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Judy Chicago: Visions for Feminist Art

Abstract

Controversy, awe, and revelation distinguish Judy Chicago's now 40 year career in the art world. Chicago's large body of work is inseparable from her ideologies pertaining to women's crippling exclusion from male dominated disciplines within art, history, and society overall. Her work is characterized by a desire to establish feminine iconography ("central-core imagery") and create a feminist lexicon applicable to the arts as to validate and celebrate women's experience. Viewing her artwork as a tool for social change and dialogue, Chicago has incorporated collaboration and consciousness-raising into her art making process. Thus, her collaborators gain not only the participation of creating the works, but also share in the cultivation of a female (art) history. In her grand endeavors such as *Womanhouse*, *The Dinner Party*, and the *Birth Project*, Chicago has created an art history of women-- a history which has often been overlooked and erased. This paper demonstrates how Chicago strove to elevate women's "craft" art to the level of fine art, to explore the often silenced conditions of women, and to produce truthful renditions of women's experiences, culture, and heritage.

Keywords

Judy Chicago, feminist art, central-core imagery, The Dinner Party, the Birth Project, art history, women's craft art

Disciplines

American Art and Architecture | Contemporary Art

Introduction

Contemporary artist Judy Chicago is a historical fact checker. She has always been aware that the history of men, also termed world history, has viciously omitted acknowledgements of women's paramount contributions. Beginning in the late 1960s, her inquiry into the margins of history where women's lives remain is a result of her desire to expose the truth of women's shrouded experience, past and present. Women, for the most part, have been written out of history and the canon of art history. Their accomplishments, personalities, heroic stories, creative expressions, and struggles have been rendered irrelevant and secondary compared to the Euro-phallogocentric point of view that history, culture, and society has succumbed to. Through an art practice that is informed by these injustices, Chicago has created works and a paralleling iconography that serve to express women's essence, experience, and aesthetics, as well as the burgeoning goals of Feminism in the 1970s.

As one of America's foremost feminist artists, Chicago has established a women-centered iconography and lexicon applicable to the arts and has helped develop a new environment for women artists to thrive in. She pioneered women-centered art education programs and used the teachings of Feminism and women's history to render women's personal content in art more accessible and to make the process of understanding art more democratic. In this way, Chicago challenged the intellectual elitism of the art world and confronted the male-centered hierarchies which controlled the public's understanding and value-judgment of art. In explaining the importance of a relationship between the artist and a broad audience she stated that, "we [art institutions, humanity] have cut art off from the larger human experience and have rendered it inaccessible to all but a few. I feel strongly about wanting to make a contribution to an expanded

role for art because I feel we've lost contact with why art is important."¹ Chicago is critiquing artists, and institutions, which place value in formal, technical, and impersonal art as opposed to art which is personally and globally authentic. Chicago addressed this cultural injustice by creating art, and institutions, which tended to authentic human experience, specifically, women's experience.

Her work has been shown all over the United States and internationally; she has lectured widely and has written twelve books. She has used her "struggles as a female artist" (a phrase she coined herself) to provide insight and guidance to younger women in the hopes that they can learn to be empowered, realistic and professional and to create personally authentic work. Through examining the context, form, process, and content of Chicago's oeuvre, is clear that it is diverse in its media and seeks to address, and fix, specific injustices suffered by women and therefore humanity. By way of examining her works and relating them to her broader philosophies and development as a feminist artist, it is clear that given the position of women in society during Chicago's early/mid career, her actions as an individual challenging sexism were of an unparalleled, revolutionary magnitude. This paper will outline and reassess these many contributions so as to offer another avenue in which a woman's legacy cannot be overlooked or erased. By way of examining how Chicago developed her style in her early work, her famed *The Dinner Party*, and her participatory art endeavor the *Birth Project* it can be demonstrated that Judy Chicago used a feminist avant-garde art practice to expand the dialogue of art to include women.

¹ Vicki D. Thompson Wylder and Lucy R. Lippard, Judy Chicago: Trials and Tributes (University of Washington Press: June 1999) p. 15.

Early Career

Judy Chicago was born Judy Cohen in 1939 to two hardworking, non-practicing Jewish parents. Her father, a union organizer, cultivated a sense of assured intelligence in his daughter so that she could learn the art of articulating her beliefs and opinions. Her mother, a lover of the arts, encouraged Chicago's interest in art-making and art history. In Chicago's autobiography *Beyond the Flower* (1996) she reflects upon her active pursuit of opportunities for artistic involvement. During the span of her childhood, Chicago continuously took art classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. She recalls wandering through the art museum and marveling at the renowned and innovative works in the collection. She had a sharp eye for underlying structure and was able to engage with the paintings aesthetically. She notes, "As observant as I was, however, the one thing that I totally failed to notice was that nearly all of the art at the museum was by men. But even if I had noticed, I doubt that I would have been at all deterred from my own aspirations [to be an artist]."² The predominating position that male artists hold not only within the museum but also within history would become a point of reference for Chicago later in her career.

She relocated to Southern California and received her B.A. in fine arts and humanities 1962 and MA in painting and sculpture in 1964 at UCLA.³ During this time, she was creating art that was characterized by personally relevant subject matter and an expressive, metaphorical use of bodily forms. Paintings such as *Mother Superette* (fig.1, 1963) and *Bigamy* (fig.2, 1963) display organic forms relevant to her as a woman barely shadowed under the guise of abstraction. When confronted with the negative critique of creating "woman's art" Chicago

² Judy Chicago, *Beyond the Flower: The Autobiography of a Feminist Artist* (Penguin:, 1997) p.2.

³ *Ibid* 5.

withdrew from personal/sexual “feminine” expressions and focused on the industrial sculpture common to L.A.’s local avant-garde Finish Fetish art movement, also known as the “cool school.”⁴ Artists such as Larry Bell, Billy Al Bengston, and Craig Kauffman led this California school that was interested in formalism, minimalism, and works that were devoid of emotional content. They created pieces that possessed an “immaculate finish, which seemed to put it on the same footing as a high-quality manufactured object.”⁵ They used industrial materials such as petrochemical plastics (i.e.; acrylic, vinyl, and polyester) and mechanized techniques (i.e.; spray painting and vacuum-molding) to create a “cool” aesthetic which was devoid of any suggestions of labor or personal content. These artists aspired towards “surface perfection” that only “chemical-physical processes”⁶ could produce. An example of this style is seen in Larry Bell’s *Untitled* (fig.3, 1968) in which he vacuum-coated anodized particles onto heavy sheets of glass and joined them together with polished chrome. The resulting “transparent and translucent” cube encouraged the “free circulation of light” of a highly finished object.⁷ The school was also concerned with manipulating while honoring the “sensuous optical effects made possible by contemporary industrial techniques”⁸—a work that was very much viewed solely as a masculine interest.

Driven to be successful within this predominant style, Chicago enrolled into auto body school to learn how to spray paint, attended boat-building school to learn how to mold fiberglass, and apprenticed as a pyrotechnician to make firework displays. To further remove herself from the negative identification of a *woman* attempting to be an artist, Chicago felt pressured to

⁴ Amelia Jones, *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in the Feminist Art History* (University of California Press: 1996) p. 49.

⁵ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Judy Chicago: An American Vision* (Watson-Guptill, 2000) p. 20.

⁶ Jones 51.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Jones 51.

convince the contemporary male artists working around her that she was serious and therefore unfeminine. In order to be accepted within the “swaggering machismo”⁹ that defined the personalities of her peers, Chicago “began to wear boots and smoke cigars. [She] went to motorcycle races and tried to act ‘tough’ whenever [she] saw them.”¹⁰ Despite all of her efforts, she was continuously told that women couldn’t be artists and the respectable art that she created was given value based on how much it looked as if a man had made it. Chicago’s internalization of these criticisms created an awareness that would influence the future of her career: that her experience as a person, and an artist, was drastically shaped, and could be hindered by the fact that she was a woman.

Wanting to avoid the bodily forms that surfaced in her early work, Chicago focused on issues of color in her sculpture. In 1965 she created *Rainbow Pickett* (fig.4), a highly formal and minimal work that was never attributed any personal relevance, which the artist eventually destroyed. In 1966 to 1967 she made various other sculptures that, now void of color, explored the forms of abstract sculpture itself. Chicago understood that because she had to deny the expression of herself (i.e.; personal/sexual subject matter) in her artwork then she must develop the formal qualities necessary to be contemporaneous. When reflecting on the sizes of her works like *Cubes and Cylinders* (fig.5, 1967) and *10 Part Cylinders* (fig.6, 1966), Chicago notes, “In my studio, I was large and able to manipulate my own circumstances; in the world, I was small and could get lost in values and attitudes that were hostile and foreign to me.”¹¹ It was during this time wherein Chicago concealed her womanliness most and produced works concerned with form that she was critically acclaimed to be a reputable member of the L.A. art scene.

⁹ Lucie-Smith 18.

¹⁰ Ibid 20.

¹¹ Ibid 21.

Art historian and critic Lucy Lippard wrote on the inequitable dichotomy of gender in the art world during the 1960s and 70s in her feminist-art anthology *From the Center* (1976). In this text, Lippard outlines nine key points of discrimination that women in the art world experience. These points include not encouraging or supporting women in art school, degrading women to sex objects, attempting to turn women artist's on each other and therefore isolate them, rating their value only on which male artists they know, turning down women artists based solely on their gender without any consideration for their artistic merit, and treating women as weaker, less skilled, and less intelligent. Lippard suggests that the cause of the discrimination is in considering art to be a man's realm as it is a "primary function, like running a business, or a government, and women are conventionally relegated to the secondary—housekeeping activities—such as writing about, exhibiting, and caring for the art made by men."¹² Lippard points out that when a woman's identity has become completely inauthentic and enveloped into the male art world, she "denigrates and isolates herself and her work by being ashamed of her own sex."¹³

With the recognition that she could no longer disconnect her experience as a woman from the creation of her artwork, Chicago realized that her "real sexual identity had been denied by [her] culture, and this somehow represented the entire sense of denial [she] had been experiencing as a woman artist."¹⁴ She considered that if she could only give symbolic form to her sexual nature, then she could explore the dynamic between this nature and her identity as a woman within the larger framework of society. She would however, have to explore these forms as they pertain to personal subject matter with an air of secrecy so as to not lose "validation from men" by straying too far from the formalist method. In her first autobiography *Through the*

¹² Lucy Lippard, *From the Center* (Plume: 1976) p.31.

¹³ Lippard 33.

¹⁴ Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (Authors Choice 2006) p. 52.

Flower (1975) Chicago explains that she chose to use “three dome shapes, the simplest forms that [she] could think of that had reference to [her] own body, breasts, and fecundity.” With these forms and her technical skills, Chicago would explore “what it was like to be a female and to have a multi-orgasmic sexuality”¹⁵ in all its luminosity, ethereality, and complexity.

In 1968 Chicago created her first set of *Domes* (fig. 7). The three domes were laid in a triangular format and were made of mound-shaped transparent acrylic that contained interior layers sprayed with shifting tones of acrylic lacquer. Incorporating her training related to the Finish Fetish movement, Chicago utilized difficult techniques learned in auto body school in order to exemplify that the technical risk present in the construction of the pieces mirrored the “sense of risk [she] felt in the subject matter.”¹⁶ In an interview with Lippard, Chicago discussed how emotionally invested she was into the subject matter and process. She explained that the solvent for the paint was the same for the plastic surface so a mistake could not be reversed and the whole piece would be lost. Being lost had great personal resonance. She was aware of the fragility of her status as a female artist and how easily it was to be lost in art that was not authentically hers or to be lost in a world that viewed women’s accomplishments as only secondary to men’s.

Even though the *Domes*’ forms were relatively neutralized and the subject matter veiled, a female artist visiting Chicago’s studio reproached the piece and referred to the forms as similar to those seen in the Venus of Willendorf. This artist suggested that the *Domes*’ bulbous forms were reminiscent of the “swollen breast or belly form”¹⁷ of female-fertility artifacts. This reading, against the backdrop of Chicago’s bodily identification with the forms, would be correct. Being exposed however, as creating “woman forms” devastated her. She realized that

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lippard 216.

¹⁷ Ibid.

she could not deny or conceal herself in her artwork any longer so as to be accepted within a male-dominated art world. She decided to return to painting in order to expand upon the feminine dome forms.

On a two-dimensional surface, Chicago went back to redefine and reshape the spherical, expanding mounds found in her *Domes*. She kept the circular model yet she drew and sprayed shapes that were now open or closed in the center. She “developed color systems which made forms turn, dissolve, open, close, vibrate, gesture, wiggle,” reflecting “emotional and body sensations translated into form and color.”¹⁸ Chicago created a symbol that reflects the deliberate organization around a central point. She believed that this inner highlight seen not only in her *Pasadena Lifesavers* (fig. 8, 1968-70), but also in herself, is a cunt, a central core, a vulvic motif—and it is precisely that which had been shaping her experience. Vaginal iconography would become the trademark of Chicago’s art practice and what many would associate her with. Her interest in expanding on its physical form as well as its attached meanings derived out of her desire to create a language in art relevant to women and the feminist movement.

Feminism and Feminist Art

The onset of Chicago’s cultivation of an “active vaginal form”¹⁹ and her liberation into creating work rooted in her experience as a woman correlated with the rise of the political activism in the U.S. Starting in the 1950s and early 1960s, roots were laid for the civil rights, women, and anti-war student liberation movements. In 1953 Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (originally published in France, 1949) coined the phrase “women’s liberation” that would then go on to serve as the main objective for the feminist stance on equality.²⁰ In 1956, a year after Rosa Parks refused to sit at the back of the bus; Martin Luther King became the leader of

¹⁸ Lippard 216.

¹⁹ Wylder 22.

²⁰ Jones 236.

the civil rights movement wherein people of color also demanded the restructuring of the U.S.'s discriminatory society.²¹ In 1962, two years after Students for a Democratic Society was established to support draft-resistance and protest the atrocities occurring in Vietnam, the students issued a manifesto which called for a “participatory democracy to overcome a sense of powerlessness in society.”²² In response to these male-dominated student movements, women’s liberation groups began to develop in 1968, and “by 1971 more than one hundred women’s movement journals, newsletters, and newspapers”²³ circulated around the country.

Feminism is understood as a series of movements dedicated to the progression of the status, and quality of life, for women. The first wave of feminism (19th and early 20th c.) was primarily concerned with women’s suffrage, civil equality, and laying the groundwork for future generations of women’s activism. The second wave of feminism beginning in the 1960s aimed to raise the consciousness of society, specifically of women, to promote the theory that women’s lives were unavoidably shaped by a long withstanding institutionalized, patriarchal discrimination. The slogan for this wave of feminism was “the personal is political” which again suggested that status of women in society was the result of sexist power structures. Various ads from the burgeoning 1950’s consumerist society exemplify the staunch sexism that deemed women inferior (physically, emotionally, and intellectually), objectified their bodies, and solely designated them to domestic labors such as birthing, child-rearing, cleaning, and cooking.

To aid in the fight for women’s liberation in the face of gendered oppression, radical feminist theory was informed by various texts, for example, *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970). It is an anthology of essays written by pioneering feminist activists such as Kate Millet, Naomi Weisstein, and Flo Kennedy that was edited by Robin Morgan, a feminist poet and founding

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid 237.

²³ Ibid.

mother New York Radical Women and W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell). One notable inclusion in this is text is Valerie Solanas' *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* (1967) which calls upon women to "overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex."²⁴ Written in an exaggerated, satirical yet vehemently passionate manner, this text lists a number of grievances that women hold against men including war, prostitution, and "great art." The acronym S.C.U.M. has been attributed the meaning of "Society for Cutting Up Men." The author originally used the word scum however, to describe "dominant, secure, self-confident, nasty, violent, selfish, independent, proud, thrill-seeking, free-wheeling, arrogant females, who consider themselves fit to rule the universe."²⁵ Although Chicago thought Solanas was extreme and was not interested in such a forcefully political approach, she realized that she could supplement these major efforts for women's liberation and equality through radical feminist art. In the years following, Chicago's radical ideologies on changing the art world dynamic translated into an avant-garde approach to creating shocking and innovative art. In Chicago's practice specifically, the avant-garde or, desire to challenge the status quo, is cued by her untraditional methods of art collaboration and use of women's craft, her highly provocative use of vaginal imagery, and her desire to expand the dialogue of art to make it more accessible to viewers.

In 1968, Chicago educated herself on the demands, concerns, and aspirations that the radical feminists were putting forward and was relieved to discover that she wasn't as alone as she had assumed—other women had experienced sexism and they too wanted to assertively confront and change it. In the fall of 1970 Chicago held her first solo exhibition at the California State University Fullerton gallery and it was there that, for the first time, her work was framed

²⁴ WomynKind.org, *Scum Manifesto* (1970, < <http://www.womynkind.org/scum.htm>>).

²⁵ Ibid.

within a feminist context. Included in the exhibition were various *Domes* and *Pasadena Lifesavers* pieces as well as photo documentations of her *Atmospheres* (fig. 9). *Atmospheres* were outdoor smoke demonstrations that combined her background in pyrotechnics, interest in colors, and desire to soften and feminize the environment. The greatest legacy left behind of this exhibition however, is the public announcement of Judy Gerowitz's legal name change to Judy Chicago (fig. 10), a surname that she chose because of her characteristic, thick accent. Chicago did this not only as an act of defiance to the "male social dominance" of surnames but also as an affirmation that she was now an independent woman with power over her own identity. Nevertheless critics overlooked this defiant act of protest as well as the feminine content of the work and solely noted the formal aspects. Chicago translated this misreading as a lack of a "frame of reference in art...to understand a woman's struggle."²⁶ She decided that "if the art community as it existed could not provide me with what I needed in order to realize myself, then I would have to commit myself to developing an alternative."²⁷ Coinciding with the CSU Fullerton show, Chicago had another show at the Jack Glenn gallery in Corona del Mar. To advertise for this exhibition, Chicago posed in a boxing ring to parody the staunch masculinity of the L.A. art scene and her "stepping up" to challenge it (fig. 11). Years later she reflected how this ad marked a moment when woman all over the country declared that they had had enough and that they were ready to fight and change art world.

Chicago's "fight" to develop a women-centered alternative art scene came underway in fall 1970 when she accepted a full-time teaching position at California State University Fresno to instruct an all women's art class. Chicago established what was then to become the first Feminist Art Program in the nation (1970-71). She saw a desperate need for a college art system that could

²⁶ Jones 54.

²⁷ Jones 54.

train professional female artists and an instructor who could help them unearth subject matter pertinent to them in order to create feminist art. Feminist art, according to Chicago, is defined as “art that is authentic to one’s lived experience.”²⁸ It was here that she hoped to turn her “struggles as a female artist” into insight for the aspiring artists who wanted to be taken seriously and create authentic work. She also found it crucial for the students to educate themselves on the role of women in art history because it was “important to establish an historical context for the art the students were making, art with female subject matter.”²⁹

Chicago used many innovative and feminist-influenced methods of teaching in the program. Aside from students sharing the responsibility of preparing for and conducting class sessions, a primary teaching method exercised in the art program as well as with feminists throughout the nation was consciousness-raising. Consciousness-raising (CR) is a form of group dialogue in which participants share their personal experiences in order to understand how those experiences relate to others and to systematic forms of power and oppression. For the art program itself, conversations were guided towards scrutinizing the consequences of the stereotypical “female role” and embracing the validity of one’s “‘female experience’ as artistic content.”³⁰ Faith Wilding, teaching assistant and program participant, later reflected that through this practice the students found that they were each experiencing “a common oppression based on [their] gender, which was defining [their] roles and identities as women.”³¹ They placed their experiences within a larger social perspective and witnessed that the 1970s feminist slogan was actually quite salient and that *the personal is political*. Chicago wanted to further address the topics arising and thus based class assignments on information gathered during the CR sessions.

²⁸ Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, The Power of Feminist Art (Harry N. Abrams, Inc.: New York 1994) p.67.

²⁹ Ibid 66.

³⁰ Jones 56.

³¹ Ibid.

One topic that surfaced was the desire to establish positive means of representing their sexuality. They were therefore encouraged to create images of “cunts—defiantly recuperating a term that traditionally had been used derogatorily and thereby opposing the phallic imagery developed by men.”³² Classics historian Eva Keuls examined the Athenian roots of the phallic symbol and phallocracy. She defines phallocracy as literally “the power of the phallus”³³ and explains that the phallus is a renowned symbol extracted from the language of domination established of men’s continual, absolute power and control. Representing, both physically and metaphorically an erect penis, the phallic symbol can be easily identified and understood in relation to its antithesis, the vagina. If the phallus is associated, as it has been throughout history and art, with autonomy, severity, and hegemony then the vagina, its negatively qualified counterpart must then embody dependence, subservience, and submission. Therefore feminists dealt with was how this “reign of the phallus” had moved out of the realm of imagery and translated into tangible forms of gendered oppression throughout history.

In the 1970s this oppression in the art world was faced with a multitude of inquisitive, zealous women who decided that it was time to address and distress the sexist status-quo. Art historian Linda Nochlin pioneered the first undergraduate art history course that focused solely on women’s studies. The seminar, entitled “The Image of Women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries,” was taught at Vassar College, her alma mater, in the spring of 1970.³⁴ It was Nochlin’s hope to draw attention to the accomplishments of women artists who seemed to have been frequently overlooked in the historical art canon. The widely accepted canon of that time was outlined in H.W. Janson’s *The History of Art* (first published in 1962). As it was the most popular text used in college art history courses, this text was paramount in the education of

³² Ibid.

³³ Eva Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus* (Harper & Row: New York 1985) p.2.

³⁴ Vassar.edu (<<http://innovators.vassar.edu/innovator.html?id=48>>)

art history and the framing of it as solely a male dominated realm. In 1979, Eleanor Dickinson published an essay in *Woman Artists News* titled “Sexist Texts Boycotted” wherein she criticized Janson’s Euro-phallogocentric approach to the cataloguing of art history. She wrote that “of some 3000 artworks presented in the tome, not one is attributed to women.”³⁵ When justifying as to why he chose to exclude women from the text, he contended that he “had not been able to find a woman artist who clearly belongs in a one-volume history of art.” He also noted that he had yet to be exposed to the work of a woman artist whose work is “representative of achievements of the imagination” and had “changed the history of art.”³⁶

In 1971, Nochlin published a ground-breaking essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” that assessed how the current inferior status of women in the art world, and their exclusion from the canon, had developed. Published originally in *Art News*, she offered socio-historical evidence which affirmed her thesis that “patriarchal art institutions have worked to exclude women artists and that women’s artwork has been undervalued.”³⁷ This, she claimed, is the reason why women could truly not reach the levels of opportunity or success that their male counterparts could. Nochlin confronted the recurrent association between claiming that the disposition of a male artist is *Genius* and regarding his art as *Great*. Beginning with Italian historian Giorgio Vasari and tracing artists through the nineteenth century and into Modernism, she examines how the male artists who now make up the art history canon have been bequeathed with a “semi-religious conception of their artist’s role.”³⁸ Viewing the only worthy art as a result of genius, routinely attributed to the “white Western male,”³⁹ deems art (history and production)

³⁵ John C. McEntore and Deborah F. Pokinski, Critical Perspectives on Art History (Upper Saddle River: New Jersey, 2002) p.150.

³⁶ McEnroe 150.

³⁷ Jones 239.

³⁸ Linda Nochlin, Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays (Harper & Row: 1988) p.155.

³⁹ Ibid 146.

inaccessible, elitist and therefore innately discriminatory. Shortly thereafter, in the 1974 *Art Journal* in an article about the importance of women's studies in art and art history, art historian Barbara Ehrlich White further supported Nochlin's thesis by outlining points which summarized why there were fewer successful women artists and why "being a woman contradicted being a serious artist."⁴⁰ Again due to patriarchal cultures and religions, obedient women were expected to perform domestic tasks and care for the family, while other efforts for individuality and liberation were obstructed. Overtime the narrow path that was laid out for women resulted in a "cultural brainwashing"⁴¹ which conditioned women not to be innovative, ambitious, ego-strong, assertive, and aggressive—these of course being the primary qualities of a successful artist.⁴²

Having personally experienced discrimination in their careers as artists and still attaining the traits necessary to be successful, women around the country initiated numerous activist/separatist art collectives, ad hoc groups, and publications to first, offer a community of support for each other and second, make women's art more accessible and valid. Early notable groups included the Women Artists in Revolution (1969), the Ad Hoc Women Artists' Committee (1970), and the L.A. Council of Women Artists (1970). These groups understood that if women were not accepted on a leveled playing field within the male-dominated institution of art, then they would have to create their own institutions so as to place their work in a scholarly discourse and assign it value. Chicago found this system of separatism to be a beneficial aspect when it came to teaching at the Feminist Art Program. Not only could separatism offer women a tailored education that would meet their personal, developmental needs but the women felt more authentic, intelligent, and courageous when in an environment surrounded by women, not men. It

⁴⁰ Barbara Ehrlich White, A 1974 Perspective: Why Women's Studies in Art and Art History (Art Journal: 1976) p.342.

⁴¹ White 343.

⁴² Ibid.

was the success of separatism that Chicago had witnessed within the Fresno program that encouraged her to relocate it to CalArts in the fall of 1971 where she would collaboratively instruct with artist Miriam Schapiro.

During the CalArts program, Chicago and Schapiro published an essay titled “Female Imagery” in *Womanspace Journal* which was a short-lived publication of the Womanspace Gallery that Chicago had helped establish. In this essay, Chicago and Schapiro introduced the notion of “central-core imagery” in order to name, and make known, the symbology of the vagina that Chicago had been developing. To elaborate on this imagery they drew historical references to past female artists who they believed formatted some works around a centralized point. Examples included Georgia O’Keeffe’s (American, 1887-1986) *Black Iris* (fig. 12, 1969), Lee Bontecou’s (English, 1903-1975) *Untitled* (fig. 13, 1961), and Barbara Hepworth’s (American, b.1931) *Nesting Stones* (fig. 14, 1937). Chicago and Schapiro claimed that these vulvic-forms were representative of the artists’ “sexual experiences as women.”⁴³ Interestingly, Georgia O’Keeffe had always been adamantly opposed to “feminine” readings of her work. Like Chicago, she too wanted to be taken seriously as an artist within a male-dominated art world. She found that if she were to be associated with feminine art she would be branded as a woman artist and therefore not respected as a serious artist. Seriousness, within the field of art successes is quantified by creating work is “seen, critiqued, discussed, collected, and would have to find a meaningful and lasting place in the historical record.”⁴⁴

O’Keeffe has remained renowned and respected in the art world but she has never been able to escape feminine readings of her flower paintings. In *Black Iris* the sinuous, layered petals form a delicately contoured swelling flower of monumental size. The lush surfaces comprise two

⁴³ Lippard 277.

⁴⁴ Wylder 9.

focal triangular shapes which are reminiscent of labia minora that direct attention to the deep, central void—the vaginal entrance.

Chicago's wanted the vulvic shape to “displace traditional masculinist aesthetic strategies”⁴⁵ so that the vagina, and women's bodies (and by extension, their lives), could be the subject, not the object and active, not passive in art. With “central-core imagery,” Chicago laid the groundwork for a feminist visual language that correlated with the new vocabulary born of the Women's Liberation movement. Aside from an entire history of oppression, feminists dealt with the more salient repercussions of the harsh repression of women's sexuality in the 1950s and 1960s. Feminist scholars Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard maintain that:

Heterosexual women were not encouraged to experience their bodies directly, but only as they were perceived and used by men and children. Young women were taught to value their bodies as a trophy to give or withhold in response to male desire, and, after marriage, as the vehicle for wifely duty. Female sexual pleasure was framed and mediated by constructs of “good girl vs. bad girl,” chastity vs. shame. Given the centuries of indoctrination of women in the determinism of their biological identity, it is not surprising that in the early 70s feminist artists should have taken their first rebellious step by challenging the most repressive category—the sexual.⁴⁶

The vagina, the center of a woman's sexuality, therefore became the metaphorical battleground for women's independence and freedom. In response to this position, Chicago created a lithograph that bluntly addressed her desire to reinstate power into the image of the vagina and to oust traditional, demeaning representations of femininity. *Red Flag* (fig. 15, 1971) is a photograph of the artist's pelvic area that shows her pulling a bloody tampon out of herself. The stark white background and the pastel pink coloring of the artist's flesh frame the highlighted bloody red tampon whose visual strength and boldness maintains itself even in the presence of a distorted, enlarged hand. Art history's beloved *pudica*, and its associations with being “chaste,

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Broude and Garrard 24.

virtuous, fertile and sexually docile,”⁴⁷ has been replaced with a shocking image of a shadowy presence from which life and blood emerge. Chicago has provided viewers with an image of the feminist cunt in the 1970s, “no longer colonized or dominated and not represented on compromising terms.”⁴⁸ She chose the topic of menstruation because she wanted to demonstrate the reality of women’s lives and challenge widespread preconceptions on women’s “dirty and shameful”⁴⁹ biological processes. Historically, a woman’s menstruation has been a contested topic. According to historian Rudolph Bell, one reason why men feared menstrual blood can be traced back to Judeo-Christian belief that it contained sinful, “magical powers.”⁵⁰ To elaborate on some of the historically harsh ideas about women’s menstruation, Bell presented a quote from Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) in which his holiness avowed that, “It [menstrual blood] is said to be so detestable and impure, that, from contact therewith, fruits and grains are blighted, bushes dry up, grasses die, trees lose their fruits, and if dogs chance to eat of it they go mad.”⁵¹

Chicago again addressed the crudeness of menstruation in her installation piece, *Menstruation Bathroom* (fig. 16, 1972), this time examining the cultural obsession with vaginal sanitation products and how they swarm a woman’s life. Set in an actual bathroom, she filled a trashcan with what we meant to be seen as used pads that had been painted red. Sprawled out over the floor were “bloodied” tampons and numerous boxes of sanitation products were shelved. This *Bathroom* was one part of an entire house, *Womanhouse* (1972), which was a product of CalArts Feminist Art Program’s investigation, and criticism, of a woman’s predetermined role in the domestic setting. In the spring semester of the program’s first year at CalArts Chicago, Schapiro, and twenty-one female students collaborated to create

⁴⁷ Allyson Mitchell, *When Women Rule the World* (ABC Art Books: Canada, 2009) p. 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Rudolph Bell, *How to Do It* (The University of Chicago Press: 1999) p.66.

⁵¹ Ibid.

Womanhouse—“an avant-garde site installation (fig. 17).”⁵² Students were encouraged to “accept their own life experience and preoccupations—no matter how ‘trivial’ they had been conditioned to think they were—as worthy subjects for their art.”⁵³ Affected by the stereotypical association with the home and interested in exploring this affiliation within the domain itself, the women leased an abandoned, seventeen-room house in downtown Los Angeles. After the house had been prepared after a month of arduous 8-hour maintenance days, students each selected a room and its correlating theme and began to construct an installation. Moving away from male-owned conventional art practices such as painting and sculpture, the women in the program were required to use the objects of a woman’s life as their artistic media. *Nurturant Kitchen* (fig.18) and *Shoe Closet* (fig. 19) both take realms commonly identified with women and recreate them into surreal scenes and abnormal obsessions depicting the damaging results of female stereotypes. Rooms like *The Dining Room* (fig. 20) and the *Crocheted Environment* (fig. 21) reference domestic chores (i.e.; preparing dinner and needlework) and allude to Chicago’s later use of “women’s work” as a component of *The Dinner Party* and the *Birth Project*.

Womanhouse opened to the public from January 30 to February 28, 1972 and over ten thousand people were exposed to the “deconstruction of the myth of the white, middle-class housewife as a satisfied, fulfilled, domestic goddess.”⁵⁴ During the exhibition, *Womanhouse* participants also performed for (female) viewers cathartic, therapeutic and partly didactic plays that further attended to various experiences of women. Two specific performances, the *Birth Trilogy* and the *Cock and Cunt* play, also foreshadowed themes that Chicago grappled with later in her career. *The Birth Trilogy* (fig. 22) was a “ritual of rebirth and new identity symbolizing the

⁵² Broude & Garrard 32.

⁵³ Paula Harper, *The First Feminist Art Program: A View from the 1980s* (Signs: 1985) p. 765.

⁵⁴ Temma Balducci, *Revisiting Womanhouse* (Women’s Art Journal: 2006) p. 17.

community of women who attend their own and one another's birth."⁵⁵ Comparable to Chicago's "rebirth" when she changed her last name and declared her identity as a feminist, this play, and later *The Birth Project*, demonstrated how giving birth, solely a woman's experience, serves as a metaphor for the deep transformation a woman's life can undergo. The *Cock and Cunt* play (fig. 23), a performance meant to mock and make humorous the biological attributes of social roles, takes place between a man (the "cock") and his wife (the "cunt"). With enlarged, stylized genitalia awkwardly attached to their pubic area, the man explains to his wife that because her cunt is round like a dish, it is biologically appropriate for her to wash the dishes and because of his phallus it is biologically appropriate for him to shoot guns and missiles. The cunt/dish motif and the dichotomy between how biology and culture can establish gender will be one of the many topics addressed in *The Dinner Party*.

It is important to examine Chicago's and her students' intentional use of the vulgar term cunt. Cunt is a highly tabooed word that derogatorily refers to female genitalia. It has been used as a heavily offensive epithet for both men and women to degrade and detest. Certain feminists of the 1970s sought to completely eradicate the use of offensive derisions directed towards women (i.e.; bitch, cunt). Catherine Mackinnon and Andrea Dworkin both argued that the popular use of such weighty terms dehumanizes women and objectifies their body. Chicago however, sought to reframe the word cunt in its innate harshness (and its reference to women) as a celebratory phenomenon, owned by women as a symbol for independence. In the 1971 documentary *Judy Chicago and the California Girls* (referring to her students in the Feminist Art Program), she articulated how reclaiming cunt would benefit women:

What is cunt? We have definitions of ourselves by men. Cunt is passive, cunt is receptacle, and cunt is vessel, cunt is giver of all rewards and blessings-mother, cunt is evil and demonic — will swallow you up. Those are all fantasy projections but what we have to do is seize

⁵⁵ Broude & Garrard 61.

our own cunt, grab it firmly in our hands and proceed to announce what it is. Announce that it's real, it's alive, aggressive, outgoing, it looks like this, it needs this, it has this kind of dimension and what does that mean? It means to take control over our own identity as women and our cunts are symbolic of our identity as women. When people put people down by calling then cunt it means that it is an image of contempt. That is what a cunt is. We have to get a hold of our own image. That's why I changed my name because I took hold of my own identity, henceforth I shall determine who I am, I reject the definition that society has given me because the definitions that society has given me are non-operable, they are incorrect, they are crippling, they are dehumanizing, so I take hold of my identity, I take hold of my cunt. Henceforth I shall say what cunt is, I shall build cunt myself.⁵⁶

Karen LeCocq's *Feather Cunt* (fig. 24, 1971) and Marlene McCarty's *Untitled (CUNT)* (fig. 25, 1990) display how younger female artists were influenced by the permission to use "cunt" on their own terms. LeCocq, a student of Chicago's, created *Feather Cunt* which combines plush deep red velvet and pink feathers to create a frilly, delicate "anatomically-detailed"⁵⁷ vaginal mound. She wanted to take "something that society had labeled in bad slang and turn it into something wonderful, beautiful and celebrated."⁵⁸ Years later McCarthy took the cunt imagery of the 1970s and reestablished its presence in a straightforward manner; instead of creating another visual, symbol she spells out the word to confront viewers with their own internal images of and ideas about cunt.

After Chicago left the Feminist Art Program at the end of spring 1972 she returned to her studio to continue to develop the vulvic motif. She wanted to continue to address the lack of a "frame of reference in 1970 to understand a woman's struggle, to value it, or to read and respond to its imagery" because the art community was still resiliently constructed on the basis of the "interests and needs of men."⁵⁹ With her two Feminist Art Programs, and her founding of the Feminist Studio Workshop and Womanspace Gallery, Chicago strove to establish an alternative

⁵⁶ Judy Chicago and the California Girls. DVD. Judith Dancoff, 1971.

⁵⁷ Laura Meyer, Power and Pleasure: Feminist Art Practice and Theory in the United States and Britain (Blackwell Publishing Ltd.: 2006) p.322.

⁵⁸ Donald Munro, A Special Gathering at Fresno State (FresnoBeehive <fresnobeehive.com/2009/09.html>)

⁵⁹ Chicago Through the Flower p.69.

art community “relevant to [her] and other female artists.”⁶⁰ Yet on a personal level, her art had not yet reached its fullest, activist/feminist potential.

The following year she created a great deal of work that expanded her interests in a collective female experience, woman-centered iconography, a bodily identification with art, and the erasure of women in history. Two of these works include the *Through the Flower* series and *Transformation Painting: Great Ladies Transforming Themselves into Butterflies*. In the *Through the Flower* (fig.26) series Chicago initially used the flower “as a symbol of femininity”⁶¹ and allowed the interior void to allude to an “undefined space, the space beyond the confines of our femininity.”⁶² This enigmatic, interior core refers to the raw, unrefined presence of such women-centered imagery in art and society and to the enlightenment that may occur when one passes through to the other side. The works in this series display a clear fusion of Chicago’s Modernist roots established by minimalism, formalism, and finish fetish, and a novel feminized aesthetic (feminine referring here to the flower, softness, organic forms, layering, central core, space, and color choice). With the *Transformation Painting: Great Ladies Transforming Themselves into Butterflies* (fig.27) Chicago again used a centralized composition and visually translated “available historical information on women using form, color and text to express her understanding of each woman’s identity and personality.”⁶³ She used the lepidopteron (butterfly) form to symbolize the metamorphosis and liberation granted to these women through her contemporary remembrance and honoring of them. The historical women, or *Great Ladies*, in these particular pieces Mme de Stael (1766-1817), George Sand (1804-76), and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), were the subjects of an earlier work titled *Reincarnation Triptych*

⁶⁰ Ibid 66.

⁶¹ Lucie-Smith 46.

⁶² Lucie-Smith 46.

⁶³ Wylder 54.

(fig. 28, 1973). Using specific colors to create pulsating, effervescent waves emerging from a delicate, interior void, Chicago created central-core images in homage to the women. Her statement that accompanies the pieces further explains that:

The Great Ladies—begun in the Fall of 1972, completed in the Summer or 1973—represent themselves, aspects of myself, and various ways in which women have accommodated themselves to the constraints of their circumstances. Some years ago I began to read women’s literature, study women’s art, and examine the lives of women who lived before me. I wanted to find role models, to discover how my predecessors had dealt with their oppression as women. I was also searching for clues in their world—clues that could aid me in my art. I wanted to speak out of my femaleness, to make art out of the very thing that made me the ‘other’ in male society.⁶⁴

The inclusion of text demonstrates another developing objective of Chicago’s work. To deter the viewer from restrictive formalist readings she wanted to emphasize that her works had a particular subject matter. Although the images themselves are abstracted, knowing the artist’s intention of a work can trump misinformed readings force the viewer to “see the images within a specific context and with a specific content.”⁶⁵ This was an early attempt of Chicago’s to create clear, accessible images that depict a visual feminist lexicon.

Up until this point Chicago’s primary media had been acrylic spraying and Prismacolor pencils. The subtle blending and gradation of colors easily translated over to china painting in a more precise manner. Between 1972 and 1974 Chicago experimented with ceramic arts and was curious as to why this art form was regarded as simply a woman’s hobby. In a studio class she had taken, students were not encouraged to paint content relevant to their lives; they were instead taught to paint particular (domestic) subjects in a standard, non-creative way. It was also around this time that Chicago was exposed to ecclesiastical embroidery and immediately recognized the aesthetic value and potential of needlework. Although the work she saw, continually done by the women, was superb, she was saddened that they received no credit for their work and were

⁶⁴ Lucie-Smith 48.

⁶⁵ Wylder 54.

wasting their talents on a “religious system that was essentially oppressive to the female sex.”⁶⁶

Familiarity with the role of domestic craft in a woman’s life and its relationship with how “high” and “low” art becomes defined, are issues addressed in *The Dinner Party* and the *Birth Project*.

The Dinner Party

Equipped with a new appreciation for women’s craft and history, and an assortment of feminine symbols including mounds, circles, butterflies, vulvas, pulsating contours, flower, fans, and a highlighted central core, Chicago set out to work on a new piece. With this next project her goal was to create something that would impact and engage the viewer in the same manner that the performances at *Womanhouse* had. She wanted to make use of, however, the artistic skills that she had worked so diligently to hone. Her initial idea was to create 25 plates entitled *Twenty-Five Women Who Were Eaten Alive* to serve as a metaphor for society’s brutal consumption (use, abuse, and erasure) of women throughout history. Combining her exploration of the domestic in *Womanhouse*, potential of handicraft, feminist iconography, and a fascination for women’s ancestry, she decided that since men had their *Last Supper*, women would therefore host a *Dinner Party*. Chicago used the scene of a dinner party because of its associations with the cooking, cleaning, and setting up that historically women have been responsible for.

The Dinner Party (fig. 29, 1974-79) is a huge, multi-media installation meant to reflect the monumental contributions of women to history, culture, and politics. It has become the most “celebrated and notorious”⁶⁷ iconic work of the 1970s feminist art movement. It consists of an equilateral triangular table which is representative of perfect harmony in equality and is also an “ancient symbol for female sexuality and power.”⁶⁸ Each side is 48 feet long and has thirty-nine personal place settings dedicated to each of the distinguished, pioneering historical women who

⁶⁶ Lucie-Smith 55.

⁶⁷ Lucie-smith 59.

⁶⁸ Sylvan Barnet, *A Short Guide to Writing About Art* (Pearson: 2011) p.231.

were “invited” to the *Party*. Set atop a white porcelain *Heritage Floor* (fig. 30) inscribed with the names of 999 other historically significant women and goddesses; each place setting consists of a table runner done in the traditional needlework style of each woman’s culture and a 14” sculpted dinner plate decorated with personalized central-core imagery. As for the overall content of the piece, Chicago noted in her documentation of the work that:

There is a strong narrative aspect to the piece that grew out of the history uncovered in our research and underlying the entire conception of *The Dinner Party*. This historical narrative is divided into three parts, corresponding to the three wings of the table. The first table begins with pre-history and ends with the point in time when global history was diminishing. The second wing stretches from the beginning of Christianity to the Reformation, and the third table includes the 17th to the 20th centuries. Beginning with prepatriarchal society, *The Dinner Party* demonstrates the development of goddess worship, which represents a time when women had social and political control (clearly reflected in the goddess imagery common to the early stages of almost every society in the world). The piece then suggests the gradual destruction of women by men, tracing the institutionalizing of that repression and women’s response to it.⁶⁹

The Primordial Goddess is the first plate in the whole series (fig. 31), and it represents the “original female being, in ancient religious, from whom all life emerged—the Earth Mother.”⁷⁰

The earth-colored voluptuous, overlapping forms that make up the plate’s imagery are reminiscent of a cave’s entrance and the reddish glow deep within suggests the earth’s pulsating, fiery core. The table runner consists of the skins of two calves and is embellished with cowry shells drawing on the connection of the early people and their link to flora and fauna. The illuminated first letter of her name references designs found in Paleolithic cave paintings. Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122-1204) is in the second wing and was a “medieval queen of France and then of England who was imprisoned by her husband Henry II for sixteen years.”⁷¹ Her place setting (fig. 32) reflects her royalty through the inclusion of fleur-de-lys on her plate and for the first letter of her name:

⁶⁹ Lucie-Smith 62.

⁷⁰ Acoustiguide Inc., *The Dinner Party by Judy Chicago* (Brooklyn Museum)

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

The fleur-de-lys was not only the emblem of the French monarchy; it was the emblem of the Virgin Mary as queen of heaven. The cult of the Virgin reached a high point at this period and found a secular counterpart in the Courts of Love, which Eleanor of Aquitaine initiated, in which man—poets above all—were encouraged to place women on a pedestal.⁷²

Eleanor's captivity by her husband is referenced through the use of a "millefleurs unicorn"⁷³ scene, originally depicted in a tapestry circa 1500, which illustrates a unicorn enclosed within a constricting picket fence—in this setting the plate is representative of the unicorn that serves as a metaphor for Eleanor. Emily Dickinson (1830-86) is in the third wing of *The Dinner Party* and who is a "Victorian-era American lyric poet whose early feminist voice and unconventional style went largely unrecognized until thousands of her poems were discovered and published after her death."⁷⁴ The lacework design for the plate (fig. 33) employs the traditional china-painting practice of lace draping to express that even though Dickinson was strong woman, she was "smothered by Victorian ideals."⁷⁵ The table runner and the embellishment of the first initial were done in the technique of a traditional 19th century ribbon work wherein ribbons are "folded and embroidered to make tiny flowers."⁷⁶

Chicago intended the imagery on the plates and runners to be readable and accessible to a wide variety of viewers, all of whom were new to the rise of radical feminist art. This proved to be a difficult task as she had also wanted to maintain an air of fine/high art quality in the completed piece. Although straightforward in her intention of the work's purpose, her use of vaginal imagery and domestic craft, its massive size and inventive design, *The Dinner Party* signals an avant-garde practice, that conceptually, risks being misunderstood or difficult to access. What Chicago was attempting to figure out was how to challenge the male-dominated

⁷² Lucie-Smith 74.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Acoustiguide.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Lucie-Smith 74.

conception of valuable art from within the museum itself. She had to dually create art that could be institutionally received yet publically comprehensible.

Accessibility in art, or “democratic art,” collaboration and documentation create the triad of egalitarian feminist art production. Creating art through an alternative process, like those sought out in the feminist art movement, sought to challenge and counter “exclusionary and elitist systems of value—which have conventionally worked to exclude the work of women artists.”⁷⁷ Chicago had initially worked in isolation for the first year of her preparation for *The Dinner Party* but as the project grew more ambitious, she required a team for assistance. The core group consisted of about twenty people or so who oversaw all areas of craftsmanship and research, helped with administrative tasks, exhibition plans, documented the project, and publicized it in order to recruit volunteers and raise funds. Volunteers, 400 in total and mostly women with considerable technical skill, were from all walks of life. They carried out long hours of arduous work and technical and financial hardships, but were content with the opportunity to use their “craft for the creation of most ambitious feminist creation.”⁷⁸ *The Dinner Party* is the result of the collaboration of hardworking contributors and is a true testament to women’s achievement rooted in a collective experience—including the shared history being demonstrated.

Wholly aware of the common practice of erasing women past and trying to confront this with the monumental memorial *The Dinner Party*, Chicago wanted to ensure that the history of the *The Dinner Party* was not erased or overlooked as well. This is addressed through the sound documentation of the history, objectives, worker’s contributions, and complete production process. To date she has compiled five books and one documentary on the piece.

⁷⁷ Jones 90.

⁷⁸ Lucie-Smith 72.

The inaugural exhibition took place at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in March 1979. Five thousand people attended opening day, and during its three months on view, over one hundred thousand people viewed *The Dinner Party*.⁷⁹ As it traveled the country, the overall response was divided. Some saw it as a positive affirmation of solidarity and women's history while others found it utterly divisive. Some art critics deemed the raw expressions of female sexuality forceful and unnerving and viewed the inclusion of domestic crafts as kitschy. It would be the feminist art movement however, which would find itself most affected by the catalytic debate *The Dinner Party* generated.

The inclusion of the embellished vulvic shape on the plates was meant to suggest that what the “guests” shared amongst themselves—the strength to “resist the oppression of male-dominated social institutions” —arose from their “female sexual power.”⁸⁰ Chicago established images of “powerful, lush, varied representations of female genitalia [to] assert the value and integrity of female sexuality”⁸¹ to further affirm that the “one reason we don’t know these women is because they all had vaginas.”⁸² In the midst of the developing feminist visual theories, the term ‘essentialism’ was applied to art (like Chicago’s) that displayed a certain “‘feminine’ sensibility or aesthetic”⁸³ which reflected the view that there was a biological and universal quality to women’s experience.

In the 1970s, the theme of female essence in connection with one’s body can also be found in the work of Ana Mendieta and Carolee Schneemann. Cuban born Mendieta “used her own body as well as fire, flowers, earth, and other natural materials to evoke a feminine cosmic

⁷⁹ Lucie-smith 76.

⁸⁰ Jones 26.

⁸¹ Ibid 71.

⁸² Lorraine Sorrel, Congress Disapproves the Dinner Party (Off Our Backs: 1980) p.21.

⁸³ Ibid.

force in her *Silhueta* series (fig. 34, 1973-80).⁸⁴ Mendieta used her “earth-body sculptures”⁸⁵ to explore a multitude of bodily, worldly experiences that she felt shaped her identity as a woman. Through a spiritual awe with the forces of nature, Mendieta also felt a sense of connection to a cosmic collective rooted in goddesses and maternity. In Carolee Schneemann’s 1975 *Interior Scroll* performance (fig. 35), the artist stood naked on a table, slathered her body in mud, and she proceeded to slowly pull a small scroll out of her vagina as she read the text written on it. Schneemann’s interest in her female body rose out of a certain reverence that she had for its “vulvic space.”⁸⁶ She saw the vagina as a “source for sacred, ‘interior’ knowledge” which unified “spirit and flesh.”⁸⁷

With *The Dinner Party* specifically, not everybody approved of its essentialist position and the bold use of vaginal imagery. Art critic Maureen Mullarkey, fearful of the immense popularity of Chicago’s piece, commented that, “The women who file worshipfully past this cunnilingus-as-communion table see nothing askew to Chicago’s decision to represent the stature and variety of women’s accomplishments by genitals only.”⁸⁸ Many regarded Chicago’s work as reductive and politically exploitive of women’s bodies. She was criticized for what many assumed to be her mistreatment and overworking of her studio volunteers. Many of the more art theoretical criticisms arose out of ‘Post-structuralism,’ or ‘Anti-essentialism,’ which was developed in response to the “perceived shortcomings and misconceptions”⁸⁹ of essentialism. This theory, forefronted by feminist Griselda Pollock, maintained that the work of Chicago uses a woman’s sexualized body as a symbol for personal integrity and identity—however this use of

⁸⁴ Meyer 322.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Tate.org.UK [Carolee Schneemann](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-l02469) (<<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-l02469>>)

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Jones 90.

⁸⁹ Meyer 318.

the body further objectifies and “others” it. Pollock favored examining the problems of patriarchally-mannered modes of representing women, addressing how images of women acquire meaning over time, and learning how to manipulate that process in feminist art in order to “deconstruct the notion of ‘woman’ as a category.”⁹⁰ Mary Kelly, the foremost artist of post-structuralism, combined psychoanalytic theory in her feminist art practice to examine the construction (and further, deconstruction) of ‘woman’ and the “dominant forms of representing difference” which “justifies subordination in [the] social order.”⁹¹ Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* (fig. 36, 1973-9) consists of six ‘documentations’ wherein Kelly exhibits “diagrams, transcripts of recorded conversations, and analytical commentary”⁹² of herself as a new mother as she mechanically monitored her young son’s development. Kelly attempted to interrupt the viewer’s assumption of “traditional expectations of womanhood (and/or motherhood)”⁹³ to validate that there is no preexisting essentiality in ‘woman’ but *she* is instead molded through dominant social and visual codes. Barbara Krueger was another prominent anti-essentialist/post-structuralism feminist artist. Her works are characterized by a “text-image”⁹⁴ format wherein bold words are arranged on top of low quality black and white images. By creating images that are difficult to see and haphazardly placing text over visual information, the viewer’s previously held visual pleasure of art (and a woman as its object) is interrupted. In her 1981 *Untitled (You Thrive on Mistaken Identity)* (fig. 37) Krueger “mimicked the language of advertising”⁹⁵ in order to ruin the common representation of women in the public sphere. The *You* that Krueger is addressing is both men and women. She is criticizing women who “internalize female

⁹⁰ Ibid 319.

⁹¹ Mayer 331.

⁹² Ibid 330.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid 331.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

stereotypes” and men who “benefit from their mistaken assumptions and objectification of women.”⁹⁶ The distortion of female faces also aims to eschew negative interpretations of women’s bodies wrought by the “male gaze.” The term “male gaze” was introduced by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”⁹⁷ This essay examined sexual imbalance of roles in film and stated that the visual pleasure of viewing has been “split between active/male and passive/female”⁹⁸ wherein the female is defined only in relation to the male and therefore cannot stand alone as a singular entity—and most definitely cannot assist in her own self-definition. Mulvey goes on to explain that the beholder of the “male gaze” applies his fantasy onto women and determines her “exhibitionist role” which is dictated that she must appear with “strong visual and erotic impact.”⁹⁹ The influential anti-essentialist/post-structuralism feminists therefore supported the theory that “woman” was a political and social construction lacking any essential femininity that critics claimed Chicago based *The Dinner Party* on.

At the end of the 1970s as a result of the theoretical divide between feminists, artists, and art critics due to *The Dinner Party*, Chicago was met with institutional resistance. Museums, wanting to avoid potential controversy sparked by the vaginal forms, rejected *The Dinner Party* from being shown. Although the media and population remained highly interested in it and ad hoc groups managed to continue exhibiting the *Party*, it was eventually deprived of its permanent housing and left in storage until the foreseeable future.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 333.

⁹⁷ Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (Screen: 1975)

⁹⁸ Mulvey 4.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

The Birth Project

In response to the misinterpretations surrounding her work and the criticism that she was receiving, Chicago had to reaffirm her goals as a feminist artist:

The whole notion of feminist art, as I was trying to articulate it, is that the form-code of contemporary art has to be broken in order to broaden the audience base... what I have been after from the beginning is a redefinition of the role of the artist, a reexamination of the relation of art and community, and a broadening of the definitions of who controls art and, in fact, an enlarged dialogue about art with new and more diverse participants.”¹⁰⁰

Chicago attempted to unite her goals for the democratization of art with her desire to communicate “hidden aspects of the female experience”¹⁰¹ and involve women, and their craft, into the conversation of art through her *Birth Project* (1980-85). Chicago was first drawn to the subject of birth while she was designing the table runner for the Mary Wollstonecraft *Dinner Party* place setting (fig. 38). The scene depicts Wollstonecraft bleeding to death during the birth of her child Mary Shelley (who went on to write *Frankenstein*). She was shocked by the raw power of the image but was satisfied with the way in which the needlework rendered the scene readable, tendered, and aesthetically engaging. After the debut of the immensely popular *Dinner Party*, Chicago was met with an outpouring of support from different women all over the country who wanted to be a part of what they saw as progressive, feminist art. She decided to build upon this national community by establishing another participatory project wherein volunteers could work in their own homes. The volunteers, 150 women, were required to send in a needlework sample (pre-designed by Chicago) that could demonstrate their technical skill and preferred style. Upon submitting their sample and qualifying for the project, Chicago took into consideration their individual technique when designing the template and detailed color guide that was sent back to the participant. The needleworker was then not only responsible for translating the artist’s original design into needlework in a timely fashion, but also for meeting

¹⁰⁰ Jones 90.

¹⁰¹ Jones 90.

the multitude of demands that their careers, families, and homemaking required of them—a task that proved to be exhaustively difficult for both Chicago and the workers.

Chicago recognized that various needlework/textile techniques implemented in the *Birth Project* pieces like quilting, embroidery, crochet, macramé, petit-point, smocking, appliqué, batik, and beading could create didactic images of “one of the most fundamental and important life experiences of the human race.”¹⁰² She also chose needlework (as she did for *The Dinner Party*) because of its low art association with women’s domesticity. Her goal was to restore worth into their media and “lend significance to the everyday practices of ordinary women”¹⁰³ past and present. Prior to their collaboration with Chicago, the volunteers practiced their needlework as a hobby; the pieces lacked personal content and were often the result of mass produced patterns and designs (i.e.; Biblical quotes, domestic scenes/objects, flowers, or pets). She wanted her volunteers to view their *Birth Project* pieces as respectable art and themselves as contributors to women’s history. She encouraged them think about the entire composition as they worked to counter the “small thinking” that “dutiful, submissive” housewives are systematically taught.¹⁰⁴

In 1980 Chicago began researching the subject of birth. She was shocked to find that there was nearly no material on birth and there were “almost no images of birth in Western art”¹⁰⁵—certainly none from a female’s perspective. Chicago saw this as another example in which women’s experience was not considered important subject matter and had remained shrouded in secrecy. Commenting on the men’s reign over high art, Chicago noted that if “men

¹⁰² Mitchell 38.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid 18.

¹⁰⁵ Chicago *Through the Flower* p.89.

had babies, there would be thousands of images of the crowning”¹⁰⁶ since she believed that male artists focused on subject matter that they deemed salient and had therefore avoided the truthful and imagery of birth.

It is important to note that fertility, pregnancy, motherhood, and Nativity of Jesus had all been themes present in art before the 1980s (although not many had been introduced into the canon yet). Examples of these themes can be seen in a diverse array of time periods and media. Renowned paintings such as Botticelli’s *The Mystical Nativity* (fig. 39, 1500-1501), Jan Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini Portrait* (fig. 40, 1434), and Jean Fouquet’s *Virgin and Child* (fig. 41, 1450) are examples of art that address the themes of birth, pregnancy (fertility), and motherhood. The scenes depicted are sanitized in a manner to do away with the graphic imagery commonly associated with birth and do not seem to allude to any sort of feminine emotional reference in response to the birthing/mothering experience. The psychological content of the females in these paintings, whether they are the Virgin Mary or a wife, becomes secondary in relation to the primary focus of the scenes themselves: the men.

Chicago was interested in investigating and depicting an assortment of mythological, spiritual, and visceral renditions of women’s unique and universalized births. She decided that since she could not turn towards art or history to understand a woman’s perspective on birth she “began seeking out private photographs and descriptions from people who’d given birth, witnessed and/or participated in the birth process, or studied and documented it.”¹⁰⁷ Since Chicago lived in the Bay Area at this time she was able to learn about natural birthing, which was coming into popularity during this time, as well as standard hospital procedures. A 1980 study in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* examined how the quality of a woman’s birth

¹⁰⁶ Judy Chicago and Edward Lucie-Smith, *Women and Art: Contested Territory* (Watson-Guptill Publications: New York 1999) p. 50.

¹⁰⁷ Chicago *Through the Flower* 98.

experience could be enhanced by increasing the mother's preparation (i.e.; Lamaze breathing techniques). When commenting on why there was a revived interest in redefining the dominate methods of delivery, the study stated that:

The feminist movement, with its emphasis on female achievement, strongly recommends an active role for women in childbirth—many women now wish to “give birth” rather than to be passively delivered, and there is an undercurrent of feeling among feminists that the treatment of obstetric patients at the hands of (mostly male) obstetricians can denigrate the woman's role in the birth process.¹⁰⁸

In a sociological study titled “Giving Birth like a Girl,” Professor Karin Martin of the University of Michigan put forward a feminist critique of medicated/technology-dependent births (i.e.; viewing birthing mothers as “sick patients”) and supported changing the dynamics of institutional birthing procedures. She claimed that “women and their bodies are controlled and disempowered by social institutions during childbirth” and that “white, middle-class, heterosexual women often worry about being nice, polite, kind, and selfless in their interactions during labor and childbirth.”¹⁰⁹ This disempowerment, Martin believed, was a result of how “ideologies of patriarchy, technology, and capitalism situate and control mothering, pregnancy, and birth.”¹¹⁰ What Martin found most compelling however, is that many women felt as though they had “missed” the birth because they could not directly witness it occurring. New mothers were often disappointed because they regarded the “outsider gaze” (as belonging to their partner, the doctor, or society) as more knowledgeable than them despite it being their own experience.

Chicago had wanted to bring the point of view back to ownership of the women. In her study of the subject matter at hand, she had witnessed two central different, yet intersecting, elements of birth which are present in many of the *Birth Project* pieces. First, it seemed that not all experiences were empowering and that the “golden days” of new motherhood was often a

¹⁰⁸ Susan D. Doering, Modeling the Quality of Women's Birth Experience (Journal of Health and Social Behavior: 1980) p. 12-13.

¹⁰⁹ Karin A. Martin, Giving Birth like a Girl (Gender and Society: 2003) p. 54.

¹¹⁰ Ibid 56.

façade for the feelings of losing one's independence, fear, and exhaustion. Commenting on this harsher aspect of being a mother, Dr. Ashley Montague, known for his work with child development, stated that "In almost all cultures, pregnancy, birth, and nursing are interpreted by both sexes as handicapping experiences; as a consequence women have been made to feel that by virtue of their biological functions they have been biologically, naturally, placed in an inferior position to men (1954)."¹¹¹

Illustrations of the more debilitating and personally challenging aspects of birth are demonstrated in two *Birth Tear/Tear* pieces. The first of these two was embroidered on silk by Jane Thompson (fig. 42). Sensual, red silk is paired with a powerful image of a weighty woman as her very core is ripped apart by her emerging uterus. The figure is outlined with radiating bands of embroidery which seem to emanate power and strife from her brow as she is engulfed by pain. Outlining the uterus are pulsating ribbons which resemble the natural patterning and coiling of an umbilical cord which permits the child to consume life from its mother. In the latter *Birth Tear/Tear* done in macramé in 1985 by Pat Rudy-Baese, the same hefty, pain stricken figure from the previous image reappears (fig. 43). This time she is accompanied by her three children who are scrambling and swallowing her in their desperate need to be nourished. The mother's birth canal is emboldened through the layering and undulation produced through the macramé's thick, knotted quality.

Aligned with narratives of the more empowering birth experiences, Chicago also found a great deal of literature in which women were associated with cosmic forces, divinity, creation myths, matriarchy, and earth elements. Examples of this are seen in *Earth Birth* and *The Creation of the Universe*. *Earth Birth* was quilted by Jackie Moore in 1983. Using a palette of cool colors combined with the atmospheric quality of Chicago's underlying fabric paint

¹¹¹ Chicago Women and Art 54.

spraying, *Earth Birth* (fig. 44) was a result of the perception of the physical qualities of earth as having feminine forms and Chicago's desire to "merge the female and the landscape."¹¹² *The Creation of the Universe* (fig. 45) is a wool and silk tapestry woven by Audrey Cowan (who worked with Chicago on *The Dinner Party*). In this piece, Chicago used "the physical process of giving birth as a metaphor for the birth of the universe and of life itself"¹¹³ and drew parallels between the human reproductive system and the solar system noting the "macrocosmic and microcosmic reflections of the creation and life process."¹¹⁴ Through the combination of abstract, organic ripples and swirls and stylized images of flora and fauna, *The Creation of the Universe* offers a scene wherein female and universal forms are recognizable and all are attributed to the creation of the universe and an "intimately feminine act."¹¹⁵

Even though 85 pieces were completed, they have never been exhibited all together, but instead have been gifted individually or exhibited in small groups. This specific exhibition criterion reflects Chicago's desire to place art in an environment in which it can be appreciated and relevant to its viewers. Although she cared about the formal integrity of art, she claimed that her primary impulse is to demystify it and thereby give it back to ordinary people. This democratic practice of "demystifying" art was made evident through the use of documentation panels in the final exhibition cases. All *Birth Project* pieces are accompanied by five to ten 9x12 panels which present quotes and images of the needle worker, the timeline of the production, preparatory drawings, the artist's specific intention of the design, or other miscellaneous information pertinent to the creation of the piece (fig. 46).

¹¹² Judy Chicago, *The Birth Project* (Doubleday & Company, Inc.: New York 1985) p. 13.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

The documentation panels for *Birth #4* include letters from the volunteer Marcia Nowlan to Judy Chicago that display her constant struggle to make time to needlework and her fears of creating inadequate work (fig. 47). The letters note however, her strong desire to persevere and a commitment to restructure her life in order to complete the piece. Also included with the documentation is Nowlan's original sample that she submitted when she applied to be a part of the Birth Project.

The documentation panels for *Creation of the World #7* include a statement made by Chicago on how the image celebrates the generative power of women and extends this power beyond the literal act of birth to encompass the creation of life and all living creatures (fig. 48). The panels also include excerpts from the journal of the volunteer. She wrote on the technical details of her needlework process, her initial creative block, and the difficulty in making mistakes and ripping out the thread. She wrote on what it was like to receive artistic criticism from Chicago and how hard it was for her to finally part with the piece. She also described how she came to view *The Creation of the World* not only as a reflection of herself as a creative woman but also as a reflection of the pain she experienced with a recent miscarriage.

The decentralized nature of the *Birth Project* has resulted in less popularity and broad impact than that of *The Dinner Party*. Through its innovative process of production and exhibition however, the *Birth Project* is a step forward to what Chicago wanted to be understood as accessible and democratic art; and its impact on the lives of the women who participated is immeasurable.

Conclusion—Contemporary Presence

A few years following the completion of the *Birth Project*, arrangements were made to renovate an old library at University of D.C. in Washington, D.C. so as to permanently house

The Dinner Party—which had been donated by the artist. Due to the expensive nature of this renovation and installation, the U.S. House of Representatives were responsible for deciding whether or not it was fiscally responsible for D.C. to spend the money for such an expensive undertaking. Representatives, having never seen the work itself or attempting to understand the value of feminist art, used the House session to promote a personal moral agenda and slandered the work of art. Dana Rohrabacher (R. California) condemned it as “weird sexual art”¹¹⁶ Stan Parris (R. Virginia) described it as “clearly pornographic,” and Robert K. Dornan (R. California) labeled it “3D ceramic pornography.”¹¹⁷ Due to their misguided appraisal of *The Dinner Party* as offensive and unethical, and their refusal to allow women to participate in the dialogue, *The Dinner Party* was banned from a D.C. public institution in 1991.

Years later in 2007, *The Dinner Party* was permanently installed at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art in the Brooklyn Museum, New York City. Visitors to *The Dinner Party* begin their journey into women’s history by first walking through an entrance hallway lined with hanging banners that read :

*And She Gathered All before Her
And She made for them A Sign to See
And lo they saw a Vision
From this day forth Like to like in All things
And then all that divided them merged
And then Everywhere was Eden Once again (fig. 49)*

This prophetic message alludes to the sacredness of the space being entered. With the text, Chicago intended to demonstrate that *The Dinner Party* could be a “vision” that would expose people to Eden—an expanded dialogue in art and overall equality for women. The arena in which *The Dinner Party* is displayed has a characteristic, shrine-like quality to the space. The room is dark with reflective black walls. The space is enclosed and therefore hushed and

¹¹⁶ Lucie-Smith 68.

¹¹⁷ Sorrel 21.

contemplative. Dramatic, theatrical lighting highlights the plates of *The Dinner Party* and illuminates their iridescent painting. Due to the finely detailed quality of ceramic and needlework, viewers are encouraged to move around the table slowly and thoughtfully.

Education is an important aspect of *The Dinner Party* viewing experience. It was Chicago's intention to not only present imagery of historical women, but also make sure that viewers were intellectually engaged with their accomplishments. Upon entering *The Dinner Party* viewers can pick up a booklet that contains an image of each of the plates, a description of the woman it belongs to, and the artist's statement of the entire work. Also in the guidebook is a phone number that viewers can call to hear Chicago speak about the piece. Each place setting also has an extension number wherein she discusses the creation of the place setting, as well as the woman, more in-depth. Upon exiting *The Dinner Party* viewers are met with a large display board of a descriptive historical timeline that includes each of the 1038 women (fig. 50). The purpose of this informational board is to help viewers place these women within a historical context and intertwine their contributions to that of the male dominated history. There are also two iPads that flank each side of the timeline (fig. 51). Each iPad allows viewers to access information regarding the making of *The Dinner Party*, its history spanning 1970 until 2007, and again more information regarding each of the 1038 guests. *The Dinner Party* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum is truly a multi-media educational experience. The vulvic images on the plates will most likely remain contentious, but many viewers now seem to be interested in a radical feminist art practice as an historical experience with a great deal of contemporary relevance.

Judy Chicago visited Gettysburg College in the early 90s for a symposium and gifted two Birth Project pieces to the institution. She believed this academic environment would be an

appropriate place to host progressive, feminist art. She also hoped that the works could be a resource on the education of women's experiences in birth and art.

When the two pieces were hung, people raised concerns about what they saw as indecent, pornographic imagery. In fact, one male art critic commenting on other *Birth Project* pieces compared its imagery to that of *Hustler* magazine. At Gettysburg, it was decided by the Board of Trustees that it was morally preferable to attach closeable shutters so that the pieces could be opened and closed on demand. When the covers were eventually removed however, the two pieces had already been rendered unimportant and were therefore forgotten by the campus community.

I had the opportunity to speak with Chicago earlier this spring at her home in New Mexico on the subject of the *Birth Project*. We discussed her unexpectedly, deep involvement into the personal lives of the needle workers. She traveled around the country visiting them in their homes to see their progress and offer encouragement. She recalled how she felt as though she was doing hand-to-hand battle with all of the demands made of a woman by her family and friends. She observed that the women's needs were always met last and she challenged the women to develop work ethic and the ability to reclaim independent, personal time.

When I showed Chicago images of the current set-up of the *Birth Project* pieces at Gettysburg College she was upset by the inadequate display and poor care of the valuable work. She said that this lack of concern had made the pieces look like specimen, not art.

It is my hope to host an exhibition of these pieces at Gettysburg College's Schmucker Art Gallery in the spring semester of 2013. I also hope to work with my college's archival collections staff in order to ensure proper conservation of the two pieces. An exhibition that

offers value and insight into these remarkable works will help to guarantee that the efforts of Chicago, like that of so many other women in history, are not erased or overlooked.

An exhibition could also present a new understanding of her work, help frame it within larger feminist movement, and examine how “making the personal experiences of woman—menstruation, childbearing, maternity, aging, eroticism, domesticity, violence, objectification—political, feminists challenged the age-old erasure of women’s participation in Western culture.”¹¹⁸ Feminist art of the 1970s and 80s addressed topics that are still incredibly relevant today and an interest in it is as relevant as ever. When asked if “we” had outgrown feminist art, artist and Feminist Art Program student, Karen LeCocq stated:

If you define feminist art as art done from a woman's viewpoint, from a woman's sensibility, it is very much alive today in art done by women from a woman's perspective. If you define it as a movement that happened in the 1970's, then it is historical as well. I think some people would like to believe that the woman's movement is over, like the civil rights movement is over, by defining feminist art as something political, something that is “in your face”, so they say there is no need for it in today's world. I believe, art, its best causes you to think, to look from another viewpoint, to question “what is”. I don't think we ever “outgrow” that type of art.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Jones 27.

¹¹⁹ FresnoBeehive.com

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Honor Code: I affirm that I have upheld the highest standards of honesty and integrity in my academic work.