

# DAZED

"Judy Chicago on her radical feminist art project, Womanhouse"

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Judy Chicago, "Cock and Cunt" play from Womanhouse (1972), Performed by Faith Wilding and Jan Lester© Judy Chicago/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York Photo Courtesy of Though the Flower Archives housed at Penn State University Archives

## The artist reveals the 50-year history of the subversive group exhibition exploring domestic space

In 1972, art world luminary [Judy Chicago](#) and her students took over an abandoned house and repurposed it as the first exclusively female-centred installation. The exhibition, *Womanhouse*, became a sensation, attracting thousands of visitors in its month-long duration. "Since that time, it has stimulated *Womanhouse* projects around the world," the acclaimed artist explains. "I've been joking that, like a lot of Judy Chicago projects, this has taken on a life of its own. It's galloping along with me following after saying, 'Wait for me, wait for me!'"

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"Birth Trilogy" from Womanhouse (1972), Performed by Shawnee Wollenman, Judy Huddleston, Nancy Youdelman, Chris Rush, Jan Oxenberg, and Sandra Orgel.

Photo courtesy of Through the Flower Archives housed at the Penn State University Archives.

Speaking over Zoom from her adopted hometown of Belen in the state of New Mexico, Chicago looks back at the inaugural exhibition: "I started the first feminist art program in Fresno which was, at that time, a fairly provincial, semi-rural community, and it gave the opportunity for a lot of young women to enter a world that they would never have been able to had it not been for the feminist art program." The evolution of the project began when the California Institute of the Arts invited her to expand the programme. "Cal Arts were going to provide us with a big studio, but the new building wasn't ready so we started out meeting in people's living rooms. At one point, the art historian Paul Harper suggested the idea of doing a house project because of the historical association of women in the home. We all liked that very much."

Overseen by the artist, her students created a unique, collaborative exhibition examining issues relating to issues of domesticity, gender, power dynamics, abuse, gender roles, parenting, daily rituals, private space, and more. Each room was transformed into an installation and the living room became a performance space.

Regarding her own life, Chicago is unequivocal about the demands of domesticity and her own decisions regarding the demands of family versus work. "I made a very clear choice early in my career that, based on my research into women's history - including Virginia Woolf's *A Room of*

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One's Own - and discovered that most of the women artists who had a successful career did not have children," she explains. "I was very fortunate I did not have what some women describe as a burning desire for a kid, so it wasn't, for me, a huge choice. I could not have had the career I've had if I had children. There's just no question."

In 2001, the next iteration of *Womanhouse* took place in Kentucky, where the idea was evolved to include work by male artists. "Since the first *Womanhouse*, there'd been 50 years of art by women exploring all these issues related to the home, motherhood, and domesticity. But it was very startling to us that, in the *At Home* project, the men's work was the most interesting... because it was new. And that's one of the reasons, apart from the changing definitions of gender, that we decided to invite artists across the gender spectrum. Because we realised men live in houses too, yet there's been very little art by them about that."



Karen LeCocq, Nancy Youdelman Lea's Room from *Womanhouse* (1972), (Based upon *Chéri* a novel by Colette), Performed by Karen LeCocq Photo Courtesy of *Though the Flower* Archives housed at the Penn State University Archives

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She recalls a particularly compelling work by three young male students from that occasion called "The Pornography Closet". "They each had very different views of pornography and so they basically created a closet - which is already symbolic - where they could air their disagreements," she explains. "One of them was totally against pornography. One of them, interestingly enough, came from a very religious household and, for him, pornography acted as a sex manual. Then there was another closet - the forbidden closet - in which another male student installed all the things that were forbidden to him as a man. It was totally fascinating."

Now, 50 years after it was first conceived, [Womanhouse](#) is returning. This time, the project is taking place at New Mexico's [Through the Flower](#) art space in Belen. Along with [Megan Malcolm-Morgan](#), the gallery's executive director, Chicago intends to further broaden the scope of representation by including a wider range of artists from across the gender spectrum. She tells us: "It'll be very interesting to discover what the male and trans students do."

Malcolm-Morgan joins our conversation to add: "50 years ago, we were looking at domestic space in a kind of different lens because it was really the realm of women. 50 years later, that's not really the case anymore... sometimes it's more based on the socioeconomics and power dynamics and relationships. So, for instance, we have men who are stay-at-home dads, or we have same-sex couples who are dealing with the same domestic kind of issues in the home that women dealt with 50 years ago."

### **"Like a lot of Judy Chicago projects, this has taken on a life of its own" - Judy Chicago**

"We're very excited. And, as I keep saying, it's taken on a life of its own," Chicago enthuses. "We got 90 proposals for 14 rooms from all over the state of New Mexico. There are two sections to it - the transformation of an absolutely perfect 1950s house complete with shagpile carpets and floral wallpaper, and a historic exhibition in Through the Flower. In addition, there's an exhibition in Santa Fe, at [Turner Carroll Gallery](#) called *Women in the House*... there will be a number of artists, including the facilitator, [Nancy Youdelman](#) who will participate in that. And, in the spirit of the original Womanhouse, and the fact that a number of the artists submitted work that could be translated into performances, we're going to also have performances, both historic and new. So for example, we're going to put on *Cock and Cunt* [the subversive play by Chicago, first performed at *Womanhouse*, 1972] but with men, which ought to be a lot of fun, right?"

Malcolm-Morgan elaborates: "These things still need to be addressed. Because sometimes it's more than just your gender, right? It's about other structures... families, what are the parenting issues, who takes on the chores, what kind of abuse is there? It's about really delving into the home space." She muses on the transformations the concept of domestic space has undergone as a result of the pandemic. "I think that with COVID, everybody got sent home. So now the home is so important because it's not just a place you live, it's a place you work, it's a place you go to school, it's a place you teach... So I think those constraints really make this project important, because it's relevant right now."

Take a look through the gallery above for a glimpse of Womanhouse projects over the years. Wo/Manhouse opens on 18 June 2022. See the [exhibition website](#) for tickets and programming

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