

FEMINIST ART

Betty Friedan's 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* signaled the start of the feminist movement, and almost simultaneously a number of women artists began making work that dealt with women's issues. Nancy Spero made simple but powerful painterly drawings depicting violence toward woman, whereas Mimi Smith made what is now recognized as the first clothing art, objects like a minimalist *Girdle* (1966) made out of rubber bathmats that capture the discomfort of women's clothing. Carolee Schneemann did such outrageous performances as *Interior Scroll* (1975). Naked and crouching, she pulled from her vagina a long scroll, from which she read a fictitious conversation between a woman and a man who failed to recognize the woman as an artist, not just a wife and mother.

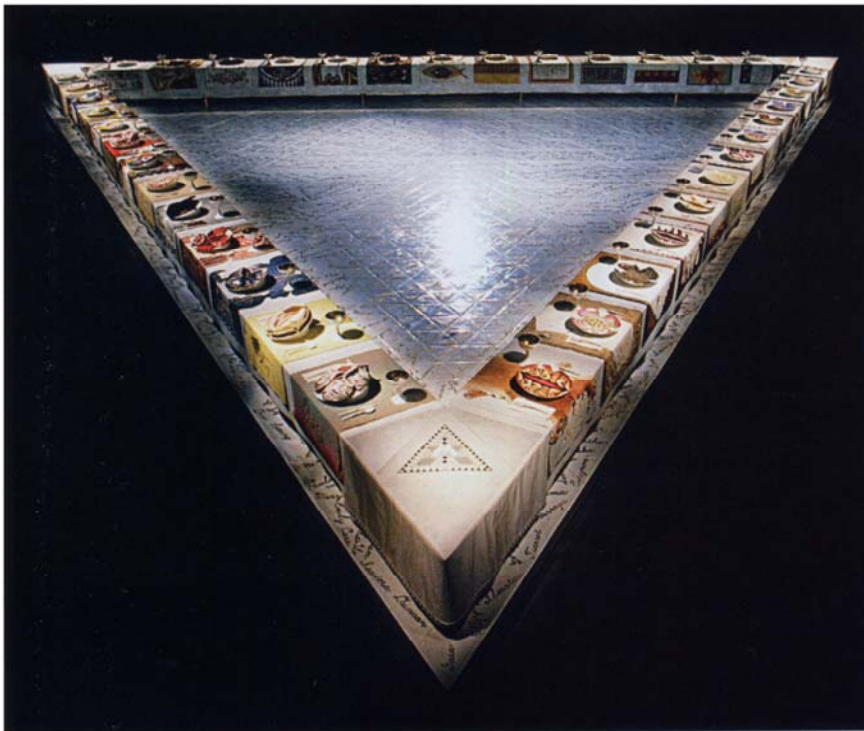
Judy Chicago The great monument to the women's movement, however, is Judy Chicago's (b. 1939) controversial *The Dinner Table* (fig. 27-30), made by over 400 women between 1974 and 1979. By the late 1960s, Chicago was a dedicated feminist, who in the early 1970s established a Feminist Art Program, the first of its kind, at California State University at Fresno and then shortly thereafter with artist Miriam Schapiro a second similar program at the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. The thrust of the courses was to encourage women to deal with gender

identity and cultivate a female sensibility. The projects in Valencia included *Womanhouse* (1972) a suburban house near the campus that was used by female faculty and students for the creation of gender-related installations and performances, especially dealing with oppression and stereotyping of women.

The Dinner Party reflects Chicago's shift from a maker of abstract minimal objects and paintings to working in installation on environmental scale. It pays homage to the many women who Chicago felt were ignored, underrecognized, or outright omitted from the history books. Chicago first laboriously researched these forgotten figures. She then designed a triangular table with 39 place settings, 13 to a side, each honoring a significant woman, ranging from ancient goddesses to such twentieth-century icons as Georgia O'Keeffe. Hundreds of other names are inscribed on white floor tiles lying in the triangular intersection of the tables. Each place setting included a hand-painted ceramic plate that pictured a vagina executed in a period style—Emily Dickinson's sex, for example, is surrounded by lace, and French queen Eleanor of Aquitaine is encased in a fleur-de-lis. Under each place setting is an embroidered runner, often elaborate and again in period style. Instead of using bulldozers, chain saws, hoists, and welding

equipment as the men did for their environments and installations, Chicago intentionally turned to a media associated with women—china painting, ceramics, and embroidery. Although the work evokes a male ritual, Christ's Last Supper, it is transformed into a feminist ceremony. She collaborated with hundreds of women to produce the highly refined components of her elegant but complicated sculpture.

The Dinner Party was first shown at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979, after which it was scheduled to tour the nation. But because of its overt sexuality and what was then perceived as confrontational feminist politics, most major institutions canceled the show (without specifying their reasons). Instead it was shown in alternative spaces, which began to proliferate in the late 1970s. Traditional museums had not adequately represented women and minorities, and now, these alternative spaces exhibited works that reflected the multifaceted pluralistic art that characterized the period. Today it is difficult to see what the fuss was all about. This exquisite setting for a spiritual last supper embraces many of the characteristics we associate with the new artistic freedoms of the period. It stands as a powerful icon for women's liberation and independence. Additionally, its gender politics, commentary on contemporary society, and use of so many different styles and periods announces the art of the 1980s, an art that still prevails today and has come to be called Post-Modernism.



27-30 Judy Chicago. *The Dinner Party*. 1979. Mixed media, 3 × 48 × 42' (.9 × 17.6 × 12.8 m). Brooklyn Museum of Art

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