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### **Articulating a Lesbian Identity through the Lesbian Art Project**

Characterized as a “feminist mecca”, the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles, California promoted feminist activism through artistic mediums from its inception in 1973 until its close in 1991 (Breslauer 1). As a center for the woman’s movement, the Woman’s Building established a platform of expression for lesbian artists through performance, art making, salons, workshops, and education. Exemplifying this, the Lesbian Art Project, founded by Terry Wolverton and Arlene Raven in 1977, utilized performative art, visual art, and educational reform to articulate lesbian identity narratives and ultimately augment lesbian women’s agency in the western United States.

To begin, the Los Angeles Lesbian Art Project developed a visible lesbian identity through performative arts to amplify lesbian women’s agency in the public sphere of western patriarchy. Essentially, the Lesbian Art Project’s “mandate included ... promoting lesbian art and artists, and writing a lesbian history of art [while] ... organizing a major performance event at the Woman’s Building based on lesbian identities: *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism*,” in order to explore the socio-cultural implications of lesbianism in the 1970s (Klein 239). In other words, the organization characterized the lesbian identity by achieving visibility for lesbian artists and their narratives of oppression through theatrical performance and historical reclamation. Using theatrical performances including *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism* to draw attention to the suppression of lesbian women’s voices in the public sphere, artistic activism combatted butch/femme lesbianism stereotypes and reconstructed the lesbian identity according to six elementary identity archetypes representing a multifaceted, non-normative community.

Altogether, by creating an artistic environment dedicated to performative expression of complex lesbian identities through performative activism, the Lesbian Art Project provided an organized platform for the expansion of non-heteronormative voice, visibility, and agency in the western United States.

Moreover, by employing activist performative arts aimed at constructing a lesbian identity in the public sphere, the Lesbian Art Project merged non-normative sexualities with pop culture art production and engendered the expansion of lesbian women's voice and visibility. That is to say, the Lesbian Art Project "was a...narrative of an engagement with the ideas of lesbian feminism, art history, and art-making practices. It was the first attempt to articulate a gendered art-making practice that made room for artists—and humans—to become something other than what they were expected to be" under the constraints of patriarchal sexuality norms (Klein 257). Centrally, the Lesbian Art Project combined performative representations of lesbian women's identity narratives with mainstream 1970s pop culture in Los Angeles to expand public sphere recognition of lesbian identity politics, the influence of lesbian artists, and the importance of empowering the voices of sexually non-normative women. At the crux, the Lesbian Art Project amplified lesbian women's agency by promoting performative arts in conjunction with pop culture that articulated the lesbian identity of the late 1970s to establish a platform of voice and visibility for lesbian artists in the United States.

Next, the Lesbian Art Project further explored lesbian female identity politics through visual arts in order to characterize the sexually non-normative female experience and provide a platform of visibility to augment lesbian women's agency in the public sphere. To this point, "Leora Stewart's sculpture *Wall Form* ... metaphorically gestures to the ways in which lesbian feminism was all consuming in political, social, sexual, and erotic spheres of life. Sexually

suggestive rather than explicit, the work ... nuances the essentialist deployment of female imagery by some cultural feminists as a means of universalizing the experience of [lesbian] women” who exist outside socio-cultural heterosexuality norms (Burk 69). Fundamentally, in representing lesbian women’s experience through physical mediums, artists in the Lesbian Art Project illustrated the identity politics affecting lesbian women’s narratives and combatted societal institutions suppressing sexually non-normative voices. Most importantly, visual arts mediums employed by the Lesbian Art Project bolstered the development of a nuanced lesbian identity in the public sphere of the western United States encompassing narratives of oppression and difference that intrinsically established a platform for heightened lesbian agency through visibility.

Continuing, the Lesbian Art Project utilized visual arts as a medium for communicating a multi-faceted lesbian identity to expand non-heterosexual women’s agency and visibility in the western United States during the 1970s. In other words, “for lesbian artists engaged in feminism yet wary of the stridency of political movements, artistic practice could provide the means to ‘establish a lesbian subject full of complexity and contradiction, unfixed, ever shifting and reinventing itself in order to embrace and reflect an articulation of difference’, to experience oneself as both woman and artist, and to explore” the interplay between these two politically-charged identities (Walker 329). That is to say, adopting visual arts as a medium of sexually non-normative activism allowed lesbian female artists to convey narratives of identity politics rooted in institutional oppression of non-normative agency. Most notably, the Lesbian Art Project engendered elevated visibility for productions of visual arts targeting the development of a communicable, inclusive lesbian identity in the western United States that, as a result, inherently expanded lesbian female agency.

Finally, the Lesbian Art Project's educational reform initiative aimed to construct an inclusive history representing lesbian identities through the Sapphic academic model to ultimately augment lesbian women's agency in the public sphere of the western United States. Centrally, Lesbian Art Project founders Terrie Wolverton and Arlene Raven "wanted to reshape the aesthetics of lesbian art and the public perception of lesbians [by] creat[ing] art [them]selves, curat[ing] exhibitions, [and] offer[ing] an educational program for lesbians" intended to build lesbian consciousness and community through six elemental archetypes of the lesbian identity (Wolverton 2). Essentially, employing the Sapphic education model precipitated the formation of an inclusive lesbian identity encompassing narratives of difference and oppression. Additionally, the Sapphic academic model reconstructed a history of feminist lesbian activism in the public sphere of the western United States to generate group consciousness among sexually non-normative women rooted in shared experiences of voice suppression. To this point, the Lesbian Art Project succeeded in bringing visibility to lesbian women's narratives through educational reform and, consequently, actualized heightened agency for lesbian women seeking to articulate a shared, non-normative identity in the public sphere of patriarchy.

Furthermore, incorporating educational reform into the Lesbian Art Project amplified lesbian women's agency by articulating lesbian communal identity through the reconstruction of a comprehensive history of lesbian artists that seeks to disrupt the silencing of sexually non-normative identities. At the crux, despite patriarchal societal norms of the late 1970s in the western United States that "exterminated, erased, or misnamed" lesbian female narratives, the Sapphic educational system engendered "the breaking of [that] silence [by] inspir[ing] other lesbians in [the] declaration that [lesbian women would] no longer be invisible or mute" in the public sphere (Wolverton and Wong 53). Moreover, the Lesbian Art Project expanded lesbian

women's agency by using an educational system that targeted the development of lesbian consciousness through identity politics and historical reclamation. Most notably, through educational reform the Lesbian Art Project impeded societal suppression of non-normative agency and, therefore, empowered lesbian women's voices in the public sphere while aiding the development of a comprehensive, historically contextualized lesbian identity. Altogether, establishing an academic platform for communicating lesbian women's identities, narratives, and historical contexts disrupted patriarchal silencing of non-normative individuals and fundamentally elevated lesbian women's agency in the western United States during the late 1970s.

In conclusion, Terry Wolverton and Arlene Raven's Lesbian Art Project augmented lesbian women's agency in western patriarchy through the development and conveyance of a comprehensive, complex lesbian identity. Employing performative art, visual art, and educational reform, the Lesbian Art Project articulated narratives of difference and oppression affecting lesbian artists to establish a platform of heightened voice and visibility for sexually non-normative women. Exploring lesbian identity politics through the theater production, *An Oral Herstory of Lesbianism*, while reclaiming lesbian women's history through the Sapphic education model, the Lesbian Art Project established a communal lesbian identity rooted in non-heteronormative women's shared experiences to ultimately elevate lesbian women's agency in the western United States.

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