

Taking it to the Streets: Feminist Artist Transforms Westwood Blvd. into "Suffragette City"

Kitty Lindsay interviews Lara Schnitger

ON THE HEELS of Hillary Clinton's historic presidential race, Dutch-born Los Angeles-based sculptor Lara Schnitger brings her political performance-art-fiery-feminist-protest hybrid, Suffragette City, to the streets of Westwood beginning at noon on Saturday, November 12.

Drawing inspiration from SlutWalk — a transnational movement of scantily clad women marching in protest of the pervasiveness of rape culture — and the women's suffrage marches of the mid-1880s and early 1900s, Suffragette City features a parade of costumed men and women with "Slut-sticks," mounted sculptures bearing such feminist agitprop slogans as "Don't Let the Boys Win" and "Be the Walker, Not the Dog." Audiences are not only invited to observe, but also to participate in the procession, thereby engaging in the ongoing fight for women's rights. As a result, the stirring installation moves in more ways than one.

Suffragette City, which debuted in Basel, Switzerland, before being showcased in France and New York City, is part of the Hammer Museum's Bureau of Feminism initiative. This ongoing series of thoughtfully curated exhibitions, conversations, and performances is designed to spark public dialogue about ever-evolving gender roles, women's and LGBTQ equality, as well as feminist ideology, activism, and agitation.

I spoke with Schnitger prior to her West Coast premiere about creating sculptures that move, her identity as a "feminist artist," and finding power through the art of protest.

KITTY LINDSAY: What inspired *Suffragette City*?

LARA SCHNITGER: I've been making sculptures for a long time and I always somehow wanted to make them animated, not set in stone in their museum position. That's how the procession element came about. I deal a lot with different female issues, and recently I noticed the Slut-Walks. A lot of my earlier sculptures deal with clothing and with how what you wear can tell so much about you. It's a way of communicating. You can put messages on your shirt and people will read those and you get conversations going. But now, a lot of females are skipping the T-shirt and writing straight onto their bodies.

When the suffragettes were trying to get attention to get the vote, they wore these beautiful white dresses to show they were educated ladies. So, it's interesting how the language of clothing and the way to protest has changed so much over the years, from being completely dressed to completely naked. I wanted to mix together this procession idea and create more of a protest parade for female rights. So all those different elements, combined with my frustration about being a woman in the art world, kind of made this procession possible.

How did you go about organizing and putting this together?

I had been making quilts that have strong slogans and images on them, and looking into processions where people from the church take their



fabric and tapestries out into the street. I thought: These are great as protest signs. I ended up making a group of 10 Slut-sticks, which are sculptures made from a single stick using as little fabric as I could.

A couple of years ago in Canada, a woman was raped and a man said something like, "Yeah, of course you got raped, you were wearing a little skirt or you were dressed like it." That of course made a huge uproar like, "No, we can dress however we want." So what happened during these protests is that the women go out into the streets in the most vulgar outfits, shouting, "No means no," like, whatever we're wearing does not give you permission to rape us. So that's what I connected with in the sculptures, making these female figures with as little as a couple of strings and bra pieces.

How did you go about recruiting people to participate in your installation?

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We reached out within our own community in art schools and different people from around the art world. In Basel, it was the first time we presented it, so it was hard to describe what was going to happen. We actually had two people show up. So, we ended up getting people from the street that day, and we had all the dresses there. People were very excited to be a part of it and I let everyone pick the artwork they were going to carry.

For the one in Los Angeles, we need about 40 or 50 men and women. I'm going to have a special group of young children and young adults who will also be part of the procession. They're the next generation, and, hopefully, won't have to deal with some of the problems we're dealing with now.

Europe has a different relationship to feminism and a different history regarding women's rights than the United States. What was the response to the installation in Europe?

It was good! In a way, it doesn't really matter where you go to create. Women are women everywhere in the world, and women have been going out into the streets protesting everywhere around in the world. I don't know if the women from Europe knew what Suffragette City was or how that came about, but that didn't really matter, because it was about them standing up for themselves.

Why do you feel this is an important piece to show in the United States right now, at this moment in history?

There are still so many barriers to equality. It's something that needs to be seriously addressed. It's incredible timing now. We might have a female president; that, of course, is a very good example of what young women can do with their future selves. I think people feel that even though equality hasn't happened yet, there is a movement going on in the streets and in the consciousness.

Feminism colors all of your artistic work. Do you consciously choose to incorporate feminism in your sculptures, or is it organic to your expression?

It's kind of both. When I started making sculptures, I always used a lot of fabrics. As an artist, I think because I was using fabrics and stockings, I got put in more of the realm of "feminist artist," because fabrics were seen as "feminist" materials back in the 1990s. I kind of took that on and said, "Okay, if this is it, then I'll show you what a feminist looks like!" If that material already gives that dimension to my work, then I will take it to the next level.

Even though a lot of my sculptures are truly dealing with form, with color, with texture — all kinds of issues that are not particularly feminist — some of my frustrations do come out as feminist in my work, and I do think now is a good time to share my frustrations and shout about it again. I feel a frustration with what's going on, and we have to be heard.

How does Suffragette City serve as an expression of your frustration with the painfully slow progression of women's rights around the world?

Going out into the streets in this procession, it is like a protest parade,



and you can take it or leave it. I don't think every artist needs to go out into the street and do this kind of stuff. If you want to sit at home and paint and do weird perverse stuff, please do it on a sculpture. Don't do it on women on the street. You feel like groping? Grope a sculpture.

That's the great thing about art. You can use it to interact with some of your anger. That's how I use it. As much as I am very positive and optimistic in my way of thinking, for me to create these kinds of pieces and to get this whole thing happening, there is a certain aggressive drive or a frustration coming out of me: why are we still dealing with this? That frustration makes me able to make this. It's not like I'm sitting cozy on the couch knitting this beautiful piece. These are aggressive, big sculptures going down the street! I have to get these people, this big force of nature, moving.

What do you see as the responsibility of artists to raise consciousness about these issues, to shift the public consciousness?

I don't think it's the role of artists to address these things. That's the great thing about being an artist. You can do whatever you want to do. It's very exciting to have my art out on the street for people who might never go into the museums. Hopefully they will get inspired and join our procession, and come back to the museum, celebrate art, and celebrate equality for everybody.

This piece is sociopolitical in nature. What is the potential of art to effect social change?

I think art always has the potential to change things. Think about the history of art and the way people have been portrayed. Women used to be painted with their big boobs and their big bellies and their big hips. Renaissance paintings were completely different. I don't think artists can show you the whole world, but rather the world they see, and a better world they want to be in. I think as an artist, you're building your own community through image. You talk through images, or you see each other through those images.

Do you consider art an act of revolution?

It's a difficult question, because art is its own culture. You could revolt from within. I think back in the day, you got the Cubists revolting

against the Impressionists, and the Expressionists revolting against the Cubists. There's a big group of colorful painters now, but I don't think they see themselves as a group trying to stand up for a certain kind of painting. Everybody is kind of on their own track right now in art, which is kind of sad in a way. I don't feel the revolution in the art. I mean, there are always artists who like to shock, but that's not revolutionary.

You've incorporated a lot of text for the banners: Don't Let The Boys Win; Beauty Is the Enemy of Expression; and No Means No. Yes Means Yes. Is all of it original? Or did you pull quotes from other sources?

It's mixed. Some I pulled from T-shirts I've seen around, or from the slogans people were writing on their bodies while they were in the protest tours, or the signs they held up. Some are my own text or historical text, even some Dutch text.

The problem with text is that it sometimes takes away from the sculpture, so I'm not using it all the time. It's so demanding.

What kind of conversations do you hope this performance project sparks, or adds to existing conversations?

It's not just for women, but for all of us. We're all in this together, so I hope to have everybody there together, taking pride in the work, and then carrying that pride with them and sharing it with other people. I want those other people to go out into the streets and fight for their own rights, or whatever they feel like standing up for. Maybe they can take the power from this event and feel like: We can do more.

So were you inspired by David Bowie's song "Suffragette City"?

I was! I was looking to connect with the suffragettes and I liked the idea of a city — a world with these different kinds of suffragettes and different kinds of people in one place. That's what I like. I have a lot of Bowie titles. He's so poetic.

The procession is on a Saturday in Westwood, followed by screenings of feminist films on Sunday. Did you curate those films?

Yeah, we're still in the midst of it. I had some interesting films I wanted to show, but it's hard sometimes to get the permission, so I cannot tell you what we will show yet. We have different ideas about what's going to be shown on that day, but we will have the auditorium and we might have speakers.

What topics are you hoping to address with the movies?

I hope to address female empowerment. Some of the women who have inspired me to say what I say, or who say as artists, "Make your art!" That kind of positive energy. It's for us to be inspired by each other.



In collaboration with the artist Lara Schnitger, the Hammer invites the public to come together this Saturday, November 12th, for a community gathering with open mic to share thoughts and reflections regarding the recent election. We will convene directly following Schnitger's procession, Suffragette City, a march through Westwood. Schnitger's procession includes sculptures whose images, forms, garments, and texts explicitly address women's rights and civil rights. We welcome one and all to join us as we come together in solidarity.

The community gathering will begin at approximately 2pm; the procession will take place from 12 to 1:30pm. The afternoon will also include a musical performance by Miya Folick.