

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

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**Judy Chicago's "Will to Power" and the
Invention of Feminist Art as a Curatorial
Practice in 1970s Los Angeles**



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Why would I, an art historian and theorist identified as a queer feminist, articulate a set of arguments about Judy Chicago's contribution to feminist art making, curating, and teaching through a concept from the work of Friedrich Nietzsche? I do so in order to provoke, and in order to make a strong argument about how profoundly effective the efforts of Judy Chicago and her collaborators in 1970s Los Angeles were in shifting concepts of what women artists could *do*, and how they could engage directly with art discourse and institutions so as to forge paths for creative women then and in the future. I will argue later on, in fact, that Chicago's "will to power" motivated the multileveled production of a range of initiatives all of which can be understood within the current concept of the *curatorial*—curatorial viewed here in a broad sense as an initiative involving the "care or superintendence of something" (including in this case feminist art, histories of women and women's art, and young women art students) and involving impulses that are pedagogical, historical, and of course aesthetic, but also necessitating the organizing, choreographing, historicizing, and public presentation of culture in one form or another.¹

In *The Will to Power* Nietzsche argues that any living being or body will "strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant,... because it is *living* and because life simply is will to power...., which is after all the will to life."² Nietzsche of course had no capacity or desire to recognize or analyze the asymmetrical structures that prevented women in Western society from attaining a relationship to this "will to power," or a sense of potential empowerment motivating striving, ambition, and a desire to achieve. It simply did not cross his mind that different kinds of humans (women, Blacks, queers, the disabled, among others) would have entirely different relationships to this capacity to "strive to... become predominant." Much of second wave feminist thought was about articulating this asymmetry. Simone de Beauvoir's epic 1949 *The Second Sex*, one of the key texts inaugurating second wave feminist theory was precisely oriented towards exposing and examining it: Beauvoir painstakingly outlines the way in which the Western concept of man as yearning to transcend embodiment (loosely oriented in Cartesianism) is in fact a concept and a yearning not available to women, Blacks, or even (she argues) Jews in European culture. While enfranchised white gentile men can at least imagine transcending their corporeality, women, Blacks, and Jews are doomed to sink into our "immanence." She notes, "whether it is race, caste class, or sex reduced to an inferior condition, the justification process is the same. 'The eternal feminine' corresponds to 'the black soul' or 'the Jewish character'."³

I began with a version of Nietzsche run through Beauvoir, then, both to suggest the basic and foundational nature of the structures of power (the asymmetrical availability of the "will to power" for actual subjects articulating themselves in relation to specific gender, racial, ethnic, religious, class, and other identifications) which second wave feminists were addressing, and provocatively to point to interrelations among groups of people oppressed for different yet related reasons in this period after WWII: women, Jews, Blacks, and so on.

Nietzsche is a provocative figure in these differentials, not the least in relation to an artist such as Judy Chicago, who as a feminist has taken on so many of the iniquitous structures of power in Western culture throughout her career, arguably through a kind of courage and strength of will and creative force that puts Nietzsche's concept in tension with the idea of feminism as the emancipation and empowerment of those *left out of* the "will to power" through which Western culture had functioned up until, arguably, the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.

Today I will look anew at Chicago's work broadly speaking (her art work, her teaching, her writing, and her curatorial work) from the period of her self-education as a feminist artist and leader of the nascent then burgeoning feminist art movement. I will then move on at the end of this presentation to question this work in relation to new developments in queer feminist and trans* discourse, art-making, and curating. What can Chicago's work teach us today as we have moved so far away from the binary conceptions of gender through which structures of power tended to be understood, theorized, and challenged by feminists in the 1970s?

I will begin with a strategically melodramatic interpretation of a key work of Chicago's, the 1971 photographic lithograph *Red Flag*, in order to understand the power of her rage during this period, then briefly trace the developments in Chicago's artwork from the late 1960s through the 1970s to explore the way in which she innovatively merged social activism—including pedagogy—with art making to forge, define, articulate a feminist art. For better or worse, Chicago largely refused a model of feminism that involved working *with* men to ask for space in their classrooms, galleries, and art publications. Rather, as she noted in a 1973 article describing the opening of Womanspace, an alternative space for feminist art in Los Angeles, "[w]e are opening a space... where our work will hang in a context that we ourselves have established, one that is relevant to women's struggles, women's subject matter, women's issues, women's values..."⁴ Looking again at Chicago's radical multi-leveled project—which was social, pedagogical, historical, and aesthetic—will provide a very interesting way of contextualizing current debates about power and culture in the twenty first century.

One of my points is that it was nothing less through a wresting of the "will to power" from the dudes dominating the Los Angeles art world that Chicago was able to achieve the goals of making a feminist art, defining a feminist approach, opening the door to the writing of feminist histories of art, and developing feminist ways of engaging new publics and educating emerging students. Chicago understood like no other artist at the time that in order for the world (and the art world in particular) to acknowledge the existence of art by women, and by feminists especially, a new audience, new venues, and new teaching methods had to be created. At the same time, one of her greatest insights was the need to work with other feminists in forging these new initiatives. Only a Nietzschean force of will—one forged through her shear courage and of lifelong consequences to come.)

Even after an adult lifetime of this monthly reminder, so often this raging message from the womb still surprises and thus destroys before it can be sopped or stopped up by absorbent wads of cotton (“feminine hygiene products,” the euphemism goes). How many pairs of knickers (underwear), how many sheets have been destroyed by this brutal memorandum from the body’s wet, dark interior?

Chicago’s project in the early 1970s was to acknowledge this glorious mess, to embrace the confusion and uncertainty of being female (whatever that means; an open--- ended prospect of identifications signaled, in part, by this very flow of blood). Through impeccable image---making technique, she renders the *uncontainability* of the anatomically female body (again, not a self---evident entity; meaning, simply, a body that we think we recognize as falling on the feminine side of the long---standing Western opposition between self and other). If the body bleeds from a hole, it must be “female.” If it bleeds, it can receive but also (if the blood stops for 9 months) deliver. Is the blood in fact a bodily marking of the possibility of the penetration or egress of other bodies?

In the 1960s in Southern California, Judy Chicago found herself angry. As narrated eloquently and with passion in her autobiographical 1975 book *Through the Flower*, she found herself raging against the sexism of the art world (particularly in its Los Angeles variant, where a group of white male artists calling themselves the “Studs” ruled the roost). She took the tools to hand, including auto---body painting techniques as well as draughtswoman’s skills and a sense of graphic design and narrative drama, and began to parlay these into images that asserted the female body as *simultaneously* viscerally physical and aggressively intellectual, thinking, and (full of an agency driven by this rage) proactive—into the “picture.”

In tandem with her now well---known innovations in pedagogy, performance, and installation in the late 1960s and early 1970s,⁷ Chicago herself developed her sharp and luscious “finish fetish” style, which had grown out of her work in tandem with some of the more innovative “Studs” and her conviction that women had to gain creative confidence by learning “masculine” skills such as auto---body painting, pyrotechnics, and carpentry, into a feminist mode of image---making by turning gridded paintings (the “Flesh Gardens” series) into paintings organized around a central core (the “Pasadena Lifesavers”) around 1970. With the central core focus of these glorious large---scale airbrushed Plexiglas paintings Chicago produced finish fetish analogues of what she believed to be “female experience,” grounded in the hole that both penetrates and anchors the female body.⁸

But it was works such as *Red Flag* (1971) that much more explicitly attested to the violence but also pleasures of inhabiting a body identified as female. The brilliance of *Red Flag* lies precisely in the stark contrast between the soft, grainy pink of the legs and hand of the female body (its edges rendered tactile by the dense black shadows and the charcoal muff of pubic hair) and the aggressive crimson of the bloody tampon the hand extracts from the vaginal canal.

The explosion of red on the tampon renders it a sign (within the heteronormative matrix of patriarchal culture) of the missing organ of the absent male lover: a castrated penis, smeared in blood. The woman is the agent of her own exploration, which marks her at least momentary freedom from the self/other relation, the patriarchal system's tendency to doom her to be forever defined as "other" in relation to a male "self." If in patriarchy the woman can only ever be viewed as lacking (a penis), as wanting (a penis), or as acting as a substitute (for the missing penis her body, in Freud's terms, signifies to the male subject), in *Red Flag* she proclaims her self--sufficiency. 9

But this self--sufficiency does not guarantee wholeness. To the contrary.

This self--sufficiency is one born in blood, sweat and tears (the tampon also reminds us of a baby emerging from the womb, covered in mucous and blood). There is no simple femininity, free from the impossibilities of being human —of being in and of a body that bleeds, and is always inexorably connected to other bodies through caretaking, desire, or even repulsion.

Chicago's Will to Power is connected to the body that works, the body that sweats and bleeds. Chicago's Will to Power is aimed at changing the inexorable reduction of women to our bodies, and at giving us access to the power attached to the structures of value in the art world.

Chicago's Development as a Feminist Artist, overview

Since its first installation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979, Judy Chicago's monumental *Dinner Party* has come to be one of the most controversial works in the history of western art. Supporters and critics of the piece alike, however, have tended to neglect the complexity and breadth of Chicago's oeuvre and her working methods. Knowing something of the multi--pronged effort she exerted in the 1970s to make, teach, and co--found alternative spaces to display feminist art shows the extent of her "will to power," which involved a broad range of strategies all of which built empowerment for her feminist vision.

Born Judy Cohen, the artist moved to Los Angeles in the late 1950s from Chicago.

By the mid 1960s, Chicago's nascent feminism, as noted, had begun to simmer in the context of her exploration of “finish fetish,” Los Angeles artists' particular fusion of Minimalist and Pop forms and techniques, involving the use of plastics, bright local color, vacuum technologies, and abstract forms.

Chicago's spray---painted car hood series from the early 1960s, for example, showed her mastery of technical skills such as auto---body painting. Signalling Chicago's conviction that women artists must demonstrate their competence in the crafts of art making, this mastery—like her mastery of ceramics, various modes of abstract as well as figural painting, lithography, etc.—gave her the authority to compete with her male colleagues.

In connection with two 1970 exhibitions of her work, one at Jack Glenn Gallery and one at California State University, Fullerton, Chicago publicly proclaimed her intention to challenge discrimination in the art world in two different advertisements.

Overtly parodying the machismo of “The Studs,” which, as we have seen, was the name half---seriously adopted by her male finish fetish colleagues, Chicago posed in short hair and boxer shorts, standing aggressively in the corner of a boxing ring, for a full---page advertisement published in *Artforum*. The entrance wall of the exhibition itself was inscribed: “Judy Gerowitz [the surname of her first husband] hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through male social dominance and freely chooses her own name Judy Chicago.” This proclamation as you see found another form in the ad for the gallery show. Here, Chicago discursively claimed the territory of authorship by literally renaming herself, dropping the name of her first husband (her birth patronym was Cohen) and taking the power to make art in a world that otherwise would not grant it.

Motivated by her rage at the discrimination she experienced in the art world and driven by a new conviction that her experiences as a woman and her sexuality were central to her art, Chicago began openly to express her goal of forging a feminist art practice— but one, as I have argued, that went far beyond simply making art work alone in a studio. The next decade of her career would be shaped by her attempt to define the particularity of this experience through increasingly recognizable representational forms, orchestrating multiple pedagogical projects, co---founding alternative feminist art spaces, as well as writing articles on feminist art and organizing feminist environments, exhibitions, and performances.

Artistically, the turn toward "content" was an explicit attempt to expose the biases behind the formalist privileging of the transcendent "universality" of male abstraction. This insertion of content began obliquely through the organization of abstract forms into what she argued to be "female" shapes: Chicago's late 1960s pictures, not explicitly figural and highly polished in appearance, were nascent formulations of the hotly debated theory of "central core" that Chicago would develop with Miriam Schapiro in the early 1970s.

In a controversial but influential article of 1972, "Female Imagery," the two artists first asked, "What does it feel like to be a woman? To be formed around a central core and have a secret place which can be entered and which is also a passageway from which life emerges? What kind of imagery does this state of feeling engender?" And then answered that there was then evidence that many women artists "have defined a central orifice" in their work, "whose formal organization is often a metaphor for a woman's body.... the experience of female sexuality."¹⁰

The abstracted centralized forms of Chicago's Pasadena Lifesavers, Star Cunts, and Donut series (all 1968--1970) were theorized as expressive symbols of the central "cavity" that defines women's experience of their sexuality. The 15 Lifesaver paintings, informed by Chicago's interest in using color to evoke particular emotional states, feminize the slick, high--tech hipness of finish fetish works: each consists of an enormous sheet of acrylic on which hover four throbbing, radiating wheels of color.

As noted above, during this transitional period Chicago also experimented with pyrotechnics, another creative process that conventionally excludes women practitioners. After studying with a fireworks company, Chicago produced a series of Atmospheres, performances documented through photographs that involved the firing of color flares in strategic patterns in public sites. Chicago saw these dramatic plumes of colored smoke as feminizing the landscape, an effect she exaggerated with pieces that included naked women performing goddess--rituals.

As I have suggested, one of Chicago's most important contributions to the feminist art movement has been her conviction that women must develop strategies of making, exhibiting, teaching, and writing about art in order to transform mainstream art institutions. Offered a teaching job at California State University, Fresno in 1970, Chicago established the now famous and highly influential Feminist Art Program in its first guise; some of the original students in this program are now key figures in the history of feminist art, namely Faith Wilding and Suzanne Lacy. Chicago moved her students (all women) off campus in the hopes of establishing an environment in which they could express themselves freely. Merging principles of cooperative education, interpersonal exploration through consciousness--raising, confidence--building strategies, and technical training, Chicago developed a ground--breaking, multi--faceted approach to art pedagogy.

During the Fresno period Chicago worked with the other members of the Feminist Art Program to develop a number of performances—including her slapstick send-up of patriarchal sex-roles, *Cock and Cunt Play* (1970), with the title characters played by Faith Wilding and Jan Lester.

In 1971, Chicago, at the invitation and support of collaborator Miriam Schapiro, moved the Feminist Art Program to California Institute of the Arts in Valencia (CalArts), where they were joined by art historian Paula Harper, designer Sheila de Bretteville, and aided by student assistants Faith Wilding, Suzanne Lacy, and Sherry Brody. After the program's climactic staging of *Womanhouse*, a derelict house in Los Angeles that they transformed into a feminist environment in 1972, Chicago became increasingly convinced that a truly alternative program could not develop fruitfully within the confines of such an institution as CalArts.

In 1973, she withdrew from the Cal Arts faculty, moving on to co-found the Feminist Studio Workshop (with Arlene Raven and de Bretteville), an independent studio program in Los Angeles.

Chicago's works from the mid-1970s, which show a gradual development of the iconography that would come to be so controversial in the *Dinner Party* plates, are visually compelling attempts to arrive at a positive and more and more explicit “female” or “central core” imagery, per the arguments she and Schapiro had made in the 1972 article.

In her central core *Through the Flower* series and “Great Ladies” paintings and drawings from 1973 Chicago explored both the symbolic effects of abstracted centralized forms and, with “Great Ladies,” the idea of using works of art to reinstall important women in history. In the “great lady” *Mme. De Stael*, in which intense, pulsating rainbow colored rays radiate from a soft open core, Chicago uses the title to give the abstracted form a specific historical content. Chicago has been criticized for this attempt to construct a “universal” sign for femininity, particularly in that it might be seen to imply that women's experiences can be summed up through the morphology of their sexual anatomy. While this criticism made some sense during the 1970s and 1980s, when questions of essentialism were hotly debated in feminism, it tends to vastly oversimplify the broader range of what Chicago was doing, not just with these art works but with her overall strategies linked to what I have called the will to power—which was about carving out a space for herself as an artist, while also teaching younger women artists how to empower themselves in the art world and its various institutions.

This contentious issue of central core, as well as the question of attempting to legitimate women through masculinist notions of “greatness”—which I’m exaggerating rather than downplaying by calling forth Nietzsche—came to the fore with the *Dinner Party*. Aided by hundreds of assistants, Chicago labored for five years on the project, which quickly expanded to a grand-scale installation modelled loosely after the exclusively male Last Supper.

Introduced by large woven banners calling for a utopian merging of differences, the three--sided equilateral table is a large centralized form pointing to central core imagery but also to egalitarianism as a goal of feminism (the 13 settings on each side also refer to the number of men at the Last Supper and the number of members of a witches' coven). A porcelain floor with an additional 999 women's names broadens Chicago's revised history.¹¹

The *Dinner Party* has been shown in venues across Europe, the U.S., Canada, and Australia but, until 2002---2007, when feminist collector Elizabeth Sackler backed the placement of the piece at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, it lacked a permanent home. Rejected by the official art world for its unabashed populism, many of the initial venues where it was shown in the 1980s were non---museum sites, the exhibitions of the piece organized by international networks of supporters (initially spearheaded by Diane Gelon, who lectured and raised money for the piece). The ad hoc exhibitionary practices necessary to show the piece until recently exemplify again the ways in which Chicago has worked through myriad and powerful strategies against the structures of the sanctioned art world. As a teacher, artist, curator, and writer, through her immense will to power—her persistence, fearlessness in countering accepted models of making and exhibiting art—she has carved out multiple and numerous sites of alternative creative expression for women and specifically for her own work.

For example, in the late 1970s, Chicago, frustrated with the lack of venues to show and sell her work as well as the continuing masculinism of the art and art history worlds, established Through the Flower, a nonprofit feminist art organization in 1978, the mission of which is, per the website, “to educate a broad public about the importance of art and its power in countering the erasure of women’s achievements.”¹² Through such means Chicago effectively created her own micro---art world, supported financially and creatively by a group of trustees and donors (including middle---class women around the world) who funded, and continue to fund, Through the Flower. This achievement has gone largely unrecognized in the increasingly heated discussions around how artists can proceed in a world dominated by hyperactive circuits of late capital, which in the artworld largely reward (still) white male artists. However anxiety--- provoking such a powerful vision might be to other feminist artists or artists in general, Chicago’s early savvy, her creative ability to forge new structures of feminist art making, teaching, art history writing, and curating was ahead of its time. Only recently have artists such as Marina Abramovic emerged with an equal will to power—but one that appears singularly oriented, in Abramovic’s case, to promoting her own career.

Chicago’s case is far more complex, as she begins always from a place of activism in relation to art and its worlds, employing people and volunteers as she constructs an entirely separate financing and exhibitionary structure for her (and potentially other women’s) works.

Curatorial Questions

If we thus view Chicago's early career as a feminist artist as a whole, we could argue that her most singular contribution was to an overall "curatorial" approach to feminist art, as I suggested at the beginning of this talk. *The Dinner Party* makes this thrust of Chicago's 1970s feminist practice clear: the piece is a work of art, clearly, but one that is *curatorial* in its appearance and carefully orchestrated layout and disposition in the art space. It is also curatorial in a pedagogical sense: it is clearly intended to teach us about women in history, by a woman artist working with other woman artists.

If we look briefly at Chicago's curatorial persona—as I'm calling it—in relation to feminist exhibition practices we gain additional insight into what she and her colleagues in the Los Angeles feminist art movement pioneered. Two major curatorial ventures from the 1970s will make this point clearer.

One of the key issues for the nascent feminist art movement in the late 1960s was the exclusion of women's art work from exhibitions of modern and contemporary art.

To that end, it is not surprising that one of the key motivations was to redress this situation either (more commonly) by founding feminist art venues independent of the dominant cultural and funding situations or developing exhibitions of women's art in mainstream institutions. Two major examples will suffice to sketch this early period here: the establishment of a series of alternative spaces in Los Angeles that were aimed at

developing both a separate *feminist pedagogy* and a separate *site for the presentation of feminist art and performance*; and the first major feminist exhibition organized for a mainstream art museum, Linda Nochlin and Linda Sutherland Harris's 1976 exhibition, commissioned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, *Women Artists: 1550 to 1950*.

A small number of excellent histories have been published on the 1970s Los Angeles area feminist art movement, from Judy Chicago's 1975 autobiography, *Through the Flower*, to recent exhibition catalogues by Laura Meyer and Terry Wolverton.¹³

This is a complex and vast history, but the founding of the Feminist Art Program, culminating in 1972 the project *Womanhouse*, was a key moment in this history. It is worth here looking at this project through the lens of the curatorial impulse I am identifying in Chicago's life work.

As I have suggested, the deeply radical nature of the feminist art program and of *Womanhouse* was in its *combination of pedagogy and practice*: Chicago in particular aimed to *empower* women both by encouraging them to mold their “personal” stories into “political” feminist art and performance, and by teaching them how to make things, build things, and generally assert themselves in the public realm of the art school and the city as a whole.¹⁴

With *Womanhouse*—a tour de force of feminist curating---as---pedagogy—Chicago and Schapiro thus worked with the Feminist Art Program students to gain the range of carpentry and other hands---on skills necessary to renovate a derelict house near downtown LA, and then to fill the rooms of the house with feminist performance works and art installations open to the public for several weeks.¹⁵ Each installation provided feminist commentary on various aspects of domestic space—as shown in these images.¹⁶

Chicago’s 1975 autobiography *Through the Flower* charts from her point of view the drive to establish separate spaces for women artists to learn and to exhibit art. Not incidentally, one of the key aspects of both these pedagogical and professional aspirations was the *unveiling and activation of the body* as a key site of former oppressions that, through being activated and empowered, could transform previous, exclusionary, modernist notions of “proper” artistic practice. As well, the foregrounding of the body took place both (as many of the participating artists have pointed out) as an extension of some of the women’s activities in late 1960s protest movements, in which the body was the site for mobilizing on the public stage, and, crucially via consciousness--- raising groups in the classroom setting, wherein each participant was urged to articulate her “personal” past as “political” and worthy of public expression, enacting the “personal is political” clarion call of the feminist movement via the explicit activation of the body.¹⁷

Our of the idea of consciousness raising came the broader mandate simply to draw on one’s fantasies to articulate empowering personas, or personas that, in being activated in an art context, could critically intervene in stereotypes about women. Thus, in this image from Suzanne Lacy’s class at the Feminist Studio Workshop in 1976, Katya Beisantz and Syl Booth explore fantasy personas—in one of the key early moments of the kind of “masquerade” that became so well---known through work of Lynn Hershman, made around the same time, or Cindy Sherman a few years later.

Artistically in the LA context the expansion of bodily experience took place via performances and via artworks articulating what was viewed controversially to be a specifically “female experience” of working from the “center,” as we have seen, theorized as “central core” imagery by Chicago and Schapiro.¹⁸ However, this thrust of Chicago’s teaching was also effectively activist, stressing the *activation* of female experience through the body. Thus key feminist performances took place at *Womanhouse*, such as Faith Wilding’s *Waiting*, in which she rocked back and forth in front of an audience reciting the litany of events women have to “wait” for in their position as passive members of family and society, Chris Rush’s piece *Scrubbing* and Sandra Orgel’s *Ironing*, commenting on women’s work, and Karen LeCocq and Leah Youdelman’s performance and installation *Léa’s Room*, an exploration of oppressive ideals of female beauty.

The concept of performance as activating women’s experiences in the public arena—experiences that had long been seen as “private,” “domestic,” and thus as “unimportant” to the larger political scene—was, as noted, a key aspect of early feminist art and exhibition practices. These concepts were carried through with the founding of other alternative spaces Chicago was involved with, including the Woman’s Building, which was a key cultural center from 1973 to 1991, in downtown Los Angeles, and included the Feminist Studio Workshop noted above. **19**

The Woman’s Building was imagined to include the flagship program of the Feminist Studio Workshop, co--founded (after the Feminist Art Program at CalArts ended) by Judy Chicago, designer Sheila de Bretteville, and art historian Arlene Raven, as well as potentially exhibition spaces, theatre companies, a feminist bookstore, and other feminist organizations.²⁰ Along with Womanspace Gallery, another alternative feminist gallery founded in 1972 in Los Angeles, the Woman’s Building and other alternative

exhibition venues founded in LA in the early to late 1970s, from Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art to Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, also hosted feminist events. This network of spaces provided both “separatist” and mixed sites for the display and performance of feminist art. The separatist feminist sites were founded with radical political motivations. As feminist art historian Ruth Iskin noted, Womanspace (like the Woman’s Building) aimed to provide an alternative to the “dealer--critic system” dominated by male artists, patrons, curators, and critics through the establishment of alternative feminist galleries *and* systems of critical and historical analysis.^{21 22}

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The alternative spaces founded by Chicago and her colleagues exemplify a particular, radical approach to promoting feminist art during the early days of the feminist art movement. The second case study, very briefly, is the organization by art historians Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris in a mainstream venue—the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—of the major exhibition, *Women Artists: 1550 to 1950*. Described generally as the “first” exhibition of women artists in history (within the Western context), the *Women Artists* show expanded on Nochlin’s now famous arguments in her 1972 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” where she rejects both the feminist strategy of simply trying to redress the exclusion of art history by recuperating lost women artists for a new canon, and the strategy (exemplified in Chicago’s pedagogy and artwork) of promoting a particular “female experience” as defining women’s art in different terms from men’s.^{23 24}

As my tracing of Chicago’s 1970s career makes clear, in Los Angeles she and other young feminist artists and teachers were developing entirely new *institutions* to articulate new modes of thinking, making, displaying, and teaching art and performance. At the same time, even large and relatively entrenched institutions such as Los Angeles County Museum of Art were not just accepting but *commissioning* a major exhibition on women’s art in history—Sutherland Harris was recruited in 1971 by Museum director Kenneth Donahue to organize *Women Artists*. In fact, however, the LACMA show is explicitly *related to* the efforts and strategies of Chicago and her colleagues. Donahue had been approached by a group of activist women artists in LA who demanded “gallery space and exhibition time for women equal to that being given to male artists.”²⁵ Here, the impact of the growing pedagogical and curatorial efforts on the part of Chicago and her students can clearly be seen directly influencing the programming of a major art institution (guided by a brave and enlightened older white man—Donahue was in his late 50s!). Los Angeles was not typical in the US at the time, and other major cities were not hosting major feminist art shows nor were broad---based initiatives in feminist art pedagogy developing elsewhere to such a degree.

This brief look at explicit curatorial efforts, through the lens of Chicago’s career, clearly indicates that her impact went far beyond the important role her actual art work played in shifting concepts about women’s art.

Chicago's Art as Queer Art

In coming to an ending, I want to point to a paradoxical moment at which Chicago's central core imagery was included in one of the most radical early exhibitions of queer art, *In a Different Light*, a 1995 exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum that marked the strong shift away from the concerns of feminism in the 1970s to the concerns of a queer approach to visual culture and identity politics. Through *In a Different Light*, Lawrence Rinder and Nayland Blake, the co-curators, produced a show that epitomized the concept of sexuality as fluid and impossible to contain or understand in purely binary terms. In the introduction to the catalogue, Rinder notes the following:

In a Different Light explores the resonance of gay and lesbian experience in twentieth-century American art. This exhibition has been developed through poetics rather than polemics: not a definitive survey of gay and lesbian aesthetic sensibilities it is, rather, a gathering of images and objects which, [...] sheds new light on our collective history.^{2627 28}

The inclusion of Chicago's intensely feminist *Female Rejection Drawing* (also called *Peeling Back*) in *In a Different Light* points in two directions: backward, to the powerful joining of aesthetic forms and political arguments by Chicago in the 1970s such that these works are still highly relevant in the 1990s through today; and forward, from Chicago's initiatives into the bones and blood of queer and feminist strategies in curating, making art, and writing about it up through the present day.

In the end, then, Chicago's impact on art practice and institutions is not about only making positive images of women (as some have reductively characterized her multifarious strategies and bodies of work). It is, rather, far more profound in that she has long set models for wresting power from those already dominating structures of viewing, teaching, and exhibiting in the art world. Through her immense and ongoing energy—her epic will to power—Chicago has forged paths through her work, her activist approach to teaching and establishing alternative institutions, her overall *curatorial* strategies of creating spaces to see differently. Positioning her work as queer is just one possibility it opens to the future.

Bibliography

¹ www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/curator

² Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, tr. Walter Kaufmann, P. 259; see <http://www.theperspectivesofnietzsche.com/nietzsche/nwill.html>

³ Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, tr. Borde and Malovany-Chevallier, 12; importantly Beauvoir goes on to note that “the Jewish problem on the whole is very different,” as well she might in the wake of the Holocaust. She argues that women and blacks have more in common in terms of shared oppression; see 12.

⁴ Chicago, “Let Sisterhood be Powerful,” *Womanspace Journal* 1, n. 1 (February/March 1973), 4. She continues on to note that the male artists in the city “did not care about my struggle for identity.... They did not relate to my need to define my womanhood in my work, to assert my sexuality in my paintings, to say; [sic] this is a woman, not your narrow conception of pinup queens, goddesses, and ministering angels.”

⁵ This section is a revised version of “A Wet Scarlet Message from the Core of the Body: Judy Chicago’s *Red Flag*,” *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (Museo Bilbao).

⁶ “This is a print made from the center drawing of the Rejection Quintet, five works originally inspired by several experiences I had in Chicago; one with a male dealer, the other with a male collector, both of whom made me feel rejected and diminished as a woman. I decided to deal with my feelings of rejection and in so doing confronted the fact that I was still hiding the real subject matter of my art behind a geometric structure as I was afraid that if I revealed my true self, I would be rejected. In the first drawings I asked “How does it feel to be rejected?” and answered : “It’s like having your flowers split open.” In the last drawing I asked: “How does it feel to expose your real identity?” And answered: “It’s like opening your flower and no longer being afraid it will be rejected.” In this, the transitional image, I “peeled back” the structure to reveal the formally hidden form. What a relief to finally say: “Here I am, a woman, with a woman’s body and a woman’s point of view.”

Text from the Peeling Back piece, found on: <https://prezi.com/hw2aendjmkq/untitled-prezi/> (from SFMoMA website?) “What I wanted to do for my students was to encourage them to ‘peel away’ the formal prohibitions to my own content. But of course they didn’t have them yet. ... “

7 She began to establish an alternative pedagogical and exhibitionary logic to the mainstream artworld—developing the groundbreaking “Feminist Art Program with Miriam Schapiro and a group of young women artists and designers first at California State University, Fullerton, and then at California Institute of the Arts in the early 1970s. These women organised performances born of the consciousness raising sessions these as part of their pedagogical routine (sessions that, driven in part by Chicago’s aggressive and focused personality, were often volatile and destructive as well as productive in developing independent creative egos in the women participants); they made pictures, objects, and installations. The most famous of the installations was the 1972 *Womanhouse*, a house in central Los Angeles they rescued from dereliction with new-found carpentry and renovation skills and turned into a multi-part, multi-authored commentary on domestic feminine experience.

8 She and Miriam Schapiro theorized central core imagery as linked to female experience in their important 1973 article "Female Imagery," *Womanspace Journal* (Summer 1973), 11--14; reprinted in Amelia Jones, ed., *Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 40--43.

9 This self-sufficiency is coupled with a sense of the vulnerability of the female body in relation to the underlying violence motivating patriarchy — as is even more assertively proclaimed in two related photographic works from the same year — *Gunsmoke*, which shows Chicago, head tilted back with a gun pointed in her mouth; and *Love Story*, depicting a female ass with a hand holding a gun to it (both hands seem to be male). *Love Story* includes a long text below the image, enunciated from the masculine point of view and beginning with the aggressive sentence “YOU ARE HERE TO SERVE YOUR MASTERS,” and continues with a violent story of gang rape. 10 Chicago and Schapiro, “Female Imagery,” *Womanspace Journal* (Summer 1973), 11.

11 As the general concept of the piece grew, so did Chicago's ambitions for the plates and the needlework runners surrounding them and her need for assistance (though Chicago never claimed the project to be collaborative as far as its authorship was concerned, she has been criticized for her hypocrisy in depending on the help of volunteers). Ultimately, each place setting was completed to include an elaborately modelled and painted 14 inch porcelain plate (designed by Chicago and executed by Leonard Skuro and a team of ceramicists) placed on an exquisitely needle worked runner representing Chicago's vision of each woman's special contribution to history (these were completed by teams headed by Susan Hill in stitches common to the period of the woman commemorated). Running from the "Primordial Goddess" through Greek culture (Sappho) up to the Enlightenment (Mary Wollstonecraft) and the nineteenth-century (Sojourner Truth [one of the few women of color at the table], Susan B. Anthony, and others), The Dinner Party's final "guest" is Georgia O'Keeffe (served by a floral plate with flesh-colored, labial folds lunging off the surface), an artist whose flower paintings Chicago found particularly inspirational.

12 <http://www.throughtheflower.org/>; accessed September 22, 2015.

13 As well as: **Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Women Artist's Movement Southern California 1970---1976 (Santa Monica: Double X, 1977)***; Moira Roth, *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in the 70s* (exhibition catalogue); Meyer, *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in the 70s* (exhibition catalogue); Terry Wolverton, *Insurgent Muse: Life and Art at the Woman's Building*.

14 Cite directly from *Through the Flower*?

15 CHECK THIS: one week?

16 , such as Susan Frazier, Vicki Hodgett, and Robin Weltsch's "nurturant kitchen" with its egg--breasts covering the walls and ceiling, Sandy Orgel's "linen closet," with its spatial literalization of a young woman being trapped in social expectations, Wilding's "womb room," and Chicago's "menstruation bathroom."

17 On the protest movements see wilding etc. LAGL interviews and LAGL essay.

18 As Faith Wilding put it in her history of the movement, *By Our Own Hands*, in 1977, the activation of one's personal past through body art and performance was a crucial means of "transformation": "women have brought new dimensions to performance art and ... their work often deals with self--transformation, which has come to be an important feminist theme in the seventies." Wilding, *By Our Own Hands*, 108.

19 **Cheri Gaulke, *This is My Body*, 198119**

Gaulke with quote from *At Home*: "In magazines and on television, we see women posing while mopping the kitchen floor, and we too learn to pose—as women. We played house only to grow up to get the starring role. Performance is not a difficult concept to us. We're on stage every moment of our lives—acting like women....

Performances were sometimes a way for women to take control of their situation at home by extending it into the public sphere." From 1983 catalogue, *At Home*.19

20 See Terry Wolverton's wonderful history of the woman's building....; and the essay by Laura Meyer, "The Los Angeles Woman's Building and the Feminist Art community, 1973---1991," in *The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in LA*, ed. David E. James (Philadelphia: Temple U Press, 2003), 39---62.

21 In order to preserve the notion of a modernist mainstream it is necessary to categorize as peripheral and minor any art that does not address itself solely and primarily to the set of issues to which the modernist line is dedicated. It is for this reason that the art of the best women artists has been categorized as minor, when addressing itself to uniquely female subject matter. Therefore, it is the task of the feminist theoretician to explicate feminist art on its own terms, with a new set of independent criteria Iskin, "A Space of Our Own, Its Meanings and Implications," WOMANSPACE JOURNAL v. 1, n. 1 (February/March 1973), p. 9.

22 Iskin (a white lesbian feminist) furthers the radical challenge these spaces initiated by noting the crucial importance of not only supporting "women" artists per se but for this feminist goal as encompassing an anti---racist and queer agenda: "For feminist art and feminist revolution to take priority in Womanspace, the exhibitions should give maximum exposure to female artists...., and to provide special opportunities for visibility to minority groups w/in the female community (such as the Black Women's Show and the Gay Week)." Iskin, 9.

23 Nochlin argues, controversially, "that there have been no supremely great women artists, as far as we know, although there have been many interesting and very good ones who remain insufficiently investigated or appreciated." Full footnote for her article; available on line at <http://www.miracosta.edu/home/gflore/noclin.htm> 24 Nochlin and Sutherland---Harris continue along this line in the catalogue, asserting that

an approach to feminist curating that involves simply inserting the work of historical women artists into un---touched canonical frameworks is "ultimately self---defeating, for it fixes women within preexisting structures without questioning the validity of these structures"; through such misbegotten methods, they argue, feminism "has come dangerously close to creating its own canon." CHECK CITATION; this is quoted in Thalia Gouma---Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," Art Bulletin 69, n. 3 (Sept. 1987), 326---357.

As follows: ----- 1976 Nochlin and A. Sutherland Harris publ. Women Artists 1550--1950, show in LA

==>> goal of proving that women have been as accomplished as men: "... we believe such an approach is ultimately self--defeating, for it fixes women within preexisting structures without questioning the validity of these structures."; and, feminism "has come dangerously close to creating its own canon" [327]// Can't find in skimming original catalogue.

Nochlin also explicitly, in the last part of the long "Introduction" to the catalogue, debunks the idea of "female imagery" by comparing works by a range of early twentieth--century women artists, from Köllwitz to O'Keeffe. She ends the introduction by noting "Nothing could better demonstrate the complexity, and the basic ambiguity, of the issue of what constitutes a valid 'feminist imagery' than the recent transformation of the placid iris into a fighting symbol [by Georgia O'Keeffe]." 67.

25 Sutherland Harris describes meeting Donohue at a conference *Caravaggio and His Followers* held at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1971; during the course of related meetings Donohue described to Sutherland Harris being approached by a group of women artists at LACMA who demanded "gallery space and exhibition time for women equal to that being given to male artists." See Sutherland Harris, "Acknowledgments," *Women Artists 1550--1950* (Los Angeles: LACMA, 1976), 8.

Donohue, born in 1915, was the second director of LaACMA and, a specialist in Italian art, does not seem the obvious candidate for promoting the first exhibition of [women's art](http://www.dictionarofarthistorians.org/donahuek.htm) (see <http://www.dictionarofarthistorians.org/donahuek.htm>).

26 Lawrence Rinder, "An Introduction to *In a Different Light*," in *In a Different Light: Visual Culture, Sexual Identity, Queer Practice*, eds. Nayland Blake, Rinder, and Amy Scholder (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1995), 1.

27 The curators of *In a Different Light* thus mirrored the concept of queer mobilized in one of the first exhibitions of "homosexual" art, Dan Cameron's 1982 *Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art* (at the New Museum in New York). Cameron had argued in the catalogue to the 1982 show that, "[t]o assume that gay content cannot be present without a strong and clear indication that someone involved has sex with members of the same gender is to underestimate both the flexibility of the idea of content and the gay imagination." Dan Cameron, *Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art*, exh. cat. (New York: New Museum, 1982), 9.

28 Blake explained in his curatorial essay accompanying *In a Different Light* that “[t]he experience of opening up a place for queer identity on the street then provided the model for doing so in the context of the gallery.”²⁸ However, he notes that due in part to the tendency among arts institutions to cut queer work down to “sizes it could digest,” much of this activist work remains absent from the “visual memory of the art world,” existing as though in a parallel, yet annexed, art history. *Ibid.*, 26---27. The 2012 exhibition *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s*, curated by Helen Molesworth at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, suggests that historians and curators are increasingly turning their attention to the art work of the 1980s, which, in Molesworth’s opinion, must necessarily include the influence of feminist thought and the AIDS crisis on cultural production. However, this is a nascent historical project and surely more work on the subject will be forthcoming. See Molesworth, *This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago & New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

VII. Edition Feminist Perspectives in Artistic Productions
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