Early in October 2013, Suzanne Lacy was seated center-stage in the auditorium of the Brooklyn Museum. She was there to discuss her upcoming 400-person performance, “Between the Door and the Street.” She is an arts activist who carefully orchestrates monumental projects. Her public art pieces have taken place in such institutions as The Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid, The Tate Modern and the Manchester Art Gallery in England. She is the founding Chair of the MFA degree program in Public Practice at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. Her work has evolved over four decades starting from a pivotal time in her 20s when she shifted her interest from science and medicine to the arts. This was concurrent with the second wave of feminism in the ‘70s and a burgeoning of Wiccan practice in Los Angeles. She has long looked at the issue of violence against women. Her work is also centered on using the healing power of the spoken word shared between women.

She was at the Museum to talk about the making of her project with Catherine J. Morris, Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum and Nato Thompson, Chief Curator of Creative Time. Both institutions were behind Lacy's Brooklyn performance event. The project would bring together over 60 conversations modeled on the consciousness-raising discussion format designed to engender trust and mutual respect. The goal of the project was to shed light on current feminist issues including immigration, equal pay, childcare, violence against women, sexism and racism. Lacy reluctantly spoke about her own personal background, preferring to focus on the particulars of the project, which had grown into an immense undertaking. Lacy spoke about the months of preparatory work, and the hundreds of people she had directly or indirectly worked with to make it all happen.

After the event I spoke with Lacy from her home in Los Angeles. (A group from GAG had participated in the project.) I wanted to know more about her personal inspirations. Lacy had worked hard to ensure a diversity of age and race amongst those involved with “Between the Door and the Street.” The project was enthusiastically embraced by many, especially New York's young feminists. I was curious to compare Lacy's own formative feminist experiences with how she saw those of young women today. I also wanted to know her views on the current political and social climate and on how things have changed since the ‘70s. We discussed what had gone into the design of the project and its array of outcomes. What would be the lasting impact of the project's many small-group conversations that lingered only in the memory of the participants and their audience?
Anne Sherwood Pundyk: Why is it important for young women today to learn about the first, second, third and subsequent waves of feminism, or to look even further back to older stories about goddesses and witch-hunts?

Suzanne Lacy: I think it’s important to respect the women that came before us and to build on what they did in terms of activism. The world has plenty of forces mobilized against us so there is no point in wasting energy by reinventing the wheel. In “Between the Door and the Street” I was interested in constructing a space where women’s experiences would be seen as—“sacred” is not the right word—but as art historian Paula Harper put it: I wanted to create a space of “deep apprehension” of women’s realities and circumstances. To me this moves toward the spiritual. I remember years ago my friend, the art historian and curator Arlene Raven, came back from New York having heard Mary Daly speak. Daly had just published Beyond God the Father and Raven handed me the book and said, “I think you’re doing this; this is the type of thing you’re creating.” In her book Daly was talking about women finding their spirituality in immanence as opposed to transcendence; Daly saw women’s spirituality as emanating from and by and with the body and in the spaces created by women’s relationships with each other. I was also influenced by conceptual art and people like Dan Graham who experimented with psychological processes as art. I found that a woman’s experience talking with another woman—capturing that experience aesthetically and creating spaces where that transfer takes place—generated ideas related to both feminist politics and conceptual art. That spirit of gendered relationships probably existed historically to some degree in convents and in Wiccan and pagan religions.

ASP: Tell me more about women authors, in addition to Daly, who were important discoveries for you early on in your work.

SL: Personally, I was not drawn to personifications of goddesses, although I understood the politics behind these ideas. I was drawn, rath-
er, to the sense of a new potential that existed in exploring the space between women and a possible redefinition of our relationships with each other. These relationships, particularly as expressed in post-war movies of my childhood, were competitive and untrustworthy. I felt this had to change. In the ’70s I had to rethink my relationships with women, who as a group disappointed me by their lack of adventurousness. This involved re-training myself. In talking with small groups of mostly men (as I did within the context of my studies of science) I had to learn to pay attention to the women in the group when they talked. I inherited from men dismissive ideas about the capacities of women.

It was not just a simple form of camaraderie that created such energy and power in west coast feminist circles, but also a politicization of the relationships that developed between women. The first Wiccan I came in touch with was Z Budapest. She moved to Los Angeles from her native Hungary. She was instrumental in the formation of the Wiccan movement. Interestingly, Wiccan culture connected with social concerns about violence against women. I first heard Budapest speak at Cal Arts when we asked her to be on a panel discussion about rape. It was an electric evening, with the issue discussed in public for the first time, in my experience. The themes of both violence and spirituality connected to the body were woven together as political themes throughout the ’70s.

The abortion movement began almost simultaneously with the development of domestic violence shelters. Early abortion arguments were as much about the violence of back street abortions as they were about a woman’s right to control her own body. Rape became a topic of public concern as a criminal phenomenon, but for women the intense relationship to a bodily invasion made it much more than a crime. Susan Griffin, a poet and early eco-feminist, wrote a profound book, *Women in Nature, the Roaring Inside Her*, a meditation on themes around “her” body and “her” consciousness, including violence, pleasure, sensuality and aging. From such thinking eco-feminism, or the idea of the earth as a defiled—even raped—body connected with and influenced our
thinking in the ecology movement. Some of these ideas also seemed to come as a reaction to texts in Catholic theology where women’s bodies represented the seduction of the flesh and entrapment of mortality. Rachel Rosenthal movingly enacted the Goddess Gaea, representing earth and our desecration of nature through the body of an aging, homeless woman.

**ASP:** In this issue *GAG* is also taking a look at the book that came out in the ‘70s, *Our Bodies, Our Selves*.

**SL:** I suspect the small booklet, *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses* written by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English probably influenced the creators of *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, but I don’t have evidence of that. For me, Budapest’s book called *The Feminist Book of Light and Shadows* (its second edition was printed in ’76) was important in this examination of a woman’s body and her spiritual life. Many of us practiced white witchcraft, or did simple spells, as a form of meditation and a primitive research into women’s spirituality. The sexism in organized religion pushed many of us out of the churches, mosques and synagogues where we were raised. And historically, as Ehrenreich and English pointed out, early healers were often women herbalists, living alone, and they performed the important functions of midwifery. These women who were disconnected from husbands and families—and thus outside of “normal” society—were easily transformed in the popular imagination into “witches” during The Inquisition.

**ASP:** What was your personal entry point into these topics?

**SL:** I was interested in healing and medicine. My first degree was in zoology. By the time I consciously became a feminist, I was in graduate school studying psychology and planning to be a doctor. Feminists were uncovering various aspects of women’s history that challenged the patriarchal narratives in science, medicine, psychology, and other fields. *Witches, Midwives and Healers*, was a treatise on how women figured into allopathic medicine. As you probably know, the specula-
tion that “germs” (bacteria) existed and were a cause of puerperal fever during childbirth was directly attributable to doctors replacing midwives. I did a great deal of reading on the history of medicine, as it had to do with women. The development of gynecology, for example, was based on a male doctor’s horrible surgical experimentation on women who were American slaves and poor immigrants. There was also the subject of mental illness and its relationship to gender. I learned about this from books such as *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Phyllis Chesler’s *Women and Madness*.

**ASP:** Why were these ideas attractive to you?

**SL:** As someone interested in mind and body relationships, I looked into psychosomatic medicine, madness, witchcraft and mythologies of women. Three books that interested me at the time were *The Fear of Women* by Wolfgang Lederer, *The Dangerous Sex* by H.R. Hayes and the *Malleus Maleficarum*, a book written by Catholic priests during The Inquisition, filled with fantasies of witches and explicit torture. I incorporated this research into some of my first performances and installations. I became interested in a number of related subjects from prostitution to violence against women. There are various forms of violence that were rediscovered in the ‘90s but first came to view in the ‘70s, from clitoridectomies to the use of Korean comfort women. There is a large territory of issues related to women’s bodies that surfaced in the ‘70s pertaining to violence and healing, autonomy and entrapment. If this seems somewhat scattered in light of today’s depth of information available on any single one of these topics, remember that wide-ranging interests were easily satisfied in the ‘70s because there were so few texts on any given feminist subject. Later specialization brought much deeper thinking, whereas earlier our thoughts were perhaps more associative, at least among artists.

**ASP:** All of these topics are still relevant; do you think overall that there is a resurgence of interest in feminism in the arts?
SL: It may not be a resurgence, but more of a deepening of the knowledge and engagement with feminist activism. I remember how we scoured bookstores in the mid-sixties for any kind of text on women, and how a scant decade later there were entire bookstores dedicated to women’s issues. I’m curious about how activists today understand their role as gendered beings in political and private sectors. I’ve noticed more interest in the arts related to politics by younger urban people. For example, the evolution of social practice in the last few years is evidence of ideas that have been in circulation for three decades now rising in importance for young artists. There is an emergence of a global awareness of violence against women in different parts of the world, whereas before it was mostly known only amongst feminists. Through social media you see young women involved in various kinds of actions and connecting with each other’s interests in the conditions of other women. There are also the counter movements, like the glamorization of the glimpse of bare pubes of slackers like Lindsay Lohan. Hot topics of women’s sexuality range from Slut Walk to hijab; they are all very different ways of responding to the implications of the female body in public.

ASP: Do you see anything else that explains the current heightened activity and interest in feminist issues, especially in the arts?

SL: I do think we’ve reached the point today where there are plenty of women in the art world with a variety of political perspectives to serve as role models. There still isn’t equity however, and a look at the sales prices of work by comparable men and women artists and their representations by galleries and the numbers of women in exhibitions tells the same tale. I also think we live in a political moment that has some similarities to the ‘70s. There are ongoing wars, street protests like those of Code Pink, and a widening income gap. All of these are putting women at risk. There are issues of race and racism that are perpetuated by institutions like the prison-industrial complex. All of these factors come together to create similar conditions to those from which second wave feminism emerged. Gender issues arose and often do arise
historically out of other large scale social movements, so the civil rights movements seems to have given birth to women noting their own position within these struggles. You can look at the recent incidents of violence toward women in Tahrir Square, in the Occupy movement, or in Afghanistan, where our war has brought longstanding issues like the prohibition against women’s education to the fore. So gendered concerns emerge out of other kinds of global conflicts.

**ASP:** There is a subtlety to your point about gender issues embedded in other discussions of inequity, exploitation and conflict. There are nuances to parse and a need to look further and dig deeper into each of these subjects. You listed several reasons why it’s now a fruitful environment for engagement, questioning and activism similar to that of the ‘70s. What is different now?

**SL:** One big difference is that the right has caught on to many of the strategies that came out of the ‘60s and ‘70s such as those used by leftist, labor and community organizers. Conservatives have become much more aware of how to organize grassroots movements. The Tea Party is a good example. There’s a great deal of conservative money behind the Tea Party’s so-called grassroots efforts, for example, in the battle over medical care going on in this country. I think there has been a large shift in public consciousness from the left to the right in the past few decades.

**ASP:** How has this conservatism played out with respect to your project in Brooklyn last fall?

**SL:** The conservatism in this era is mobilized, as usual, to protect the rights of the wealthy; the activists we worked with in this project generally were working to make conditions better for those without economic resources, although not exclusively. The many issues, both local and global in scope, which informed our thinking, began with the premise that gender still matters. Issues with which I was particularly concerned were related to immigration, poverty, violence and
racism and how they intersect with gender. In large part the groups predicted the choice of topics with which we worked; conversely we sought out groups based on their engagement with these key themes. For “Between the Door and the Street” I was particularly interested in how immigration links to feminism today. New York seemed to be a perfect place to explore the nuances of the gendering of immigration. For instance, during the course of developing the project NPR ran a documentary on sexual violence against undocumented women.

I have been reading about the global care industry and the ways in which women are moved, or have to move, around the world in order to care for their own families. They often take up the traditions of caregiving for families in the developed world, allowing the women there to enter the labor market. Metaphorically, from sex trafficking to domestic labor, women from undeveloped countries assume the traditional roles of women in the family—growing and preparing food, raising children, cleaning, even serving sexual needs. But they often have to leave their own children to care for somebody else’s. There is little research on the how this impacts these women and their families.

My art uses a process of asking questions, both privately about what I, as an artist, might be interested in and collectively, to structure the organization of public events. A personal and private subtitle to the project in Brooklyn was “looking for feminism,” because I wanted to understand how younger women now think about the relationship between gender and activism. In particular this project was about diversity and formulating a space for cross-race, cross-ethnicity and cross-gender conversations. One of the critiques of ‘70s feminism was that it was racist. My position is that it was on par with other progressive movements at the time, and included racist attitudes and behaviors. One of the problems was that in that era, the issues of race, class, and gender were seen as, and sometimes actually were, in conflict. I think those are false dichotomies; discrimination based on race is a fundamental oppression that continues in virulent forms in this country. The first step in addressing this is listening deeply to perspectives
based on individual experiences, and then working to create laws and polices that enhance racial and gender equity.

We were very thoughtful in our approach to organizing this project, which was done by a team of young women who worked under the leadership of Jennifer Hsu. We started with an analysis of the demographic constituency of the New York City region; we made adjustments for inclusion based on other factors, like profession, and added “passion” votes for groups that organizers wanted to ensure were included, such as women ex-prisoners. Coming from another perspective, at the beginning of the project, Jean Cooney, the Creative Time project manager, began by surveying women-run or women-centered organizations in the region. We wanted to ensure that the project participants were “grounded” in on-going relationships outside the project. We asked that each group have a leader, often one in a non-profit organization.

**ASP:** “Between the Door and the Street” was successful from our group’s vantage point. We were able to quickly absorb the consciousness-raising discussion format. There was a meaningful, moving quality to the dialog itself; it felt like our exchange was part of the larger chorus of heartfelt conversations going on around us.

**SL:** To really drill down to the politics of this work, it is important to know how the project was constructed. It was very intentionally planned, from the organizing strategies to who was brought on to work on the project. We assembled a team of young women because we wanted to build in a mentorship as part of our politics. They were taught about organizing, although some already had prior experience. We hired this team looking to meet the same kinds of diversity goals we had for the project as a whole. We engaged them in setting goals and in considering who should be invited. They discussed and resolved issues such as what languages would be spoken during the performance. We worked on the budget so that we could afford to support all the women who worked on the project; many were younger and did not have full
time jobs. For me, addressing authority, authorship, and pay within the working groups was part of the aesthetics as well as the politics. We had many systems in place for people to give us feedback at every step of the way. How a project is organized—the visible and the invisible layers—is a key consideration to my art practice. No one person is ever privy to all the types of conversations or the processes of resolving contradictions and disagreements as they come up. It’s important to really look for negotiation strategies, particularly when the issue of exploitation comes up, as it did in this project around providing childcare and payment for performers.

The other—often invisible—effort in the work is the deep attention we paid to creating support systems for participants. The elaborate communication structure in this performance was based on my other large-scale performances. I have learned over the years about how to support a consciousness raising process that takes place in public with a series of monitoring systems designed to create a safe space. We had a complex communication system between over 50 people organized around the protection of each performer. I appreciate hearing from participants about how it worked for them, and apparently you were able to feel safe enough to share meaningfully between each other. That is the first criteria of success for me, and I feel that when that does take place, the energy of each exchange, multiplied this time by the energies of over 60 conversations, creates a space of aesthetic pleasure for much, although not all, of the audience.

**ASP:** For me it feels like good parenting or any experience where authority acts responsibly.

**SL:** I’d frame it differently; authority over logistics is not the same thing as parental responsibility. It wasn’t my role to “teach” anything, only to protect individual expression. I’d frame it as respecting, supporting and creating safe spaces for people with diverse backgrounds within which to share their experiences. It’s about understanding that people who have experienced different forms of oppression need sup-
port for their voices to enter into the public sphere.

Arlene Raven’s ideas on how to provide emotional support for the effects of painful disclosures that happen during the unfolding of a work are very important to me. She once said that if you’re going to take people to the places where they have to confront the violence they’ve experienced, you need to think about their safe passage through the memory of that experience. For “Between The Door and the Street,” we thought about how much we could ask of people in terms of their vulnerability and self-revelation. We organized ourselves around the idea of preserving their feeling of safety. Each group had a leader who had been sensitized and trained to help protect people from going into emotional places that might not be right for them. We anticipated that people participating in the event could have anger or be distressed with the way society deals with their anger; they also might have shame or self-blame. All of these complicated feelings can be associated with the effects of oppression.

**ASP:** Does this idea of supporting people in their passage through difficult material continue to guide all your work?

**SL:** Yes, though when I work, all the experiences people engage with are not necessarily centered on oppression. Early in 2013, during the “Silver Action” performance at the Tate Modern in London, the conversations grew out of the participants’ reflections on the history of women’s activism. When I do a large public artwork, I think about everybody in the work: the people who are revealing their experiences, the people who organize and produce the event, and the audience. For me, they are all participants. Specifically, in “Between the Door and the Street,” I thought about the frustration the audience might experience if they were not able to hear or to respond; I thought about the performers’ exposure to the public and the risk of interruption. In this project we sought to balance the frustration the audience might feel by not being able to engage in the stoop conversations, with the benefit of what they might learn if listening was enforced. I thought
about when the audience was regulated and when they were free to create their own narrative structures. The audience could construct their own narratives based on their own trajectories; but on the other hand, they couldn’t intervene in the developing group narratives. Sometimes they couldn’t hear, so that set up inevitable frustrations. Early in our planning we thought about the problem of audio and decided that the technical challenges including the expense, the difficulty of performers trying to hear themselves and the effect that amplification would produce, were not surmountable. We did what we could to mask the ambient sound and distribute the audience between conversation groups for better access. In the end we had to live with some problems with audio legibility.

There were many other issues that came up and had to be considered, for political, aesthetic or practical reasons. We thought about the difference between sharing experiences and advocating for political perspectives. We thought about how to navigate the audience’s interest in personal narratives versus the very real need to discuss the political perspectives of each group. Near the end of the event we opened the stoop conversations up to the audience thus making the two groups into one. This resolved the dilemma of wanting to engage the audience, versus wanting the audience to hear everyone else’s experiences. Whether our solutions worked on the ground or not, is a measure of how well we planned them, but I can guarantee you that we really tried to address all perspectives and issues that arose—we took everyone’s concerns seriously. I personally thought it went off very well and I’m glad you concur.