

# UNBURYING HISTORIES: THE FUTURE(S) OF FEMINIST ART

Theresa Chavez



*L.A. Real*, original performance. Theresa Chavez, writer and director. Pictured actress Rose Portillo, premiered National Women's Theatre Festival, Los Angeles, 1992. © Theresa Chavez.

1.

**I am someone who is connected to and surrounded by many histories, all of which are buried, misunderstood or romanticized.**

I am a Chicana and a Californiana—a seventh generation Californian/Los Angelina whose Mestiza past is buried under the surface of postindustrial Los Angeles. My history is revealed, if at all, in a reconstituted version made up of Taco Bells, romanticized *señoritas*, Zorro movies, and idealized fantasies represented in Mission Revival homes with tile roofs.

I am an interdisciplinary theater artist. A majority of my original theater work is developed, written, and created collaboratively within the context of an arts organization, About Productions, which I cofounded in 1988, and for which I serve as the artistic director. Over the past nineteen years, much of the work of this company has dealt with uncovering histories that my colleagues/collaborators and I are connected to and which, without this artistic devotion, would remain silent within the world at large and even within the framework of the art and theater worlds. Histories of Los Angeles, of California, and of the West; Chicano and Mexicano histories; Native American histories; gay and lesbian histories; histories of feminist writers; and histories of the avant-garde. Not just uncovering but illuminating them in the present tense.

My work is connected to art and theater movements whose histories have been neglected or shattered, regarded only to illuminate a particular historic era or a specific

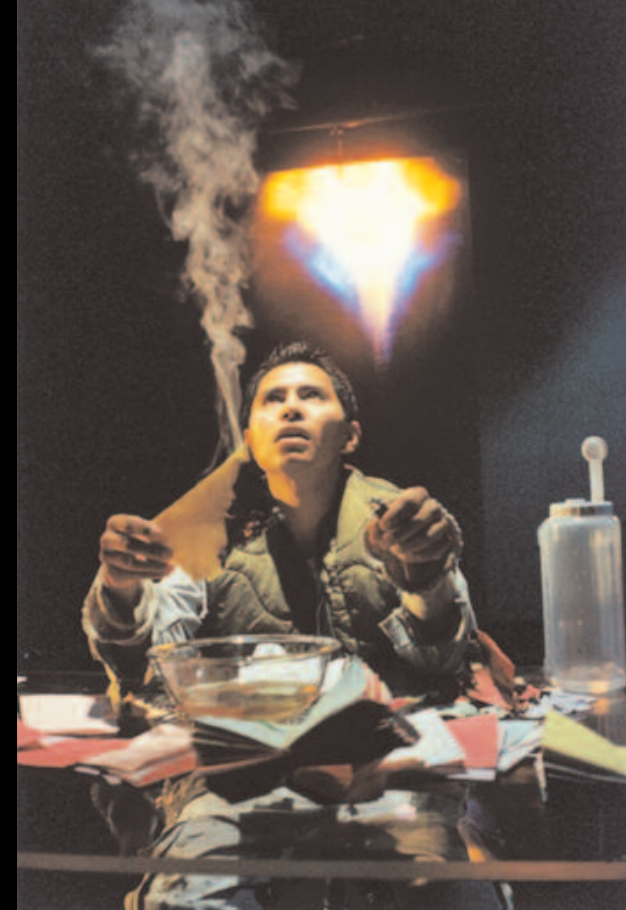
discipline, and rarely seen as a whole or as intersecting worlds. Dada, Fluxus, Bauhaus, Judson Church, Chicano art, experimental theater, performance art, feminist art—they are, in some cases, just beginning to be recognized outside the rarified world of the art historian or art aficionado. Because of their experimental, even revolutionary, nature, these histories and their related art practices tend to be ignored by the mainstream and, thus, are left to be rediscovered over and over again, each artistic generation defining them as something “new and original.” And because of their transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary, or multidisciplinary natures, they also tend to fall through the cracks of the still-in-use, nineteenth-century manner of categorizing art practice into standard, singular disciplines.

One of these various histories I am specifically and directly connected to is the semi-buried history of feminist art practice at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), which began with the founding of the Feminist Art Program by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in 1972, and its subsequent incarnation at the Woman's Building.<sup>1</sup> In the mid-eighties, I worked at the Woman's Building, as a very young artist. In 1987, I received an MFA from CalArts and have, as of this writing, been teaching at CalArts for the past sixteen years.

Current and past artists/faculty, academicians, and administrators at CalArts have passed on very little knowledge of or perspective on the school's relationship to feminist art and to the Woman's Building. There are no references to it in the “official history” that is available through the CalArts Office of Public Affairs. In some schools (there are six—music, dance, theater, art, film/video, and critical studies) there exists no class or requirement that would pass on this knowledge; in others there are opportunities to at least be introduced to this feminist history.

CalArts has joined the ranks of those in the field of art who, for various reasons, neglect to point out and illuminate the role of this experimental, politically motivated, socially passionate, and community-driven movement that questioned and pushed the boundaries of contemporary art making. So most students (and possibly most faculty) do not know that CalArts is directly linked to one of the most important and prominent institutions in the feminist art movement. Perhaps because the idea for the Woman's Building came from a group of renegade women who had been teaching at CalArts, rather than from the men at CalArts, we have a gaping historical hole left from an ideological and cultural split created out of necessity and survival.

The reality of having been born of and deeply influenced by cultures, histories, movements, ideologies, and practices that are at heart revolutionary is a constant for me. What is in flux is my relationship to these various genetic and sociopolitical voices and conditions. Revolutions have a peculiar life span that both requires the individual to subscribe to certain beliefs held by the movement, and later (perhaps years later) offers a renewal of those vows performed in an individualistic, self-determined manner. Who are we now that the revolution is over, pre-empted, destroyed, or reinvented? How do I now redefine myself and, in turn, redefine the revolution?



All images:  
***On earth as it is in heaven.***  
original theater work, cowritten by  
Theresa Chavez, Laurel Ollstein, and  
Rose Portillo; directed by Theresa  
Chavez. Pictured actors clockwise from  
top: Jesse Ramirez, Laurel Ollstein, and  
Ramirez. Premiered 24th St. Theatre,  
Los Angeles, 2002. © Theresa Chavez.







*They Shoot Mexicans, Don't They?*, original theater work, cowritten and directed by Theresa Chavez. Pictured (foreground) actor and co-writer Rose Portillo; and (background L to R) dancer Courtney Combs, actor Michael Manuel and dancer Veronica Caudillo; premiered Luckman Center Fine Arts Complex, Los Angeles, 2005. © Theresa Chavez.

And what of those younger artists who missed the big party, the one the revolution threw when it was birthing itself, staking its claim, and becoming fulfilled? What if you missed the party but received its gifts anyway? Are you obligated to the gift givers? Are the gift givers obligated to explain those gifts, where they came from, how they were chosen, and why they are wrapped in a particular way?

### **RE: Inventing the Wheel**

I am not a historian; I am an artist. I teach classes in interdisciplinary studies at CalArts and I have made it part of my teaching practice to make my students aware of not only CalArts' feminist history but also of other intersecting histories that, due to their experimental nature, have been relegated to the corners of visual and performing art history.

Young artists tend to be ignorant of these particular histories and tend, in a vacuum, to create similar work. I find this is no less true with the art produced by my female students, whether or not their declared intentions are feminist. This is not to say that the students' goal is purely to be original, but instead that the goal should be to

strive to be informed, influenced, and, in turn, interesting. Quoting work that has preceded one's can be an elegant exercise and a useful context in which to put one's work. And although each generation speaks in its own terms, the perspective of student artists can be shaped with knowledge offered as a gift from previous generations.

One of the classes I have designed and taught is called "RE: Inventing the Wheel." It is a survey that covers many of these aforementioned histories of the twentieth century and presents perspectives by multiple artists, writers, and curators who visit my classroom to represent the momentous movements from which they come and to speak of the vital work they continue to produce.

In some cases, this class is the only time students are introduced to feminist art history, especially as it relates to CalArts and the Woman's Building. I'm indebted to Nancy Buchanan and Terry Wolverton for bringing their first-hand experiences into the classroom and to Rachel Rosenthal and Barbara Smith for connecting their work with the work of the Building and the feminist art movement, and in turn enlightening my students. The efforts of these artists to directly engage these students has allowed this feminist history—to which they are connected simply by enrolling at CalArts—to become tangible and visceral and to remain at their fingertips.

## **2.**

To further explore the students' relationships to feminism and feminist art history, I chose to engage in a form of dialogue with a group of graduate and undergraduate women who studied at CalArts from approximately 2000 to 2007. Conducted largely through e-mail, I posed a series of questions and invited their responses. Those responses reveal a group of women who have grown up within an American culture that is deeply ambivalent about the term "feminist." Our exchanges reveal a group of women who have inherited (sometimes without knowing it) a legacy that allows them to construct themselves as women artists in any way they see fit. And they reveal a group of women whose range of art making supersedes that of the generations preceding them and who only sometimes must directly address the quandary of how to negotiate the feminine perspective in one's art and one's life. These women understand that they must make a choice about their identity in relationship to their art making, but their decisions, by and large, will not be driven by the question "Am I a feminist?" but rather by "What kind of feminist am I?"

My special thanks go to the participants in this dialogue. The range of their responses partially can be attributed to the range of disciplines they represent, as some fields have a more direct link to "second-wave feminism." Visual art in particular, having been at the forefront of this movement, has made major strides. Others, still dominated by men, have not created the opportunities to match the visual art's engagement in feminist art making and dialogue, and the basic education of women. The participants are composer/vocalist Julie Adler (JA), visual artist Nicole Antebi (NA), photographer/

filmmaker Diane Arellano (DA), musician Erin Breen (EB), vocalist Nina Sun Eidsheim (NSE), theater and film director Rachel Goldberg (RG), performance artist Christine Gump (CG), multimedia artist Carole Kim (CK), artist/performer Alanna Lin (AL), visual artist Theresa Masangkay (TM), and visual artist Melissa J. Regas (MJR).

**3.**

What follows are the questions I posed to these students, a selection of their responses, and my own commentary in response to them.

**In your own unique way/style, please describe how you think (or don't think) of yourself as a feminist OR an artist who is a feminist OR a feminist artist OR perhaps a female artist. (If none of the above use your own description.)**

*I think of myself as an artist who happens to be of the female gender. (MJR)*

*I essentially equate intelligence with feminism. I know the world doesn't abide by this equation but I'm always a bit shocked, at least initially, when an intelligent person is not a feminist. Feminism is part of who I am, how I perceive the world around me, how I move within this world. (CK)*

*I am an artist. I am a woman. Neither excludes the other, nor are they mutually inclusive. (RG)*

*I'd say "female artist" is fine with me. The title of "female" has never had me feeling alienated from anything, misrepresented or tied to anything. (CG)*

*I have found that contextualizing myself as a feminist artist invariably predetermines the work. To avoid hypocrisy, I subscribe to the idea of becoming both a woman and an artist. (NA)*

Yes, becoming. Honoring the process of discovering what one is for oneself. Why use the term "feminist" for oneself: Is it a gift or a Girl Scout honor badge? Is it something to be earned, something to be embraced, something to be enveloped by? Is its meaning something to be understood, studied? Who will help you understand its past, present, and future? Does it need to be taught? Or in the current contemporary context, can we assume that in a young woman's journey to define her self-identity as an artist she will have the access, and the desire, to seek the tools and knowledge she needs, and therefore she should be left to her own creative devices, experiences, and discoveries?



**Nicole Antebi, Invisible Inflatable/Deflatable Monument: Russian Church, Jerusalem, 2002.** Mixed media, dimensions variable. Photograph by Anthony Cunha. © Nicole Antebi.



Julie Adler, *Inbedded*, 1998. Still image from video/performance, Valencia, California. Photograph by Lara Bank. © Julie Adler.

*I am a female artist. As time goes by, I find myself [and]...my surroundings emphasize the fact that I am a woman. The Gaze follows me. How would my days and life be carried out in its absence? Is there life outside, or is the Gaze the creator of "female life?" How has the gaze influenced me, shaped me as an artist?... Much of the Western Classical repertoire sustains the myth of the lethargic woman, the witch/crazy woman in its opera literature.... The stereotype of the "soprano" is imbedded in the opera literature. The voice category "soprano" is used in roles such as the naïve young girl subject to an old pig's desire (Susanna), and the temptress who leads the male astray from his socially sanctioned principles (Carmen).... As a woman and a performer, I am performing for a gaze that has been engrained by socialization. And now, actively playing around and working with this issue, I find that going too far away from the roles the carrier of the gaze offers, one finds oneself erased. (NSE)*

*I worked with what was a sense of woman caged, silenced, struggling to make sound or communicate, a woman on a pedestal, or stuck in a bed, hidden, alien, full of desire for speech and to be heard. That it can be labeled "feminist" because it represents the position of a woman struggling for her "rights"; that these social and political implications are evident in my work is absolutely fine by me. I think that to be feminist is to advance the "cause" of women in general, to continue to expose and then root out all the inequalities and inequities that still exist in the world between men and women. As long as there are women still covered from head to toe in burkas or beaten down by rules and social platitudes, feminism should exist. (JA)*

**How did you grow up with the term "feminist?" Who influenced how you respond to that term? How American is your response to the term? And as you grow as an artist, how will your perspective change, especially as you meet other woman from other worlds, other cultures?**

*I have never considered myself a feminist, which I imagine comes from growing up in the late eighties, when all the hard work seemed to have been completed. I must have taken feminism for granted, imagining that it related to women's suffrage or wearing pants. "Feminism" to me suggested something far short of "equality"; the feminists we heard of were full of hatred, raging male bashers loudly seeking the disempowerment of men. The concept sounded whiny and somehow weak.... I loathed the generalizations that were associated with the expression and avoided it accordingly until this survey. I am realizing now that feminist art denotes something much farther reaching than feminism and that it absolutely applies to me as a musician and will continue to apply to me in a still fairly male-dominated field. (EB)*

*I do identify as a feminist artist. I feel [gaining] ownership of my feminist artist identity has and continues to be a complex journey. I began to consider the idea that perhaps women weren't quite "equal" during my undergraduate experience. In a film lighting class consisting of about fifteen students, I was one of two female students. Our male instructor often used the other female student and myself as the film subjects. The problem with always being the subject is that we could not see our instructor explain lighting, since we were often the diagram he pointed out to the male students. [C]onsequently, the education of our male peers resulted at the expense of our own.... Prior to this experience, I never really believed women had reached full or true equality but I didn't think I would ever have such blatant gender discrimination experiences. I feel lucky that in time I was able to process these experiences and emerge as person committed to gender equality and social justice. I look back on my baptism by fire experience as necessary to becoming a critical thinker. (DA)*

*Since starting at CalArts, in 2005, in the MFA in Art program, I have been asking myself about my relationship with the word "Feminist." I'm constantly questioning the word, whether or not I need it, or belong to it. And my thoughts about it are changing every day. (TM)*

A young Muslim student of mine was living inside what I would consider to be the contradiction of becoming an independent, university-educated woman and continuing to practice a religion that, in my opinion, not only separates men and women but also regards her role in that practice to be less important than her male counterpart. Her commitment to both worlds was so complete that she could seamlessly move from one to the other and stunningly fully integrate these two spheres within her own mind and body. For the time being, she had learned to negotiate the complex territory that allowed her to become fully realized academically but that simultaneously demanded her acquiescence to a religious system that defines participation according to gender.



*The majority of women whom I know from college and graduate school settings generally identify themselves with what I now distinguish as “secular-feminism.” As an adult convert to Catholicism, I have often been assumed to be outside of self-respecting feminist womanhood.... It has been my good fortune to fall upon a community of Trappist, feminist nuns who have led me to a lexicon for which I have been searching a very long time. I am a feminist in that I believe in the inherent mutuality and equality of the sexes as metaphorical resources in the depiction of God’s image in the world. Humanity—all men, all women—are together the sacred likeness of God in the world and should be respected and cherished. (AL)*

As we witness the seemingly contradictory complications our students and colleagues experience, we must work to reconsider what it means to be a feminist. If one of feminism’s goals is to free women to become truly who they are and to act in any way they feel or see fit (and as long as their individual and collective choices do not erode or undermine historical feminist achievements) then we must accept those woman and those acts in the spirit of those goals. The power of this acceptance will be a gift that embraces any and all versions of intelligently self-defined womanhood as acted upon by current and future generations of women—American and otherwise.

**Please describe the general attitude towards feminism of your fellow artists, students, etc.**

*This question is tricky because quite honestly it is not brought up. I have never worked on any projects with someone who was vocal about being feminist. The strong women I have encountered in my travels certainly frowned upon feminism as a movement, preferring to do their own art in their best capacity, completely unconcerned with labeling it or themselves. If I had to generalize, most young men and women recoil at the term, anticipating the quality of an overtly feminist artistic work to be more like a pamphlet or tirade. (EB)*

*I find my more successful artist friends are very aware of gender, race, and class social dynamics and often utilize these issues within their respective art practices. On the other hand, my friends who have a superficial understanding...seem more confused and even bitter. I think they don’t have the necessary tools to process their experiences, and personalize instead of analyzing or questioning. I really do think it’s critical that women artists are educated on our/their history. I believe this education should encompass women of all racial, economic, and sexual preference backgrounds. It’s critical that young women artists are exposed to the process of owning and accepting our collective experiences and narratives; otherwise we risk needlessly struggling to conform to fields or disciplines that have their own particular histories of embracing or rejecting women artists. (DA)*



Above: **Alanna Lin, Mindy Chiu with Hairbrush**, 2006. Digital print. © Alanna Lin



Left: **Erin Breen, performance artist, Paul Kirby and Nans Kelder, set designers, Vanishing Currents**, 2005. Image includes partial view of set design on tall ship Amara Zee, Lafitte, LA. See video at [www.caravanstage.org](http://www.caravanstage.org). Photograph by Erin Breen.

*It seems that three-fourths of the people I meet think that "Feminism" was a temporary wave during the seventies and that the activism led to full equality between men and women. The remaining one-fourth is a greatly varied group ranging from feminist activists to "patriarchic leaning" men. (NSE)*

*Generally, my peers are either apathetic or displeased with the seventies feminist model for action. The criticism seems to be located in the vulnerability facing the author of a personal work and the alienation of men. However, there is a firm acknowledgement of the [women's] movement's impact on the positions that women occupy today. (NA)*

*There are a lot of women around now who are consistently outside of any discrimination for their sex... their work is empowered in both feminine and masculine ways... women aren't as afraid to use masculinity in work... it's sexy, and stimulating... the confidence it instills has become stunning to the senses of both men and women.<sup>2</sup> (CT)*

*Actually, I came to CalArts not knowing how conceptual the direction of the visual arts department was. My art practice had been evolving very "organically" and "intuitively," words associated with the "female." I use these words deliberately because they were verboten in class critiques. Teachers would actually cringe at hearing these two words spoken. I was making art without having the concept/idea come first in any logical form. And I was very interested in not being "mental" about it. I write all this because my attitude in conjunction with my body/self in the art made me "feminist" but apparently stuck in the seventies. It was as if the faculty (my mentors) had positioned me in the past, that we were now beyond the self-absorbed, sexually tinged, expressionistic, and potentially "essentialist" work of the seventies, and it was up to me to transcend this "platform" and move forward into the postmodern, deconstructed view of feminism. No definitions were actually given for what that was supposed to be. (JA)*

*What I am trying to get at is that there is a "generalized feminism," which has generalized notions of equality and what women deserve, that often seems myopically self-centered and not tied into the greater implications of feminism that have been recently and explicitly articulated to me. Feminism, like religion, is easily flattened by a literalization of its symbols. Is Feminism about womyn's will to power? The right to unlimited minutes with cell phone and dildo and other metonyms for liberated womanhood? Is it about defeating false notions of "otherness"? Is it about social justice, human justice? I think there is a cacophony under the umbrella of feminism, and while most of us benefit from the real political achievements of feminism, plenty of us are divorced from an intimate consideration of what it's all about. (AL)*

*I feel that we all have different ideas about what Feminism is. Sometimes I like to call it "Feminisms." But through organizing/curating the symposium and exhibition at CalArts (Exquisite Acts & Everyday Rebellions: 2007 CalArts Feminist Art Project), I find my fellow*

*artists (alumni, faculty, and students) are willing and excited to have a discourse about their own idea of Feminism. (TM)*

*The term "feminism" still proves to be much more problematic than one would hope. I find that my peers, students, and friends are either hesitant to align themselves as feminists and/or feel the need to qualify their relationship to the term... I don't know whether coining a new term would be effective. Certainly, persisting to educate and inform is necessary. (CK)*

Perhaps what's lacking today is the opportunity to reinvent, redefine, and even possibly reassert the right to reconsider the term "feminist" in a group and/or collaborative process in order to create work that lives within the context of feminist art practice but also intersects with, is in dialogue with, and is enlivened by other movements, histories, and practices.

We can collectively look back, but can we collectively look forward? Feminist art as a term has ridden a slippery slope as it has moved from generation to generation. It has been left to the individual artist to define the term for herself. Furthermore, the splintering of our contemporary lives into infinitesimal interests and the pursuit of these interests as individual acts do not support an entire generation of artists collectively redefining what feminism means. I only ask then that young women be given the opportunity to study its permutations and as a contemporary artist choose wisely how you would like to use it in relationship to either yourself or your art making or both.

**Have you been educated about the seventies feminist art movement in any way, shape, or form? If yes, how has that history influenced you and your work? What parts of the legacy of this movement are useful to you as a contemporary artist, and which are not?**

*Yes, I have been educated in this art movement. In some ways it feels like a blip on the landscape. And yet it was very much connected to other events/happenings/artistry... I feel camaraderie with what the women did then. It's nice to have the lineage behind me. But, unfortunately, I don't feel the community these women may have felt back then. To me, that communal spirit is gone in the art world, in terms of women's work specifically. If I work from emotion and impulse, in alignment with those of the past, I am happy to follow that legacy. (JA)*

Did the Woman's Building serve its purpose (for its time) and then allow its shockwaves to spread out and affect whoever is in the path of the aftershocks? Culture-specific institutions within the art world have sustained themselves much better than feminist institutions, yet this doesn't mean that institutions that are built on a feminist or feminine network of ideas, visions, and concepts should not be envisioned and built.





**Theresa Masangkay, still of right channel of *Pop*, 2006.** Two-channel video, Super 8 transferred to digital video, 11 minutes. © Theresa Masangkay.



**Rachel Goldberg, director, *Salome*, 2001.** Interdisciplinary production using film, puppetry, masks, and music, Raven Theatre, Los Angeles. Photographs by Sean Higgins. © Rachel Goldberg.



*There's no question for me that my predecessors have helped pave the way to my being able to be the person I am today. (CK)*

*I have not been educated about the seventies feminist art movement in any way, shape, or form. I'm interested, but have never read about it on my own. (RG)*

*While attending CalArts, I was told first-hand accounts of Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's legacy there. They introduced fiber arts and crafts as legitimate materials for producing art objects. This is integral to my practice. Parts of the movement that are not useful to me are the claims about gender distinctions. (NA)*

*I have absolutely not been educated about the feminist art movement. The most I have heard about this genre of art is within my first semester of graduate school at CalArts. (EB)*

*My most formal education in the seventies feminist movement has been at CalArts, in Theresa Chavez's "RE: Inventing the Wheel" class, through lecturers and visiting artists. My contact with feminist works has been from photos documenting performances or exhibitions, video documentaries, manifestos, articles, and books. Being in a dialogue with other women's work is pertinent to feeling a sense of creative and critical community. (NSE)*

*I find having a sense of history and a sense of [what] my artistic predecessors accomplished or how they were hindered by their gender useful and inspirational. I make it a point to keep in mind that the most successful women were often viewed as the most outrageous, indecent, and audacious women within what is considered their most productive periods. I can't recount anything I learned about women artists that isn't useful. (DA)*

*I have been educated about the seventies feminist art movement, especially through my study of Judy Chicago. Through reading her autobiography, I learned about discrimination towards female artists in college as well as the art world of galleries and art magazines. I admire and am thankful for the influence of the Woman's Building. It was a place that provided a voice of confidence, inspiration, and courage for female artists. (MJR)*

*I took a critical studies class with Christine Wertheim (Fall 2006) titled "Womanhouse: CalArts, Feminism, and the Arts." We read articles from *The Power of Feminist Art*,<sup>3</sup> discussed feminist theory, and had conscious-raising groups. What influenced me the most, other than the intimate conversations we had, was reading an essay by Yolanda M. Lopez and Moira Roth.<sup>4</sup> I really appreciate that they were aware of their own personal connection with Feminism, questioned its history, and decided to write an essay that focused on what they thought needed to be included. (TM)*

Is it the legacy of the Woman's Building that feminist art is a living, breathing, evolving form reshaped by each generation of women who choose to make art? Young artists who are feminists or feminist art makers have evolved in such different environments from their predecessors that they are almost like two different animals. In the present tense, feminism has become a fluctuating act of redefinition within the context of one's personal and professional circumstance, geography, culture, etc. In the past tense, we can locate feminism and discuss it through the act of stopping time and focusing on a specific historical moment. In the future tense, in order to further its evolution we must be in dialogue with third-wave *feministas*.

**If you had a "room of your own" what would it ideally look like? Describe how it would be a part of a larger space (building, network, community) or be its own independent space.**

*In a rural setting, perhaps a large converted barn or warehouse-type building, but set in a very beautiful, natural location, away from any big city environment. This space would have a baby grand piano (my grandmother's, actually), and a recording room, complete with computer, audio equipment, and sound-proof booth. Another part of the space would be made into a visual arts work/studio space, complete with walls for drawings, paintings, and a large work-table and shelves for objects and collected items.*

*This building would be linked to my main residence and there would also be a yoga room, and a meditation room, perhaps to accommodate groups of people. As well as envisioning my own residence and art/work space, I would like to be able to create an arts residence center (on the same property?) where people could come on retreat to make their own artworks but have opportunities to sit in meditation twice daily, eat together at meals, and come to evening dharma (Buddhist teachings) talks. So, built into the arts residency would be development of community, dialogue, and spiritual practice. (JA)*

*A space similar to Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's vision of Womanhouse. However, each room would be in a constant state of flux or reinvention. The space would realize an ever-expanding, rhizomatic site similar to that of the Winchester Mystery House or the Internet.<sup>5</sup> (NA)*

*I will be Dominatrix. In the space there'll be paper figures true-to-life size, including Beethoven, Stravinsky, Boulez, and Elvis Presley. This can be presented as a film, or on a stage level with the audience. Maybe taped text (my voice) talking about my relationship to them. Maybe taped voices talking about them, or musical or written quotes by them. I will do funny things to the paper-men, return the Gaze—not really the gaze, but play with them like chess bricks. I think the space/film should be saturated with really funky music while I perform these actions, a series of performances. (NSE)*



Christine Gump, *Gumplestiltskin*, 2005. Performance at American Circus, International Cultural Tourism Festival, Beijing, China. © Christine Gump.

*I am not sure if “room of your own” is in reference to the feminist movement. I am not familiar with the term. I believe it means if I could have my own ideal space, what would it be. Ideally, I would like my room to be part of a larger space, in terms of network and community. I would love to create a space open to artists of all disciplines, where artists could pursue their mediums for free (i.e., darkrooms for photographers, stages for theater artists, easels and studios for painters, recording studios for musicians, etc.). In exchange, they would teach classes to local children for free and be active in community outreach and schools. Hopefully, the space would foster collaboration between different art forms, the community at large with the artists, students, and teachers, adults and children. It would have a gallery, stages, and screening rooms. It would invite artists from all over the world and from all sensibilities to share their work and create in this space. It would be difficult to find such a space and develop the funding to support it, but this would be a “room of my own” which would hopefully be a room for all. (RG)*

*Envisioning an ideal room of my own would be more a conceptual space than an actual, physical, architectural space. It would mean a shift in scale and access to people (and the time people would be able to devote to any given project), resources, equipment, and materials. The same issues of interaction and collaboration would come into play. (CK)*

*My dream room would be a wide-open space in the midst of a public park. The four inside walls would be covered with a mural of a digital image facing each other of me swimming in a sunset. My room is a pathway where people walk through into another environment filled with the aspiration that anything is possible with an open heart and imagination. Then when people leave the room, they will see their original environment in a new light. Using my room as a place where others can feel at home and inspired to live their dreams would fulfill my goal as an artist. (MJR)*

*A room of unlimited technical expertise and tools...state of the art...a place to explore myself and my work inside the possibilities of the future... (CG)*

*I would like to see a community-based space working towards developing young women filmmakers, screenwriters, and playwrights of color. I feel these disciplines continue to be male dominated and often exclude the voices of women of color. Particularly in film, the perspectives of women of color continue to be severely underrepresented. I think developing young, female filmmakers and screenwriters is a step toward achieving mainstream representation (portrayals of Latina, African-American, Asian, and Native American women in film) through a variety of perspectives. (DA)*



*A stage on one end, not too high... maybe the floor is just a few inches higher and it is acoustically engineered. There ARE windows, but they can be blacked out quickly and easily. There are couches and rearrange-able chairs to seat seventy to one hundred people. Everything is moveable so we can have dance lessons or art exhibits. We are in the middle of a medium-sized town, active members of the community. There are education programs in loads of disciplines and writing workshops and book releases and a big kitchen and an outdoor amphitheater and visiting artists and photography and a million adventures! (EB)*

*Inside my Broad Studio [at CalArts]. And the larger space would be the campus. I often feel very comfortable here. It's a place that I can often be myself and at the same time constantly question who that person is. (TM)*

Nancy Pelosi has just become the first woman Speaker of the House of Representatives of the U.S. Congress. An extraordinary feat. We as women are impressed and pleased. Yet despite its standing as an democratic institution, congress still exists within a



**Carole Kim, *Chasing the Pools*, 2005.** Still from live-feed performance-based installation in the pine tree grove at Barnsdall Art Park, Hollywood, CA (dancer: Shuriu Lo, live camera: Maile Colbert, live mix: Pablo Molina). © 2005, Carole Kim.



**Melissa J. Regas, *Why Happy, Why Sad*, 2008.** Painting series, collection of 10 paintings, mixed media on canvas, 4' x 4' each. © Melissa Regas.

monolithic, masculine framework and one could make the case that it has become corrupted by this particular framework. Pelosi has become part of it. It has already been created, and no matter how many women are elected to serve in it, the institution itself will always be primarily defined by its framers. This is why it is extremely important that institutions created by woman that forward a feminist framework exist and be preserved either as institutions or within the public historical archive and dialogue. These institutions have and will approach the great questions of humanity and the environment in their own unique manner. And they will provide solutions that represent an entirely different set of assumptions and strategies.

#### 4.

Dear Julie, Nicole, Diane, Erin, Nina, Rachel, Christine, Carole, Alanna, Theresa, and Melissa,

The basic fact that all of you are still practicing the act of making art, still voicing an artistic point of view, and still envisioning a self that moves through the world as an agile spirit seeking the freedom to express yourself creatively is a minor miracle. For the most part, you have no internal questions about whether you have the right to practice, voice, envision, move, seek, and express within yourself and within the institutions you must negotiate in order to be an artist in the United States. There are only the external questions raised by the cultures of which we are part, collectively and individually, that in some antiquated way continue to seek to control our right to express and create and be recognized for the artistic work we do.

The different historical contexts of our lives cannot help but influence who we are and how we see ourselves. I can only offer you my story of how I got here and you can impart yours to me. This act of exchange does not cancel out our experience, it only broadens our sense of who we are as women, as human beings, as artists.

I consider myself lucky to have grown up in a turbulent time when the Civil Rights Movement was forcing a reconsideration of the entire structure of American society.

I am a Chicana. I can say that without equivocation. I was able to add this to my identity because I grew up during the time “Chicano” was first defined. It was revolutionary and its worldview struck a chord that continues to resonate throughout my body.

I am a feminist. I can say that without equivocation. I was able to add this to my identity because I grew up during the time “feminist,” as in “second-wave feminist,” was first defined. It was revolutionary and its worldview struck a chord that continues to resonate throughout my body.

But I realize that the social contract for the mutually agreed upon definition of certain terms such as “feminist” has expired. So I pass it onto you to redefine and use as you may. But use or don't use it thoughtfully, with a mix of bold political stance, conscious social context, informed historical reference, and enlightened personal choice.

I consider it a measure of our accomplishment that women of your generation have such choices.

In Sisterhood (as we once would have said),  
Theresa

## 5.

As of this writing, in 2007, many of the CalArts students quoted in this essay are now CalArts alumnae. Their thoughts here are in response to their experience as CalArts students. As they've evolved as artists and as women, their relationship to feminism and/or to a feminist art practice continues to evolve. As CalArts continues to question its own racial and gender inequities, I find their responses still timely and pertinent.

CalArts generally does not promote its relationship to feminist art history, but it doesn't shy away from it either. In March of 2007, the institute supported a student-organized symposium and exhibition titled *Exquisite Acts & Everyday Rebellions: 2007 CalArts Feminist Art Project*. The project is primarily supported by the School of Art (along with the Office of the President and the Student Council). Greatly due to its faculty, the School of Art has offered its students many opportunities to discover the feminist history hidden beneath the official record and has encouraged its students to explore how it is relevant to them in the present tense.

*Exquisite Acts & Everyday Rebellions* was conceived in response to the spring 2007 exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. It is in some respects a watershed year for the recognition by American museums of the influence feminist art has now had on several generations of artists, both in the United States and abroad. Along with MOCA's major show, New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the Brooklyn Museum are organizing symposiums and exhibitions that, in their own important yet parochial way, will surely

illuminate the primary brand of American “second-wave feminism” generated mostly by a revolutionary band of white, middle- and upper-class women. As economics allow, a major and more diverse set of women is emerging to study and professionally create contemporary art. This national shift, which is a true reflection of demographics in the United States, will continue to produce an evolution of feminist art practice that I greatly look forward to experiencing.

Inevitably, as young female artists do not have to confront their disciplinary headmasters in regards to whether they have the right to simply pursue a creative practice, their need to self-define as feminists has been diluted. As to whether their work should be defined as feminist has in some ways become a separate and perhaps more crucial matter. Some of the responses published here give reason to assume that young artists have to some degree assimilated a point of view that is derived from “second-wave feminism” but that is also intriguingly and uniquely informed by their own state of being. They have much to teach us.

## Biographies of the Respondents

JULIE ADLER is an artist working in the mediums of music (voice and composition), painting, drawing, and writing. She is a graduate of Cooper Union and w222q. In the past, she was coproducer of EARJAM, a new music festival; Vocal Lounge; and Call & Response, a concert featuring new music works and Tibetan monks. Recent activities include travel to India, China, and Eastern Tibet and working on projects related to Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, including as coproducer of *Living Wisdom with His Holiness the Dalai Lama* (Sounds True, 2006) and contributing assistant to *Portraits of Tibetan Buddhist Masters* (UC Press, 2005). She is now associate producer on “The Tibet Connection,” a monthly radio program on KPFF (Radio Pacifica) (<http://www.thetibetconnection.org>). Examples of past music work can be found on <http://www.myspace.com/julieadler>.

NICOLE ANTEBI is a Los Angeles-based visual artist. Her work about the Salton Sea was exhibited at Kristi Engle Gallery and the Dallas Contemporary in 2007. Additional collaborative projects include *Failure! Experiments in Aesthetic and Social Practices* (co-edited with Colin Dickey and Robby Herbst) and the exhibition *Failure Ridiculous Terrible Wonderful at Park Projects* (co-organized with Robby Herbst and Irene Tsatsos); [http://registry.whitecolumns.org/view\\_artist.php?artist=2613](http://registry.whitecolumns.org/view_artist.php?artist=2613) and/or [www.hausgallery.com](http://www.hausgallery.com)

ERIN BREEN completed her BFA in clarinet performance at Carnegie Mellon University in 2003. She spent two years working with a circus theater company, performing as an actress and multi-instrumentalist with aerialists, actors, and videographers. The shows are performed on the deck of a ship and the audience watches from shore. At the time of writing, Erin is in her first year of the master's program at CalArts, focusing her studies on the collaborative process in performance art while studying clarinet, saxophone, and flute.



DIANE ARELLANO received her bachelor's degree from CalArts in 2005. Diane's work investigates the social dynamics that arise from nuanced yet fundamentally blanket generalizations of race, class, and gender that persist in mainstream cultures. Diane's carefully woven narratives of a transforming, illusive, and oftentimes indefinable Latino identity are most frequently contextualized within the boundaries of Los Angeles County.

RACHEL GOLDBERG earned her MFA in Directing for Film and Theatre from CalArts and her BA in Theatre and Psychology from the University of Pennsylvania. She recently taught Acting Technique and Scene Study at the University of Pennsylvania's Summer Academy, attended the Lincoln Center's Directors Lab as an invited playwright, and had the great pleasure of working with Quentin Tarantino in the editing department of *Kill Bill Vol. 2*. Rachel was also the assistant director on a staged production of *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, starring Jason Alexander, Noah Wyle, and Harry Hamlin. As a member of Film Outreach LA, Rachel was a key player in the inception of a program dedicated to providing at-risk youth in the Los Angeles area with film-making skills and mentors. Her original scripts for both stage and film have won or reached finalist status in many festivals around the country.

CHRISTINE GUMP performs as Kitty Gump in Trash Band (<http://www.trashband.net>) and works on stilts in Gumpstiltskin, which is devoted to eccentric and one-of-a-kind performances (<http://www.gumpstiltskin.com>); she cofounded both groups with her husband. She is in her final year of a Master's in Traditional Chinese Medicine. She believes this is a direct progression from her work as a performance artist, with Chinese medicine being a deeper level of human integration and experience utilizing the emotional and spiritual body to express a message of healing.

CAROLE KIM is an interdisciplinary artist with a focus on performance-based video installation combining digital/new media technologies and the sensitivity of the improvisational live performer/participant. Her work emphasizes video's capacity as a live medium and the illusory architecture of layered video projection in space. More recent works have introduced the live presence of dancers into this layered landscape, mediating the body while preserving the dynamic edge of the live performer. The performances are immersive environments that often explore a decentralized performance space that supports an integrated reciprocal exchange between sound, image, movement, and space.

ALANNA LIN is a writer/performer-at-large on the Internet and Los Angeles and vicinity, operating under the project moniker "Fascinoma," a.k.a. "Mindy Chiu." She loosely runs LTBB (Little Tokyo Bed and Breakfast), an artist's rehearsal/recording workshop out of Downtown Los Angeles, and between 10:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. daily, she can be found at Michael Mangia's foundation for innovation in the arts and promotion of the arts, Orphan Records. Her website is defunct, her MySpace page hosts "improvised musics," and her blog can be found all too easily—Google: Mindy Chiu. She doesn't sleep, eats too much bacon, and has been diagnosed as being in love.

THERESA MASANGKAY is a Los Angeles-born artist who works primarily in painting and video. Her work investigates time, memory, language, and power. She is currently an MFA candidate at the CalArts, where she is the co-organizer and cocurator of Exquisite Acts & Everyday Rebellions: 2007 CalArts Feminist Art Project. Theresa has also received a post-baccalaureate in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and her BA from the University of California, Irvine.

MELISSA J. REGAS obtained her BFA from CalArts in December 2001 and received subsequent training in media arts and animation at the Art Institute of California, San Diego. Currently, she is a freelance graphic and fine artist. Her recent group show at Script Memorial Hospital, *Artful Healing Program: Series II*, was presented by Studio Vivace. Melissa is also teaching art to children ages three to five at the San Diego State University Children's Center. Melissa has a severe to profound bilateral hearing loss and lives between the Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing and Hearing cultures. As a user of sign language, the historical clichés of gender and culture signs became increasingly disturbing to her. This inspired her to search for an unbiased approach that evolved into a new model: Peoples' Sign Language (PSL). As an artist/performer and advocate for PSL, she has created a video series that address various proposals to invite dialogue and suggest new options (<http://www.mjrhoneybeecreations.com>).

NINA SUN EIDSHEIM is a scholar, performer, and assistant professor in the UCLA Department of Musicology. She is particularly interested in the performative aspects of the production, reception, and perception of vocal timbre; her research examines aspects of the voice and its inferred meaning in opera, popular music, and music technology through the lenses of American and African-American studies, performance, culture, gender, and race. Currently she is preparing a book manuscript tentatively titled *Musicology in the Flesh: An Essay on Voice, Body and Affect*. Inspired in part by her work as a genre-crossing singer working within contemporary classical repertoire, improvisation, and live electronic performance, Eidsheim is dedicated to an interdisciplinary and multi-modular approach to the study of musical cultures. As part of this effort, she composes, commissions, and produces music with her electro-acoustic ensemble, soNu. The ensemble's most recent large-scale collaborative work was an opera written by composer Anne Lebaron and librettist Douglas Kearney, which was premiered at REDCAT in Los Angeles ([http://adagio.calarts.edu/virtualcage/?page\\_id=1424](http://adagio.calarts.edu/virtualcage/?page_id=1424)).

## Notes

1. The Woman's Building was founded in 1973 by Chicago and two other CalArts faculty, Arlene Raven and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, partly due to the sexism they and their female students encountered at CalArts.
2. Ellipses are in original text.
3. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 1994).
4. Yolanda M. Lopez and Moira Roth, "Social Protest: Racism and Sexism," in *The Power of Feminist Art*.
5. The Winchester Mystery House, located in San Jose, California, was built by Sarah Winchester, the heiress to the Winchester Rifle fortune, and was under continuous construction from 1884 to 1922. Winchester believed the house was haunted by the ghosts of those who'd been killed by Winchester rifles, and that only continuous construction would appease them. The mansion has 160 rooms and includes inexplicable features such as doorways and staircases that lead to nowhere. It is currently a tourist attraction.



*Ablutions*, performance by  
Judy Chicago, Suzanne  
Lacy, Sandra Orgel, Aviva  
Rashmani, 1972. Venice, CA.  
© Judy Chicago, courtesy  
Through the Flower Archives.

