

**THE SOCIAL ARTISITC MEANINGS OF *IN MOURNING AND IN RAGE* BY
SUZANNE LACY AND LESLIE LABOWITZ AND *AT THE TIME OF THE
LOUIS VILLE FLOOD* BY MARGARET BOURKE-WHITE ©**

By Connie J. Schlosberg

Sometimes art tells us a story, but sometimes art takes on a social meaning that moves us to think more, to change. Artists take on a responsibility to show us what is out there. A lot of times, we don't see what problems exist until we visualize it through art. This visualization comes in many forms of art such as painting, photography, and performance art. The following paragraphs we will look at two works of art that help us discover the social issues that abound in our society – Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz's *In Mourning and In Rage* and Margaret Bourke-White's *At the Time of the Louisville Flood*.

Performance art can shock its audience with their own culture. In December 1977, Los Angeles was in a turmoil trying to stop the "Hillside Strangler" from brutally murdering one more woman. The media sensationalized the violence of these women but failed to address the severity of violence against women in the United States. The performance of Lacy and Labowitz's *In Mourning and In Rage* offered a female's perspective to these violent acts against women. Representing each victim, ten women dressed in black clothing with their heads covered each resembling the grim reaper. This performance speaks volumes about women's violence and oppression. Typically in the old world, women wore black to show they were in mourning. By hiding their heads under covers, the artists make a political statement on how these victims are

faceless, unknowns in our society. In essence, we ignore violence against women.

Some might say that photographs are our only proof of what existed. Margaret Bourke-White's *At the Time of the Louisville Flood* shows us the discrimination against African-Americans in the thirties. The back drop shows us the quintessential happy white American family – dad, mom, son, daughter and the family dog – driving in the typical middle-class car on a journey to some where. Above this picture are the words “World’s Highest Standard of Living” and beneath that is the statement “There’s no way like the American way.” The irony is the line of despondent-looking African-Americans, some with baskets in their hands, probably waiting for food rations. Notice that the billboard of the family is lighter than the lines of people waiting. This contrasts the two tones (and moods) shown in the photograph. Is Bourke-White telling us that the “American way” and the “standard of living” are different for blacks than for whites in the United States?

I believe that both of these works of art have effectively conveyed its meaning to me. Lacy and Lebowitz's *In Mourning and in Rage* shows me the seriousness of violence against women. I probably would have been more outraged had I been standing there watching the performance, listening to each “victim” speak. Violence against women is a serious issue and needs to be addressed by everyone. It is not just a government or media concern. It's all of our concern. Bourke-White's *At the Time of the Louisville Flood* also convinced me of important social issues of racism and unfairness plaguing the United

States. The billboard of White America standing mighty above the destitute Black America hovering below it. It is good for artists to put these social issues before us in a visual sense. Seeing is believing. If we are to become a better society, we need these artists to present to us the fallacies that we tell ourselves about what life is really like in the United States. From there, we can learn from our mistakes.