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feminist response to pop culture

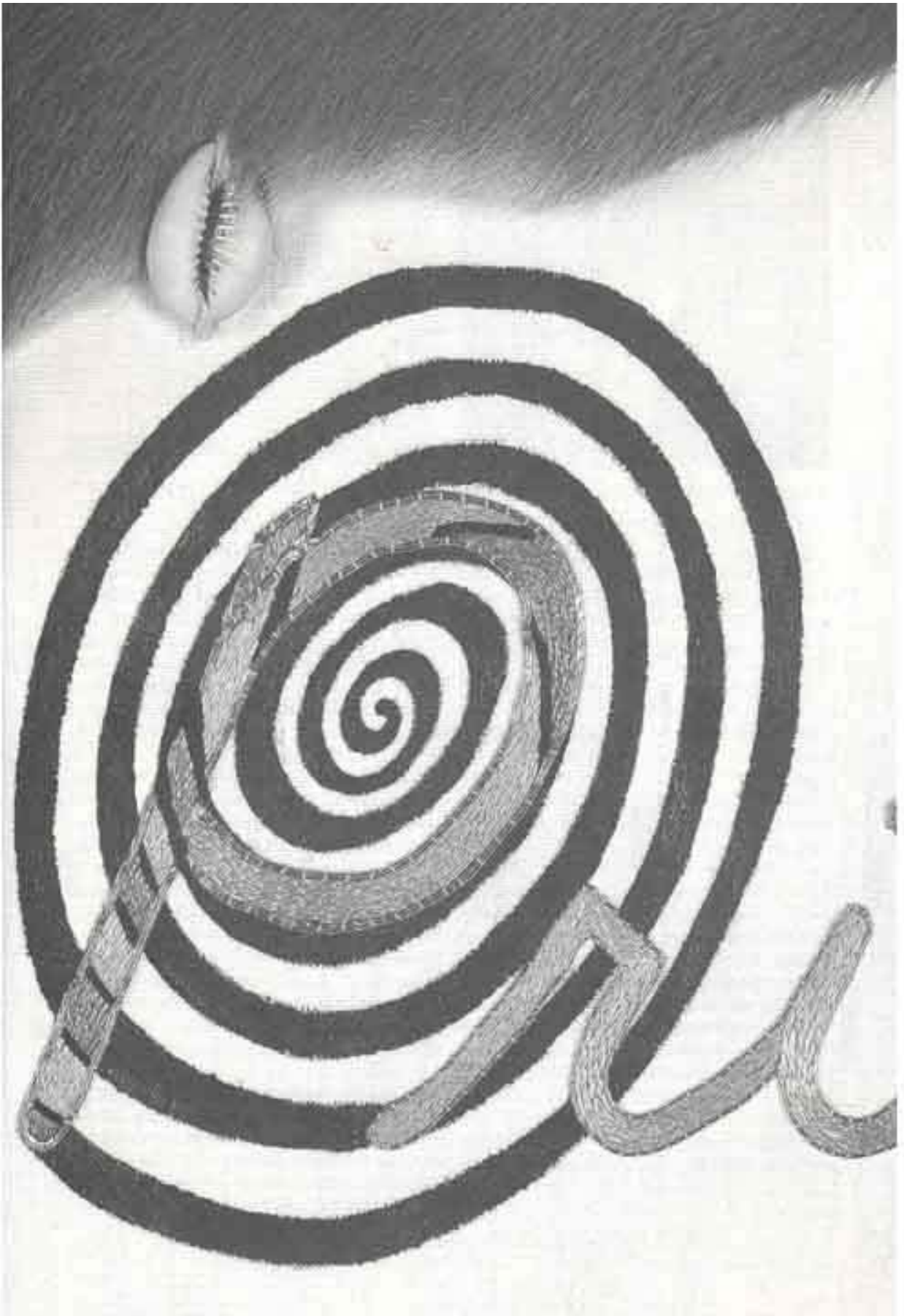
party line

30 Years Later, Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* Has Enough to Go Around

To many people, the name Judy Chicago is synonymous with the 1970s Feminist Art movement. She created the Feminist Art Program at California State University-Fresno in the early 1970s and cofounded a similar program at California Institute of the Arts with Miriam Schapiro. In 1973, she cofounded the Women's Building in Los Angeles with art historian Arlene Raven and designer Shelia de Bretteville. Shortly after, she began her best-known work: *The Dinner Party*, a massive, triangular table set with 39 place settings, each representing a historic female figure—from Sappho to Artemisia Gentileschi to Sojourner Truth—is a multimedia monument that employed a variety of techniques (ceramics, needlework, china painting, gilding) and was more than five years in the making.

The Dinner Party debuted at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979, and though the exhibition was profitable for the museum ("the bookstore made so much money they bought a computerized cash register they called 'Judy,'" notes Chicago), its debut inspired heated arguments everywhere from the feminist community to the halls of Congress. As an explicit comment on women's erasure from the annals of history, the piece was both more political and—with its famously vulvic painted plates—more sexual than much modern art of the time, and its coverage by mainstream news and art publications was, though widespread, largely derisive.

by Lauren O'Neill-Butler





The Dinner Party, installation view and "Primordial Goddess" place setting

Chicago went on to create other collaborative works, including the *Birth Project* (1980–83) and the *Holocaust Project* (1985–93), and to receive a slew of grants, awards, and honorary degrees. Her *Through the Flower* organization, established in 1978 to help facilitate the completion of *The Dinner Party*, works to create programs promoting women's cultural achievements and to promote Chicago's own work. Recently, she helped create the Feminist Art Project, a website for exhibitions, symposia, publications, courses, and other special events designed to highlight feminist artists.

Nearly three decades later, Chicago's most famous work is again in the spotlight: *The Dinner Party* has found a permanent home at the newly constructed Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, opening this spring. Two new books on Chicago's art and life accompany the opening: the biography *Becoming Judy Chicago* by Gail Levin, and *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*, written by Chicago herself. With 2007 shaping up to be a great year for feminist art—along with the opening of the Sackler Center, L.A.'s Museum of Contemporary Art is premiering the exhibition "Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution," and the Brooklyn Museum's "Global Feminisms" will showcase more than 100 contemporary female artists from 50 countries—*Bitch* got Chicago on the phone for her thoughts on the past, present, and future of a controversial genre.

Did you have any idea in 1974 that *The Dinner Party* would become such a feminist landmark?

I set out to try and teach women's history through a monumental work of art, and from the beginning my goal was for it to be permanently housed. I was just very naïve about how that happens. I thought that it would be toured around the world and it would end up permanently housed. So it was a complete shock when instead of my dream coming true, *The Dinner Party* became the piece that nobody wanted to show.

I've had a really long struggle to get here and to fight for the recognition of feminist art, because there's been a real resistance to both the word "feminist" and to acknowledging the importance of the feminist art movement. There were decades of people doing grassroots organizing and women petitioning their local museums and trying to find permanent housing [for the piece], and finally it was achieved because of Elizabeth Sackler, [Brooklyn Museum director] Arnold Lehman, and the trustees of the Brooklyn Museum. I never dreamed how long it would take; I never imagined the level of controversy that would erupt. But out of that I have learned quite a lot.

What kept you going through these tumultuous years? Art critics called the work "kitsch," conservatives called it "porn," and some members of Congress proposed to cut funding to the University of the District of Columbia in 1990 if you donated the work to the school.

That was a sustained effort to silence me and to try and pretend *The Dinner Party* hadn't been seen by a million people. But there are two things that sustained me. One, my knowledge of women's history: I knew the stories of women who had gone before me and I knew what they had encountered. When Elizabeth Blackwell went to medical school—she was the first woman doctor—she was only accepted into the school as a joke. She was spit at on the street and no one spoke to her for two years. Sojourner Truth was humiliated when she lectured; a man [once] said to her, "You must be a man, you can't be a woman." Susan B. Anthony was ridiculed. I think knowing what women before me had been able to overcome in order to make the changes upon which we stand was really important for me.

The other thing is that I've been very fortunate to have a number of people who have supported me, because without support you just can't do anything. Even if they were museum people, or collectors—or in the case of the *Holocaust Project*, Holocaust scholars—that didn't stop writers from accusing them of bad judgment for believing that my work was important. It wasn't just me who had to stand up to it.

But within the feminist community there was also some controversy. *The Dinner Party* opened up many discourses on feminism—on feminism and race, for example, since Truth was the only black woman represented in the piece. Meanwhile, feminist art critics hadn't developed a language of their own, so it was difficult for the work to receive their input, and easy for critics to bash it. All in all, though, it seems like *The Dinner Party* was instrumental in the way that it challenged feminists during this time. Is that right?

Well, I think that's true. Although one of the things that was exceedingly disappointing was the degree to which feminist critics picked up the language of [New York Times art critic] Hilton Kramer—that's an indication of the degree to which women are still enthralled by patriarchal authority. You know, when *The Dinner Party* was shown in 1996 as part of the "Sexual Politics" exhibition at UCLA's Armand Hammer Museum that was curated by Amelia Jones, the Women's Studies department at UCLA threatened to picket the show! I remember Through the Flower's board hearing this and the discussion was, "How could hundreds of thousands of perfectly ordinary women recognize that *The Dinner Party* celebrated women, but so-called feminist theorists didn't get it?"

It seemed like the reviews of the show were negative because it was openly feminist. The Los Angeles Times's Christopher Knight, in his review of the show, wrote: "Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* in Feminist Art History' is the worst exhibition I've seen in a Los Angeles museum in many a moon.... Now the work has been foolishly trotted out at the UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum of Art as the catalyst for a look at feminist issues from the last quarter-century."

As much as Amelia Jones had studied what happened to me, she was unprepared for what happened to her. She was attacked in very much the same way I had been attacked. At that point there wasn't much critics could do about *The Dinner Party* since it was already such a part of our history. People were studying it and, like you said, beginning to look at the discourse around it. But Amelia became the target of some pretty brutal criticism.

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But there have been some revelatory reviews as well, though most have been in the last decade. New York Times art critic Roberta Smith's 2002 review of *The Dinner Party* at the Brooklyn Museum is definitely important to mention.

It was fantastic. The way the Times works is that once somebody renders an opinion, nobody can challenge it within the paper; all the other articles have to be consistent. And so, with that review, Roberta Smith basically reversed the 20 years of New York Times attitude. I called [former SFMOMA and Hammer Museum direc-

tor] Henry Hopkins after the review and said, "Henry, am I a different person than I was yesterday? Is *The Dinner Party* a different piece?" Because once the *Times* changed its opinion, everyone changed their minds. It was incredible, [but] disappointing too. I mean, I was very glad to receive the review—don't get me wrong—but people should think for themselves.

I want to go back to the Feminist Art movement of the late 1970s. Critics like Lucy Lippard and Arlene Raven were standing up and taking controversial risks by trying to expose your art and other feminist art to the public. Despite their efforts, it seems to me that the history of the Feminist Art movement is commonly misunderstood and rarely taught. It's not enough to say that the optimism of the era is gone and that the complexities surrounding sexual politics and contemporary art have surpassed the ideas in your work.

The mainstream art world's attitude towards the 1970s feminist art movement—that it was something minor, and that it's now passé—gets transmitted into their writings on it. So one of the things I'm looking forward to in 2007 is the real story that's going to emerge through these exhibitions.

You know, feminist art has spread all over the world. But it is a long way from being recognized, and that's one of the reasons Arlene and I came up with the Feminist Art Project. I went back to teaching in 1999, and over the last seven years I've taught at six different institutions. One of the reasons I went back was to see what was happening in university art education. Well, I was horrified! Young women are not learning about feminist art, are still not learning about women artists, and are still not encouraged to work out of their experience as women—and if they do, there's no comprehension of what they're doing, so they're not [getting] guidance and support from their professors. That's where a lot of my thinking has been focused, on how to change that.

You present feminism as heroic and expressive: There's frequently a unified symbol of female imagery (a triangle or flower, for example) in your work, and you use embroidery, ceramics, and china painting—forms that have been called "feminine," but raise craft to high art. Why did you choose these materials?

I've always chosen particular techniques for their expressive purpose. And I've often worked, even before I veered away from modernism and minimalism, in fringe

techniques. I've worked with fireworks, I went to auto-body school, and I've worked in plastics. I've worked in techniques that were not so rooted in the Eurocentric tradition because [doing so] allowed for an opening of expressive possibilities. This is fairly significant in the history of women artists—you go back to the 17th century, where women had to use the prevailing forms (biblical painting, for example) and insert their content into that. I tried that with minimalism, and even when I got some personal content in there it wasn't perceived. So when I started *The Dinner Party*, I looked to medieval art, which taught Christian religion through religious imagery. I was looking for new forms to represent content. I had done this series called *The Great Ladies* with sprayed acrylic, but I wanted something more specific in terms of technique, which is how I stumbled onto china painting.

There's been a lot of misunderstanding of my choice of techniques for *The Dinner Party* and even later work, as if I made a feminist proclamation like, "I'm going to use china painting and needlework because it's always been associated with women." No. Both had unexplored aesthetic potential, [and] that probably was because they were associated with women and weren't taken seriously by the mainstream. Nevertheless, had they not had that [potential], I would never have chosen them. But once having chosen them, of course, I realized there was an irony in using these degraded techniques, since I was using them to express a degraded, diminished history. So the techniques fit the content.

Most of your work is concerned with teaching women's history, and your nonprofit Through the Flower practices feminist art pedagogy and takes its name from your first book. Can you touch on your contributions to feminist art education?

The original idea was to build on the success of *The Dinner Party* and to make *Through the Flower* an independent institution—it just took 25 years! Now, *Through the Flower*, which is a feminist art organization, is turning its attention more to education and long-term planning. One of the things we're working on is the development of a *Dinner Party*-related curriculum for grade school, middle school, and high school.

I'm sure there will be school tours going through the Sackler Center, so these will be important in developing young feminists. But you know, I read *Through the Flower* for the first time while preparing for this interview and I wish that I had



The Dinner Party, detail, "Anna van Schurman" runner

read it much earlier—like when I was first learning about women artists 10 years ago!

Well, we brought it back on iUniverse. I could say I'm flattered, but it also speaks to the fact that there has not been as much change as I would have hoped for in those 30 years since it was published. *If Through the Flower*, which was the outpouring of a young woman struggling to find her own voice, is still relevant, that means that there has not been enough change.

It does, unfortunately, still apply to the current situation, even when something like 60 percent of people in art school are women. As you say, this history is treated as totally passé, as if gender in art is no longer an issue.

I've had to work outside of the art market because the market wasn't interested in distributing what I produced. Now that's starting to change, but it's very interesting to see what work is becoming marketable. Of course, it's the work that's the least disruptive.

One of the issues that I hope will become the subject of some discourse is: Can feminist art be absorbed by the mainstream, or will it be cut off from its radical roots? Because feminist art, at least as I conceived of it, was intended to create change, to reach a broad audience and not to be consumed by a small elitist audience.

One of the biggest problems for women has been sustaining our institutions, our magazines, and our schools. And that's a place where work by philanthropists like Elizabeth Sackler could act as a tremendous model. Still, there has been a lack of understanding of the importance of financial support or a lack of willingness on the part of women to take risks and support those vehicles, organizations, forms, and institutions that give us a voice. Until that happens, we're going to stay on the margins.

That leads into my final questions: What are your suggestions for feminist art and your thoughts on the future of feminism? And what's some advice you might give to emerg-

ing feminist artists?

This goes back to your earlier question about how I've sustained myself—I've done so by understanding where I am and where we are in history. This isn't about giving white middle-class career women more rights. This is about a fundamental change on our planet. And art is part of this larger struggle.

We are about to see, as I mentioned, that what has happened is a global feminist art movement. For young women who live in countries where it's literally dangerous to make feminist art, many leave their country of origin and they go to New York or they go to London and they begin to work for a western audience. Even though it's understandable that they do that, we have to be willing to take the risk to challenge the structures of society that both imprison and silence us.

I hope that *The Dinner Party* will act as a model because of its story. There I was—a young woman without any of the trappings that artists usually have in order to get their work [out]. I didn't have a major curator, or a collector, or a critic. [What] we are taught in school is that there are a small number of people who care about art, and that you have to work for that audience. Well, I didn't. And what I learned from what happened with *The Dinner Party* is that the power of art can be enormous.

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