

**FEMINIST
PERSPECTIVES
IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS
AND THEORIES OF ART**

IV. EDITION

2015

Author

JANE GERHARD

Title

Judy Chicago



**AZKUNA ZENTROA
ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO**

INTRODUCTION

While we are here honoring the work of Judy Chicago, my talk today is focused on the ways that The Dinner Party always exceeded Judy's control. By that I mean that the meaning of the piece was not ultimately controlled by her alone but by audiences who encountered it. Likewise the feminism of The Dinner Party was not defined solely by Judy's feminism, but was brought to life by SO MANY OTHERS-- who worked on it at her Santa Monica studio, by people who viewed it in alternative venues, and by those who evaluated it in the media, positively and negatively. In other words, The Dinner Party took on a life of its own and I think Judy would be the first person to agree.

The journey of The Dinner Party to the Brooklyn Museum where it is now on permanent display at the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art cannot be assumed as an outcome that was inevitable. In fact, it's kind of amazing that its there at all for us all to enjoy, debate and ponder. The road to Brooklyn was bumpy and marked by controversies. But as I learned in my research and argue in my book, the controversies faced by The Dinner Party cannot be separated out from the process of its canonization.

To start, I want to situate origins of TDP in the Feminist Art Movement.

PART I: FAM

*On any given day in 1970, art made by women comprised a mere 1% of what was on display at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the percentage was no better at New York's premier museums.

* In 1970 88% of the reviews in Artforum discussed men's work as did 92% of Art in America's reviews.

*In 1972, the National Endowment for the Arts gave 100% of its grants to men.

*Female artists earned two-thirds of what male artists earned.

*Art schools admitted a majority of women into their programs but graduated very few artists whose work showed.

*Few college art programs or art schools could boast of a single female artist on their faculties.

This was the atmosphere in which JC came of age professionally. And such obstacles, coupled with an ascendant women's movement, led groups of women on both the American east and west coasts to organize. What did they do? Many things and most of it centered around establishing women-centered spaces where feminist artists and audiences could meet face to face.

*They started Feminist Art Programs within universities and art schools: Judy Chicago opened the nation's first FAPs in Fresno in 1970 and CalArts in 1972



*They founded community art schools that were open to the broader women's community, not only university students. — an example of this in LA is the Feminist Studio Workshop—1973—which Chicago and two other women founded. In all these art programs students researched the history of women artists and people who had been left out of major surveys of art. History was always a political practice for this generation of feminists.

*They Built gallery spaces to show women's work right away. The most successful of these was the LA woman's building. The Woman's building ran five shows running a month, which soon represented a significant percentage LA's art scene. Feminists also launched small journals and newsletters to review women's work which mainstream reviewers tended to ignore. EVERYWOMAN for example had office spaces at The Woman's Building.

*Strategized about what "feminist art" or "female aesthetic" might mean, discussed materials, mediums; what counted as art and why, the distinction between fine art and craft. Chicago's contribution to this came by way of her discussion of "female content." By this she meant art that drew on both woman's "human" experiences and their varied experience of having a female body in a male dominated world.

What you see in this powerful synergy between artists and communities is a form of art activism that was directed at getting women artists noticed and their work shown, reviewed, and financially re-numerated. The women's art scene in southern California attempted to build the kind of support system—both material and psychological—that women artists historically lacked.

Many of the values and the practices of the Feminist Art Movement —including its optimism about role of art in social change- shaped The Dinner Party. Obviously these values came through Chicago herself but they also infused the historical moment of the mid 1970s as other artists and workers came to help her complete the piece.

II: VOLUNTEERISM

There are two waves of volunteerism associated with DP, both of which testify to the values of the feminist art movement. The first wave is associated with the making of TDP and took place in Chicago's studio.

In 1977 the artist issued a call for volunteers to help her with the daunting task of completing The Dinner Party. She needed help in historical research, graphics, needlework and fundraising. People came from around the country to help for a week, a month or a year; lots of artists from Southern CA moved to Santa Monica to work on the piece. Groups came from the LA Woman's Building to help for a weekend.

8 people drew small stipends for their daily work at the studio; others volunteered their time and expertise. This idea of "volunteering" might sound casual but was anything but. If you participated, you followed a schedule. At the peak of its size, that is, in the summers of 1977 and 1978, about 25-35 people worked at the studio at any given day. The winter staff dropped to about 12 people. As previously noted, 400 people helped to produce TDP, making Chicago's DP studio one of the largest cultural feminist organizations of the period.

The people gathered at the studio also practiced feminism in the way most radical feminist groups did in the 1970s. Everyone received a list of feminist theory to read once they arrived. Everyone was assigned to a Consciousness Raising group (which met out of the studio) and everyone participated in Thursday night rap sessions and monthly pot luck/lecture series.



Everyone was expected to follow through on their studio commitments, to take on more leadership and responsibility and to give as much as they could to the project. They were expected to speak up when they were unhappy but never to speak loudly between the hours of 9-5 since their voices could be heard throughout the studio.

Each person who worked on a runner put her initials on the back, everyone who worked had their name listed on the acknowledgement panels and in all DP publications. Chicago attempted to disrupt the ecclesiastical tradition of not acknowledging needleworkers as artists.

Still, the making of TDP was not a collaborative process—yes 100 plus people put stitches into the runners and yes 30 plus people did all the historical research of the piece—but the work was Chicago's and she had the last say about everything. She was never far away from decision-making. This was not an art class or art school—everyone did her art. The risks and the rewards of the piece remained hers.

So before we go on, let's look at The Dinner Party

Six densely woven banners overhead greet the viewer and orient him or her to what will follow—and warn them that this is not your typical museum fare. Once the viewer steps into the dim gallery space they see three large tables (48 feet each) arranged in the shape of a triangle; one might mistake them as alters. But quickly one sees that one has stumbled upon a banquet. Places are set for a grand dinner party where 39 great women from history each have a unique place setting (13 per table). Guests include goddesses like Kali and Sophia, legendary heroines like Judith and the Amazons, queens like Theodora and Elizabeth, religious women like St. Bridget, activists like Susan B. Anthony; there are female astronomers, composers, nuns, witches, doctors, theologians, artists, composers and writers. The table ends with Virginia Woolf and Georgia O'Keefe, Chicago's personal role models for what she called their expressive “female form” language.

Each place setting has an oversized porcelain plate carved in the shape of a vulva or butterfly, designed to represent the woman commemorated. The 39 plates took Chicago and her two assistants five years to finish—a minimum of eight or nine plates broke for every one that survived the numerous firings.

Each plate sits on a richly designed embroidery runner done in stitching appropriate to the guest's historical era. The runners, when taken together, constitute a history of embroidery and a social history of women's domestic arts. So for example the primal goddess runner has hand made yarn from a drop spindle, a bone needle craved from a cow bone. Each needlepoint runners took 3-5 workers nearly two years to complete.

The Heritage floor under the table is made up of approximately 2500 porcelain triangles where the names of 999 “women of merit” are painted in glossy gold script. These names comprise streams of influence moving across time and connect the great women at the table to female networks of support or inspiration. The floor radiates light and in the original exhibit was the main source of illumination for the room.

The entire exhibit creates the feeling of being in a religious sanctuary. Viewers move around the installation, looking at the details in front of them and across the large triangle at the backs of runners that are visible only from afar. Histories of every woman named at The Dinner Party can be read in the Heritage panels installed outside the exhibit or on the cell phone tour, first made in 1980 as one of the first audio museum tours ever

Part of what makes the history of TDP so fascinating happens at this point—in 1979 after the gala opening in SF when it looked like all of Chicago's aspirations about bringing women-centered content into the museum were about to be realized. There had been such tremendous effort poured out to complete the work and there had been so many dramas both large and



small to get *The Dinner Party* ready for SF that it was hard to imagine anything but a wildly successful museum tour. Chicago had secured two US museums—SF and Brooklyn—but none followed. The anticipated museum tour never materialized. Images of Chicago at this moment drive home the devastation she felt at the prospect of TDP being crated.

This marks the beginning of the second wave of volunteerism associated with TDP and again demonstrates how the piece became meaningful in ways that may have been hard to predict. Groups of women in five cities organized themselves to bring TDP to their communities: Houston, Boston, Cleveland, Chicago, and Atlanta. These community shows took place outside of museums, in renovated spaces specially rebuilt for TDP that approximated museum conditions. Each show took approximately two years to organize. Tasks included finding and renovating a suitable space, fund raising to cover building costs as well as the expenses associated with installing and insuring the piece, and publicity. In the Do It Yourself spirit of the Feminist Art Movement, the groups themselves did much of the labor involved in renovating these spaces.

Each community group organized educational and cultural events to go along with their exhibit. Seminars and lectures in local women's history, concerts of women's music, women-only dances enabled local communities to mix and mingle. Again, in the tradition of the Feminist Art Movement, the community groups built temporary woman-centered art galleries where feminist artists and audiences could meet, face to face.

These showings proved to be very successful, drawing in between 50,000 and 100 thousand viewers each. The majority of Americans who saw TDP saw it in these non-museum venues. The money raised through community shows stayed with the groups—Chicago only took a small honorarium for opening night remarks—and the organizers distributed their profits as they saw fit. For example, in Cleveland funds went to a local women's center and rape hotline, in Boston, to small grants for women artists. Community shows extended grassroots elements of the Feminist Art Movement geographically into smaller cities beyond NY and LA and chronologically into the 1980s. Again and again one can see a powerful synergy between artist and audience: JC made a feminist-themed work of art and feminist audiences helped give it life and vitality.

An unexpected consequence of the collapse of the American museum tour, then, was that *The Dinner Party* built its reputation as a significant cultural event based on its popularity, not the blessings of the formal art world. And I could trace the popularity in the archive through funders and ticket-buyers, volunteers and organizers, book sales, through letters audiences wrote to their newspapers, and accounts of friends telling friends to go see *The Dinner Party*. These were the people who made *The Dinner Party* into the first feminist art blockbuster, not reviewers, museum curators, or boards of directors.

In addition to the American tour, *The Dinner Party* toured Europe and the UK for eight years. And there audiences saw it in museums, except for in Great Britain. Yet here too, interest in bringing it was driven by audiences. Local women raised funds and organized viewings in all but two of the venues; the only museums to initiate showings were in San Francisco and Montréal. All told, *The Dinner Party* was shown fourteen times in six countries. All told over a million people came to see it between 1979 and 1989.

III: CONTROVERSIES AND CANNONIZATION

Again it is worth stressing that *The Dinner Party*'s canonization came in no small part from the controversies it generated. The controversies are multifaceted and tell us a lot about the contentiousness within feminism, the hostility facing feminists, and the difficulty of bringing about change in the status of women in the arts. I want to just touch on some of the debates associated with the piece between 1980 and 1990, and suggest why these too matter to TDP's journey to the Brooklyn museum and its current iconic status.



Feminists debated the feminism of TDP right from the start. Charges that Chicago herself was not feminist in the right ways dogged the piece: rumors of exploitation at the studio began immediately, at the opening weekend events. There were published mentions of Chicago as egotistical at the expense of other women; I found stated and hinted attacks on Chicago for her desire to “make it” as an artist rather than really changing the DNA of the art world. For example one feminist wrote that “Chicago emulated the oppressive social and art school practices that many feminists have fought.” Some saw volunteerism itself as an extension of women’s domestic roles and thus intrinsically not feminist. In the fraught atmosphere of 70s feminism, as celebrations of women’s shared culture of oppression flourished, ambition itself could become a fraught category. Groups were known to regularly and symbolically behead their strongest members.

Another major controversy attached to TDP was the issue of multiculturalism. 37 of the 39 guests at the table are white women. Alice Walker issued the most stinging critique, wondering about the seeming inability of white feminists to imagine the bodies of non-white women. She wrote a damning critique of TDP in *Ms. Magazine* in 1980 that was read widely among feminists. A lesser-known instance of multicultural critique came from Hispanic women in 1978. A group of women met with Chicago to suggest a new dinner party guest be added --Juana Ines de la Cruz, a nun of New Spain and the first woman to write Mexican literature in Spanish. They threatened to picket the SF opening. This critique too, placed the reception of TDP at the center of second wave feminism as calls by feminists of color for what we now call intersectionality began to be disseminated widely.

Class exclusion or the issue of elitism was an issue near and dear to this generation of feminists, many of whom were the first in their families to attend college. Left-leaning and socialist feminists complained that The Great Men model of history was problematic as a basis for a history of women. Many feminists rejected the entire historical project of TDP, worrying that it did not do enough to dismantle a range of overlapping privileges that shaped women’s lives and instead inserted women into the categories of “white male history.”

Lastly, the issue of essentialism—of representing women through vulva plates—was a heated debate among feminists and between feminists and art critics. If The Dinner Party exposed the fissures among women who called themselves feminists it did even more to expose what women artists were up against, whether or not they identified themselves as feminist. And no issue fired up controversy than The DP’s representation of women through vulva plates.

The most important critical review came from Hilton Kramer of the NYT who wrote that the vulva plates demonstrated a “vulgarity more appropriate to an advertising campaign than to a work of art.” Robert Hughes, writing in *Time Magazine*, said: “To represent Virginia Woolf as a clump of pottery labia majora is on par with symbolizing Mozart as a phallus. Other memorable phrases include describing it as “Sex shop paraphernalia,” and “Three D. Beaver”

Chicago came out swinging in any interview she could grab. She stressed that the vulva imagery should be seen as a female liberation symbol. In one interview she laid out the very definition of cultural feminism and why it mattered: “People get upset about the word ‘cunt.’ Well, that word does not mean to me what it means to other people. I don’t have cunt hatred. My work starts with an assumption about feeling okay about being female and universalizing from there. Why can’t the whole human experience be expressed through a female metaphor?”

It was a hard case to make. Even feminist Ellen Willis, of *The Village Voice*, wrote that the symbolism worked too closely with the sexist belief that ‘a woman’s personality lies between her legs.’”

Critics debated every aspect, including the staging of the piece. Hal Fisher of *Artforum* described the presentation as “obsessively literal and cloyingly ecclesiastic.” Another called it a “black Mass of feminism.” Critics across the board repeated that the piece’s devotion to feminism marred its art.



Lucy Lippard was the most prominent feminist art critic to come to Chicago's defense. To Chicago's critics she said TDP "satisfied a deep cultural hunger in women" for affirming symbols. She also saw the crowds it drew as a rebuke to a museum system unwilling to be responsive to its audience. Being popular was not a repudiation of JC as an artist.

The final aspect of controversy and overheated rhetoric involves, of all things, the US Congress. And here I want to remind you that the controversy and the canonization of TDP go hand in hand.

With the end of the International tour, the search for a permanent home became pressing. In the spring of 1990, a long time Chicago supporter and board member of the University of the District of Columbia in Washington D.C. (UDC), approached Chicago with an idea: Gift The Dinner Party to the underfunded, working class, predominantly African American university as part of its newly proposed multicultural arts center. It looked like a win-win situation. The new multicultural arts center would bring in much needed money to the University. For Chicago, such a context would highlight the common plight of the disadvantaged—or non-white, non-male—artists. The arrangements, which included fund raising and donors—ensured that The Dinner Party would not take a cent from the operating budget of the university.

In the middle of that hot summer of 1990, grumblings about the gift appeared in the conservative newspaper The Washington Times who re-wrote recent history. The paper reported that The Dinner Party had been "banned in several art galleries around the country because it depicts women's genitalia on plates and has been criticized by some critics as obscene." More damaging, the article linked cutbacks in football and continuing education classes as well as unpaid staff salaries to The Dinner Party. The story appeared in the national press and was linked to growing controversy about the role of government funds for art that some Americans found offensive.

On July 26, 1990, the controversy went live on CSPAN when the House of Representatives debated UDC's budget as part of a larger D.C. appropriations bill. The eighty-seven-minute debate centered on an amendment offered by Representative Parris to subtract \$1.6 million from the UDC's budget request. It's hard to miss the racial dynamics of this fight. In a nutshell the white guys are obsessed with "obscenity" and the black guys are defending home rule and freedom of expression.

LET'S WATCH:

Observers noted that this controversy acted as dry run for a larger effort by conservative republicans to defund the National Endowment for the Arts for their support of so-called "obscene" art. The story of that fight, which focused most famously over the work of Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, has yet to include this episode, even though Chicago's run-in with the activist Congress was nestled right in the middle of those unfolding fights. TDP v. Congress by any measure ought to have been a major chapter in that story. And yet it was not, a situation that leads me to speculate about what the defenders of art and culture in the US thought about feminist art in 1989 and 1990. Was it worth the fight? Was it a major artistic movement or was it marginal. And as an example of Feminist Art, was The Dinner Party seen as burdened by its political message and too tied to the plight of women to matter as art?

However one answers these questions, the facts remain the same. Chicago withdrew her gift and the search for a permanent home continued until 2002 when Eliz Sackler donated it to The BMA.

I want to leave you with this final thought: The DP became famous and infamous simultaneously. It became known, ridiculed and revered at the same time. And this, I believe, enabled its iconic status. Its tremendous popularity and notoriety—as



these were entangled with each other and with the complex feelings different groups had about feminism and “art” — allowed TDP to move from a piece that no American museum would show in the 1980s to this statement in the NYT in 2002, that TDP is “almost as much a part of American culture as Norman Rockwell, Walt Disney, WPA murals and the AIDS Quilt. This exemplar of Our Body, Ourselves phase of 70s feminism keeps getting better with age.”

When TDP went on permanent display in 2007 it did so as history, as one of the elders of the FAM. This was synergistically aided by the broader reassessment of feminist art happening at the same time. TDP went on display with two important new shows—Global Feminisms at Brooklyn and two weeks later, the Museum of Contemporary Art in LA opened WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution. The canonization of feminist art had officially begun.

So, in sum—TDP could not make it into the museum as art in 1980 but it could as history in 2007. Times had changed enough so that neither feminists nor art critics needed to take it on as forcefully as they had decades earlier: its essentialism was no longer primarily debated as obscene; its Eurocentricism, incendiary in 1980, now seen as symptomatic of the well-chronicled optimism of “sisterhood is powerful” phase of feminism. The museum context freed TDP of the burden of “representing” more than Chicago’s view of WOMAN as a force in history.

Despite of-- and because of --all the clamor associated with The Dinner Party, it is important to pause over one salient fact: TDP still inspires debates among audiences and this alone remains a testimony to its vitality. It still does the good work any important feminist text does, no matter its age, race, nationality or medium-- to raise pressing and always urgent questions about what feminism looks like.

