

“Flavia [Rando] and I were both Italian and spoke the language and we would do actions like trying to move women out of Kooky’s Bar (which was mafia-run) into Alternate U., which was where we had dances down the street. Flavia and I would stand out there handing out leaflets about the dances and the mafia goons who sat in the front with guns would come out. I only went to Kooky’s once and I found it so repressive and so horrible. The drinks were so expensive and Kooky would put her finger in your drink and say, ‘It’s warm. You better get another one.’ One night the mafia came to our dance at Alternate U. I saw the guns first. As they began to climb the stairs I took the box that had the money in it, handed it off to Donna Gottschalk, and told her to get it downstairs as fast as she could. This was all while the dance was going on! Everybody was there dancing and drinking beer and having a great time! The guys were holding their guns and asking me where the money was so I told them we didn’t charge anything and that these dances were free. We just stood up to them and finally they left. I really wasn’t a part of that bar scene, even though I was drinking heavily. I never felt that this was the only part of my life. I had a much bigger life! I had a lot of friends, I had a lot of interests, and so meeting gay women was not my only objective in doing things. And I was beginning to show my art and getting involved in the Lower East Side cultural world. There was a publication called *The Rat* on the Lower East Side. It was a radical publication. Martha Shelley and Karla Jay both worked as writers there. Some men worked there too until the women took it over. They needed a paste-up artist and Jane Alpert (who had been one of the editors) had to go underground because she was wanted by the FBI. I knew how to do mechanicals and paste-ups so I went. I was surrounded by a lot of women who were both gay and straight because some of them were from Redstockings and some of them were from the Women’s Movement.

I was one of the first twelve members of the National Organization for Women (NOW). I ended up resigning because of their policies about lesbians not really being women. The straight feminists from NOW and the NY Radical Feminists had this huge action where they were going to take over the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Susan Brownmiller had asked me to design the cover, which I did. The morning of the action I wasn’t there and nobody knew why. The action was on Monday and on Sunday Susan had written an article in the *New York Times* about the rise of feminism and when she got to the part about lesbians she wrote, ‘A lavender herring perhaps, but surely no clear and present danger.’ I was incensed. I didn’t show up on Monday for the action. They had the cover that I had designed and no one called me. I considered Susan Brownmiller a friend. That Friday night we had a dance and I had made a t-shirt that said ‘Lavender Herring.’ Everybody loved it and then we started talking about how awful it was that Susan had written this and how oppressive Betty [Friedan] had been. We knew the Congress to Unite Women was coming up and decided to call ourselves the Lavender Menace. Jessica Falstein and I were the ones who scouted out the school. I had worked on a stage so I knew how to work the lights in the auditorium. The minute Betty got up on stage to welcome everybody to the conference, BOOM, the place went pitch black and Martha Shelley grabbed that microphone. When the lights came back on, the Lavender Menace was standing there. A lot of women left. They were afraid of lesbians, like they were going to catch some kind of flu or something, but a lot of women stayed. That was the beginning of an actual dialogue. It wasn’t until 1978 (eight years later) in Houston that Betty finally relented because we were all there en masse saying how the women’s movement had just thrown us to the wolves. That was how the Lavender Menace started.”

Michela Griffo, 2018