

A BITE OUT OF HISTORY: A FEMINIST  
REEVALUATION OF JUDY CHICAGO'S

*THE DINNER PARTY*

By

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REEVALUATION OF JUDY CHICAGO'S  
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Abstract: For the purposes of this project, I examine Judy Chicago's monumental work of feminist installation art, *The Dinner Party*, through a contemporary intersectional feminist lens as a means to resolve the problematic elements found not only within the piece itself, but also within its time and place of creation and its continual preservation as a historic and foundational feminist art object. Questioning our traditional understandings of *The Dinner Party*, I consider how contemporary intersectional feminist thought and feminist art history can contextualize sometimes problematic works (even if those works are considered to hold feminist understandings) while still recognizing and appreciating their social and historical value. The precise moment in feminist art and history in which the piece was created, has often compromised *The Dinner Party*'s capabilities to evolve and incorporate intersectional approaches. While *The Dinner Party* undoubtedly has a specific place within the genealogy of feminism, notably situated within the United States' Second-Wave feminist movement, this specific historical and social context has continually reinforced the work to exist and primarily function as the starting place for Western feminist art history. In questioning both the historical and contemporary value of the work, I explore *The Dinner Party*'s missing stories—asking what else the work has to offer because of what and who it misses. What is it about this unwavering historical context that can actually inform a new feminism? I therefore provide three chronological and intersectional-based approaches to the work, looking to the past, present, and future, as a means to resolve the problematic elements within the piece itself and within the art historical canon. Using this feminist framework, I argue that *The Dinner Party* remains an important point in our feminist art historical past, while at the same time becomes a rich object that actually evolves with us as our contemporary feminist theories progress towards a more equal and inclusive future.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

On March 14<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Judy Chicago's monumental work of second-wave feminist art, *The Dinner Party*, was opened to the public at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Upon its debut, *The Dinner Party* immediately became a national sensation, sparking interest as well as controversy from average museum-goers to the United States House of Representatives. Although the work has received mixed reviews over the years, from flagrant criticisms to unabashed praises, it has nevertheless played a unique, and arguably pivotal, role in the establishment of feminist art and feminist art history. Thanks to its prominent status within the field of feminist art (whether that prominence has been achieved through praise or critique), the piece has been the subject of countless discussions and much scholarship. It has been nearly forty years since *The Dinner Party* made its premiere, and yet scholars in the fields of Gender and Women's Studies, Feminist Studies, and Art History, art critics, and even the artist herself seem no less intrigued by the work today than upon its first public appearance.

Judy Chicago, born Judith Sylvia Cohen in 1939, is an American artist and educator most known for her collaborative projects. Her works are constructed from a conscious choice of

media that are stereotypically gendered. She employs art forms traditionally associated with women, such as textile and needle work, in combination with art forms generally associated with masculine connotations, such as welding and large-scale construction, to produce her grand installations.<sup>1</sup> While trying to insert herself into the Los Angeles art scene of the 1960s, after graduating from the University of California, Los Angeles, Chicago found that becoming a successful “woman artist” was a difficult feat in a male-dominated art world.<sup>2</sup> In reference to that period of her life, she has said “my only choice at that time seemed to involve modeling myself on men and men’s art. But this did not work for me.”<sup>3</sup> In trying to find an art that better included and acknowledged Chicago’s experiences as both a woman and an artist, she began doing research on women’s history—not surprisingly, she didn’t find much. The information on women’s history that Chicago did find, over the course of several years, was crucial for her to share with others. She said “at that point, I began to see myself as being in service to a larger purpose; that is, as having the obligation of using my talent on behalf of teaching women’s history through art.”<sup>4</sup> Those findings on women’s history would in fact be shared by means of her most famous art project, *The Dinner Party*.

Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* has since become a, if not *the*, monumental work of Western feminist art. Although *The Dinner Party* premiered nearly seven years after the famous *Womanhouse* installation, also organized by Judy Chicago alongside Miriam Schapiro, it is *The Dinner Party* that has continually garnered the attention of those in the art world since its debut.

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy R. Lippard et al., *Judy Chicago* (Watson-Guption Publications, 2002), 4.

<sup>2</sup> I use the phrase “woman artist” in quotations because, I believe, we should be able to discuss artists without a gendered qualifier. However, for the purposes of this essay, using the term “woman” is actually important to understanding women’s longstanding displacement in the art world and for understanding Chicago’s point of view in relation to *The Dinner Party*.

<sup>3</sup> Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation* (London ; New York: Merrell, 2007), 10–11.

<sup>4</sup> Chicago, 12.



While *Womanhouse* was unprecedented in its construction and content, it was an ephemeral exhibition installed in a rundown mansion on the outskirts of Hollywood that was always meant to be destroyed.<sup>5</sup> The impermanent qualities of *Womanhouse* are quite opposite compared to *The Dinner Party*'s, as Chicago had every intention of permanently sharing this piece with the world in an accredited institution.

Though the work has garnered the attention of many, why has *The Dinner Party* come to represent the beginning of women's contributions to art history? Why is it that as we begin feminist art historical studies, we start with *The Dinner Party*? In Linda Nochlin's 1971 canonical piece of feminist art history, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," she prompts the field of art history to engage with and include feminist discourse. However, despite Nochlin's mentioning of the women artists who have produced artwork centuries before Chicago, our discussions of feminist art history today still often begin with *The Dinner Party*.<sup>6</sup> If it is the case that *The Dinner Party* will remain a starting point in including a feminist art historical perspective, are we actually discussing the piece under all the right terms? If so, I believe that we can ask more of it in relation to the art historical canon more broadly.

Therefore, in the pages to follow, it is my intention to offer new examinations of *The Dinner Party* to resolve the problematic elements found not only within the piece itself, but also within its time and place of creation and its continual preservation as a historic and foundational feminist art object. I begin with introducing the works itself, the literature which has aided in its canonization, and contextualize the piece within a brief history of feminism. In the subsequent

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<sup>5</sup> Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, *Womanhouse* (California Institute of the Arts, 1972).

<sup>6</sup> Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," in *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays* (Westview Press, 1989), 145–78.

chapters, three points of interest provide feminist frameworks that allow *The Dinner Party* to remain an important point in our feminist art historical past, and become a rich object that actually evolves with us as our contemporary feminist theories progress towards a more equal and inclusive future. While I wanted to make clear throughout this thesis that the circumstances of Second-Wave feminism under which the piece was created cannot be ignored, it is not my wish to add any more fuel to this argument—as this point has been made clear by some feminist art historians and the artist herself. Rather, I argue that the piece continues to provide us with means to evaluate the art historical canon and can aid us in the production of a well-rounded feminist art historical discourse. Like many artworks, this is an object of the past that is situated within the present. Despite being an object of many valid critiques, it is a piece that can still be discussed with contemporary relevance to the state of feminist art history.

### **Welcome to *The Dinner Party*:**

After the work's unveiling at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, national uproar, social backlash, and harsh criticisms influenced institutions' interest in exhibiting, housing, or taking care of the piece. A museum tour of *The Dinner Party* was scheduled after its display at the SFMoMA ended in the spring of 1979, however, museums continued to rescind their invitations to display the work until the tour completely collapsed. Of this time, the artist has said “years later I would joke that *The Dinner Party* became the piece that everyone wanted to see but no museum wanted to show.”<sup>7</sup> The following year (1980), an international tour finally took hold, but inevitably the piece went back into storage when the tour ended in 1988. It wouldn't be until

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<sup>7</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 270.

1996 that *The Dinner Party* reopened at the UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in Los Angeles. An exhibition titled “Sexual Politics,” curated by feminist art historian, Amelia Jones, sought to “spark a reevaluation” of the piece and “contextualize *The Dinner Party* in what was by then twenty years of feminist theory and art practice.”<sup>8</sup> Once again, the piece (as well as the exhibition overall and even the curator) received scathing reviews—despite the show’s 55,000 visitors. In 2002 Elizabeth A. Sackler, a longtime friend of Chicago, acquired the piece and donated it to the Brooklyn Museum. And in 2007, the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art opened to the public. This center is now the work’s permanent home, functioning as the pièce de résistance of the feminist art wing.<sup>9</sup>

When one enters the Brooklyn Museum’s Center for Feminist Art today, text against a red wall welcomes audiences to *The Dinner Party*, inviting the viewer in to a “foyer” where six large woven banners hanging from the ceiling reveal feminist themes and forms that will be crucial once one has arrived at the main event. These woven tapestries display phrases “intended to convey Chicago’s vision for an equalized world, one in which women’s history and perspectives are fully recognized and integrated into all aspects of human civilization.”<sup>10</sup> They read as follows:

*And She Gathered All before Her*

*And She made for them A Sign to See*

*And lo They saw a Vision*

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<sup>8</sup> Chicago, 284.

<sup>9</sup> Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation* (London; New York: Merrell, 2007), 10; “Brooklyn Museum: About the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art,” accessed November 29, 2017, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/about/>. According to the Brooklyn Museum, “The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art is an exhibition and education environment dedicated to feminist art—its past, present, and future.”

<sup>10</sup> “Brooklyn Museum: Entry Banners,” accessed January 16, 2019, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner\\_party/entry\\_banners](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/entry_banners).

*From this day forth Like to like in All things  
And then all that divided them merged  
And then Everywhere was Eden Once again*

After walking through this entry point, guests have the option to continue forward into a dimly lit, tent-like “dining room” that separates *The Dinner Party* from the rest of the Center. If they so choose, the viewer then encounters a massive table in the shape of an equilateral triangle—not only a visually strong and stable form, but is one that is associated with feminism and feminist theories (figure 1).<sup>11</sup> Chicago says this triangular form “connotes an ancient symbol for both women and the Goddess.”<sup>12</sup> The three equal sides also references the artist striving for an equal representation of men and women in the art world. The triangular table is split into three wings, each side of the triangle being a “wing.” Each wing is then meant to represent a specific timeframe or historical era from Western civilization. Wing one represents pre-history to Rome, wing two from Christianity to the Reformation, and wing three from the American Revolution to the Women’s Revolution.

Metaphorically seated at the table are thirty-nine (thirteen on each side) women who, for Chicago, each made significant contributions to women’s history. The whole triangular table is placed on *The Heritage Floor*, made of white porcelain tiles. The tile “floor” is inscribed with gold script, naming 999 other historical “women of merit.”<sup>13</sup> In total, the piece includes the names of 1,038 different women. Each woman at the table has their own place setting; each features a plate, chalice, and utensils that rest on an elaborately embroidered runner (30 inches

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<sup>11</sup> Anne Maria Holli, “Feminist Triangles: A Conceptual Analysis,” *Representation* 44, no. 2 (July 1, 2008): 169–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344890802080407>.

<sup>12</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Gerhard, Potter, and Romano, *The Dinner Party*, 2.

by 51 inches).<sup>14</sup> Each runner is shown with different imagery, iconography, and colors while naming the woman for whom the place setting represents. Each dinner plate on top of the table is a hand-carved and hand-painted ceramic piece. These plates however, do not resemble your average dinnerware, as they are importantly made to be either in the shape of a butterfly or a vulva. These vulva and butterfly shapes are all painted or carved differently, similarly to the runner, in that they are meant to represent the work or culture of the woman it symbolizes.

In addition to Chicago's relentless determination to have this work on view and accessible to public, its renowned status can so too be ascribed when considering the work's innovative standing as a single art object—regardless of its feminist and educational intentions. At a time when feminist art was highly performative and often employed the artist's own body, and when a minimalist aesthetic was trending in sculptural and installation art, Chicago's piece visually breaks with many artistic tendencies of the time.<sup>15</sup> The work is deserving of artistic credit when considering the extreme creative skills and planning it took to bring this multimedia piece to life—incorporating textiles, needlework, ceramics, china-painting, construction of the triangular table itself, on top of in-depth historical research. Its monumental status as a work of feminist art also recognizes the physical scale on which Chicago was working, not only its symbolic visual content. As each side of the table is forty-eight feet in length, and nearly every inch of those three forty-eight foot sides are elaborately decorated, Chicago was elevating the standing of feminist art more broadly.

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<sup>14</sup> Gerhard, Potter, and Romano, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Erin Striff, "Bodies of Evidence: Feminist Performance Art," *Critical Survey* 9, no. 1 (1997): 1–18; Gregory Battcock, *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

## Critical Response:

Chicago's persistence to have this work displayed, combined with the educational impact the piece played in introducing women's history, have inevitably led to its canonization. As previously stated, today the work is often used as *the* introductory piece of feminist art in many educational settings. It is included in Advanced Placement art history courses during secondary education, university art history survey courses, online educational sources such as Khan Academy, and major textbooks such as *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, Stokstad's *Art History*, and Arnason and Mansfield's *History of Modern Art*.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to its foundational place within an introductory art historical education, the *The Dinner Party* has been a popular subject of art historical scholarship since its debut. Immediately following its premier in 1979, a 255 page book on the work was published by the artist herself. In *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage*, Chicago discusses the process of the work's creation and offers historical descriptions of every woman represented in the work.<sup>17</sup> Since this initial publication, Chicago has written four more books on the *The Dinner Party* alone, not including her several other lengthy biographical and educational publications which also include discussions of the work.<sup>18</sup> While the amount of text written by the artist herself is quite extensive (in addition to numerous candid interviews, documentary films, and a personal Instagram account, which also contribute to her continual perspectives of the piece) art historians have additionally produced countless studies of *The Dinner Party* in books, essay compilations,

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<sup>16</sup> Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner's Art through the Ages: The Western Perspective*, 13th ed., vol. II (Cengage Learning, 2009), 765–66; Marilyn Stokstad and Michael W. Cothren, *Art History*, 5 edition (Boston: Pearson, 2014), 1100–1102; H. H. Arnason and Elizabeth C. Mansfield, *History of Modern Art*, 7 edition (Boston: Pearson, 2012), 576–77.

<sup>17</sup> Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage*, 1st ed.. (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979).

<sup>18</sup> Judy Chicago, *Institutional Time: A Critique of Studio Art Education* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2014); Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, 1st ed.. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975).

exhibition catalogues, and scholarly journal articles. The most notable publications however have come from well-known scholars in the fields of both feminist art history and women's studies, including: Amelia Jones, Lucy Lippard, Jane F. Gerhard, and Gail Levin.<sup>19</sup>

Though these academics have each offered an array of perspectives by which we have generally come to understand *The Dinner Party*, its creator, and its history, their views of the work are generally favorable. And, while these authors do not deny areas where the physical object and its methods of creation could have been improved, the overall consensus within this large body of scholarship is that the work is absolutely groundbreaking to the subject of feminist art and a positive step towards feminist practices. On the other hand, as groundbreaking as many feminist art historians find it, the work has also received a fair amount of criticism from journalists, fellow artists, and even United States Congressmen.<sup>20</sup> After the work premiered and was gaining recognition within the art world (before the much of the art historical approvals had been published), respected art critics at *The New York Times* and *Time* magazine published negatives reviews of the piece. It was called “very bad” and “failed art” by the *Times*'s Hilton Kramer, and Robert Hughes at *Time* called it “mainly cliché.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Amelia Jones and UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, 1996); Lippard et al., *Judy Chicago*; Jane Gerhard, Claire Potter, and Renee Romano, *The Dinner Party: Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2013); Gail Levin, *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist* (Univ of California Press, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> “Congressman Dicussing Dinner Party | User Clip | C-SPAN.Org,” accessed December 3, 2018, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4603955/congressman-dicussing-dinner-party>.

<sup>21</sup> Hilton Kramer, “Art: Judy Chicago's ‘Dinner Party’ Comes to Brooklyn Museum; Art: Judy Chicago ‘Dinner Party,’” *The New York Times*, October 17, 1980, sec. Archives, <https://www.nytimes.com/1980/10/17/archives/art-judy-chicagos-dinner-party-comes-to-brooklyn-museum-art-judy.html>; Robert Hughes, “Art: An Obsessive Feminist Pantheon,” *Time*, 1980, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,922239,00.html>.

In 1981 artist and critic (a member of the International Association of Art Critics) Maureen Mullarkey published a harsh review of *The Dinner Party*.<sup>22</sup> Though Mullarkey's extremely negative review was not affiliated with a major publication like *The New York Times*, it was read by Chicago and impacted the artist's later discussions of *The Dinner Party*. In her 2007 book, *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*, Chicago references the criticisms made by Mullarkey several times in an attempt to counter the critic's perspectives. Though she does not mention her by name, Chicago directly interacts with the claims made by Mullarkey specifically.<sup>23</sup> Also mentioned by Chicago in this book is a reference to the critical response concerning race relations. Both Alice Walker and Hortense Spillers have critiqued *The Dinner Party* for its depiction of black women—specifically the Sojourner Truth plate which they argue ignores the sexuality of black women because it lacks vaginal imagery.<sup>24</sup>

This concern put forth by Walker and Spillers leads us to consider the growing impact that contemporary feminist theory could have on the history of feminist art and feminist practices—compelling art historians and gender scholars to perform much needed reevaluations of feminist artworks like *The Dinner Party*. Though Chicago has briefly addressed concerns like these pertaining to race, have they in some ways been justified because of the precise moment in feminist art and history in which the work was created?

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<sup>22</sup> Maureen Mullarkey, "The Dinner Party Is a Church Supper: Judy Chicago at the Brooklyn Museum," 1981, <http://www.maureenmullarkey.com/essays/dinnerparty.html>.

<sup>23</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 2–13.

<sup>24</sup> Alice Walker, "Coming Apart," in *Take Back the Night*, 1st edition (New York: Harper Perennial, 1980), 94–104; Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 156–57.



## A Brief Feminist History:

To explore possible answers to this question, it is necessary to engage the work in a discussion of feminist theory and feminist art history. I will now provide a very brief introduction to the history of feminism, and introduce a key concept to my arguments moving forward—intersectionality. The First-Wave Feminist Movement in the United States began during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and lasted until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a movement primarily focused on women’s suffrage and civil liberties. The Second-Wave Feminist Movement of the 1960s and 70s was concerned with furthering First-Wave goals in order for women to be “fully liberated.” These Second-Wave goals and Second-Wave ideology will be continually discussed throughout this project, as Judy Chicago was making *The Dinner Party* during the Second-Wave Movement. To achieve “full liberation,” women needed more economic opportunities and sexual freedoms on top of their recently earned civil rights.<sup>25</sup> Betty Friedan’s 1963 book, *The Feminine Mystique*, is credited with initiating Second-Wave feminist ideology. In this book, Friedan addresses “the problem that has no name,” or the widespread unhappiness of white middle-class women in America who worked as housewives and were restrained to lives of domesticity.<sup>26</sup> After the book was published, massive women’s organizations were formed, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW), which allowed for and encouraged effective women’s communication and cooperation from all over the United States. These newly established assemblages prompted theoretical writings, activisms, art, and literature that were concerned with advancing women’s political, economic, social, educational, and sexual advancements in American society.

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<sup>25</sup> Rosemarie Putnam Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction* (Avalon Publishing, 2013), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. (New York: Norton, 1963).

While the Second-Wave Feminist Movement was indeed concerned with an egalitarian society in which men and women were seen as equal, it is important to recognize that this ideology was mostly focused on white, middle-to-upper class men and women. Black feminist thought and Womanism emerged alongside, not necessarily within, the Second-Wave Feminist Movement. This congruent movement to the Second-Wave allowed for a broader public focus regarding issues specifically facing black women and women of color when Second-Wave feminism had dismissed or altogether ignored the voices of minority women. The term *Womanism* was first used in print the same year *The Dinner Party* premiered. In 1979 Alice Walker's short story "Coming Apart" was published in Laura Lederer's *Take Back the Night* anthology.<sup>27</sup> According to Layli Maparyan Phillips, Walker's use of a "womanist" identity allowed for a more "common" or "everyday" position of women's resistance, rather than taking on the "exclusive and limited label" of "feminist."<sup>28</sup> In the groundbreaking 2006 anthology, *The Womanist Reader*, Maparyan argues that Womanism is *not* Feminism. Though its relationships to feminist and Black feminist thought are important, Womanism "does not privilege gender or sexism; rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action."<sup>29</sup>

This Womanist goal of analyzing all oppressing factors, not just sex and/or gender, has similar objectives to the more contemporary practice of *intersectional* feminism—a feminist viewpoint that takes into consideration the "interconnected nature of social categories such as race, class, and gender."<sup>30</sup> Essentially, an intersectional approach helps us to understand how the combination of class, race, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and gender, affects people

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<sup>27</sup> Walker, "Coming Apart."

<sup>28</sup> Layli Phillips, *The Womanist Reader* (Taylor & Francis, 2006), xix–xx.

<sup>29</sup> Phillips, xx–xxi.

<sup>30</sup> Tong, *Feminist Thought*, 30–31.

differently.<sup>31</sup> Ten years after *The Dinner Party*'s premiere and Alice Walker's introductory use of "Womanism," pioneering scholar in critical race theory, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, first used the term "intersectionality" in a feminist context. At the 1989 University of Chicago Legal Forum, Crenshaw gave a paper titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," wherein she develops a Black feminist criticism that does not treat "race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis."<sup>32</sup> Focusing on the "multidimensionality of Black women's experiences," Crenshaw posits that the "single-axis" framework of analysis limits and undermines feminist theory and marginalizes Black women:

These problems of exclusion cannot be solved simply by including Black women within an already established analytical structure. Because the *intersectional* [emphasis added] experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Thus, for feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating 'women's experience' or 'the Black experience' into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast.<sup>33</sup>

After Crenshaw's public call for intersectional practices, the term's meaning developed throughout feminist and gender scholarship of the 1990s, and has continued to play an extraordinary role into our current state of feminism. For example, in 2016 Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge co-authored a book on intersectionality, wherein they reexamine the complexity of the subject in globalized and contemporary contexts.<sup>34</sup> And while intersectionality importantly stemmed from Womanism and Black feminist thought, the subject has grown to include

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<sup>31</sup> Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge, *Intersectionality* (John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139.

<sup>33</sup> Crenshaw, 140.

<sup>34</sup> Collins and Bilge, *Intersectionality*.

discussions of sexual orientation, age, religion, and bodily ability. In 2015, authors Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa published their fourth edition of *This Bridge Called My Back, Fourth Edition: Writings by Radical Women of Color*.<sup>35</sup> The book offers an updated compilation of feminist essays that account for *all* women of color's multiple positionings—including Black, Native American, Asian American, and Latina women.

The history of these feminist movements and the utilization of intersectionality will be a running topic throughout this project. The two function together to illustrate how *The Dinner Party* project was not only perceived during the time of its construction, but how the piece still prompts us to have meaningful feminist conversations in contemporary environments. Just as many of our feminist theories change and evolve over time, so too does much of our feminist language. As *The Dinner Party* was produced during the Second-Wave Feminist Movement, I would like to briefly define some gendered terms that I will use over the course of this project. While these terms may have had different associations or definitions during the Second-Wave, as used in this paper, the term *sex* refers to a biological category (most often male or female, although there are more) which is generally assigned at birth on the basis of external genitalia. *Gender*, on the other hand, is defined based on culturally defined visual indicators—such as hair, dress, makeup, etc. Today, gender scholars widely refer to *gender* as the social construction of masculinities and femininities in which “an identity is instituted through a stylized repetition of acts,” therefore, it is something one “does” rather than something one “is.”<sup>36</sup> *Sex* and *gender* (along with *sexuality*, *masculinity*, *femininity*, *male*, and *female*) are terms frequently employed

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<sup>35</sup> Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back, Fourth Edition: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (SUNY Press, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (1987): 125–51; Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (Psychology Press, 2003), 392.

to describe works of art and their content, subjects, styles, mediums, along with the creators who produce them. These terms are especially critical to understand when analyzing *The Dinner Party* and its reception, for *sex* and *gender* are often misused or confused with one another.

### **Conclusion:**

It is a combination of both the critical responses and scholarship and its unique historical positioning within the Second-Wave feminist movement that has canonized *The Dinner Party*. However, with its canonical standing, the work's capabilities to evolve and incorporate new feminist approaches has been compromised in the process. Though it undoubtedly has a specific place within the genealogy of feminism and feminist art history, these specific historical and academic contexts have continually reinforced *The Dinner Party* to exist and primarily function as the starting place for Western feminist art history. Therefore, in questioning both the historical *and* contemporary value of the work, I want to explore *The Dinner Party*'s missing stories—asking what else the work has to offer because of what and who it misses. What is it about this unwavering historical context that can actually inform a new feminism? As the piece has become so incredibly foundational to the canonical expectations of feminist art, there are repetitions in scholarly research and more broadly art-based discussions that often ignore the intersectional component that I will use throughout the remainder of this project.

In the following chapters, I examine the chronology of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* through a contemporary intersectional feminist lens. I provide three approaches by which the work can be discussed in today's scholarship, museums, and educational environments—each approach engaging with a different point of the work's lifetime. My preliminary investigations of

*The Dinner Party* are fueled by the following question: how can contemporary intersectional feminist thought and feminist art history contextualize sometimes problematic works (even if those works are considered to hold feminist understandings) while still recognizing and appreciating their social and historical value?

In conducting research that incorporates an intersectional approach to evaluating *The Dinner Party*, I employ four methodological frameworks: historiography, socio-cultural, visual analysis, and feminist thought (gender studies). A brief history of feminism and feminist art is also needed to illustrate the novelty of *The Dinner Party* during its time and place of creation—which inevitably led to its popularity (whether or not that popularity was favorable or not). A socio-cultural framework is necessary to accompany the historic events of these feminist movements—as they were (and are) socially driven. The partnership of the socio-cultural and historiographic research then allows for a deeper consideration of cultural and historical factors which led to the creation of *The Dinner Party*, its public reception, and what role it now plays in our contemporary state of feminism and feminist art history. As formerly described, *The Dinner Party* holds an innovative standing as a single art object—consisting of multiple and complex visual components. Therefore, a visual analysis of the work is present throughout the project to exemplify Chicago’s elevation of feminist art and the implications of the work’s visual messages. The three aforementioned methodologies are all engaged by means of an intersectional feminist lens. Multidisciplinary feminist thought and theory is primarily employed for the project’s entirety as the main framework.

The proceeding chapter will begin my explorations by looking to the past, exploring the original creation of *The Dinner Party* to consider problematic hierarchical and gendered workplace environments. Here, I offer an examination of women’s labor during the Second-

Wave movement, and provide an intersectional analysis in approaching how the work was created—in a massive studio fueled by artistic collaboration amongst women. I examine the studio space via an intersectional lens to expose racialized, classed, and gendered barriers, which I argue allowed many white women to perform unpaid labor in the studio. This understanding of women’s labor during the Second-Wave movement also provides us with useful context for how gendered, racialized, and classed labor is performed in the art world today. Here, I rely on the work of Linda Nochlin’s feminist art historical precedent, as well as feminist sociological theories on the gendered division of labor.

Chapter three will explore *The Dinner Party* as it relates to present conversations in art history surrounding the “ornamental.” I will employ ornamental theories through a feminist lens to argue that the problematic gendering of objects continues to guide much of the art historical canon. In doing so, this chapter seeks to unify *The Dinner Party*’s lesser acknowledged ornamental qualities with existing feminist and feminist art historical scholarship on the work. Looking to scholarship that references both *The Dinner Party* and the study of ornament—from both feminist and non-feminist viewpoints, will be necessary. I consider the work of art historians Jonathan Hay, who discusses ornamental objects as agentic and gendered, and Amelia Jones, who writes on reclaiming female agency while specifically citing *The Dinner Party*. These two viewpoints will be key ideas in determining whether a reclamation of the female body and of female agency on such object-based terms is a progressive tactic for feminist art and artists, or, if this type of reclamation merely reinforces dated parallels between the ornamental and the feminine.

Chapter four explores the future of *The Dinner Party* and its relevance to the state of museums as the pressure of inclusivity and social justice encroaches on public art institutions.

This final chapter evaluates *The Dinner Party* in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum and the artwork's future as an object with adaptive meanings. Elizabeth Sackler and the Sackler family have been long-time donors and supporters of the arts in America, but have recently been the subjects of heavy criticisms due to the problematic source of their almost thirteen billion dollar fortune. In light of this recent controversy, this chapter seeks to examine not only how the cultural impact of museum donors can impact our understandings of artworks, but also how our feminist understandings and strivings for equal representations affect our museum experiences.

As previously stated, *The Dinner Party* has been the subject of myriad theoretically rich and complex analyses. Yet, I believe this piece offers more to the art historical canon than just its feminist messages, and we limit the possibilities of feminist art when the feminist label is the only thing that we examine when these works are discussed. Therefore, in providing three different analyses of *The Dinner Party*, each will cultivate different and meaningful inclusive feminist and art historical conversations as means to broaden the scope of what feminist art can do for the present state of the canon. While intersectionality remains a key component to my thought process, it is utilized less a tool to critique *The Dinner Party*, and more a device to broaden our perspectives and critique the state of the art historical canon, and the role that feminist art and theory plays within it. Throughout the project, intersectionality aids in the production of a well-rounded feminist art historical discourse—rather than a critique of the physical object I am studying. Because we have locked *The Dinner Party* into an initiating role in the history of feminist art, we have made its meanings stagnant. The points I make in the following chapters extend past this singular origin story of *The Dinner Party*. While this will



always be an important factor, I believe the work has more to say, and this type of analysis can aid us in finding new ways to learn from problematic artworks and our exclusive feminist pasts.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A PROBLEMATIC PAST: THE MAKING OF *THE DINNER PARTY*

To initiate these new discussions of *The Dinner Party*, I begin by exploring the making of the work itself. My focus here is on the unpaid labor performed in Judy Chicago's collaborative studio environment—wherein many women volunteered their time, artistry, and academic skills to aid Chicago in bringing her vision to fruition. While the role of the volunteers in the creation process has been acknowledged by the artist throughout her career, I intend to consider the construction of racialized, classed, and gendered barriers that may have allowed certain women to perform this specifically unpaid labor. The studio space and the volunteers have aided the historical grounding of *The Dinner Party* in a Second-Wave context. However, while acknowledging the problematic truth of this historical moment, my intent in this chapter is to lift the work out of a position where it is only discussed in Second-Wave terms and into a space that becomes productive. Rather than adding more critical response to the work, I will utilize its feminist lineage to incorporate *The Dinner Party* in our relevant and contemporary conversations surrounding labor in the art world.

The idea for *The Dinner Party* was conceived after Chicago finished graduate school in Los Angeles. While both working as an artist and attending graduate classes, Chicago grew increasingly frustrated not only with the male-dominated field of practicing artists, but also with the lack of women's art from which to study. She received her Master of Fine Arts degree in 1964, just as the Second-Wave Feminist Movement was making social and political headway. During her time as a student, however, she has said “there were no Women's Studies courses, no body of feminist theory, no knowledge of women's history, nor any acknowledgement of the international impact of the first wave of feminism.”<sup>37</sup> This lack of a comprehensive and accessible women's history consumed Chicago, and after completing her MFA, she felt a moral obligation to teach and share women's history through her art.

Prior to landing on the idea for *The Dinner Party*, Chicago had produced works that featured or were reminiscent of sexual organs. For example, her 1964 piece titled *Bigamy* (figure 2) depicts an abstracted phallus before it enters the vagina.<sup>38</sup> Unfortunately, many of these anatomically derived early works were thrown away or destroyed by the artist herself, due to the “disgust” they received from her all-male professors. Chicago says her instructors “*accused*” her of making “wombs and breasts”—as if wombs, breasts, or any part of the body hadn't already been showcased and exploited throughout the history of art.<sup>39</sup> During this time, Chicago also created abstracted portraits of historically-notable women, spraying acrylic on canvas in a series called *The Great Ladies* (figure 3). It would be a combination of these two series that would

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<sup>37</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Avital Bloch, Lauri Umansky, and Gale Levin, “Judy Chicago in the 1960s,” in *Impossible to Hold: Women and Culture in the 1960's* (NYU Press, 2005), 311.

<sup>39</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 13.

eventually merge to create *The Dinner Party*. But before these ideas were joined, what would be an important element to *The Dinner Party* was introduced to the artist—china painting.

China painting was the final building block in Chicago's artistic inspiration to start *The Dinner Party*. In her efforts to research and teach women's history through her art, Chicago felt that her *Great Ladies* series needed to be re-worked using a different medium. In 1971 she enrolled in a china-painting class, the first step in learning a technique that would take her two years of private study to master.<sup>40</sup> During her exploration of china-painting, Chicago befriended china-painter Rosemary Radmaker—a woman who not only taught Chicago in the technique of china-painting, but who would be an instrumental figure who actually worked as a volunteer on *The Dinner Party*.<sup>41</sup> Chicago used her new skillset to re-create her ideas from *Great Ladies*, making a set of china-painted plates that featured abstracted portraits of historical women.

In the spring of 1974, Chicago decided to place these plates on a banquet table.<sup>42</sup> Originally, this was to be a small-scale project (or smaller scale project than what ended up being the final installation) that was a reinterpretation of the Last Supper. The Last Supper is an image that visually communicates a biblical narrative, a meal that evokes the Christian ritual of bodily consumption—the Eucharist. Chicago took this classic image, an easily identifiable narrative to many, and flipped the script to showcase the social, political, economic, and most importantly *historical* swallowing of women. Chicago's version of the Last Supper is a play on the traditional sacred presentation and feasting of a male body, and tells a different story from

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<sup>40</sup> Chicago, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Johanna Chicago Demetrakas, Phoenix/BFA Films & Video, and Phoenix Learning Group., *Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party / Tyson, Thom*. (Phoenix Learning Group, 1999). Radmaker is featured in the documentary *Right Out of History* as a clear expert in china-painting and an instrumental figure to the creation of the plates.

<sup>42</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 11.

the point of view “of those who have done the cooking throughout history; hence; a ‘dinner party.’”<sup>43</sup> The traditional depiction describes a symbolic and spiritual meal of nourishment and sacrifice, Chicago’s dinner meal interprets that consumption as something that hides the achievements of women. Chicago’s idea for her project would exemplify the point that while women were (and are) making significant contributions to history, their stories have continually been dismissed.

In a recent study published by the National Women’s History Museum, researchers found that in public United States K-12 social studies education, “women’s experiences and stories are not well integrated into US state history standards.”<sup>44</sup> The study shows that state regulations do not portray the “breadth and depth” of women’s history. Rather, 53% of the women’s history that is presented, examines women’s domestic roles; 63% of the women discussed are white.<sup>45</sup> This study demonstrates the same omission of women and their histories that Chicago sought to address. Yet, it does not fully exhibit the reasons why a thorough women’s history is still largely overlooked. While there is a large body of scholarship from a variety of disciplines that seeks to explain the reasons behind the historical oversight of women, as I move forward in this chapter, I would like to discuss these theories as they specifically relate to the art historical canon.<sup>46</sup>

In consideration of Chicago’s concentration on women’s history, we cannot ignore the canonical piece of feminist art historical thought, “Why Have There Been No Great Women

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<sup>43</sup> Chicago, 12.

<sup>44</sup> National Women’s History Museum, “Where Are the Women?,” National Women’s History Museum, accessed November 5, 2018, <https://www.womenshistory.org/social-studies-standards>; K. Y., “Standards Lack Women In History,” *School Library Journal* 64, no. 7 (July 2018): 11–11.

<sup>45</sup> National Women’s History Museum, “Where Are the Women?”

<sup>46</sup> Gowri Parameswaran, Suzanne Kelly, and Nancy Schniedewind, *Women: Images & Realities, A Multicultural Anthology* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2011), 8–14. The opening chapter to this compilation of feminist theories offers an introduction to historical factors that have prohibited a comprehensive women’s history.

Artists” essay from 1971 by American art historian Linda Nochlin. Nochlin’s publication has come to be a pivotal work for art historical scholarship in reference to the need for inclusion of women artists in a traditionally male-dominated field. In order to go beyond “digging up examples of worthy or insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history,” Nochlin explores the institutional and educational barriers that have conventionally prevented women from achieving “greatness” as artists.<sup>47</sup> For example: in a discussion of “the nude” as an essential component to artistic studies and training, she says that women were not given the chance to be “great,” as they were not allowed into art academies where nude subjects would have been studied and created by male artists. And, for the rare exceptions of women artists who did in fact achieve the status of “greatness,” such as Artemisia Gentileschi, they were often trained by their artistic fathers or given opportunities by men. Moreover, most of these “great” women artists are predominantly white and likely from the middle to upper class.

Like Nochlin, Chicago was interested in the relationship between women’s history and the arts when forming her ideas on *The Dinner Party*. Although compiling a women’s history for her piece took place after Nochlin’s essay was published, Chicago seems to contradict some suggestions presented in “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists.” Despite Nochlin’s argument, as Chicago started performing research for the piece, she was “digging up” “examples of worthy or insufficiently appreciated women artists throughout history”—even though Nochlin claimed that wouldn’t lead to society’s creation and acceptance of “great” women artists.<sup>48</sup>

Chicago’s research on women’s history progressed for a year and a half before realizing that she would need help with the project, as her play on the Last Supper was now to become a

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<sup>47</sup> Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?,” 147.

<sup>48</sup> Nochlin, 147.

large-scale installation. Continuing to work with the anatomically-inspired forms that her male professors had disparaged, Chicago sought the help of an audience who would respond to this imagery. She specifically invited individuals from UCLA, and female artists she had met since graduation to work on the project, and over the next three and a half years, more than 400 volunteers came to work on *The Dinner Party* with Chicago.<sup>49</sup> Most people came from all over the United States, while some came from around the globe, even as far as Australia.<sup>50</sup>

This collaborative group approach made the completion of *The Dinner Party* possible. By 1975 the project had turned into a banquet table with 39 women to be “seated.” Thousands of historical women needed to be researched, not only to decide on the 39 seated, but to narrow the selection on the 999 women for the *Heritage Floor*. Place settings needed to be fired and painted, and runners had to be stitched. Given this enormous undertaking, and the complexity of the work itself, the project would never have been finished in five years by a single individual. Despite this enormous team of female (and some male) volunteers who worked on *The Dinner Party* in a private studio space, the end product is almost exclusively associated with Judy Chicago’s name. This point is evinced throughout introductory textbooks, academic scholarship, the exhibitions it was featured in, and the Brooklyn Museum’s cataloging and display of the work—wherein the work has always been formally credited to Chicago.<sup>51</sup> Though never having denied the fact that numerous women worked on the piece in her studio, she has said “I did retain aesthetic authority

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<sup>49</sup> “The Dinner Party Institute, July 18 - 22, 2016,” accessed November 5, 2018, <http://www.thedinnerpartyinstitute.com/speakers.html>; Judy Chicago, *Embroidering Our Heritage: The Dinner Party Needlework*, 1st edition (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1980), 280. One method of recruitment documented in *Embroidering Our Heritage* is illustrated by Susan Hill’s introduction to Chicago. In 1976 Hill attended a lecture by Chicago in which a member of the audience asked if Chicago made collective art. To which Chicago replied “no, but I am working on a large piece, and I need assistants.” Hill volunteered after the lecture.

<sup>50</sup> Demetrakas, Phoenix/BFA Films & Video, and Phoenix Learning Group., *Right Out of History*.

<sup>51</sup> “Brooklyn Museum: The Dinner Party by Judy Chicago,” accessed February 27, 2019, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner\\_party](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party); Stokstad and Cothren, *Art History*, 1100; Jones and Center, *Sexual Politics*. I have yet to find a source where the work is formally credited to Chicago and her volunteers, or a source that names the artist as someone or something other than Chicago.

over *The Dinner Party*; after all, it was ultimately my piece.”<sup>52</sup> And in her book on *The Dinner Party*’s embroidery and needlework she writes:

The reason I insisted on esthetic control of all aspects of the project was that first, it was my concept; second, I was the most developed artist; and last, my control ensured visual consistency in a work of art that contained an enormous range of images, styles, and techniques. However, establishing a balance between my ultimate authority and an open esthetic process was one of my goals in the studio.<sup>53</sup>

Regardless of her transparency regarding the volunteer-based studio, some critics believe that the artist took a rather un-feminist role in relying on her volunteers, even suggesting Chicago “exploited” them.<sup>54</sup> In a *Woman’s Art Journal* article published shortly after *The Dinner Party* premiered, Lauren Rabinovitz suggests that “by emphasizing her role as an authority figure and encouraging ‘volunteerism,’ Chicago emulated the societal and art school practices that many feminists have fought.”<sup>55</sup> While Rabinovitz makes a valid claim that Chicago’s authoritarian control over the piece and her volunteers seems (on the surface) counterproductive to Second-Wave goals of women’s mass equality in the workplace, Chicago saw these studio practices and opportunities as a means of education and empowerment for women. She has written that the popular interpretation of her exploitive and unscrupulous demeanor demonizes her and “those who have chosen to volunteer, negating their personal agency and reducing them to unthinking robots who are easily manipulated.”<sup>56</sup> This quote exemplifies the outlook Chicago has taken on her volunteers for the *The Dinner Party* as well as her later work in which she has relied on collaborative artistic processes.

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<sup>52</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 15.

<sup>53</sup> Chicago, *Embroidering Our Heritage*, 279.

<sup>54</sup> Judy Gerstel, “Feminist Artist on ‘The Dinner Party,’” *Thestar.Com*, September 7, 2007, [https://www.thestar.com/life/2007/09/07/feminist\\_artist\\_on\\_the\\_dinner\\_party.html](https://www.thestar.com/life/2007/09/07/feminist_artist_on_the_dinner_party.html); Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 14.

<sup>55</sup> Lauren Rabinovitz, “Issues of Feminist Aesthetics: Judy Chicago and Joyce Wieland,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 1, no. 2 (1980): 39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1358083>.

<sup>56</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 14.



As such, it seems inappropriate to critique her for wanting credit for her artistic vision—especially considering the numerous contemporary male artists who have enormous production studios that function on a global scale. Jeff Koons, Takashi Murakami, Dale Chihuly, El Anatsui, and Kehinde Wiley are just a few major contemporary artists who have large-scale studios around the world that produce works of art credited to a single artist. In an interview with Koons, the artist said “I’m basically the idea person, I’m not physically involved in the production. I don’t have the necessary abilities, so I go to the top people.”<sup>57</sup> The artist workshop is by no means a contemporary construct either. If one considers sculptors and painters from the Italian Renaissance or the Dutch Baroque, for example, we find that artists have been relying on the work of other artists for centuries. However, there is a gendered comparison to be made between these men and Chicago—as it appears that Judy Chicago actually received more criticism for taking credit for her work than her male contemporaries. Furthermore, Chicago has been far more transparent about relying on volunteers and has given them more public recognition than many of these men offer their assistants and collaborators.

Although these men are participating in a globalized art market, and are making more money than Chicago was at the time (meaning these men *can* pay their studio assistants where Chicago could not), is it problematic, in relation to *feminist* ideology, that Judy Chicago’s name is almost solely associated with the piece—if it is in fact her work and she did want to retain that aesthetic authority? In her 1990 article, “Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations,” American sociologist Joan Acker discusses workplace institutions as gendered structures. In looking at feminist scholarship she says there had been little feminist debate

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<sup>57</sup> John Powers, “I Was Jeff Koons’s Studio Serf,” *The New York Times*, August 17, 2012, sec. Magazine, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/19/magazine/i-was-jeff-koonss-studio-serf.html>.

regarding gender and workplace theories because the connection between gender and work had simply been so obvious. In Acker's words "part of the feminist project was to create nonhierarchical, egalitarian organizations that would demonstrate the possibilities of non-patriarchal ways of working."<sup>58</sup> More importantly, she says that during the second-wave feminist movement, there was an "embarrassing reality" in which women failed to "cooperate with each other, taking power and using it in oppressive ways," creating new structures of status and reward that previously had been unattainable for most women.<sup>59</sup> If we take Acker's argument regarding gendered workplaces of the 1970s, and apply it to the workspace where *The Dinner Party* was created, it does seem problematic that Chicago would advocate for such an inclusive and collaborative feminist space whilst simultaneously taking most of the credit. However, given her transparency regarding her reliance on the volunteers, I would argue that Chicago is simply trying to stake her claim as a woman in the art world.

In Johanna Demetrakas' 1980 documentary film, *Right Out of History: The Making of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party*, the audience is given access to a fascinating behind the scenes look at the studio space, witnessing *The Dinner Party*'s creation almost from start to finish.<sup>60</sup> As the film demonstrates, it is unquestionable that Chicago is the leader of this group—and that leadership is documented to show both admiration for and frustration with Chicago from her volunteers (figure 4). For example, the film also shows a clearly organized and hierarchical workplace environment. We see various "departments" (research, needlework, ceramics, painting, etc.), and their respective "department heads" who lead volunteers in each group. Susan

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<sup>58</sup> Joan Acker, "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations," *Gender & Society* 4, no. 2 (June 1, 1990): 141, <https://doi.org/10.1177/089124390004002002>.

<sup>59</sup> Acker, 141. I think it is important to note that Acker's article does not adequately discuss the intersect of race. It should be said that these newly attainable structures of status and reward in the workplace were becoming more available to white women.

<sup>60</sup> Demetrakas, Phoenix/BFA Films & Video, and Phoenix Learning Group., *Right Out of History*.

Hill who introduces herself as the “head of needlework” in the beginning of the film, and acts a main “tour guide” for the film’s audience, is credited with this title throughout Chicago’s own publications on the work.<sup>61</sup> Like any workplace environment, the film shows various frustrations from volunteers. Most of these frustrations are expressed freely by volunteers at their weekly potlucks, which (at least in the film) appear to be a time when everyone on the project can come together and openly express their concerns without severe repercussions (figure 5). In one scene, Diane Gelon, a researcher turned self-appointed Project Administrator of *The Dinner Party*, says to the rest of the group, clearly and without hesitation, that this workplace “is *not* [emphasis added] a collective. It is a hierarchy, but a flexible one at that.”<sup>62</sup>

This environment clearly functioned as a hierarchical workplace and it was largely an unpaid one. According to Chicago, only a “core group” of individuals, those who made significant contributions to the work and aided Chicago in getting the piece on public display, were paid. Chicago has said that while she *wanted* to pay every volunteer, paying everyone was “absolutely not” a possibility. Even without pay, Chicago still retained a consistent team of volunteers throughout *The Dinner Party*’s production. According to the artist, “nobody cared [about receiving payment]. Our motivation was not money; it was about changing history.”<sup>63</sup> Chicago says she liked to think of this environment as an “affinity group,” or a place of support for women who wanted an escape from the male-dominated world—particularly for women

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<sup>61</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1979, 230; Chicago, *Embroidering Our Heritage*, 12–13, 278–80.

<sup>62</sup> Demetrakas, Phoenix/BFA Films & Video, and Phoenix Learning Group., *Right Out of History*; “The Dinner Party Institute, July 18 - 22, 2016”; Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 13. In 1976 Judy Chicago asked Gelon, a graduate student in Art History at the time, to be a researcher on the project. Within a matter of months, Gelon self-appointed herself as the Project Administrator of *The Dinner Party* and “took on the task of raising funds, managing the studio environment, and then ensuring that the work remained visible when the institutions refused to show it.” Gelon was also in charge of working with art museums, community organizers, and fundraisers where *The Dinner Party* was exhibited.

<sup>63</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 14.

artists. She claims that people simply continued to work on the project because they wanted to; they selflessly devoted themselves and their labor to a larger purpose.<sup>64</sup>

After the work's initial premier in 1979 at SFMoMA, Chicago (and the work) was almost immediately met with heavy criticism regarding her "exploitation of others" and the seemingly un-feminist hierarchy in both the making of *The Dinner Party* and in the work itself.<sup>65</sup> Chicago claims that she was completely shocked by these accusations and has attempted to address the concerns of her accusers, saying "*The Dinner Party* studio had both educated and empowered most—if not all—of the workers."<sup>66</sup> But these statements from Chicago did not deter artist and writer Maureen Mullarkey who in 1981 published a rhetorically charged article in which she questioned the visual hierarchy of women seen in the work itself, along with the hierarchy in the studio—claiming that Chicago unfairly treated her female volunteers, while giving more compensation to the men who supported the project.<sup>67</sup> She argues:

Unpaid workers, mostly young, anonymous women from inconspicuous places around the country, paid their own transportation to and from the West Coast workshops and their own living expenses for the duration of their participation in the construction of *The Dinner Party*. Only a few core people in the project received compensation. The key members of that core were the three men without whose technical skill *The Dinner Party* would not exist. While salaries might not have been large, the symbolic import of the difference between the salaried and the non-salaried is not to be ignored.

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<sup>64</sup> Chicago, 14.

<sup>65</sup> Lippard et al., *Judy Chicago*.

<sup>66</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 14.

<sup>67</sup> Maureen Mullarkey, "The Dinner Party Is a Church Supper: Judy Chicago at the Brooklyn Museum." Originally published: Mullarkey, Maureen. "The Dinner Party is a Church Supper: Judy Chicago at the Brooklyn Museum." Commonweal Foundation, 1981. In Chicago's 2007 book on *The Dinner Party*, she does mention that some "core individuals" were paid, but neglects to define the gender of who did and did not receive payment. In her 2002 statement referring to *The Dinner Party*'s permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum, Mullarkey has said her harsh opinions on the piece haven't changed.

To Mullarkey's point, it seems significant to point out that both Chicago and the work itself have been criticized for this same issue of perpetuating a hierarchy. Indeed, *The Dinner Party* seems to quite literally enforce ideas of status amongst women in Western history through its own physical structure. As the viewer walks around the piece—moving from the Primordial Goddess to Georgia O'Keeffe—they can see that the porcelain plates become more elevated “throughout time.” While Chicago has said that this was her way of showing women's elevated status and recognition over time in Western societies more broadly, it could be argued that this literal elevation reinforces a hierarchy amongst women, with the higher plates signifying higher status and influence. The elevated plates are reserved for those women who, in Chicago's eyes, made “significant contributions to women's history,” which earned them a seat at the table—while an additional 999 women have their names placed on the floor, underneath the women at the table. Although Chicago, and Second-Wave feminist ideology, advocated for equal opportunities for women, *The Dinner Party* disregards some ideas of equality amongst women, as the names of 999 women are placed on the floor beneath the “more famous” names who get their own place setting. Chicago has discussed the process by which the selection process was made—saying that at the time, there was little information available on some of these women, leading to the decision to place some names on the floor based on the limitation of research. However, much to Chicago's credit, she has done extensive research over the years to showcase the importance of every name within the piece. And while she's claimed that she would change out some of the names, she does not appear to regret the physical hierarchy of table versus floor.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 23–24.

Returning to the hierarchy in *The Dinner Party*'s studio, in their book *Women and Men at Work* from 1994, sociologists Barbara Reskin and Irene Padavic provide a useful overview of three key manifestations that have typically prevented workplace (and therefore economic and social) inequality: sex (or now I would suggest a gendered) segregation of labor, gendered differences in promotion and authority, and gendered differences in earning.<sup>69</sup> What I would like to focus on here is the gendered division of labor, which has more commonly left women in positions with little to no pay. Social or political activism, such as the work that was taking place within *The Dinner Party*'s studio, is a laborious position that, women (and other marginalized groups) have typically assumed.

In consideration of women's unpaid labor, in Chicago's studio specifically, an intersectional feminist approach can be applied here to provide a deeper examination of the studio in its 1970s context. It also provides us with a foil to how unpaid labor is still performed in the art world today—thus, demonstrating *The Dinner Party*'s usefulness to a feminist lineage and the art historical canon. The expanding recognition of feminism during the 1960s and 70s was fueled by a wide range of activist events—from private consciousness raising groups, to public demonstrations that gained national attention, and to the production of feminist artworks.<sup>70</sup> Although these efforts made by women are no doubt a significant building block in the history of feminism, a major critique of this movement is that it was exclusive to white, middle to upper-class women. While many women involved in these displays had earnest intentions, it is nevertheless the case that women who did not fall into this category were largely

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<sup>69</sup> Barbara F. Reskin, *Women and Men at Work*, Sociology for a New Century (Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1994), 37–39.

<sup>70</sup> Melissa R. Peet and Beth Glover Reed, “The Development of Political Consciousness and Agency: The Role of Activism and Race/Ethnicity in an Introductory Women's Studies Course,” *Feminist Teacher* 14, no. 2 (2002): 106–22.

excluded from participation through unjust socially constructed barriers. This point, I believe, is illustrated in the unpaid labor of those women volunteers who worked on *The Dinner Party*.

Although creating *The Dinner Party* was surely done for a cause that most volunteers unquestionably cared about, I want to explore the possible privileges that some of these women may have had which *allowed* them (by choice) to be unpaid feminist activists. In Judy Chicago's book *Embroidering Our Heritage*, the final section titled "Recognizing Our Community," provides images of the needle-workers who embroidered the work's 39 runners and underlying tablecloth, and also provides these women's occupations outside of their volunteer work—with a majority of them identified as "artists" or "art students."<sup>71</sup>

In a 1998 study, psychologists interviewed women who were raised in American working and middle-class families during the 1950s, and attended universities during the 1960s and early 1970s—a location where women's activism was largely viewed in favorable terms. During and after their time at school, these women were found to break with the previous generation's social expectations of gender.<sup>72</sup> The authors posit that "college-educated women were particularly well situated to reap the many benefits of the women's movement. Thus, like many women of their cohort, activists and non-activists both would have taken similar advantage of the new opportunities for career, education, and family arrangements that were made possible by the women's movement."<sup>73</sup> However, taking advantage of these second-wave benefits appears to have been a privilege for a select group, a group that appears to be exemplified in *The Dinner*

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<sup>71</sup> Chicago, *Embroidering Our Heritage*, 281–82. For example: "Mary Helen Krehbiel, homemaker, needlewoman." Or "Catherine Stifter, artist."

<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth R. Cole, Alyssa N. Zucker, and Joan M. Ostrove, "Political Participation and Feminist Consciousness among Women Activists of the 1960s," *Political Psychology* 19, no. 2 (1998): 351.

<sup>73</sup> Cole, Zucker, and Ostrove, 351.

*Party*'s volunteer base—a group of largely white women who were financially able to volunteer their free time, and could use their higher educational status to help produce the work.<sup>74</sup>

Issues of race, gender, and class have unfortunately not disappeared from the contemporary art world. Institutions' exploitation of unpaid labor is a problem that concerns many young professionals entering the field—as many artist studios, galleries, and museums rely on the full-time work of college educated unpaid interns. In a 2017 article titled “Can Only Rich Kids Afford to Work in the Art World?,” writer Anna Louie Sussman “highlights the largely invisible role of class in the art world” and “points to some of the challenges in bringing *economic* [emphasis added] diversity to a liberal-leaning industry that values humanism and resourcefulness.”<sup>75</sup> According to a *New York Times* article from the same year by Quoc Trung Bui, “about 40 percent of 22 to 24 year-olds receive some financial assistance from their parents for living expenses. Among young people who aspire to have a career in art and design, 53 percent get rent money from their parents. Young people who live in urban centers are more likely to have their parents help pay the rent.”<sup>76</sup> Although these articles provide excellent introductory material on the subject, neither Sussman nor Bui mention the larger racialized and gendered barriers that often inform structures of class, which, in order to practice intersectional feminism and truly strive for a more diverse and equal art world, is absolutely necessary.

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<sup>74</sup> I want to emphasize the word “*largely*” used in this sentence because I do not want to presume the racial or ethnic background of any individual based on sight without asking each person (over 400 who worked on the project throughout the five years) how they identify themselves. My observation of the racial breakdown within *The Dinner Party*'s studio is based on documentary film and photographs of the studio space.

<sup>75</sup> Anna Louie Sussman, “Can Only Rich Kids Afford to Work in the Art World?,” Artsy, February 14, 2017, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-rich-kids-afford-work-art-world>.

<sup>76</sup> Quoc Trung Bui, “A Secret of Many Urban 20-Somethings: Their Parents Help With the Rent,” *The New York Times*, 02 2017, sec. The Upshot, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/09/upshot/a-secret-of-many-urban-20-somethings-their-parents-help-with-the-rent.html>.



Although Chicago is *now* a famous artist who has been accepted by the canon, this was not the case when *The Dinner Party* was under construction. As she has said “people just wanted to work with her” on the piece for a larger purpose, but as we now know, this opportunity to work on an activist piece (even for a lesser known artist at the time) was a privilege that only certain volunteers could take advantage of.<sup>77</sup> While unpacking, or even acknowledging, these privileges held by some *women* was not a goal of the Second-Wave, Chicago has said that she always tried to provide an inclusive environment for all her workers, stating that she “tried to be generous with those people who aspired to be professional artists” by providing “real-life” training to women who were not receiving it elsewhere.<sup>78</sup>

In conclusion, this chapter reevaluates the work’s place and means of creation during the Second-Wave Feminist Movement, in which a more nuanced discussion of intersectionality and gendered workplace environments is key. This new lens by which racialized, classed, and gendered barriers now becomes exposed, is manifested to provide a useful comparison for how *The Dinner Party* remains an relevant object that allows us to further question how labor is performed in the art world today. I’d like to end this chapter with a quote from Chicago where she responds to the criticism that she has “abandoned feminist values” in her work. She writes “This is not true. Rather, I have steadily expanded my gaze, gradually widening my perspective on the oppression of women symbolized by *The Dinner Party*—until I understood it in a wider global context of injustice, inequality, and vast suffering.”<sup>79</sup> This statement exemplifies my overall argument for this project, that *The Dinner Party* allows us (including the artist herself) to turn our feminist gaze outward—expanding it to not only include intersectional practices in our

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<sup>77</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 12–15.

<sup>78</sup> Chicago, 15.

<sup>79</sup> Chicago, 9.

every days lives, but to also expand upon art historical discourse. This practice of expanded feminist thought in art historical contexts moves me to the following chapter as I begin a discussion of the canon's present state of Ornamental thought as it relates to *The Dinner Party*.

## CHAPTER THREE

### CRITIQUING THE CANON: RECLAMATION AND ORNAMENT

As I have demonstrated in the preceding chapter, hierarchical critiques of *The Dinner Party* and its production are historical feminist issues that should be noted when discussing the work, they can also be employed as a foil to examine how the piece functions today (and remains a relevant artwork) in relation to contemporary concerns in the art world. Likewise, this chapter also analyzes hierarchical notions, but instead is geared toward questioning these notions that are quite often found within the art historical canon itself. Here, I discuss how *gendered* hierarchies are embedded within the canon, and how today's art historians not only rely on, but apply, these dated and problematic theories in relation to art and artworks as they exist in the present. I illustrate this point by means of engaging *The Dinner Party* in conversation with the ornamental, contextualizing the piece within a new frame of ornamental theory. The acknowledgement of *The Dinner Party*'s ornamental qualities is contextualized within existing feminist and feminist art historical scholarship—providing an example by which *The Dinner Party* becomes a piece of art that (again, while problematic) can aid us in reevaluating our present canonical understandings of art history.

I employ a feminist art historical view of the ornamental to exemplify gendered connections between the art historical canon and Chicago's piece. *The Dinner Party* provides us with an opportunity to simultaneously critique, yet continually discuss, problematic works of art in productive manners. Therefore, I reframe and employ the ornamental in conjunction with the criticism that *The Dinner Party* exhibits and promotes ideas of biological essentialism. With this in mind, I present several case studies of the ornamental to determine whether the artist has in fact satirically reclaimed an ornamental and specifically *female* body (and if this proves to be a progressive tactic for feminist art and artists), or, if this type of reclamation merely reinforces dated and essentialist parallels between the ornamental and the feminine.

### **A Canonized Hierarchy of the Arts:**

In his 1918 book, *Foundations of Modern Art*, French painter Amédée Ozenfant says in his section on cubism: "There is a hierarchy in the arts: decorative art at the bottom, and the human form at the top. Because we are men!"<sup>80</sup> Whilst this quote from Ozenfant exhibits a sexist statement, it also illustrates two key notions that will be useful in this analysis of *The Dinner Party*. First, it exposes a distorted value system within traditional Western art, in which the *decorative* and the *figural* are positioned to compete against one another. Second, this quote highlights the problematic gendering of the decorative arts as "feminine" and the figural arts as "masculine."

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<sup>80</sup> Amédée Ozenfant, *Foundations of Modern Art*, [New American ed., augm.]. (New York: Dover Publications, 1952).

In his book *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*, Larry Shiner argues that beginning in the eighteenth century, the “concept of art” was split between the “fine arts” and the “crafts or popular arts.” He suggests that while the “fine arts were a matter of inspiration and genius intended for *refined* [emphasis added] pleasure,” the “popular arts were designed for mere use or entertainment.”<sup>81</sup> In a 1978 publication from the feminist art journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, American artists (and key contributors to the journal) Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff argue that “since the art experts consider the ‘high arts’ of Western men superior to all other forms of art, those arts done by non-Western people, low-class people and women are categorized as ‘minor arts,’ ‘primitive arts,’ ‘low arts,’ etc. The myth that high art is for a select few perpetuates the hierarchy in the arts, and among people as well.”<sup>82</sup> What Shiner and Kozloff and Jaudon essentially claim in two separate instances is that social structures of race, class, and gender informed this divide within the arts in a battle of power relations. The decorative arts were categorized as “minor,” “low,” or “craft” because of the makers, users, and viewers of objects that are assigned to that category. It is therefore these two precedents—the hierarchy of the decorative versus the figural (“fine/high” and “popular/low”), and the problematic categorization of gendering those art forms—that merge in Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*. This coalescence then allows for a unique analysis regarding the reclamation of the feminine and of the ornamental.

Throughout her career, Chicago’s works are often constructed from a conscious choice of media that are stereotypically gendered. She employs art forms traditionally associated with women, such as textiles and needle work, in combination with art forms generally associated

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<sup>81</sup> Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (University of Chicago Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>82</sup> Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff, “Art Hysterical Notions of Progress and Culture,” *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* no. 4, no. Winter 1978 (1978): 38–42.

with masculine connotations, such as welding and large-scale construction, in order to produce her grand installations.<sup>83</sup> *The Dinner Party* was no exception to Chicago's use of various mediums, no matter what kind of creators "typically" used them. While the processes and modes of creating were problematically labeled during *The Dinner Party*'s production, what is interesting about this gendering of materials is that when we look at the end result today, the work as a whole has been "feminized" not only through its content and feminist messages, but in the makeup of its specifically *ornamental* media.

### ***The Dinner Party and the Ornamental Body:***

"The Dinner Party." The title in itself references a domestic occurrence. Although a "dinner party" should theoretically *not* be a gendered event, social constructions of masculinity and femininity have traditionally assigned the hosting of such an event as a feminine duty. Conventionally employed throughout such events *is* the ornamental. Place settings, fine china, beautiful glassware. Embellished textiles, which should not only protect but simultaneously adorn the table. What may be both essential and decorative objects at a real dinner party, are however transformed in Chicago's piece to represent female bodies—reinforcing not only feminine associations with the domestic, but feminine associations to the ornamental. Here, each woman at the table has their own place setting; each features a plate, chalice, and utensils that rest on an elaborately embroidered runner.<sup>84</sup> Each dinner plate on top of the table is a hand-carved and hand-painted ceramic piece. These plates however, do not resemble your average

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<sup>83</sup> Lippard et al., *Judy Chicago*, 4.

<sup>84</sup> Gerhard, Potter, and Romano, *The Dinner Party*, 1.

dinnerware, as they are importantly made to be either in the shape of a butterfly or a vulva. Although it seems Chicago's clear intention was to bring light to women's rightful place in history, it could be argued that she has regressively placed these women back in to a domestic setting—literally embodied in decorative objects.

While *The Dinner Party*'s premier celebrated and encouraged women's history, it has been argued that, in reality, the work celebrates the experiences of *females* (and as Alice Walker argues, specifically *white* females) rather than an all-encompassing expression of womanhood because of the essentialist vaginal imagery that defines many of the table's plates.<sup>85</sup> In the 1970s, a major goal for Second-Wave feminists was to debunk biological essentialist beliefs that men and women contained inherent (or natural) attributes that made them equipped for different social roles based on *sex*.<sup>86</sup> However, in the 1980s and 90s, debates among feminists, coinciding with the emergence of transfeminism, sparked another debate about essentialist tendencies *within* feminist theory—wherein feminism and feminist issues were once again limited to a select few, this time based on the female sex. As argued by Emi Koyama in “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” the development of transfeminist theory was initially met with backlash because it was seen as “fragmenting feminism with trivial matters.”<sup>87</sup> Yet, it has since become an integral facet of intersectional feminist thought and gender studies. In Sandy Stone's 1987 essay “A Posttranssexual Manifesto,” she argues:

In the transsexual as text, we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the

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<sup>85</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Prose* (Open Road Media, 2011), 373; Jasmine Weber, “Judy Chicago Responds to Criticisms About the ‘Dinner Party,’” *Hyperallergic*, August 13, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/455572/judy-chicago-responds-to-criticisms-about-the-dinner-party/>.

<sup>86</sup> Raewyn Connell, “Gender: Biology, Roles and Activism,” *The Occupied Times* (blog), February 18, 2013, <https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=8036>.

<sup>87</sup> Emi Koyama, “The Transfeminist Manifesto,” in *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 244–61.

dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries. I suggest we start by taking [Janice] Raymond's accusation that 'transsexuals divide women' beyond itself, and turn it into a productive force to multiplicatively divide the old binary discourses of gender.<sup>88</sup>

Here, Stone is proposing that the claimed "division" amongst women might be somewhat valid in the sense that there had not been (at this point) an inclusive gender discourse that accounted for a transfeminist discussion. However, she believes that gender studies can be mended, or at least reconfigured to include what she later calls "genres," in order to productively explore multiple gender identities.<sup>89</sup>

As argued by Naomi Schor in 1994, essentialism is, at its core, a feminist concern where the body *is* the fundamental issue.<sup>90</sup> After the second wave, the topic became a growing concern among many feminists, particularly within transfeminist theory, as questions of gender construction and performativity (put forth by writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler) presented a problem of which Schor calls the "*real* versus *nominal*;" or, in other words, the question of what constitutes a "real" woman.<sup>91</sup> Therefore, it seems no surprise that when one of the most important exhibitions regarding feminist art history opened during the time these questions surfaced, audiences and feminists opposed Chicago's anatomically feminist messages found within in *The Dinner Party*.

While today the widespread support an all-inclusive approach to identity is growing, and an intersectional understanding that not everyone who identifies as a woman was "born" or "assigned" *female* at birth, it is unlikely that Chicago wished to promote a highly essentialist

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<sup>88</sup> Sandy Stone, "A Posttranssexual Manifesto," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (Psychology Press, 2003), 188.

<sup>89</sup> Stone, 188.

<sup>90</sup> Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed, *The Essential Difference* (Indiana University Press, 1994), ix.

<sup>91</sup> Schor and Weed, x.



feminist message when creating the plates of *The Dinner Party*. In fact, I am inclined to argue quite the contrary. While clearly aware of the anatomical symbolism, and implications those may carry, Chicago may actually be reclaiming this imagery—even going as far to satirize it. In one scene of Johanna Demetrakas’s documentary, *Right out of History*, Chicago is shown working on the incredibly intricate and delicate Emily Dickinson plate (figure 6). Here, she says “oh Emily, I know you want to get up off this plate. *You don’t belong on here* [emphasis added].”<sup>92</sup> This quote supports the idea that Chicago clearly knew women (and their bodies) should not be reduced to their anatomy, and should clearly not be embodied in decorative objects—although some protestors may believe otherwise.

Rather than examining the work at face value, Chicago is bringing a certain degree of humor to the table in an attempt to reclaim what has been continually displayed throughout the history of art. For what could possibly be more ridiculous than carving 39 vulvas and putting them on a dinner plate for the party guests to enjoy, and theoretically, eat? I would argue that Chicago wanted to call attention to the very common motif of female objectification within ornamental objects. What I would now like to propose is that instead of contesting a satirical display of feminist minded, female-bodied objects, Chicago has created a path for us to evaluate the real absurdity of a non-satirical problem that continually persists within the art historical canon.

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<sup>92</sup> Demetrakas, Phoenix/BFA Films & Video, and Phoenix Learning Group., *Right Out of History*.

## The Female Body as an Art Historical and Ornamental Object:

The connection between female bodies and the ornamental is by no means a newly conceived notion, and certainly did not begin with *The Dinner Party*. I would now like to offer an example by which the female body has been used both historically and contemporarily to illustrate how this comparison of object-body relations problematically guides an un-feminist canonical discussion of art objects. In 1542 the Italian poet Agnolo Firenzuola completed his book, *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne* or *On the Beauty of Women*.<sup>93</sup> In her article, “On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style,” Elizabeth Cropper argues that Firenzuola’s book is “probably the most complete exposition of the beauty of the ideal woman among the multitude of sixteenth-century treatments of the theme, being concerned not only with her perfect features, but also with her colors, proportions, and elusive qualities.”<sup>94</sup> Here, Cropper draws a connection between Parmigianino’s *Madonna with the Long Neck* and Firenzuola’s study of vases (figure 7). She argues that “the analogy between the form of a beautiful antique vase and the shape of an ideally beautiful woman is one that also fascinated Firenzuola.”<sup>95</sup> According to the Italian poet:

the vase on the far right, with its long neck rising delicately from its shoulders, is like a woman with a long slender neck and wide, graceful shoulders. The next vase has sides that swell out around the sturdy neck, making it appear more slender, and this resembles the ideal, fleshy-hipped woman, who needs no belt to set off her slender midriff. In contrast to the first, the third vase is like a skinny angular woman, whereas the fourth, unlike the second, recalls those over-endowed women who are simply blocked out by a mallet without being finished by the chisel and the rasp.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Agnolo Firenzuola, *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne di m. Agnolo Firenzuola fiorentino* (per Giouan. Griffio, 1552), [http://archive.org/details/bub\\_gb\\_MxwK0qHV8e4C](http://archive.org/details/bub_gb_MxwK0qHV8e4C); Agnolo Firenzuola, Jacqueline Murray, and Konrad Eisenbichler, *On the Beauty of Women* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

<sup>94</sup> Elizabeth Cropper, “On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo, and the Vernacular Style,” *The Art Bulletin* 58, no. 3 (1976): 374, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3049531>.

<sup>95</sup> Cropper, 376.

<sup>96</sup> Cropper, 377; Agnolo Firenzuola, *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne di m. Agnolo Firenzuola fiorentino*.

Although written in 1542, Firenzuola's objectification of female bodies via the ornamental and his universalizing proposal that female bodies are represented by four kinds of vases, is unfortunately not something that has escaped academic understandings of the decorative—nor, has it escaped the ways in which artists create works and represent female bodies.

In his 2010 publication, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China*, Jonathan Hay explores the decorative arts in Ming and Qing dynasty China. In it, he argues that “our interactions with decorative objects, like other artworks, are transactional.”<sup>97</sup> In other words, decorative objects hold a sense of agency. While this claim is indeed compelling and is presented quite convincingly, my quarrel lies not within Hay's notion that “objects have agency,” but within his problematic comparison between decorative objects and *female* bodies in particular. Initially, this comparison between objects and bodies offers an interesting analysis on the physical connection between the aesthetic qualities of decorative objects, and those objects' imitation of the human body. However, as Hay's analysis continues, it is only the female body that is invoked in such an ornamental, and quite sensual, manner—for there is never any mention of the relationship between objects and *male* bodies.

Hay's examination of these objects is strikingly similar to another analysis by Firenzuola on an ancient vase, the Mona Lampiada (figure 8). Here, Firenzuola describes the ancient vase as if it has agency, claiming “*she* [emphasis added] is not just a vase, but certainly an entire treasure chest of all the virtues that adorn the spirit of a gentlewoman.”<sup>98</sup> The vase is treated as a woman in that it, or “she,” is given gendered pronouns as well as her own spirit. However, it is

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<sup>97</sup> Jonathan Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces: The Decorative Object in Early Modern China* (Reaktion Books, 2010), 61–90.

<sup>98</sup> Firenzuola, Murray, and Eisenbichler, *On the Beauty of Women*, 62; Agnolo Firenzuola, *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne di m. Agnolo Firenzuola fiorentino*, 42.

Firenzuola who ascribes these specific agentic qualities onto the vase and then connects his visual perception of the object to a human *female* form—much like the following description from Hay in his second chapter from *Sensuous Surfaces* (figure 9):

Decorative objects also metaphorized both human and animal bodies. In tables, the bodily allusions were only to legs and feet. Table legs often ended in hoofs, and bowed or cabriole leg forms accentuated the bodily metaphor and affect. At a smaller scale, stabilizing stands that extended some way up an object recapitulated the act of holding. The sinuous body and small neck of certain vases and covered jars evoked the *female* [emphasis added] form. More esoterically, the rhinoceros horn libation cup was associated with the interior of the vulva.<sup>99</sup>

Although Firenzuola and Hay both make compelling visual analyses that persuasively call attention to the visual likeness of domestic objects to bodily forms, these analyses extend into dated parallels between the “inherent” connection of specifically female bodies and vases (along with other domestic objects).

### **Feminist Reclamation and Agency in *The Dinner Party*:**

In *The Dinner Party*, Chicago does not recreate rhinoceros horn libation cups, but she does create ceramic wares in the shape of a vulva (figure 10) —perhaps even more explicitly so than one of these carved cups or the Qing Dynasty vase described by Hay. Although there no doubt seems to be a problematic correlation between female bodies and ornamental objects, according to feminist art historian Amelia Jones, the essentializing metaphor found in *The Dinner Party* was rather an act of political defiance, and I suggest, a satirical one at that.<sup>100</sup> Firenzuola and Hay

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<sup>99</sup> Hay, *Sensuous Surfaces*, 65.

<sup>100</sup> Amelia Jones, “The ‘Sexual Politics’ of The Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism* (Univ of California Press, 2005), 420; Norma Broude, Mary D. Garrard, and Judith K. Brodsky, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (H.N. Abrams, 1994), 24–28.

provide descriptions of art objects that exhibit problematic embodiments of women as ornamental—and by doing such, I imply that the “female” object therefore has no agency, or perhaps a restricted agency—Judy Chicago is instead *reclaiming* the female body. According to Jones, Chicago is “using these forms and materials was a way of *reclaiming* them and valuing the femininity with which they were associated.”<sup>101</sup>

In her 2006 article “Ornament and the Feminine,” Australian scholar Llewellyn Negrin argues that since the 1980s, there has been a “rehabilitation” of ornament—prompted by feminist art historians who have increasingly pointed out the problematic fusion and devaluation of the ornamental and the feminine.<sup>102</sup> However, the author seems somewhat skeptical of these accumulating reclamations, arguing:

While these recent feminist defenses of ornament have quite rightly problematized the denigration of the feminine implicit in modernist functionalism, they still remain bound within its parameters insofar as they accept uncritically its conception of ornament as decorative embellishment devoid of meaning. The only respect in which they differ from modernism is in giving ornament and its features a positive rather than a negative valuation, while leaving the definition of ornament intact. Consequently, their defense of ornament as a re-assertion of the legitimacy of the feminine ultimately perpetuates rather than undermines stereotypical associations of the feminine with the sensuous, the superficial and the irrational.<sup>103</sup>

Is this the case for Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*? Although Chicago was indeed trying to reclaim a kind of feminine ornament, is her work nevertheless bound within these preexisting assumptions of the ornament as feminine? If *The Dinner Party* is, as argued by Amelia Jones, an act of “political defiance,” is that act going to carry with it problematic notions because of its ornamental qualities? In order to explore these questions further, I now compare *The Dinner*

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<sup>101</sup> Jones, “The ‘Sexual Politics’ of The Dinner Party: A Critical Context,” 420.

<sup>102</sup> Llewellyn Negrin, “Ornament and the Feminine,” *Feminist Theory* 7, no. 2 (August 1, 2006): 219, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700106064421>.

<sup>103</sup> Negrin, 220.

Party to John Singer Sargent's painting from 1882, *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (figure 11).

### **A Comparative Analysis in Art Historical Agency:**

In 1882 American painter John Singer Sargent was commissioned by his friends, Edward Darley Boit and Mary Louisa Cushing Boit to paint a portrait of their four daughters. Although the parents were both Americans born into great wealth, they preferred living in Europe to the United States.<sup>104</sup> This painting not only features portraits of their four young girls, but also the lavish interior space of their Parisian home. This work has been the subject of numerous art historical studies, given its unique composition and Sargent's unconventional means of representing the children. Unlike a classic portrait that might offer the viewer some deeper understanding of the sitter(s), the daughters of Edward Darley Boit rather appear to be part of the interior space itself—as their bodies are visually echoed in the shape, size, and placement of the two large Japanese vases (or urns) that accompany the girls in the foyer of their home.

In his 2003 book, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*, Bill Brown (a leading scholar on the subject of “object relations”), argues that this painting invokes one's “inability to distinguish between the animate and the inanimate.”<sup>105</sup> According to Brown, Sargent has “managed to paint a *portrait* of vases, and a *still-life* of girls.”<sup>106</sup> Art historian Susan Sidlauskas has also pointed out the corporeal connections between the girls and the vases,

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<sup>104</sup> Susan Sidlauskas, *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 61–90.

<sup>105</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 137.

<sup>106</sup> Brown, 140.

which she believes was an intentional choice made by Sargent. She claims that this body-object parallel, or the girls' "fusion" with the vases, illustrates Louis-Edmond Duranty's short story "*Bric-à-brac*," in which "furniture legs become indistinguishable from the limbs of the family who owns them."<sup>107</sup>

As the daughters and their presumably female bodies have been paralleled and objectified by male artist John Singer Sargent, the matter of agency and object once again comes into question. If the daughters are indeed being compared to the ornamental vases, then their own bodies appear to be just as ornamental. Although the artistic intentions of Sargent could of course be debated, as we may never attain hard evidence this was in fact his perspective on the girls, the work nevertheless falls into a long line of art historical scholarship that exhibits women's bodies as ornamental.<sup>108</sup> Both the figures and the ceramic wares are decorative objects that adorn the foyer of the Boit's home.

Almost a century later, it could be argued that Judy Chicago has done something quite similar with her creation of *The Dinner Party*. At a basic level, a group of 39 women are objectified, without their consent, and placed on view in a domestic-like setting. Although Chicago is a self-identified "woman artist," and is drawing upon shared inequalities that *many* women have undoubtedly faced throughout Western history, is it fair for her to use these women and turn their historical achievements into pieces of decoration, simply based on perceived shared experiences of being a woman, or (even more specifically) being a *female*? It seems that

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<sup>107</sup> Sidlauskas, *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting*, 87; Louis Emile Edmond Duranty, *Les six barons de Septfontaines ...* (Paris: GCharpentier, 1878), <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/23402012.html>.

<sup>108</sup> Sidlauskas, *Body, Place, and Self in Nineteenth-Century Painting*, 61–90. Sidlauskas in fact makes an argument that Sargent was closer in age to the oldest daughter than to the parents, and may have therefore empathized with the children. However, I do not think this is reason to ignore how he painted them in connection to the domestic space and their ornamental accompaniments.

while Chicago may have attempted to reclaim her *own* female agency via the ornamental, she has potentially taken away the agency of the women she represents in her *Dinner Party*.

Take the example of the place setting for the American painter, Georgia O’Keeffe (figure 10). According to Chicago, if the viewer engages with the piece “correctly” and follow the proposed timeline, O’Keeffe’s place setting is meant to be the last of the seated figures. O’Keeffe is well known for her close-up paintings of flowers, which have often been interpreted as resembling female anatomy. However, despite these common explanations, O’Keeffe had strongly denied any sexual associations with her flower paintings. In an interview with Ernest Watson in 1943, O’Keeffe said, “Well—I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flowers you hung all your own associations with flowers on *my* flower [emphasis added] and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower—and I don’t...”<sup>109</sup> O’Keeffe’s plate alone has been the center of much controversy, as many critics were aware of the refusal from O’Keeffe to connect vaginal forms and her flowers—which are problematically reinforced by Chicago’s rendition.

For example, in 1981, artist and writer Maureen Mullarkey published a rhetorically charged article in which she heavily criticized the entire *Dinner Party*, but specifically called attention to O’Keeffe’s place setting. Arguing that O’Keeffe “is equally misrepresented by tendril pastels that bear little relation to the span and vigor of the woman’s work—refusing to acknowledge narrowly sexual interpretations of her work.”<sup>110</sup> In this example, it does appear that

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<sup>109</sup> Ernest W. Watson, “Georgia O’Keeffe,” *American Artist*, no. 7 (June 1943), [https://www.okeeffemuseum.org/part-ii-19431968-what-they-saw/#\\_ftnref2](https://www.okeeffemuseum.org/part-ii-19431968-what-they-saw/#_ftnref2).

<sup>110</sup> Maureen Mullarkey, “The Dinner Party Is a Church Supper: Judy Chicago at the Brooklyn Museum.”



Chicago has not only tied O’Keeffe’s work to sexual associations that the artist herself did not agree with, but has embodied the artist herself into a sexualized work of the ornament.

In consideration of reclaiming agency in the feminine ornament, in conjunction with Chicago’s desire to bring women’s history to public attention, I argue that Chicago truly intended to positively reclaim what has been placed on women (and in this case specifically female bodies) throughout the tradition of Western art and art history. Yet, I wonder if audiences would have been equally offended by *The Dinner Party* if it were created by a male artist? As evinced by Firenzuola, Ozenfant, and Sargent, male artists have continually diminished the ornamental, considered it to be feminine, and have added problematic links to the resilient chain of parallels that physically connect ornamental objects and female bodies—leaving these “female” objects with few agentic qualities. Even in the writings of a contemporary scholar like Jonathan Hay, these notions be continually regurgitated with seemingly little backlash—respectively compared to the amount of criticism Judy Chicago has faced regarding *The Dinner Party*.

Additionally, Chicago has also received harsher criticism compared to other artists who have engaged with similar imagery. For example, Mary Beth Edelson created a feminist version of the Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper* in her 1972 lithograph *Some Living American Women Artists/Last Supper*. While this work does not engage with vaginal imagery, it does utilize similar historical figures used by Chicago in place of biblical ones—Georgia O’Keeffe for example is positioned as the figure of Jesus. In comparison women artists *have* taken to exploring vulvar representations in their work, such as Ana Mendieta who created vaginal earth art sculptures based on her own body, what did Chicago do so differently to warrant such disapproval? In his 1980 review of *The Dinner Party*, *New York Times* critic Hilton Kramer wrote that the work is

“fixated on the external genital organs of the female body. Its many variations of the image are not without a certain ingenuity, to be sure, but it is the kind of ingenuity we associate with kitsch. No doubt it is intended to be an ironic comment on history, but that is not the way it comes through. The result looks merely crass and solemn and dismantled.”<sup>111</sup> Chicago later responded to Kramer by saying “if there is an affirmation of femaleness in my work, what’s wrong with that, given all the phallic imagery around?”<sup>112</sup>

Acts of reclamation are no doubt still in need of scholarly attention. As evinced with *The Dinner Party*, a work created nearly four decades ago, reclamation is not without its continual controversy and scholars may never come to an agreement for how acts of reclamation should be addressed or produced in works of art. However, I hope my assertions in this chapter have nevertheless created a compelling starting point by which we can discuss these controversial issues that have yet to come to a consensus across disciplines. Additionally, I believe my engagement with scholars from both feminist and ornamental perspectives has provided a means for *The Dinner Party* to become something more as it relates to present conversations in art history—presenting scholars with an opportunity to examine a multitude of intersects that perhaps have not been regularly considered.

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<sup>111</sup> Kramer, “Art.”

<sup>112</sup> Women in the arts, “Controversial Representations of Sexuality in Feminist Art,” *Broad Strokes: The National Museum of Women in the Arts’ Blog* (blog), April 18, 2014, <https://blog.nmwa.org/2014/04/18/controversial-representations-of-sexuality-in-feminist-art/>.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### EXPERIENCING *THE DINNER PARTY* AND THE FUTURE OF FEMINIST SPACES

This chapter focuses on how *The Dinner Party*'s institutional place of residence may convey regressive messages that aid in keeping the work locked in its initiating Second-Wave position, hindering its potential to develop contemporary meanings and relevance. Here, I ask what a major museum setting, even a seemingly feminist one, holds for the future of *The Dinner Party*. This section will examine *The Dinner Party* as it exists today within the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. As our societies encourage the development of justice movements like MeToo and Time's Up, should we allow these movements to penetrate the art world, including museum spaces, and what are the best ways to exhibit "controversial" art work? I will support my argument that our museum and gallery spaces are in need of feminist renovations by illustrating my own experience of visiting the *The Dinner Party* in the Sackler Center; a space that, in my view, is not necessarily creating the inclusive feminist path for museums that its name may have us believe.

Nearly six years after its last public appearance in Amelia Jones' *Sexual Politics* show in Los Angeles, *The Dinner Party* was brought out of storage in 2002. It had finally found a lasting

home when Dr. Elizabeth A. Sackler acquired the piece from Chicago and donated it to the Brooklyn Museum. Elizabeth Ann Sackler was born in New York in 1948. She is the daughter of Arthur M. Sackler, a psychiatrist who in 1974, along with his two brothers (Mortimer and Raymond), donated 3.5 million dollars to New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1970s—earning them a wing of the museum with their name on it.<sup>113</sup> Elizabeth grew up in a wealthy, upper-class family, which allowed her to attend a private high school in New York where she became involved in the activism of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>114</sup> In 1997, she received her PhD in Public History, and was the first female chair of the Brooklyn Museum's board. Her family has a history of collecting fine art, which clearly did not escape Elizabeth. In a 2016 interview, Sackler said “art has always been part of [my] life, but the social justice piece comes out because I can't help myself.”<sup>115</sup>

While Elizabeth has been a social justice and arts advocate for almost her entire life, her family name has recently made headlines in relation to the opioid epidemic that has taken hold of the United States. In 2018 a lawsuit was filed against Purdue Pharma, a company founded by Elizabeth's two uncles and is now owned and operated by other members of the Sackler family. The Massachusetts attorney general found that eight members of the Sackler family were “personally responsible for deceptively selling OxyContin”—aiding the sweeping effect of the epidemic across the country.<sup>116</sup> Elizabeth however is not named as one of them and has even

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<sup>113</sup> Joanna Walters, “Artist Nan Goldin Stages Opioids Protest in Metropolitan Museum Sackler Wing,” *The Guardian*, March 11, 2018, sec. US news, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/mar/10/opioids-nan-goldin-protest-metropolitan-museum-sackler-wing>.

<sup>114</sup> “Art and Activism: The Compass Points of Elizabeth Sackler's Storied Career – Women in the World,” accessed December 3, 2018, <https://womenintheworld.com/2016/01/08/art-and-activism-intersect-across-elizabeth-sacklers-storied-career/>.

<sup>115</sup> “Art and Activism: The Compass Points of Elizabeth Sackler's Storied Career – Women in the World.”

<sup>116</sup> CBS News January 24, 2019, and 7:37 Am, “Family behind OxyContin Maker Engineered Opioid Crisis, Massachusetts AG Says,” accessed February 3, 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/purdue-pharma-lawsuit-massachusetts-attorney-general-blames-sackler-family-for-creating-opioid-crisis-oxycontin/>.

recently come out in support of the protests held at artistic and education spaces that display the Sackler name.<sup>117</sup> None of these protests have been held at the Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum.

Elizabeth first met Judy Chicago in 1988 when she visited Chicago's studio in Santa Fe. At the time, Chicago was exploring her Jewish heritage in her *Holocaust Project*; and the pair became extremely close—even sharing Passover together. Sackler has since become one of Chicago's most prominent collectors, saying of the artist: "Judy was really my teacher about the feminist art movement."<sup>118</sup> In Chicago's book, *The Dinner Party: From Creation to Preservation*, the artist writes the following on Sackler:

Her own personal history prepared her to play an important role as a patron, as she is from a family that has practiced both art patronage and philanthropy for many decades. One important lesson to be learned from her decision to house *The Dinner Party* is that one person can intercede in history—in this case, by single-handedly guaranteeing the work's preservation. Her act also illustrates the crucial significance of patronage, something that had been sorely lacking in relation to women's art, which is one reason so much of it has been erased.<sup>119</sup>

This statement was written before the opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, which was officially unveiled at the Brooklyn Museum on March 23, 2007.

While there are small museums and historic sites around the country that are dedicated to women's social achievements, the Sackler Center is the first of its kind, acting as "an exhibition and education environment dedicated to feminist art—its past, present, and future."<sup>120</sup> Its mission "is to raise awareness of feminism's cultural contributions, to educate new generations about the meaning of feminist art, and to maintain a dynamic and welcoming learning environment."<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Mara Siegler, "Sackler Scion Backs Photog's Campaign against OxyContin," *Page Six* (blog), January 18, 2018, <https://pagesix.com/2018/01/17/oxycontin-scion-backs-photogs-campaign-against-drug/>.

<sup>118</sup> "Art and Activism: The Compass Points of Elizabeth Sackler's Storied Career – Women in the World."

<sup>119</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 285–86.

<sup>120</sup> "Brooklyn Museum: About the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art."

<sup>121</sup> "Brooklyn Museum: About the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art."

Unlike the National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington D.C. (the only major museum in the world solely dedicated to championing women through the arts), the Sackler Center functions as a unique entity within a large art institution. It resides on the fourth floor, where visitors can also find the Contemporary and Decorative Art collections. At nearly 8,300 square feet, the Center's exhibition space is a large square—split into three gallery spaces defined by the walls of the triangular tent-like structure in the middle of the space that encloses *The Dinner Party*.

The Center also features other adjoining rooms intended for studies, educational purposes, and public programming—which are often provided by the Center's Council for Feminist Art. This Council is led by Chair members and the current Center's Senior Curator, Catherine Morris, and is designed to invite members “to engage in a dialogue about feminism's relevance to visual culture and participate in exhibition openings, private visits to artists' studios and art fairs, curator-led tours, lectures, and much more.”<sup>122</sup> In addition to these programming events, the Sackler Center hosts a “Women in the Arts” award and “First Awards,” both of which are annual ceremonies deigned to highlight the artistic contributions of women. Many of these programs, events, and panel discussions are video recorded and can be watched for free on the Sackler Center's website.

Coinciding with the Center's public engagement opportunities, its main priority is of course to showcase feminist art. In the three spaces that surround Chicago's table, a “regular exhibition schedule of feminist art” is on view with two to three new shows per year.<sup>123</sup> Upon its opening, the Center premiered with *Global Feminisms* which focused on feminist art from 1990

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<sup>122</sup> “Brooklyn Museum: Council for Feminist Art,” accessed March 6, 2019, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/council\\_for\\_feminist\\_art](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/council_for_feminist_art).

<sup>123</sup> “Brooklyn Museum: About the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.”

to the present. Since its opening they have exhibited a variety of works and artists; and while the Center often brings in particular pieces or artists for these exhibitions, their 2018-19 show, *Half the Picture*, highlights just over 100 of the Center's works from the permanent collection. The permanent collection of feminist art specifically designated to the Sackler Center is listed on the Brooklyn Museum's website to contain 167 artworks—including each place setting of *The Dinner Party*, the entry banners, the acknowledgement panels, and the heritage panels. This collection is mostly made of works that range from the mid-twentieth century to the present, and are specifically categorized as “feminist art works.” However, the Brooklyn Museum's digital catalogue search does offer online visitors the option of searching through women artists whose works are featured in other areas of the museum's permanent collection.

In addition to the permanent collection's digital accessibility when the works are not on display in the gallery, the Center has included an online “Feminist Art Base”—a “digital archive dedicated solely to feminist art, offering profiles of some of the most prominent and promising contributors to the field.”<sup>124</sup> The archive was started in 2007 and expanded until 2014. Though the Center is no longer adding information to this database of feminist art, the art included ranges from about the same dates as the permanent collection—approximately 1960 through the early 2000s. On the webpage where one accesses this feminist archive, a disclaimer appears to the browser, reading: “The Feminist Art Base may present images directed to adult audiences, and deals with challenging subject matter that may include sexual content or violence. If you are under 18, do not browse the Feminist Art Base without the permission of a parent or guardian.”<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> “Brooklyn Museum: Feminist Art Base,” accessed March 6, 2019, [https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist\\_art\\_base/P80](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/P80).

<sup>125</sup> “Brooklyn Museum: Feminist Art Base.”

Interestingly, this message warning the Brooklyn Museum’s online visitors of “explicit” content is not found anywhere else throughout the online collection’s search catalogue, including the permanent collection of the Sackler Center. However, a similar signal of caution was physically present at the time I visited the Sackler Center for Feminist Art on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018. In conducting research for this project, I travelled to the Brooklyn Museum specifically to view *The Dinner Party* and the Sackler Center. On view at the time was their *Half the Picture* exhibition, meaning everything on display in the Center (including *The Dinner Party*) was part of the permanent feminist art collection. As one entered the doors of the Center, a standing sign read: “This exhibition contains explicit content and may not be suitable for all audiences, including minors. Viewer discretion is advised” (figure 12). I was admittedly quite surprised to see such a warning sign in front of the Center’s doors, because it felt like a discouragement of the works about to be viewed, rather than an encouraging opportunity for people to embrace and think critically about the feminist messages being conveyed in this type of space—a space that is supposed to be innovative and full of groundbreaking feminist art. Is it not the Sackler Center for *Feminist Art* after all?

If the Sackler Center was displaying artworks that potentially recalled intensely traumatic experiences, I would understand where a trigger warning might be necessary. *Trigger warnings* are disclaimers or texts that alert “the existence of one or more possible anxiety-causing subjects, whether readings or visual media,” and can sometimes be a way to warn viewers of overtly explicit content when required.<sup>126</sup> In her study of these controversial labels, Catherine James claims that these warnings are “an emerging predicament for academic libraries. To label or not

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<sup>126</sup> Catherine James, “Trigger Warnings: To Label or Not to Label?,” *Public Services Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (September 12, 2017): 296, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2017.1375883>.



to label collections and resources is the ethical dilemma facing college and university libraries and librarians.”<sup>127</sup> I would also argue that this claim holds true for art institutions, and may even hold more weight at a major art museum like the Brooklyn Museum. However, while the warning on the Feminist Art Base webpage did disclose that the archive held some sexual and violent content, it was not necessarily warning victims of sexual or violent trauma who might be triggered, but rather simply discouraging viewers under the age of 18 because of the “adult” directed content. Similarly, the physical sign on display in front of the Sackler Center was also *not* a trigger warning, but a message that also targeted minors.

Cheri Eileen Ehrlich is an art educator who previously worked within the education department at the Brooklyn Museum and was an instrumental figure in producing *The Dinner Party* Institute Curriculum—“a short course dedicated to teaching K-12 teachers how to utilize *The Dinner Party* Curriculum Project to teach students about Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* and included topics that arise when looking at and discussing this artwork, such as feminism, gender, sexuality, women’s history, and women’s rights.”<sup>128</sup> In 2011, Ehrlich produced a study in which 19 adolescent girls, minors, participated in the Women Artists and their Artwork program at the Brooklyn Museum. “This study investigated what could be learned about girls’ interests in feminist exhibitions and why girls’ interests in feminist exhibitions are relevant when teaching them about feminist artworks. It also considered how, if at all, engagement with feminist artworks that interest girls reinforce or change their thinking about gender (in)equality.”<sup>129</sup> The program involved the young girls in looking at and discussing feminist

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<sup>127</sup> James, 296.

<sup>128</sup> “An Invitation to The Dinner Party Institute - BKM TECH,” accessed March 6, 2019, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/2010/11/05/an-invitation-to-the-dinner-party-institute/>.

<sup>129</sup> Cheri Eileen Ehrlich, “Adolescent Girls’ Responses to Feminist Artworks in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum,” *Visual Arts Research* 37, no. 2 (2011): 59, <https://doi.org/10.5406/visuartsrese.37.2.0055>.

works by Edwina Sandys, Bailey Doogan, Kiki Smith, and of course Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. What the study revealed was that this program heightened the adolescent girls' affinity toward and interest in feminist art and allowed them to "explore their personal feelings and thoughts about human experiences."<sup>130</sup> This study in mind, one conducted at the Brooklyn Museum and engages specifically with feminist works on view in the Sackler Center, it seems surprising that the curatorial or directorial staff would feel it necessary to display signs that not only warn about the content, but direct it as being inappropriate to minors.<sup>131</sup>

In the beginning of her article, Ehrlich argues that:

Feminist artworks often address controversial and complex issues through imagery that can be sexually and violently graphic, and concerns arise about how to meet the educational, social, and developmental needs of adolescent girls when teaching from these artworks. Determining a starting point that enables educators to understand adolescent girls' perceptions of feminist artworks is key to developing appropriate and beneficial programs and lessons for them.<sup>132</sup>

While the subject of her study is of course to focus on the interactions that adolescent girls have with feminist art, I would argue that developing these types of educational and curatorial strategies more broadly would not only help minors to interact with complex works in the Sackler Center, but aid all viewers in engaging with types of art that they maybe have never seen before or feel initially uncomfortable with. What is particularly troubling for me in seeing these disclaimers next to feminist art specifically, is that they are not found anywhere else in the Brooklyn Museum or on its website. I believe that these signs may actually be turning people

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<sup>130</sup> Ehrlich, 62.

<sup>131</sup> Throughout this research project, I have been in some contact with the staff at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. I would like to note that I did contact them in questioning the reasons behind their placement and language of the disclaimer sign in front of the Sackler Center, but as of March 6, 2019, I have not heard a response from any staff member.

<sup>132</sup> Ehrlich, "Adolescent Girls' Responses to Feminist Artworks in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum," 56.

away, adults included, who perhaps do not know what awaits them in the gallery. Rather than inviting museum-goers into a feminist labeled space to learn something new, they are met with a cautionary text that reaffirms many biases towards feminist art.

For example, the idea that feminist art creates problematic viewing experiences because of its sexual content recalls the 1990 plans for *The Dinner Party* to be permanently moved to University of the District of Columbia (UDC). However, these plans fell through when on July 26th, 1990 *The Washington Times* published an article that was read aloud in the U.S. House of Representatives by Congressman Robert K. Dornan who called the work a disgusting piece of “3-D ceramic pornography” that children of the UDC campus “shouldn’t go anywhere near.”<sup>133</sup> Although the disclaimer in front of the Sackler Center doors do not specifically reference *The Dinner Party* as being *the* “explicit content,” the connections between the negative critiques that have culturally deemed the work “explicit” and the Center’s own curatorial decisions to display the sign seem counterintuitive to the meaning of the feminist space. When we observe *The Dinner Party* as its own object, aside from its designated place in feminist art history, or its physical place of residence in the Sackler Center, it is somewhat hard to imagine that ceramic dinnerware could ever be categorized as pornographic, let alone “explicit” in a major cultural institution. How could a *table* cause so much uproar in the art world, amongst women’s rights groups, and even within the United States House of Representatives throughout the past forty years? In this case I might rather coincide with Hilton Kramer’s remark that the Chicago’s dinnerware is “kitsch” rather than explicit.<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> “Congressman Discussing Dinner Party | User Clip | C-SPAN.Org.”

<sup>134</sup> Kramer, “Art.”

I am also not convinced that the collective work on view, speaking from my viewing experience of the Center, was any more explicit than other sexist or nude imagery displayed regularly in any other art museum. *The Dinner Party* was of course on view, along with works by the Guerrilla Girls, Barbara Kruger, Carrie Mae Weems, and Betty Tompkins. I understand that feminist art like *The Dinner Party* can recall problematic messages, which can undoubtedly be a tricky path to navigate for a public institutions. However, is it not the job of an art museum to provided spaces where we can collectively confront social and politic issues as a means to create encouraging conversations? According to the National Coalition Against Censorship’s 2019 “Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy” guidelines:

To exhibit a work of art is not to endorse the work or the vision, ideas, and opinions of the artist. It is to uphold the right of all to experience diverse visions and views. If and when controversies arise from the exhibition of a work of art, we welcome public discussion and debate with the belief that such discussion is integral to the experience of the art. Consistent with our fundamental commitment to freedom of speech, however, we will not censor exhibitions in response to political or ideological pressure.<sup>135</sup>

While the Sackler Center is not covering up any feminist artworks, or censoring them in a physical sense, I think that these disclaimers censor the public’s viewing experiences—which have aided in not only the “othering” of feminist art, but has led to the continual stigmatization of *The Dinner Party*. However, other institutions, curators, and artists have begun utilizing different kinds of signage or texts, not only to prompt intersectional feminist conversations, but also to consider solutions for discussing problematic works of art, artists, and collections.

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<sup>135</sup> National Coalition Against Censorship, “Museum Best Practices for Managing Controversy” (National Coalition Against Censorship, 2019), <https://ncac.org/resource/museum-best-practices-for-managing-controversy>. Members of the Coalition include the Collage Art Association, the American Alliance of Museums, and the Association of Art Museum Curators.

Beginning with the 2016 United States presidential election, a historic period of reckoning has struck the United States. The Me Too, Time’s Up, Women’s March, and Cancel Culture movements have invaded popular culture—exposing the predatory or insupportable actions of Hollywood moguls, our favorite recording artists, and even Supreme Court justices. These movements have given many people some feeling of comfort in coming forward with their stories—aiding our society in collectively holding those in power accountable for justice, transparency, and equality. This is a moment that has not gone unnoticed within the art world, and has begun to infiltrate our experience of artistic spaces and alter our encounters with the objects they house—through including an intersectional approach to the way we look at and talk about art.

For example, in 2018 the former curator of American Art at the Worcester Art Museum, Elizabeth Athens, created museum labels that provided visitors with a more comprehensive narrative of the objects on display. In the portrait gallery, Athens added text to preexisting labels where benefits from slavery occurred—feeling it “unethical to allow the early American gallery to frame history with an uneven narrative that effaced people of color.”<sup>136</sup> Additionally, the Guerrilla Girls have once again pressed museums to take action in how they represent their collections. The group has called out the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. and their 2006 presidential portrait of Bill Clinton by Chuck Close (an artist with multiple allegations of sexual assault against him). In their 2018 work, *3 Ways to Write a Museum Wall Label When the Artist is a Sexual Predator*, the Girls offer museums a satirical example by which they can provide full disclosure of their problematic artworks to their viewers (figure 13). While museums

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<sup>136</sup> “At The Worcester Art Museum, New Signs Tell Visitors Which Early American Subjects Benefited From Slavery,” accessed February 2, 2019, <https://www.wbur.org/artery/2018/06/08/worcester-art-museum-colonial-america-slavery>.

and other art houses may not want to borrow the exact phrasing suggested by the Guerrilla Girls for their new disclosures, it is an undertaking that is nevertheless catching on.

The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art defines itself as “an exhibition and education facility dedicated to feminist art—its past, present, and future.”<sup>137</sup> However, as it exists today with careful disclaimers, I am concerned for the growth of feminist spaces like the Center and for the future of feminist art. In order to expand the meanings of feminism and apply them to a broader range of artworks and disciplines, these spaces cannot contain feminist art into a problematic and censored corner; and should by no means have to justify putting these works on view or offer cautions to viewers. Compared to the countless naked and exposed bodies visitors see every single time they walk in to an art museum, *The Dinner Party* and the works displayed in the Sackler Center need a place where they can be unapologetically feminist—so we *can* learn what types of feminism are problematic. Our feminist strives for equal representation only have a chance at succeeding when we can learn from our past without biases. What my experience of the Center reaffirmed for me is that *The Dinner Party* is still teaching us how we can be better. Even with its problematic history, its Second-Wave creation, it is sitting in this “othered” space begging for the same acceptance we give any other art object that isn’t in the feminist wing. It still has so much to teach us about the way we practice feminism and display and encourage feminist art and art history.

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<sup>137</sup> “Brooklyn Museum: About the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

## CONCLUSION

Since *The Dinner Party* premiered in 1979, Chicago has continued her research on women's history and has continually updated her findings through numerous publications. In her latest book, Chicago says "I can only hope that that both readers and viewers will take into consideration my sincere efforts to be inclusive, and fault me more for evincing the intellectual limits of the period and the available scholarship (which was exceedingly restricted)."<sup>138</sup> This is a model that I hope many scholars can use to reevaluate their own assertions in order to produce something that isn't as critical as it is prolific in its ability to produce contemporary and meaningful conversations. This is what I hope to have achieved throughout the course of this project, creating new conversations around a work that has succumbed to a canonical and unwavering historical placement and meaning.

In examining the chronological life of *The Dinner Party*, I have discussed Judy Chicago's work through a contemporary intersectional feminist lens—providing three approaches by which

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<sup>138</sup> Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 2007, 19.

the work can be discussed in today's scholarship, museums, and educational environments. Chapter two looked to the past, examining the studio space in which the work was produced through an intersectional lens. This analysis was rooted in a discussion of Second-Wave feminist scholarship, but created a useful foil to examine the state of artist studios and art-based employment in today's contemporary work environments. Chapter three's assertions looked towards the ornamental and decorative qualities of *The Dinner Party*. In congruence with conversations of reclaiming female agency through objects, I also sought to expand the possibilities for which a feminist labeled artwork can breach its canonical definitions and make connections in other art historical disciplines. Chapter four accounted for my own experience at the Elizabeth A. Sackler for Feminist Art, wherein I offered my thoughts on the future of feminist art spaces when they are "othered" in their place of residence.

I hope that while these chapters were indeed quite different in content, they may prompt institutions and academics to represent and discuss the sometimes difficult truths of our art world, so that we may offer a starting point at which art historians can evaluate and utilize problematic works of art to improve upon our canonical methods and discussions. Gender scholar Raewyn Connell argued that:

Building a genuine scientific understanding of gender and gender relations is an immense task, involving both biological and social science as well as a rethinking of human history and human evolution. The Women's Liberation Movement is rightly seen as the modern starting point of gender studies, opening up this whole terrain to serious analysis. Some of its formulations, we can now see, were too simple, but the movement was right in its perception that gender arrangements can and do change historically."<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Raewyn Connell, "Gender."



Not only does this quote resonate with the progression of gender studies, but also with how we approach art history. I believe that *The Dinner Party* should rightly be seen as a starting point for feminist art history. However, we often simplify its meanings and do not allow it to evolve with us as our feminist and art historical discussions progress.

While this research project as a whole has been importantly guided by an intersectional approach and provides an in-depth application of recent feminist theory to a specific work of art, more broadly I believe that this study sets a precedent for art historians to engage with feminist art differently, and to engage with non-feminist art through a feminist lens. In my three different analyses of *The Dinner Party*, I have not only discussed a singular work of art, but have created a model for scholars to cultivate meaningful and inclusive feminist and art historical conversations as means to broaden the scope of what feminist art can do for the present state of the canon. As I claim within the project, *The Dinner Party* has been locked into an initiating role in the history of feminist art, and therefore its meanings have been made stagnant. The points I make in each of my chapters are assumed to utilize intersectionality, while extending past this singular origin story of *The Dinner Party*. I believe this method can also be applied to other works of feminist and non-feminist art, as we begin to navigate the complex relations between problematic works and their unwavering importance to our field. This type of analysis can aid us in finding new ways to learn from problematic artworks—including our exclusive feminist pasts. With this research, I offer a starting point at which art historians can evaluate and utilize problematic works of art to improve upon our canonical methods and discussions.

Throughout this project I have thought much about the feminist issues and art criticisms raised by *The Dinner Party*. Truthfully, at points in forming my arguments I have thought that our feminist battles could be better fought elsewhere, instead of rehashing what has been fraught

over for nearly forty years. Yet, here I am still talking about *The Dinner Party*. I have thought about why I am choosing to deliberate over a classic example of white, dated, Second-Wave feminist art—instead of bringing light to women’s art that hasn’t garnered the same amounts of historical scrutiny and praise. What I have come to realize, and what I hope to have proven throughout this project, is that the meanings of *The Dinner Party* can change. We can change. Our art historical canon can be more than our problematic past. This type of reevaluation within the art world is becoming a major issue for not only viewers, but those who study problematic art works. Feminism is sometimes problematic, but instead of discounting our problematic histories, let us use these art works to learn how we can do better. Intersectionality and equality are maybe the toughest challenges facing our feminist state, but do not need to celebrate dated feminism and works like *The Dinner Party* to find them useful. *The Dinner Party* is not a limit to our feminism, but an opportunity to expand it.

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## LIST OF FIGURES



Figure 1  
Judy Chicago  
*The Dinner Party*  
1979  
Mixed Media  
Brooklyn Museum, New York



Figure 2  
Judy Chicago  
*Bigamy*  
1964  
Acrylic on Ceramic  
15.5 x 20 x 8 in.



Figure 3  
Judy Chicago  
*Marie Antoinette*, from *the Great Ladies* series  
1973  
Sprayed acrylic on canvas  
40 x 40 in.



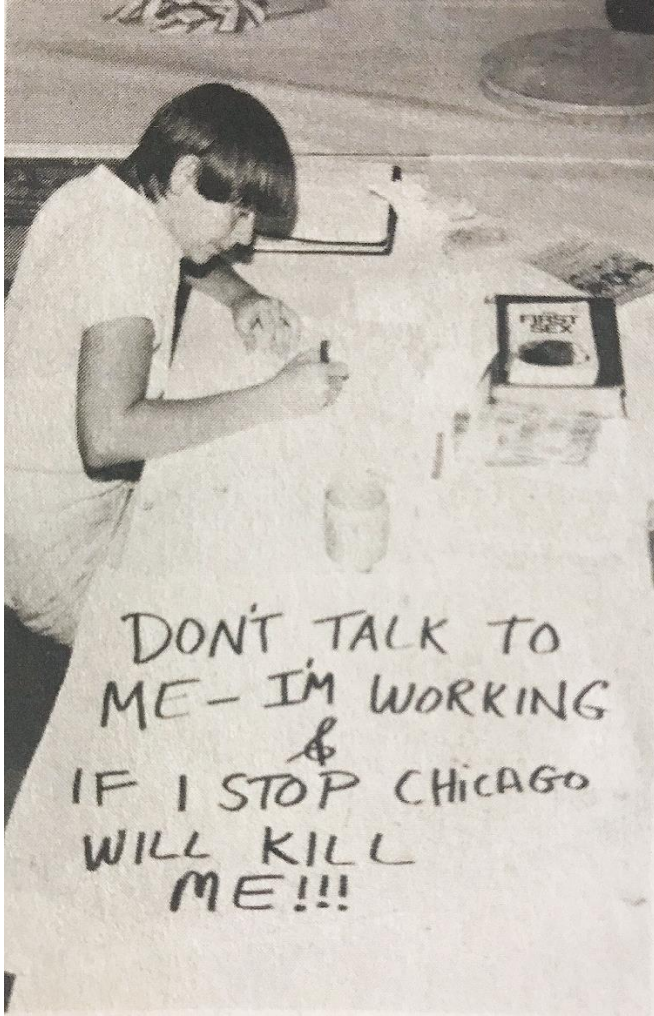


Figure 4  
Image of Juliet Myers in *The Dinner Party Studio*  
Image source: *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage*  
Judy Chicago  
1979



Figure 5  
Judy Chicago  
*"Potluck in the dinner Party studio"*  
Through the Flower Archives.





Figure 6  
Judy Chicago  
*The Dinner Party* (Emily Dickinson plate)  
1979  
Porcelain (or possibly stoneware), overglaze enamel (China paint),  
and possible additional paint  
Brooklyn Museum, New York

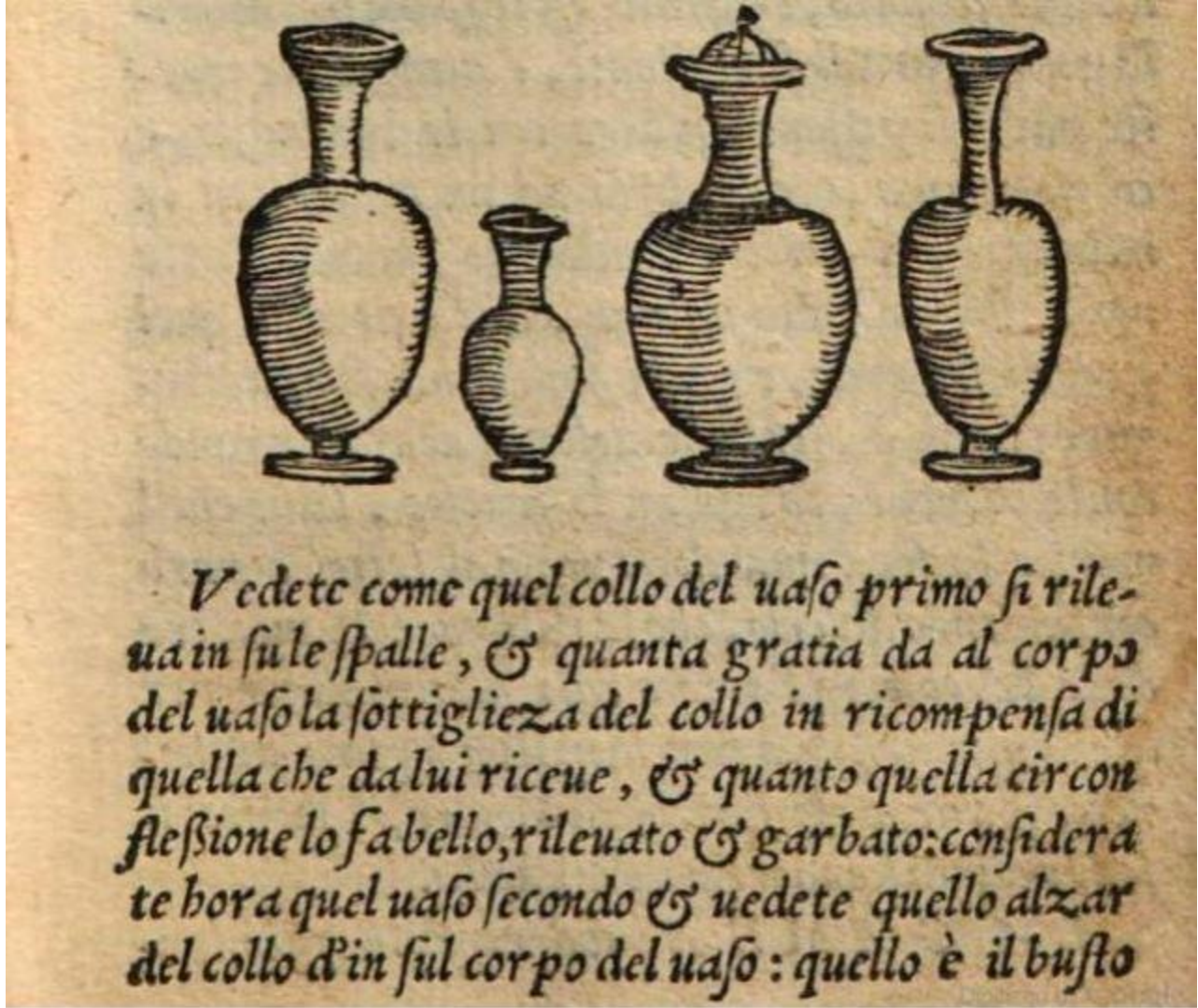


Figure 7  
Detail of four vases from *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne*  
(*On the Beauty of Women*)  
Agnolo Firenzuola  
1542  
Page 43

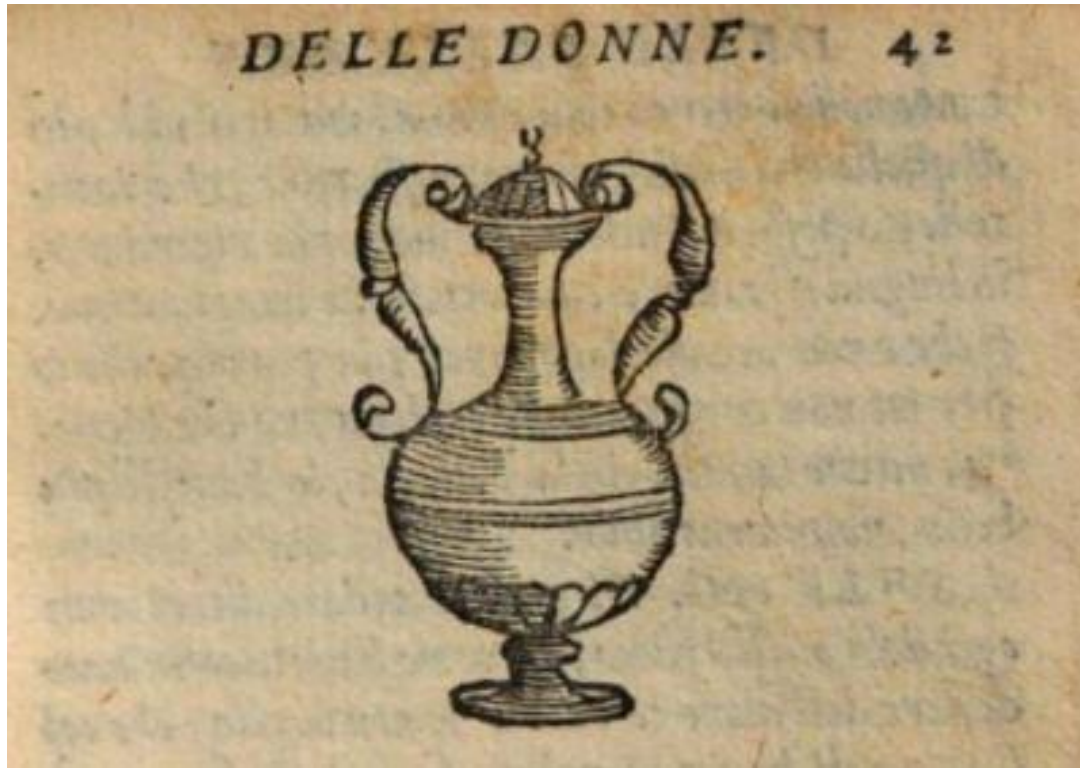


Figure 8  
Detail of Mona Lampiada from *Dialogo delle bellezze delle donne*  
(*On the Beauty of Women*)  
Agnolo Firenzuola  
1542  
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Figure 9  
*Vase, Qing Dynasty*  
c. 1740 with French gilt-bronze mounts  
c. 1745-50, the vase of Jingdezhen porcelain with a pale celadon-green glaze  
Height with mounts 36.8 cm.  
J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Figure 10  
*The Dinner Party* (Detail of Georgia O'Keeffe)  
Judy Chicago  
1979  
Mixed Media  
Brooklyn Museum, New York



Figure 11  
*The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*  
John Singer Sargent  
1882  
Oil on Canvas  
1882, 221.93 x 222.57 cm  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

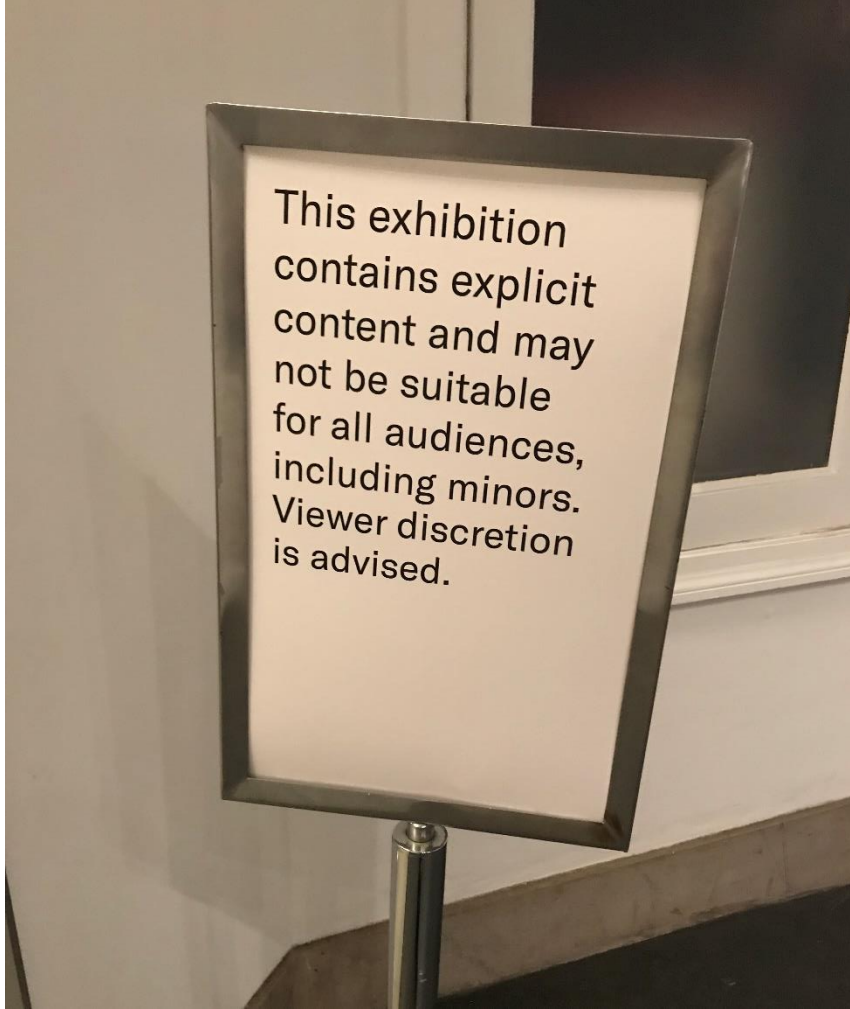


Figure 12

“Photograph documenting the ‘explicit warning’ offered to visitors of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art”

Photograph taken by Bianca Martucci-Fink on December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018 at the Brooklyn Museum in New York.



# 3 WAYS TO WRITE A MUSEUM WALL LABEL WHEN THE ARTIST IS A SEXUAL PREDATOR

For museums afraid of alienating billionaire trustees and collectors who donated the artist's work

## Chuck Close

American, born 1940 Monroe, Ohio

*Portrait of President Bill Clinton*, 1992  
oil on canvas  
National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC

Chuck Close is one of the most important artists of his generation, and the creator of a new kind of portraiture consisting of patterns of color.

For museums conflicted about disclosing an artist's abuse next to his art

## Chuck Close

American, born 1940 Monroe, Ohio

*Portrait of President Bill Clinton*, 1992  
oil on canvas  
National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC

Chuck Close is one of the most important artists of his generation, and the creator of a new kind of portraiture consisting of patterns of color. Like many artists, he has had a few disgruntled employees.

For museums who need help from the Guerrilla Girls

## Chuck Close

American, born 1940 Monroe, Ohio

*Portrait of President Bill Clinton*, 1992  
oil on canvas  
National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC

Chuck Close has had a huge career with prices to match. He has been accused of sexually abusing models, and students he picked up at fancy art schools. How fitting and ironic that he painted the official portrait of Bill Clinton. The art world tolerates abuse because it believes art is above it all, and rules don't apply to "genius" white male artists. WRONG!

A PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGE FROM



CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

Figure 13  
*3 Ways to Write a Museum Wall Label  
When the Artist is a Sexual Predator*  
The Guerrilla Girls  
2018



VITA

Bianca Martucci-Fink

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Thesis: A BITE OUT OF HISTORY: A FEMINIST REEVALUATION OF JUDY CHICAGO'S  
*THE DINNER PARTY*

Major Field: Art History

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