

Trappings

Stories of Women, Power and Clothing

MAKES YOU FEEL POWERFUL?

Two Girls Working

Tiffany Ludwig and Renee Piechocki

The Power of Two

Two Girls Working. Two artists with a query. A single question asked in hundreds of interviews. These are the elements of a five-year collaborative national project that continues to flourish. The artists' deadpan, interview-based process produces open-ended, often surprisingly vivid effects. Tapping into existing networks in communities, Tiffany Ludwig and Renee Piechocki make investigative art in the places, organizations, and clubs where women convene.

In 2000, Ludwig and Piechocki met while organizing a conference. With backgrounds in interdisciplinary and performance art (Ludwig) and painting and public art (Piechocki), each artist was poised to extend and deepen her practice. From an inventory of interests and strengths, the fraught condition of feminism, identity politics, women's relationships to power, and other common concerns crystallized in conversation. Both artists shared a driving interest to work beyond the studio and to engage diverse "non-art" audiences in commonplace sites and situations. The Tupperware party, Mary Kay cosmetics, and the book group became paragons. *Trappings* developed from this fertile alchemy of motives and preoccupations. With the appellation Two Girls Working, they took to the road seeking public conversations with women in far-flung sites and communities.



Trappings installations: Center for Photography at Woodstock (left) 2004, Nashville International Airport 2005 (right top), Pittsburgh Bus Cards 2005, Jersey City Museum 2004, and LOOM2 2002, and *Trappings* Interview Sessions Stills (below).

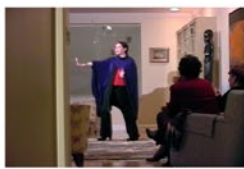
A "host", who they generally do not know, often helps to assemble a group of women to participate in the project. With an invitation and fact sheet from the artists, participants meet in church basements, schools, community centers, or homes to respond – and listen answers – to the central, if indirect, question that drives *Trappings*:

WHAT DO YOU WEAR THAT MAKES YOU FEEL POWERFUL?

Interviewees arrive in the clothes, outfits, and accessories to demonstrate or perform responses to the question. Ludwig and Piechocki stand unobtrusively behind the video camera recording a series of interviews that begin to intersect and connect forming striking narratives on women's ideas on power and identity. The stories, videotapes, and other images from these encounters are transcribed, printed, edited, assembled, and presented on their website and in exhibitions nationally that bring visual, audio, and ephemeral evidence of the forums to members of the public.

Fashion has become a permissible subject, if not significant preoccupation, in contemporary art, but Ludwig and Piechocki claim no interest in clothing per se. Of course, they revel in the extraordinary range of attire they have encountered in their 16-state, 500-interview (and counting) odyssey, but clothing, even if it appears to be the question, is not the subject. So why would artists/interviewers ask repeatedly a question they really do not want answered? *Trappings* tactically introduces the "wrong" question to stimulate a "right" conversation.¹ Not unlike Martha Rosler's brilliant use of the decoy in her work, Ludwig and Piechocki pose an enticing query, whose answer they neither seek nor expect, to move dialogue to unanticipated places.² As they suggest, the issues of feminism, women, and the intricate negotiations of power that *Trappings* seeks to extricate and illuminate are "cloaked" in the subject of women and clothes. Ludwig and Piechocki speculate that direct questions on women's ideas of feminism and power often are perceived as threatening, intrusive, or daunting. Alternatively, a question about clothes serves as a bait or lure that leads women to a common ground of experience from which independent stories passionately and poignantly emerge.

And how do artists Ludwig and Piechocki's own ideas of identity and power influence and inform this project? There is the well-established tradition of collectives with a common name (Group Material, Guerrilla Girls, Critical Art Ensemble, Collective Action, etc.) that suppresses or protects the identity of members and challenges the stubborn tradition of



independent authorship and the individual artist. Two Girls Working (not pointedly Two Working Girls or Two Women Working or Two Artists Working) is the identification that Ludwig and Piechocki have created for their collaborative practice – and this ambitious project. Cloaked in their own humble, possibly self-effacing moniker, the implication is that the artists/interviewers, like the hundreds of women they have met and interviewed, perform tasks both expected of them and embraced by them. Two Girls Working does not solely or simply signify a two-artist collaboration, but also the psychologically complex, social “workings” that invariably take place between interviewers and interviewees. As determinedly and consistently as Ludwig and Piechocki try to “naturalize” the environment and the interviews (the church, the community center, and unobtrusive videotaping and background roles of the artists), there is an aestheticized performance of an artist-orchestrated project.

Two Girls Working (rather than Two Artists Working) is not a depreciation of an art practice, but an open acknowledgement of a social collaboration that blurs the boundaries between art and life, conversation and performance, intention and content. The work of *Trappings* is presented in the videotapes, photographs, and stories that Ludwig and Piechocki assemble and install in national venues, but it is also represented in the unrepressed dynamics of staged, yet unscripted dialogues, the different perceptions and expectations that artists and participants bring to community-based projects, and the power and identity issues embedded in this kind of aesthetic practice. As *Trappings* documents and demonstrates, two artists with one good (if wrong) question stimulate a fruitful engagement of the roles of women, power, and art in contemporary life.

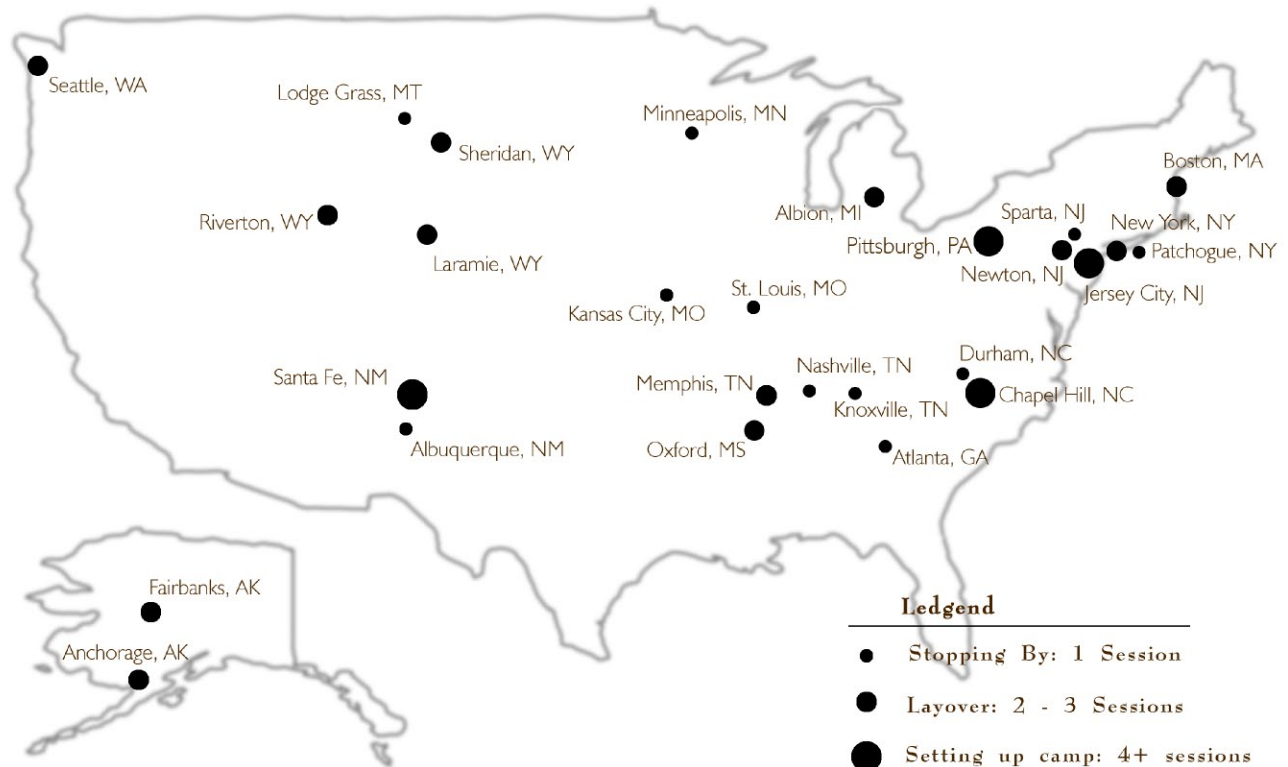
Patricia C. Phillips
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1. See Miwon Kwon, “The Wrong Place”, *Art Journal*, Spring 2000, pp. 33-43.
2. See Catherine de Zegher. *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*. (Cambridge: The M.I.T. Press, 1998) and in particular Alexander Alberro, “The Dialectics of Everyday Life: Martha Rosler and the Strategy of the Decoy”.

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Trappings Interview Locations 2001-2006



WHAT DO YOU WEAR THAT

Trappings Exhibition Dates

July 7 – August 11, 2006
Regina Miller Gallery, Carnegie Mellon
University, Pittsburgh, PA

THE HEINZ
ENDOWMENTS



October 30 – December 13, 2006
Central Wyoming College, Riverton, WY
The exhibition is supported in
part by an award from The
National Endowment for the Arts.



About Two Girls Working

The long-distance collaboration of Tiffany Ludwig (NJ) and Renee Piechocki (PA) is grounded in the concept of artists working in the public realm as catalysts to civic dialogue facilitated by technology. Since 2001, Two Girls Working have been collaborating on *Trappings*, inviting women from across the country to contribute to a dialogue about power. *Trappings: Stories of Women, Power and Clothing* will be published by Rutgers University Press in fall 2007.

Trappings: Stories of Women, Power and Clothing is a national, traveling exhibition.
To learn about upcoming dates, visit
www.twogirlsworking.com