

POWER AND SPACE: FEMINIST CULTURE AND THE LOS ANGELES WOMAN'S BUILDING, A CONTEXT

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It was a house large enough for everyone, all women, we claimed. It was Womanspace, *Womanhouse*, and the House of Women, “At Home,” Everywoman’s space, and *Femme/Maison*. It was female space, safe space, sacred space, contested space, occupied space, appropriated space, and transformed space. It was revolution and revelation. We were squatters and proprietors, renegades and healers; we dichotomized and fused. We had one commonality: we were convinced that we were transforming culture by offering alternatives, as women, not only in the arts and culture, but also in the way we used space and conducted politics in that space.

In its theory and praxis, the Los Angeles Woman’s Building, a material site for nearly two decades, appeared to epitomize much of what is sometimes referred to as “second-wave feminism.” However, because of the totalizing claim and limited reality of the concept, I have problematized the term “second-wave feminism” throughout this essay. The term gives the impression of a beginning and an end when, in actuality, activism on behalf of women has been ongoing. It also suggests one movement where there were many. Conventionally, it refers to a series of organizations—both mainstream and radical—that were dominated by white women; the considerable activism on the part of women of color is glossed over and made invisible.

The Los Angeles Woman’s Building, by most outside accounts, may be considered part of “second-wave feminism,” but the sharp break with the ideas and strategies of “first-wave feminism” (primarily the Suffrage Movement, but including settlement



Founders of the Woman's Building: Sheila Levrant de Bretteville (L), Arlene Raven (M), Judy Chicago (R), circa 1973. Photographer unknown, Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.

house movements, early experiments in collective living, and other experiments) and the utopian nature of the cultural feminism that was the Woman's Building's linchpin, justify an argument to the contrary, i.e., that cultural feminism was a thing apart. Certainly core activists in the Woman's Building did not describe themselves as part of "second-wave feminism." Surely any community that sees itself as creating an entirely new culture for the future that is based on egalitarian, collective/communal, nonhierarchical, noncompetitive, and, perhaps, gender transcendent principles transcends the notions of democratic ideals espoused by first- and second-wave feminists.

Regardless of its place within the categories of feminism, its niche in the politics of space is, however, unarguable; the Woman's Building was an enduring institution by the longevity standards of the times. But how secure is its place in feminist art history and in social and cultural history, in general? Are the trends that Woman's Building-associated artists and activists originated, developed, transformed, and pre-saged acknowledged as important to the politics and culture of today? Or is the historical demise of the Woman's Building one more example of the invisibility of women's work: an "anonymous" contribution to feminist art historical and cultural studies?

The Woman's Building of Los Angeles was the first independent feminist cultural institution in the world. Founded in 1973, by artist Judy Chicago, graphic designer Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, and the late art historian Arlene Raven, the Woman's Building drew together talented women of many artistic disciplines from across the United States and around the world to pioneer new modes of art making and arts education within the context of a supportive feminist community. In its eighteen-year history (1973–1991), thousands of artists created and or presented new work, gained new skills, and made bold statements within the context of this vital organization.

In this volume, we bring together a group of writers, artists, and academics (and combinations thereof)—some formerly associated with the Woman's Building and others representing newer generations of feminists—to explore the history and accomplishments of the Woman's Building. Our contributions focus on analyses, art practices, and feminist processes pioneered during the organization's history that continue to have an impact on contemporary culture. The purpose of this combination of reconstruction/recuperation and visionary essays is not only to keep alive the history of this organization and to analyze the impact of its contributions on current art and feminist practices, but also to gain insight into contemporary culture.

This overview frames the phenomenon of the Woman's Building within the social, political, and philosophical atmosphere of late twentieth-century social thought, social movements, and feminisms. The Woman's Building and the ideas that undergirded its founding and continued existence are Modernist; behind the goals and ambitions of the founders and participants was an emancipatory narrative, a liberation theme that typified Modernism.

Although the phenomenon is Modernist, nonetheless, we can also see Woman's

Building origins that are pre-Renaissance—the rise of the concept of "museum" as a place that houses and organizes the cultural resources of a community.¹ Such a facility/construction of a concept or site as the museum may come about from a crisis of knowledge that the fabrication of a building is trying to solve.² In the case of the Woman's Building this would refer to feminism and the appropriation of space to address the conditions of women's lives in the midst of an androcentric culture. Women had reached a point where they were no longer able to negotiate, adjust to, and deny androcentrism; thus a crisis of knowledge and identity emerged.

Yet, in many ways a museum is also a metaphor for community house, one whose visual, spatial and cultural aspects are able to bridge public and private space,³ much as the creators and art producers of the Woman's Building saw themselves doing. Another idea that emanates from the original museum concept is that the Woman's Building is "a room of muses."⁴

Still, for all of its pre-Modernist and Modernist roots and manifestations, many of the forms of feminism that permeated the Woman's Building and its rarified environments also straddled Postmodernism, with its insistence on ambiguity; breaking down of dichotomies; questioning of authority and the authorial figure (traditional male subject and the male artist as romantic hero); the deconstruction of language—both visual and literate; and its undermining of the privileging of sight, of linear thinking, and of conventional definitions of "art."⁵ In this way and in many others, the history of the Woman's Building is complex and multilayered. The Woman's Building was always contested space. Nonetheless, while recognizing many feminists' ambivalence toward Modernism, the organization's stated goals emanated from many of the goals of Modernist "second-wave feminism." Here I explore some of the most prominent themes, privileging two main concepts: *culture* and *space*—their "contents" and points of convergence.

Culture and Space

Among the most prevalent themes of contemporary feminisms are women's need for space ("A Room of One's Own" reaching cliché status by the eighties⁶), and an encouragement and exploration of the culture that occupied that space. Reaching manifesto status was the linked set of ideas that, if women were to do their best work (defined broadly), they would need an unadulterated space, that they would produce out of their *own experience*, and that the work done in that space would constitute "women's culture." An aspect of the demand for space was the owning and controlling of the space and the *body* that occupies it.

A 1983 symposium on women's culture, *The House of Women: Art and Culture in the 1980s*,⁷ addressed issues under the rubric of "women's culture," at the time one of the more controversial and elusive formulations within communities of women and feminists—scholars, activists, and artists—primarily because of the implications



Linda Nishio, *Ghost in the Machine*, 1983. Multimedia performance at the Woman's Building. Photograph by Sheila Ruth. © Linda Nishio.

of *essentialism* and separatism. In many ways the site of the symposium—the Greater Los Angeles/Long Beach area—was perfect for such a gathering because of the proximity of several vital women's communities, research and teaching centers, and perhaps most significantly, a dynamic feminist art community, symbolized by the Woman's Building.

The House of Women, which featured over a dozen Woman's Building practitioners and founders, was held in conjunction with the "At Home" art exhibit at the Long Beach Museum of Art, a celebration of ten years of feminist art in the area.⁸ Art historian and Woman's Building co-founder the late Arlene Raven was guest curator of the show. She gathered people to discuss the artistic and sociopolitical themes of "At Home," with an eye toward an analysis of the changes in feminist ideas since *Womanhouse* of ten years before. Toward that end, artists, academicians, and community/movement people were congregated in the same room (house) for an exploration of the changes in how we relate to the house/home environment and for an investigation of the development of the "women's culture" concept.

The House of Women participants recognized that we were both the heirs and progenitors of two significant manifestations of "women's culture"—*Womanhouse* of 1973 and "At Home" of 1983—major feminist environmental and performance art projects.⁹ The latter, an homage to the former, expressed and recognized the special

relationship feminist art has had to the themes of house and home.¹⁰ Like *Womanhouse* before it, "At Home" recreated the house as environmental art and traced the relationship among women, space, and culture—both abstract and material. The metaphor of the *house* seemed especially appropriate, as it suggests both material (the physical structure of the house) and myth/imagination (refuge, psychological shelter, "home"). Also, if women were the first to seek out and build shelters, then *house* is an important focus in the history of women's material culture.¹¹

The "Women's Culture" Concept

By the seventies, feminist scholars, artists, and architects had begun to develop some of the earlier formulations about "women's culture" as an important and self-conscious concept to use aesthetically and programmatically in response to the oppression of women.¹² In 1980, *Feminist Studies*, then only in its sixth year, published a debate about "women's culture" as a problematic concept. Ellen DuBois defined "women's culture" as it is used by U.S. historians: "the broad-based commonality of values, institutions, relationships and methods of communication, focused on domesticity and morality and particular to late eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century women."¹³ Others raised questions about "cultural feminism," arguably equated with "women's culture," and its role in the women's movement and the analytical and political distinction between "women's culture" and "feminism," a distinction that also became salient in the House of Women symposium. In a sense, the distinction revealed a tension between "cultural feminists" and "political/materialist/socialist feminists," but that distinction is too facile, just as the stereotype of the Woman's Building as comprised entirely of "cultural feminists" was too totalizing.

In the seventies and eighties, the heyday of the Woman's Building, feminists saw an explosion of works on women's art and art history, feminist literary criticism, and feminist responses to negative images in film and popular culture.¹⁴ However, the concept "women's culture," an important centerpiece concept undergirding the Woman's Building, remained under the skin and was not often explicitly theorized. Therefore, one could say that one of the most potentially dynamic concepts within feminism faltered from theoretical neglect. Partially the neglect was a result of early feminism's distrust of academic "High Theory." The distrust was based on the notion that "High Theory" is male and that men used theories as tools to dominate women and others, primarily by writing women out of history and culture. Women, it was argued by many feminists, were theorized out. Also, "High Theory" was considered a privilege of the elite and a manifestation of elitism, which feminists claimed to eschew.¹⁵

This is not to erase the fact that theory was being produced by feminists at sites other than academic institutions and being disseminated in ways other than by mainstream publishing houses. Feminists at the Woman's Building, for example, were producing theories about the qualities of a utopian society, the nature of art,

power relationships (gender, race and class) and sexuality. In 1992, Beatriz Colomina published a book on sexuality and space,¹⁶ utilizing concepts such as domestic voyeurism, the female spectator and the lesbian specter, and perverse space. Twenty years earlier, performance and other art productions had forwarded theories about sexuality and space, e.g. *Womanhouse*, and a bit later, the Lesbian Art Project at the Woman's Building.

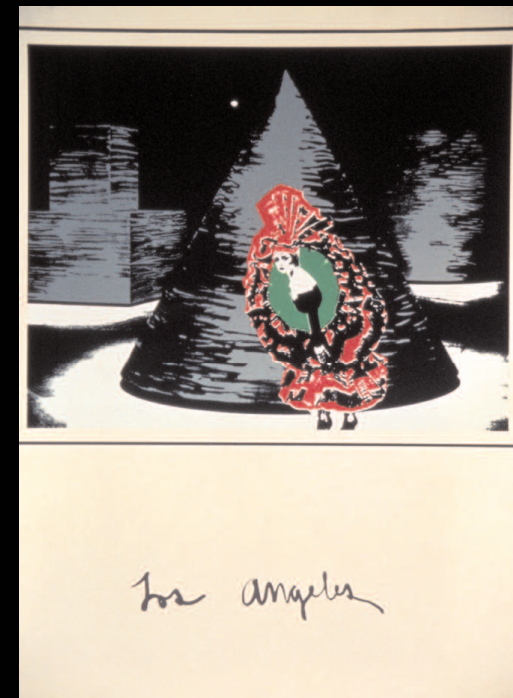
At any rate, the distrust of "High Theory" by most feminists and of academic theorizing by feminist community activists and artists thwarted attempts to define "women's culture" intellectually and rigorously. Likewise theorizing women's culture was often confounded by ideological debates within feminisms. These debates were often framed in the very dichotomies we professed to avoid, e.g. intellect/intuition, academy/community, and separatist or alternative/mainstream.

The lack of intellectual rigor may also be attributed to early second-wave feminism's common professional/intellectual isolationism. One rarely saw the integration of studies in nonverbal communication; gender spatial relationships; landscapes of the home, neighborhood, and city; gender roles and domesticity; material culture and environment; the psychosexual dynamics of interior and exterior; and folklore with art criticism and art historical studies. Artists seldom referenced these works.¹⁷ In other words, in those years we were only gendering certain aspects of society and culture. It worked both ways: academic feminists ignored theories that were being produced in the community; the notion of the "organic intellectual" was rarely ever acknowledged. With distrust on one side and elitism on the other, the possibility for integrated theories of empowerment and the transformation of culture were curtailed, as was the integration of various intellectual communities with the Woman's Building.

One community of feminist scholars/practitioners was developing integrated theories: architects, designers, urban planners, and preservationists such as Gwendolyn Wright, Ann Markusen, Gerda Wekerle and Dolores Hayden. They pointed out the relationship between the way houses, neighborhoods, and cities have been designed and socially sanctioned ideas about gender roles and domesticity.¹⁸ For example, Hayden described the ideas and concrete projects of early material feminists who forged the beginnings of a socialist feminist material culture and environment. She singled out the Woman's Building in a section on "Creating Innovative Institutions to Link Private Life and Public Space," that is, "domesticating urban space."¹⁹ Hayden, whose ideas were greatly influenced by Woman's Building co-founder, Sheila de Bretteville, was at the time one of the few academics to put the Woman's Building on the cultural map and to recognize its importance as a site. Hayden argued:

In the process of domesticating public space, cultural institutions that exist somewhere between the private domain and the public domain play a key role.... One such institution is the Los Angeles

Patssi Valdez,
Untitled, 1983. Poster
from "Life in L.A.," a
commissioned project
directed by Sheila
Levrant de Bretteville
and Susan E. King.
© Patssi Valdez.



Woman's Building, a public center for women's culture... [that] serves as a gathering place for painters, graphic designers, video artists, performance artists, novelists, and playwrights. It includes gallery space, artists' studio space, performance space, and offices. The Woman's Building was designed to create a political and cultural bridge between public and private life. The group encourages members to make public art about their lives.²⁰

Hayden singles out a Los Angeles project of de Bretteville's, "Public Announcements/Private Conversations," the goals of which were to create works about public places with personal meaning. Hayden also cites Suzanne Lacy, a performance artist associated with the Woman's Building, for her public performances such as *Three Weeks in May*. Coordinated with Leslie Labowitz, *Three Weeks in May* dealt with the very private/public themes of rape and violence against women.

By placing their art productions intentionally "midway between the home and the street," the Woman's Building artists and cultural workers create[d] a "homelike world."²¹

The Experiences Within—Interior and Exterior Space

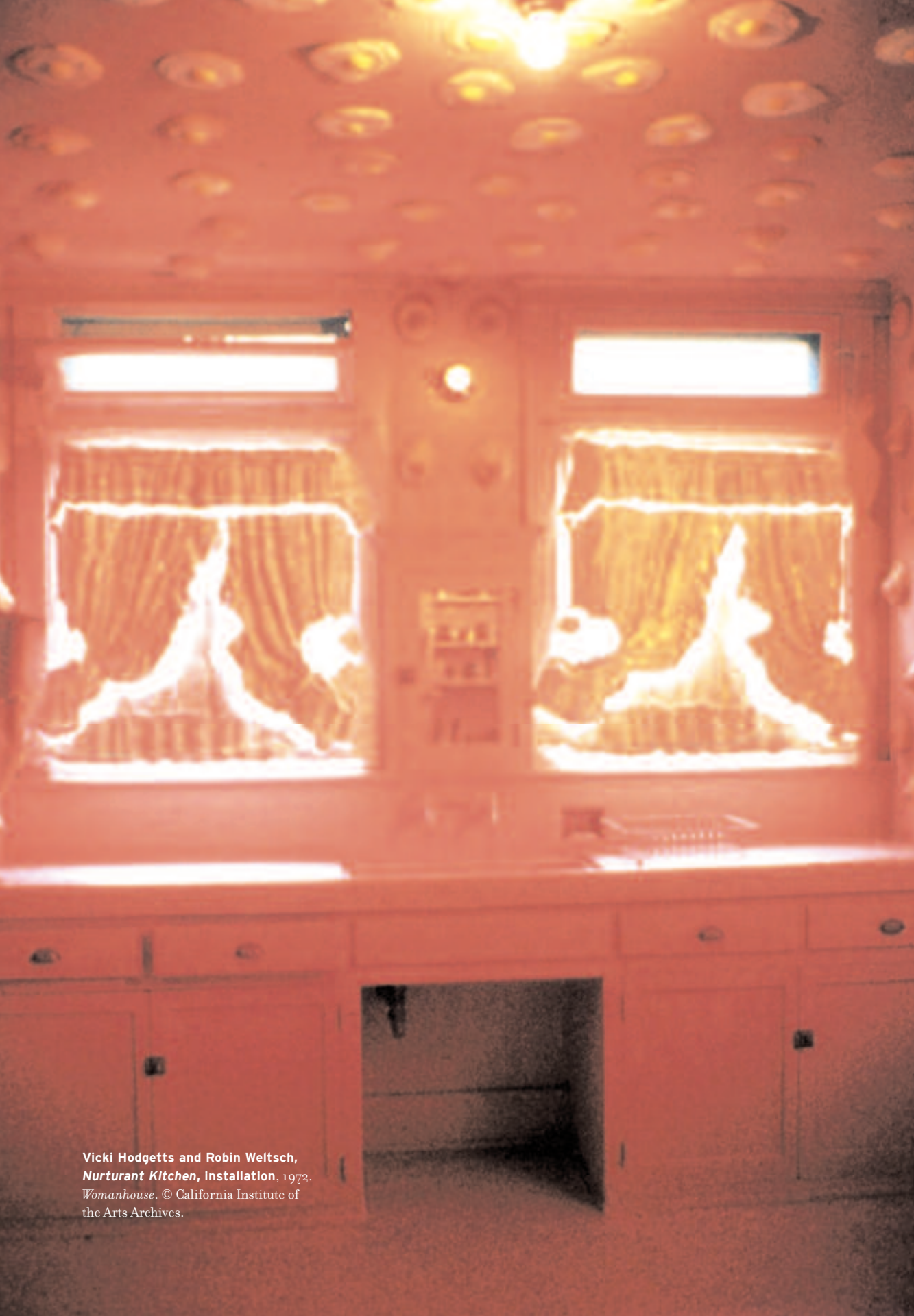
Although the validity of the dichotomous model of private and public is constantly being challenged, especially as it is associated with gender relationships, nonetheless, it may not have totally exhausted its analytical utility. In order to analyze the interiors of the mind and house and to suggest the reappropriation or redefinition of androcenters, it may still be helpful to conceive of female and male space, i.e., gendered space.²²

In *The Poetics of Space*, existentialist Gaston Bachelard comments on the interior landscape:

A house that shines from the care it receives appears to have been rebuilt from the inside; it is as though it were new inside. In the intimate harmony of walls and furniture, it may be said that we become conscious of a house that is built by women, since men only know how to build a house from the outside.²³

Bachelard's notion of interior landscape resonates with Violette Leduc's house of women, where the house is space, lineage, material, and myth.²⁴ The boundaries that separate the interior and the exterior may be the same boundaries thought to separate mind and body. The courtyard of a Northern Sudanese house, where I spent countless hours over decades, may, in material reality, separate the physical spheres of men and women and epitomize the effects of the gender division of labor on the cultural landscape and built environment.²⁵ Moreover, metaphorically (in Western literature), the interior separation of male and female in the Arab house may stand for the repression of female sexuality. Nonetheless, although women can be seen as culturally alienated within their own interior space, women's culture that emerges in the seclusion of the courtyard is the transformation of that alienation. Mary Ellen Mazey and David Lee use the ideas of Leila Ahmed to argue that the detached, isolated, single-family house (especially in North America) is more alienating of North American women than is the Arab house of Arab women. In the latter, the combination of the extended family, with its communal advantages, and the harem (women's quarters) allow for sisterhood and collectivity. The harem, then, while suggesting to Westerners a system of sexual access for males, is also a system whereby women have living space (culture) beyond the patriarchy. This merging and alienation, explicit in Leduc, is one of many aspects of the dialectics of interior/exterior space, women, and culture.²⁶

Women, original designers of shelter, are said to have lost their architectural roles to men,²⁷ retreating/escaping, perhaps, into the personal landscape of the garden, "a medium for her creative idiosyncrasies and aesthetic sensitivities,"²⁸ a landscape of her mind. Thus, the North American, suburban, single-family dwelling—one of the most notable forms of isolation and alienation for women—is also where women



Vicki Hodgetts and Robin Weltsch,
Nurturant Kitchen, installation, 1972.
Womanhouse. © California Institute of
the Arts Archives.

transform that alienation through a personal aesthetic, perhaps metaphysically recapturing or reappropriating the lost agricultural fields.

In both the installation *Womanhouse* and the Woman's Building, feminists built the house from the inside.²⁹ Both projects involved the invention of spaces that covered all and revealed all. In the same way that the "little white apron" of the working-class servant in Leduc's novel signified the repression of women's sexuality by covering the belly and the genitals,³⁰ *Womanhouse* concealed and revealed the horrors and repression within the domestic interior. Likewise, the woman-made quilt, an interior narrative, a shelter built by women, covered all and revealed all: class, repression, and resistance. The same irony prevailed at the Woman's Building, where often the art revealed the house as the domestic site of repression of female sexuality while, simultaneously, the Woman's Building was offering shelter (a house) for women.

A consideration of our interior landscapes in relation to our material and unconscious culture facilitates an understanding of the importance of the Woman's Building as cultural site. Seeing women's culture as counter hegemonic to patriarchal culture is, perhaps, only part of the story, and we are still only in the fundamental stages of considering the material bases of some of the more elusive concepts within feminist theories, such as patriarchy.³¹ Patriarchy's loose counterpart, "women's culture," is also usually analyzed apart from its material base. As a consequence, the analyses are spatially, temporally, and culturally truncated (or, uprooted, to continue the biological metaphor). I argue that had the concept of "women's culture" had more theoretical salience and, had the material bases (including space and house) of both women's culture and patriarchy been more commonly explored, the phenomenon of the existence of the Woman's Building could not have been ignored in both feminist thought and in social history.³²

The Metaphors of Women's Culture

Explorations of "women's culture" have been of at least two kinds: (1) descriptions of material culture produced by women (these have generally been ethnographic studies); and (2) descriptions of superstructure devoid of consideration of the material base (these are most often feminist studies of North America). These are very limited approaches. We have failed to ask: When women have made vessels or quilts, how have they altered the material environment, and how have these producers themselves been altered? How have women *experienced* their production and reproduction, and how have the people around them changed as part of the interaction? Mainly we have lacked the methods for such analyses; even materialist interpretations have fallen short.

The concept of *space* has potential as a methodological "bridge." Space (ranging from a quilt, a white apron, and a building to a city) is culturally constructed and may be seen as material and myth/metaphor, therefore as both an aspect of material culture and as an element in superstructure (or the ideational level), but also as both

production and social reproduction. In these respects, one can certainly see the Woman's Building as multilayered space.

Some feminists have studied or participated in the process of women appropriating space (e.g. squatting) and transforming that space.³³ The creation of women's culture (feminist culture?) can be seen, then, as one of the strategies for transforming male-dominated space. The last Woman's Building site was a 1920s building in a warehouse district—a formerly male space that was filled with "things" that were male associated. It is not an illusion to see this space as transformed by feminist architects, designers, artists and visionaries, re-made from top to bottom, and occupied by metaphorical squatters along the railroad tracks.

In the feminist thought of the seventies and eighties, the separation of men's and women's spheres was a dominant idea. Not until the late eighties did a notion of gender as a system begin to take shape and prevail. If women's culture is a valid concept, what are the metaphors with which it is expressed? Are there spaces generated by that culture? Are they "female cultural spaces"?

Space is not a given. It is not a container or a void that is filled up; it is created just as gender is created, as part of culture. The dialectical process of the generation of space must be considered when looking at all cultural forms. One school of thought expounds that capitalist-patriarchy is a process that generates a particular kind of consumer space. The results of this process may be seen, then, as androcenters, or male spaces. Therefore, it is argued that one can look upon our urban spaces as capitalist-generated male cultural centers.

Following the same argument, would we say that just as there may be male and female methods (processes) for creating and relating to culture, there may be male and female principles in creating and relating to space? Are these principles necessarily liberating? When women and men occupy space are they also occupied by that space? In this essay I have automatically raised questions about space, culture, and freedom, which in turn provokes the question of how dreams, quilts and resistance are related to space, how these are related to alienation, and if culture is liberating or inhibiting. For our purposes here, we might ask if it was liberating for the women of the Woman's Building to have a site, a container, a culture of "their own."

If, as some feminist planners and architects have argued, men and women use different cultural metaphors in relating to their environments, is it valid to speak of female and male space (or androcenters) in analyzing the interiors of the mind and house, and in illuminating the structure of the city? Margrit Kennedy once delineated nine categories where men and women apply different principles of design. She argued that the "female principles" of design are more user-oriented, ergonomic, functional, flexible, organically ordered, holistic, complex, socially oriented, and slowly growing. Respectively, male principles are more designer-oriented, large-scale/monumental, formal, fixed, abstractly systematized, specialized, one-dimensional, profit-oriented,

and quickly constructed.³⁴ Although Kennedy's model is intended as a continuum rather than exclusive or absolute categories, it still raises a central problematic: Is "women's culture" merely or simply the flip side of "men's culture"?

Borrowing from an Adrienne Rich poem, can one speak of the "obscure underside [of women's] imagination?"³⁵ Gerda Wekerle, Rebecca Peterson, and David Morley refer to women's "distinctive 'underside' experience" as providing the basis for a different institutional style that leads to the development of environments based on a new set of principles.³⁶ They set up a model for the gender contrasts in institutional metaphors. Male institutional metaphors were individualist, centralized, displayed stratified/hierarchical organization, had a center-periphery relationship with environments, viewed change in terms of technological innovation, used productivity/growth models of change, used rational decision-making processes, and rewarded individuals for leadership. The female metaphors, respectively, were communal, decentralized, engaged in informal networking as organization, had a localist/participatory relationship with environments, viewed change in terms of social innovation, used conserver models of change, used decision-making processes that involved sentiment, emotions, and instinct, and rewarded the individual for service to others.³⁷ Many of these metaphors of female institutional and organizational behavior also characterized the Woman's Building during its existence as a site.

Rather than interpret "women's culture" as the obscure underbelly of culture, one might instead follow the metaphors, and see women, feminists, and Woman's Building art workers as rebuilding a house from the inside. These "houses" are the institutions of women's culture, which we have built (rather than rebuilt), perhaps using "feminist process" and education to develop out from the center. The houses are often referred to as "alternative feminist organizations," those fluid, egalitarian, informal, unstructured nebulae of our imaginations. These are laboratories where women can apply their dreams and metaphors, and recreate themselves in a concrete environment, spinning out redemptive culture-in-formation.

The Work Space—Pedagogy and Process

The "alternative feminist organizations" have been, perhaps, most striking in their attempts to develop new ways of relating in the work environment. Karl Marx and Marxists have written a great deal about the relations of production, but until very recently such labors as art were seldom analyzed in these terms. Artists at California Institute of the Arts in the Miriam Schapiro/Judy Chicago seventies era of the Feminist Studio Workshop, at *Womanhouse*, and at the Woman's Building, among many other art/work places, tried to analyze and change the relations of production.

One of the most important attributes of the Woman's Building was its process and its related *pedagogy*. Community organizations such as the Woman's Building were significant influences on the educational processes in various institutions of learning.

Teachers and students, likewise, in "alternative" feminist university departments (i.e., early, grassroots-oriented, community-oriented women's studies programs) attempted to analyze the relations of production and to develop a process for exploring those relations.³⁸ Some have referred to "feminist process" as the *practice* of women's studies. Ideally, that means that "content" emanates not only from a person designated as instructor/professor, but also from those designated as students. That means that the teacher learns from the students, as well. The classroom, altered in its structure, is student-oriented. The structure is symbolized, most often, by the circle. Each member of the circle is equal to any other and, consequently, is given equal time and space. Space is, again, a relevant concept—taking, owning, occupying, and controlling space. All experience is valid, and everyone is validated. The person designated instructor (facilitator) may be more experienced in certain areas of curriculum content, but this formal knowledge is not to be mystified and there should be no hidden agenda in that sense or in any other. What takes place is a constant process of consciousness-raising through revelation and sharing and through the politicizing of the personal. The ideal was to make decisions through consensus and to work collectively on projects. The women in the circle were constantly self-evaluating (criticism/self-criticism). This process—a self-empowering, consciousness-raising, action-oriented mode of interaction—is integrally linked to feminist pedagogy.

Such pedagogy and process were at the core of feminist education at the Woman's Building: in the classes, the performances, the organization of the artwork, and in the administrative functioning. For many years, "alternative institutions" were the heart of second-wave feminism and space was a precious commodity.³⁹

Are these "alternative" institutions the "flip side" of patriarchal culture/androcenters? Although the form(s) may be different, the *raison d'être*, goals, functions and processes may be much the same as the quilting bee of an earlier period in North America or the *zaar* of Sudan (a ritualized self-help, therapeutic gathering on behalf of a "sister" in crisis). If these are a "flip side," are they unconscious in their construction and, in that sense, do they involve prefeminist consciousness or "female consciousness"?⁴⁰ Or, were all alternative institutions constructed through feminist consciousness?

When the variables of different disciplines are assembled that are said to signal differing principles for the use of space by women and men, differing gender metaphors for the creation of institutions, and a process for the creation of new modes of relationships in the work environment, a women's culture concept begins to develop that moves beyond the descriptive and definitional and into the conceptual.

To summarize, the space (both material and metaphorical) into which women/feminists pour their culture is user-oriented, ergonomic, functional, flexible, organic, holistic, complex, social, slowly growing, communal, decentralized, informal, localist, participatory, conservationist, emotional, affective, instinctual, nurturing, experiential,

nonhierarchical, fluid, reflective (self-critical), egalitarian, and collaborative. The way in which we build a house is as important, if not more so, than the house itself. At the Woman's Building, the way the house was run and the relations of production that were developed were as significant as the content of the house, i.e., the art that was produced.⁴¹

Space, Culture, and Freedom: Revolutionary Feminist Art

What is the possibility for women's culture to transform space radically and, therefore, to transform culture? In other words, does women's culture have revolutionary potential? Is women's art (which so often embodies many of the principles, metaphors, and processes of women's culture) revolutionary? I consider revolutionary art to be that which (1) has a profound relationship to material conditions (i.e., art which is not isolated or isolating and is not alienated from the material world, the producer or the audience); (2) is relatively unbounded or has flexible boundaries; (3) is collective; (4) is egalitarian; (5) is active (especially in the sense of demanding social change); (6) is transcultural (while sometimes using our ethnicities to arrive at that point); (7) is disruptive of the dichotomy between subject and object or any other dichotomy. The act or *process* of creating the art is revolutionary, rather than the actual form or even the content. (This idea is borrowed and altered from John Berger.⁴²) More importantly, the revolutionary aspect of the art is in the interaction process of the creators. In this way culture, as it is articulated through art production, is simultaneously theory and practice. That is, through culture, the person is in a state of constant revolt in which she simultaneously fulfills and creates her own values. The revolt is not an intellectual invention, but is based upon human experience and action toward change.⁴³ In this way, the art form is one around which women can mobilize or organize and build institutions of change. It is, in fact, political organization itself.

To many theorists and activists, performance art was the quintessential revolutionary art. The art form was at its most political when it produced an intersection of space, culture, and freedom. Performance art, especially as we knew it among feminist art producers in the Greater Los Angeles area, was a feminist art of and for the era. It was oftentimes also the epitome of the expression of sexuality and space.

A number of the performance pieces of the era exhibited many of the "principles," "institutional metaphors," and processes explored above: fluidity, egalitarianism, communalism, and informality. The initiator of a massive public performance piece is a self-conscious actor, but the people drawn into it, immersed in the piece sometimes by accident, may take on their own dynamic and are changed and, in turn, change their environment. Whether or not the performances followed the original design of their initiator, they created a political and cultural bridge between public and private life (to which Sheila de Bretteville's design projects also speak so eloquently). There is a great deal in feminist public performance art that emanates from the people themselves, is spontaneous, and is localist/participatory. It is, in that sense, ideal



Take Back the Night, performance by Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy, 1978, San Francisco. Photograph by Rob Blalack. © Leslie Labowitz and Suzanne Lacy.

feminist process. Many of the women passersby who participate are not doing so self-consciously but rather may be responding to their own needs (material or social conditions) or identifying with a particular form of oppression/repression. They may be part of the same community or network in which there are shared institutions, values, relationships, norms, organizations, arts, methods of communication, and history. If only temporarily, they act together to change their environment (space).

It is significant to the theorizing of space, sexuality, and politics that this art was focused as much at the Woman's Building as at any other one site. Performance art workers appropriated space and filled it with autobiography, theater, mysticism, sexuality, and politics to produce compelling invitations to deal with our personal/political selves. Some works by the Feminist Art Workers, Mother Art, Double X (XX), Ariadne: A Social Art Network, The Waitresses, Sisters Of Survival, and others also used collective action to bring about change, to subvert the public/private dichotomy, and to engage in praxis.⁴⁴

In the late seventies, especially in the work of Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, performance art as media event, as spectacle, reached its peak. Large, politically

conscious action groups were coordinated, appropriating urban space, mapping women's oppression, and using performativity, feminist theory, community organization, media analysis, and ideas from Conceptual art for change.

Change through irony was one of the unstated goals of some performance. One of the best examples of ironic performance was the Feminist Art Workers' *This Ain't No Heavy Breathing* (1978), in which the group selected women's names at random from the phone book, called them, and instead of making lewd comments, affirmed and validated them. Other performances involved juxtaposing opposing groups of people in the same space to cooperate toward one goal and in this way synthesizing structure and method. In these public art events, it was ambiguous who was the audience and who was the "performer"; all became cultural workers who may have been altering space and body within that space. Likewise, it was unclear where the "piece" began and where it ended; such terminology is, in fact, not appropriate. Dialogue, protest, confrontation, and celebration are all human behaviors simultaneously recreating culture and changing the cultural space.

Art Critical Theories and Feminism

Most feminist art of the seventies⁴⁵ was political art in many senses, just as feminist art criticism was political criticism, whether critiquing feminist art or conventional/mainstream/patriarchal art. Lillian Robinson, literary critic, referred to feminist art criticism as *engaged* criticism, Lucy Lippard as *advocacy* criticism: It should be just as engaged as the art itself.⁴⁶

For many cultural feminists, it is arguable to posit that the feminist art movement of the seventies emanated from "second-wave feminism," because of the utopian nature of much of feminist art. Nonetheless, both cultural feminists and other "second-wave feminists" were responding to the abysmal material conditions of most women's lives; to the secondary nature of women's lives, so poignantly narrated by Simone de Beauvoir; and to the "problem that had no name" of Friedan's "feminine mystique" (among other things, the boredom and lack of fulfillment of the middle-class [white] housewife).⁴⁷ The movements were also a reaction to the fact that existed then and still exists today: more women are killed and maimed by the men in their lives (often in their own homes) than in any other way.

From this knot of facts, and from where most feminists chose to position the site of the struggle at that time, emerged the most famous slogan of the era: "The personal is political." This slogan/theory/praxis/mode of relating to the world was a cardinal belief of most feminists and was to transform many women's lives, the nature of feminism, and the content and practice of feminist art.

"Feminism" itself was/is many things: an academic and theoretical point-of-view, a didactic stance, a political agenda, an ideological and/or philosophical perspective, and a *program* to change the conditions of women's lives. There are many

definitions of "feminism" and many different perspectives; each one may be said to contain a cultural component and the seeds of a cultural movement. Not only is feminism not monolithic, no one person fits neatly into one category of feminism. This was, apparently, a difficult idea for the many factions of feminists to grasp and hold onto all of the time. Feminists and their critics also had difficulty or refused to fathom the idea that feminism is dynamic. Therefore, what was true of feminism in the seventies may not be true of feminism in the early twenty-first century.

Second-wave feminism was characterized by an emphasis on consciousness-raising about women's or one's status and identity. It was an exploration and exposé of the socialization processes that were said to account for women's status. In art, literature, and even in academic writings there was an emphasis on images and self-images: challenging, creating, subverting, and valorizing them.

What set "second-wave" feminism off from "first-wave" was the former's emphasis on the spiritual and cultural and on image and imagery. And connected, almost mystically, was the notion that there is a unified subject, a biological femaleness. We were all women after all. Such ideas were theorized by Mary Daly and Susan Griffin, and poeticized through some of the early works of Adrienne Rich, especially *The Dream of a Common Language*, which included "Transcendental Etude," an anthem to women's culture and a call for the invention of a women's history. Some of these pioneers of the women's culture movement presented valorized and "fixed" ideas about the "nature" of women and of women together.⁴⁸

The women's cultural movement has been a very important element in U.S. feminism, and has been especially prominent on the West Coast.⁴⁹ Women began to believe that they had to change culture—language, history, philosophy, the arts—to achieve equality and liberation. Just as women had been cut off from their history, they had been cut off from their culture. I argue that there is no better way to dominate a group of people than to withhold, make invisible, or distort their history or culture. To the activists in the women's cultural movement this had to be addressed. The process for addressing it was dialectical; the strategy was twofold. That is, although feminists delegated themselves to change the culture, it was argued by some that women could also use that same culture to accomplish the transformation. A debate over whether or not we can use the "Master's tools to dismantle the Master's house" still rages.⁵⁰

The cultural movement is also a reaction to the condition of women in the arts, including how they have been portrayed in art and how they have been treated as artists, e.g., how their labor has been devalued and the products of their work trivialized or marginalized. That had to be changed. But how would women artists come into their own without knowledge of their role in the history of art?

Therefore, an important goal within the women's cultural movement has been the rewriting of art history to reflect more accurately the contribution of women, but also to assess the negative impact of the traditional depiction of women in art. Although

some have called for a rewriting of art history, others such as Griselda Pollock have suggested, instead, “feminist interventions in art history.”⁵¹

Perhaps it is too obvious to say that Western art was the domain of men because art is one of the highest expressions of culture, and therefore, was coveted and protected by men—like a grand copyright. Art in most societies is also the expression of the ideas of a particular class. Within Western capitalist society, this took particular forms. Before the twentieth century, the images of women were patriarchal types. Alexandra Comini referred to “vampires, virgins and voyeurs” and Carol Duncan and others to Madonna, Eve, and Venus (and sometimes Salome). It is among the middle and upper classes where we can trace the ideas that Duncan has referred to as “virility and domination,” the pervading themes of Modernism (the Fauves, Cubists, German Expressionists, and other “vanguard” artists). But no salacious or pristine image can compete in ferocity and brutishness with twentieth century Modernist themes.⁵²

Modernism and the avant-garde schools were quite different. They asserted,

sometimes in manifestos, the virile, vigorous, and uninhibited sexual appetite of the artist; male artists celebrated the male erotic experience. Modernism was/is voyeuristic in that the woman's body—in the form of the nude—was laid out for the male gaze. She/it is fragmented, objectified, commoditized, passive, vulnerable, and submissive to the male artist. Her blank gaze tells us little about her. She/it is devalued.⁵³

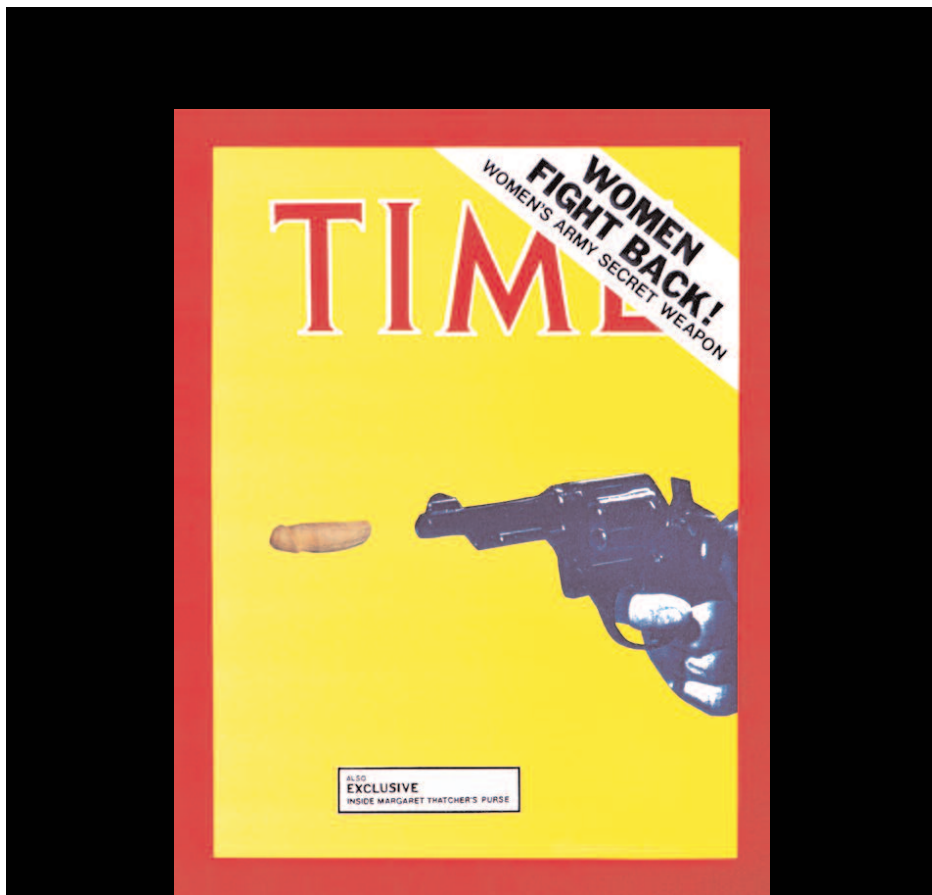
Clearly feminist artists and critics had their work cut out for them.

Art and Resistance

The much overworked themes of oppression and resistance characterized a great deal of feminist arts of the seventies; these themes were always visible in differing degrees at the Woman's Building: (1) Woman as oppressed, but with her anger about that oppression turned inward. This was often literature that included ironic or self-mocking acts of degradation, self-hatred, and self-destruction, often directed at the artist's own body. We see this in the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton.⁵⁴ (2) Woman as oppressed, but with her anger aimed outward, usually at men, patriarchy, or male-dominated society. Or, in the art by women of color, the anger might be directed at whites of both genders. Action might take the form of talking or fighting back. The early poetry of Ntozake Shange is a good example.⁵⁵ (3) Affirmation, validation, or celebration of womanhood and of women being together, or in the case of women of color, of the race and women of the race, bonding.⁵⁶ No literature was as validating of women than the poetry of Adrienne Rich, especially in *The Dream of a Common Language*.⁵⁷ Celebration of womanhood is the salient theme in Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. In *The Great Wall* and other works, muralist Judy Baca included strong Latinas, alongside Latinos, forging United States history.

Because the structures of domination remain in place no matter how much women celebrated their attributes, the themes above may not have been the most effective methods for achieving the stated goals of the period, which amounted to nothing less than a social revolution. Even if these goals were not achievable, the significant act was to intervene in social history in order to unsettle and subvert the hegemonic process. In the area of art history and art, in general, a lot of feminist intervention had to happen.

Clearly, feminists felt a need to correct the vilification of women in life and in art, starting by pointing out the negative images and then subverting, replacing, or negating them. Second, there was an expressed need to make women visible—in the past (restoration, resuscitation, resurrection, redemption, and recuperation) and in the present. Third, feminists had to address the mistakes and fill in the gaps. Fourth, feminists saw an effective method in turning things on their heads, or turning the tables, for example, rescuing taboos and appropriating them, and in the process, imbuing them with power. Fifth, feminists also saw a need to present new, strong, positive images and heroic narratives to replace the negative images. This often



Mariona Barkus, *Women Fight Back*, 1984. Collage. Collection of the artist. Photograph Mariona Barkus. © 1984 by Mariona Barkus.

involved valorizing women, making women the narrators of their own lives and the curators of their own culture. Sixth, because women had been deprived of much of their past, feminists aimed at continuity with the past. In art, this often entailed rescuing a “traditional” motif, such as quilting, and giving it meaning in contemporary life (e.g. the art of Faith Ringgold and Miriam Schapiro). Last, and perhaps the most controversial, feminists aimed to find the “Truth” (placing them in the heart of Modernism) that emerged in the form of a unified subject. Many feminists of the seventies took the position that women were more unified by the fact of being “woman” than by the specifics of race, class, sexuality, region, material conditions, religion, and culture.

The last goal mentioned above is controversial because it has been perceived as essentialist by feminist critics, critics of feminism, and by women of color inside and outside of those first two categories. Women of color often did not see themselves in the picture, asserting that by “woman,” that unified and totalized subject, the “knowers” (the gatekeepers in the art world and in academia) really were referring to white, middle-class, Western women.⁵⁸

In a way, the splits that were a result of “identity politics” are ironic because, if there is some commonality between the work of women of color and white feminist women, identity politics is one. Yet, it was not *identity politics* that unified women in the seventies and eighties. Quite the contrary. For all of the attempts at spinning and weaving, things spun out of control. The Woman's Building is no exception to the strife that consumed so much of the feminisms of the era. The predominantly white feminists at the Woman's Building were never really able to recover from the charge by women artists, critics, and art historians of color that the agenda was set, and only as an afterthought were women of color invited to the tea party. Internal and external criticisms that the Woman's Building did not have “enough diversity” were mollified by an “add a woman of color and stir” strategy.⁵⁹ For women artists of color, the strategy of building a house from within did not, it seemed, resemble moving from the margins to the center (within).

When women artists of color did address some of the themes delineated above, they did it with a twist. For one thing, there was often less emphasis on the individual artist as subject and a greater tendency to talk about one's own group, e.g., African Americans. By depicting the stereotypical Black maid with a gun in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, Betye Saar was appropriating a negative image and imbuing it with power. Thus, although Saar might have been including herself in the general image-making, the comment was broader and served as a reminder to middle-class white women that Black women still occupy the lower rungs of the workforce. White feminist academics and artists devoted a great deal of energy to a characterization of all women as exploited through domestic labor; this piece of Saar's served as a reminder of who is more exploited.



Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972. Mixed media assemblage, 11 3/4" x 8" x 2 3/4". Collection of University of California, Berkeley Art Museum, purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts. Photograph courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York.



The All City Waitress Marching Band, 1979. Performance by The Waitresses, created by Jerri Allyn, Leslie Belt, Chutney Berry (pictured in front with baton), Anne Mavor and 35 waitresses. The DooDah Parade, Pasadena, CA. Performed by: Nancy Angelo, Elizabeth Blouser, Terry Bleacher, Diane Diplata, Laurine DiRicco, Anne Gauldin, Cheri Gaulke, Leibe Gray, Anita Green, Maisha Green, Vanalyn Green, Annette Hunt, Elizabeth Irons, Julie James, Maria Karras, Laurel Klick, Sue Maberry, Anne Phillips, Linda Preuss, Arlene Raven, Maureen Renville, Rita Rodriguez, Jeanne Shanin, Barbara Stophia, Cheryl Swannack, Sue, Talbot, Rina Viezel, Lynne Warshafsky, Christine Wong. Photograph by Mary McNally. © The Waitresses: Jerri Allyn and Anne Gauldin.

The art by women of color added many other themes to the lexicon, however, ones generally not dealt with by white feminist artists. Following Lippard in *Mixed Blessings*, one could characterize the art by women of color as dealing with the various themes of telling, mapping, naming, landing, remembering, longing, dreaming, resisting, and appropriating. Memory and loss are very powerful themes in the art by American Indians/Native Americans and Asian Americans. Telling, naming, and resisting seem very important among African American artists; mapping, *reappropriating*, and resisting are salient themes among Chicanas and Latinas. Certainly, the relationship to land is very significant: no land, stolen land, remembered land, and dual lands or identity.⁶⁰ It is this last set of themes that resonate with feminist concern for space, house, and home. White feminists, however, rarely dealt with land. Their art was more insular, closer to home than to faraway lands, closer to the house than to the fields.⁶¹

Feminist Art Strategies in the 1970s

In its leadership role in the arts communities, the feminist art of the Woman's Building in the seventies and into the eighties was often in the genre of biography or autobiography and was also multiple, layered in time, and non-linear. In tone, its critics said that it was humorless, or "dead serious," and that feminist art dealt primarily with oppression, trivialization, and the brutalization of women. This is reductive, however, because, although it is true that these were some of the prevalent themes of *Woman-house*, feminist art at the Woman's Building was also about *survivors*, not victims, and it was often very funny.⁶²

Some of the art used biting comedy or satire—even about such serious themes as the exploitation and the sexualization of women's labor. The Waitresses, for example, was a Woman's Building-associated performance group that staged events in restaurants throughout the city, appropriating and altering space. They did comical renditions of sexual harassment and exploitation of labor. Arguing that feminist art is "too serious" also overlooks the guerilla theater / performance group Guerrilla Girls, who stage comical public demonstrations and events (in disguise) to protest discrimination against women's art and women artists, and whose publications are equally humorous.⁶³

Furthermore, the parallel woman-as-hero theme was also prevalent in seventies feminist art. Linear, heroic narratives were prominent strategies in the construction of a new mythology and cosmology (e.g., Judy Baca's early paintings and murals and Yolanda Lopez's work). In fact, the linear narrative depicting women's lives was a popular feminist strategy for more accurately representing women in art and academic research, and it resulted in the collection of life-histories or personal narratives. Although Baca created strong graphic narratives that are emancipatory in theme, others used oral histories and personal stories to represent "ordinary" women in an attempt to show that no woman is ordinary.

The personal art of quilt making manifests many of the themes I have mentioned. Quilts are, of course, important as examples in feminist art histories of restoring and resurrecting art forms by women that have been trivialized and marginalized (in fact, not even considered "art"). Moreover, by examining quilts in women's history, feminists illuminated issues of work, of community collaboration, personal and family history, ritual, multi-layered history, commemoration, and the importance of decoration. Quilts are also reflections of race, ethnicity, class, and regional diversity. Quilt makers are, indeed, cultural workers. Their work covers and reveals.

Sheila de Bretteville created *Pink* in 1974. She invited women from the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW) to create page art about the color pink. Some of the squares are text only; some are images. Then she "quilted" the responses together, pinned them to the wall, and photographed the ensemble. From the photograph, she created one poster that is really the patchwork/quilting of twenty-nine women.

In fact, for many feminists, quilts have been used in book and essay titles as metaphors for weaving women's lives together, for particular kinds of labor, for collaborative work, for the layered history of women's lives, and the like. Two striking examples of literary metaphors are Shirley Lim's "A Dazzling Quilt" and Bettina Aptheker's *Tapestries of Life*.⁶⁴ In looking at the process of quilting, feminists can see the metaphors of finishing each other's stitches; collaborative work; linking women, families, and generations; the labor of love; and the valuing of women's labor, including art.

The visualization of this process of quilting and the resurrection of needlework as art were important in the works of at least four prominent artists: Faith Ringgold, with her quilt series depicting African American lives; Miriam Schapiro, who combined the quilt motif with the central core imagery (e.g., "The Poet," "The House That Miriam Built," and "Wonderland"); Faith Wilding, whose scrapbooks, scriptoriums, and *Womb Room(s)* crocheted her environment; and Judy Chicago, whose *Dinner Party* rescued china painting and needle art and who also produced dramatic needle works herself (e.g., "The Birth Project"). The last three artists were closely affiliated with the Woman's Building.

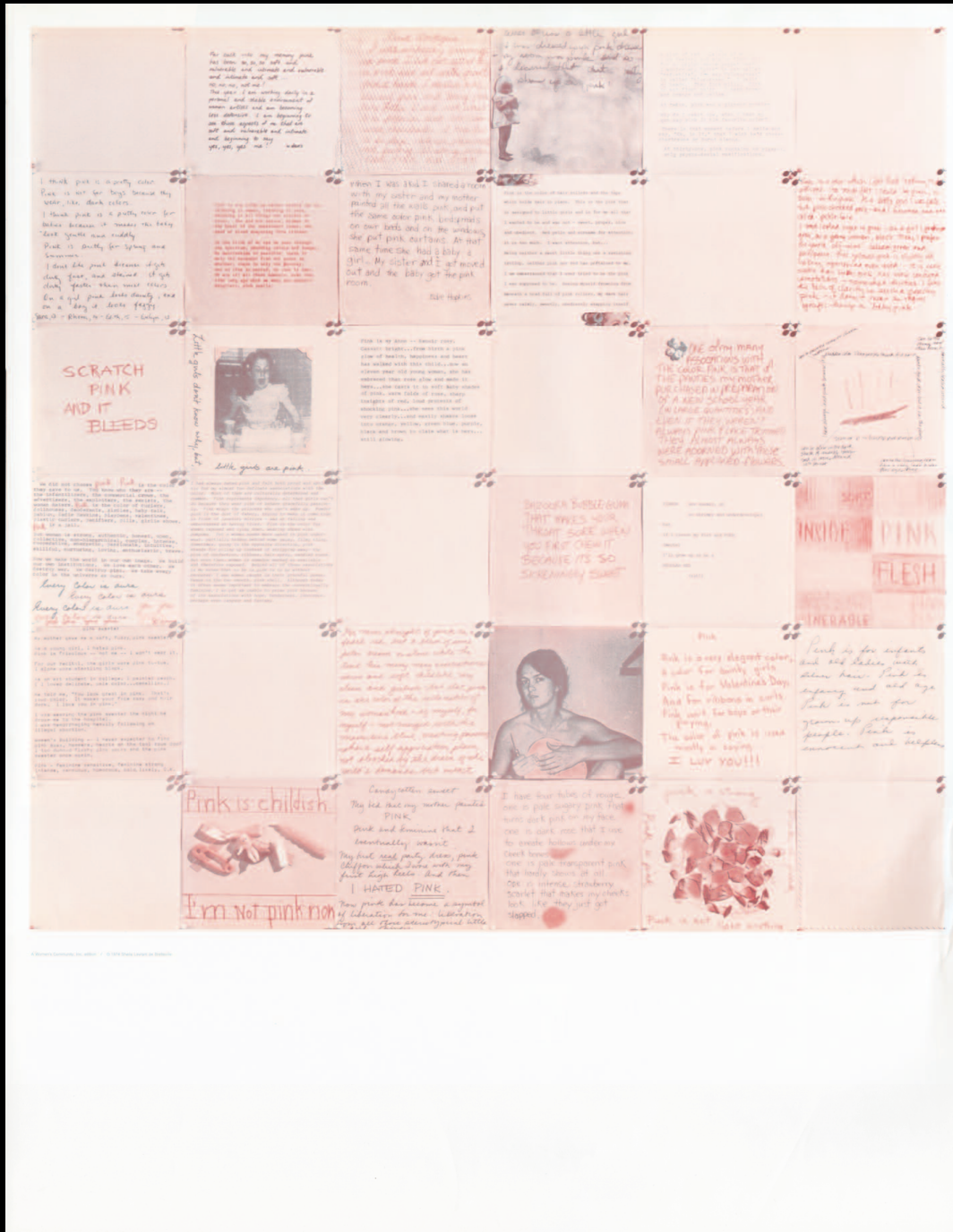
As we can see from the example of *Pink*, it was not only forms and motifs that were rescued from trivialization, but colors as well. De Bretteville appropriated the color pink, the dreaded, super-feminine, and most trivial of colors associated with the construction of femininity. In *Pink*, FSW participants were asked to address a wide range of topics, using only pink. The page art dealt with image and text, the personal and political, and formed an integrated poster. The poster, an art medium that was a salient feature of Woman's Building art, provided a way of appropriating public space to make private communications, which was a trademark of de Bretteville's art (e.g., her 1979 "The Personal Voice in Public Communication").

It is no accident that a poster designed in 1998 by a new generation of feminists at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), who were intent on reclaiming their feminist history from obscurity, was also predominantly pink! The poster advertised a conference entitled *The F Word: Contemporary Feminisms and the Legacy of the Los Angeles Feminist Art Movement*.

The tactile and narrative works mentioned above evoked the house and home, domesticity as an extraordinary/ordinary existence, the private and public, and space.

The Body as a Site of Resistance

Another central credo of feminism is that there is nothing more authentic than the self and speaking from that self. Therefore, using the self as subject (as in autobiography and memoir, for example) has been a primary strategy of feminist expression, including much academic writing. Nowhere has this been more striking, however, than in the use of the body, especially the artist's own body, in feminist art, which has resulted in



Sheila de Bretteville, *Pink*, 1974. Two color offset poster, edition of 500, printing by Helen Alm Roth, 20 1/2" x 20". © Women's Community Inc., 1974.

setting up the paradox of the artist as subject and object. The body has been delineated as both the site of oppression and the site of resistance. Using the self as space for art (sometimes as a canvas) became one of the most common strategies of feminist art and writing and a mainstay of the kinds of performance art associated with the West Coast and with the Woman's Building. Part of the legacy is extant in later, "transgressive art" (e.g., Annie Sprinkle).

In our concern for space, and the control and ownership of space, feminists have tried to locate these sites of oppression and sites of resistance. It was clear to seventies feminist artists how much women's bodies are a focus of contestation, and how much this contested terrain of women's bodies is a central theme in feminist theories and in art. As Barbara Kruger asserts: "Your body is a battleground."⁶⁵ It is also narrative, discourse, primordial Truth, spectacle, nature, and masquerade.⁶⁶

Use of the body, especially inscribing the body, was a multifaceted strategy. The artists could challenge conventional/historical representation of women's bodies (e.g., Carolee Schneemann's take off on Édouard Manet's *Olympia* [1863] in *Site* [1964], or Hung Liu's version of *Olympia*, with its double pun [1992]); they could appropriate taboos by depicting them (e.g., blood and vagina in Shigeo Kubota's *Vagina Painting* [1965], or Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* [1975], or Chicago's *Menstruation Bathroom for Womanhouse* [1972], or later, *The Dinner Party*); they could express the body as perverse space/site (e.g., Schneemann's *Site*) or express site as body (as in Faith Wilding's *Womb Room* [1972] in *Womanhouse*). They could even mock the essentialism of a woman's body as representing her essence, her perfection (or lack of), as in Martha Rosler's video *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977), in which she stands in a room where a team of "authorities" measures every crucial inch of her body and announces its findings of her "assets" or "liabilities" to the assembled, who assess if her measurements measure up to the "standard." Or, an artist could use her body to make a commentary on other "historical bodies" (e.g., Cheri Gaulke's Christ/Eve-like persona, who both eats an apple and lounges on the cross in *This Is My Body* and *This Is My Body Illuminated* [both works, 1985]). Feminist artists could use metaphors connected with food, eating, plates, and dinner parties to display vaginas (perhaps as "butterflies"). They could give the body, especially the vagina, texture—crocheting the womb (e.g. Wilding) and quilting that "central cavity" (e.g., Schapiro's quilt motifs).

Perhaps the most common image of feminist art in the seventies, and the most graphic site of resistance, was the vaginal image, or central cavity, mentioned above, or what some refer to as "cunt art." The central cavity image challenged the male view of the woman as "just a hole" or the phallic lack, to use Jane Gallop's terminology.⁶⁷ At the time, the mere representation of the vagina was itself a powerful consciousness-raiser.

By using space (including central space), nature, the body, and taboo sites of resistance, a new cosmology was developing—a new mythology with a reservoir of earthy images and an emphasis on female power (for example, Mary Beth Edelson's



Ana Mendieta, *Siluetas Works in Mexico*, August 1973/1991. Estate color photograph, one from a series of twelve, 20" x 16". Courtesy Galerie LeLong, New York. © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection.

This is My Body, performance by Cheri Gaulke, 1982. ESpace DBD, Los Angeles. Photograph by Sheila Ruth. © Cheri Gaulke.

portrayals of female spiritual power). In order not to be left out of history and culture, women's bodies were inserted/planted in the earth (or emerged from the earth or through a flower). Ana Mendieta's earthy, erotic pieces were carved or burned into nature. In *Excavations* (1985), a lesbian performance work by Terry Wolverton, bodies/beings unearthed themselves (a metaphor for lesbian self-discovery). These art motifs that placed women close to the earth or "blossoming" in the midst of a negative world, such as Leslie Labowitz's *It's Sproutime* (1983) in the "At Home" show, both reflected and influenced the ecofeminist movement.

However, many of these motifs invited criticisms from a number of different directions. For example, the explicit display of the body was seen as narcissistic. Some said that the genital image, signifying woman, was *essentialist*, that it fed into stereotypes, was ultimately impersonal, and was outside of history.⁶⁸ The nature theme was also criticized as essentialist and as romanticizing/exoticizing women's bodies and lives and, thereby nurturing the "man of culture and woman of nature" formula.

However, not all body art, or the use of one's body to convey the theme, seems to have lent itself to "essentialist" interpretations.⁶⁹ A number of artists in the seventies and later performed or depicted the idea of women as socially constructed beings/ bodies, sometimes racialized, sometimes biomedically constructed. Among

the examples are Cindy Sherman's ongoing series of untitled photographs, which are supposedly of subjects in different time periods, ways of life, and themes. Sherman, indelibly inscribing herself into history and culture, appears as the central figure in all of the photos: Hollywood star; battered woman; dissipated, fearful victim; and corpse⁷⁰—not quite types, but evocative of women we remember. They remind us of something/someone. Other examples are Martha Rosler's *Vital Statistics* performance and video mentioned above; Hannah Wilke's photographic series that captures the stages of her physical degeneration as she is dying from cancer on a hospital bed (*Intra-Venus*, 1992–93), exhibited in the group show "Sexual Politics," curated by Amelia Jones in 1996; Eleanor Antin's multiple, constructed characters that are either photographed or performed (e.g., the ballerina); and Terry Wolverton's *Me and My Shadow* (1984), a performance at the Woman's Building that addressed racism. These were all far from essentialism and romanticization.

Sometimes using the body as central image has involved re-readings of Freud and the depiction of male sexuality or of human sexuality in general, as in the work of Mira Schor (e.g., *Cunt* and *Penis* of 1993), or Hannah Wilke's *Venus Envy* (1980).⁷¹ These are hard-edged works that lacked sentimentality, romance, or nostalgia.

In the same time period a number of male artists were also using their bodies as subject, as conveyors of meaning. But they were doing "body art" quite differently. For the most part, the violent and hard-edged work of such artists as Vito Acconci and Chris Burden may have transgressed social norms, but in most cases, not the norms of masculinity, which may account for why the reaction to their work was different. Not that what they were performing or depicting did not challenge masculinity, but they were within the range of outrageous, masculinist behavior. Their work was rarely ever deemed narcissistic or self-indulgent. Lippard makes the contrast in commenting on the uproar over Linda Benglis's infamous advertisement in which she wears a giant dildo in *Artforum* (1974).

The uproar that this last image created proved conclusively that there are still things that women may not do. The notion of sexual transformation has, after all, been around for some time. No such clamor arose in 1970 when Vito Acconci burned hair from his chest, "pulling at it, making it supple, flexible—an attempt to develop a female breast," then tucked his penis between his legs to "extend the sex change," and finally "acquired a female form" by having a woman kneel behind him with his penis "disappearing" in her mouth (*Avalanche*, Fall 1972). Nor was there any hullabaloo when Scott Burton promenaded 14th Street in drag for a 1969 *Street Work*, or when he flaunted a giant black phallus in a static performance in 1973; or when William Wegman made his amusing *trompe-l'oeil*



Lynda Benglis, *SELF* (*Artforum* Advertisement, November 1974), various dates 1970–76. Portfolio of 9 pigment prints, 34" x 23", edition of 25. Image courtesy of Cheim & Read, New York.

“breast” piece . . . or when Lucas Samaras played with himself in front of his Polaroid camera.⁷²

Rebecca Schneider claimed, “Nudity was not the problem. Sexual display was not the problem. *The agency of the body displayed, the authority of the agent*—that was the problem with women’s work.”⁷³

Transgressing social norms, especially sexual mores, was a trademark of seventies art. The daring body and performance art of Woman’s Building art workers such as Cheri Gaulke, with pieces such as *This Is My Body*, clearly presaged later works represented in both the “Bad Girls” and “Bad Girls West” shows (1994), and in “Sexual Politics.”⁷⁴ Linda Goode Bryant defines “transgressive” art as “works which speak to a female identity that exists outside conventional feminine traits, aspirations and decorum.”⁷⁵ That much of feminist art still claims to be transgressive is an homage to much of the art of the Woman’s Building.⁷⁶ Following in the tradition of such first generation transgressive performance and multimedia artists as Schneemann, we see Karen Finley, Sandra Bernhard, and Annie Sprinkle use primitivism in performance to mock commodity fetishism and pornography, transgressing feminine decorum. The 1990s misappropriation of the concept of transgressive art by curators of “naughty” and titillating art is, however, a contributor to the erasure of the Woman’s Building legacy and is discussed below.

Written Out of History: The Woman's Building in Feminist Art and Social History

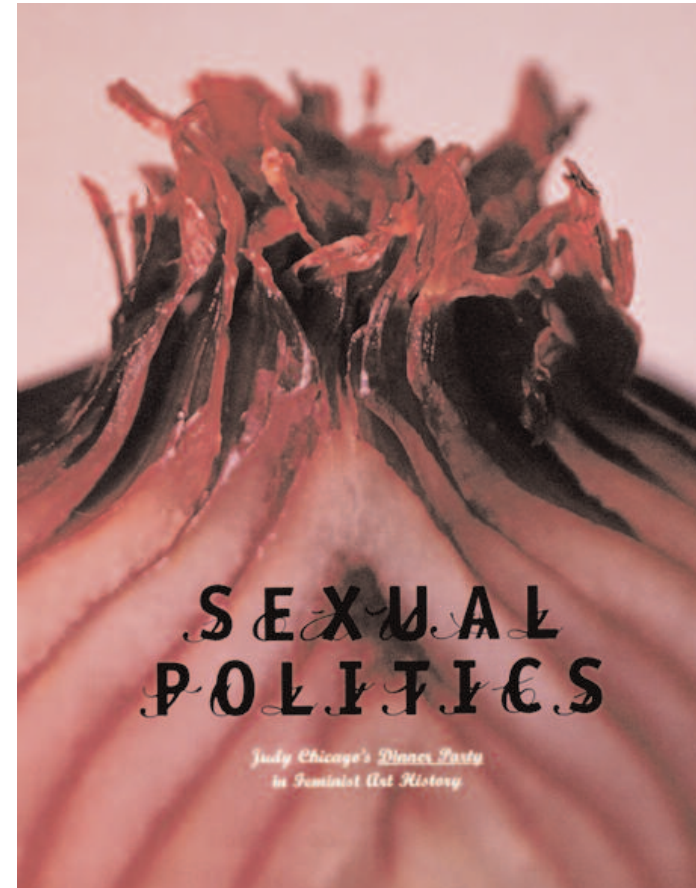
Can one say about the Woman’s Building the same thing that Amelia Jones said about the position of *The Dinner Party*?

At the same time it has not been incorporated in any satisfactory way into histories and theories of feminism or contemporary art; it seems that the very contentiousness of the piece has precluded the thoughtful examination of its effects.⁷⁷

I contend that the “bookends theory” of feminist art history in Los Angeles and at the Woman’s Building, while attempting to argue from a point of strength, instead disables a broader view of the contribution of the art of the Woman’s Building.

By “bookends theory” of Los Angeles feminist art, I am referring to the starting point and ending point of discussions about seventies feminist art in this region—the work of Judy Chicago. In this model, the foundation of the Woman’s Building is subsumed by the power of Chicago’s art, from *Womanhouse* to *The Dinner Party*. An example of this approach to social history is the 1996 “Sexual Politics” show that used *The Dinner Party* as the essence of feminist art, as a bookend for an era. If one wanted

Susan Silton, cover design for the exhibition catalog *Sexual Politics*, ed. Amelia Jones (Los Angeles: UCLA Hammer Museum, and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Cover photograph by Jennifer Cheung and Steve Nilsson, styling by Terry Wolverton. Cover image courtesy Susan Silton.



to create a bookends model, one could just as appropriately select *Womanhouse* and “At Home,” which were a decade apart and encompass the major themes of Southern California feminist art. Or, if not restricted to California, one might have begun with Louise Bourgeois’s *Femme/Maison* series and ended with “At Home.” I am arguing for the importance of the appropriation of space to feminist art, centering the Woman’s Building as the pinnacle of ownership and control of female space.

This is not in any way to denigrate the significance of Chicago’s work. In many ways, the content of *The Dinner Party* (that is, the ideas the work chose to carry forward and the form/structure of the work) and the various critiques of it contained most of the guiding methods and ideas of “second-wave” and cultural feminism. In that sense, we could say that it was an attempted hegemonic cultural construct for women on the West Coast and contained in it, dialectically, counter hegemonic detractions and movements (especially as forwarded by women of color).

If one accepts the above “bookends” model of feminist art in Greater Los Angeles or Southern California, one is expected to see the acknowledged and unacknowledged role of a central site, i.e., the Los Angeles Woman's Building. Most of the artists and critics who produced and critiqued art in conjunction with or inspired by this era were also associated in some way with the Woman's Building, e.g., exhibiting in the Woman's Building gallery and offering workshops. Yet, the essays in the “Sexual Politics” catalog barely acknowledged the Woman's Building, virtually erasing the site, perhaps in the name of a cosmopolitanism, which, ironically, could not be achieved in the show because of the very bookends approach. After all, “cosmopolitanism,” in the provincial and parochial manner of U.S. social thought, often simply refers to including both East and West Coast contributions.

There is no doubt that the fame and notoriety of Chicago's work, especially *The Dinner Party*, is power in itself, attracting attention to an otherwise “esoteric” segment of the art world. Although a major influence on a segment of feminist artists, the type of attention that the work drew was also a distraction from some of the equally and more profound achievements of some of the other artists.

How do we account for the writing of the Woman's Building out of history? Is it what I have suggested above: the distortion of one artist's importance? Or, has the distancing of the three co-founders contributed to this: de Bretteville leaving Los Angeles to chair Yale's Design Department; Chicago removing herself to New Mexico; Raven moving to New York? All three stayed in touch, but their influence became less local and localized. On the other hand, we could just as easily see this as a possibility for the dissemination of Woman's Building influence. Many other well-known Woman's Building-associated artists have left Los Angeles, e.g., Nancy Buchanan, for a time, and Faith Wilding.

However, attributing the erasure of an institution's viability in historical memory to the presence or absence of particular actors is a weak explanation. In fact, the transfer of power and direction to a second generation can be strength. There are more significant reasons associated with ideas, with changes in mores and in the political climate (i.e., the backlash of the Reagan/Bush years), and with the power of the organization to rub against the grain of society. After all, the Woman's Building represents, as a response to both external and internalized oppression, a conscious and willful attempt on the part of a segment of the feminist community to set itself apart from conventional/mainstream society. This conscious marginalization was both strategic and adaptive, and unlike some other feminist institutions, it was not easily co-opted. It was easier to erase. Certainly, academic feminists who internalized mainstream criticisms made a contribution to that erasure.

Furthermore, one cannot overlook the homophobia that was eventually to produce unprecedented numbers of hate crimes; the cooptation of the hard edge of lesbianism and lesbian ideas by “queer theory”; the softening of the marginalization

through popularizing (e.g., the television program “Ellen”); and the dismantling of women's separate spheres through processes such as the preference for “gender studies” over “women's studies” in most elite academic circles.

The importance and preponderance of lesbian art making and community formation at the Woman's Building, and the effect that those processes have had on social ideas, is not neutral. Lesbian art making dealt with the difficult-to-digest themes of incest, violence against women, autoeroticism, and compulsory heterosexuality. It was, however, the profoundly political *ideas* behind this socially conscious cultural work that were threatening: the goal of creating an entirely new culture and community. Whether or not this was achievable is irrelevant to the threat that such ideas posed.

Furthermore, the utopian ideas of much of the art and methods of collaborating on that art were based on the idea of an affirmative women's culture, a celebration of femaleness, the offer of a counter canon. This counter canon is a self-conscious, liberatory women's culture.

The United States is a society that has mastered the art of depoliticization: in the courts, media, schools, and social institutions. Media all too prematurely herald the “post-” of a movement. “Postfeminists” proclaim that they are feminists without the anger and polemics. They are feminists with a sense of humor, or what *Esquire* magazine dubbed the “Do-Me Feminists.”

By the 1990s, funny bad girls were appropriating ideas from seventies feminist art. For example, the statements by the curators of the sister shows, “Bad Girls” and “Bad Girls West,” in 1994, are a harbinger of ill will toward the Woman's Building, or an index of faulty memory. To Marcia Tucker, curator of the New York show, the “Bad Girls” show exhibited women artists and others “defying the conventions and proprieties of traditional femininity to define themselves according to their own terms, their own pleasures, their own interests, in their own way. But they're doing it by using a delicious and outrageous sense of humor...”⁷⁸

Marcia Tanner, curator of “Bad Girls West,” the West Coast version of “Bad Girls,” referred to the exhibition as “iconoclastic” art by “outlaws.” She differentiates “Bad Girl” art from feminist art of the seventies and eighties: “It's irreverent, anti-ideological, non-doctrinaire, non-didactic, unpolemical and thoroughly unladylike.”⁷⁹ She, too, stresses sense of humor.

Tanner describes the art of the “Bad Girls West” show as tackling “body-self-image; sexuality and eroticism; gender roles, relationships, and behavior; fashion, make-up, and consumerism; celebrity, glamour, and aging,”⁸⁰ in other words, the very subjects of much of the Woman's Building art making.

Tanner is, perhaps, most revealing when she discusses the importance of *venue* for “Bad Girls West” and refers to choosing Los Angeles because it is the “very groin of Hollywood's male-dominated entertainment industry.”⁸¹ There is not one mention in the catalog, nor in the show, that Los Angeles was also the home of the Woman's Building, the heart of seventies feminist art.

Is it possible, then, that this political erasure is because of the ideological, didactic, polemical, and radical nature of the ideas that emanated from the Woman's Building? That very essentialism that was condemned in the final years of the institution had been a guiding principle for teaching, mobilizing, and organizing. We were definitely not insouciant.

Conclusion

Assessing the influence of the Los Angeles Woman's Building on American life is like trying to assess the influence of feminism on contemporary ideas: too vast and profound and too elusive and embedded. However, we can isolate a few of the salencies of the Woman's Building legacy.

As a space occupied and controlled by women, the Woman's Building's influence permeates contemporary social ideas and contemporary feminisms. By appropriating, designing, and contesting space the Woman's Building, through its spirit of place, has exerted a significant influence on urban life.

The expanded notions of sexuality and the body are major contributions to the modern and postmodern. If female sexuality is *the* defining component of seventies feminist art, as it reflects women's identities and experiences of living in a patriarchal culture, then what does that say for and about the art of the Woman's Building? To paraphrase Amelia Jones, in the artists' attempts to define sexualities and subjectivities, to analyze political agency, to explore female desire and eroticism, and to reveal the complexities and problematics of female identities, the range of art ideologies and practices was vast.⁸²

For all of the advantages of being housed under one roof, as a "family of women," so to speak, or a "community of feminists" or "room of muses," there were drawbacks. The charge of essentialism plagued the Woman's Building for much of its later history. That very essentialism, used programmatically, strategically, and effectively to raise the consciousness of women about their value, their valorized difference(s) from men, and the potential power of their numbers and abilities, was to continue to influence gender identity politics. But it was, dialectically, also to lay bare the racism of seventies feminism in its inadvertent erasure of differences among women.

Ironically, although music, for example, was never seen as a major element in the programming of the Woman's Building, the workshops and concerts that were held were highly influential in disseminating ideas about process and music as a tool for organizing. Women physically using their formerly muted, atrophied voices in solidarity was not a neutral process. This conversion of metaphor ("giving voice") into materiality and actuality is only one example of the didactic power of some of the programs. Many of these same ideas were taken over by women's studies programs throughout the country, i.e., disseminated to thousands of students. Perhaps there is no pair of ideas promulgated by the art workers and activists of the Woman's Building

that has more power than the notion of the citizen artist and the idea that art should be in the public interest (and in the public).⁸³ Although Woman's Building artists were often accused of individualism and self-indulgence because of the highly personal art production, the opposite was true. Art in the public interest was a very important part of Woman's Building philosophy and praxis, e.g., the spirit of guerrilla theater that flourished in the performance and organizing work of Woman's Building activists such as the Feminist Art Workers, and that influenced Women against Pornography and WAC (Women's Action Coalition). Although guerrilla theater did not originate at the Woman's Building, some of the ideas that infuse contemporary guerrilla theater may be traced to cultural feminist ideas. For example, the ecological/spiritual theme of Leslie Labowitz's *It's Sproutime* and the work of Ana Mendieta can be seen in the Greenpeace guerrilla theater. The idea that private fantasies shape public events is a force in contemporary performance art in the public interest and the notion of collaborative art permeates much of contemporary socially conscious art.

In heralding a new era of public art, *Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena*, edited by Linda Frye Burnham, a critic who was often associated with the Woman's Building milieu, and Steven Durland, is as much about the art of the Woman's Building as not (e.g., with articles by and about Lacy, Gaulke, and other Southern California artists associated at one time or another with the Woman's Building). The editors feature art as a life experiment and the artist as citizen, and I sometimes felt I was reading a history of the Woman's Building.⁸⁴

Certainly, the three founders of the Woman's Building advocated art in the public interest and the artist as citizen.

Perhaps if the influence of all three of the founders had been stressed by more art historians, and for the right reasons, giving full range to their ideas, the influence of the Woman's Building environment might have been felt more keenly. De Bretteville's influence on American design cannot be overestimated. Her austere design, not to mention her stress on site and the spirit of place, and her insistence on examining the issues of public and private communication, have all been important. As for Raven, she exerted strong influence on art historical ideas, for example, radical feminism/cultural feminism, essentialism as programmatic, the critic as inseparable from the artist, highly personalized art, and her methods of writing art criticism, to name only a few. Chicago's influence has been her insistence on collaboration, on reclaiming art practices that had been dismissed and trivialized as "female," and on the particular visualizations of the body—the central cavity and the roundedness of femaleness. Her spirit of entrepreneurial art, provocation, and female valorizing should not be overlooked as imbuing feminist art and artists with more power.

When one considers these founders and art thinkers/workers as a trilogy, we open up the possibilities for an intervention into art history and lead the way for a stronger interpretation of the influence of the Woman's Building.

In assessing that contribution, we will have to evaluate the Woman's Building's role in Modernism and Postmodernism. Can we see any bridge between the primarily Modernist art of the Woman's Building and what we are witnessing now among some Postmodern feminist artists as Mary Kelly (and including Kruger, Sue Coe, Jenny Holzer, and others) who refuse to use images of women in their work in order to subvert the use of the female image as object and spectacle?

In Kelly's *Post Partum Document* (begun in 1973, but first exhibited in 1979), she presages the eighties.⁸⁵ Her work has been an attempt to expose the processes of representation, language, and sexual position and their significance "to show what lies behind the sexual division of labour in child care, what is ideological in the notion of natural maternal instinct, what is repressed and almost unrepresentable in patriarchal language, female subjectivity..."⁸⁶

The autobiographical nature of Kelly's work reminds one that art makers at the Los Angeles Woman's Building were instrumental in valorizing autobiography as a valid premise for art making. This cardinal premise (linked to idea that the personal is political) guided much of the art of the Woman's Building and contributed to our cultural reserve of personal narratives, fantasies, and visual stories. Giving testimony is now one of the most powerful human endeavors, giving voice and agency to "ordinary" people.

Although much of the Woman's Building's legacy has been unheralded until very recent years, there have been patches of acknowledgment. Some well-known male artists, especially performance, installation, and conceptual artists, have recognized the Woman's Building's influence on their work. Tim Miller, for example, cited the Woman's Building as an influence on his work, acknowledging that the work at the feminist institution gave him permission to explore autobiographical material in his performance art.⁸⁷

Yet other male artists have been publicly silent on the issue of feminist influences on their work. Among those who have received a great deal of critical attention and who have utilized feminist strategies of art making (without acknowledging this) is Jim Isermann, who was in Los Angeles during the heyday of the Woman's Building. Isermann knits or crochets large quilts that are his "canvases." Mike Kelley, who was a student at CalArts in the seventies, uses stuffed animals and other materials first utilized by feminist artists. Nayland Blake, influenced by Kelley, is the next generation to pick up the mantle of this genre.⁸⁸

Nonetheless, new generations of feminists and feminist artists are alerted to the significance of their legacy. I have already mentioned the new generation of CalArts feminists who resurrected their feminist legacy. Their pink poster for the F Word conference proclaimed:

[F]eminist art programs of the early seventies are at the center of the dynamic history of feminist art education.

Suzanne Lacy... is an artist who was part of the original Women's Design Program and developed a performance program at the Woman's Building.

Faith Wilding [Woman's Building affiliate]... is an artist and professor who was a member of the Feminist Art Program and *Womanhouse*.

Sue Maberry... is the Director of the Library at Otis College of Art and Design, where the Women's [sic] Building slide archives are housed. She has been involved with the Woman's Building for years.

Nancy Buchanan... began using video as a natural extension to performance and installation. Her artworks have been exhibited and screened worldwide.... She has participated in various artist-run organizations such as Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, and the Woman's Building.

It is certainly to the credit of the CalArts Feminist Art Workshop that they noted their feminist art program's direct descent from the Feminist Studio Workshop, *Womanhouse*, and the Woman's Building. The stated goal of the F Word conference was "to better establish their legacy and to foster understanding of contemporary feminisms... [creating] a dialogue between the different generations associated with feminist practice."⁸⁹ That these newer generation feminist artists had to engage in "detective work" to trace their lineage is one of the points of this essay and the collection.

It is clear that some of the artists, critics, and academics of the newer generation are looking at unfinished business. They are not only trying to understand their legacy, but also to acknowledge it publicly.

One piece of unfinished business at the Woman's Building, and in feminism in general, however, is the extant racism in our approaches. Most who were in the arts community associated with the old Woman's Building readily admit that the relationship of women of color to the Woman's Building was never resolved and that we mostly failed in our various quests for a liberated race politics. As I have implied, this element of the Woman's Building past is a legacy of second-wave feminism, in general, and carries over into contemporary gender studies and queer studies. Just as we now have to look at the ways in which women's and men's experiences of the world have been socially constructed, so it is with race and class. Our next task is to do a better job in producing a critical theory that gives examples of how class, race, and gender are constructed and reinforced through representation.

The irony of our failure to wage a partially successful struggle with racism is that we had the tools to do it. A number of the strategies that Woman's Building artists and others used might have been instrumental in addressing racism. Women artists

have been trying to negotiate new relationships to the body and to decolonize it in every way. This was a central task of Woman's Building activist artists. We demanded a body that was not negated, was not the "other," was not colonized—a body that was truly liberated—just as we were searching for a truly liberated art practice and theory. That we did not apply this praxis to race politics and that we did not see that body as racialized is a negative aspect of the history.

Our Woman's Building environment was an imagined, a built, and a *living* environment. Some say that women's material culture (as in quilts) has a symbolic language, and therefore, is a vital repository of a group's collective worldview. Another view is that direct actions, such as performance art and squatting, politicize and recreate environments. Or, that we can reveal the oppression of women through art by making public their private lives. The transformation of women's art from use value to commodity in a colonial context is alienation and can have implications for a "culture of resistance." The home, house (and museum and salon) can be seen as subversive "fronts," catalysts for women's creations and a space in which underlying feminist agendas unfold.

This is our vital history and our dynamic present. Denizens of the Woman's Building transformed physical site to conceptual space and invented a vision that was to sustain the community for longer than any women's cultural institution in the country.

The "boundaries" of the Woman's Building were both liberating and limiting—the former realized through our march into the future; the latter through the removal of our site and a politics of memory that was a conscious and unconscious attempt to erase our presence as a force in the twenty-first century of cultural and social ideas. *From Site to Vision: The Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture* is an attempt to address the latter and underscore the former.⁹⁰

Notes

1. Paula Findlen, "The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy," *The Journal of Museum Collections* 1.1 (1989): 60.
2. *Ibid.*, 73.
3. *Ibid.*, 59.
4. *Ibid.*, 60.
5. Many scholars have pointed to or alluded to feminism's ambiguous and ambivalent relationship to Modernism and Postmodernism. See, for example, Henry Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989); Craig Owens, "The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodernist Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 57–83; and Lucy R. Lippard, "Both Sides Now: A Reprise," in *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 266–77.

6. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1945 [1928]).

7. The symposium, which I organized, was held at California State University, Long Beach, in 1983, and was co-sponsored by the CSULB Women's Studies Program and the Center for the Continuing Education of Women.

8. See Arlene Raven's catalog essay for the show in *At Home* (Long Beach, California: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1983).

9. *Ibid.*, and *Womanhouse* (Valencia, California: California Institute of the Arts, 1972).

10. It would be an oversight not to acknowledge the very early feminist work by Louise Bourgeois on the themes of women and house in her series of the 1940s: *Femme/Maison*. A piece from the series, *Femme/Maison—To Carletto* (1947), is reproduced on the cover of Lucy Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976).

11. Some geographers have claimed that women were the first to build shelters, e.g., Carl Sauer, "Sedentary and Mobile Bents in Early Societies," in *Social Life of Early Man [sic]*, ed. Sherwood Washburn (Chicago: Aldine, 1961), 256–66, especially 260–66. For this reference I am indebted to Arlene Rengert and Janice Monk, *Women and Spatial Change: Learning Resources for Social Science Courses* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt, 1982).

12. In critiquing early uses of the expression and concept, Ellen DuBois pointed out that perhaps the first use of the term "women's culture" is in Nancy Cott's book, *Root of Bitterness*, in 1972. Most North American students of the "women's culture" concept acknowledge Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's seminal article, "The Female World of Love and Ritual." Ellen DuBois, et al., "Politics and Culture in Women's History: A Symposium," *Feminist Studies* 6.1 (1980): 25–64; Nancy Cott, ed., *Root of Bitterness* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1972); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1.1 (1975): 1–28. These are, of course, academic uses; practitioners at the Woman's Building were using the term all along, at least by implication.

13. DuBois, et al., 29. Within the broad framework of "women's culture," others of the same era, in their attempts to define or question a "feminine aesthetic," "the female imagination," and "women and creativity," or to illuminate the "female world," used different terms. See, for example, respectively, Patricia Spacks, *The Female Imagination* (New York: Avon, 1972); Joelynn Snyder-Ott, *Women and Creativity* (Millbrae, California: Les Femmes, 1978); and Jessie Bernard, *The Female World* (New York: Free Press, 1981). An example of the use of the term "women's culture" is Gayle Kimball, ed., *Women's Culture: The Women's Renaissance of the Seventies* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow, 1981).

14. Among some of the works reflecting the ideas of the time within art history and art criticism is Lucy R. Lippard's pioneering *From the Center*, 1976. Many of her essays on feminist art are brought together in the *Pink Swan*. Some of Lippard's later works, although not exclusively about feminist art, contain some of the most provocative and stimulating ideas in the field of public/activist feminist art, for example, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: Pantheon, 1983); *Get the Message? A Decade of Art for Social Change* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1984); and *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: Pantheon, 1990). *Chrysalis, a Magazine of Women's Culture*, a journal integrally connected to the Woman's Building, presented incomparable contemporary pieces on women's culture, but rarely used the women's culture concept and seldom supplied overarching theories. *Heresies*, the most political of the women-and-the-arts journals, continued for over twenty years to challenge traditional/conventional views of art, most often offering a socialist feminist version of the feminist avant-garde. Nonetheless, in its attempt to politicize and to stimulate activist art, *Heresies* editors neglected an analysis of culture as it relates to feminist precepts.

15. The Woman's Building partisans were no exception to the distrust of "High Theory" and academic theory.

16. Beatriz Colomina, ed. *Sexuality and Space* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Architectural Press), 1992.

17. The standard at the time for studies of nonverbal communication was Nancy Henley, *Body Politics: Power, Sex, and Non-Verbal Communication* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1977). For gender spatial relationships, one of the best was Shirley Ardener, ed., *Women and Space: Ground Rules and Social Maps* (London: Croom Helm, 1981). Ardener's book does not explicitly deal with "women's culture" as a totalized culture, but with aspects of that culture or the way women behave as a result of gender bifurcated human culture. I never saw it cited in any feminist art/culture works in the eighties. As for landscapes of the home, neighborhood, and city, few feminists cited Rengert and Monk's modest-appearing work, *Women and Spatial Change*, which gave me a number of ideas for The House of Women symposium. Major studies on the subject include Catharine Stimpson,

et al., eds. *Women and the American City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and Gerda Wekerle et al., eds., *New Space for Women* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1980). On gender roles and domesticity, a literature that could have shed light on the culture concept, see, for example, Mary Ryan, "The Empire of the Mother: American Writings about Domesticity, 1830–1860," *Women and History* 2/3 (1982); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973). In terms of material culture and environment, there was available Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), as well as Rengert and Monk. Although problematic for many feminists, useful for ideas on psychosexual dynamics of interior and exterior is Erik Erikson, "Inner and Outer Space: Reflections on Womanhood," *Daedalus* (1964): 582–606. Folklore, especially women's folklore, was a trove of unused (by feminists) ideas about women's culture. See, for example, Rosan Jordan and Susan Kalcik, eds., *Women's Folklore, Women's Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

18. Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict, 1873–1913* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981); Ann Markusen, "City Spatial Structure, Women's Household Work, and National Urban Policy," in Stimpson et al., *Women and the American City*; Wekerle et al.; and Dolores Hayden, *Redesigning the American Dream: The Future of Housing, Work, and Family Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1984).
19. Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution and Redesigning the American Dream*.
20. Hayden, *Redesigning*, 222–23.
21. Hayden, *Redesigning*, 223. By 1983, Hayden, de Bretteville, and others were focusing on "The Power of Place," a feminist restoration project in Los Angeles.
22. For a 1990s study of gendered space, see Daphne Spain, *Gendered Spaces* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1992). More recent works by feminist geographers and others have dealt with gender and space, but I am citing the works that were available at the time that the Woman's Building was open and active.
23. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 68.
24. Bonnie Engdahl, "Violette Leduc: Autobiography as Self-Exploration," in Sondra Hale, ed., *The House of Women: Art and Culture in the Eighties* (Long Beach, California: California State University, Women's Studies, Occasional Publication 1, 1985) 111–29. This essay is in a section entitled, "The Apron, the Blanket, and the Blank Page: Class, Gender, Sexuality and Self in the House of Women."
25. See Spain, *Gendered Spaces*.
26. Leila Ahmed, "Western Ethnocentrism and Perception of the Harem," *Feminist Studies* 8 (1981): 524. Mary Ellen Mazey and David R. Lee, *Her Space, Her Place* (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Geographers, 1983), 66. Woman's Building feminists restricted access to their house, if not *de jure*, at least *de facto*. When Lucy Lippard posed the question of why so many feminists on the West Coast restrict themselves and their art to a female audience, she responded: "The L.A. Woman's Building's separatism has been necessary to the contributions those groups have made. Women have come together as a community, and only in communities or groups does anything decisive get accomplished." (Lippard, *Get the Message?* 34)
27. Mazey and Lee, 55.
28. *Ibid.*, 64.
29. This comment is in reference to the total remodeling of the inside of the Woman's Building to reflect feminist values and aesthetics. Thus, although the outside frame was built by the male-dominated Standard Oil Company in the 1920s, the inside was built by women.
30. Engdahl.
31. I am making reference to the much-quoted Heidi Hartmann article, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. Lydia Sargent (London: South End Press, 1981), 29. This essay still stands as a classic in our thinking about materiality and feminism.
32. That feminist analyses of culture are also ethnocentric is, by now, a truism, but I am not going to delve into a cross-cultural analysis in this essay. See the essay by Sondra Hale and Michelle Moravec in this volume.

33. Mary Beth Welch analyzed women taking space in "Space as a Political Commodity: Establishing a Feminist Presence in a Man-Made Environment," in Hale, 69–77. A striking novel about feminists, squatting, the transformation of space, and the empowerment of women is Zoë Fairbairns, *Benefits* (London: Virago, 1979).
34. Margrit Kennedy, "Seven Hypotheses on Female and Male Principles in Architecture," *Heresies* 3:3 (1981):12.
35. Adrienne Rich, "After Twenty Years," *Diving into the Wreck: Poems, 1971–1972* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 13.
36. Wekerle et al., 26. The authors are, in turn, borrowing from Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History: A View of Women through Time* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1980).
37. *Ibid.*, 27.
38. For example, the early period of Women's Studies in some of the California State University campuses: San Diego, Long Beach, and Sacramento.
39. Some of the other "alternative" spaces into which feminists have poured their culture are: self-help health clinics and counseling centers; feminist credit unions; women's resource centers; feminist bookstores and presses; women's coffee houses/saloons/restaurants; child care centers; food cooperatives/housekeeping cooperatives; legal rights centers; spiritual centers; inter-arts centers; the shelter movement (battering, rape, child abuse, drugs, alcohol); and the special spaces created by and for lesbians, women of color, the elderly, the disabled, and others who have been even more marginalized than those in the general female population.
40. For the distinctions between female and feminist consciousness, see Julie Peteet, *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); and my elaboration of the distinction in *Gender Politics in Sudan: Islamism, Socialism, and the State* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1996).
41. Some have proposed that the attempt to manage affairs in a feminist mode, as I have described it here, in the midst of corporate America and in an era of diminished funding for the arts, cooptation and devaluing of feminist ideals, and the erosion of egalitarian principles in general, caused the demise of the Woman's Building.
42. John Berger, *Art and Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1969), 27.
43. Here I have borrowed from Zygmunt Bauman, *Culture as Praxis* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), 178.
44. One of the best source books for performance art of this period is *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America, 1970–1980*, Moira Roth, ed. (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983). Woman's Building-affiliated artists are well represented.
45. It should be clear at this point that throughout this essay I have been using the "seventies" as a model, not as the chronological truth.
46. Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class, and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 3; Lucy Lippard has made the point in several publications that art and criticism are political and engaged. See, for example, *Get the Message?* and various issues of *Heresies*.
47. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage, 1974 [1952]); and Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1974 [1963]).
48. Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon, 1978); Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her* (New York: Harper, 1978); and Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1977* (New York: Norton, 1978). Rich is not usually referred to as a "cultural feminist" or a "radical feminist" because of her socialist tendencies. But certain of her poems are women's cultural tropes, e.g., "Transcendental Etudes," from the above collection.
49. Los Angeles itself was said to consist of the cultural feminists on the west side of town and the more political (e.g. socialist feminists) on the east side (e.g., Silver Lake and Echo Park).
50. Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), 110–13.
51. Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 17.
52. Alexandra Comini, "Vampires, Virgins and Voyeurs in Imperial Vienna," in Thomas Hess and Linda Nochlin, eds., *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730–1970* (New York: Newsweek, 1972); Carol Duncan,

"Esthetics of Power," *Heresies* 1 (1977), 46–50, and her classic "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," *Artforum* 12.4 (1973).

53. Duncan, "Virility and Domination."

54. Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965); Anne Sexton, *The Death Notebooks* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

55. Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf: A Choreopoem* (New York: Macmillan, 1975). See, for example, "sorry" (52–54) and "somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff" (49–51).

56. See, for example, Shange's "a laying on of hands" in *For Colored Girls* (60–64). See below for further discussion of the themes by people of color. At Woman's Building poetry readings and workshops, both Wanda Coleman and Michelle Clinton spanned all of these three themes. Mitsuye Yamada talked of Japanese Americans in concentration camps, but rarely presented women of color as victims.

57. Rich, 1978.

58. A number of dilemmas were extant. For example, lesbians often asserted that the essentialized and totalized category "woman" generally meant heterosexual women and yet, lesbians were vocal in the "unity of women" stance.

59. This is a play on a comment attributed to Charlotte Bunch—"add a woman and stir"—which was a critique of tokenism.

60. Lippard, *Mixed Blessings*.

61. Mary Beth Edelson represents an exception in her performance piece *Mourning Our Lost Herstory*, from "Your 5,000 Years Are Up" (1977). This performance evoked the kind of nostalgia for lost land, history, and culture that characterized some art by women artists of color.

62. The designation "survivor," as contrasted to "victim," used to refer to women who had experienced rape, incest, or domestic violence, was an innovation of the Woman's Building. According to Terry Wolverton, it was first used in such art events as "The Incest Awareness Project." Terry Wolverton in personal conversation with the author, September 15, 1999.

63. See Guerrilla Girls, *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art* (New York: Penguin, 1998); and the Guerrilla Girls' poster, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* <http://www.guerrillagirls.com/>.

64. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, "Dazzling Quilt," in *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian-American Women's Anthology*, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Mayumi Tsutakawa, and Margarita Donnelly, eds. (Corvallis, Oregon: Calyx Books, 1989); Bettina Aptheker, *Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Experience* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1989). Also, see Pam McAllister, *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1982).

65. This piece by Kruger is reproduced in her book *Love for Sale* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1990), 58.

66. See the special issue on "The Body as Discourse" in *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 3.2 (1987), especially the diagram on 5.

67. Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

68. After the first exhibitions of *The Dinner Party*, a special issue of the feminist quarterly *Fireweed* (Canada) was published and it encapsulated a number of these criticisms. See *Fireweed* 15 (1982), especially Lisa Steele's "The Limitations of 'The Dinner Party,'" 27–31. Chicago's "monumentalism," her "mystification of the role of women as biological creatures enmeshed in private emotion, domestic labour, and the decorative arts" are also criticized in Carol Cone's "Washing the Dishes," 42. In my own work, I have raised these criticisms and others (the whiteness of the subjects, the class bias, and the imperfect nature of the collaborative project), e.g., "Women's Cultural Movement: Atavistic or Revolutionary?," unpublished paper for the Conference on Women's Culture in American Society, 1880–1980, Los Angeles, National Endowment for the Humanities and the Los Angeles Woman's Building, March 21–23, 1981; and "Introduction . . .," *The House of Women*.

69. Note that these criticisms are not commonly leveled at the work of women artists of color who use their bodies in similar ways. For example, the early inscribing on the body of Frida Kahlo, the earth sculptures of Mendieta, and the later, Postmodernist photographic series by Lorna Simpson, such as *Guarded Conditions* (1989). I doubt that the lack of nudity in some of these pieces can explain the different responses.

70. Or, "Movies, Monstrosities, and Masks," to quote Amada Cruz in an essay by that name in *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1997), 1–17.

71. See Mira Schor, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham: Duke University, 1997).

72. Lippard, *From the Center*, 1976, 127. I am indebted to Rebecca Schneider for calling my attention to the Lippard quote, in *The Explicit Body in Performance* (London: Routledge, 1997), 35.

73. Schneider, 35.

74. "Bad Girls" was curated by Marcia Tucker at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, and its counterpart, "Bad Girls West," was curated by Marcia Tanner at UCLA's Wight Gallery, Los Angeles, both in 1994; "Sexual Politics" was curated by Amelia Jones at the UCLA Armand Hammer Gallery, Los Angeles, in 1996.

75. Linda Goode Bryant, "'All That She Wants': Transgressions, Appropriations, and Art," *Bad Girls* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 97.

76. Both Amelia Jones and Rebecca Schneider have updated these seventies and Woman's Building themes in their studies of the body in performance art. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, 1997; Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1998).

77. Amelia Jones, "Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies, Feminist Conflicts, Feminist Histories," in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (Los Angeles: UCLA Hammer Museum and Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 20–38. As of March 23, 2007, *The Dinner Party* has a permanent home at the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum. Chicago will be less written out of history.

78. Marcia Tucker, Introduction, *Bad Girls*, 5.

79. Marcia Tanner, *Bad Girls*, 10.

80. *Ibid.*, 11.

81. *Ibid.*, 11.

82. Jones, *Sexual Politics*, 22.

83. Arlene Raven, *Art in the Public Interest* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993).

84. Linda Frye Burnham and Steven Durland, eds., *The Citizen Artist: 20 Years of Art in the Public Arena: An Anthology from High Performance Magazine, 1978–1998* (Gardiner, NY: Critical Press, 1998).

85. Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

86. Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 167.

87. This particular information on male artists who were influenced by the Woman's Building is from Terry Wolverton. Personal e-mail communication, September 17, 1999.

88. *Ibid.*

89. All of these quotes are from the Feminist Art Workshop's poster for their conference, "The F Word: Contemporary Feminisms and the Legacy of the Los Angeles Feminist Art Movement," 1998.

90. Feminist art is flourishing in 2010, much of it connected to the West Coast in some way. "Nationwide USA The Feminist Art Project," a brainchild of Judy Chicago, has served as an umbrella for a number of projects. The California Caucus for Art Conference (2007) featured feminist art. In Los Angeles, the Museum of Contemporary Art launched "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" on March 4, 2007. The Woman's Building and feminist art will be featured in the massive West Coast collaboration Pacific Standard Time, with exhibitions, a companion volume to this one, and many references. And *The Dinner Party* has a home.



Mother Art, performing in "Haunted Womanhouse," a performance series for the House of Women Conference as part of the exhibition "At Home," Long Beach Museum of Art, 1983. © Mother Art.