

Rebecca Gomperts Discusses Art, Activism, and Reproductive Rights

Friday, October 27, 2023 at 5:30 p.m.
Ray Stark Family Theatre, SCA 108
University of Southern California



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

This event features Dutch physician, artist, and activist Rebecca Gomperts in conversation with USC Roski professor Amelia Jones about the intersections of art, medicine, and activism for reproductive rights.

REBECCA GOMPERTS

Rebecca Gomperts, MD, MPP, PhD, is a Dutch physician, artist, and activist. She has founded three international organizations to improve women's access to healthcare worldwide: Women on Waves, Women on Web, and Aid Access.

Rebecca Gomperts studied medicine and visual arts in Amsterdam. She became an abortion doctor and served as a doctor and environmental activist on the Greenpeace ship *Rainbow Warrior II*. During that time, she encountered many women who lacked access to reproductive health care and safe, legal abortions, which inspired her to start Women on Waves in 1999.

Women on Waves is a Dutch NGO that brings reproductive health care to women in countries with restrictive abortion laws. Women on Waves also engages in art projects, legal actions, sex ed and medical workshops, and other initiatives. Women on Web is an online medical abortion service that supports women living in countries where safe abortion is not available. Aid Access helps people get abortion medications via mail.

REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS AND HEALTH CARE AROUND THE WORLD

- As of 2021, just over half of the world's women were able to make their own informed decisions about sex and reproduction. (UN Women)
- Across 115 countries, 76 percent of laws needed to guarantee access to sexual and reproductive health care were in place as of 2022. (UN Women)
- 214 million women worldwide want, but lack access to, contraception. (Global Fund for Women)
- Globally, about 25 percent of women* of reproductive age live somewhere where abortion is broadly available, 35 percent where abortion is permitted upon request (generally with gestational limits), 12 percent where abortion is permitted only on narrow grounds (such as risk to the pregnant person's health, rape, or incest), 22 percent where abortion is permitted to save the person's life, and 6 percent in places where abortion is prohibited altogether. (Center for Reproductive Rights)

* The Center for Reproductive Rights reports these percentages based on UN Population data, which tracks the category women. The Center recognizes that people who do not identify as women also need access to abortion care and that available global population data does not speak to this.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF ABORTION ACCESS AND RIGHTS

The World Health Organization recognizes abortion care as an essential health care service, and abortion rights have been established as a human right in numerous international frameworks. Yet the legal right to abortion, and access to abortion care, vary by country. (The United States and Mexico are the only countries where abortion rights vary significantly by state.)

Things are generally moving in the direction of expanded rights, with a few exceptions. In the last few decades, more than 60 countries have liberalized their abortion laws, reports the Center for Reproductive Rights. Only four have rolled back abortion rights: the United States, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Poland.

ART AS ACTIVISM

Art and activism interrelate in many ways—from artists creating protests signs or visuals for political campaigns to the use of storytelling to humanize an issue or inspire an emotional connection to a cause. In contexts of censorship or political repression, art in the form of allegorical stories or images can critique a powerful person or institution without directly naming them. And in some cases, defining an activist project as art can be a way to enter political spaces and conversations that would be harder for activists to access.

For example, the Cuban installation and performance artist Tania Bruguera invited Cubans to voice their visions of a better future Cuba by nominating herself as a candidate for the Cuban presidency in 2018. Since she could not actually self-nominate as a candidate (candidates are elected by the legislature), the “campaign” was a performance in which the artist gathered real videos of real people speaking to questions like, “What if we actually had that power? ... Who would we be? What would we do?” Several years prior, Bruguera had been arrested in Cuba for organizing a public performance where Cubans would be invited to take to the mic in a public plaza and speak freely about their ideas for Cuba’s future. Bruguera has developed the notion of *arte útil*, which roughly translates into English as “useful art,” and which Bruguera conceptualizes as using artistic thinking to “imagine, create, and implement tactics that change how we act in society.”

L.A.-based performance artist Kristina Wong has actively explored the relationships between political action and art, becoming an actual elected representative on the Koreatown neighborhood council and exploring in a performance piece about it questions such as: Is she more effective as a performance artist or a politician? Can she abolish ICE? Is there actually a difference between performance art and politics?



Tania Bruguera, *Estadística*, 1996, woven human hair and cloth laid on cardboard



Kristina Wong

Photo: Tom Fowler



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Women on Waves was created as an art project and received initial funding from a Dutch NGO that supports visual artists. Women on Waves' clinic-inside-a-shipping-container, the *A-Portable*, was designed by artist and sculptor Joep van Lieshout to function simultaneously as an art installation and a mobile medical clinic. It has even been exhibited in art venues in different countries. Ahead of Women on Waves' first voyage, to Ireland, "When the [Dutch] transport ministry threatened to revoke the ship's authorization because of the container on deck, van Lieshout faxed them a certificate decreeing the clinic a functional work of art, titled 'a-portable.' The ship was allowed to sail," Emily Bazelon reported in the *New York Times*.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- How does Rebecca Gomperts bring together health care, art, and activism?
- How has art shaped your understanding of health, rights, and justice?
- How can art contribute to social and political change?
- What do you think of the idea of *arte útil*?

IF YOU LIKED THIS EVENT, YOU MIGHT WANT TO CHECK OUT:

- Women on Waves | womenonwaves.org
- Women on Web | womenonweb.org
- Aid Access | aidaccess.org
- USC Arts in Action | artsinaction.usc.edu
- SisterSong's Artists United for Reproductive Justice sistersong.net/artist-united-for-reproductive-justice
- The Art of Abortion Storytelling at The Center for Cultural Power culturalpower.org/stories/art-abortion-storytelling
- Arte Útil | arte-util.org
- Center for Reproductive Rights | reproductiverights.org
- Upcoming Visions and Voices events:
 - 11/2/23:** [Graphic Medicine: Comics as Tools for Advocacy and Self-Reflection—An Afternoon with Shirlene Obuobi](#)
 - 11/13/23:** [An Evening with Maxine Hong Kingston](#)
 - 1/19/24:** [Nobody Knows: \(Un\)Muted Voices—43rd Annual USC Celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#)
 - 1/25-31/2024:** [Blood Baby](#)
 - 2/28/24:** [waheedworks: Bodies as Site of Faith and Protest](#)
 - 3/21/24:** [About Face: Women, War, and Re-envisioning Troy](#)

VOCABULARY CORNER

reproductive health focuses on health services and access to health care such as care for reproductive tract infections, sexually transmitted disease, sex education, contraception, abortion, family planning, and more

reproductive justice is “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities” (SisterSong)

reproductive rights focuses on legal rights to reproductive health services, including the right to abortion and access to family planning services

As defined by: SisterSong: Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice



11/13/23: An Evening with Maxine Hong Kingston



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VESSEL (2014)

Gomperts is featured in the film *Vessel* (2014), which documents her sailing a ship through loopholes in international law, providing abortions on the high seas, and leaving in her wake a network of emboldened activists who trust women to handle abortion on their own terms. Directed by Diana Whitten, the film premiered at the SXSW Film Festival, winning the Audience Award for Documentary in Competition and a Special Jury Award for Political Courage. It has gone on to screen at over 350 festivals, campuses, and communities worldwide. The link to stream the film is available below.



DISCOVER MORE AT THE USC LIBRARIES

Jennifer Silverman of the USC Libraries selected the following resources to help you learn more about this event. Electronic resources are accessible through the search bar on the USC Libraries homepage at libraries.usc.edu but may require the user to log in using their USC credentials.

ARTICLES

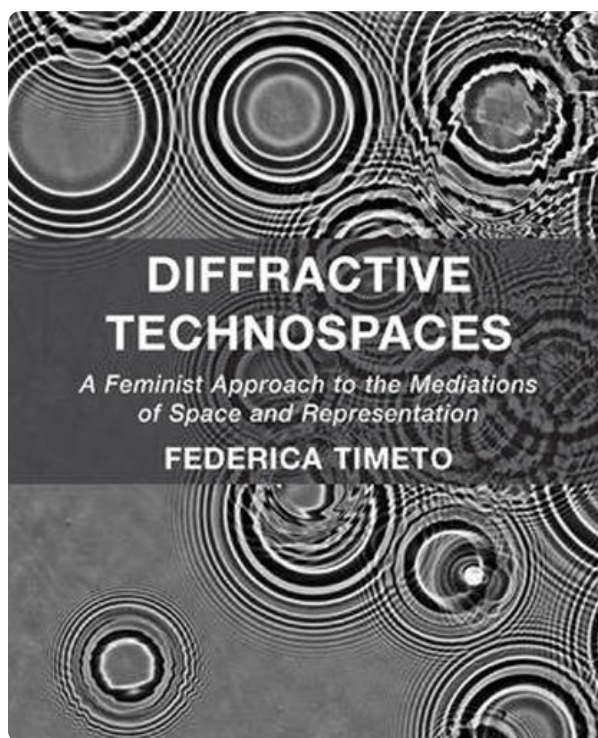
- Alyssa Best, "[Abortion Rights along the Irish-English Border and the Liminality of Women's Experiences](#)," *Dialectical Anthropology* 29 (2005): 423–37.
- Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "[Twelve Miles: Boundaries of the New Art/Activism](#)," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33, no. 2 (2008): 309–27.
- Chris Weinkopf, "[The Abortion Boat](#)," *Human Life Review* 27, no. 1 (2001): 23–30.

BOOKS

- Federica Timeto, "Chapter 4: [Diffracting Technoscience](#)," in [Diffractive Technospaces: A Feminist Approach to the Mediations of Space and Representation](#) (Farnham: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 156–200.
- World Health Organization, [Safe Abortion: Technical and Policy Guidance for Health Systems](#) (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2012).
- World Health Organization, [Clinical Practice Handbook for Safe Abortion](#) (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2014).

STREAMING MEDIA

- [Abortion at Sea](#) (Economist Films, 2017).
- [Vessel](#) (Kino Lorber, 2014).



Abortion at Sea (Economist Films, 2017).