the ways that I conducted research and careful choices were paramount. Beyond that, the methodology of my thesis became a way in itself through which I could critique, subvert, and re-construct problematic constructions and institutions of the past. In my research, I never saw methodology as politically neutral or predetermined. Instead, I conducted my research through deliberately feminist-oriented techniques.

There are certain principles that helped guide my research and which I believe makes my work feminist or feminist-oriented. These include, but are not limited to: a commitment to deconstruction of harmful cultural norms and traditions; decolonizing methods of production; commitment to institutional critique; local, community-based activist goals; reflexivity and personal reflection; questioning accessibility; collaboration and power-sharing with research participants; community support and community solutions; and a commitment to deconstructing the naturalized hierarchies of aesthetics, history, and activism. That said, these principles were never rules or strict parameters; rather, they existed as guidelines for reference throughout the research of my project. The flexible and evolving ideas behind and throughout my research are formed by and reinforced by my positionality as a researcher, an American, a white woman, and other factors of my identity. With this in mind, I proceed unassumingly with reflexive and reflective knowledge of my own beliefs and knowledge base. Researcher Myfanwy Franks strives towards this localized understanding of feminist values, and thus, feminist research, in her

⁷⁸ Sutherland, Christine Mason. “Feminist Historiography: Research Methods in Rhetoric” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1, Winter 2002. Web. 1 April 2012. JSTOR. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3886309>> 109.

piece “Feminisms and Cross-Ideological Feminist Social Research: Standpoint, Situatedness and Positionality.”⁷⁹ This approach, Franks hopes, will lead to increased opportunities for “collaboration in feminist social research in terms of making coalitions, researching our similarities and differences.”⁸⁰

I kept Clark University Sociology Professor Patricia Ewick’s two guiding principles to “Integrating Feminist Epistemologies in Undergraduate Research Methods” in mind while both constructing my research as well as contextualizing the research during and after interviews.⁸¹ She recommends “adopting a more holistic approach in structuring our research...[in which] social research...[is] described and presented as an ongoing and contingent process that does not occur outside of the social world it examines.”⁸² In addition, Ewick suggests considering research methods “in the context of a substantive topic or set of questions that would allow for an examination of the historical conditions under which research questions were posed and the trajectory of their development.”⁸³ Alongside Ewick’s guidelines, feminist oral historians Armitage and Gluck expand on this careful balance between preserving individual voices and providing historical and cultural context to interviews. They maintain: “Is our best advice to try and dialogue about meaning and, if we can’t, at least explain the basis for our attribution of meaning? Some might still say “Let them speak for themselves.” But increasingly I find

⁷⁹ Franks, Myfanwy. “Feminisms and Cross-ideological Feminist Social Research: Standpoint, Situatedness and Positionality - Developing Cross-ideological Feminist Research.” *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol 3, No 2: May 2002. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.bridgew.edu/soas/jiws/June02/feministsocialresearch.pdf>>

⁸⁰ Ibid. 9.

⁸¹ Ewick, Patricia. “Integrating Feminist Epistemologies in Undergraduate Research Methods.” *Gender and Society*. Vol. 8, No. 1, March 1994. Web. 1 April 2012. JSTOR. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/190073>> 99.

⁸² Ibid. 99.

⁸³ Ibid. 99.

this...disingenuous...and governed by a host of complicated determinants, then I think we have an obligation to historicize and contextualize.”⁸⁴

I approached the primary data collection parts of my research in three ways: through one-on-one feminist interviews; looking at zines/other independent art; and feminist theoretical literature, often (but certainly not solely) academic literature. These three approaches helped me to synthesize diverse, interdisciplinary, and multi-media source materials. These multiple approaches also helped me to combat the de-legitimization of feminist, queer, and radical voices through a research stance dedicated to multiple standpoints and perspectives. Faced with the task of documenting the underground, the independent, the non-mainstream, I strove to employ flexible, creative, and evolving research techniques in order to most strongly break open and thus protest through my research and thesis the silence about independent media approaches to issues of reproductive justice.

Because traditional academic libraries, archives, and collections lack funding and mainstream support for radical, political, feminist, underground arts or texts, these materials remain elusive. Or even worse, they are left unpreserved and unrecorded. After researching lesbian art activism in the ‘70s in the fall of 2010, and realizing the desperate lack of recognition within even “alternative” sources, my connection to feminist historiography strengthened. With this research interest, I strove to focus primarily on gathering primary source materials that are typically ephemeral, underground, and under-recognized. Because of this lack of archived and

⁸⁴ Armitage, Susan and Sherna B. Gluck, “Reflections on Women’s Oral History: An Exchange.” Women’s Oral History, ed. by Susan Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002.

published source materials about these topics, artist Mira Schor stresses the “problems of institutional memory and of storage of cultural work” that still remain for feminists today.⁸⁵

These explicitly feminist-oriented project goals and methods are rooted in my personal experience as a feminist activist in addition to existing within a long and complex history of feminist responses, criticisms, and approaches to more traditionally-constructed social science research. Naomi Gottlieb and Marti Bombyk provide a brief history of this push by the women’s movement to reform approaches to research, especially qualitative. Despite evolving goals and techniques of feminist social science research, the history provided by Gottlieb and Bombyk frames this project’s aims within this larger legacy of “passionate scholarship” which “expect[s] scholarship on women’s lives to have an impact on the socioeconomic structure that determines the status of women.”⁸⁶ In addition, this legacy of feminist social science research makes no assumptions about the cultural context of research with the exception of the knowledge that “all social science research has a political context and objectives.”⁸⁷

In order to support and expand upon the ideas explored in the zines, art, and interviews, I provide theoretical frameworks, positions, and questions later in the paper. These frameworks and positions have informed the construction of my research methods in addition to the explorations and questions raised in my analysis. I selected secondary sources from a multiple of disciplines when crafting my project, believing that this interdisciplinary research approach would allow me to explore different aspects of media and art protest methods simultaneously.

⁸⁵ Schor, Mira. “Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory, and Activism – An Intergenerational Perspective.” *Art Journal* Vol. 58 No. 4. Winter, 1999. 23

⁸⁶ DuBois’ term from 1983, as quoted in Gottlieb, N. & Bombyk, M. “Strategies for strengthening feminist research.” *Affilia: A Journal of Women and Social Work*. 2(2), 1987. 26.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 26.

Interviews

The heart of my research lies in the voices and stories of the women I interviewed. I was fortunate enough to hear many of these narratives through interviews and conversations in addition to zines and other art pieces. I chose to conduct primary source interviews to uphold and honor the growing tradition of feminist oral history. This tradition refuses to accept the sexist, racist, cissexist, practices of mainstream academic history and, instead, values the direct stories and experiences of women as legitimate and important pieces of historical information. The intersection of abortion rights activism and feminist art practices, the focus of this thesis, has yet to be explored by mainstream academia. Even assuming it is covered by academics in the future, I fear that the voices of grassroots organizers and artists will be obscured by the process of conversion to a more “formal” medium or format. Through the process of critical, anti-racist, anti-oppression, feminist interview research, I seek to return dignity and justice to the stories and organizing of grassroots feminist activism. These stories are often messy and momentary, with ephemeral media materials accompanying their work. In this way, as well, feminist theories are carefully considered at all steps of the research project, as researcher Katherine Boland asserts:

I am suggesting that we might open up the exchange of ideas so that we do not simply gather data on others to fit into our own paradigms once we are safely ensconced in our university libraries ready to do interpretation. By extending the conversation we initiate while collecting oral narratives to the later stage of interpretation, we might more sensitively negotiate issues of interpretive authority in our research.⁸⁸

Choosing to interview alternative artists as one of the main forms of my research was necessary to show my commitment to a growing body of feminist/anti-oppression approaches to academic research. Researcher Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis speaks about a similar need for revised research techniques in order to transform the position of black women’s stories within American society. Specifically, Etter-Lewis rejects the idea of “expanding ‘the cannon’ to embrace women

⁸⁸ Borland, Katherine. “‘That’s Not What I Said’: Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research” ed. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York: Routledge, 1991.

and minorities” as a method of infusing the oral history discipline with feminist activist goals (“the cannon fits appropriately within what Schaef refers to as a ‘white male system’”).⁸⁹

Rather, she stresses the need to transform and re-envision methodologies and positions as researchers and activists, staying away from the “dualistic thinking” of the academy – a re-building of a new system which actively and inherently “involves women from a diversity of backgrounds and viewpoints.”⁹⁰ In imagining my methodologies themselves as sites for transformative social change, I attempted with my interview research process to actively work against typical barriers to the discussions of feminist activist art.

One of the ways that I enacted this research standpoint is through this valuing of “subjective evidence” within a world of “traditional academic theory” that “restricts the scope of acceptable forms of evidence...by placing the highest value on that which is defined as objective evidence, marginalizing more subjective forms of evidence,” as researcher Barbara Pickering suggests.⁹¹ She examines some primary functions of personal/subjective testimony as a strategy within reproductive justice media, including the importance of demonstrating the “relational nature of morality found in personal testimony...is distinct from the rule-based standards typically found both in public policy debate and in pro-life rhetoric.”⁹² In this way, the use of personal testimony within a project focused on reproductive justice activism acknowledges the importance and power within feminist-identified methodologies in order to combat mainstream media norms and assumptions.

⁸⁹ Etter-Lewis, Gwendolyn. “Black Women’s Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts.” Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History ed. Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai. New York: Routledge. 1991. 55.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 56.

⁹¹ Pickering, Barbara. “Women’s Voices as evidence: personal testimony is pro-choice films” *Argumentation and Advocacy*. 40.1 (Summer 2003). 15

⁹² Ibid.

I interviewed 8 people during the fall of 2011 and January – March of 2012. I spoke to each participant for approximately forty to ninety minutes. Depending on the preference of the participant, I spoke with them in person, through Skype, on the phone, or even through email. Due to my location, this research tended towards activists on the East Coast, but includes people from all over the country. The geographic scope of my research limited me to projects and artists located within the United States as well as those strongly influencing politics and activism within the States. Before each interview session, I explained my project aims in depth to each participant. I sent them an Interview Release form, which I adapted from Susan Reverby's course at Wellesley College, "History, Memory, and Women's Lives." This form included Professor Reverby's contact information and a more formalized description of the project. In addition, I emailed participants a list of 10 general questions that were the basis of the interview. These questions were meant to provide a context for the participants in terms of what kinds of information I was interested in discussing. For example, I not only sent participants questions about their work and activism, but I deliberately wondered about the intersections between their personal identity and their media/arts work

I solicited and received interview participants through a variety of methods: online feminist networks, word of mouth, attending feminist events, and emailing authors/artists whom I admired. This technique of finding interview participants was successful in many ways, but undoubtedly this "snowball" selection technique affords my project a slightly biased and in-group lens, a factor that strongly contributed to my efforts to analyze other forms of media in addition to interviews. To start, I utilized my current connections within feminist activism and media justice work to find potential people to interview. This included Megan Smith, whom I first met in the summer of 2011 when she founded the Reproductive Justice Guerrilla Art

Collective (RJGAC) in Boston as well as the “Repeal Hyde Community Art Project,” an incredibly influential and important step in my formation of this thesis topic. Megan is a current volunteer at the Eastern Massachusetts Abortion (EMA) Fund, which opened up a tight-knit community of grassroots reproductive justice activists to me for my research.

I also asked the Women, Action, & the Media listserv, part of a larger nonprofit working for gender justice in the media, for advice and guidance, which helped connect me to some more established and experienced artists and media-makers working in reproductive justice media campaigns. The small and insular networks of activists that I have come across have been both helpful and challenging. Generally, participants seemed to know other participants I had been in touch with and thus, were more comfortable speaking with me once they knew I had spoken to their colleagues. Additionally, this meant that activists have been very helpful in recommending me to speak with their friends, colleagues, and others in their activist networks. In this way this was a traditional “snowball” sampling technique, picking up new artists as I spoke to others.

First, in order to speak with activists whom I had never met, I tried my best to reach out through the internet. I posted on some Facebook forums in the hopes of finding underground and independent media-makers outside of my limited feminist network. I posted in a national Facebook group for Gender Equity organizers and numerous other progressive and reproductive justice oriented online groups. In addition, I emailed many organizations, libraries, feminist centers, and groups for their research support/help and connections. Some artists or activists directly contacted me through my postings on the various digital groups or forums. I never had anyone respond declining to participate in my research, which I attribute to my positionality within the movement, which I speak about in the next section.

Although I for the most part experienced emotional closeness with my project participants, who primarily saw and described me as a reproductive justice colleague, these relationships were not always easy or immediate. I took the advice of feminist oral historians Armitage and Gluck in regards to the question of interacting with participants across race, class, other identity boundaries: “I don’t want postmodern cautions and concerns to stop us from interviewing women we haven’t encountered before. I want the kind of shock and necessity to accept difference and the multitude of voices that have characterized international women’s conferences, and I want to do it with tape recorder.”⁹³ I tried to lean into the boundaries between my position as student researcher and the activists and artists with whom I spoke, accepting initial and occasional discomfort as an inevitable part of this process.

I have had developing and growing relationships with my collaborators, and this is another central part of my thesis’s aims. Not only was the maintenance of these relationships important to my methods themselves, but a developing feminist network is its own goal for this thesis. I want this project to increase collaboration and community building through the process of sharing and publicizing other feminists’ art and media and increasing the connections between independent artists and activists.

The interview process also actualized my goal of collaboration and power-sharing between researcher and participant. I sent the questions to all participants, whether they asked for them specifically or not; I believe that these questions set an important tone for the interview and oriented the collaborators to the larger questions within my research. However, as feminist historian Sherry Thomas describes in “Digging Beneath the Surface,” once I began conducting multiple interviews in a short span of time, my carefully constructed questionnaire dissolved.

⁹³ Armitage, Susan and Sherna B. Gluck, “Reflections on Women’s Oral History: An Exchange.” Women’s Oral History, ed. by Susan Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 82.

Instead, I tailored my questions to each participant's specific life experiences and work with which I was familiar, using that as a jumping off point for other reflections on activism and the arts.⁹⁴ Koni Benson and Richa Nagar discuss the importance of recognizing collaboration's benefits and limitations as a research stance, and the attempts to "bridge the divide between processes and products" in their piece "Collaboration as Resistance? Reconsidering the processes, products, and possibilities of feminist oral history and ethnography."⁹⁵ Collaboration requires accountability on the part of the researcher – in both "academic and grassroots/community-based projects," with Benson and Nagar providing examples of this research paralleling NGO rhetoric about women's empowerment. Additionally, this model of collaborative interview research seeks to "generate new dialogues" based on the "premises that (a) authority does not remain exclusively in the hands of the researcher; (b) neither the interpreter's nor the narrator's perspective is necessarily privileged; and (c) the meaning forged through dialogue is not necessarily arrived at through agreement and shared perspective but can evolve from constructive disagreements."⁹⁶

Koni and Nagar additionally bring up both theoretical and institutional challenges to the collaborative social science perspective. One of these challenges includes the need to be held accountable not only to "the people with/for whom it is imagined and undertaken, as well as multiple academic/institutional audiences who have supported or are invested in the project,"

⁹⁴ Thomas, Sherry. "Digging Beneath the Surface: Oral History Techniques." *Women's Oral History*, ed. by Susan Armitage, Patricia Hart, and Karen Weathermon. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 52.

⁹⁵ Benson, Koni and Richa Nagar "Collaboration as Resistance? Reconsidering the Processes, Products, and Possibilities of Feminist Oral History and Ethnography." *Gender, Place, and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*. 20 Nov 2006. Web. 1 April 2012.

<<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09663690600859083>> 587.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 584.

which ultimately produces a project with “radically different forms of responsibility for assessment and analysis.”⁹⁷

In thinking about the physical spaces of my interviews, it is significant that I conducted the overwhelming majority of them through the Internet. I even conducted phone interviews online for easy recording. Again, I carefully considered the methodological weight of choosing where and how the interviews would be conducted. If speaking with an activist colleague whom I had known before the project, it only seemed natural to our interactions to hold the interview in a familiar space, face-to-face; with participants with whom I’d connected over the internet, growing closer through a similar digital relationship process made the most sense. Similarly, my “follow-up” research behaviors were responses to each individual participant relationship and context – everything from emails to text messages to additional in-person conversations to positive attention on Twitter. The consideration of space throughout the research project was inspired by Kim England’s piece “Getting Personal: Reflexivity, Positionality, and Feminist Research,” in which she also confirms that “fieldwork is intensely personal” and plays a “central role in the research process.”⁹⁸

Zines and other Ephemeral Media

In addition to my primary sources of oral history interviews, I chose to examine other independent sources of reproductive justice activist media, such as zines, pamphlets, and comics. Some of these were acquired personally before the start of the project; others were acquired online through digitized archives (QZAP- the Queer Zine Archive Project, for example), and

⁹⁷ Ibid. 584.

⁹⁸ England, Kim. 251

even more were found by searching physical zine archives in Boston.⁹⁹ The inclusion of ephemeral materials like zines which have been used for reproductive justice information sharing and activist organizing strengthens my interview research and broadens the voices and images that I drawn upon when thinking about larger trends and strategies of activism.



Figure 20: QZAP Flyer from 2012

QZAP, a digitized zine archive project, has scanned copies of zines available for free download through its website. This zine archive also has the compelling characteristic of containing author/user-defined tags for each zine, allowing for an ease of searching based on the author's own characterizations of her work rather than through an archiving project with little exposure to zines.¹⁰⁰ There are also some individual zine creators, authors, and artists who have uploaded copies of their work online available to the public; other individuals have preserved similar zines online in the spirit of keeping them accessible for consumption and increasingly, research on zines. These digitized and online archives helped to strengthen my project's goals to not only study, but to increase awareness and accessibility of such materials that are particularly ephemeral – out-of-print, rare, and old.

⁹⁹ QZAP website. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.qzap.org/v6/index.php>>

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.



Figure 21: Screenshot of the QZAP welcome screen

Boston's *Papercut Zine Library* is another valuable resource for primary source zine materials. Special appointments with Papercut librarians were helpful in locating reproductive justice related zines from the collection. The *Papercut* library community contributed to my project in other ways as well; for instance, corresponding with librarians led me to meet a community women's health volunteer using zines in her workshops, giving me a fuller perspective not only on zines as community tools but as zine libraries within feminist communities.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ "Papercut Zine Library" Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.papercutzinelibrary.org/wordpress/>>

Positionality – “What we do is who we are”¹⁰²

In addition, methodology was important to my research due to my positionality within the same activist circles I was researching. To most of the people whom I contacted for my research, I was an insider. I believe that this insider perspective and identity helped me tremendously in garnering activists and artists for interviews. With a subject so incredibly controversial and difficult to speak about in public or mainstream media circles, it is understandable that trust is a key component of person-to-person research on anything related to abortion or reproductive justice/pro-choice healthcare or activism.

I discuss my position openly as much as possible not for narcissistic reflection space, but for integrity and honesty in my subjective orientation towards this research. This discussion of methodology can open up collaborative feminist research dialogues. Of course, participation in abortion activism was not the only factor that linked or distanced me from collaborators. My racial/ethnic identity, age, ability, and sexuality all dictated how my individual interactions were to go. I strove as often as possible to check, revise, and re-think my assumptions and privileges while trusting the process, my participants, and my own reflexivity and commitment.

This emphasis on positionality and the subsequent post-modern critiques of dualistic researcher versus participant thinking allows researchers to question and re-imagine the possibilities within the unique products of feminist social science data collection. Christina Chavez of California State Polytechnic University (Pomona) provides a framework for examining one's positionality as a researcher in her piece “Conceptualizing from the Inside:

¹⁰² Jenny Bourne. “Homelands of the Mind: Jewish Feminism and Identity Politics,” *Race and Class* 29, no. 1 (1987): 3. Quoted in Patai, Daphne. “Is Ethical Research Possible?” *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* ed. Sherna Gluck and Daphne Patai. New York: Routledge. 1991. 150.

Advantages, Complications, and Demands on Insider Positionality.”¹⁰³ She explains one’s “insider/outsiderness positionality on a continuum based on intellectual, cultural, and social distance to indigenous community,” approaching positionality as a constantly negotiated spectrum with intersectional identities shaping the interactions between every researcher and participant.

¹⁰³ Chavez, Christina “Conceptualizing from the Inside: Advantages, Complications, and Demands on Insider Positionality.” *The Qualitative Report*. Vol. 13 No. 3. September 2008. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13-3/chavez.pdf>> 474.

Chapter Four

Experiences of Contemporary Reproductive Justice Activists

With the legacies of feminist organizing, the continuing struggle for female artists, and the changing dynamics of media production and representation in the United States, the work by contemporary activists can be analyzed for their potentially radical possibilities. These possibilities exist for broadening the methods and modes of reproductive justice activism, the scope and reach of such activism, and for re-imagining abortion-rights activism within a more positive, woman-focused, holistic framework. This re-imagining also requires the careful maintenance of activist, reproductive justice, artist, and/or clinic workers' communities and solidarity as a central part of the larger battle for abortion rights.

Interviews

I chose feminist oral history interviews, as noted in the previous chapter, as my mechanism of data collection because of its philosophical connection to my project aims. I wanted to know the concrete strategies and techniques of this kind of activism and how they work. To understand this, I wanted these strategies to not only be rooted in theory and academic writing, but to come from the experiences and lives of organizers and artists. I questioned participants for their "advice" to younger and less experienced activists in addition to subtly building questions that would, I hoped, tease out their memorable challenges and triumphs. I chose to use this kind of feminist interview listening and biographical approach to find some commonalities between the strategies, values, and future visions of these activists.

Using a feminist-grounded methodology, I hoped to find commonalities of experience or communicated strategies, but the experiences of the artists I interviewed interact with each other on many levels, and thus, they could be arranged in many ways. The strategies, techniques, and

media used by the participants vary depending on the individual's employment background, geographic location, previous experience working with abortion clinics, and the desired end-result of their project. While participants such as Steph Herold primarily use Twitter and a blog to communicate their reproductive justice message, others such as Heather Freeman rely on hand-made drawings. The following discussion of the interview delves deeper into the strengths and challenges associated with these different mediums and techniques, each affording the artist a unique space within the sphere of reproductive justice activist activism. Although these mediums and techniques are disparate, they are united through some shared values of the artists.

These artists' reflections on their work embody some common guiding values of contemporary reproductive justice activism, including a commitment to localized, community-based activism; a strong and growing connection with abortion clinics and doctors, clinic employees, and clinic escort volunteers; an acknowledgement of their freedom as independent artists working outside of mainstream funding systems; a flexible and evolving approach to both creation and distribution which utilizes digital and social media advances whenever beneficial; and representations of reproductive justice as a multi-faceted, complex, and nuanced issue that must be addressed through a multiplicity of perspectives. In these ways, the means of producing this independent art allows these activists a compelling identity as activists and media-makers, often distinctly separate from mainstream pro-choice organizations' methods of media production. In terms of content, these methods and techniques together seek to restore dignity and respect to the pregnant woman, whom the participants agree seems to be outrageously missing from anti-choice propaganda campaigns.

However, for each of these strengths associated with this independent media work, the interview participants also spoke about the challenges inherent in their approaches. These

challenges include: a lack of adequate funding; a lack of technological resources; a lack of publicity resources; personal and emotional exhaustion; digital and in-person threats and general anti-choice resistance; and a lack of support (financial, emotional) from the established progressive, liberal, and left-wing forces and mainstream organizations.

Despite these challenges, independent reproductive justice activism continues and grows stronger as connections between these artists are fostered and sustained as important resources for social change. These various arts and media interventions into the typical ways of thinking about abortion and even the pro-choice movement seek to disrupt commonplace norms about abortion, pregnancy, and motherhood. These activists use visual imagery to strengthen the legitimacy of women's voices within popular discourse about abortion politics.

Furthermore, these methods challenge the very definition of activist media itself, often existing within new and emerging terrains of social justice. Ultimately, these activists are connected to each other through both in-person and digital organizing methods, increasing the chances for solidarity and collaboration between individuals. With this increase in solidarity and collaboration, these activists can more successfully share and distribute their work, communicate with similar media-makers in order to develop a cohesive visual strategy for similar protests, and perhaps, more importantly, these activists can support each other emotionally through the difficulties in this method of organizing.

Megan Smith: Fostering Connection and Change through Community Voices

Megan Smith was the first person I interviewed for this research. We spoke about two of her reproductive justice activist art projects: *The Waiting Room* play (2010) and the *Repeal Hyde*

Art Project (2011-2012). She currently works full-time at *Ibis Reproductive Health*, a separate reproductive health research organization.

Megan's entry into reproductive justice activism began in college through her work at Women's Medical Fund (WMF): *"Bryn Mawr has a program called community based work study where you can get paid to do awesome stuff through work study... I liked the idea of giving back to the surrounding community and getting work-study for it. I saw that they had descriptions of the places where you could work, and the abortion fund was one of them... That stood out to me, because I didn't know that a funds existed until then, and when you realize that that's a thing that happens it's kind of shocking or it was for me as least -- because as a white middle class complacent liberal I thought that Roe v Wade was awesome and that we had fixed things and I didn't see any reason to think otherwise."* Working at WMF, as Megan recalls, was the catalyst for her later activism: *"So that's how I got into it and I want to keep doing it, abortion activism, until Hyde is repealed, and until everyone can have an abortion."*

This internship and her time at college cemented her commitment to both theatre and sociology. As she now recalls: *"It wasn't until WMF and wanting to do something more to give back to the fund and to think about ways to share those stories that I had been hearing on the phone that I thought about combining those things together."* She has *"connections in the theatre department, connections from work and the civic engagement office,"* allowing her the network and support to pursue activist art, *"but I'd never thought about doing it myself as a serious idea...there was no one who I was really seeing who was doing both of those things together as one thing."* This question of identity led to Megan's awareness of herself in relation to her future work: *"I think one of the biggest realizations that I had was when I realized that those parts of my selves, that if I wanted to be an activist or if I wanted to be an artist, that those*

parts of my selves are the same thing and the same person, and its only when I've been able to combine both of them that I'm doing work that I want to be doing."

While at Bryn Mawr and working at WMF, Megan wrote a play based on her experiences there, called *The Waiting Room*, as a fundraiser for the organization. Her hope in writing the play was to expose an audience to the voices she and other abortion fund callers spoke with on a regular basis, in an attempt at breaking down commonplace stigmas associated with women seeking abortion services. *The Waiting Room* was initially produced in March 2010 and has since been reproduced twice, by the Planned Parenthood of Southern New Jersey and South Jersey National Organization for Women (October 2010), and at Albright College in February 2012. The production of this play, incorporating the voices from her work at WMF, challenged Megan as an artist and activist in terms of her use of stories and other voices within her playwriting: *"I am an outsider and I don't want to co-opt stories for my own purposes, and thinking about that line as an artist and as a writer is hard. I'm glad that I was conscious of it as I was developing it. One thing that helped me a lot which came in the third draft of the play was I ended up introducing another character. The characters now are 5 main characters who are trying to get abortions and can't pay. The nurse and everyone who works in an abortion clinic... She is the outsider in the play now, and she in the beginning thinks that she knows everything and wants to make everyone comfortable and feel better, she thinks that she knows how to do that, and she thinks that she has the power to do that, and by the end she has everything handed to her and realizes that that's not true, but still acknowledges that she is the one that is keeping the stories in her. So I think that just by adding more of myself to that character – and I think I'm*

very critical of myself and of her – I think at least that that made me feel a lot better about the whole thing. I think that putting a critique of myself in it was really helpful.”¹⁰⁴

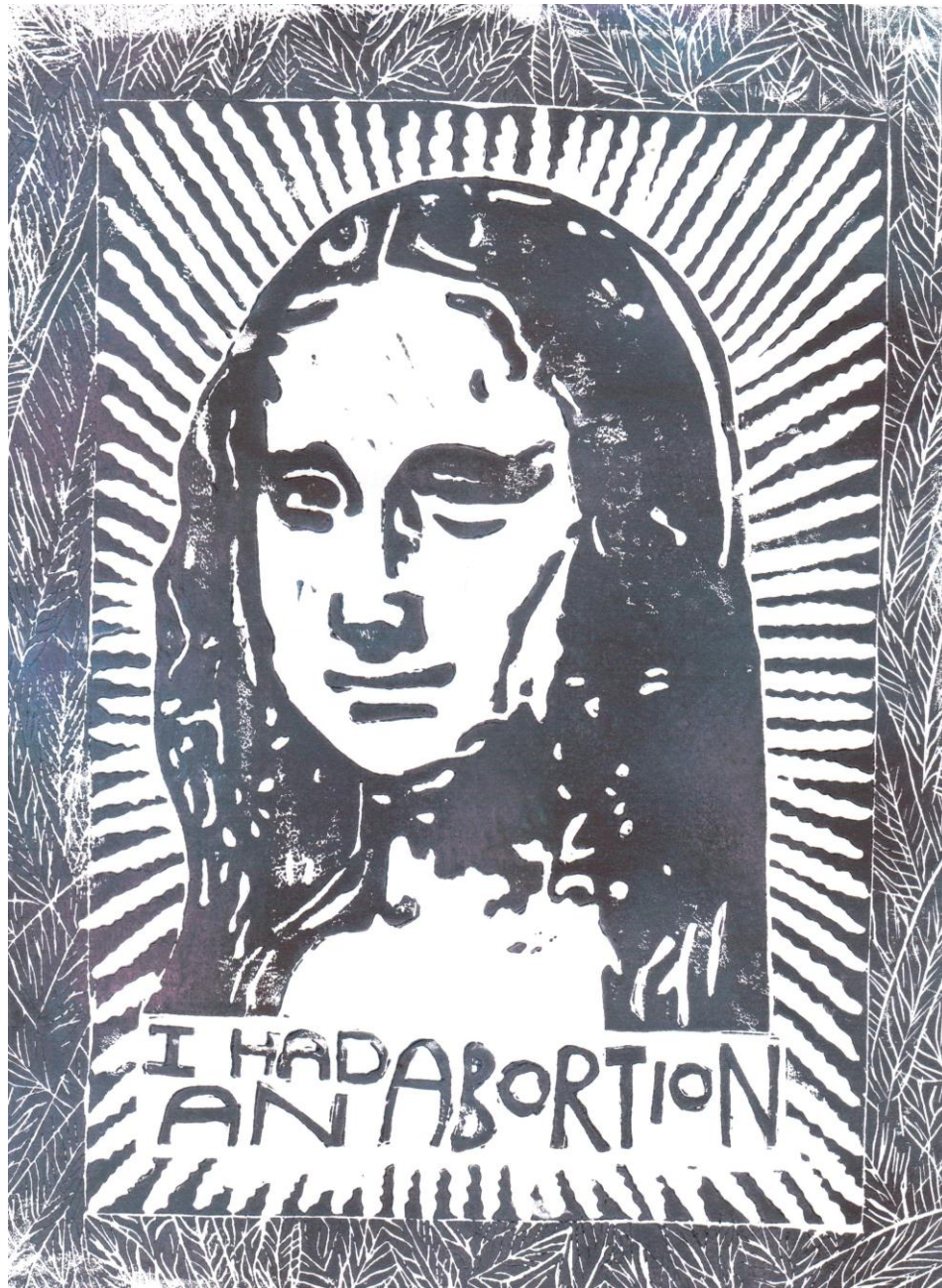


Figure 22: Megan Smith "I Had An Abortion" Mona Lisa piece

¹⁰⁴ For more information on Megan's play "The Waiting Room," refer to this Feministing article. <<http://events.feministing.com/event/waiting-room-an-original-play-by-megan-smith/>>

Megan acknowledges that she knew she was part of a larger activist movement. She especially relates stories about her boss Susan at WMF and Susan's effects on her framing of reproductive justice: *"When I think about describing the influence she had on me, I'm overwhelmed by it. Things that.. the way that I still frame things that I talk about now, I can feel the way that she made me think about things in a different way, if that makes sense. I know that "Trusting Women" is this abstract thing that we say all the time, but until you really feel how to do that, and feel yourself... it's not always going to be- it's always going to be a challenge, there are always going to be things that come up."* In this way, Megan was able to better understand the meaning behind some typical pro-choice rhetoric through her position within a larger, established community of clinic employees.

In addition to her boss Susan, Megan emotionally describes another hero of hers – her grandmother – and their interconnected identities as artists: *"I was just thinking about my grandma, and she is an artist, she had always painted but had never really done it as her main thing until she retired, and um, she...she and my mother are both, they would consider themselves feminists but it's not something that we really talk about, and they both are not as radical as me. This abortion funding concept is still something that does like not quite translate. They are supportive of it and think it's awesome that I do stuff, but I still sometimes don't think that they get it in the same, but... my grandmother was a riveter in WWII, like Rosie."*

Megan continued, speaking about her hometown Philadelphia's Mural Arts Project, which often features local community arts/mural projects, and the role community arts played in her relationship with her grandmother's art: *"They were doing this one in West Philly about women and women who had lived in Philadelphia and also famous and local women, and they wanted to interview people who had lived in Philadelphia for a while, and my grandma has lived*

in Philadelphia basically her whole life, so I went and did the interview with her, and they wanted to interview both of us together...That's my grandmother.. But.. she... I'm going to cry.. she like... Um, I try to tell this story so many times and I still get emotional about it. They asked her, it was both of us together, if she, I want to get the phrasing right, if she thought that she would do something, if she were me, would her life be different now if she was growing up now where I was, would she be an artist, basically, and she was like, Oh yeah, like I would totally have gone to art school, I wouldn't have gone to secretary school...she followed it up by saying that that's why she's so happy for me and for my sister, because she had worked hard so that it was instilled in us that we could do that ... I thought she liked to paint so she painted... and that's kind of how it was, how her life was structured so it happened this way.” Through the stories of her own grandmother's relationship to feminism and art, in addition to her mentorship from Susan at Women's Medical Fund, Megan received support and encouragement from established feminist and abortion-rights communities, connecting her own stories to a long legacy of women in her family and from her hometown.

Megan describes the impact of her arts activism on her personal life and friendships, and the necessity for finding a community of similar-minded reproductive justice activists: *“It is kinda funny with an abortion fund because there are abortion funds everywhere, so you can join and find a network of people who are interested in the same stuff, which is weird but kind of cool, so I've made a lot of connections through funds, and funds of course are connected to other organizations... since I've moved, especially, probably most people that I know now are somehow through a repro health or justice related thing.”* This immediate network flies in the face of typical awkwardness or alienation surrounding abortion funding workers: *“I don't have many in depth conversations about it. I think that's the thing about being such a radical*

abortion funding person is that... you don't really bring that up to anyone... 'cuz it's not a positive conversation, it's not a conversation everyone is having." In this way, Megan defines her beliefs and activist strategies as radical and radically different than even the self-identified "liberal" people in her life.

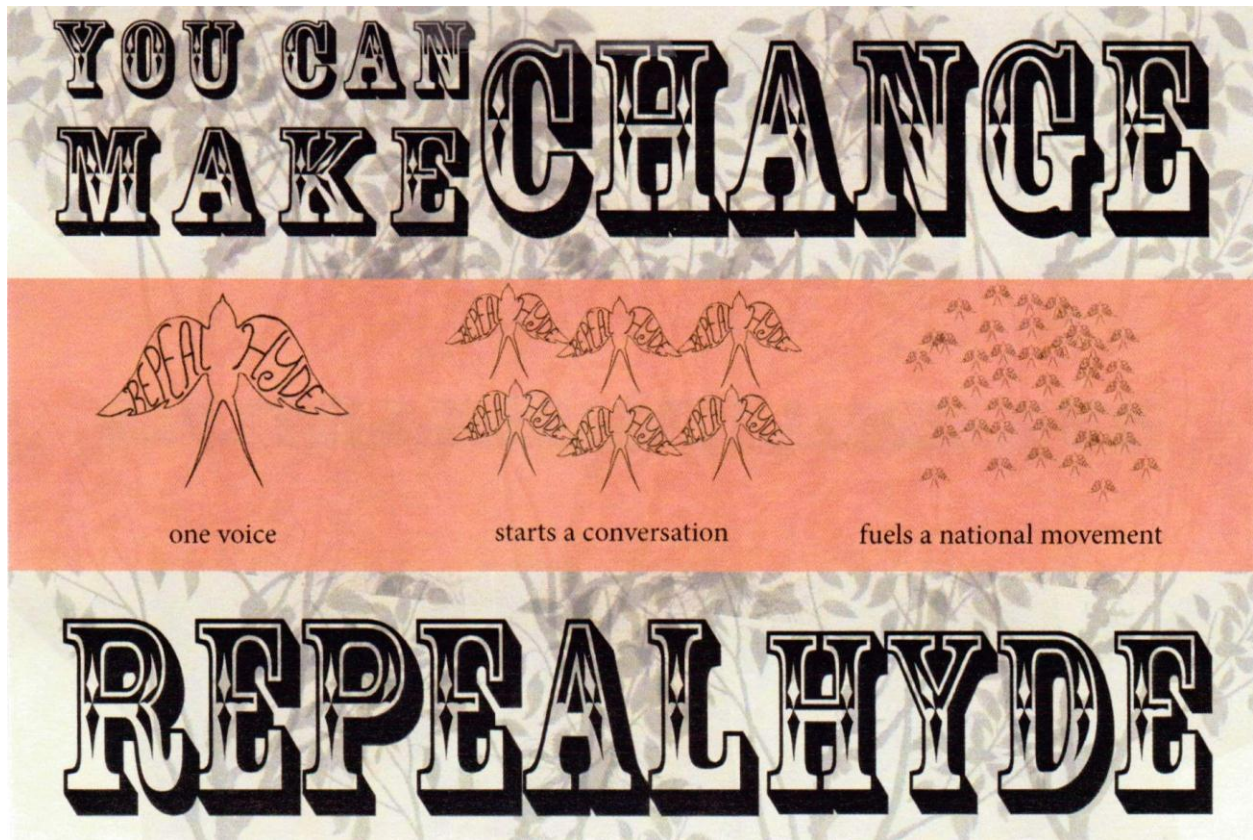


Figure 23: 2012 Flyer for the Repeal Hyde Art Project

Megan continued her activism after college, when she came to Boston to work at *Ibis Reproductive Health*. She describes the creation of the Repeal Hyde Art Project for the 35th year of the Hyde Amendment (prohibiting the use of federal funds for abortion) and how she initially conceived of the project: *"I think it's a really hard issue to think about because there isn't going to be much action in the short term, and if you feel differently about that then I love that about you, anyone, but I think that given the current climate I think it's not something that's going to change soon, so I think the challenge is doing something that will continue the conversation with*

people who are involved, like us, in reproductive health, maybe not necessarily abortion fund people because they are thinking about it all the time, but people in the field, you know, or interested in abortion rights. ...And something that would also bring it to the consciousness of people who aren't familiar with it. I think that despite being here for 35 years it's still invisible, and most people don't know that it exists. Maybe more people do now given all the stuff about health care reform.”¹⁰⁵

She continues with the logistical specifics of how the installation works, emphasizing the importance of its community-based and collaborative mission: “*So I came up with the idea of having a community art installation... with paper birds that say repeal Hyde on the front and on the back you can write a message about why you think the Hyde Amendment should be repealed, there's a template online so you can print it out and mail it in to me and then I will put them all up in an installation.*



Figure 24: Repeal Hyde Art Project – original template

¹⁰⁵ For more information on the Hyde Amendment, refer here: <<http://www.fundabortionnow.org/learn/hyde>>

And I did the first installation at the Choice USA conference at the end of September, and I'm plotting some future directions, hopefully doing an installation at least one more time. They're all made of computer paper, so they're kind of beat up, I don't know how many can be done, but at least one more."

Megan also discussed the use of social media to publicize and spread the project, from its genesis to now, and the importance of the internet in spreading the Repeal Hyde project to people outside of her immediate activist networks: *"I had the idea, and I talked to my coworker about it... and then I put it up on Facebook... And I was very fortunate that it just got picked up by a lot of people. It's been more successful than I ever thought it would turn out to be. And Steph [Herold] posted about it on abortiongang [blog site]...And the national network put it on their website, and other people.. I was going to the Choice USA conference anyway to be on a panel about arts and activism and it was at the end of September... and I was like, I should just ask them if I can do it there, so I did, and they were like, that's great. So I had all these Choice USA connections and they are still supporters of the project, which is really cool... I do think that social media is how it got to all those people. It went from Facebook to abortiongang to websites to Twitter, I did very little outreach for it, I talked to people I knew about it, but most of the work and recruitment... I wasn't really heavily recruiting, mostly people finding out about it happened organically through Twitter and stuff which is really cool."*

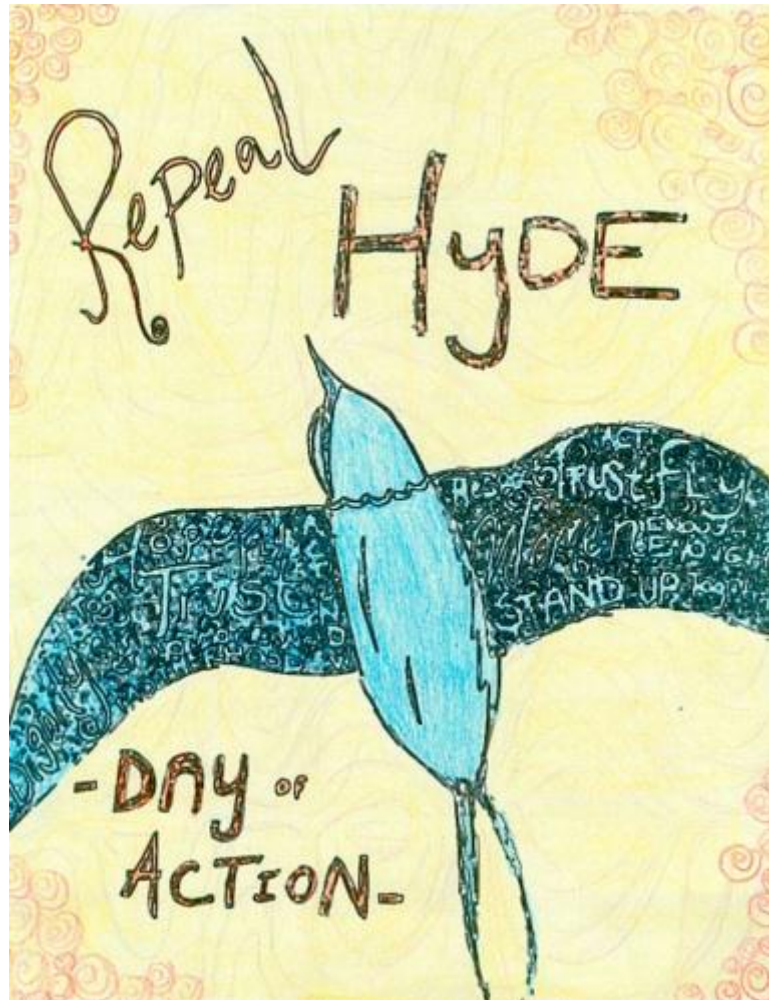


Figure 25: Repeal Hyde Day of Action flier

After describing her initial aims and goals for the Repeal Hyde Art Project, Megan looks to “next directions with [her] art”: *“I’ve been really interested in bringing my art to more of a public space, and allowing for a conversation to take place...Also, I wanted to do something that was kind of hopeful given all of that. I think that if we don’t have hope about the issue that it’s not going to change.”* Megan underscores her belief in the power of collaborative, community-based, independent art projects that strive for a more hopeful vision of the future.



Figure 26: Repeal Hyde Community Art Installation at the Choice USA Conference

Steph Herold: Clinic Advocate Tweets for Justice and Community

Early on in the project, I also interviewed Megan Smith's friend and colleague, Steph Herold. She is the founder of IAmDrTiller.com, the @IamDrTiller twitter account, and she is also one of the organizers for the Philadelphia Reproductive Justice Arts Extravaganza, a large, arts-based celebration for the Women's Medical Fund. Steph also founded AbortionGang.org, a reproductive justice blog aimed at promoting the voices of young people within the

movement.¹⁰⁶ Steph, like Megan, describes her beginning in reproductive justice activism as her work for Women’s Medical Fund while at Bryn Mawr College. WMF, as she describes, “*opened [her] eyes to abortion access and the obstacles women go through to obtain abortions.*” The next part of her story comes out of the tragic murder of Dr. George Tiller -- a “*devastating event*” to Steph’s community of abortion providers and clinic staff. As a community, Steph describes that they talked about their own safety and how they would, as a clinic, react to the murder, to such a “*horrible, horrible event.*” Steph explains how, as a clinic, they realized that they were doing everything possible to support patients and people seeking abortion care, but that they weren’t doing enough to “*take care of ourselves and tell our own stories of how and why we do this work.*” From here, Steph recalls understanding her role in the recovery and re-building process: “*This is the one thing I can do, I can create some kind of platform for abortion providers and the abortion provider community.*”

Originally, Steph claims she was “skeptical” of using Twitter as an activist platform. But soon, she realized its potential utility to activist movements in terms of connecting people to news, to activist opportunities, and to each other: “*It has a lot of power; people wanted to hear about stories from those in the abortion providing community.*” She describes tweeting specifically about her clinic, on national abortion-related political news, on intra-movement politics, and in promoting the work of other young reproductive justice activists.

Twitter also provides Steph and others within the clinic advocacy community a real-time, free, and public space to reflect and respond to clinic threats and violence, enhancing the feelings of togetherness and solidarity of the activists. Steph particularly remembers one intense moment of resistance after her clinic pledged to provide abortions for free in honor of Dr. Tiller, soon after the time of his murder: “*I decided that it would be a great idea to tweet that—why not*

¹⁰⁶ “AbortionGang.” Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://abortiongang.org/>>

promote what my clinic was doing? And within half an hour, there were maybe the double the amount of protestors we usually have outside, we had local news agencies outside our clinic to ask about the “free abortion” business.” Steph’s twitter activism offered unique opportunities for reflection on the danger inherent in her work as well as the potential for the creation of supportive communities: *“We had harassing phone calls, and it was just awful. I had no idea that twitter had that kind of power. While I had mostly supportive people tweeting and following, there were also lots of anti-abortion people keeping tabs on me and using whatever I put out there against the clinic and abortion providers in general. It was a real wake up call to me about how twitter can have immediate, real world impacts, both positive and negative.”* She moved forward with these earlier experiences on Twitter to reach even more audiences.

Steph started the #IHadAnAbortion on Twitter which constantly strives to revive itself through the constant inclusion of new community voices and stories: *“I started the hashtag in part to bring new people in the conversation about abortion access – specifically women who’ve had abortions.”* With #IHadAnAbortion, Steph looked to Twitter’s wide public reach as a means of increasing accessibility to reproductive justice activism: *“But one of my goals with that was to bring women who’ve had abortions into the online pro-choice activist world. Because there is really so much vitriol from people who are anti-abortion and people who want to re-criminalize abortion.”* As a strategy against this wide-spread fear-mongering and abortion-related hate speech, Steph took advantage of Twitter’s power: *“So it was, let’s get the voices of the women who they want to go to jail for exercising their civil rights into the conversation.”* The project provided an opportunity for media activists to think about online privacy and safety when anti-choice individuals harassed and intimidated the women posting with the #IHadAnAbortion publically: *“What I didn’t think about, that I have learned over the last year, is how twitter may*

not be a safe space for people to do that. For example, for someone who may have used the hashtag may not be prepared for the cruel and very disrespectful and deeply wrong information and insults that might have been hurled in their way by anti-abortion people.”

Another way Steph’s work helps her remain firm in the face of such hate-filled backlash is through the creation and maintenance of close-knit online feminist communities. Steph describes how online feminist communities function on two levels of support: through story-sharing and emotional support. In terms of story sharing through social media/blogging, Steph sees these forms of media as a means of “consciousness raising” in her generation’s cultural context, summarizing of her core beliefs about reproductive justice media activism: *“It’s how we tell our stories, it’s how we share the stories of others, it’s how we support each other, it’s how we affirm that we experience the same things that others have experienced and that we aren’t crazy or wrong. That’s one thing my friend Shelby (Knox, vocal young feminist writer) likes to say a lot. Through twitter and blogging, we teach each other and we teach ourselves, and that is important for movement-building, including people in our movement, for building the movement for reproductive justice that we want to be a part of and lead.”* In terms of self-care and emotional support, Steph sees online feminist communities as venues for emotional accountability and a group dynamic working to reinforce the strengths and achievements of others: *“These kind of communities can help keep you in check, and what I mean by that is that it’s really obvious for someone to see when you’re working hard, when you’re burnt out... you can step back and let others into the conversation, and get a lot of support that maybe you weren’t able to get if you didn’t have these kind of communities.”*

She started the blogging community Abortion Gang hoping to apply this format of feminist community to reproductive justice blogging for a more insular community, supporting

each other and less focused on larger, public twitter campaigns, for example. Primarily focused on emphasizing the voices of “young people, who are involved in reproductive justice activism in some way,” Abortion Gang exists as a highly radicalized, almost experimental zone of independent collective reproductive justice activists, a very unique entity in the larger world of feminist and pro-choice bloggers. Through this small, tight-knit community of fewer than 20 bloggers, the technology of blogging is utilized for its ability to connect radicalized people with a specific message together for the purposes of activism even across much distance. Steph describes Abortion Gang as not only a site for public blog entries on reproductive justice issues but also as a place where members turn to each other for a variety of kinds of support, as she mentioned previously in her views for online digital communities.¹⁰⁷

In addition to online collaboration in reproductive justice media activism, Steph helped to plan a Reproductive Justice Arts Extravaganza event in Philadelphia, PA as a means of bringing pro-choice and art communities together in solidarity. The event featured a variety of artists (including Megan Smith, Heather Ault, Heather Freeman, and Martha Solomon, also interviewed for this project) working in mediums as varying as spoken word, burlesque dancing, visual arts, and theatrical performance. The event stands out in recent years as a testament to effective collaborative organizing and a beautiful intersection of art and activist goals. Intended as a celebration for the Women’s Medical Fund, Steph describes the planning committee as diverse on all levels, with varied levels of experience planning events, some from the abortion

¹⁰⁷ From the AbortionGang About page: “We are Jewish, Christian, atheist, Muslim, Wiccan, secular. We are mixed race, African-American, Latina, White, bi-racial. We are completing a graduate degree, we didn’t finish high school. We have had abortions, children, miscarriages. We have IUDs and we use rhythm beads. We work in reproductive health and we twitter about being #prochoice. We call ourselves feminists, womanists, womyn, wimmin, grrls, bois, men, women. We are cis gender, we are trans women, we’re straight men, we are gender queer. We have sex with anything that moves, we are abstinent, we are poly amorous. And we stand for choice. This is our space to talk about what drives, inspires, and challenges us, what renews our passion for reproductive justice, what outrages us, and our ideas to keep the movement going forward. We range from 16 years old to 50, all creatively using new media (along with many other outlets) to change the way we think about and interact with activism.” <<http://abortiongang.org/>>

clinic/reproductive justice community and some from the local art scene. Despite difficulties organizing across so many differences, the event was hugely successful: *“We created it from the ground-up. We got established Philadelphia artists to judge art for us, we found a space, we had to figure out donations. It wasn’t supposed to be a fundraiser, but a celebratory event, but it ended up raising a good chunk of money.”*

The RJ Arts Extravaganza’s success, based on Steph’s accounts, seems to have come from hers and other activists’ visions of collaborative, community-based organizing: *“Having people with different expertise and different community roles at the table was vital for making that event a success, because it meant that the event appealed to different people in the community. It wasn’t just an event for people in the abortion rights world, it wasn’t just an event for people in the art world. And it wasn’t just an event for young people either. I think that even though sometimes us being so different made the organizing process difficult, it also made the event more holistic, interesting, multi-dimensional.”* Steph cites the specific example of collaboration at the RJ Arts Fest with the inclusion of local art students. Especially with the highly economic-conscious subject of abortion funding, Steph saw an undiscovered partnership in art students: *“We have more friends in this issue than we realize...These [art] students understood what it meant to have little to no income and be struggling to make ends meet and without health insurance. And even if you had health insurance that it might not cover the care you need...So that kind of reaching out to different communities that we wouldn’t usually consider our allies...that was something that was important.”*

When I asked Steph about some of her visions for the future of reproductive justice media activism, she talked about projects by similar activists. When specifically speaking about reproductive justice media activists who inspire her work, Steph emphatically recommended

Megan Smith (my first interview participant): *“Megan Smith and her Repeal Hyde bird art project is amazing. I think it raises awareness about the Hyde Amendment, which can be an esoteric and wonky thing to talk about it...I admire her innovative thinking and passionate and creative mind.”* Here, Steph emphasizes the need for flexible, community-based approaches and responses to the increasing restrictions on women’s reproductive freedoms. With stronger communities – both in person, like at the Reproductive Justice Arts Extravaganza – and through the Internet – like AbortionGang and twitter – Steph and others hope for a more cohesive and supportive reproductive justice movement.

Nuala Cabral: Deconstructing Media and Increasing Media Literacy

Nuala Cabral is a filmmaker and media literacy expert invested in deconstructing problematic media and then constructing her own activist-oriented work. After *“walking around with a tape recorder”* during middle school, Nuala was then confronted with the landmark reality television show “The Real World” which premiered on MTV while she was in high school, fueling her future work in and with film media: *“That was the first time that I became aware and frustrated and started talking about stereotypes in the media. I loved the show, but I always wondered why do they only have one black person or person of color, and why are they treated this way, why are they always seen as crazy? So walking around with my camera was like showing a different kind of real world.”* Nuala went on to study International Relations with a minor in Women’s Studies at Tufts University; a semester she spent at Spellman College, where she studied feminist theory, strengthened her experience in *“Thinking about the relationship between media and the de-humanization of women’s bodies.”* She made her first film about representations of women of color in hip-hop, incorporating opinions and viewpoints which she had previously encountered in her everyday interactions: *“They were conversations I would hear*

in my living room and in front of the TV, but I wanted to interrogate it more and I wanted to document it in a way that was meaningful.”

Nuala reports that seeing the response to her first film was “*the first time that I really saw video as more than a hobby...the video wasn’t professionally done...but the video...got me really interested in media literacy...and got me thinking a lot about the different ways violence against women happens and how talking about it in dialogue can be a part of resisting that and deconstructing it all. That’s when I was like: media. It’s more than just documenting my friends and telling my story and expressing myself: it can be a tool to raise consciousness, start dialogue, and perhaps and inspire change.*” The film itself went on to show at festivals and conferences, connecting Nuala to a variety of activist networks of people working specifically on Black women’s issues within media representations and production.

Another turning point in Nuala’s growth as a reproductive justice media activist is her experience with the group media literacy organization, *Chica Luna*, based out of NYC. She learned of *Chica Luna* through a *Women, Action, and the Media* conference and their presentation immediately spoke to her interests; *Women, Action and the Media* is a nonprofit working for gender justice in the media, encompassing a variety of activist methodologies including digital campaigns, an email Listserv, and many in-person conferences and collaborative events across the country. She was so inspired by their presentation that she “re-evaluated [her] steps, [her] near future” and declined an offer to get a Master’s degree at Brown University in favor of media literacy justice work. Working in NYC, she interned at the Women’s Media Center and worked with the Third World News Reel, a program for documentary film-makers interested in social justice, born from the historical Newsreel

collectives formed in 1967 in locations across the country.¹⁰⁸ During this time, Nuala created her films “Affording Progress” (about the gentrification of Brooklyn) and “Walking Home,” her street-harassment focused film.



Figure 27: Still from Nuala Cabral's short film, “Walking Home”

Social media was one of the most important factors in Nuala's development as a filmmaker. It spread her street-harassment film, “Walking Home,” throughout different activist and social justice networks primarily through Facebook: *“It started dialogues, and that's how I got connected to the larger discourse around street harassment, and the activist movements around street harassment.”* Individuals sharing the film on their personal pages initially propelled publicity for her film; after a few years, Nuala expanded into twitter alongside her Facebook, YouTube, and Vimeo. Blogger reviews of her films also helped her to maintain a strong audience despite her completely independent status as an artist, both personal blogs (often through Tumblr) and larger, more recognized publications and online magazines, such as Colorlines, a digital news site focusing on issues of racial justice in America. Reflecting on her

¹⁰⁸ “Third World Newsreel” Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.twn.org/twnpages/about/history.aspx>>

story being picked up by Colorlines, Nuala remembers their omission of her last name and turns it in to a strategy for young activists using social media to their best advantage: *“One thing that’s good to try to do, is to put it out there whatever way you can, and then document it as much as you can. Try to track where it is, what audiences are watching it, Why?... It can make you feel like your media is actually having an impact, which as a film-maker you need.”* Tracking where your media is shared to and re-printed, especially on the Internet, also helps a media-maker to look into the media’s audience to evaluate the effectiveness of past projects and strategize the production of future ones. Not only does tracking a piece’s audience help better shape the content for future audiences, but it can also reinforce the activist’s position. Thus, as a non-mainstream filmmaker, Nuala relied on knowledge of her Internet audience to improve her future work as well as to reinforce her personal identification as an artist.

Nuala reflects on the function of social media in her art and activism in creating feminist communities dedicated to media literacy and criticism and ensuring an audience for future pieces. Particularly on the platform of Twitter, the hashtag function is an important step in the formation and maintenance of these groups: *“The hashtag is really important...it connects you to communities...The #StreetHarassment...helps us to talk within our community and contribute to the ongoing discourse about the issue.”* Her Twitter presence helped Nuala’s work to reach different levels of street harassment, feminist, and reproductive justice activists despite her lack of funding or mainstream media support.

Difficulties in her independent filmmaking are primarily about funding and access to film-making technologies. Nuala describes the grants which have *“helped [her] through some of the process,” despite the fact that “[her] work has been very grassroots, do-it-yourself.”* For example, the Rhode Island Council of Humanities provided Nuala with a grant to pay for

expenses associated with the production of her first film, but funding still proved to be one of the primary challenges to the widespread distribution of her work. The sources of funding anxiety seem endless to independent film-makers, even beyond the technological requirements:

“travelling to festivals, festival submission fees, blank DVDs, time spent on the project...All that stuff should be accounted for.” To young activists, Nuala urges in favor of carefully organized records of expenses and technological needs, which can be forgotten when one is funding their own projects.

For the technology of each project, Nuala says she *“always used whatever...was available to me,”* demonstrating her flexibility and adaptability as an activist and media-maker. When associated with any particular media group, Nuala would use their available resources (such as using Third World News Reel’s equipment), but once she left such groups, the technology she used was what was immediately available and cost-effective: a Flip camera, her computer speakers, and her computer microphone. On the subject of her evolving needs, uses for, and choices behind her projects’ technology, Nuala elaborates on her ideas of quality, funding, and artist accessibility: *“I always felt ‘whatever, I’m going to tell my story, I don’t care how professional it looks as long as it’s my story, I don’t care if people want to watch it.’ I wasn’t always as pro-active to get money. I think it’s good to go out and shoot when you can, to create the art whenever you can.”* At the same time, Nuala recognized the importance of “style” and warned against *“spreading yourself too thin”* if you really just need better equipment.”

Currently, Nuala’s media activism can be seen in her project, FAAN Mail. She describes the group and its functions: *“[FAAN Mail] ties together my passion for media literacy and my passion for making media, formed by young women of color who, like me, felt frustrated with media representations, and feeling like we wanted to talk back to the media and we wanted to*

create our own. FAAN Mail is a diverse group of women, but a lot of the media that we engage with involved intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class, and we try to unpack that together, and we inspire audiences to be more active in critical thinking, and want to create more realistic and diverse representations of who we are...I'm very passionate about it." FAAN Mail thrives with an ethos of community, collaboration, and connectedness. Nuala reflects on their Talk Back videos created in response to popular media representations after FAAN Mail discussions, which FAAN Mail creates to criticize problematic media and to create space for community, feminist, and women of color-centric media: *"I don't know what's going to come from these videos, but some people are watching them.. some people who have the 'credibility' or whatever [journalists, recognized media critics, etc.]. It's nice to know that it resonates with people. I think that the coolest thing about FAAN Mail: it models media literacy for people who don't know what that phrase means. It also creates a safe space where we feel like we can get together and build intellectually and better understand media we are consuming and our relationship to it."* For example, Nuala described to me a recent FAAN Mail response video, which targeted a music video ("It's Free Swipe Yo EBT") depicting a stereotypical Black "welfare queen." In their response video, some members of the FAAN Mail collective deconstruct and analyze the representations within the video, relying on each other and their collective to formulate a simultaneously disparate/individualized and community response, using each other for emotional support while still pushing back with an active response.¹⁰⁹

This safe space in which media can be questioned and critiqued features the collaborative effect to connect women, especially women of color, with similar voices in solidarity:

"[Watching the recent film 'Miss Representation']..reminded me that I'm not crazy...there is this

¹⁰⁹ "FAAN Mail Talk Back: 'It's Free Swipe Yo EBT'" FAAN Mail. Web 1 April 2012.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_LMzkHITRig>

huge machine that we have to work against or transform. [The director] said that sometimes when she'll talk about stuff in the media, and people will say, oh you're being sensitive, you're overreacting, you're being a girl. In FAAN Mail, no one's going to say you're over-reacting or you're too sensitive. We're here because we think it's important and we are going to work to change it. We're a little idealistic." This vision of solidarity upholding accessibility is a guiding principle; Nuala expands on this idea through the example of language: *"The other thing about FAAN Mail is : we have these moments of academics, with academic jargon, and which resonates with some audiences, and speaks to some of the educations and backgrounds which some of us have and are receiving, but in the next sentence you'll hear regular talk, or slang, or something you would've said when you were a kid, that can also connect with a different audience. I think being able to show a spectrum of who we are. We're not all academic people, but most of us are pretty well-educated. I think FAAN Mail kind of shows the spectrum... I want us to be accessible. I want us to make conversations you might hear in academia accessible to everyday people who might not be privileged enough to be in those spaces. I want them to watch our videos and say, "I get what they're talking about" and can relate to it. There might be some that people can't understand, but I want at least some of it to be accessible, to invite conversations across backgrounds and privilege."*

Cindy Cooper: Theatre as Discussion & Exchange of Complex Stories

I connected to playwright, author, and journalist Cindy Cooper through the Women, Action, and the Media (WAM!) listserv, focused on gender justice in the media. She describes the birth of her play "Words of Choice" as an accidental process that occurred when she was the Communications Director for the Center for Reproductive Rights. As Communications Director,

Cindy reports that her *“idea of communication was bigger than press releases, so I decided we were going to do an art show, which was a step out for such an organization, as many large pro-choice organizations can actually be quite conservative in their internal structure. So it was a big persuading, and marshaling resources, getting people on board to support it, etc.”* For over a year, Cindy worked within the Center for Reproductive Rights to plan this art show in NYC. Procuring a space was “critical” to the planning of the event, which took place in the Sirius Gallery; once they had the space, she wanted to plan more events, but something specifically “more creative than just speakers.” Cindy looked for theatre pieces to perform, and *“didn’t find anything that I really felt spoke to the complexity and breadth of the material that was being presented on the walls [at the gallery], which was quite extensive.”* With this realization, she decided that they had to create a play of their own.

“Words of Choice” began as a *“one-off thing, but it worked so well we started getting other requests to do it – Planned Parenthood of NYC, a National Abortion Convention performance; and other audiences continued requesting it.”* The play itself contains different stories about abortion and women’s reproductive health that are told through a small ensemble of actors. In addition to Cindy Cooper as the creator, numerous pro-choice and arts figures are also credited as contributing writers for the original play, including Judith Arcana (former member of the Jane abortion collective in Chicago), Justice Harry Blackmun (former U.S. Supreme Court Justice who wrote the Roe v. Wade decision), Gloria Feldt (former president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America), and ten others.¹¹⁰ She continues describing the beginnings of the play: *“We had a volunteer-based performance at the Here Theatre in NY, at which the president of the board of Planned Parenthood NYC, Kathy Kramer, stood up and asked ‘Where*

¹¹⁰ “About the Writers.” *Words of Choice*. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://wordsofchoice.org/the-play/about-the-writers>>

are you going next?’ and I said, ‘I’m going home and going to sleep!’ We talked, and it stuck with me. People really felt in that time period, the pressure and the oppression because of the Bush administration. So that’s when I started getting more organized about doing it, creating our own nonprofit, responding to requests ,trying to raise money, trying to do everything to put it out there. And I have to say, even at that PP event, and even today, I look at it and I am surprised at how well it works. I’m thrilled, but it’s good. I can’t entirely explain why, but I remember when Kathy Kramer stood up, it I felt like it was really reaching out to people.”



Figure 28: Three Cast members from one "Words of Choice" Performance

Cindy also talked about the possibilities within theatre as a medium and theatre’s unique ability to create a community discussion about a subject so politicized and complex as abortion rights. She distinguishes theatre from other mediums: *“Theatre is the most unique medium, and for that reason, it’s accidentally, utterly appropriate for the subject of reproductive justice in this*

time period. Because theatre has an interaction with people in a real-time way. There's a constant flow backward and forward between the audience and performers, which is not necessarily true in film, for example. The audiences bring their own experiences to the work but they are in a group, live, so their own experiences are interacting kind of silently with what they are seeing and absorbing from the live performers... Theatre by virtue of being live and by having people who are present with you, it's more like a church or temple. You're interacting with the people around you, with the performers. Not all theatre has a thinking component, but ours does. Interacting with people's emotions, experiences, imaginations, and also their thoughts and impressions they received, the rhetoric they've heard in the community... Maybe theatre can have an impact when other media forms are stale, aren't getting out there, are being thwarted, and let's see what we can do with this."

The theatrical medium also offered "Words of Choice" a unique position within the abortion rights political framework as artwork to contemplate, rather than overly-politicized rhetoric, as Cindy describes: *"We got out of the debate in a lot of ways. Even in a local community like Iowa or Minnesota or Kansas... a columnist can write about us without writing about the debate. We have a different entry into the rest of the world. Just by being theatre, by being an arts group, we can get around some of the things that have become obstructions to a full and robust discussion around reproductive rights."* Cindy says she refuses to do a performance without a discussion afterwards. These discussions serve the community and audience in a number of ways: they engage the audience with "creativity exercises" to think critically about their own assumptions and thoughts about reproductive justice they allow the audience members, cast, and producers/writers to process each performance; and they facilitate an invaluable and very rare space for reflection and discussion about reproductive justice. Cindy

says: *“If people have comments they can make them, that’s fine, often times I let people in the audience respond. In Missouri, I remember a comment with a religious element to it, and I don’t always feel so comfortable answering those, and I knew there was a woman there from a local religious community and I asked her to answer, and she did, beautifully.”* These discussions also provide safer and more respectful spaces for opponents of abortion to speak about their disagreements with pro-choice folks.

Because of Cindy’s close work with local abortion clinics and abortion provider/funder communities in relation to “Words of Choice,” the performers and play have been the target of various types of anti-abortion resistance and harassment; in addition, Cindy and the play have run into resistance from liberal organizations. Cindy describes memories of famous anti-choice group Operation Rescue showing up before performances with their famous Fetus Truck; individuals handing out pamphlets outside the venue; chalking on the campus before a show; etc. But these incidents were an “isolated half a dozen out of 100 or so.” However, Cindy and the play have experienced resistance from within the social justice community, as she describes next, which can be *“even a little more painful for me because I want them to be more open to the arts. It’s a hard road for reproductive justice and abortion. It’s a lot of persuading and articulating why an event does not have to be a speech, and how you can communicate to people without lecturing them or telling them what to think, but letting them open their minds to information...and to not have to control every message. There are some things in “Words of Choice” that I don’t necessarily agree with, or that I was very surprised at how much they resonated with audience members.”*



Figure 29: Photograph of One Operation Rescue Truck

An example of this conflict with larger social justice organizations occurred during Cindy's experience with Amnesty International. Amnesty was planning an Arts Festival and Words of Choice had signed up to perform, with extensive communication with Amnesty prior to their arrival. *"When we got down there, (there were hundreds of visual artists dealing with all aspects of oppression and freedom), someone from Amnesty would have to introduce every event of ours and say that they disagree with our position or we couldn't perform. We were the only group out of these hundred that Amnesty decided they should comment on. They hadn't seen the show or looked at the script, even, so you know it was a political move."* This conflict with larger organizations can also be seen in a lack of respect for the worth of the artists' and performers' talent: *"I'm constantly doing this speech – we do a lot of work with Unitarian churches. One group contacted me and asked if the actors would perform for free and I said no, we don't allow that. They're professionals, they do this for a living, and they make sacrifices to*

do this, they need to be paid. There are 20 writers and we pay them too. It's the most arduous accounting process but we do pay them some little amount for their work."

The funding of "Words of Choice" performances is context-dependent and flexible. Sometimes, a large abortion-rights group might pay the group enough to cover the costs (no profit). Other times, the nonprofit organization created for the performance can raise money and subsidize part, or in rare cases, all of a performance. When subsidizing 100% of a performance, the play is actually able to raise money. Individual donors have also been important, according to Cindy, especially during the extensive tours for ballot measures and election years. These performances and funding patterns also show the connections between Cindy's play and local abortion-rights activist communities. For example, Cindy talks about the Summer of Trust/Summer of Choice event last summer, when grassroots activists were mobilizing to protect Dr. Carhart, who had taken over the practice of Dr. Tiller after he was murdered.

In terms of creative production and the formation of an artist message, Cindy had many things to share with younger activists working within media and arts: *"There isn't any one answer. You're on the WAM! [Women, Action, and the Media] list. I think there are many different approaches and we need to use them ALL. Don't get stuck in your concrete. If one thing doesn't work, try something else. They are going to do what they do. They being the hardcore antis. I try to ignore the hardcore ones as much as possible besides making sure we are safe and prepared for them. To think about the huge amount of people who are in the middle or who are uninformed, and thinking what can we do to help them understand the topic? It's to think creatively, to come up with new ideas. That's why I started the blog, Up the Creativity. Try something else, new, different. I aim for high quality. Don't just do something for the sake of doing it. Aim for the highest quality work you are capable, but put it out there and try it.*

Develop the work, refine it, listen to people's concerns and comments about whether it's reaching audiences. Try and reach audiences."

She extended some of this advice to organizations too, stressing the need to focus on women's lives and decisions rather than operating in response to politics and funding, limiting their overall potential power: "*[Non profit organizations] can get really rigid. For liberal groups, they are ultra-conservative in how they want to handle their messaging. We've tried that for 30 years and it didn't work. And now it's 40 years. Loosen up a little and open up to letting people think, maybe it's not exactly on party lines but they will be on their side because they have generated their own ideas on it, and that's what it is to me that we need, to create allies by allowing them to tap into the topic in the way that is comfortable for them. So I kinda disagree with people sometimes – this is what I love about theatre too – I say we have to go beyond it—the Speak Out kind of movement. I think it limits it to those who has an experience to speak out about. Also people who cannot speak out, especially in isolated communities. We have people all the time after shows who come up and tell us they are afraid of stigma, of violence, of being judged, or what their family would think, the secrets they keep. We have to be respectful of the fact that not everyone is in the position to speak about their experiences.*

I want a bus! To tour the country and do a show. There's a place that used to be a condom factory and I want to do a carnival there. I want to do Repro Justice arts fairs all across the country. To try and keep generating ideas, to talk to organizations about why it's valuable to open up to different types of work." Cindy describes a desire to open dialogue about abortion, reproductive justice, and women's rights through theatrical performance that can operate outside of polarizing, overly negative political discussions.

Martha Solomon: Visual Stories, Positive Choices

Martha Solomon is a film-maker and artist who was recommended to me by numerous American sources and organizations for her work with the project Arts 4 Choice, which arranges black and white photos of women alongside with their stories of abortion experiences, displayed in some exhibitions but primarily on their website, and potentially, in the future, in a book. Martha speaks about the project's genesis, which formed from an American protest event: "*Arts 4 Choice was started as a cooperative arts project. Initially there was another woman...who was a dancer, with me and Kathryn [Martha's partner in Arts4Choice]. I had met Kathryn on the bus on the way down to the 2004 March for Women's Lives. She was a photographer doing documentary photos of that march, and I was doing a film, and coming from Canada we had a lot to talk about. We were doing the same thing in slightly different formats, and we were both involved in OCAC, which is the Ontario Coalition for Abortion Clinics, which is a pretty active group which does a lot of political activism and front-line defending clinics work. I was interested in looking at women who have been doing this, that was what my film was about.*"

Arts 4 Choice was also sparked by the need to address this disconnect between women's experiences and common perceptions of abortion: "*This woman wrote that no one cared about abortion issues anymore, because women will not talk about their experiences. If they don't, it will remain an abstract political issue. She said women don't think about it anymore. That's what got us really upset. Plenty of women are thinking about it – it's one of the most commonplace medical practices in Canada. We were wondering how we could solve this missing link with women's experiences holistically, instead of an abstract thing people can have impersonal opinions about, out of the hands of women. We also really tried to tackle fear and the shaming of women who have had abortions.*" As part of the long legacy of American

feminists fighting against the stigmas associated with abortion, Martha and Arts4Choice present similar woman-centric stories but updated for 2012, relying primarily on the internet for displaying the project and publicizing it. Part of the collaborative process of starting the project also dealt with combining the artist talents of the three founders: Kathryn with photograph, Elizabeth with dance, and Martha with interviews and documentary film (which was eventually dropped from the Arts 4 Choice project).

To logistically get it started, they relied on the strength of their pre-existing activist networks for support and participants: *“We started emailing everyone we knew, contacts through OCAC and activist groups across the country. We sent emails out about the project and we had an avalanche response of people, which really pleased us—we were tentative if women would be interested in participating, if they would tell us their stories.”* Once they began, concerns about the women, the scope of the project, and the possibilities of their work came to be discussed: *“We were also worried about the safety – making their pictures publically, both politically and from family and employers. That’s how it started. Then we got responses from all over, from the States, from Europe even, and that’s when we sat down and had to determine our project’s scope. That’s one really important lesson for us, finding a manageable size. We are both big thinkers – we were both like, we could take it global, it could be this amazing thing. But there’s no way we could have done all of that and still worked, and fed ourselves and still done all that we needed to do. So we really had a couple of heart to hearts about what we wanted for the project. And we decided to keep it Canadian – within our frame of reference, and financially, it was what we could do.”* In this decision we see the importance of balancing the scope of one’s art within the larger technological and funding needs of the project.

For funding, Arts 4 Choice received funds from the City of Toronto Arts fund, the Ontario provincial government arts fund, but they did not apply to any federal government grants, which Martha reports are for artists in more advanced stages of their careers. They won a grant in order to put on their second art show – “Choice out Loud.” They also displayed their photos at a NAF (National Abortion Fund) meeting and a few other shows. Currently, the artists are working on another project, and wrapping up Arts 4 Choice by continuing the blog and website (although they are no longer actively seeking participants), most of all they are working on a book proposal for the photos. The format of a book is specifically important to the goals of the project, Martha explains: *When we started the project, we wanted to make it as accessible as possible for women who are looking for information about abortion. And we looked at it as a community exercise as well. That’s why we made a website in addition to an exhibition. A number of abortion referrals and providers in Canada have linked to our sites, which made us feel so special that women who were seeking abortions would be able to look at our website and read the stories on it. And with the book, it is another delivery system, we could have it in clinics, in women’s centers, in women’s studies departments, that it would be accessible to women in another format as well. We will self-publish if we have to, to get it into waiting rooms.”*

Martha also elaborates on some of the difficulties inherent in setting up a collaborative art project, especially one with limited funding and no access to mainstream publicity; although the Arts4Choice project centers on the importance of community collaboration and participation, her experiences describe some of the issues one might come across in similar work: *“We wanted a collective end result that we could grow and share. A lot of artists we knew wanted to participate in a really limited way – they wanted to contribute a song, a 10 min dance piece, one*

painting, a sculpture. For us—the problem was how do we showcase all of this? And are we going to become the administrators of a larger art project, which is not what we wanted or set out to do. We have done that, to a large degree, but the actual time involved in even answering all the emails we received really took a chunk out of our own goals for the project.”

Martha also describes the difficulties of collaborative projects in terms of the diversity of the stories in the reproductive justice movement, a spectrum impossible to convey through the work of one or two people: *“Reproductive Justice is a lively field. There’s a huge spectrum of how people want to talk about it, represent the movement, organize things. A lot of the interest we received didn’t match what we wanted to do. Not that it wasn’t wonderful and amazing stuff but a lot of times it just didn’t fit into our particular project. We struggled a lot in terms of, should we change the project so we can fit all this wonderful stuff in? We decided we wanted to focus on our core mandate. Those core beliefs. We realized that the more diffuse we were, the less we were able to be visible. We had to distill this into one thing we could manage—we were working separate jobs, we both had young families, and we didn’t have a whole lot of time. We wanted to keep it simple. That would be one of the lessons – if I did it again I would start with creating.. a mandate, what things you want to accomplish at the end? Because goals change. Ours was for other women to hear about women’s experiences and stories, and to create a space where people could see women’s faces, and see that their stories were like theirs.”*

PORTRAIT GALLERY #1



Figure 30: Example Arts4Choice Image

For younger activists, Martha recommends strategic thinking in terms of funding in order to approach their art in a realistic way: *“Think of how to monetize your project. It sounds like a dirty word. But we put a PayPal button on our site, and we’ve received donations. We put out a call for donations on our email list and listservs, and we’ve received money. Don’t be afraid to ask. You can ask politely for whatever people can offer. And it really did help us, in terms of even getting photographic equipment, or travel to meet the women, or photo paper to print them out*

for exhibitions. Going to a publisher and trying to make something that people will pay for is not necessarily a bad thing. Heather Ault—I love her model. I think her model is genius. It's beautiful art, it's a really positive message. I have no idea how much she is managing to make, but it is really funny that in the activist field we feel bad asking for money for our art. But I think it can be both. You don't have to be required to live in poverty. Although you still probably will (laughs)."

In addition, she urges careful attention to publicity, through word-of-mouth networks as well as utilizing the capacities of digital publicizing: *"Local, word of mouth publicity. Before our blog and website, we were thinking of exhibitions, galleries. We did an email call out and to our friends, cold calling to organizations as well. We had to have a place where they could go to see that we were legit and how we were about, to attract more women to participate. And then we realized really quickly that this was the project. We have a Facebook page, the blog, we tweet very rarely but we have a Twitter account. But really our pre-existing contacts were the most helpful in terms of outreach. People shouldn't be afraid of approaching mainstream news outlets. Something may not happen but it might. Often I think we limit our options too soon, so try going big. Why not? It's still an option."*

Although the scope of Arts 4 Choice was limited to Canadian women's experiences, Martha's experiences living in the United States has increased her knowledge of the differences between the States and Canada in terms of this climate. These considerations especially focused on safety and anti-choice resistance to the project: *"We also were expecting fearfulness on the part of participants, which we took very seriously, and we still do. We had a few abortion providers who wanted to participate. We ultimately decided that that's something that we both don't feel like we can take on, that responsibility for their safety. I don't know if I'm the person*

who wants to put their photos on the Internet. We both felt kind of cowardly, but I felt like if anything ever happened I would never forgive myself.” In addition, this resistance was felt in the process of approaching publishers: *“Well we aren’t going to do an art book on abortion. Our response was Why Not? What are your reasons for not doing it? These are beautiful photos and really compelling stories, and I think it would make a really lovely coffee table book. It’s these kind of kneejerk responses to abortion, like we don’t want to hear about it, it’s not polite, that kind of stuff.”*

Now, Martha and Kathryn are working together on another similar project that depicts breastfeeding mothers, extending the successful methods of Arts4Choice into another connected realm of reproductive justice. Martha speaks about the Arts 4 Choice model of the story and photo pairing, which *“Encapsulated everything we wanted to portray. We’re here, we’re open about it, here are our faces... Shorter texts were more moving and hit people in a stronger way. It’s one thing to just see a portrait, which can be really moving, but to have them together you kinda feel like you are meeting someone. That’s what we feel is really missing around the debate about abortion rights. We’re not talking about something abstract, but something personal and important.”*

Martha shares her thoughts on the future of visual rhetorical strategies within the reproductive justice movement, which she thinks should focus heavily on the lives of whole women. She sees the duty of reproductive justice activists as fighting the strong images put forth by anti-choice forces: *“The antis have really dictated what image we see in our heads when we think of abortion – that gross, disgusting dismembered fetus which is fake –turning that around, we need to let people know that this is about women’s lives and experiences. Having images of women is a strong statement that this is really what’s at stake – women’s lives – the main issue.*

This is something I really like about Heather [Ault's] work, "Good women have abortions" banner – the beauty and positivity, makes it a more holistic message about women's lives in general. In terms of specific images – women. It's the key. We are the missing piece in the whole debate. They talk about providers, politicians, babies. Women are missing from the whole equation."

Jane Cawthorne: Pregnant Women Made Whole through Multi-faceted Performance

I also interviewed another Canadian woman, playwright and pro-choice activist Jane Cawthorne from Calgary. She spoke of her entrance into activist arts through her grassroots activism in addition to her academic work as a Women's Studies professor. She found that storytelling was a crucial element of her Women's Studies classes, where often works of fiction and the personal anecdotes of students could often affect women more strongly than history or a series of statistics indicating women are second class citizens. The beginning of her work on *The Abortion Monologues* came from her writing stories about women's abortion experiences, and figuring out how to blend these different stories together: *"I kept writing all of these women characters who were having abortions. At one point I probably had close to 100. This is getting really crazy, what am I doing here? That's kind of how art works – you don't always know what it is when it starts. I thought – I'm writing monologues of women who've had abortions. I started shaping those to make them producible and to get them into a format and length that someone can sit through in a theatre. My idea was that there had to be a lot of them. If there was one story, people who get fixated on why this particular woman had an abortion. I didn't want it to be focused on a reason. I wanted there to be so many stories that eventually you'd go wow, I could never make that decision. The only person who could make that decision is her. At 23 I*

decided that was enough right there. The play is almost relentless in a way – with so many situations. Until finally you go – wow, she’s the only person who can make that decision, and what am I doing in the audience judging her? I’ve produced the play enough to know that a person’s position from the beginning to the ending of the play changes quite rapidly.”

Jane expands on the varied conditions for the performance, and she elaborates on the political implications of the different venues and events. She explained one showing of the production in particular which was for the NAF (National Abortion Fund) conference. The event was closed and high security because it was filled with abortion providers; because of this, everyone working on that production had to be from within the community or affiliated with it in some way, which was a “poignantly powerful way to produce the play.” Generally the play is produced to encourage awareness or activism, to fundraise (like for the Emma Goldman clinic, for example), or as “straight theater.” Each of these different incarnations requires different funding methods and strategies. Jane reports that there was no possible way she could get a grant for it – *“too political...no one wants to touch it.”* In terms of publishing, she says that *“they don’t want it on their list. It’s too much of a risk. I’m a very practical person. I’m fortunate that I can do things on my own, I’m lucky as compared to younger artists with no personal financial security. You must have a personal interest in it.”*

Jane felt like the strength of her work comes from the strength of the theatre medium in order to give people a safe space and time for contemplating abortion, which she sees as sorely needed in America: *“I think there is no better place for people to think deeply about questions of life when they are in a dark theatre, and in quiet. I think it’s an incredible opportunity. There’s something about sitting in the dark that is really conducive to some great contemplation. The way public discourse is right now- we don’t listen to each other. In the United States more so but*

now also in Canada. When someone talks, all the other person is doing is thinking about how they are going to assault that position, instead of taking it in and thinking about it. I felt compelled to present voices of women—who are fictional – which could be safer than autobiographical stories with a big risk. You present 23 fictional women – you let them speak about their experiences and just talk about their lives. When was the last time that happened? And then you go out for a beer after and you talk about it. What could be better? It's the medium that I understand, at least."

This process also changes how Jane writes the individual monologues as part of one entire story, and it emphasizes the importance of the multiplicity of voices within the play, communicating a wide variety of attitudes and perspectives on abortion and reproductive justice: *"Everyone writes from their own experience. I've had 25 years talking to hundreds of women, literally, about abortions, their own abortions, about reproductive rights. It's all there somewhere and it translates to the page. Some of the situations I've seen in real life could not translate to a play or fiction because they are too much. Could we talk about the woman who decides to abort triplets? Truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction is challenging because we must make it manageable for people to accept but at the same time not to turn stories into clichés. None of these women said what you expected them to say. There's a twist in every monologue that gets you thinking which was very important to me.... Women don't admit these things in public but they admit it in the play. There are plenty of women who have abortions and only end up feeling relief. Also there are women who struggle with the decision of course. As the playwright, I have to try not to fall into the predetermined narrative of abortion. Women do it to themselves too. Their feelings of guilt are about not feeling guilty, they report. Isn't that crazy?"* Especially when compared with popular media representations of the mistakenly pregnant

woman who must make an ‘inconvenient’ choice in order to prove herself ‘selfless,’ the presence of Jane’s alternative narratives about abortion are increasingly meaningful to women’s actual lives and choices.

The message of the play, however, is very separate from its aesthetics, according to Jane and the mission of her work: *“Social justice plays can be deadly. I never meant for this play to be pedantic. I don’t know how people will feel after they watch it. You could watch this play as an anti-choice person and feel validated. That’s not how I wrote it, but I can see how that could happen. Art has to stand on its own. If I’m out there writing a piece to hammer out a moralistic message, it will fail as art, it will fail as a message. It will not be enjoyable. And I have to let go of what people take away from it. I can’t control that. I can do my best to make it clear, to write the characters as clearly as I can, but after that I have to walk away – it must stand on its own. I worry about an interview like this or a panel discussion – it’s tough.”*

In terms of future reproductive justice imagery, Jane wants to fight the image of the fetus and unify it back within the pregnant woman’s consciousness: *“Women are more and more being set up as potential problematic influences to the fetus that is seen increasingly as a person. She might drink alcohol, run a marathon, that harms the fetus. She is increasingly set up in opposition to the fetus, and this is happening more in popular culture. And the anti-choice have exploited this bifurcation of a pregnant woman.”*

Heather Ault: Protest Imagery Reflecting a Clinic Community

Heather Ault, artist and activist and creator of the 4000 Years of Choice project, an arts project representing women’s contraceptive choices over history, spoke with me right after she had attended the D.C. Roe v. Wade anniversary celebration of 2012 with her Good Women Have

Abortions poster series. In developing the series, Heather analyzed hundreds of messages and slogans from the Walk for Choices protests in 2011, using groups and individuals' flickr photo pages. She asked the Abortion Care Network to rank the 100 unique but most common slogans from the walks and to decide which ones they appreciate the most. She expands on this: *"I've heard from providers that they often don't really like what the activists bring to the clinics. Even though they are supporting the clinics, they don't always see the messages as supportive to their community, or messages they would want their patients to hear, or the way they want to interact with the anti-choice protestors. I thought this was an opportunity to really ask providers: what messages do you like? What messages reflect your own ideals and values that you would be happy to see displayed on banners near your clinic. They ranked the slogans from Walks for Choice and that's how I came up with the seven banners that I brought to Germantown. There was a noticeable change in tone of that particular event because of these banners. Folks were really excited about these because they were positive but also very polished-looking, very colorful and easy to read, visible from a distance."* She used these same messages and signs at the Roe v. Wade anniversary celebration. One of her hopes was that her posters would be photographed by the media, by participants, and by pro-choice and pro-life people alike.



Figure 31: Heather Ault's signs at a protest to support Dr. Cahart

These cohesive, bold, carefully-designed, and hopeful signs of hers are a strong antidote to the ineffective, confused, and scattered messaging she's seen at other recent pro-choice protests: *What struck me, even on this one day, there were a lot of different messages and strategies and approaches that we all were taking that seemed very different from each other. Depending on who someone may have come in contact with, they may have left with a very different story about what we were doing that day. Some younger feminists, a contingent of younger folks who were chanting. They were really high-spirited chanting. You say No choice we say Pro-choice and other common feminist chants, through the whole day. Other folks who seemed to be providers or others who had lots of thoughts and ideas about the experience of abortion and abortion as a political/cultural experience. They were really engaging thoughtfully with a lot of the people who were approaching. I heard a lot of people saying, thank you so much for speaking with me and for not yelling at me. I think that sentiment was appreciated on both sides. A lot of pro-choice folks, especially at clinics, have had the experience mainly of*

being yelled at, as they are coming and going from work, or going in to patient services, so the fact that there were a fair amount of pro-life folks who really wanted to know what we thought, where we were coming from.



Figure 32: Heather Ault, the artist, with one of her signs at the Dr. Cahart protest

Heather also questions the place of visual rhetoric in contemporary pro-choice protest efforts and pushes for a more careful and thoughtful treatment of protest signs and banners:

“One thing I’ve found again and again is that protest or rallies are planned weeks or months in advance, all this planning goes into it, people are invited, fliers are put out to make sure people are there, and then literally the night before is when folks are at home making their posters with their magic markers. I’ve been there too. That’s when I have writer’s or sign-making block. I can’t think of what I want to put on my banner! I’m ready to go and I can only imagine that a lot of people might have the same experience. The kind of signs I think we want to be making are

not being made, and instead I think we are throwing together messages that are maybe just exactly what we've already seen on signs, slogans we've seen again and again, but there isn't a lot of forethought about how to create a strong visual presence when a lot of people show up."

Heather also discusses the importance of the clinic community within her work, placing clinic workers and the clinic environment at the forefront of her design goals, connecting her work to the larger context of abortion provider communities: *"In art school, one question that's frequently asked is who is your audience and what kind of venue do you intend on displaying this work? The audience /venue— is the clinic itself. This is the place in our community which is where these discussions are happening every day, and I think so neglected by the pro-choice community. So many calls are directed up to Washington D.C. and national politics and organizations...that's fine, but there's almost no community that happens with clinics and in people's communities. The pro-life side actually goes to clinics - -every weekend, sometimes as much as 100 people. They have local organizers, when they plan an event or protest, they have a local base of people they know who will show up and support their efforts. I've experienced in my own locally pro-choice organizing...I really don't have a sense of who's going to come out in my community to an event that supports a local clinic, and who would be willing to stand outside in front of a clinic in support. Rather than relying on the clinic to organize these things, which I don't think they want to, they have enough security issues of their own, there needs to be more of a locally-lead movement to organize people so that there are go-to folks and lists and ways to organize people quickly for local support of clinics. ...A local movement of which everyone has control, that's where organizing should be happening, rather than focusing all of our attention on D.C. It doesn't ultimately engage us with people, it doesn't let us do things that are really meaningful, that make us feel like we are having an impact."*

She is critical of the recent Trust Women/Silver Ribbon campaign, a virtual pro-choice march that took place January 20-27, 2012, put on together by a large and extensive coalition of national and local pro-choice groups to establish a strong digital reproductive justice presence. Heather remains critical of the impact of an almost entirely digital organizing effort for its lack of organizing across and within local communities in addition to garnering a large amount of national support: *“As a digital virtual march it was somewhat “invisible.” Everyone knew it was happening, we got updates about it happening, people signed on and sent the messages, but it didn’t feel like anything really happened, because it was so behind the scenes somehow. It didn’t seem as effective as maybe other things that are much more visible, like through Facebook, where things are right in your face getting re-posted in the moment. I think that certain kinds of digital communities can be really effective, it’s something I’d like to participate more in, but I do feel like coming together in person is something we need to do for our activism. We do physically live in communities where women get harassed every day on their way to an abortion, where providers’ lives are at risk, and people stand in front of our clinics on street corners. That’s something a digital movement is not going to address.”*

Originally, she sent her 4000 Years for Choice historical postcards to abortion clinics themselves, but ran out of funds at the seventh week. *“As an artist, it’s been interesting to think about how I could work more strategically as an entrepreneur to make this into an art-making business rather than a grant-funded project that relies on donations from the community. I’ve been resistant to partner up with any existing, larger pro-choice groups because I have so much more freedom to insert a new message that feels entirely from my own experience and perspective into the larger pro-choice debate and discussion, as an independent artist. I’ve enjoyed the autonomy of keeping this project smaller and organically-growing as people contact*

me, as people contact me, and as there is interest in the story. With the banners –I’ve asked friends and colleagues to participate in supporting them through a kickstarter campaign.”

Kickstarter, a funding website that has been especially useful recently for independent artists and projects, allows individuals to donate directly to a project or artist and gives the community updates on the project’s progress.



Figure 33: 4000 Years for Choice exhibition at the University of Illinois

In terms of production, digital techniques allow Heather more freedom of production and distribution: “[I] designed all original posters on the computer with digital editing and printed them on a high-quality printer at her university. The quality was so stunning and beautiful that I decided to stick to the digital format because it was so easy to reproduce. The ease of reproduction was ultimately more valuable than to create something that was an original art piece.” Accessibility is also a common theme in her work and technique: “I tried to put myself in the position of a regular person living in a small Midwest town where I wasn’t surrounded by an amazing feminist community or art 24/7. I wasn’t surrounded by my people, I was relying on the

internet, and email lists I could access where I could learn more about pro-choice issues and people. I think that helped me in some ways respond to the very mainstream messaging I was receiving from planned parenthood or NARAL or anti-choice messaging they send out. I think a lot of women don't identify with feminism, so that can be an off-putting way to bring reproductive justice issues into a conversation. Feminism makes so many assumptions about what people believe and who they are, and can be very alienating to many young women. That's helped me develop a voice for my work that speaks to regular people who wanted to talk about reproductive rights or have an opportunity to but they don't know where to open that door and step into that conversation."



Figure 34: A Collection of Images from the 4000 Years for Choice Series

For younger or newer activists, Heather recommends careful contemplation of visual rhetoric as a way of expanding minds, rather than a means of winning a political argument. She also recommends activists not use the “coathanger image,” which she believes many people actually do not recognize as a pro-choice symbol, disconnected from its previously evoked images of illegal abortion deaths in the ‘60s and ‘70s. In addition, she recommends: *“One strategy I personally benefitted from was going to the anti-choice side and sitting and listening to what they were doing... I just listened... it really struck me. There’s a certain kind of passion and commitment that comes out of this movement that is admirable, and it made me that much more committed to what I want to do. I learned so much. What I saw in their side at least, when they were speaking to their own side, they really talked about messaging, community organizing, how to get people involved. They were smart, strategic organizing, and they talked openly about their strategies. It made me realize that there are many ways to organize people ... I brought that experience back into my own work and used it to critique what I am doing currently, what is my movement during currently, that we could do better. Often we are speaking to our own side, we don’t really know to do something different.”*

Heather Freeman: Art/Text as an Open Door

Heather’s best-known reproductive justice image – “Not Yours” – seems to accompany many digital pieces on reproductive justice despite a lack of knowledge about the artist herself and the rest of her body of work. Heather’s images are created through pen and ink and scanned online in order to be displayed; in addition, Heather incorporates text in many of her images, related to the overall meaning behind the image.

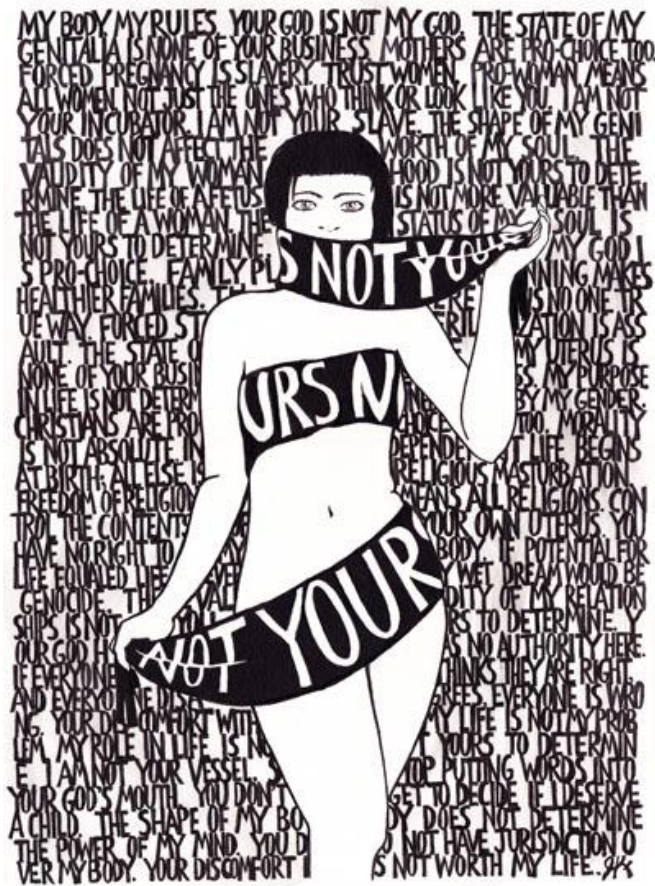


Figure 35: Heather Freeman's "Not Yours"

Her images, her art-making techniques, and her approaches to artistry, Heather describes, have all changed dramatically after a car accident that left her disabled and in chronic pain. This technique limited her more to the pen/ink that she could easily take with her on to a more comfortable surface. In addition, her art flow and even art gestures were completely different after this accident. For these pen and ink drawings, Heather says she only digitally edits them when she wants to make them look more like the original image before the effects of scanning. As an artist, she's drawn to images with high contrast and dynamic movement of lines. For her mission: *"Never been quite enough to make pretty images, I've wanted them to mean something, to communicate something, to make a difference in the world. In college I majored in graphic*

design at first, I was thinking of art with a purpose. I didn't stay in design... I came back into art with the needing for a sense of purpose."

When I asked Heather where she imagined her art to be, she responded: *"I don't generally think about where I'd love for the art to be, because that often gets me depressed. Of course I'd love for my art to be on huge billboards. Every day I have to pass by a huge pro-life billboard...I'd love to see my work incorporated with national information campaigns, I'd love to work with NARAL or NOW or a large feminist organization...Most of them probably have in-house designers or not a lot of cash, so it's probably not realistic, but it's something I'd love to do".* She continues about funding: *"I wish there was funding for my work. I make very little money for my art. I do what I do because as an artist, I can't not do it, it's like breathing. With the activist stuff, I feel the message is such that I have to get it out there whether or not I'm getting paid. Of course the money can help me get it out there but I don't do it for the money, if I did I wouldn't be doing it."*

When thinking about activism and its intersections with art, Heather spoke about 'typical liberal imagery' and its role in changing minds and the reactions she tries to evoke with her own pieces, trying to encourage careful thought and contemplation about abortion and women's rights outside of the political realm: *"Most people won't stop to read an argument that's different than their opinion. But an image can get in there and get them to stop and think. Like Not Yours, someone can get the philosophical depth of the issues from the images with the longer they look at it. My goal is to get people thinking, capturing them first with a compelling image, and then I've got that chink in their armor where I can get more reasoning in. Often our side uses little doodles or cartoons, like a white house with a little uterus inside of it. Those can be perfectly effective, but it's not what I do. I know I very much want to see artwork that reminds people*

these are whole and complete people who you are talking about, so focusing on the uterus is not as effective an argument for me.”

Her piece “Not Yours” won first prize at the Reproductive Justice Arts Extravaganza, the large, community-focused event celebrating a local Pennsylvania abortion clinic co-organized by interview participant Steph Herold. Through attending this event, Heather realized the importance of physical communities and gatherings that go beyond possibilities of solidarity-building within digital communities. Heather reflects on these event dynamics: *“Feeling that community in the flesh was exhilarating and energizing. I got my ideas for my next pro-choice art piece I did in the following weeks. Sharing space with people who believe as you do especially with something as personal as reproductive justice, knowing that every person in that room would stand up and fight to protect my rights over my body, as I would for them, was magical. The event was overwhelming, I’m an incredible introvert, I don’t do well with the schmoozing since I knew no one there. I loved looking at the work other people had done. Fascinating techniques and ideas, and the only problem was there wasn’t enough of it. I’d really love to see more of that kind of work, there needs to be more out there. So much of modern art has gone to conceptual and beyond conceptual, not connected to the real world at all, there’s certainly space for that, but art has so much power to connect to people here and now, and to connect them to real-world issues, and to see that power not being used, it needs to change.”*

For solutions to these problems with visual rhetoric, Heather looks to connections and collaborations: *“I’d like to be more connected there [with clinics] than I am now. I applied to volunteer with Planned Parenthood, but I don’t want to just barge in there, I know they’re busy enough. I’m doing what I can with what I know my strengths to be. I certainly do believe there’s a lot of room for collaboration between communities of clinics and artists, just the nature of the*

work clinic providers do, the nature of the protestors. Any support we can give them, support and inspiration, that's something I hope we can provide them. I'd love for my art to be displayed in a clinic. Most artists are the kind of people who enjoy that kind of solitude, and reaching out is difficult, like me. But I do crave the stimulation from working with artists who are on the same plane as you. I'd love to see more thought-sharing, collaboration, between artists. There's never one solution, I think it's multi-pronged. A website, a newsletter, I'd love to see a pro-choice arts convention travelling in the U.S. and Canada. I'd certainly be there every year."



Figure 36: Freeman's "Motherhood"

Heather also elaborates on the importance of her independent status as an artist and the authenticity and freedom it has given her work, despite the difficulties associated with her independence: “It’s an uncertain journey, but general being independent has been my preferred mode of operation.” She appreciates the digital feminist communities that have supported her work, allowing her to continue creating: *“Small exposure sometimes, pro-choice people on twitter who RT and get attention that way. Niche enough art that any kind of mainstream approach is gonna stop dead. I have to go through the people who are as passionate about the cause as I am. Those are the same people who will be willing to give money to it. Especially in this age of twitter where this kind of marketing is possible, not like 20 years ago even.”* In this way, niche interests such as arts about abortion rights can be found easily through time and space, and then those niche projects can be communicated by individuals across larger networks and groups of people, expanding their overall reach.

She also looks at these messages within a larger context of leftist, progressive message-making and the importance of framing in the struggle for media about reproductive justice: *“Diversity of the message on the left – by nature of being progressive, you’re always evolving your message. If you had a singular message we would lose the dynamism and strength of our side, which can seem incoherent at times. I’ve been following the changes within the reproductive justice movement very closely. Even just using the term reproductive justice instead of choice, it’s a framing issue. This happens in all sorts of progressive movements, we try to look for new phrases, and new phrases might not be as evocative straight off. The right wing has co-opted all of the terms with the strongest emotional resonance, like family, patriotism, etc., although those terms are of course no more right wing than progressive. The left wing does need to work on framing, better ways to work on deeper levels, we already have the image of living in*

our heads and not in the real world, which obviously isn't true, but how do we communicate that? I'm not sure what the answer is, but part of it is to get more people making pro-choice art work. I'd love to see more big, bold graphics out there that are explicitly pro-choice. Because it's a more complex philosophical position, it's harder to convey in a singular image. It's not just, Yay babies are good."



Figure 37: Freeman's "My Body Isn't Mine"

To future artists, she has advice about the convictions behind independent art-making, which can be a lonely, isolating, defeating process at times: *“If you make any kind of art, make what you really believe in. don’t try to make the art that’s more palatable, or appropriate, or sanitized, don’t try to tweak your message to make it more salable, it is what it is and the strength of your conviction will show in the artwork, the strength of the artwork comes from the conviction and shows in the artwork. Practice. Embrace failure when it happens and learn from it, which includes putting your art out there, not just making art itself. With every rejection you’ll learn something. You’re getting more information and that’s always a good thing. Find people who believe as you do, online or in real-life. They will be sources of energy, you will get burned out and depressed. The work is never done; it always feels like one step forward and two steps back. Your comrades in arm make it really worthwhile.”*

Zines

In addition to interviews, this project surveys some specific zines and pamphlet art related to reproductive justice activism. These zine sources are housed at the Papercut Zine Library, a volunteer-run, collective archive for local and national zines on a variety of subjects. The zines focused on in this project relate specifically to reproductive justice in terms of their content (birth control methods, sex education, alternative health care, collective organizing methods, history of abortion rights, and self-abortion) as well as methodology (focus on creative, bold statements supported by diverse visual materials enriching the narrative, and a lack of emphasis on individual authorship and ownership of the material). Zines, like the independent media and arts projects described by the interview participant activists previously, rely on the unique context of their medium in order to participate in different forms of collective, creative, and future-oriented dialogue and media-making.

Zines as a Reclamation of Women's Healthcare & Breaking down Stigmas and Barriers

Many of the reproductive justice-focused zines surveyed provided readers with self-healthcare information and strategies rather than overtly political descriptions of abortion rights activism, connecting reproductive justice to the relevance of women's everyday health needs. Zine author "Alicia non Grata" created "Take Back Your Life: A Wimmin's Guide to Alternative Health Care" as a means of dismantling barriers to everyday reproductive health care. She asserts: "Healing ourselves; every womyn's right. Yet throughout our lives we have relied solely on interpretations of 'experts.'"¹¹¹ In the same vein, anonymously-created zine "It's OK to Peek" focuses on the self-gynecological exam process and self-help tips for how to end a pregnancy, complete with diagrams in addition to art by abortion-rights zine artist, Merry Death. "Regaining Control: Taking Health Care into our Own Hands" uses the zine medium to share and distribute information and references related to herbal abortions and self-health care.¹¹² They explain this information-sharing focus in their mission statement, describing it in relation to their members and the overall zine goals, calling for future collaborations:

The authors of this pamphlet are a group of Boston area anarcha-feminists dedicated to the idea of putting health care back into our own hands. Our members include a physician assistant, and we have consulted an herbalist, and a variety of resources. This pamphlet is solely the work of the authors, and no organization or publication mentioned bears any responsibility for its contents... Please share with us your experience using these methods, as well as any other knowledge you may have.¹¹³

Similarly, zine "Crucial Sisterhood: Birth Control, DIY Healthcare, Masturbation and Sex, Mestruation and Alternatives" presents a plethora of book and other references, diagram re-

¹¹¹"non Grata, Alicia," "Take Back Your Life: A Wimmin's Guide to Alternative Health Care." Profane Existence Collective, Minneapolis, MN. 1990. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

¹¹² Boston Anarchafeminist Self-Health Group. "Regaining Control: Taking Health Care into our own Hands Zine." 1989. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

¹¹³ Ibid.

prints, and specific information on the “morning after pill” and RU 486.¹¹⁴ Anonymously created zine “blood.CUNT: All you ever wanted to know about femstruation” (a play of the word “menstruation” and “feminine”/“feminist”) uses the unapologetic discussion of menstrual blood and “alternatives to mass marketed femstruation products” to break down stigmas about women’s reproductive health. The author describes her intent in producing the zine:

My goal in life is to breakdown the stigmas associated with blood and cunts that tell womyn to keep things secret because they are dirty. Blood.cunt is an attempt to do just that. I know that I probably won’t change the world with this zine; I only hope to change *your* world. If you like this zine, pass it on. Tell your friends, tell your sisters, tell your mothers. Blood and cunts are beautiful. Treasure this and pass the knowledge on.¹¹⁵

This process of de-stigmatization also works to increase access to information that would be otherwise unattainable, such as information about ordering specific herbs used in reproductive healthcare, as in “Taking Charge: Abortion and Your Options” by sherri gumption and Lee Roosevelt.¹¹⁶ In this way, some reproductive justice zines take on the task of using the independent, collaborative, information-sharing medium of the zine as a tool for women-centric alternative healthcare as a part of transforming discussions on abortion into considerations of women’s entire beings and livelihoods.

¹¹⁴ “Crucial Sisterhood: Birth Control, DIY Healthcare, Masturbation and Sex, Menstruation and Alternatives.” KrissieVegan.org. Richmond, VA. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

¹¹⁵ Anonymous. “blood.CUNT: All you ever wanted to know about femstruation.” crewslc@jmu.edu. Harrisonburg, VA. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

¹¹⁶ Gumption, sherri and Lee Roosevelt. “Taking Charge: Abortion and Your Options.” Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library.



Figure 38: Feminist comic reprinted in "Crucial Sisterhood" Zine

Zines as Means of Collective Reproductive Justice Organizing

Just as some reproductive justice zines share and distribute information pertaining to women's own reproductive healthcare, some reproductive justice activist zines share information that strengthens local, community-oriented activism. For example, the zine "ANTI-MASS methods of organization for collectives" addresses the importance of reflexivity within and regarding activist collectives, focusing on both individual relations between members as well as larger visions about the collective's goals. The anonymous author(s) asserts the importance of localized, smaller collectives as an alternative to the idea of a "mass movement":

This form of struggle, no matter how radical its demands, never threatens the basic structure – the mass itself. Under these circumstances it takes great effort to Imagine new forms of existence. Space must be created before we can think of these things and be able to establish the legitimacy of acting upon them.

The form of the collective is its practice. The collective is opposed to the mass. IT contradicts the structure of the mass. The collective is anti-mass.¹¹⁷

This emphasis on collectivity as a means of reproductive justice activism is compelling in that many of the zines were produced by and through collectives from across the country (“Take Back Your Life” from the Profane Existence Collective; “Wive’s Tales” [sic] from the How2Distro (“Distro” is a zine distribution collective) in Richmond, VA; and “Regaining Control” from the Boston-area collective, to name a few).¹¹⁸ In addition, these zines generally use the stylistic method of informality (swearing, crossing out/erasing/corrections within the pieces, etc.) as a means of dismantling structures of power associated with women’s healthcare, instead looking to collectives and individuals as sources of information and empowerment.¹¹⁹

The collectivity aspect of these zines is also located in their medium and format choices, reflecting the zine’s core value as creative expressions of community-building and information sharing, exploring unique medium choices and encouraging community participation in the zine’s future. “Fertility Awareness for Non-Invasive Birth Control,” produced by the “Arthouse Coalition” in Portland, ME contains many medical diagrams (some corrected, added to, and edited by the author(s)) with the command (and pun): “REPRODUCE (this zine...).”¹²⁰ The “Not Your Mother’s Meatloaf: A Sex Education Comic Book” uses the model of “Experiences Not Answers” as a means of discussing reproductive healthcare in less stigmatized and arguably

¹¹⁷ Anonymous. “ANTI-MASS methods of organizing for collectives.” 2. Accessed through the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

¹¹⁸ “Wive’s Tales” How2Distro, Richmond VA. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

¹¹⁹ Many of the zines I surveyed used these techniques of “informality” which is one of the central distinguishing factors of the medium. For example, author “Marie” from Meadville, PA (Papercat@emote.org) created the zine “it’s your fucking body #2: reclaim your cunt,” in which she describes: “so this is all new for me and I’m not sure how it’s going to turn out. This is an experiment.”

¹²⁰ “Fertility Awareness for Non-Invasive Birth Control” Arthouse Coalition, Portland ME. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

more accessible, friendly, and creative approach of comics.¹²¹ Similarly, the “Abortion Etiquette: take care of your friends” zine uses comics to express the challenges of talking about abortion with friends and one’s community. Each page has a different tip for this kind of support – everything from financial questions to a cookie recipe.¹²² The woman-focused healthcare zine, “Crucial Sisterhood,” also reprinted a comic critiquing the institutional barriers to reproductive health services.¹²³

¹²¹ “Not Your Mother’s Meatloaf: A Sex Education Comic Book: Issue #2: Firsts.”

Notyourmothersmeatloaf@gmail.com 2009. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

¹²² “Abortion Etiquette: take care of your friends” Pensacola, Florida. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

¹²³ Crucial Sisterhood

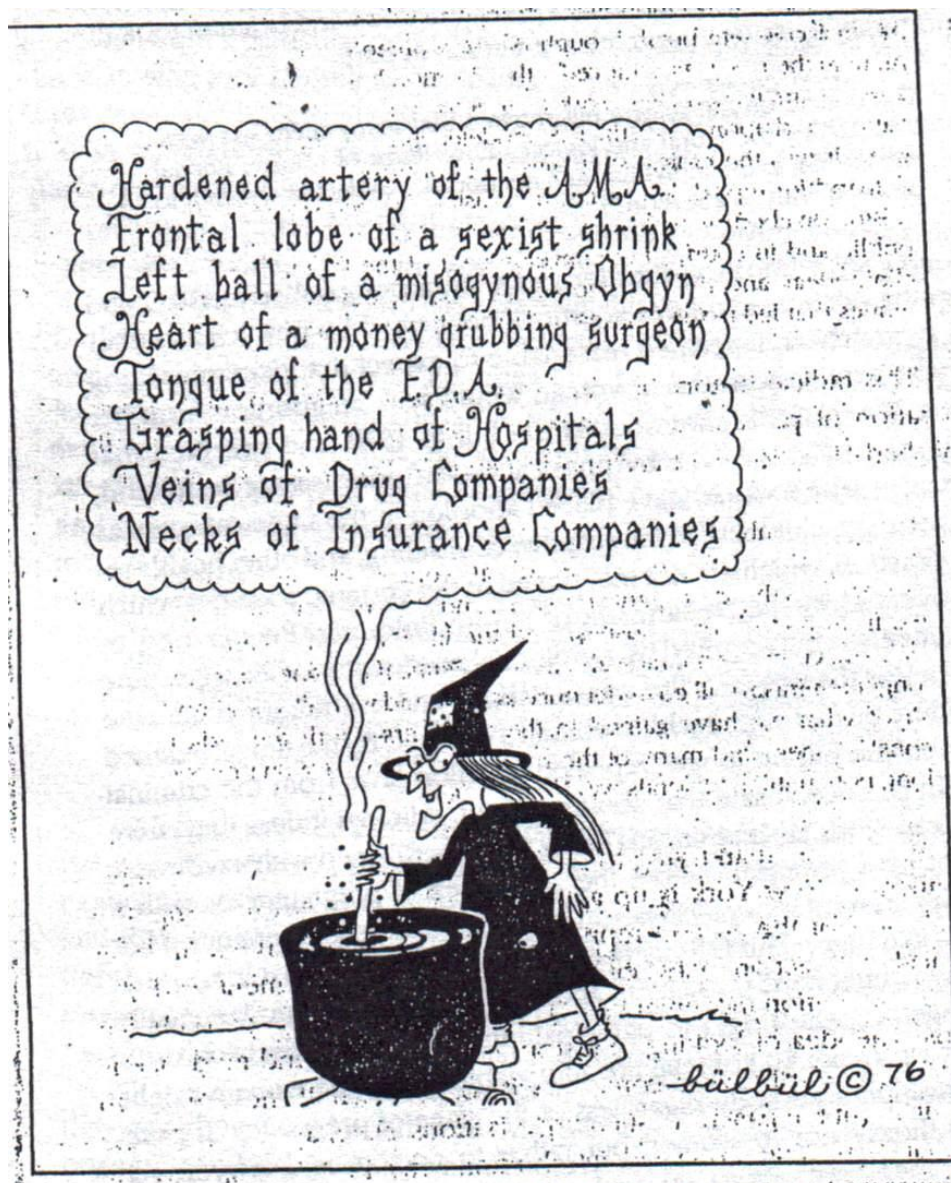


Figure 39: Comic reprinted in "Crucial Sisterhood" zine

#7 NO LECTURES

PLEASE NO DIATRIBES ABOUT BIRTH CONTROL. SHE'S ALREADY PREGNANT - SHE DOESN'T NEED YOUR HELP IN REEVALUATING



HOW TO HANDLE SHIT. ALSO NO SPEECHES ON ABORTION. AS IMPORTANT AS VOCAL SUPPORT FOR ABORTION IS - TAKE THIS TIME TO REALIZE THE HUMANITY OF BEING PRO-CHOICE + NOT MAKE IT SO POLITICAL.

Figure 40: A Page from "Abortion Etiquette: take care of your friends"

“Ancient and Alternative Abortifacients” by zinester astrid s. Anderson uses historical reproductive health information to contextualize the women’s health experience within communities as a key component of the health model:

The purpose of this book is not to encourage women to take risks alone: these herbs are powerful and should be treated as potent prescriptions. Rather, this book is just a window into the potential for ancient knowledge to be reintegrated into women’s lives so that individuals and communities might have many perspectives to help each other and ourselves. These circumstances should not be pioneered alone but in a community of love and support; always make sure that someone knows the situation and is willing to step in and seek the help needed to ensure physical and emotional safety.¹²⁴

This zine also proposes a possible increase in distribution of this reproductive health information through new technologies: “clearly there is a need for this type of information: user-friendly, accessible and affordable. Trends toward...grassroots groups of women learn[ing] about and aid[ing] each other, grows as women become more informed in the age of information.”¹²⁵ Thus, through their form, content, and activist goals, reproductive justice zines embody a commitment to fostering and sustaining collective and community-focused activism and encouraging participation in the larger movement through local media activism.

Zines as a Means of Preserving Recent Reproductive Justice Activist History

Many of the zines I surveyed also focused on the importance of preserving and cherishing recent and past reproductive justice activist history; however, given the nature of the zine medium, these histories de-center the legal battles for abortion as one of many threads contributing to the lack of abortion and reproductive healthcare access for women, opening up the narratives as powerful tools of activist skill-sharing. One often-cited example is the zine “Abortion Without Apology: A radical history for the 1990s” by Ninia Baehr, based on

¹²⁴ Anderson, astrid s. “Ancient and Alternative Abortifacients.” A.s.a. productions, Haydenville, MA. 2002. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

“audiotaped, videotaped, and filmed interviews,” and with abortion-related organizers in order to document this recent history.¹²⁶

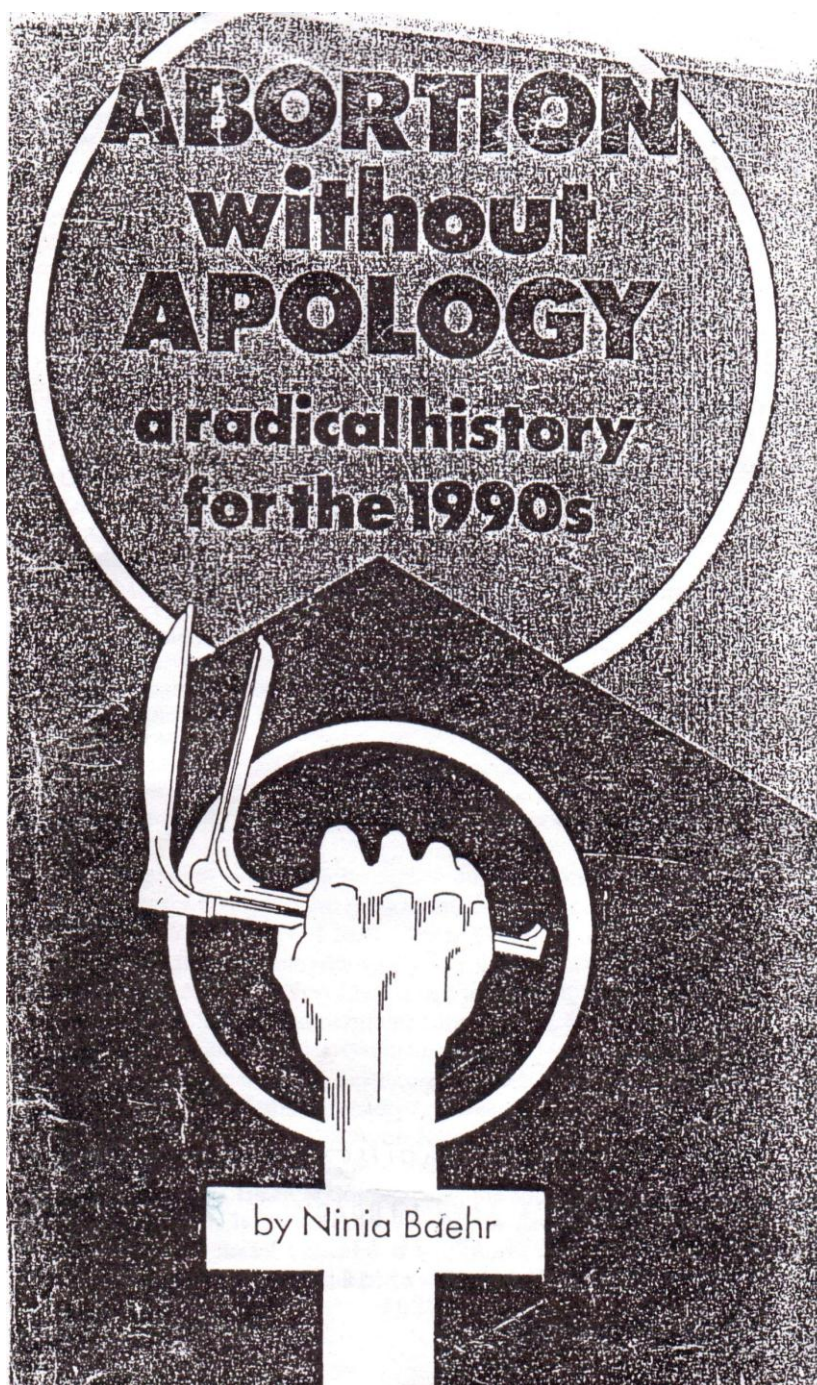


Figure 41: Baehr's Zine Cover

¹²⁶ Baehr, Ninia. “Abortion without Apology: a radical history for the 1990s.” South End Press. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.



Figure 42: Image accompanying Baehr's History of Sterilization

Similarly, the zine “Jane: Documents from Chicago’s Clandestine Abortion Service 1968-1973” uses the history of the Jane Collective to affirm contemporary reproductive justice values.¹²⁷ Through this technique, the zine presents important reflections on past grassroots, collective

¹²⁷ “Jane: Documents from Chicago’s Clandestine Abortion Service 1968-1973.” Firestarter press, Baltimore MD. 2004. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

activist legacies and presents the information to contemporary activists looking for inspiration in their own independent organizing:

Jane functioned in direct opposition to modern, Western medical traditions by providing abortions outside the confines of sterile medical centers (and their patient-as-consumer mentality) *and* making the women who needed abortions feel as much a part of the process as the members, thereby demystifying the abortion procedure so everyone could make intelligent decisions. Throughout their dealings with *Jane*, the women who needed abortions and their families and lovers were supported materially, emotionally, and informationally by members of *Jane*...

Jane is an inspiration- a beautiful example that battles can be won without begging. Today they can be seen as a bold display of an effective underground organization operating with utter disregard for the letter of the law- women taking their lives into their own hands and taking responsibility for their actions, all the while without asking for anyone's permission.¹²⁸

Notable reproductive justice organizers Marlene G. Fried and Loretta Ross published a zine/pamphlet "Reproductive Freedom: Our right to Decide" together in 1992, describing the evolution of the abortion-rights struggle from the '80s on, which saw the pro-choice movement, in their opinion, responding to various pressures by becoming "less radical, hoping to make them more acceptable to those in power," accomplished through more "sanitized" language of the movement, which they characterize as an "effort to make us less threatening" that ended up "mak[ing] us almost invisible [as women]."¹²⁹ Through this process, Fried and Ross in their zine assert the need for the creativity and collective focus embodied in their easily-reprinted and cheap zine: "There is a need for many forms of political activism and for activists working in different arenas to find ways to support each other's activities. After all, it is the ability to translate our collective rage, vision and hope into collective action that is our power."¹³⁰

Zines such as "MINE: An Anthology of Women's Choices" and "Personal Stories of Reproductive Freedom" also demonstrate reproductive justice activists' commitment to the personal narratives of women's experiences with abortion as a central factor linking individual

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Fried, Marlene G. and Loretta Ross. "Reproductive Freedom: Our Right to Decide." Open Magazine Pamphlet Series. Westfield, New Jersey. 1992.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

reproductive health, abortion rights history, and contemporary collective activism. For instance, a Minneapolis-based group “Anti-Racist Action” authored the zine “Personal Stories of Reproductive Freedom,” seeking to “combat anti-choice by recounting OUR OWN experiences rather than appealing to political lines,” relying on the power of the narrative as a means of political change through the zine’s inclusion of diverse narratives explaining a variety of reproductive health and justice experiences.¹³¹ Similarly, the often-cited zine “MINE: An Anthology of women’s choices” by artist MerryDeath is a collection of stories about women’s abortion experiences, re-printing stories in each individual’s own hand and format as a means of creating a larger narrative collection.¹³²

Through the examination of extended personal interviews and contemporary reproductive justice-focused zines and pamphlets, the importance of independent media and arts creation within the current incarnation of reproductive justice activism is displayed. These artists, media activists, and zinesters communicate an infinite variety of women’s abortion experiences and stories within the narratives, health information, and local resources they suggest and provide in their media. Generally, these sources emphasize the importance of a few central values and guiding ideas inspiring many of these activists and artists, including a commitment to local, collective organizing; the need for creative flexibility in methods and approach; the need for broad visual imagery representing a variety of abortion experiences; the need for a connection between the art and information about local abortion health centers and clinics; a fascination with the ways that digital media can aid this struggle for information-sharing; and the overall freedom of messaging and imagery allowed to independent, non-mainstream, collective-based media sources.

¹³¹ “Personal Stories of Reproductive Freedom.” Anti-Racist Action, Minneapolis, MN.

¹³² MerryDeath. “MINE: An Anthology of Women’s choices” Merrydeath@hotmail.com. 2002. Accessed at the Papercut Zine Library, Boston.

Five

Conclusions: Strategies for Future Reproductive Justice Media Activism

These interviews, zines, and other research make it possible to explore contemporary reproductive justice art and media. I bring together these sources with the intent of sharing and reflecting on some of the difficulties faced by feminist activists working within independent media formats in addition to their triumphs. I have chosen to explore these strategies for multiple reasons: to celebrate fellow activists' successes; to think carefully about how organization happens; and to reflect on the transformative potential of independent media/arts as an activist methodology within the reproductive justice movement. In addition to the statements provided by interviews, zines, and art pieces, I will use some voices from academic and popular feminist scholarship to illuminate other perspectives on the contemporary incarnation of independent reproductive justice media activism. What are the strategies we as activists, artists, and clinic community members should be sustaining and supporting in the upcoming years as they attempt to formulate a cohesive plan to defend reproductive justice? What guiding values unite these disparate methodologies and media-making techniques in order to bring about the most ultimately effective results?

Four dynamics of this contemporary activism emerged from the research: strategies of independent methodologies, independent and nuanced narrative content, digital activism, and a community-based, collaborative focus. For one, the methodology, process, and production of independent media will be discussed as a unique process requiring flexibility in methods and creative thinking, maximizing the overall reach and effect of the work itself. Additionally, these activist art interventions will be viewed within the changing landscape of democratized digital media in an attempt to analyze the strategic ways the Internet, social media, and digitalization benefit reproductive justice activism. The independent nature of this media activism will also be

analyzed for its freedom of content, allowing a wider and more in-depth range of abortion-related experience stories, which serve as important counter-images to the ubiquitous fetal pro-life rhetoric. Finally, collaborative, local community-based media projects strengthen the current and future reproductive justice movement by establishing valuable allies, particularly in art and abortion clinic communities.

Operating Outside of Mainstream Production: Flexibility & Creativity are Crucial

Given the outrageous and slowly shrinking diversity in American media content, due to media consolidation and the loss of many local radio, television, and print media sources, independent media-makers face a tough battle in 2012. There are some clear challenges that independent activist artists face in their work, including funding and resources available to them. In addition, the benefits and meaning behind their identity as independents underscores their dedication to alternative media expressions, especially related to the topics of reproductive justice through a feminist lens. These independent forms of activist media inherently, because of their non-mainstream status, subvert their relationship to mainstream institutions and production. In addition, some media-makers and projects specifically work to critique, deconstruct, and interrogate their relationship to the methods of their art production. These forms of production often seek to imagine new realities of media production for reproductive justice activists frustrated with the trite images used in discussions of abortion rights.

Not surprisingly, funding and access to resources are an ongoing challenge for independent activist artists who must exhibit flexibility and creativity in order to support their work. Heather Ault referenced the importance of the Kickstarter online fundraising service as a means of providing at least partial funding for her art. Heather is among a large and growing community of activists who use Kickstarter and other online fundraising methods to supplement

their income and/or help cover some of their production costs. Kathleen Sweeney writes on the “crowdfunding potential of Kickstarter for women filmmakers” in her article for the Women’s Media Center, “Kicking It on Kickstarter!”¹³³ Although similar online fundraising sites such as IndieGoGo also focus on the importance of individual donors, Kathleen sees “the genius of Kickstarter’s design is that small donations-as little as one or five dollars- can crowdfund the campaign to rollicking successful...If pledges do not meet the targeted amount by the final date, the entire campaign folds.”¹³⁴ She references the fundraising site in relation to its potential in supporting not only individual projects and activists but also as a larger movement towards more diverse media production generally, through this force called “the people’s NEA” by the *New York Times*, perhaps activists can envision future ways of collaborative funding and economic support for independent feminist media projects.¹³⁵ In this way, media-makers can call upon their targeted audience communities for funding and support of their projects, rather than relying on potentially restrictive mainstream media powers.

Independent production also requires flexibility of materials, spaces, and technologies dependent on one’s access to resources and overall project goals. For example, Megan Smith initially reports using printable paper birds for her Repeal Hyde Community Art Installation, appreciating the ease of availability for individuals and valuing their material for its low cost and portability. However, as her project grew, one of the changes Megan made for the project was to switch to cloth birds. Although this switch in materials changed the mode of her art (instead of sending in paper birds, cloth birds must be designed in-person at an event when Megan brings

¹³³ Sweeney, Kathleen. “Kicking it on Kickstarter!” *Women’s Media Center*. 13 Jan 2012. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.womensmediacenter.com/feature/entry/kicking-it-on-kickstarter>>

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

them), it also demonstrates the flexibility of her community project (in this case, giving the installation a longer life-span with a more durable, but still affordable, material).

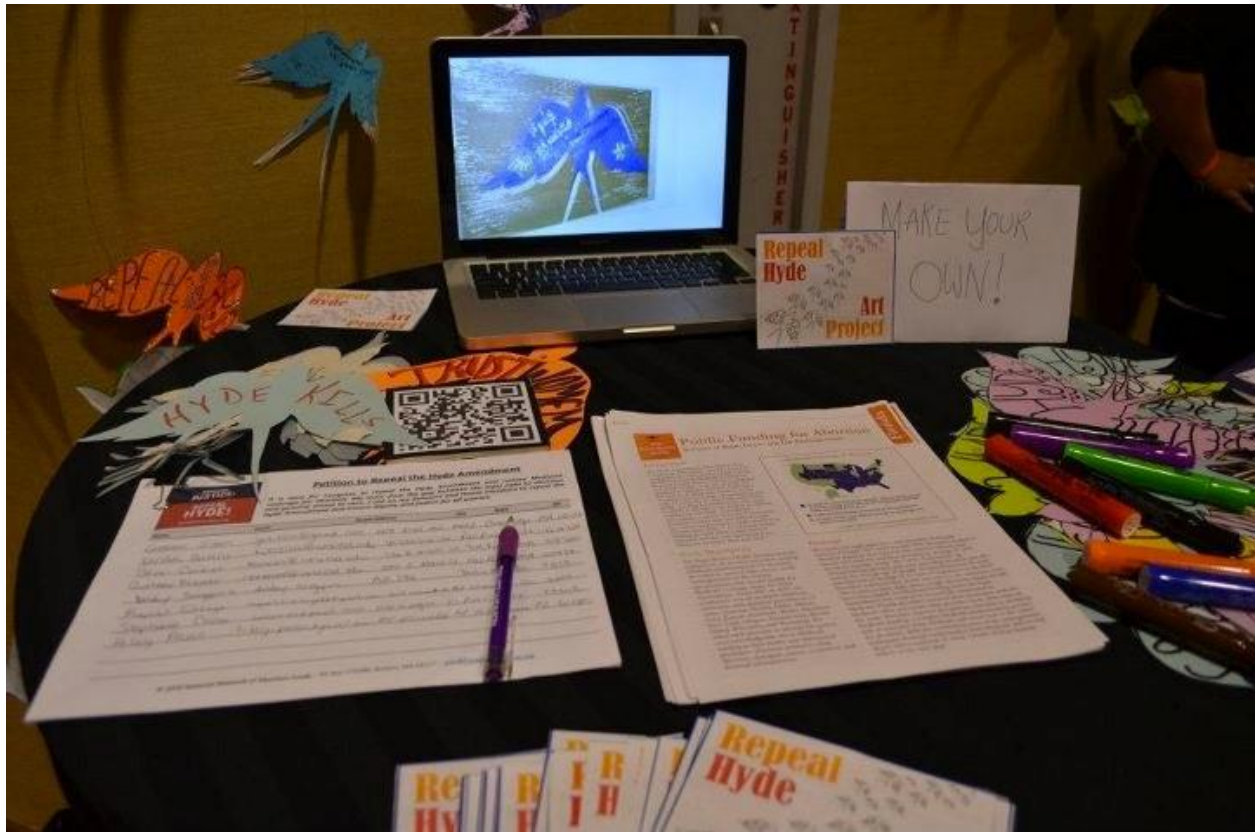


Figure 43: Repeal Hyde Art Project table at the 2011 Choice USA Conference

Filmmaker Nuala Cabral muses on this tension between seeking out the best possible resources at one's disposable while still having the confidence to create art with the available means, whatever they are; a media-maker working independently must be aware of the “professionalism” of their project aesthetics versus the possibility of “spreading yourself too thin if you really just need better equipment.”¹³⁶ This struggle to find a balance between grassroots methods and professional-looking aesthetics encourages artists like Nuala to make use of all possible materials. This range of materials and technologies used to create activist media not

¹³⁶ Chapter 4: Interview with Nuala Cabral.

only reflects a need born from the conflict between mainstream and independent arts but also emphasizes the adaptive power of individual artists free from mainstream production standards.

Flexibility and creativity with methods and content can increase the community ties to localized social movements, as social movement theorist Suzanne Staggenborg maintains. For instance, Staggenborg addresses the flexibility of volunteer-run organizations that often use “cultural activities like musical festivals” as the basis for activist events, “which often provide relaxing atmospheres in which activists can renew their energies.”¹³⁷

Democratization of Feminist Media through Digitalization

Contemporary reproductive justice media-makers also must focus their efforts on the careful study of digital communities and the use of digital technologies for producing, distributing, publicizing, critiquing, and revising past, current, and future projects. Feminist theorist Ann Travers claims the radical potential of digital spaces: “Grounding cyberpublics in affirmations of community and embodied social relations may be the most important contribution that feminists can make.”¹³⁸ Some activists, such as interview participant Steph Herold, use the Internet and social media networking as their primary method of activism, with their goals connected intimately with their choices of digital technology. Even for artists who work with non-digital materials, knowledge of the relationship between the Internet and the distribution and publicity of any current art or media is crucial for contemporary reproductive justice activists. For some artists, the use of digital technology is primarily related to their art in their search for feminist, artist, and activist communities with which to collaborate and exchange ideas and strategies. Regardless of their exact interaction with digital technology and the

¹³⁷ Staggenborg, S. “Social Movement Communities and Cycles of Protest: The Emergence and Maintenance of a Local Women’s Movement.” *Social Problems*. Vol. 45, No. 2. May, 1998. 186.

¹³⁸ Travers, Ann. “Parallel Subaltern Feminist Counterpublics in Cyberspace.” *Sociological Perspectives*. Vol. 46, No. 2. Summer 2003. University of California Press. JSTOR. Web. 1 April 2012.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sop.2003.46.2.223>> 227

Internet, contemporary reproductive justice activists must acknowledge the role this digitalization plays in the reception of their work and the dynamics it creates for organizers as well as community members with whom they are attempting to build a dialogue.

For independent artists without the backing of mainstream media, the Internet can be a crucial (or even primary) method of sharing and publicizing their work, increasing the overall accessibility for the arts for people with Internet access. In working to deconstruct and fight against the dominant mainstream media images associated with abortion, reproductive justice media activists must be creative in their strategies of dissemination. Feminist icon bell hooks supports this focus on the importance of fighting mainstream media images with flexible, multi-faceted, and increasingly accessible pieces of feminist media: “By failing to create a mass-based educational movement to teach everyone about feminism we allow mainstream patriarchal mass media to remain the primary place where folks learn about feminism, and most of what they learn is negative. Teaching feminist thought and theory to everyone means that we have to reach beyond the academic and even the written word.”¹³⁹ hooks’ emphasis on accessibility values the disparate communication methods in order to reach the maximum possible audience. Of course, this idea of accessibility must take into account the growing technology and information gap, privileging certain images and information to certain populations with specific Internet access. Given this fact, it is not surprising that many of the artists I spoke with asserted their strong commitment not only to a digital presence, but a physical, community-based, and local one as well.

In addition to the importance of digital technologies for the sharing of reproductive justice media, digital landscapes can be crucial in creating new, safer spaces for women and other marginalized groups in society, organized around the presentation and distribution of this

¹³⁹ hooks, bell. Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics. Cambridge: South End Press, 2000. 22

media. In a world where women and girls can be unsafe online, there is a strong need for online communities to foster positive growth in response. Feminist author Jessica Valenti offers her take on the devastating effects of this rampant web-based sexism and abuse with a call to “take back the sites,” envisioning the Internet as the next frontier of feminism.¹⁴⁰ Within reproductive justice activist communities, I see a great deal of potential in the use of digital technologies and social media networks to combatting digital misogyny and misinformation while at the same time forging new artistic and activist identities and connections. For instance, feminist writer Krista Scott-Dixon reflects on the compelling potential to connect activists through the digital communities of “e-zines,” (digitized versions of the conventional print zines).¹⁴¹ This digitalization, as Scott-Dixon asserts, not only serves to foster meaningful digital activist communities but also underscores the deeply transformative potential inherent in self-produced media:

Since ezines, like ‘zines and the majority of other sites on the Web, are directly produced by their creators, without intervention from editors, publishers or even collective editorial boards, and are not governed by any roles[sic] on content, they are generally driven by their creator’s sense of identity... The perceived immediacy of the electronic medium... augments the illusion of direct contact between creator and reader.¹⁴²

In addition, as zine scholar Elke Zobl asserts, quoting a 2003 study on political resistance within girl zines, “that confidence gained from having this safe, supportive space to express c/overt resistance can lead to further, more overt involvement in political movements, such as feminism.”¹⁴³ In order to have an more expansive effect than consciousness-raising, feminist

¹⁴⁰ Valenti, Jessica. “How the web became a sexist’s paradise.” *The Guardian*, April 5 2007. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/apr/06/gender.blogging>>

¹⁴¹ Scott-Dixon, Krista. “Ezines and Feminist Activism: building a community” *Resources for Feminist Research* 27. ½ (1999) 127-132. Web. 1 April 2012.

<<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Ezines+and+feminist+activism%3A+building+a+community.-a030102821>>

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Zobl, Elke. “Cultural Production, Transnational Networking, and Critical Reflection in Feminist Zines.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 35.1. 2009. 5.

theorist Ann Travers proposes a re-thinking of digital political action as a means of igniting grassroots, community-based action “in the flesh”:

In cyberspace, an effective strategy for challenging the public takes one step further the notion of the women’s caucus as empowering its members to change the larger context. The necessarily separatist off-line subaltern counterpublic serves as the basis for organizing the contestation of the mainstream cyberpublic but gives way to a parallel structure on-line.¹⁴⁴

Thus, independent media content working in conjunction with the Internet can build and sustain activist communities. Simultaneously, these digital networks can connect artists to audiences in a nearly direct exchange, increasing the overall participatory nature of the movement.

Freedom for Complex and Positive Stories in New Abortion Narratives

The independent format of this activism also leads to greater freedom in expressing taboo or highly stigmatized content; in the context of reproductive justice, this indicates a push towards a more nuanced treatment of abortion narratives beyond the singular experience of abortion. For one, independent media artists are allowed a measure of freedom in their choices over content due to their lack of accountability to a mainstream source of funding. This freedom over the content of their narrative allows for reproductive justice activists to delve into the issues and dynamics of the activism that they find most compelling, important, and representative of women’s experiences with abortion. A number of these activists that I interviewed have meaningful relationships and connections with local clinic communities, giving them perspectives on abortion that are rooted in the everyday realities of women’s health. In this way, reproductive justice media activists can speak to the complex and evolving narratives about abortion from experiences with real women, as a powerful means of combatting the harmfully-reductive and irresponsibly-misinformative images of abortion put forth by mainstream media. As independent artists work to counter these mainstream abortion images, they increase the

¹⁴⁴ Travers, Ann. “Parallel Subaltern Feminist Counterpublics in Cyberspace” 231

space for women to speak freely and without shame about their abortion experiences and the factors that contributed to that decision.

In the visual campaigns and projects of reproductive justice activists, we see the complexity of their message, which offers a distinct and evolving array of representational images. As a counter to the ubiquitous “pro-life” fetus imagery, which stands in as the primary symbol of abortion, contemporary reproductive justice activists use media to express the infinite range of potential encounters with, experiences with, and associations with abortion and reproductive justice for American women. For some artists, such as playwright Jane Cawthorne, this new visual rhetoric must honor the pregnant woman as a whole being rather than representing a fetus as detached from a mother. Others, such as Heather Ault, look at classic pro-choice activist symbols such as the coathanger as dated; in addition to lacking the instant recognition it may have once had, the coathanger symbol also focuses too specifically on the womb and the woman’s reproductive capacity.¹⁴⁵ Many of these images, such as Heather Freeman’s, show women’s whole bodies and touch upon the concerns of their entire lives.¹⁴⁶ The focus on essentializing images that reduce the reproductive justice movement to images of women’s biology (the uterus, the womb, the vagina, and all of their direct references, like the coathanger) also isolates and marginalizes the important role that transgendered rights should play in the organizing and media-making of pro-choice and reproductive justice activists, as

¹⁴⁵ This is not to say that all contemporary activists detach themselves from the power of the coathanger. For instance, film-maker Angie Young produced a film that employed the coathanger as a visual tool. Despite her difference in opinion regarding the symbol, the ethos and goals of the film seems compatible with many other contemporary, independent media activists. From the official website: “The Coat Hanger Project aims to provide a radical, fierce, unflinchingly prochoice perspective and show the world that we can stand strong as advocates for women's reproductive freedom.” More at www.thecoathangerproject.com

¹⁴⁶ See Chapter Four, Interview with Heather Freeman

referred to by Katherine Cross of the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, working to ensure the legal rights and justice of gender non-confirming people.¹⁴⁷

Author Laurie Shrage expands on this need for nuanced images of abortion's everyday place in women's lives as a means of infusing these narratives with women-focused hope, imagining a world with "peaceful, nonviolent images...[that] attempt to equate abortion with the exercise of women's positive agency-agency that leads to happy and productive women, and well-cared for children."¹⁴⁸ The faith-focused reproductive justice organization "Faith Aloud" has a 2012 postcard campaign with explicitly positive and affirming messaging, both visual and textual, equating accessing abortion services as a need, right, normal part of family life, and an issue that merits the attention of faithful and religious Americans.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Cross, Katherine. "Trans Rights are Reproductive Rights" 4/10/12 *Feministing*. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://feministing.com/2012/04/10/trans-rights-are-reproductive-rights/>>

¹⁴⁸ Shrage, Laurie. "From Reproductive Rights to Reproductive Barbie: Post-Porn Modernism and Abortion." *Feminist Studies* Vol. 28 No. 1, Spring 2002. JSTOR. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3178495>> 88

¹⁴⁹ "Faith Aloud" Web. 1 April 2012. <www.faithaloud.org>

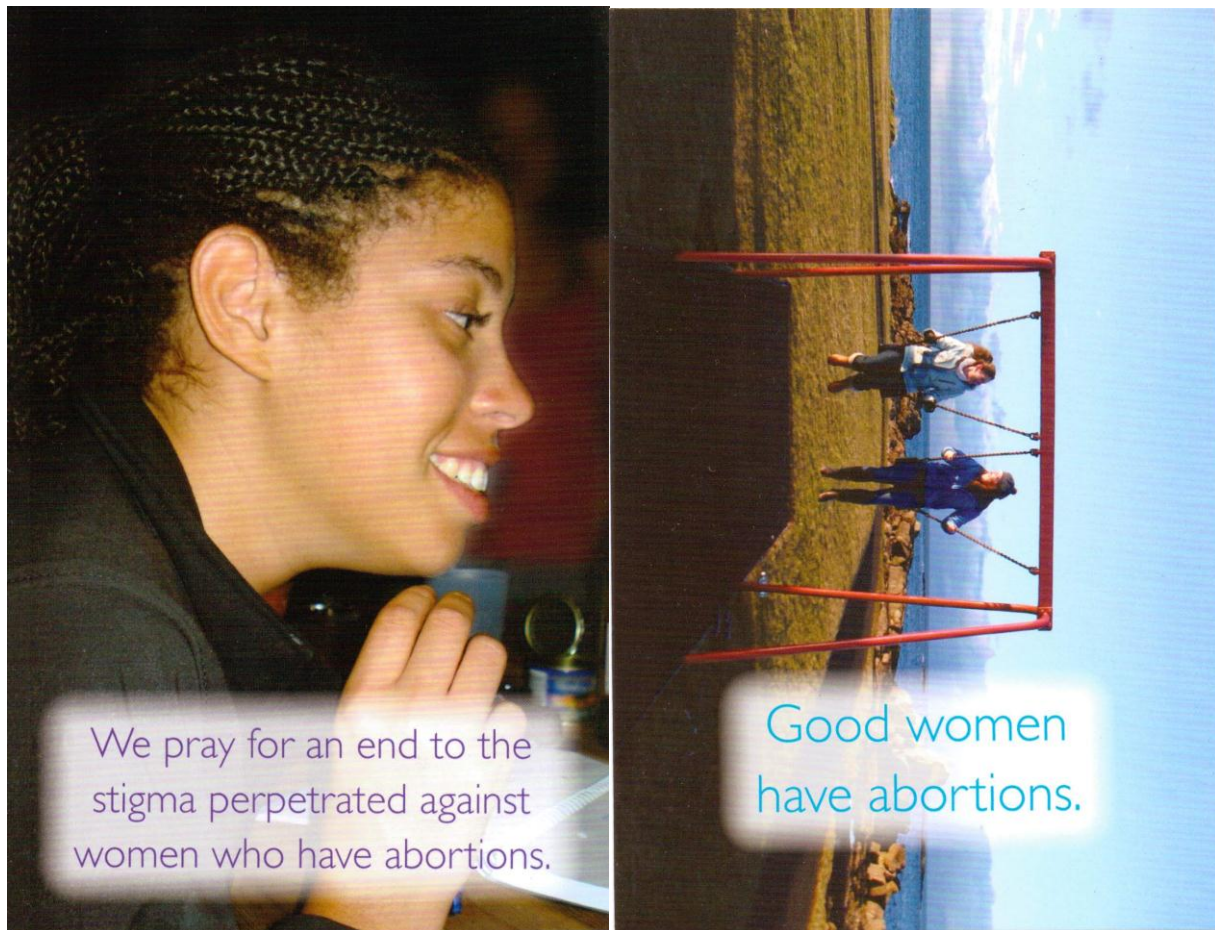


Figure 44: Two Images from Faith Aloud's Series

Through this expansion of the positive visual rhetoric used to represent abortion, some of the initial goals associated the evolving reproductive justice framework can be actualized: with the wide and growing range of images and visual rhetorical devices and strategies used to represent the issue, a similarly expansive framework of reproductive justice – including women's access to healthcare and contraceptives, their family life, their experiences with violence, their educational opportunities – all become important to the scope of the abortion debate.

Another technique that many of these media activists employ is representing narratives and individual stories within the art or the accompanying the media as a means of preserving this complexity within abortion decision-making. With the playwrights I spoke to, voices for

individual characters came from the experiences of the playwrights with clinic communities and reproductive justice activism and the artists sought to keep much of these narratives as intact as possible. Even with Jane Cawthorne, who relied on completely fictionalized accounts of women (but based in her lifelong abortion rights activism experience), the preservation of a narrative is crucial in order to contextualize the abortion experience as one part of a larger and more complex struggle for bodily autonomy.¹⁵⁰ The Tumblr blog “Planned Parenthood Saved Me,” created by media and technology activist and expert Deanna Zandt, relies on user-submissions of early cancer detection and other life-saving health services provided by the organization, as a means of supporting the organization during the recent feminist uproar over the Susan G. Komen Foundation for the Cure announced their withdrawal of funds from them.¹⁵¹ The sexual health organization “Amplify,” a project of the larger Advocates for Youth, launched a recent video component to their “1 in 3” campaign, seeking to use free digital services to de-stigmatize abortion through a multiplicity of different narratives.¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ Chapter Four, Interview with Jane Cawthorne

¹⁵¹ Jacobson, Jodi. “Planned Parenthood Saved Me: Women Tell their Stories.” 2/3/12. *RH Reality Check*. <http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/article/2012/02/03/planned-parenthood-saved-me-women-tell-their-stories>

¹⁵² “1 in 3 Campaign” *Amplify*. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.1in3campaign.org/>>

Planned Parenthood Saved Me

Jump to month ▾

MARCH 2012

3 POSTS

Saved from scars
When I was a child I experienced some fairly brutal and long term abuse. This left me with a level of uterine scarring that cannot be helped,

Planned Parenthood of Missouri saved my bacon...
Back when I was eighteen, I was "kind of" seeing a guy who had the awful habit

Planned Parenthood saved my life!
When I was 17 I was felled by severe abdominal pain and was sent to the hospital. They

FEBRUARY 2012

311 POSTS

When I was 15, I foolishly had unprotected sex and became pregnant. Thanks to the abortion services at Planned Parenthood, the course of my

there are so many different reasons
When I was 24 I got a urinary tract infection for the first time. I proceeded to get one every two or three months for the next

PP reassured me
One month when I was an uninsured 19 year-old college student, my period was a week late. I was too poor to even buy a pregnancy

Women saving women
I have to have my second colpo in a year. The first one I had student health insurance to cover. But I've graduated

When I was 16 I had to go to Planned Parenthood in order to obtain birth control. I had been having sex with I was 14 and had asked my parents for birth

Cyst-prevention, or "Insurance doesn't cover BIRTH...
It was freshman year in college, and just after winter break I started to have awful

Planned Parenthood Saved Me
When I was in college, and without insurance, I began to have extremely heavy periods. I was

PP to the rescue - twice...
Once for my best friend in her college days, and once for my darling, dearest little sister who had made the mistake of

Figure 45: Archival View of Some Responses on Planned Parenthood Saved Me



LOG IN JOIN BLOG SEARCH ALL DIARIES

Search

Website Blog

BLOGS ISSUES TAKE ACTION VIDEOS DONATE ABOUT YOUTHRESOURCE MYSISTAHS ADVOCATES FOR YOUTH

1 in 3

WATCH the VIDEOS LEARN MORE GET INVOLVED

Sign Up for Email Updates:

email address ZIP Submit

A COLLABORATION OF:

Advocates for Youth Rights. Respect. Responsibility.

Choice USA

SYRF

1 in 3 women will have an abortion in her lifetime, but we almost never hear those voices. Join the 1 in 3 Campaign and share these stories – or your own – with three people. It's time to come out in support of each other and access to legal and safe abortion in our communities. Help start the conversation!

Share Your Story >>
Submit Video or Text

Figure 46: The 1 in 3 Amplify Project Homepage

This method of narrative sharing can break abortion stigmas while also spreading the word about reproductive justice activism, projects, and artists in historical context of the movement. For example, filmmaker N'Dieye Gray Danavall used extensive media footage from the 2004 March for Women's Lives protest in Washington, D.C., to create her film "Listen Up! New Voices for Reproductive Justice."¹⁵³ By weaving the stories of recognized women of color visionaries (such as Loretta Ross and Dazon Diallo) alongside unknown activists, the film-maker is able to achieve her goal of "put[ing] a new face on the movement," with all of its complexities and nuances, especially to include the experiences of women of color at mainstream events and protests.¹⁵⁴



Figure 47: "Listen Up!" Graphic

¹⁵³ Danavall, N'Dieye Gray. "Listen Up! Film" Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://www.listenupfilm.com/about.htm>>

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

This emphasis on a continued narrative presence surrounding an abortion experience also is reflected in the practical artistic choices of the activists, who frequently represent their visual imagery/art with accompanying or supplemental materials that enrich the overall message. For example, playwright Cindy Cooper refuses to produce “Words of Choice” without a discussion after the play, in order to expand upon and work through the tensions and complexities within the represented stories.¹⁵⁵ Further, all of the artists have websites, social media accounts, and/or blogs which deepen and broaden the bounds of the discussion provoked by their work; one of the chief uses of these sites is to link audience members to notable resources, other reproductive justice art and media projects, and to clinic communities and activists, in order to continue the discussion past the realm of the art.

Collaboration & Collectivist Praxis: Together we are Strong

Many see the creation of art as central to the act of collaborative protest. Similarly, many feminist artists see collaboration and collaborative protest as central to the act of art creation. In both of these ways, art and media act as a means of sharing power, skills, and technologies in order to most strongly support one another’s art and politics. These collaborations and community-based interventions and projects focus on the importance of forging meaningful and long-term bonds between reproductive justice activists, media-makers, and clinic communities/reproductive healthcare provider communities, broadening the potential reach of their messages and increasing the strength of allies in the greater fight. This emphasis on collaboration and community-focused activism centers on the sharing of important media and art-related resources, technologies, and knowledge as a form of community-education and support, providing reproductive justice activists with some of the tools and support needed to create and sustain their work.

¹⁵⁵ Chapter Four, Interview with Cindy Cooper

One of the most important collaborative aspects of reproductive justice media activism is the close work with abortion provider and abortion clinic communities, enriching the debate with their experience and increasing the overall political support for abortion rights. There is a sense among the women I interviewed that their art should, and will, connect and interact with abortion provider communities, whether through a digital activist presence, through direct consultations for messaging advice (as with Heather Ault who surveyed clinics to determine the messages they found most appealing), or even simply through a deep respect for clinic workers' passion and commitment. Events such as the Reproductive Justice Arts Extravaganza brought together the clinic community, local arts community, and reproductive justice activists together in celebration of the arts, increasing the overall collaboration and communication between these sometimes distanced groups. Feminist author Naomi Wolf charges the pro-choice community with the offense of a lack of collaboration, at the expense of abortion doctors: "Abortion doctors are our contemporary scapegoats."¹⁵⁶ Professors C.E. Joffe and C.L. Stacey and reproductive rights researcher T.A. Weitz expand on the importance of collaboration between clinic/medical and activist communities in their piece "Uneasy allies: pro-choice physicians, feminist health activists, and the struggle for abortion rights."¹⁵⁷ The team suggests that, through the changing face of mainstream pro-choice organizations in the '80s, there is currently a need for more activist collaborations between these communities, not only for the success of activist projects but for the support and protection of clinic workers, especially physicians. The article concludes: "contemporary activists will find it strategic, if not essential, to align with health

¹⁵⁶ Wolf, Naomi. "Our Bodies, Our souls" *The New Republic*, Oct 16 1995. 35

¹⁵⁷ Joffe, C.E., T.A. Weitz, and C.L. Stacey. "Uneasy allies: pro-choice physicians, feminist health activists, and the struggle for abortion rights." *Sociology of Health and Illness* Vol. 26 No. 6. 2004. Web. 1 April 2012. <<http://bixbycenter.ucsf.edu/resources/files/Joffe.UneasyAllies.pdf>>

professionals.”¹⁵⁸ In this alignment, reproductive justice activists not only solidify their work as advocating for the health and well-being of women, adding another layer of legitimacy to their independent approaches, but through this collaboration activists also can broaden their own impressions of abortion rights through the interactions with clinics, making sure to keep their visuals, rhetoric, and messaging as evolving and relevant as possible.

This collaborative focus is subtle, localized in scope, and disinterested in larger efforts to enter mainstream political debates and media exchanges. Some of these collaborations are meant to increase the overall scope and reach of reproductive justice activist media; others, however, are designed as spaces for in-group strategizing and support: Rohlinger addresses this point when she maintains that although many media tactics work for increased mainstream representation and support, “others may be employed to keep a group out of mass media.”¹⁵⁹ Art activist journalist Michael Shank builds on this:

Art activists less interested in directly confronting the powerful social order and more interested in working to build bridges among marginalized or powerless communities and organizations will likely opt for capacity-building work that subscribes to the following mission: Sustainability is the key principle of this category of peacebuilding.¹⁶⁰

Finally, this focus on collaboration also manifests itself in the sharing of resources, materials, and technologies used to produce, distribute, or display art/media projects, increasing the overall reach and success of the art. Collaboration and a focus on community as a core value of current reproductive justice arts activism can also be seen in the interactions between the women I interviewed, who make a point to share, celebrate, and promote the art and projects of their colleagues as an act of resistance against dominant mainstream “pro-life” imagery. In every interview, connections to other organizations or artists were made clear, not only in the

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 792

¹⁵⁹ Rohlinger, D. “Friends and Foes: Media, Politics, and Tactics in the Abortion War.” *Social Problems* Vol. 53, No. 4, November 2006. 556.

¹⁶⁰ Shank, Michael. “Re-defining the Movement: Art Activism.” *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*. Vol. 3, Issue 2 Spring/Summer. 2005.

participants' natural discussions of their activist trajectories but also in their unfailing promotion of similar artists.

Looking at all of these sources and ideas together, one can envision the qualities and dynamics that influence the definitions of future reproductive justice activist art. Social movement theorist Suzanne Staggenborg proposes a pairing of localized, community-based protests in conjunction with “national linkages,” which she sees as “important in keeping local communities alive during slow periods,” demonstrating the utility of large pro-choice organizations' messaging strategies as supportive of local activism.¹⁶¹ In a similar vein, when we look at the meaning-making within social movements and localized activist communities, the importance of recognizing the achievements, actions, and messages of underground, alternative, and independent activists becomes evident, even if the projects or art pieces never reach mainstream recognition. Social movement theorist Charles Kurzman asserts this utility and importance of alternative, ephemeral, and/or localized art and media activism:

Research on social movement outcomes, as well, draws on meaning-making. Indeed, a long tradition in social movement studies and its precursors treats social change as the product of cultural innovation among small avant-gardes (Blumer 1939; Gusfield 1981; Rochon 1998). Even when movements fail at their stated goals, their ideals, discourse, and methods may survive and flourish.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Staggenborg, S. “Social Movement Communities and Cycles of Protest: The Emergence and Maintenance of a Local Women's Movement.” *Social Problems*. Vol. 45, No. 2. May, 1998. 186.

¹⁶² Kurzman, Charles. “Meaning-Making in Social Movements.” University of North Carolina. June 2011. Web. 1 April 2012. <http://kurzman.unc.edu/files/2011/06/Kurzman_Meaning-Making.pdf> 10.

Thus, these localized activist methods have clear and tangible ramifications on the way we view protest, resistance, art, new media, and feminist organizing. These manifold art and media projects are, in reality, the primary tools not only of activist communications, but of activist strategizing, self-reflection, and community-building. Free from the conceptual and physical confines of art institutions, independent media protest is integral to the core ways of practicing this localized, immediate, and holistic form of contemporary activism.

If feminism truly cares about women's lives, and is serious about revolutionizing the discourse around access to reproductive services, we will collectively look beyond mainstream feminist organizations to the avant-garde radical reproductive justice abortion communities where activists on the cutting edge are making their artistic contribution to the movement towards justice.

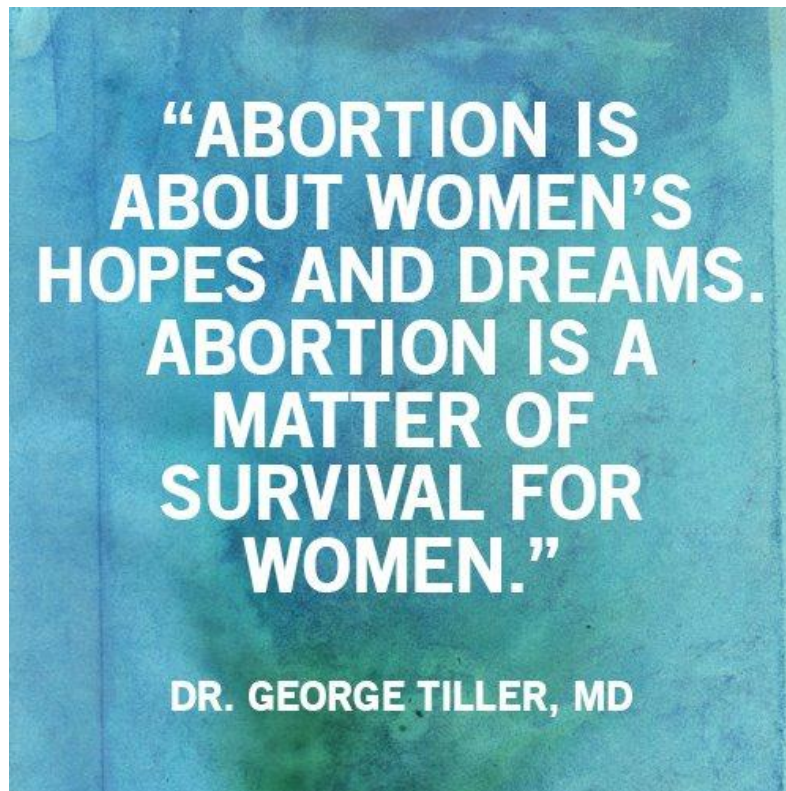


Figure 48: Image from a 2012 Series by Heather Ault



Figure 49: Favianna Rodriguez's "I'm a Slut. I vote!" Piece from 2012

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