

Who wants to go *The Dinner Party*?
An Examination of Receptions to Feminist Art

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When Judy Chicago's, *The Dinner Party*, premiered at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979 she unleashed more than an art exhibition. She brought conversations regarding women's art, sexuality, and history to the forefront of social consciousness. In a time when various social movements were commanding awareness, Chicago was able to share the "1970s feminist art movement's message to thousands of viewers around the globe."¹ *The Dinner Party* has evoked passionate responses, both positive and negative. In the three decades since *The Dinner Party* was opened to the public, it has served a central and controversial role in debates of art and feminism. It has received both praise as a representation of women's history by highlighting their struggles and achievements and criticism for failing to represent women of color and overtly displaying women's sexuality. The reception of Judy Chicago's 1970s feminist art installation has varied. Its polarizing nature speaks to wider issues seen within the women's movement and feminist art. Historical context provides insight into the opinions expressed by diverse critics, such as feminist author Alice Walker, art historians such as Amelia Jones, and oppositionist conservative institutions.

The Dinner Party is a product of the women's movement and logically, it embodies and represents key elements, both the positive and negative. The parallels between *The Dinner Party* and the women's movement are exhibited by white women's exclusion of women of color and their failure to acknowledge black women's sexuality. Additionally, when feminist statements, especially expressions of female sexuality

¹ Laura Meyer, "From Fetish to Feminism: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in California Art History" in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* ed. Amelia Jones; essays by Laura Cottingham...et al (Los Angeles: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with University of California Press, 1996), 71.

challenge the patriarchy it has historically been met with fierce opposition. *The Dinner Party* is significant because it serves as a case study for the second-wave feminist movement. Both have functioned as a channel to bring awareness to stories of women who have been historically marginalized. Feminism “changed the narratives of what mattered and, by doing so, changed history itself” and simultaneously *The Dinner Party* had similar effects on our collective notions of female sexuality, women’s role in history, and representation of women in art.²

The Dinner Party has been discussed and debated in major media publications, on national radio stations, and even on the floor of the United States House of Representatives. Conservative art critics and politicians have called it pornographic, kitsch, and weird sexual art. Conversely, women visitors to the exhibition, writers, and feminists have heralded the piece inspiring, life changing, and exemplifying the female experience.

So what is it about *The Dinner Party* that makes it capable of garnering such visceral and diverse reactions? It is a visually and physically grand installation, which features three forty-eight foot tables arranged in an equilateral triangle. Each table has 13 place settings, representing 39 women of historical significance. The women featured comprise mythical, Biblical, and contemporary mid-twentieth century figures and are organized in chronological order. The first table features notable women “From Prehistory to Rome,” the second “From Christianity to the Reformation,” and the third “From the American Revolution to the Women’s Revolution.” Starting with Primordial

² Jane Gerhard, *The Dinner Party, Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 4.

Goddess and ending with Georgia O'Keefe, each setting has 30-inch-wide and 51-inch-long runner embroidered with the guest's name and embellished in a fashion that represents the period in which they lived.³

On these individual runners sits a large china plate that has been sculpted and hand painted to represent vulval/butterfly forms. Chicago intended for the colorful and three-dimensional ceramic plates to “physically rise up as a symbol of women’s struggle for freedom from such containment.”⁴ The plates along each table become increasingly



Fig. 1. Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1979, China paint on porcelain, 35.6 x 35.6 x 2.5 cm, Brooklyn Museum. From *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage*. New York: Anchor Books, 1979).

elaborate as they progress through the timeline. For example, the dinner plate for Emily Dickinson, located on the third table, is especially complicated because it features layers of lace that have been dipped in a porcelain slip and then fired in a kiln.⁵ The delicate lace represents ideals of Victorian beauty; paired with the soft pink colors, suggest a “sensuality that nineteenth-century women were not supposed to have.”⁶ This plate, in comparison to the others

³ Jane Gerhard, *The Dinner Party, Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 1.

⁴ Judy Chicago, *Beyond the Flower* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 47.

⁵ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Judy Chicago: An American Vision* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2000), 74.

⁶ Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (New York: Anchor Books, 1979), 91.

at the table, bears more overt resemblance to a vulva. While most plates follow this theme, the plate for Sojourner Truth, has been singled out and criticized for this reason, as well as the only setting for an African-American woman.

The table rests upon an impressive porcelain tile floor, known as the Heritage Floor. The 2,300 tiles are hand-cast and painted with the names of 999 women. According to the Brooklyn Museum, where *The Dinner Party* is currently on display, the inclusion of historic women on the Heritage Floor were decided on by three criteria: did the woman make a worthwhile contribution to society; had she attempted to improve conditions for women; did her life/work exemplify a significant aspect of women's history or provide a role model for a more egalitarian society?⁷ The names featured on the Heritage Floor are organized by geography, time period, and area of discipline under the corresponding dinner plates. The process in finding and selecting names to be featured required Chicago to seek assistance from experts in the field of women's studies. Chicago acquired syllabi from "Joan Kelly-Gadol at Sarah Lawrence College and Vern Bullough of California State University, Northridge" in order to complete the Heritage Floor.⁸ Chicago utilized women's history, their role in society, and representations of their body in order to invoke a new perspective of art as a vehicle for female expression.

The conceptualization and construction of *The Dinner Party* took many years to complete, but the groundwork for the piece started in the 1960s, when Judy Chicago was a struggling young art student eager to be seen and heard in the Los Angeles art scene.

⁷ "Heritage Floor," *Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art*, accessed July 30, 2015, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/heritage_floor/

⁸ Jane Gerhard, *The Dinner Party, Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 77.

She was faced with the harsh reality of working in a male-dominated world and was conflicted about how to express her identity and experiences as a woman because this challenged socially constructed ideals about women being passive in their lives and artwork. This caused her to produce artwork that was aesthetically appealing to curators and the public, but not necessarily true to her own visions. Chicago was then able to gain acceptance and admission to local galleries, which helped to build her name recognition and credibility. Even with this emerging success, it was the rising momentum of 1960s feminist movement that acted as a turning point for Chicago and her career. In Chicago's autobiography, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, she attests to the significance the women's movement had on her life:

Here were women saying the things that I had been feeling, saying them out loud. I trembled when I read them, remembering the put-downs I encountered whenever I had tried to express the facts of my life as a woman artist...As I read, I slowly allowed the information to seep into my pores, realizing that there was an alternative to the isolation, the silence, the repressed anger, the rejection, and the denial I had been facing. If these women could say how they felt, so could I.⁹

The influence of the women's movement, caused Chicago to move forward into the 1970s art world with the desire to reconcile socialized concepts of womanhood with her own identity. She put this into action through pioneering feminist art education programs at Fresno State and then at California Institute of the Arts. In her classes, Chicago encouraged the women to delve into their personal life experiences as women as a source for artistic inspiration. These topics diverged from the strict and sterile structure of art

⁹ Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (New York: Penguin Books, 1975) 59.

classes at the time. Instead of focusing on line, color, and form, Chicago integrated into her classes a core component of the women's movement: consciousness raising.

A main tenant of consciousness raising in the women's movement has been to bring awareness to a wider group. Women across the United States, just like the women in Chicago's art classes, were being opened up to the realities that many women experienced. Chicago encouraged her students to consider experiences that were unique to their status as a woman, such as street harassment, sexual violence, relationships, and housing and employment discrimination. By creating a feminist art classroom where women could metaphorically and literally express women's socialization and roles, Chicago inaugurated a West Coast feminist art movement. The West Coast feminist art movement of the 1970s grew from enfranchising women artists and asserting "art and aesthetics could be liberating by allowing previously marginalized people to represent themselves apart from the confining aesthetics of the dominant group."¹⁰ Chicago and her students were rejecting preconceived notions about what classified as art and who could produce valued art. She was a pioneer for translating consciousness-raising into her teaching methods. From this, Chicago gained greater visibility in both the art and feminist world and turned this energy, passion, and feminist art perspective towards what would become a five-year art project: *The Dinner Party*.

In Chicago's efforts to continue to make art that represented women and their experiences, she directed her attention to creating an art piece that would exemplify women's history and their, often overlooked, contributions to society. In Judy Chicago's

¹⁰ Jane Gerhard, *The Dinner Party, Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 68.

illustrated book “*The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage*” she outlines her creative process:

I began to think about the piece as a reinterpretation of the Last Supper from the point of view of women, who, throughout history, had prepared the meals and set the table. In my “Last Supper,” however, the women would be the honored guests. Their representation in the form of plates set on the table would express the way women had been confined, and the piece would thus reflect both women’s achievements and their oppression.¹¹

This piece was intended to be the ultimate form of consciousness-raising, as a visual representation of women’s lost history. The arrangement of the tables in a triangle shape symbolizes equality, something that the guests at the table may not have experienced in their lifetime. The theme of butterflies represents liberation while also depicting the female form. The plates and runners differ in their intricacy and style, but they establish a cohesive story as one walks around the table in chronological order. *The Dinner Party* provides a “visual narrative of Western civilization as seen through women’s accomplishments.”¹² History has been told through the perspective of men, their conquests, and achievements. Chicago aimed to tell a different story, one that may not have been previously acknowledged or represented.

In developing this heroic artistic feat Chicago realized her limitations, especially since she was classically trained as a fine artist and not skilled in ceramics or needlework. Additionally, as Chicago’s ambitions and vision grew it became infeasible for her to complete the project single-handedly. In 1975, she began to enlist various artists and collaborators to assist with the project. While she initially thought of collective work as a

¹¹ Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (New York: Anchor Books, 1979), 11.

¹² Judy Chicago, *Beyond the Flower* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 46.

temporary means to improve women's self-esteem, ultimately it became the dominant mode of production for *The Dinner Party*. By readjusting her vision to include the input, assistance, and contributions of other artists, Chicago in many ways was mirroring similar changes within the women's movement. The women's movement grew from 1960s consciousness-raising to 1970s activism that established women centered institutions, women-centered values, and means to express cultural feminism. By creating a feminist art environment and welcoming the help of many volunteer artists, who were experienced in the realm of crafts, Chicago was able to actualize her vision.

The fact that *The Dinner Party* was created through the use of crafts became one of the primary negative critiques of the art piece. Techniques used, such as china painting, ceramics, needlework, and embroidery are not only considered to be low-art, but it is also traditionally viewed as women's work or a hobby. The West Coast feminist art movement, of which Chicago was instrumental, spent a great deal of time and effort speaking out against the exclusion of women artists from major galleries, museums, and art journals. The women artists from California were considered to be radical in their efforts to dismantle modernist, conservative notions of what constitutes high-art. They sought to utilize "female body imagery and traditionally 'feminine' domestic crafts and materials to explore aspects of female identity."¹³ For Chicago, the use of decorative arts was very intentional because she saw the craft of china painting as a "perfect metaphor

¹³ Laura Meyer, "From Fetish to Feminism: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in California Art History," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones; essays by Laura Cottingham...et al (Los Angeles: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with University of California Press, 1996), 55.

for women's domesticated and trivialized circumstances."¹⁴ Much of what is considered to be women's work is confined to the home and this unpaid labor is feminized and devalued by society. By utilizing craftwork, that has been traditionally limited to the domestic sphere, Chicago and her team of collaborators are validating women's artistry and contributions.

The opening of *The Dinner Party* on March 14, 1979 at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art confirmed its significance and overwhelming popularity amongst viewers. Crowds waited hours to view the installation throughout its run. The opening broke the museum's attendance records with a startling five thousand people in attendance. It maintained popularity during the three months it was on view in San Francisco as one hundred thousand people came to see it.¹⁵ The masses that flocked to see the installment were primarily white middle class women, many of whom had prior exposure to the women's movement and feminist art. While the aim of the piece is to highlight the overlooked contributions of women in history, it has only really achieved representing heterosexual, white women. Therefore the piece was very effective in attracting exactly that demographic. Feminists of color have been keenly aware of *The Dinner Party's* narrow representation of women's experience and have provided compelling critiques of the art piece's shortcomings.

¹⁴ Judith E. Stein, "Collaboration," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, and History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard; contributors, Judith K. Brodsky...et al (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1994), 228.

¹⁵ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Judy Chicago: An American Vision* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2000), 76.

The major national press and massive ticket and gift shop sales was an unexpected surprise for museum director, Henry Hopkins. Hopkins proved to be a rare ally for Chicago. As a male in a position of power at an esteemed art institution, it is noteworthy that he publicized the significance of *The Dinner Party*. In an interview with *Mother Jones*, Hopkins stated that *The Dinner Party's* “overall content is universal in its impact with no sexual or historical limitations.”¹⁶ Hopkins was one of few prominent museum curators who saw the validity in sharing Chicago’s the message and history of accomplished women.

While it is undeniable that *The Dinner Party* was popular amongst the masses who attended its opening in San Francisco, the enthusiasm was not always reciprocated by the institutional art world. The next two museums scheduled to display *The Dinner Party*; Memorial Gallery of the University of Rochester and the Seattle Art Museum, both revoked their commitments. This cancellation, as well as several others throughout the 1980s was a result of museum directors, curators, and art critics dismissing *The Dinner Party* as being too costly to move, set up, and schedule. While this may have been a contributing factor, the swirling controversy around *The Dinner Party* did not go unnoticed. Charles Cowles, director of the Seattle Art Museum, was transparent in his opposition to *The Dinner Party* by stating “I do not consider this fine art but an interesting project by a group of women whose leader is an artist.”¹⁷ Chicago and her

¹⁶ Ring, Nancy, “Identifying with Judy Chicago,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones; essays by Laura Cottingham...et al (Los Angeles: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with University of California Press, 1996),130.

¹⁷ Jane Gerhard, *The Dinner Party, Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 185.

team received similar responses by a variety of institutions, such as The National Collection of Fine Arts at the Smithsonian and the Institute for the Arts at Rice University who also rejected *The Dinner Party* on the basis that it did not “fit nicely into their program” and did not align with the art they usually present.¹⁸ Rejection such as this demonstrates how Chicago broke the mold and caused boundaries of respectability in the art community.

Even with all the accolades *The Dinner Party* received during its opening in San Francisco, it also instigated critics who challenged its status as fine art. Some commentators and museum boards saw “the circuitry between the art and the audience not as proof of its artistic effectiveness,” while others thought it was “cheapened by the crass commercialism” and some even “deemed the display of vulva images pornographic.”¹⁹ A variety of critics asserted that the ceramic plates are vulgar and therefore negate any chance to be considered art. Conservative reviewers, such as Cowles, have expressed their opposition to Chicago’s attempt to express a female social, political, and historical agenda via visual representations of vulvas. Aside from *The Dinner Party*’s dismissal as “low art” there are also deeper misogynistic undertones at play. Cowles was also quoted by the *Seattle Sun* as saying, “we don’t show feminist political statements.”²⁰ With the women’s movement proliferating into all aspects of society, Cowles like many others, felt that feminism had no place in the art world. It is

¹⁸ Ibid., 187.

¹⁹ Jane Gerhard, *The Dinner Party, Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 179.

²⁰ Ibid., 186.

the visual imagery and artistic techniques that are specifically feminine which proved to be upsetting to critics. Many forms of art have been used as a political statement, but when it is challenging the patriarchy as well as societal notions of female sexuality it is perceived as less valuable.

This issue is reminiscent of Chicago's struggles early in her career to be validated as a woman artist. There is an unspoken double standard of who can artistically represent a woman's form and how their sexuality can be conveyed. As a culture we have become "comfortable with the way in which representations of the penis have become emblems of artistic boldness" and yet when a woman artist utilizes the female form it is blasphemous. It seems that spectators, especially male ones in particular, "appear to be far more squeamish when they are confronted with something that even remotely resembles a vulva." Furthermore, "the reaction to this discomfort, which is essentially rooted in the spectator's own psychology, is to blame the artist."²¹ Chicago certainly received a fair share of criticism for her unabashed depiction of vulvar forms.

Idealizations of women's bodies and their representation in art and Western culture became a major focal point of the sexual revolution and the women's movement. The women's movement sought to reclaim the female body for women in many facets, from positive body image to reproductive rights. In the 1970 feminist classic, *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer describes at length "women's and men's fear and loathing of female sex organs."²² This disdain is exactly the feeling Chicago, and many other

²¹ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Judy Chicago: An American Vision* (New York: Watson-Guptill Publications, 2000), 77.

²² Joanna Frueh, "The Body Through Women's Eyes," in *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, and History and Impact*, ed. Norma Broude

feminist artists of the time, wanted to overcome in order to introduce a new “cunt-positive” culture. For feminists, *The Dinner Party*’s use of vulval imagery was a triumphant success, but critics did not share in this revelry of female sexuality.

A frequently referenced negative critique of *The Dinner Party* comes from prominent essayist and art critic, Hilton Kramer who served as chief art critic for *The New York Times* for nearly two decades. When *The Dinner Party* left San Francisco and struggled to find its next museum or gallery, it was then accepted by the Brooklyn Museum. Prior to the opening on October 18, 1980, Kramer wrote a pejorative critique in *The New York Times* labeling *The Dinner Party* “very bad art” and calling Chicago tasteless. As a conservative critic with a strong distaste for Pop, Contemporary, and Postmodernist art, *The Dinner Party* offended Kramer’s high art sensibilities. Kramer derides *The Dinner Party* for remaining “fixated on the external genital organs of the female body” and for reiterating its theme “with an insistence and vulgarity more appropriate...to an advertising campaign than to a work of art.”²³ While Kramer was not alone in his beliefs that *The Dinner Party* is vulgar and kitsch, he is regarded as an eminent art critic and his negative opinion, prominently featured in *The New York Times*, exacerbated Chicago’s struggle to have her work acknowledged and valued.

Feminist art historian and curator, Amelia Jones, rebutted Kramer’s critique by asserting, “the piece blatantly subverts modernist value systems, which privilege ‘pure’

and Mary D. Garrard; contributors, Judith K. Brodsky...et al (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1994), 191.

²³ Hilton Kramer, "Art: Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party' Comes to Brooklyn Museum," *New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 17, 1980.

aesthetic object over debased sentimentality of domestic and popular arts.”²⁴ The qualities that Kramer despised are some of the same reasons audiences professed their admiration. To Jones, *The Dinner Party* must be viewed in context of both art history and the evolution of feminist ideas to analyze critical responses of the work. Art critics, such as Kramer, maintain preconceived notions about what classifies art as a result of the culture they reside. In an essay about the sexual politics behind *The Dinner Party*, Jones analyzes the positive and negative responses and its overarching significance within feminism. According to Jones, studying the history of *The Dinner Party*’s reception can “tell us a great deal about the politics of art criticism and of feminism itself,” while highlighting the complexity of a feminist project, which attempts to “construct a coalition of women and to contest the exclusions that such a unification of subjects.”²⁵ *The Dinner Party* is not only a physically complex piece of art, but it is multi-layered in the ways it is analyzed. Whether it is admired or despised, a quick look around the tables exposes a shortcoming in the guest list.

This is especially evident in the lack of representation of women of color at the dinner table. There is only one plate for an African-American woman and it is set for abolitionist and women’s rights activist, Sojourner Truth. Her plate stands out amongst

²⁴ Amelia Jones, “The ‘Sexual Politics’ of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones; essays by Laura Cottingham...et al (Los Angeles: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with University of California Press, 1996), 87.

²⁵ Amelia Jones, “The ‘Sexual Politics’ of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones; essays by Laura Cottingham...et al (Los Angeles: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with University of California Press, 1996), 85.

the others not only because it is the only seat for an African-American woman, but it is also the only plate not represented with the vulval/butterfly theme. Instead, Truth's plate features a trio of faces painted with varying clichéd expressions. For the plate and runner Chicago used colors and patterns inspired by African art and each face is intended to symbolize the struggles Chicago views as central to the African-American female experience:



Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*, 1979, China paint on porcelain, 35.6 x 35.6 x 2.5 cm, Brooklyn Museum. From *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage*. New York: Anchor Books, 1979).

The sad face on the left is painted naturalistically and weeps for the suffering of the slaves. The highly stylized face on the right reflects the rage experienced by black women. The center face, a highly decorated mask, symbolizes the concealment of the real self required not only of black women but of their white sisters as well.²⁶

Chicago and her collaborative team spent a significant amount of time researching and designing the plates, and yet Chicago designed Truth's plate based on her own notions of what represents black women's experience. Chicago falls into a problematic space that

many white feminists of the 1960s, 70s, and today inhabit, which is the assumption that there is a universal female experience. Upholding this mentality causes ignorance about the complexity of experiences lived by women of color. Chicago and her art are very much a product of their time, and we have seen the ways in which the struggles of *The Dinner Party* mirror those within the women's movement. Chicago aimed to highlight the plight of women as a group historically discriminated against based on their female bodies, however her notions of the female experience as a white middle-class woman

²⁶ Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage* (New York: Anchor Books, 1979), 88.

were the only ones expressed. Other concerns held by women of color, lesbians, and women of lower socioeconomic status were left out. The outcome leads to *The Dinner Party* presenting an incomplete history of women.

The Dinner Party exemplifies the themes that were of greatest importance to white Western feminists of the 1970s and offers a view into a historical moment. Intrepid feminist poet and author, Audre Lorde succinctly addresses this issue that “white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define *woman* in terms of their own experience alone.”²⁷ Chicago has done this by only featuring one African-American woman at the table as well as by creating a plate that tokenizes and stereotypes that very woman. In an essay originally published in *Ms. Magazine*, author Alice Walker echoes Lorde’s concern that white and middle class women are either reluctant or unable to imagine experiences they have not lived. Walker sees this point illustrated in Sojourner Truth’s plate and criticizes the representation of black female subjectivity. Upon viewing *The Dinner Party*, Walker concludes, “perhaps white women feminists, no less white women generally, cannot imagine black women have vaginas.”²⁸ While other critics have opposed representing women’s genitals because of its vulgarity, Walker’s criticism rests in the fact that white women are hesitant to represent black female sexuality therefore denying their womanhood.

²⁷ Amelia Jones, “The ‘Sexual Politics’ of *The Dinner Party*: A Critical Context,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, ed. Amelia Jones; essays by Laura Cottingham...et al, (Los Angeles: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with University of California Press, 1996), 100.

²⁸ Alice Walker, *In search of our mothers’ gardens: womanist prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 373.

The Dinner Party spent much of the 1980s travelling nationally and internationally to galleries and community spaces that were open to acquiescing the cost of transporting, assembling, and displaying the large art piece. After the exhibition of *The Dinner Party* in Melbourne, Australia in 1988 the large installation was indefinitely put into storage in Northern California. *The Dinner Party* had potential for finding a permanent home when it was announced in July 1990 that a board member of the University of the District of Columbia (UDC) proposed a permanent display at UDC's Carnegie Library. What started as a well-supported plan to bring culture to an underfunded urban university escalated into a controversial nightmare for Chicago and UDC's board of trustees.

The proposed space for *The Dinner Party*, Carnegie Library required substantial renovation to not only house the sizable piece but also to provide the building with structural repair and improvement, such as a new roof, elevators, and heating systems. The District of Columbia's dependency on Congress to approve its budget caused the proposed Carnegie Library renovation budget of \$1.6 million to bear intense scrutiny. Evaluation of the use of funds for this art piece catapulted *The Dinner Party* back into the media and public discussions of its value and its supposedly vulgar imagery. For Chicago, and perhaps the board of UDC, the controversy that followed *The Dinner Party* was thought to be an inconsequential piece of the past; furthermore a permanent exhibition would solidify its status as respected art.

On July 26, 1990 during the House's consideration for the District's annual budget, Virginia Republican Representative Stan Parris "sponsored a measure that sought

to punish the university by withholding \$1.6 million from an appropriations bill.”²⁹ In the course of the eighty-seven minute debate, Representatives faced off in a heated argument about obscenity, morality, and funding for the arts. Conservatives who supported the budget cut, who unsurprisingly were all white men, were fervent in their disdain. Such as California Republican Representative, Robert Dornan, who asserted, “this is not art, it’s pornography, 3-D ceramic pornography.”³⁰ Fellow Republican California Representative, Dana Rohrabacher added that it is an “absolute waste to show this weird sexual art that is an affront to the value of our people.”³¹ This harsh criticism was not merely a debate about funding for art and UDC, but rather an attack on the value of feminist art. As seen in the women’s movement, when white male values are challenged the reaction is fierce and often aggressive. Ultimately, the House members voted 297 to 123 to reduce UDC’s budget and halted the spending of \$1.6 million.³² The conflict did not end here as UDC’s board of trustees, faculty, and even the student body became enmeshed in the debate as what to do with *The Dinner Party*. In the course of a few months, UDC shifted its position and finally opted to cancel plans to permanently display *The Dinner Party*.

For Chicago, who watched the debate on C-Span, this was an unexpected turn of events. In her autobiography *Beyond the Flower*, Chicago expressed her shock about “the

²⁹ Richard Mahler, “The Battle of Chicago: Art: Feminist artist Judy Chicago fires back at critics who call her 'Dinner Party' obscene and withdraws her gift of it to a university,” *Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles, CA), Oct.12, 1990.

³⁰ Jane Gerhard, *The Dinner Party, Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 252.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Kent Jenkins Jr., Kim Masters, “House Cuts UDC Budget \$ 1.6 Million as GOP Attacks Artwork,” *The Washington Post* (Washington DC), Jul. 27, 1990.

way in which *The Dinner Party* was denounced, excoriated, and eviscerated by men (no women participated) who had never seen the work and basically did not know what they were talking about.”³³ The House members who voraciously argued to have UDC’s budget cut and to stop the procurement of *The Dinner Party* were in upheaval about 39 ceramic plates. They did not mention or acknowledge the other significant artistic components, such as the intricately embodied runners or the impressive Heritage Floor. The conservatives in opposition to *The Dinner Party* were operating on misogynistic beliefs and biases similarly displayed by art critics and museum curators. They could not see past the artistic representation of women’s vulvas. Again, critics became upset by women’s open display of sexuality, leading *The Dinner Party* to be in the midst of a social debate where conservative and liberal social values clash. For *The Dinner Party*, history seems to repeat itself, from the 1970s women’s movement to the culture wars seen throughout the 1990s.

With all its praise and criticism, *The Dinner Party* is significant as a statement of art and women’s history. This is evident in the ways it encapsulates so many central themes and issues of the women’s movement. It is not only a product of its time, but it continues to be timely. Almost thirty years after the first opening of *The Dinner Party*, the Brooklyn Museum became the permanent exhibition space. With substantial assistance and funds contributed by New York feminist, Elizabeth Sackler, a space was dedicated not only for *The Dinner Party*, but also for feminist art. The opening in 2007 was historic for ushering a new phase in the reception of feminist art. “No longer deemed obscene, no longer an embarrassment of essentialism and unexamined racism, *The*

³³ Judy Chicago, *Beyond the Flower* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 227-228

Dinner Party arrived in Brooklyn as a monument to a movement that mattered.”³⁴ As the efforts of feminism began to permeate all aspects of women’s lives the affects are seen in the way it is received and accepted into the larger culture. Even as feminist art is canonized and celebrated by museums and art historians, the need for *The Dinner Party* is ever-present even if its perception has changed. Women and girls will continue to need to see the representation of women’s accomplishments in history. Feminists of today still need to acknowledge intersectionality and the power of diverse voices and representation. *The Dinner Party* provides inspiration for viewers of today as well insight into how reception of feminist art mirrors the women’s movement. The message and appeal of *The Dinner Party* provide it with the ability to invoke a sense of identification between women, much like the women’s movement. Through the all challenges and achievements, *The Dinner Party* demonstrates the power of feminist culture and why we must strive to keep it alive.

³⁴ Jane Gerhard, *The Dinner Party, Judy Chicago and the Power of Popular Feminism, 1970-2007* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 281.

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