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Why Judy Chicago, 78-Year-Old Feminist Godmother of Vagina Art, Is Having a Revival

By Stephanie Eckardt

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Judy Chicago with the ad of herself that ran in *Artforum* in 1970. © Donald Woodman

“V-a-g-i-n-a...” Judy Chicago, the 78-year-old feminist art pioneer, was painstakingly typing into her oversized smartphone last week when her husband, the photographer Donald Woodman, reached over and pointed out that the account she’d been searching for on Instagram, @vagina_china, had already popped up. “I mean, this would never have happened!” Chicago, who’d just shown me another favorite art account, @clubclitoris, exclaimed. “I just totally love it.”

In fact, we happened to be standing a few feet from a collection of ceramic vulva at the Brooklyn Museum that Chicago and a team of over 400 contributors spent more than five years laboring on in the '70s. In total, they make up *The Dinner Party*, the now legendary imagined banquet with 1,038 women whom Chicago considered at the time to be the most influential yet overlooked in Western history, ranging from Sappho and Sacagawea to Virginia Woolf and Emily Dickinson. (The latter has long been a fan favorite for its particularly frilly labia.)



Judy Chicago, Study for Emily Dickenson from *The Dinner Party*, 1977. © Judy Chicago / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.
Photo: Lee Staisworth

A decade ago, after garnering an audience of 15 million on a world tour, the installation took up permanent residence in the Brooklyn Museum, and last week, to Chicago's delight, it had just been relit to properly showcase the meticulously detailed plates and runners—and joined by "Roots of 'The Dinner Party': History in the Making," the first museum exhibition to explore the now iconic work's backstory, which opened on Friday as part of the Brooklyn Museum's yearlong celebration of the 10th anniversary of its Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art.

The celebration, however, isn't limited to Brooklyn: the National Museum of Women in the Arts mounted a similar reexamination this fall, in no small part because Chicago's work has suddenly found itself all too relevant again under Trump. The installation even figured prominently earlier this year in an episode of Aziz Ansari's Netflix series *Master of None*, with the participation of Chicago, who's a big fan of the show. "They sent the script they wanted to do, and it wasn't funny, so I said no, it's not up to their usual standards. So then they called me up from Italy and we talked on the phone and they submitted another script that was funny," Chicago recalled matter-of-factly.



Detail of *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago. Stan Honda/AFP/Getty Images

Chicago is headed for TV soon herself. Jill Soloway is currently developing an Amazon series based on Chicago's 1972 feminist art space and installation *Womanhouse*, an announcement that was made around the same time last year that Chicago also picked up representation from the influential New York gallery Salon 94. Its first solo show of hers, set for next spring, will come on the heels of Chicago's string of recent exhibitions, stretching from Berlin to Massachusetts. This sudden and wide-ranging resurgence in interest in her work took off in 2011, when she was featured in eight museum shows in the L.A. mega-exhibition "Pacific Standard Time"; then in 2014, to mark her 75th birthday, she once again opened eight more exhibitions, and Chicago herself even revived one of her famous firework performances in Brooklyn's Prospect Park for a crowd of 12,000.

Yes, Chicago has worked with fireworks—they were her less harmful response to the macho aggression of the Land Art and Light and Space artists she rubbed shoulders with in her youth—though you'd be forgiven for not knowing that. Not only has Chicago produced a "huge body of art" since she began taking classes at the Art Institute of Chicago more than seven decades ago (when she was five), but almost all of it has been overshadowed by *The Dinner Party*.

Not that Chicago's complaining. Her dedication to the installation, which she bounced around the museum showing off and shouting out factoids about in red- and orange-tinted glasses, oversized hoop earrings, a leopard-print shirt, and a pinstriped suit, has scarcely ebbed over the decades. Soon, the misconception of her as a one-hit wonder artist will be corrected, thanks to upcoming shows like the Institute of Contemporary Art Miami's exhibition of three decades of her work, and the National Museum of Women in the Arts's showing of her new work set for 2019, when a major monograph of her career will also be published.



The Dinner Party workers painting names on the Heritage Floor tiles, 1978. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archive.

The Dinner Party, after all, wasn't even entirely Chicago's doing: After working on it solo for a year and a half, she reached out to the ceramics department at UCLA, which she'd attended, to ask if they knew of anyone who might be of assistance. Eventually, through word of mouth, students looking for college credit, and mimeographed fliers handed out by Diane Gelon, a UCLA volunteer who became the *Dinner Party's* administrator, they managed to find hundreds willing to contribute, importantly including those familiar with crafts like needlework and China painting that Chicago has been credited with bringing into the sphere of high art.

Gelon's assistance, Chicago said, was key, as the artist lacked the "personable" qualities necessary for recruiting. "You remember the clock with my moods?" Chicago asked Gelon. "'Don't talk to me'; 'don't bother me, I'm working'; 'you can talk to me, but not for four hours.' Every day you'd set it," she reminisced with a laugh. (She got back at her team by installing a sign that said "Don't bother me, I'm working, or Chicago will kill me," on the desk of a particularly talkative and easily distracted assistant.)



Thursday Night Potluck with "The Dinner Party" Workers, 1978. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archive.

"I mean, I worked 17 hours a day," Chicago said in defense of her mercurial moods, which goes to show just how much work went into creating the *Dinner Party*; it became a running joke within the crew of hundreds—whose names are now finally back on display with the installation—that Chicago had originally thought she could tackle it all herself, China painting in the morning, doing needlework in the afternoon, and researching at night. ("I thought I could do it all with my paintbrush," Chicago admitted, a little sheepishly.)

As a woman in the art scene, however, Chicago was used to operating on her own. She was the only woman in a class of 250 men when she went to auto-body school to learn to spray paint in the '60s—a time period when, she's quick to point out, "the biggest compliment you could get is that you painted like a man." Turning her back on painting, Chicago dove into researching women's history, which soon expanded to the subjects of birth, the concept of gender, the construct of masculinity, and even the Holocaust, inspired by her Jewish roots and her father's persecution during the McCarthyism. (The F.B.I. visited her home when she was just six—long before they'd start their own file on Chicago in the late '50s when she joined the NAACP).



Judy Chicago, *Rainbow Man*, 1984, from "PowerPlay." Sprayed acrylic and oil on Belgian linen. Courtesy of Salon 94.

But, as the art historian Jonathan D. Katz put it in an essay about "PowerPlay," her '80s series tackling masculinity that'll comprise her first show at Salon 94, Chicago has a history of having "lousy timing." "The work preceded the context," Chicago said of the only body of work she's ever done that was met by complete silence; it was showcased, after all, before queer theory and masculinity studies, when the concept of gender was only thought of in relation to women.

Now, however, Chicago said with a sigh, "the context has unfortunately really caught up with the work." She twice cited a quote by Emma Thompson she'd just heard that particularly resonated with her, in which the actress called Harvey Weinstein "the top of a very particular iceberg" in "a system of harassment and belittling and bullying and interference." Chicago added, "There is a global structure of male terrorism."

When I asked if she thought her original focus of *Dinner Party*—the erasure of women's contributions and representation—still needed addressing, she burst into laughter. "Don't get me wrong—we all thought it was going to change in the '70s," she said, while allowing that things are better "in the United States of Brooklyn, and United States of Berkeley." But Chicago returned to teaching in the '90s because so many young women artists were writing to her saying that they again weren't finding support; in fact, the repeated "rising up and subsiding" of women's rights throughout history was why she decided to bring on a team to help make the plates in *The Dinner Party* three-dimensional in the first place.



Judy Chicago, *Hrosvitha Test Plate*, 1979, from "Judy Chicago's Pussies" at Jessica Silverman Gallery.
Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery.

Some things, however, have gotten better; for example, Chicago's current exhibition at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco is called "Judy Chicago's Pussies." "You know, in the '60s, I couldn't have done that," Chicago said. "Pussy," she explained, was "the worst of the worst," the word all the male artists she used to hang out with in L.A. in the '60s used to put each other down. "And now I'm an old lady doing a show called 'Pussies,' and all these young women are like, Club Clitoris, Vagina China!"

I asked Chicago if, in light of feminism's evolution since the '60s and '70s, she'd wished that she'd included more women of color and any trans women in the installation, which it's been increasingly criticized for lacking since 1979, when Alice Walker took to *Ms.* magazine to complain that white feminists seemed incapable of imagining that "black women have vaginas." Chicago, in response, quickly pointed to the only black woman with a seat at the table: "One of the reasons I included Sojourner Truth is because she's probably the first example of intersectionality—she spoke in the 19th century about the intersection between race and gender," she said, adding that she thinks it's "an incredible advance that we've begun to understand the complexity of identities."



Judy Chicago designing the entry banners for *The Dinner Party*, 1978. Courtesy of Through the Flower Archive.

Still, Chicago, who said that her feminism has “gone beyond intersectional,” seemed aghast at the idea of shying from working with vulvas and vaginas in order to be more inclusive to trans women. “There’s a lot of variation about how people define what it means to be a woman—we know that, and we know that it’s not binary,” she said. “However, most of the women who are women have vaginas, okay?”

“Listen, don’t ask me,” she went on, and returned to scrolling through grids of vulva on her phone. “Ask all these young women.”