

after the heroic era of Civil Rights. Both are essentially conceptual artists whose perceptions appear to exist within a new "post-black" space, to borrow the Studio Museum in Harlem curator Thelma Golden's appellation for a younger generation of blacks who identify less explicitly (or more circuitously) with the race struggle in America. The works of both Walker and Gallagher are likewise aesthetically provocative in that they pay peculiar homage to Jim Crow stereotypes with subject matter that would be untenable if produced by a white artist today—yet these same works have been embraced with great enthusiasm by the white art establishment.

The two women differ, however, in how they choose to problematize issues of race. Walker proffers readily legible stereotypes with little mitigating clarification, leaving ample room for multiple readings that miss the mark. Conversely, Gallagher's works are too abstruse, at least at first glance, for any ready interpretation, and her approach is more restrained and more deliberately and literally deconstructive. Although each artist strives to destabilize the stereotypes of the black past in an innovative and thought-provoking way, their goals may ultimately be unattainable so long as specters of slave girls, Uncle Toms, and bug-eyed minstrels continue to conjure up powerful and painful memories for those who remember America before the 1960s.

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Judy Chicago

edited by Elizabeth A. Sackler
Watson-Guption, 2002

Personal & Political: The Women's Art Movement, 1969-1975

by Simon Taylor and Natalie Ng
Guild Hall, Easthampton, N.Y., 2002

Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art of the 1970s

by Catherine Morris and Ingrid Schaffner
White Columns, N.Y., 2002

Reviewed by **Cassandra Langer**

The Fall 2002 art season in Washington, D.C. and New York exploded with exhibitions and catalogues of feminist art focus-

ing on the 1970s. All the familiar names were represented, both artists and critics, plus a few of the latter from a younger generation. The shows received wide media attention, with several praiseworthy reviews, even by *New York Times* critics.¹ The most lavish was the major retrospective of Judy Chicago's work, covering her 40-year career, at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. The focus was on the evolution of her art, beginning with the California years (1964-71) and highlighting such signature works as #4 from the Pasadena Lifesavers-Red Series (1960-70), *Marie Antoinette* from the Great Ladies Series, and *Through the Flower* (1973), with its radiating complex of parts and central imagery. Also included were works from *The Dinner Party* (1974-79), Birth Project (1980-85), Powerplay Series (1983-87), and Holocaust Project (1985-93), all reproduced in color in the catalogue, one to a page.

The catalogue begins with an adulatory foreword by Judy Chicago's patron, Elizabeth A. Sackler. The ample illustrations are grouped around each section: Early Years, Breakthrough Years, Dinner Party Years, Birth Project Years, Powerplay Series, Holocaust Project, and End of the Century, featuring her newest work. In a two-page overview, "Judy Chicago: A Moral Vision," Edward Lucie-Smith, the author and co-author (with Chicago) of two books on the artist, compares Chicago's work to that of Thomas Hart Benton and points out her attempts to democratize art through collaboration. He also comments on Chicago's "deeply ethical Jewish culture," rebellion against "machismo," and dedication to "teaching us how to live." (7-8)

Next comes "Entering The Culture" (11-21), a lively exchange between Chicago and the critic Lucy Lippard, who first interviewed the artist for *Artforum* in 1974. Lippard begins by asking, "Why do I think they wouldn't print us today?" In replying, Chicago takes pains to stress the gap between the "theoretical and the real," remarking that many young women do not want to identify with feminism. Their nervy and intelligent discussion touches on "postfeminism" and the "neutralization of today's good feminist art" by the patriarchal mainstream. This is a must-read for anyone interested in the development of feminist art and criticism, as these pioneers touch on the core issues still affecting women, heterogeneity, art making, and the history of art. The book concludes with "Judy Chicago: The Courage of a Singular Conviction" by curator Viki D. Thompson Wylder, who highlights Chicago's passionate dedication to social justice through biographical references to her and the development

of her oeuvre since the 1960s.

According to the media spin, the three New York exhibitions put the "hot" back into 1970s feminism. Coming back to these works after three decades, I found myself staring anew, seeing things I had not seen before. In re-examining some of the dangerous places and verbal brutalities that characterized emerging feminism and criticism of the 1970s, I wondered what any of this has to do with our existence today. To see the same art is not to make the same observations or have the same thoughts.

Judy Chicago completed her most controversial and best known work, *The Dinner Party*, in 1979. Although critical response to it has changed since it was first unveiled—*Newsweek* (October 11, 1999) cited it as one of the "Ten Works of Art That Have Rocked The Ages"—it has taken more than two decades for this iconic feminist installation piece to find a home. Thanks to Sackler's patronage, *The Dinner Party* is back before the public. Now permanently ensconced at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, it occupies an ironic position as a problematic work of 1970s feminist art. There is a certain paradox in the fact that Chicago's signature piece has found a final resting place in a major museum as an artifact of history.

When I visited *The Dinner Party* during its opening week, few others were in attendance. Some twenty-somethings were standing next to me. Curious about the younger generation's take, I asked, "What do you think?" One turned and said, "Now I understand what my mother meant by 'pussy power.'" Her companion asked, "Did she do all the work by herself?" I replied, "No, there were artists and artisans who helped her." "Oh, I get it," she said brightly, "kinda like a feminist sweatshop!" Despite the artist's attempts to challenge remarks like this, Chicago's exploitation of impressionable young women remains a popular misconception.

During the 1970s, the artists Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, along with their students in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, sought a "female imagery" to speak to and about women's experiences. Later, the heresy of Chicago and her collaborators was to rewrite history as a woman's narrative. It was more than a question of perspective; it provided a focal point for both women's rage and aspirations. In retrospect, *The Dinner Party* revealed itself as an amazing multimedia and multi-artist undertaking. It is a cutting-edge work of art that cannot be dismissed as merely a presentation of female genitalia served on a platter.

Since the beginning of her career, Chicago collaborated with others. The critical

buzz, then and now, is that Chicago is a narcissist who hired no one and exploited everyone.² Francis V. O'Connor, an art historian concerned with Depression-era art, especially the mural movement, recently challenged this thinking. "*The Dinner Party*," he claims, "is a great event, if a bit dated, and her atelier of artists and artisans was similar to the community mural movement around the same time. The problem is that modernist art historians are not used to dealing with ateliers and communal work in general."³

Amelia Jones, the editor of *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist History* (1996), the most constructive discussion of the piece to date, offered this during a recent exchange:

In my view, [the accusation of exploitation] is a red herring. She DOES, scrupulously, give credit where credit is due—listing names, showing photographs, etc. in the book and in the display of the piece. It simply is not correct to suggest otherwise. There is no question that her setup is hierarchical and that she takes the position of the primary author—but there is absolutely no hypocrisy in her practice (i.e., she never claims otherwise—this is part of her argument, that women need to learn to take leadership roles if they make sense for them, in her writings).⁴

In the Brooklyn Museum installation, the contributing artists (male and female) are represented by a photomontage with wall texts that flows into a space featuring a video of Chicago talking about her work.⁵

Some African-American women have been outraged by the Sojourner Truth plate (Pl. 17), which, they claim, shows the abolitionist, born Isabella Baumfree (c. 1797-1883), with fanglike teeth. This seems a misreading of the three faces on the plate. The one on the left shows a suffering African-American, tears flowing from her closed eyes. The center image and the right one (with the fanglike teeth) seem rooted in African masks, and the latter is surrounded by an arm raised in the black power clench. Additionally, the novelist Alice Walker incorrectly criticized it (in *My Mother's Garden*) as the only plate without genital imagery. (Amelia Jones has pointed out another, the plate dedicated to the English composer Ethel Smith [1858-1940], which is in the form of a grand piano.⁶)

Lesbian feminists have criticized Chicago for her conceptualizations of women-identified women, for example, Emily Dickinson, who is represented by a ruffled, lacelike "cunt." Dickinson, in fact, was not prissy. She shared a complex lesbian relationship with

her brother's wife, and her sexuality was passionately expressed in her poems. Similarly, Virginia Woolf's lesbianism was entirely muted. The lesbian couple Romaine Brooks and Natalie Barney were named only in the underlying titles, along with about 1,000 other historical women who did not make the plate cut.

Finally, there is the high art-low art challenge. Hilton Kramer raised the issue in his now famous "Does Feminism Conflict with Artistic Standards?" by asking "How are we to reconcile the claims of social justice with the need to distinguish artistic quality?"⁷ This is a question that continues to be raised concerning the productions of all marginalized groups seeking to claim a place in the annals of art. *The Dinner Party* spiritedly challenged traditional standards of excellence by linking craft and art in an unconventional multimedia fusion. Currently, most feminist critics view Kramer and his ilk's critical pretext as a legitimator of precisely those patriarchal values that Chicago's project, for all its theorized flaws, sought to challenge.⁸

The Dinner Party holds up surprisingly well. It still has a political urgency, and any efforts to erase or trivialize it have been effectively cut off by the Elizabeth A. Sackler Foundation's gift, which assures that this controversial work will continue to impact the art community and beyond. The foundation's mission is "to raise awareness of the contributions of women in all areas of art and culture with a specific focus on Feminist Art," claims Sackler, a member of the Brooklyn Museum's Board of Trustees. Giving *The Dinner Party* a permanent home, she believes, will "encourage an ongoing working out of all the possibilities that feminism has opened up since the 1970s."⁹

Guild Hall's "Personal and Political" exhibition, focused on the "first generation" of feminist artists, pleads for establishing a feminist canon that flows into the greater history of art. Included were 34 artists, something of a who's who of seventies feminist artists.¹⁰ Each is represented in the exhibition catalogue by at least one full page color reproduction. Although the authors of the catalogue essays bring together often disparate traditions and opinions, the greater grassroots energy in forging a feminist network is nowhere to be seen. This is lamentable, but perhaps there is no way to ensure that the voices of the neglected will be represented, but one should at least make an effort.

Kate Millet's essay, "Choices and Options," covers old ground, imploring feminists and everybody else to find peaceful solutions to global problems. In view of current world events, one would have to say this is as relevant now as then. Curators Simon Taylor and

Natalie Ng attempt to bring male and female perspectives to a complex topic in their essays "The Women Artists' Movement: From Radical to Cultural Feminism, 1969-1975" and "Embodying Feminism," respectively. Unfortunately, their overviews picture a battle for feminist art that relies heavily on non-visual, secondary source materials and disregards the controversies characteristic of the era. Taylor's essay reads like a tabloid column headed "Andy Warhol Fights For Life." It segues into Valerie Solanas's assassination attempt on that artist. Nothing was as fixed or as clear for those involved in the movement as one is led to believe.

Taylor, like an elevator operator at Bloomingdale's, moves from story to story: *The Situation of Women Artists in America; Radical Feminism; New York; The West Coast; Institutions, 1972-75; Is There a "Feminist Sensibility"?*; *Cultural Feminism; Difference; The "Lavender Menace"; The Year of the Woman, 1975*. His contention that, "women now occupy positions of power" may be true—women do direct some important museums—but they still do not call the shots in the art world. Despite the regional diversity of the women's art movement during this period, when artists, art teachers, and art historians and critics nationwide helped to create audiences for this new and controversial work, Taylor's selective presentation does nothing to change the perspective that power and influence in American art is still East Coast-West Coast based. There is little mention of feminist art criticism or publications of the period that supported the growth of the movement and focused critical attention on the works of many of the artists represented in the exhibition.

Although Natalie Ng opens "Embodying Feminism" with the phrase "Reclaiming the female body," and goes on to talk about the "taboos" broken by feminism, her essay lacks art-historical authority and fails to develop a coherent theory. Commenting on various aspects of the backlash against feminism, she mentions the influences of French feminists such as Luce Irigaray just briefly. Her references to Chicago and Schapiro and the Feminist Art Program and the battles over "nature vs. culture" and "essentialism" favor postmodern tall-tale making rather than in-depth analysis. Reflecting a shift in studies of feminist art, her postmodern epistemology reduces the movement to an ahistorical and hegemonic counterculture. Ng draws attention to power structures involving "the sexes" that are "deeply embedded in Western culture, particularly as regards the nude." (37) She leaves readers with the impression that only feminist philosophers such as Mary Daly, or the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spi-

vak and British art historian Lisa Tickner influenced the course of feminism and art in the United States, which, as readers of this journal know, is not the case. She argues that "simply replicating the strategy of the first-generation of feminist artists would be entirely pointless at the present time." According to her, "The transgressive imagery of the body has lost all of its subversive impetus." (42)

One might contend that few of today's feminist-identified artists can match the audacity of those working during the 1970s. Contemporary feminist art is more diffuse and global in its concerns. But far from losing its subversive impetus, the kind of body art that Hannah Wilke, Lynda Benglis, and Carolee Schneemann made at that time would not be tolerated in a world where Attorney General John Ashcroft drapes nude statues of Justice. Ng's misinforming presentation of the 1970s feminist art movement does not do justice to its formidable legacy. Today's feminist artists are deconstructing the somewhat elusive representation of both gender and difference, challenging models of representation that have dominated the visual arts throughout history. They are addressing issues of race, difference, class, sexual identity, and technology. Unquestionably, we are all indebted to the work on women's representation of the 1970s, particularly the extent to which it has enabled the integrative thinking of art now. This is why Ng's position is so alienated from the innovative and courageous actions that distinguished the art and artists of that period as to be unreconcilable even when fighting similar battles. The reason for this is that the framework used by both Taylor and Ng is too deeply indebted to postmodern theories, which are fast becoming dated. By writing about the movement as a promise that failed, Ng, in particular, only points researchers in more fruitful directions that will require unearthing the varied lives and voices that contributed to feminism's still relevant, coolly ironic critiques.

Inevitably, feminist analysis led to new readings in the history of art and to the emerging fields of queer studies and visual culture. Significantly, a show like "Gloria," held in the bare-bones White Columns Gallery in the West Village, puts the importance of seventies feminism on the grill. A twelve-page newspaper served as the exhibition catalogue. The artists and their works appear as classified ad-



Fig. 1. Hannah Wilke, S.O.S.—Starification Object Series (1978-79), photographs and chewing gum on board (detail). Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. Photo: D. James Dee.

vertisements on the back page." Inside was the curator's statement, "Another Look at Feminist Art of the 1970s," along with old and new quotes by women involved in the movement. Though most readers of this journal are familiar with the issues and icons of feminist art touched upon in the curator's essay, few, I would wager, have a deep understanding of the intellectual exchanges that contributed to our understanding of images that dealt with female sexuality, female identity, and traditionally defined feminine pursuits such as fashion and the decorative arts, much of it undocumented.

Curators Catherine Morris and Ingrid Schaffner conceived "Gloria" as a response to the Guggenheim Museum's panel discussion "Whatever Happened to the Women's Movement," in which the young British artist Vanessa Beecroft denounced her mother as "a communist, feminist, vegetarian and everything," and as a reaction to a *New York Times* article titled "The Artist as a Glamour Puss." (1) Their aim was

to reintroduce the efforts of pioneering artists whose influence was apparently being taken for granted, or worse, entirely written off, and to reclaim the sense of empowerment and agency that many young women now seem to enjoy as a direct legacy of feminism. Gloria set out to establish some parity between then and now, by showing that the art of the period was (and remains) significant, vital, sexy. (1)

By providing reliable and judicious ephemera, the curators proved that feminism grew out of sixties activism and created an action-based performance art that extended beyond conventional art spaces. Indeed, feminist artists of the period participated in a cultural critique framed by Pop Art as defined by the late critic Lawrence Alloway,

who was one of feminism's most vociferous supporters. In Alloway's formulation, as I understood and was influenced by it, Pop was an ongoing critical dialogue that was constantly evolving in relation to contemporary culture.

Thirty years later, due to what I consider a total misunderstanding of the aspirations of the feminist art movement in America, many younger artists disdain exhibitions devoted to women artists because they feel that they will not be viewed as seriously as those

stemming from a larger mainstream political context. This attitude extends back to the 19th century and needs to be re-examined. Although short on print and graphic illustrations, the "Gloria" catalogue demonstrates how complicated, dynamic, courageous, and innovative feminist art of the seventies was in its attempts to democratize culture and uphold diversity and pluralism. It provides a lucid, carefully researched, and reasonably fair-minded narrative of the extraordinary contributions of feminist artists. Both the exhibition and catalogue reflect the curators' reform-minded pragmatism and immerse viewers and readers in some of the political realities that shaped the arts during this fascinating decade.

Hannah Wilke was among the first artists to challenge woman's traditionally passive role as the object of male contemplation and extend it to issues concerning ideologies of gender, sexuality, and power, as in her S.O.S.—Starification Object Series (1978-79; Fig. 1), where she twisted used pieces of chewing gum into vaginal loops and pasted them on her nude body. The 35 black-and-white photographs in the series, each 6½" x 4½", were infinitely rearranged. Wilke worked primarily as a sculptor, experimenting with clay, lint, latex, erasers, chewing gum, chocolate, and her own body. She continued to produce her paintings, drawings, videotapes, and photographs even after her body—beautiful in the earlier works—had been deformed when she was dying from cancer (born in 1940, she died in 1993).

Serious art historians refrain from referring to artists' physical beauty but with Wilke it is appropriate, since she used her self-image to evoke the physical, emotional, and especially psychic expressions of our deepest thoughts and feelings. Wilke's beautiful nude self was at the heart of her art—it was truly written on the body. She played with clichés,

using sleazy porn, advertising copy, and her own naked body to symbolize patriarchy's violence against women. In "Exchange Values," the words that accompany the sexy images paraphrase Karl Marx:

Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects. What, however, does belong to us as objects is our value. Our natural intercourse as commodities proves it. In the eyes of each other we are nothing but exchange values.

Provocative quotes underscore Wilke's pointed involvement with language and the meaning of objects long before a younger generation discovered it. It was through puns and her ability to transform our consciousness of art that she connected with, and even transcended, Marcel Duchamp.

Long before feminist theorists confronted Freud, hysteria, and female sexuality, Wilke, Schneemann, Benglis, and Valie Export attacked the art world by using body language and flaunting their sexual independence in a confrontation with sexism and patriarchal power. (See, for example, Valie Export's cut-away crotch photographs, "Action Pants: Genital Panic.") In a similar vein Nancy Grossman's leather encased heads like *No Name* (1968; Pl. 18), with their laced lips, embodied the sado-masochistic narrative of patriarchal society, while Benglis's pinup posed with a dildo from her 1974 *Artforum* advertisement exposed the naked force of masculinist culture. Taking another tack, Martha Rosler's video interpretations of a robotic housewife revealed women's domestic slavery. Looking back, as "Gloria" does, we see how these feminist artists, critics, and historians altered the course of the art world. These artists' insistence on the use of women's bodies as the political edge let people know that you can not disembodiment the work from the experience, thus helping to pioneer current technologies of visual representation, including problematic works like Orlan's videotapes of her frequent extreme surgical makeovers that open up new debates in feminist criticism and theory.

What are the implications of these diacritical narratives for the development of a feminist history of art, cultural criticism, queer studies, and visual culture? I addressed some of these issues in "Feminist Art Criticism: Turning Points and Sticking Places," where I suggested that to exclude on the basis of narrow subject boundaries or fuzzy politics is a kind of censorship.¹²

Coming back to the work in these exhibits after all these years, I am better able

to see the evolution of feminist theory, the feminist movement (even in these reduced installations), and feminist cultural criticism. It is astonishing how relevant works like Nancy Spero's *Body Count* (1974) and Adrian Piper's *Some Reflective Surfaces* (1975) at Guild Hall, and "Dara Birnbaum's *Technology/Transformation: Wonder Woman* (1978) and Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills" (1979) at White Columns feel. Their themes are still charged: dangerous beauty, trashy splendor, haute-couture fashions, the quest for thinness, daily monotony, sexualized imagery, manipulative advertising, fear of aging, and tongue-in-cheek humor that bites to the quick of what needs to be fixed in our society. Feminist art, now as in the seventies, represents a multiplicity of subject areas that demand a sustained vocal and global critique of a political orientation that rewards sexism, racism, homophobia, and class warfare.

These exhibitions and the catalogues that accompanied them call into question the curatorial practices of a younger generation steeped in postmodernism. However unadventurous, they provoke discussions about these pioneering feminist artists that segue into discourses concerning today's visual culture and art history. Much of this art appears dated and will disappoint the contemporary viewer. Why would artists or critics waste their time re-justifying Chicago's staid, literalist visions at a time when feminists and media theorists have begun examining visual representations in the popular media? The answer: Precisely because seventies feminism is part of the continual evolution of life-affirming cultural criticism that is currently missing from much postmodern discourse. But without postmodernism's challenges we would not be able to take the next steps.

The problem with these three exhibitions is the canon-building they represent. I suspect that many of these artists will now be enshrined in an annex of art history and safely displayed in a Barney's window. Unfortunately, neither survey addressed the work and concerns of lesbian artists who named themselves early on in the movement. My greatest fear, however, is that this feminist art of the seventies will be completely appropriated and absorbed by the mainstream, and the larger implications of the artists' critical practices will be stored in the selective deep freeze of art history.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Roberta Smith's review, *New York Times*, September 20, 2002, E34.

2. These critics ignore the fact that her enterprise was set up like a business organization, an atelier much like the Weimar Bauhaus, which produced some of the most innovative and enduring ceramic, textile, glass, metal, and other works of design and art without ever crediting all of the artisans who participated.

3. E-mail to author from Francis V. O'Connor, October 16, 2002.

4. E-mail to author from Amelia Jones, October 24, 2002. For Julie Springer's review of the Jones catalogue, see *WAJ* (S/S99), 52-53.

5. The text states "An exhibition conceived by Judy Chicago and executed by her in cooperation with a working community of men and women." Among the people listed are Jan Marie DuBois, a weaver and bookkeeper, who wove the Hapatia tapestry; Audrey Cowan, who worked on the Eleanor of Aquitaine runner; Elaine Ireneland, the needlework coordinator, and Marjorie Briggs, who worked on the Theodora and Herschel pieces.

6. E-mail to author from Amelia Jones, February 7, 2003.

7. Hilton Kramer, "Does Feminism Conflict with Artistic Standards?" *New York Times*, January 27, 1980, D1, 27.

8. Nicholas Arnaud, in "The Sex Of Which There Is One," *Cahiers des Arts Visuels Au Quebec* (Autumn 1982), 4-6, compares *The Dinner Party* plates showing women as active, independent beings with Picasso's works in clay depicting women as passive.

9. Interview with Elizabeth A. Sackler at the Sackler Foundation, October 14, 2002.

10. The checklist includes Kate Millet, Valerie Solanas, Hannah Wilke, Laurie Anderson, Eleanor Antin, Lynda Benglis, Judith Bernstein, Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, Mary Beth Edelson, Louise Fishman, Audrey Flack, Eunice Golden, Mary Grigoriadis, Nancy Grossman, Harmony Hammond, Valerie Jaudon, Alice Neel, Faith Ringgold, Adrian Piper, Miriam Schapiro, Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, Joan Semmel, Sylvia Sleigh, and a bevy of feminist video and filmmakers.

11. The artists represented in "Gloria" were Laurie Anderson, Eleanor Antin, Lynda Benglis, Dara Birnbaum, Valie Export, Nancy Grossman, Jenny Holzer, Joan Jonas, Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Ana Mendieta, Yoko Ono, Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, Carolee Schneemann, Cindy Sherman, Mimi Smith, Nancy Spero, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Hannah Wilke, and Martha Wilson.

12. Cassandra L. Langer, "Feminist Art Criticism: Turning Points and Sticking Places," *Art Journal* (Summer 1991), 21-27.

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