

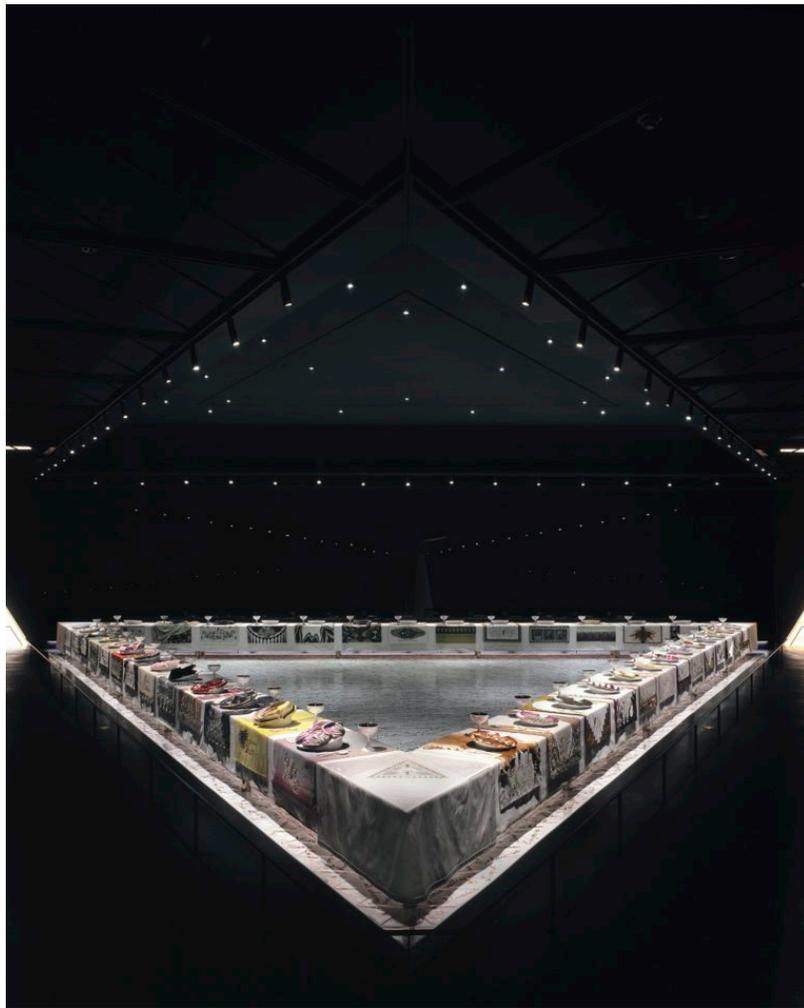
This epic, 40-year-old feminist art piece that we're still learning from today

By Jennifer Hijazi

March 20, 2018

In a dark room at the Brooklyn Museum, 39 ornate place settings, each representing a forgotten woman in history, are arranged on a triangular table.

Colorful, bulging plates—many of them abstract renderings of female genitalia—are placed atop hand-stitched, gilded table runners. The table, measuring 48 feet on each side, sits on what's called The Heritage Floor: 2,000 gleaming white tiles that contain the names of 999 other women.

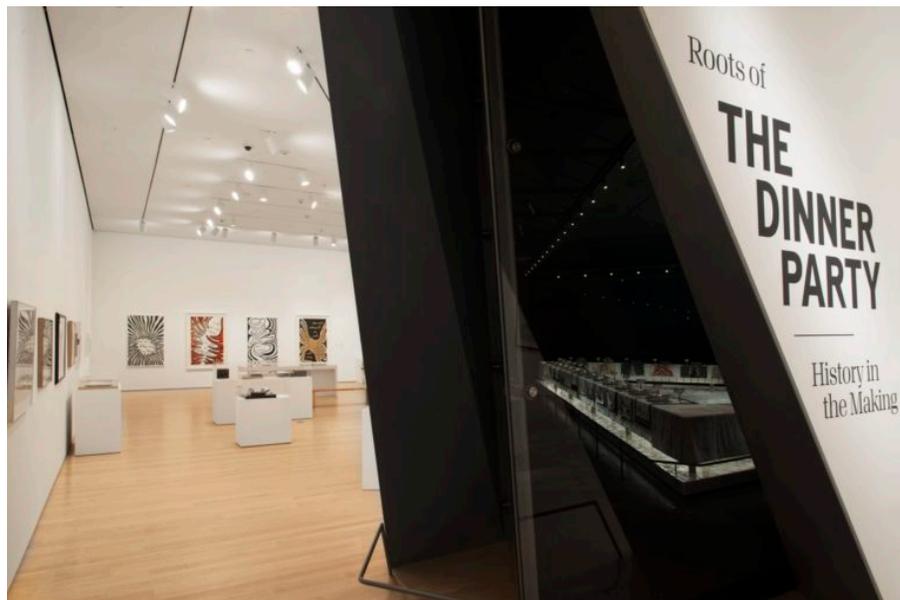


Judy Chicago (American, born 1939). *The Dinner Party*, 1974-79. (Photo © Donald Woodman)

Emily Dickinson's plate, decked with layers of stiff pink lace, is a metaphor for the repressive Victorian society in which she lived. And the plate of Margaret Sanger, birth control advocate and mother of Planned Parenthood, is painted in a startling red glaze, meant to represent the blood shed in childbirth and the activists who have fought for reproductive freedom.

With the popularity of the #MeToo and Time's Up movements, this massive altar to feminism, which artist and feminist educator Judy Chicago completed in 1979, is gaining renewed attention for its triumphs – but also its problems. Carmen Hermo, assistant curator at the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, wanted to highlight both for the museum's latest exhibit on the work.

In 2017, the Brooklyn Museum, the permanent home of the Dinner Party since 2002, resurfaced planning notebooks, research documents and test artwork from the Dinner Party's creation as part of its "Year of Yes" initiative, a showcase devoted to feminist art. "Roots of the Dinner Party: History in the Making" was the initiative's final exhibition, and showcased the massive effort that went into creating the piece in Chicago's studio, something Hermo said was missing from conversation about the well-known work. "It's become so iconic that the actual making and physical processes behind it have sort of slipped through the cracks," she said. "The intense process of china painting, the process of doing the research for 3,000 women before it actually was cut down to the 1,038 women on The Dinner Party... these kind of threads of hard work were really important to me."



Roots of "The Dinner Party": History in the Making, 2017. Images courtesy of Brooklyn Museum, photos by Jonathan Dorado.

The National Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. also hosted an exhibit about the Dinner Party studio last year, and is currently acquiring an archive of images from **Chicago's** decades-long career to be housed at the museum's Betty Boyd Dettre Library and Research Center.

Sarah Osborne Bender, director of the library, says Chicago's work is once again "having a moment," especially among a younger set of museum-goers.

"The message of this work is so literal and on point now, it's undoing the erasure of women in history," Bender said.

Chicago's vision came from the overt sexism she experienced in her professional life in the 60s and 70s. Male artists were disparaging, and calling someone a "p***y," a term Chicago loathed, was the preferred slur in artistic circles, Hermo said.

"She was so embarrassed and ashamed by that," Hermo said. "What does it mean that the ultimate put down was to be a woman?"



Judy Chicago standing in The Dinner Party studio, ca. 1978. Photograph by Amy Meadow. Judy Chicago Visual Archive, Betty Boyd Dettre Library & Research Center, National Museum of Women in the Arts

Almost 40 years later, the art world still struggles with gender disparity.

The National Museum for Women in the Arts reports that 51 **percent** of visual artists today are female, and yet their annual income is, on average, \$20,000 less than their male counterparts according to **2016 study** in the journal *Social Currents*. And when the art market website **artnet named** its 100 Most Collectible Living Artists, only two women made the list.

A **tally** from the National Museum of Women in the Arts revealed that only 9 percent of artists in one of the most well-known art history textbooks, Janson's *History of Western Art*, are women. The book is in its ninth edition. The first edition featured no women at all.

When Chicago began her search for workers for her Santa Monica studio in 1975, Susan Hill was the first to arrive. More than 100 other women followed, volunteering their time to the project.

Hill and the other Dinner Party workers – today they call themselves the “Leftovers”– believed the responsibility of telling the stories of forgotten women rested on their shoulders. “We felt incredibly responsible for bringing it forward,” Hill said.



Susan Hill and Terry Blecher work on the runner for the Kali place setting, part of The Dinner Party, in the needleworker's loft in Judy Chicago's Santa Monica, California studio, ca. 1977. Photograph by Lyn Jones.

Judy Chicago Visual Archive, Betty Boyd Dettre Library & Research Center, National Museum of Women in the Arts

Chicago set out to revise the way women were portrayed in history using traditionally “feminine” craftworks like china painting and needlework. The piece was originally conceived to include 13 painted plates inspired by the Last Supper, but grew as Judy’s vision evolved and more women arrived at the studio, Bender said.

Hill compared the atmosphere to a beehive, with little chatting, the occasional song playing on the radio and a militant work ethic. The women of Chicago’s studio were so dedicated that some gave up jobs, relationships and even their marriages to fully commit to the studio.

Kate Amend, another Dinner Party worker, quit her job in Los Angeles and lived on her savings so she could work on the project full time. The camaraderie of the studio and Chicago’s **then-iconic** vision of feminist education—still taught today at Penn State—compelled Amend to uproot her life to commit completely to the Dinner Party Studio.

“I’ve never had that experience in my life of really being energized by the work,” Amend said. She wasn’t alone. For many of the women, Hill said the intense responsibility towards the work’s mission was matched by how much it gave to them in return.

"DINNER PARTY" WORKERS
X NAME Linda Shelp DATE 8-17-76
ADDRESS 704 Pacific Ave. Venice, CA 90291
PHONE _____ BIRTHDATE 11-29-51
EDUCATION BFA - Kansas City Art Institute (sculpture major)
Kansas City Art Institute (extension classes in photography)
PROFESSION/OCCUPATION Artist
AREAS OF INTEREST Photography (black & white), sculpture, research & technical drawings.
HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED IN THE PROJECT? I heard Judy Chicago talk (Spring 1974) at Park College in Parkville, Missouri. She mentioned the DP project. I was overwhelmed and found the means to
WHAT SKILLS DO YOU BRING TO THE PROJECT? move from K.C., Mo. to work on the project. Photographic, reading, woodworking, sewing (machine - some handsewing), metal casting, sand/ceramic casting.
HOW DO YOU SEE YOURSELF IN RELATION TO THE WHOLE PROJECT? I am one of many women benefiting tremendously from the experience of working on a large scale project that celebrates the history of women. I see myself working, learning, sharing - skills and experiences with others, continually until this piece is completed.
WHAT DO YOU HOPE TO GAIN? I hope to gain a much better awareness of myself and others as human beings in this world. I want to have the ability to work professionally as a feminist/artist. Learning new skills - working compatibly with others, sharing - etc.
ADDITIONAL COMMENTS: I have never felt such strength and richness, working with any other group of people.

A Dinner Party Worker says “I have never felt such strength and richness working with any other group of people” on her information form from ‘The Dinner Party,’ 1976. Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

“It was really reciprocal. I mean it wasn’t like going to work because this thing needs to get done, it was ‘I personally am so responsible for... this part of the history or this part of a plate,’” she said. “We were being fed so deeply by that.”

Bender said one of Judy Chicago’s goals was to create an “army of women” who would absorb her feminist ideals and carry them over to their lives outside the studio. “She saw this as a way of seeding that kind of philosophy,” Bender said.

But while Chicago’s work was considered groundbreaking, it was — and still is — criticized for lack of

diversity, which is reflected in both the women included at the table and the demographics of the workers themselves.

“You start to think about who could pack up to leave their family for a few months and go to Santa Monica and have money to spare for a few months rent in a new town,” Hermo said, adding that the makeup of the women represented mostly “white upper middle class version of history.”

The only two women of color given a place at the table in The Dinner Party are Sojourner Truth and Sacajawea.

“If you’re Hispanic you’re not going to see anybody that looks like you. There are no Chinese people. There are no African people,” said Jane Gerhard, a scholar who has **written about** Chicago and the feminism of the 1970s. “So The Dinner Party is like Western civilization with a real spin towards America.”



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

Given its scale and the time it took to create, The Dinner Party also lagged behind a changing feminist movement.

Gerhard called The Dinner Party a “snapshot” of American feminist history, reflective of Second Wave Feminism’s focus on pushing back against mainstream male-dominated culture. But by the late 70s and 80s, feminism had expanded to focus on including more diverse voices—like women of color. “[Judy Chicago] disappears into the studio for five years. When she comes back out in 1979 to display the piece, feminism has changed quite a bit,” Gerhard said.

Visitor notebooks from the 1980s, too, showed that some found the work to be a “total revelation” while others found Chicago’s “tokenized” inclusion of women of color troubling. Visitor logs from recent history, Hermo said, also criticize the absence of Latina and LGBTQ guests at the table.



Judy Chicago addresses a gathering of volunteers in the Dinner Party studio, ca. 1978. Photograph by Amy Meadow. Judy Chicago Visual Archive, Betty Boyd Dettre Library & Research Center, National Museum of Women in the Arts

One of The Dinner Party's famous critics, writer Alice Walker, was disappointed to see that the only black woman at the table was associated with the legacy of slavery. Walker wrote about her experience at The Dinner Party in this 1979 essay "**One Child of One's Own.**"

But in a time of #MeToo, The Dinner Party still resonates.

Hill, who enjoys visiting it years later with other former Dinner Party workers, says that despite its flaws, the work has something important to say about women's representation in a male-dominated world. Hill insists The Dinner Party wasn't just ahead of the curve when it comes to equality and justice for female voices.

"We were the curve," she said.