FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS AND THEORIES OF ART

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EDWARD LUCIE SMITH

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Judy Chicago and the feminist narrative

AZKUNA ZENTROA
ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO

Judy Chicago occupies a central place in the narrative of feminist art. She occupies and equally central place in the story of American art in the second half of the 20th century, and also now, in the narrative of its further development in the opening years of the 21st century.

The paradox perhaps is that you probably have to be an outsider – a non-American like myself – to realize how central her place is in the second-named of these two narratives. Judy Chicago is very much an heir of the American democratic tradition. She embarks on ambitious enterprises, with a strong element of social commentary. However, these enterprises are not top down. They have not depended, like major artistic cycles in the past, on state patronage, or aristocratic patronage. They often have a strong co-operative or collaborative element. This is certainly the case with The Dinner Party, the work for which she is well known.

If one looks at her work in terms of its approach to the audience, and its attitudes towards the audience it sets out to address, they there are obvious parallels to a previous generation of artists from the American Mid-West, the Regionalists, chief among them Thomas Hart Benton. She offers a panoramic view of the themes she tackles, but never a condescending one. In The Dinner Party, all the heroines seated at the triangular banquet table are given an equal say – those who existed in real life are equals of hose who are mythological. 'Sit down with us,' the installation seems to say, 'and we will talk to you on equal terms, woman to woman.'

Judy Chicago's invention of this large scale but unapologetically democratic way of structuring what she does, in the interests of clear communication, with no bullshit element attached, has at least some of its sources, not just in the Regionalist tradition that evolved in the American Mid-West in the interwar years, but in the Pop Art of the 1960s. This part of her artistic lineage was highlighted by her inclusion in a recent ambitious exhibition at Tate Modern, The World Goes Pop. Though Pop Art often made ironic, rather than purely celebratory, use of imagery from mass consumer culture, it did emphasize the fact that there now existed a demotic visual language that enjoyed an independent life of its own, and which leaped over all barriers of class, income or education.

Recent news items – I will cite two examples here from the Saturday 3rd October issue of the Times of London – illustrate the fact that feminism is an ongoing cause, with battles still to fight. One article in the newspaper's review section was a paean of praise for the movie Suffragette, which dramatizes women's fight for the vote in early 2oth century Britain. The reviewer concludes "In Suffragette – for once – it is the male characters pleading in the doorway and the women running into danger, doing what a woman's gotta do." The suffragettes may have won their fight, but many currentblockbuster films still try to tell their audience that the victory was, at some fundamental level, irrelevant.

Another article, right next to this in the paper, reviewed a BBC television documentary about life in a big East London mosque, situated in an area of the city where there is a large Muslim immigrant population: This is how the review began:

"It's no small thing to make the only woman in a meeting sit behind a screen. I mean it really isn't, is it? Sure, you can talk about multiculturalism and diversity and alternative comprehensions of matrilineal power, as exercise in the domestic sphere. You can do that all you like. But at the end of it, you've still got a single woman, in a meeting, behind her own little wall, craning her neck to see the PowerPoint presentation."

The film review just quoted was written by a woman. The television review, as it happens, was written by a man.

I think these citations illustrate why feminist art, of which Judy Chicago is perhaps the most famous exponent, remains very much alive and relevant, yet also the fact that the situation for art of this kind is becoming increasingly complicated.

The reasons are twofold. The first is globalization. Today the world of contemporary art embraces cultures that the creators of the Modern Movement were either more or less unaware of, or which they were on the whole content to ignore. Major cultures, divorced from the European and North American mainstream, possess a strong sense of historic identity. While they embrace the idea of the 'contemporary', they are very much aware of historic roots that have little or nothing to do with the standard Western narrative of emerging feminism.

I would like to choose as examples two contemporary art worlds that I have had the privilege of knowing reasonably well at first hand, both through repeated visits and also through a network of personal friendships. One is China. The other is Iran. What these cultures have in common is a keen awareness of long historic tradition — of a continuous narrative that, in each case goes back for several thousand years.

What strikes me about the contemporary art scene as it now exists in China is the apparent scarcity of major female creative figures. There is no Chinese equivalent for the world famous Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama. There, have, very recently, been a few touring shows in China showcasing the work of female artists, but there are no dominant personalities — no Chinese equivalents for Louise Bourgeois or Agnes Martin, both of whom now enjoy an important place in the Western narrative. Certainly no equivalents for the position that Frida Kahlo has long enjoyed in the history of Mexican Modernism, or for the centrality of Tarsila do Amaral in Brazil. Yet in other respects, women enjoy great influence in Chinese society, particularly in the sphere of business. In March of this year, the South China Morning Post reported that Hong Kong ranked "second in the world when it [came] to women setting up their own businesses, behind only India, where 49 per cent of entrepreneurs are female."

The situation in the Iranian, specifically the Tehran, art world is quite different. Women are subject to many social constraints, in terms both of dress and public behavior, though in Iranian society women are also very active in business. The Iranian art scene is self-confident and coherent, particularly strong in photography and video, both quintessentially contemporary means of expression. Artists domiciled in the country do, of course have to be wary of the censorship exercised by the Iranian religious authorities. Yet Iran also has a long tradition of double-speak in art, established long before the Religious Revolution that overthrew the Shah in 1979.

Susan Habib, an Assistant Professor at the Islamic Azad University in Tehran (the third largest university in the world, with over 1.5 million students) had this to say tin a paper presented in 2007 at the International Congress of Aesthetics:

"The strong relationship between art and activism [in Iran] is sometimes established by symbolic, metaphorical facilities and devices. In Persian aesthetic and literary tradition, particularly Persian miniature painting, metaphors gave room to the expression of the poetic and the enigmatic, but also to the forbidden, Under current restrictions, this ancient device is most likely to regain its function."

The layering of meanings one finds in the best contemporary Iranian art is one of the things that make it memorable. It resonates in complex ways. It may seem selfish for an unthreatened outsider to admire this, but it is part of its creative strength., and, in particular, of its power to communicate effectively to its home audience. Its feminism is subversive, rather than being declarative. Understandably this makes many Western feminists impatient. But they are not the central figures, the ones who take risks, but also have the right to speak.

The second reason for increasing complexity is that in the West there is no longer just a simple gender divide. Instead there a plurality of causes where gender plays an important role in the artistic narratives linked to them. One unfortunate result of this is that there are often conflicting varieties of 'politically correct' when gender issues in art are discussed. Are, for example, transgender or transvestite attitudes wholly compatible with mainstream feminism? We now live in a world where sexualities exist in the complex plural.

In due course feminist theory and with it feminist artistic representation are going to have to take serious account of both cultural diversity, and also of increasing knowledge about and tolerance of sexual diversity. The globalism of our cultural world is due, in large part, to the rapid development of the Web, and also to our increasing fluency with digital images. More immediate access to information has also led to a more nuanced attitude to gender studies. However, with greater access to knowledge comes increasing confusion.

Judy Chicago has shown a remarkable ability, in the course of her career, to bridge divides and deal with differences. I think one factor, paradoxically enough, is the fact that she is so intractably American. Whatever the faults of the United States, and we can read about these in our newspapers or on our computer screens everyday, there is inbuilt in American history a commitment to democracy, free speech and equality. I say this as someone who is not an American citizen. The American Constitution, the founding document of the American state, in fact makes no distinction between the sexes. It refers to 'persons' or 'citizens', not to men or women, males of females. As one authority on the Constitution has remarked: "Slaves were no more enslaved by the Constitution than women were disenfranchised by it." True, women did not achieve voting rights in America until 1919, less than a century ago. It was the 19th Amendment to the Constitution, passed that year, which prohibited any United States citizen from being denied the right to vote on the basis of sex. In Britain, women were given the vote a year earlier, but only if they were aged 30 or older.

The impulse towards equality was always, nevertheless, from the very beginning, strongly present in American society. In that sense it is not surprising that the best known of all feminist artists should be a product of the culture of the United States.

There is one thing more to add to this. If we look at the development of the visual arts during the last two centuries, one notes a strikingly circular trajectory – from an involvement with politics, triggered by the French Revolution, to a virtual renunciation of them after the shock of the Franco-Prussian War. Then came the various radical experiments with new ways of perceiving the world – the first period of the Modern Movement – followed by a gradual return to politics, often very uneasily allied to radicalism in art. Think of the wavering, ambiguous alliance between the Surrealist Movement and Communism in the years between the two World Wars. And now, in our own day, we have the depressing situation in which supposedly avant-garde art, having largely abandoned real visual innovation, smugly presents itself as being politically radical (continuous readings from Karl Marx's Das Kapital were a feature of this year's Venice Biennale), though without any discernible practical effect. Today's avant-garde specializes in preaching to the converted. Despite the difficulties and confusions I have outlined, feminism doesn't do that. It genuinely seeks to change the world. Judy Chicago's work and career offer ample proof that this ambition can in fact have a practical effect. Yet her art never stops being art. It is always visually inventive.