

UCLA

CSW Update Newsletter

Title

Abortion Performance and Politics

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7sv5h222>

Author

Candelario, Rosemary

Publication Date

2012-03-15

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, availalbe at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Abortion Performance and Politics

by Rosemary Candelario

Performance happens at the level of the body and at the level of the live experience, yet it also exerts itself through the performativity of the documentation or language in which it is repeated. In the performativity of performance, I saw the opportunity to participate in the discursivity that is pedagogy—to not only repeat, but repeat with difference, to create a difference in bodily valuation that could be repeated.

—Aliza Shvarts,

"Figuration and failure, pedagogy and performance:
reflections three years later"¹

The point is, as soon as performativity comes to rest on a performance, questions of embodiment, of social relations, of ideological interpellations, of emotional and political effects, all become discussable.

—Elin Diamond,

*Performance and Cultural Politics*²

31 were arrested in women's rights demonstration in Richmond, Virginia, on March 3, 2012.

© John Webb,
Daily Kos
Photo Cooperative



TWO THINGS are clear at this point in the 2012 presidential campaign.

First, despite the fact that Americans consistently identify the economy and unemployment as the most important problems currently facing the country,³ Republican lawmakers continue to prioritize making abortion—and even contraception—financially and logistically inaccessible, if not outright illegal.⁴ Second, thanks to the Wisconsin Winter, the Arab Spring, and the Occupy Fall, there is a renewed belief in the efficacy of bodies engaged in political acts. The confluence of these two—the persistent obsession with restricting women's control of their own bodies 39 years after abortion was legalized in the United States and a surge of bodies performing their political demands—points to an important fault line in American politics as well as an area of great potential: the performance of abortion.

“Performing abortion” typically refers to what health care providers do in clinics, private offices, and (rarely) hospitals 1.21 million times per year,

every year, in the United States.⁵ At the same time, the phrase indicates what performance artists, choreographers, and activists have been doing on stages, in galleries, and on the streets for decades. I am intrigued by this double meaning that invites us to take seriously what abortion means at this political and historical moment, but also what performance, activism, and the concerted actions of bodies can do. This article offers some introductory thoughts on these intertwined issues, and represents the beginning of a larger project I am conducting. “Performing Abortion: Feminist Cultural Production after *Roe v. Wade*” was conceived with the premise that the examination of performances of and about abortion by feminist artists and activists may reveal productive strategies for reframing the abortion debate in the United States.

I have no illusions that this will be an easy task. The arson attack that gutted the American Family Planning clinic in Pensacola, Florida, early on New Year’s Day 2012 was a sober reminder of the ongoing campaign of extralegal harassment and violence faced by abortion providers.⁶ Beginning in early 2011, unrelenting attacks on the legality and accessibility of abortion also characterized the Republican-run House of Representatives,⁷ which produced and inspired an unprecedented number of proposed federal and state anti-abortion bills and ballot initiatives.⁸ Legislators capitalized on urgent debates on health care reform and the bud-

get, cynically turning those issues into new rationales to restrict abortion. Reform meant to expand access to health insurance was used instead as an opportunity to reduce coverage for abortion through onerous payment procedures and outright bans. Budget debates ostensibly meant to increase jobs and help the working and middle classes survive the economic recession turned into vitriolic calls to defund Planned Parenthood⁹ and end “taxpayer funding” for abortion. The suggestion was even made to remove statutory rape and incest from the exceptions to the Hyde Amendment to ensure that federal funds would neither pay for abortion nor benefit any institution that might enable abortion in any way.

What is missing from the current focus on abortion in Congress and in media coverage thereof is the notion of women as corporeal beings and any sense of the efficacy of abortion. Whereas the legalization of abortion in 1973 stopped women from dying of needless infections and injuries caused by illegal procedures, it is seen today as effecting nothing but gridlock—in Congress, on television talk shows, and in front of women’s health clinics.

It is easy to see how women’s bodies disappeared from the “pro-life” discourse. All of the restrictions and attacks I just described are designed to protect the life of the fetus. This conceptual and visual focus on the fetus—in legislative language, “pro-life” propaganda, and increasingly

required ultrasounds—erases the woman’s body from view. Jennifer Doyle, in analyzing a billboard depicting a full-term fetus with the slogan, “It’s not a choice; it’s a child,” observed how “the personification of the fetus in the womb as a visible subject, distinct in its identity from the body that contains it,” causes “the pregnant woman [to disappear] into an amorphous and undefined background.”¹⁰ In this view, the female body is nothing but a vessel. The recent uproar over a Virginia bill that would have required women seeking abortion in that state to undergo a transvaginal ultrasound is but the latest iteration, in which a woman is reduced to a passageway to be penetrated by technology that enables a fetus to be seen.¹¹

Although the “pro-life” and “pro-choice” discourses are based in radically different world-views, Carol Mason points out that, “Life is the common ground upon which two formidable foes battle over abortion, whether we call that battle an opposition between the life of the child and the life of the mother or between the life of the fetus and the life of the woman.”¹² Indeed, images and slogans that drove the early pro-choice movement forcibly called attention to the stakes for women. The gruesome photograph of a naked and bloody Gerri Santoro lying alone on the floor of a hotel room, dead from an illegal abortion, was a potent representation of the fact that legal abortion saves women’s lives.¹³ In the late 1980s and early 1990s, three mass mobilizations “For Women’s Lives”



Gerri Santoro died from an attempt at self-induced abortion in 1964.
Source: Wikimedia

drew between 300,000 and 750,000 people to the nation's capital.

Over time, the sense that “choice” signaled a concern with women’s lives was supplanted by a consumerist discourse that, perhaps not coincidentally, also governs the larger discussion of health care. Certainly the dimming of the consequences of illegal abortion in the collective memory is one factor in the disappearance of women’s bodies from pro-choice rhetoric. But I suspect that the pro-choice movement’s almost exclusive focus on legislative and electoral politics is another. Pro-life rhetoric has come to control the terms of the debate so thoroughly in the political arena that the pro-choice side has been compelled to take a largely defensive position, constantly fighting against bills and initiatives that chip away

at the parameters for legal abortion as established by the Supreme Court in 1973.

I want to be clear that when I refer to women’s bodies missing from the debate or the necessity of reintroducing them, I am not referring to an essentialized female body defined solely by her biological ability to procreate. Instead I am searching for signs of the particular, the complex, and perhaps most of all the material women who can disrupt the assumptions, stereotypes, and ideologies that have come to dominate the abortion issue.¹⁴ In many ways, my concerns match those of the movement for reproductive justice, which works to ensure that all women have access to the information and resources to control if and when they become pregnant, the support and resources to end or continue a pregnancy, and the support

and resources to care for any children they may have. Led by women of color, this vital movement draws attention to the lives of women largely ignored by the pro-choice movement, including incarcerated women, disabled women, women living with HIV, and many more.

At this early stage of my research, I have been inspired by the Occupy movement’s resolute refusal to participate in a political process that has been utterly unresponsive to their concerns. While politicians and the media sputtered about Occupy’s lack of a unified agenda, masses of bodies in local parks and squares across the country declared their dissent from business—and politics—as usual, and demonstrated that their lives and needs are not reducible to a bill in Congress. These actions forced issues of eco-

conomic inequality into the national discourse in a relatively short amount of time and made open questions of activist tactics and targets.

I am not suggesting that the reproductive justice movement should refashion itself like the Occupy movement. But I am saying that this historical moment invites us to take seriously the role of public performance and the materiality of the body in effecting change in a seemingly intractable debate. In particular, I suggest we need to pay close attention to the way performing bodies are being deployed to disrupt established discourses and reconfigure possibilities. This leads me to search for examples of performing abortion that offer the potential to shift the current national discourse away from a moralistic discourse of murder on the one hand and a consumerist discourse of choice on the other, toward one of corporeal agency and reproductive justice.

Of course, public performances or mass gatherings of bodies in themselves are not necessarily effective at changing national discourse. Mass marches served the pro-choice movement well in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when hundreds of thousands of women and men poured into the streets in protest of the *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* Supreme Court case. *Webster* made possible a new standard of review for abortion legislation, and opened the door for the *Casey v. Planned Parenthood* decision in 1992, in which a host of new restrictions on abortion were

found constitutional. According to the National Organization for Women, which initiated two national mobilizations in 1989 and one in 1992, “These mass marches forced the issue of abortion rights into the forefront of political debate going into the 1992 elections and provided strong, new networks of activists and contributors.”¹⁵ The problem was that when the groundswell of public opinion embodied in those marches led to electoral success in 1992, the movement seemed to hand over its agency to elected officials. In 2004, pro-choice organizations again organized a March for Women’s Lives. This time they were sufficiently challenged by the reproductive justice movement to be compelled to expand the roster of planning organizations. The result was largest protest in American history, bringing 1.15 million women, men, and young people to Washington, D.C. Paradoxically, this successful mass gathering was also a political failure, asserting little influence on the presidential race it was ostensibly designed to impact.¹⁶ Perhaps one of the reasons the march was not effective at impacting the national discourse is that it was organized on the basis of mobilizing people to ask others to do something, rather than mobilizing them to take a stand, to say, “Hey, you’re not listening to us, so we’re going to make you pay attention.” But even the latter approach is not always successful. The arrest of 31 women by police in riot gear at a protest at the Virginia state Capitol in early March against



2004 March for Women’s Lives. Source: National Organization of Women

What kinds of performances, then, do hold the potential to disrupt the status quo abortion discourse?

the proposed transvaginal ultrasound law certainly captured national attention, but ultimately did not prevent a revised law requiring abdominal ultrasounds from being signed into law five days later.

What kinds of performances, then, do hold the potential to disrupt the status quo abortion discourse? One example is the 2008 senior thesis project by then-Yale art major Aliza Shvarts. Over a number of months, Shvarts repeatedly artificially inseminated herself and took unnamed abortifacient drugs to stimulate her menses. Her thesis project comprised this time-based performance, a textual narrative about the process, and an installation. When the *Drudge Report* publicized the news of what it called “abortion art,” Shvarts’s work became a national controversy. Yale ultimately barred the installation from exhibition; it remains unseen to this day.

In the midst of the controversy, it seemed that everyone was siding together against Shvarts. Campus and national pro- and anti-choice organizations decried both art and artist, citing everything from ethical considerations to what they saw as a trivialization of “real” issues. The executive boards of two Yale pro-choice groups, for example, wrote that they were “shocked by the content of the art piece in question and the manner in which very serious aspects of reproductive rights have been treated. We seek to protect the rights of real women and real families who deal

with real issues of health, safety, and access.”¹⁷ Ironically, this wording suggests that Shvarts herself is not a “real woman” dealing with “real issues of health.”

Shvarts performed insemination and miscarriage while at the same time drawing attention to the constructed and multivalent nature of her performance. This move allowed her to lay bare the ideologies and policies that construct and constrain women’s sexualities in the United States, and which in fact also enmesh the “real” people and issues that the groups criticizing Shvarts claimed to represent. The tension and discomfort caused by the gap between “real issues” and a spectacular version of reality enacted on and through the (her) body prompted a public discourse far in excess of what Shvarts likely imagined when she labored to create her senior thesis. The vehemence of the widespread criticism elicited by Shvarts is an indication of the productiveness of her intervention, despite the fact that the installation was never even seen.

The 1 in 3 Campaign, a new joint project of Advocates for Youth, Choice USA, and Spiritual Youth for Reproductive Freedom, is an abortion speakout for the age of social media.¹⁸ Whereas Shvarts’s performance drew on art lineages in order to probe the boundaries of pro-life and pro-choice discourses, the 1 in 3 Campaign draws on feminist lineages of personal storytelling to expose abortion as a common secret. Women are

invited to tell their personal stories and upload them to the campaign's website. The videos are then available for anyone to share via social media as a way to broach conversations. The project was inspired by the LGBT movement's use of storytelling as a movement builder and by recent polling on abortion that shows a pro-choice position correlates to knowing someone who has had an abortion.¹⁹

In the videos, women including Debra, Joy, Angela, Nici, Yamani, and Elle sit facing a camera in their offices or bedrooms and tell their largely unremarkable stories. In calm and thoughtful voices, the women share their experiences of deciding to have an abortion and receiving the support of their partner, family, or friends. They explain how they located a clinic fairly easily, got the money together with help from personal networks, and dealt with professional and caring abortion providers with little anti-abortion interference. Although she was not writing about 1 in 3, Jeanie Ludlow articulates why these common—and largely untold—stories are so important. We must, she writes, “adjust our public discourse to claim the rightness of women’s mundane reasons for terminating pregnancies,”²⁰ rather than continuing to focus on exceptional cases that have come to define safe moral and political ground. Efforts like 1 in 3 disrupt the national discourse on abortion by emphasizing its very pervasiveness. And yet telling these commonplace stories on

the internet is still full of personal and social risk for the women who upload videos, as evidenced by the fact that there are still only a handful of videos on the campaign's website. That number has continued to grow, though, as attacks on basic women's health care, including contraception and cancer screening, have escalated over the past few months.

The Body Ecology Performance Ensemble's 2012 “RingShout for Reproductive Justice: Free-birth” is yet another example of a performance that attempts to intervene in mainstream discourse about women's bodies. According to press materials, the RingShout for Reproductive Justice was launched in response to a 2011 billboard in New York City that featured a young African American girl with the tagline, “The most dangerous place for a black child is in the womb.”²¹ The billboard was posted during Black History Month by a group called Life Always, and was widely criticized by African American leaders before being removed in response to public pressure. While images of that billboard and others like it are projected during the two-hour interweaving of ritual, song, dance, and storytelling, they do not form the centerpiece of the RingShout event. Instead, the five women performers draw inspiration from religious rituals practiced by enslaved Africans in order to embody the complexities and contradictions of the sexual and reproductive lives of women of the African diaspora. Together

they suggest that the anti-abortion billboards cannot be addressed without grappling with larger issues of African American women's sexuality and sexualization; the full spectrum of reproductive choices including giving birth; stereotypes perpetuated by popular culture and local communities; individual and cultural images of women and mothers; and what it means to give birth to oneself as a whole being in relationship to others.

After the performance, Body Ecology's Artistic Director led an hour-long feedback session and discussion, asking the audience to reflect on how the piece can be used to create change in their own communities. This explicit community-organizing component distinguishes RingShout from 1 in 3's implicit goal of individual storytelling leading to more people taking a stand politically and Shvarts's unintended national controversy. At this preliminary stage of my research, I speculate that all three approaches will be necessary for a significant shift in abortion politics to take place. As I move forward with this project, I will continue to seek out and analyze risk-taking performances of and about abortion like the ones described above. Many questions remain: When feminist artists and activists perform abortion, what do they produce? What are the implications of reintroducing women's creative bodies to the debate? Can these performances and public reactions to them lay bare the stakes of the issue? Do they reveal hidden cruces or closely guarded sore points that could

lead to vital breakthroughs? The performances that ask—and answer—these questions are the ones that can, I contend, mobilize the potential to intervene in a discourse that otherwise feels impossible to crack.

Rosemary Candelario is a CSW Research Scholar.

She was a long-time organizer for abortion access

and reproductive justice before she earned a Ph.D.

in Culture and Performance from UCLA. She thanks

Jenna Delgado, Doran George, Debra Hauser, Cristina

Rosa, Aliza Shvarts, Sarah Wilbur, and Allison Wyper

for their time and input into this article.

NOTES

1. Aliza Shvarts. "Figuration and failure, pedagogy and performance: reflections three years later," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 21, no. 1 (2011): 160.
2. Elin Diamond. "Introduction." In *Performance and Cultural Politics*, ed. Elin Diamond. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 5.
3. "U.S. Satisfaction in 2011 Ranks as Second Lowest Since 1979," Gallup Poll, December 22, 2011, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/151700/Satisfaction-2011-Ranks-Second-Lowest-1979.aspx>, accessed December 26, 2011.
4. Steinhauer, Jennifer. Under Banner of Fiscal Restraint, Republicans Plan New Abortion Bills, *New York Times*, February 8, 2011, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/09/us/politics/09congress.html?_r=2
5. "Facts on Induced Abortion in the United States," Guttmacher Institute, August 2011, http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_induced_abortion.html, accessed January 6, 2012.
6. The same clinic, under the name Ladies Center, was the site of two bombings in 1984. In 1994 Paul Hill murdered Dr. John Britton and clinic escort James Barrett as they pulled up to the clinic in Barrett's truck. For the most recent National Abortion Federation Violence and Disruption Statistics, see http://www.prochoice.org/pubs_research/publications/downloads/about_abortion/stats_table2010.pdf
7. In Fall of 2010, before their takeover of the House was certain, Republicans in Congress released "A Pledge to America." While

the table of contents refers primarily to jobs, the economy, Congressional reform, and security, the text itself contains numerous references to conservative catchwords (family, traditional marriage, and life) and outlines a plan to eliminate private insurance coverage for abortion. The full document is available for download at <http://www.gop.gov/indepth/pledge/downloads>.

8. According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, 2011 saw an unprecedented number of attempts to legislate reproductive health in the 50 states. By the end of the year, 92 provisions restricting abortion were passed in 24 states, almost triple the number for 2010. ("Laws Affecting Reproductive Health and Rights: 2011 State Policy Review," <http://www.guttmacher.org/statecenter/updates/2011/statetrends42011.html>). For the latest information on federal and state anti-abortion legislation, see the Guttmacher Institute's "An Overview of Abortion Laws," updated monthly at http://www.guttmacher.org/statecenter/spibs/spib_OAL.pdf; the Center for Reproductive Rights' "2011 at the Midpoint: The State of Reproductive Rights," available at <http://reproductiverights.org/en/feature/2011-at-the-midpoint-the-state-of-reproductive-rights>; and NARAL Pro-Choice America's annual "Who Decides? The Status of Women's Reproductive Rights in The United States" at <http://www.prochoiceamerica.org/government-and-you/who-decides/>.
9. The proposal to deny Title X funding to Planned Parenthood's network of local clinics across the country became the symbolic and emotional crux of the Republican campaign. Republican House leaders were so desperate to "defund" Planned Parenthood that they even proposed removing the entire budget for Title X, sending the message that they would rather deny *all* low-income women access to federally funded contraception and preventive health care than allow Planned Parenthood to receive any of those funds. This trend even extended to private funding when the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation announced January 31 that they were halting funding to Planned Parenthood for breast cancer exams, an evidently political decision they reversed days later amidst enormous public pressure.
10. Jennifer Doyle. "Blind Spots and Failed Performance: Abortion, Feminism, and Queer Theory," *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 18, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 2009), p. 32.
11. Coverage of the bill, particularly the oft-repeated line that requiring transvaginal ultrasound via vaginal probe was akin to state-mandated rape, deserves a dedicated analysis that I do not have the space to provide here.

12. Carol Mason. *Killing for Life: The Apocalyptic Narrative of Pro-Life Politics*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 197.
13. The famous picture, taken in 1964, appeared in *Ms. Magazine* in April 1973 just a few months after the *Roe v. Wade* decision made abortion legal. It subsequently became a ubiquitous, albeit anonymous, symbol of the pro-choice movement. The 1995 documentary *Leona's Sister Gerri* tells the story of Gerri Santoro through the eyes of her surviving family members.
14. Histories of eugenics and forced sterilization targeting women of color and low-income women, and more recent campaigns advocating coercive contraception for women receiving welfare and incarcerated women demonstrate the extent to which racism determines who is allowed to reproduce and who is not. See for example Dorothy Roberts (1997, 1998), Andrea Smith (1999, 2002), and SisterSong's *Collective Voices* (Summer 2011). For an excellent introduction to reproductive justice, see Silliman, Fried, Ross, and Gutiérrez (2004).
15. National Organization for Women, "History of Marches and Mass Actions," <http://www.now.org/history/protests.html>, accessed December 29, 2011.
16. This is of course not to say that there were no organizational or movement gains from the march.
17. Executive Boards of the Reproductive Rights Action League at Yale (RALY) and the Yale Law Students for Reproductive Justice. "Shvarts within her rights, but wrong," *Yale Daily News*. April 21, 2008.
18. Read more about the campaign and watch videos at <http://www.1in3campaign.org/>.
19. Public Religion Research Institute. "Committed to Availability, Conflicted about Morality: What the Millennial Generation Tells Us about the Future of the Abortion Debate and the Culture Wars," June 9, 2011, <http://publicreligion.org/research/2011/06/committed-to-availability-conflicted-about-morality-what-the-millennial-generation-tells-us-about-the-future-of-the-abortion-debate-and-the-culture-wars/>, accessed December 12, 2011.
20. Jeannie Ludlow. "The Things We Cannot Say: Witnessing the Traumatization of Abortion in the United States," *Women Studies Quarterly* 36: 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2008), 28-41. See also Dr. Susan Wicklund's *This Common Secret* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007) and the documentary *The Abortion Diaries* (2005).
21. <http://rs4rjfreebirth.eventbrite.com/>. The 2011 billboard later appeared in St. Louis. Other so-called "black genocide" billboards have appeared in Atlanta and Chicago.