The founding of the Woman’s Building in Los Angeles in 1973 was the culmination of several years of activity by women artists who were energized by the feminist movement in the United States. The Woman’s Building was a concrete realization of the dreams of women artists to find “a room of one’s own”—a room they could not find in the mainstream art world at that time.

To understand the origins of the feminist art movement in the United States, one must look to the foment of the sixties and early seventies, to the swarm of rebellions and leaps in consciousness that redefined American culture. In 1955, a seamstress named Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus and thus gave rise to the Civil Rights Movement, which ignited a host of struggles for social liberation waged by women, African Americans, Chicanos, Native Americans, gays and lesbians, and others. These movements not only demanded more equitable distribution of power and resources, but also raised profound questions about the meaning assigned to these identities and the cultural representations of these groups.

Opposition to the United States’ involvement in Vietnam stoked an unprecedented youth movement that, in addition to the politics of protest, embraced “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll.” This fueled a thriving counterculture determined to forge alternatives to the economic, social, and moral structures of the mainstream.

Within the art world, too, began a challenge to the hegemony of formalism that had dominated the fifties and sixties, in which any concern for content in art was...
disregarded or disdained. Questions of cultural identity incited a push for the democratization of art, a demand for greater inclusiveness with regard to both who could make images and who had access to them. Disenfranchised artists also began to create alternative institutions—later to be called artists’ organizations—that would better represent them.

In 1970, women artists in Los Angeles mobilized. The impetus was “Art and Technology,” an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in which no women artists were included. Upon further investigation, it was found that of eighty-one one-person exhibitions at LACMA over a ten-year period, only one had featured the work of a woman artist.

Women began to meet together to protest their exclusion from the LACMA show; to share the difficulties they faced in getting their work shown, reviewed, purchased, or even regarded seriously; to discuss the concerns they as women wanted to express in their artwork; and to create strategies for what to do next.

Finding the gallery and museum system generally closed to most of them, women artists in Southern California decided to launch their own gallery: Womanspace. Opened in an old laundromat in Culver City in early 1973, Womanspace was dedicated to showing and documenting women’s artwork. It quickly garnered a membership of a thousand artists and supporters.

Meanwhile, several women artists teaching in college and university programs felt the need to provide new models for the next generation of women artists and pioneered the concept of feminist art education. Painter Judy Chicago started the Feminist Art Program, the first of its kind, at California State University, Fresno.

That first year, Chicago’s visionary Feminist Art Program drew fifteen women students, many of whom were new to both feminism and art making. It was from the work of this initial group of participants that many of the core principles of feminist art education evolved. These concepts would guide Chicago and her colleagues when they established the Feminist Studio Workshop in Los Angeles three years later.

It was in the Fresno program that women first employed the process of consciousness-raising in the classroom, both to understand more deeply their position as women and to generate material for their art. This strategy flew in the face of the art establishment; in 1970, women’s experience was considered trivial and frivolous, unsuitable as subject matter for creative work. Indeed, since the end of World War II, narrative content had become taboo in the New York art world; formalist concerns dominated the critical discourse. Serious art was, by definition, the province of men, and if a woman hoped to pass into this hallowed terrain, she could only do so by making herself as much like a man as possible. The rare female art student who called attention to her gender by daring to create a work about menstruation, marriage, motherhood, or household drudgery could fully expect to be criticized or mocked by her male instructors.

In order to create an environment in which women could explore their lives through art, participants in the Fresno program insisted upon a separate classroom environment for female art students, one in which women could create the context and control what happened there. Such separation would provide not only protection from corrosive or undermining feedback, but also would allow women to bond with one another and to define for themselves their paths as artists. Additionally, the women of the Fresno program asserted the importance of female role models, both in being instructed by women and in studying the long-buried history of women’s art. Finally, Chicago and her students openly challenged the notion of art as a work of individual genius by engaging in collaborative creations.

In 1971, Chicago moved the Fresno program to California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). With the school still under construction, the twenty-five students of the Feminist Art Program launched a large-scale, site-based, collaborative project, called Womanhouse, spearheaded by Chicago and her colleague, artist Miriam Schapiro. Working together, they transformed the rooms of a slated-for-demolition Hollywood mansion into art environments that eloquently protested the domestic servitude of women’s lives. In Breast Kitchen, for example, the all-pink walls and ceiling were affixed with fried eggs—sunny side up—that gradually morphed into women’s breasts, a trenchant comment on women’s role as nurturers. Fear Bathroom contained the plaster figure of a woman in the tub, frozen up to the neck in cement, and addressed the
state of confinement and paralysis felt by women. *Linen Closet* displayed the torso of a female mannequin segmented by the closet shelves. This latter image was reproduced in *Time* magazine, which ran a story on the project. It galvanized me, and I sped around for the next week, showing the magazine to everyone at school. *Womanhouse* was, without question, the most publicly visible work of feminist art to date.

Art historian Arlene Raven had joined the faculty of the CalArts Feminist Art Program, and graphic designer Sheila Levant de Bretteville established the Women’s Design Program at CalArts. In conversations with Chicago, they shared their frustrations about working within a male-dominated institution. Separate classes for feminist students could only be so effective, they observed; what went on in those classrooms was too easily dwarfed by the larger context. They would routinely spend their class sessions building up the confidence of women students, encouraging them to take risks, only to see those same students’ works disparaged or dismissed by male instructors.

In 1973, frustrated with the limitations of working to educate women art students within the confines of a male institution, Chicago, de Bretteville, and Raven left CalArts to found an independent school for women artists: the Feminist Studio Workshop (FSW). The FSW focused not only on the development of art-making skills (in visual arts, writing, performance art, video, design, and the printing arts), but also on the development of women’s identities and sensibilities, and feminist practices of art-making, and the translation of these elements into their art.

Central to the founders’ vision was the notion that the arts should not be separated from other activities of the burgeoning women’s community, and the three looked for a space that could be shared with other organizations and enterprises. The FSW opened in September. Initial class sessions were held in de Bretteville’s living room, but by the end of November, the FSW was installed in the building that had once housed the old Chouinard Art Institute on Grandview Boulevard in the Wilshire District of Los Angeles. In November 1973, the Woman’s Building opened its doors.

Eighty years earlier, another Woman’s Building had existed in Chicago, Illinois. Designed by architect Sophia Hayden, that Woman’s Building was part of the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 and housed exhibitions of artistic and cultural works by women. After the exposition, the building was demolished; little documentation remains. The founders of the Los Angeles Woman’s Building wanted to resurrect the lost memory of its predecessor and also create a public center where the current artistic and cultural accomplishments of women could be presented and appreciated.

Before the Chouinard building could be opened to the public, massive renovation was required. Hundreds of women, men, and children worked together to build walls, scrape and paint ceilings, sand floors, move furniture and printing presses, paint signage, and generally prepare the space to welcome the community. For many of the newly recruited FSW students, their initial introduction to feminist arts education involved getting dirty and learning to use tools.
In addition to the FSW, the Woman’s Building was shared by a number of other women’s cultural groups. Womanspace moved from Culver City to join the Building, and a cooperative gallery, Grandview, took over two skylighted rooms to show members’ work. A third gallery, 707, also opened its doors in the Woman’s Building. Sisterhood Bookstore sold feminist and non-sexist literature and music, and three women’s theater groups—L.A. Feminist Theater, Women’s Improvisational Theater, and the Women’s Performance Project—used the auditorium for performances. Over the next two years, the Woman’s Building also housed an office of the National Organization for Women, a coffeehouse, and Womantours, a feminist travel agency.

Womanspace was forced to close in 1974 due to financial difficulties, but the FSW absorbed its gallery and events program under the aegis of the Woman’s Building, which became a producing entity as well as the name of a physical structure.

In 1975, a series of conferences brought nationally renowned women working in a variety of media to the Woman’s Building. Women in Design included the participation of Ellen Perry Berkeley, Jane Thompson, Claire Forrest, Denise Scott Brown, Susana Torre, and Ethel Kramer. This conference was scheduled to coincide with a retrospective exhibition of the works of British architect Eileen Grey, curated by de Bretteville. Women’s Words featured writers Kate Millett, Jill Johnston, Meridel Le Sueur, Kathleen Fraser, and Barbara Myerhoff. Personal and Public Issues: Women in Performance Art involved Eleanor Antin, Pauline Oliveros, Helen Harrison, and Barbara Smith. The Feminist Eye honored women in film and video, and Lady Fingers/Mother Earth was a tribute to women in ceramics.

These conferences were to be a sort of “last hurrah” at the old Chouinard building, which was sold in 1975. Once again, an army of volunteer painters, builders, and movers worked to renovate the new Woman’s Building, at 12 North Spring Street in an industrial section of downtown Los Angeles. Funds still needed to be raised to open the new building, and an extraordinary concert, called “Building Women,” was produced. Featured entertainers read like a Who’s Who in women’s culture at the time, including actress Lily Tomlin, and musicians Holly Near, Cris Williamson, Margie Adam, Meg Christian, and the New Miss Alice Stone Ladies Society Orchestra.

Many of the organizations and businesses that occupied the Chouinard space did not move to North Spring Street, and, over time, the full eighteen thousand square feet were taken up by the FSW, the Extension Program (which offered classes in everything from journal writing to self-defense, and was designed to accommodate the schedules of women who could not enroll in the fulltime FSW program), and other activities generated by women of the Woman’s Building. These included a full-scale gallery program, the annual Women’s Writers Series, the Women’s Graphic Center, the L.A. Women’s Video Center, the Center for Art Historical Research, screenings of film and video, lectures by activists and theorists such as Bernadette Devlin and Mary Daly, slide presentations by artists and art historians, musical and dance events, and gala fundraisers.


Chrysalis magazine poster announcing readings by Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich at the Woman's Building, 1975. Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.

Sisterhood Bookstore at the Woman's Building, 1975. Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.

Cover of Spinning Off, announcing fundraiser at the home of Sheldon Andelson featuring Lily Tomlin and the Waitresses, 1980. Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.

Clockwise from top: The Woman's Building, second location on North Spring Street, 1975. Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.

Susan King (upper left) teaching at the Women's Graphic Center, 1981. Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.

The Woman's Building, second location on North Spring Street, 1975. Woman's Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.
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From Site to Vision: the Woman’s Building in Contemporary Culture Wolverton

At various times the Woman’s Building housed a bookstore; a thrift store (The Store, created by artist Nancy Fried in 1977); the Identified Woman Café; Val’s Café; Inanna, a women’s arts and crafts store; and the offices of both Chrysalis magazine and Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW). From 1978 through 1981, the Woman’s Building published a monthly newsletter, Spanning Off, which included news of cultural, political, and social events in the community and was distributed free.

A large number of collaborative projects and art-making groups emerged from the Woman’s Building, due both to the proximity of artists working in diverse media but also to a philosophy that encouraged cooperation over competition. Performance art groups such as Mother Art, Feminist Art Workers, The Waitresses, and Sisters Of Survival originated at the Woman’s Building. Ariadne: A Social Art Network and the Lesbian Art Project both began as programs of the Feminist Studio Workshop.

As other feminist organizations burst on the scene and flared out, the Woman’s Building went on to celebrate its fifth anniversary in 1978, with the hoisting of a giant Naked Lady sculpture, by Kate Millett, to the roof of the building. (An image was reproduced on the front page of the Los Angeles Times.) A gala birthday party included the Feminist Art Workers’ performance “To Love, Honor, Cherish . . .” Other fifth anniversary activities included the exhibition “Posters, Postcards, and Books by Women,” the Family of Women Dance, and the children’s play, Why Can’t a TV Cook a Potato? by Leslie Belt.

Great challenges lay ahead. In 1981, the Woman’s Building underwent major organizational change and redefinition, as a profound sea change was occurring within the social, political, and economic climates of the United States. As demand for alternative education ebbed, the Feminist Studio Workshop closed its doors. The educational programs of the Woman’s Building were restructured to better accommodate the needs of working women.

The Woman’s Building also founded two profit-making enterprises to strengthen its financial base: the rental of artists’ studio space, and a design and typesetting business, Women’s Graphic Center, Inc. In addition, in 1982 the organization launched an annual awards event and fundraiser, the Vesta Awards, honoring women artists in a variety of disciplines.

In the eighties, the Woman’s Building needed to re-envision itself, to forge new purpose and programs that would serve the needs of our audience and at the same time prove able to attract funding support. And we needed to redefine and broaden that constituency, to serve more women.

We wanted to continue to present women’s art in various forms—visual, performance, literary, video. But we needed to ask ourselves what services we were providing to those artists: a place to show, an audience to view it, the potential for sales, the possibility of critical review, a catalog to document it? A decade after the women’s art movement had begun in Los Angeles, we could no longer assume that a woman artist

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would be grateful just to have a wall on which to hang her work. In some ways our movement had succeeded; women artists were in galleries all over town. What could we offer? The art scene in Los Angeles was developing, and most women artists were working toward carving a place for themselves within it.

In its founding, the Woman’s Building had sought to step outside the discourse of the mainstream art world from which women were largely excluded. Now we needed to rejoin the conversation. In the seventies, we had been a women’s organization about art; in the eighties we became an arts organization about women.

The content of feminist art was changing too, no longer exclusively concentrated on women’s conditions. As the political landscape became more conservative, artists turned activists for a variety of causes—the increased threat of nuclear war, United States intervention in Central America, the environment, gay and lesbian rights. Our understanding of oppression grew more sophisticated as we began to perceive patterns and linkages between women, people of color, political exiles, immigrants, poor people, gays and lesbians. Whereas once we might have believed that ending sexism would transform the world, we now saw oppression as a web with many strands that would require alliance, not separatism, to untangle.

We rented an office in the Woman’s Building to the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES) and were placed under FBI surveillance. We also became a sponsor of Target L.A., a citywide anti-nuclear arts festival. My own 1984 performance, “Me and My Shadow,” addressed racism from a feminist perspective. When an official in the Reagan Administration was quoted as saying that all we needed to survive nuclear war was “enough shovels to go around” (presumably because we could dig shelters), the political cartoonist Paul Conrad published a cartoon in the Los Angeles Times that depicted a graveyard, the crosses made of shovels. Artist Marguerite Elliott, a former member of the FSW, recreated Conrad’s shovel graveyard on the lawn of City Hall to demonstrate the threat posed by the administration’s dangerous policies. A group of performance artists from the Woman’s Building, including Sue Maberry, Cheri Gaulke, and Nancy Angelo, constituted themselves as the Sisters Of Survival; dressed in nun’s habits in the colors of the rainbow (nuns were often used as a metaphor for sisterhood), they staged a performance in Elliott’s environment, and later carried their anti-nuclear art activism to Europe.

We also set out to feature a more culturally diverse community of artists, and our audiences began to reflect this as well. The Woman’s Building secured funding to commission artists to produce new works. The first such project, “Madre Tierra,” supported twelve Chicana artists and writers, under the direction of artist Linda Vallejo, to produce broadsides that were printed in the Women’s Graphic Center studio. In a 1983 project, “Private Conversations/Public Announcements,” ten artists—including Betye Saar, Alexis Smith, and Qris Yamashita—were chosen to produce a limited edition print reflecting their personal connection to a public site in Los Angeles. This theme—
the links between personal and public life and women’s relationship to each sphere—had been an important source of exploration since the early days of the Woman’s Building. The prints were exhibited at the Bridge Gallery in Los Angeles City Hall.

Throughout the eighties, we remained committed to projects that encouraged the production of new works of art. In 1986, the project “Cross Pollination” commissioned twenty-two artists to produce posters addressing issues of their cultural heritage. Artist Patssi Valdez created a glorious tribute to Latinas in her photographic portrait of writer Sylvia Delgado, ringed by gladiolus blossoms. Artist Cyndi Kahn and poet Michelle T. Clinton created and illustrated a tapestry exploring the state of relations between the Jewish and African-American communities. Suzan Ocona combined image and text in a moving statement about her own experience of homelessness. As part of the commitment to help artists expand their audiences, complete sets of posters were distributed, free, to eighty arts and community organizations across the United States, along with information about how to purchase posters from the artists.

The Woman’s Building also embarked upon literary publication projects, including Manteniendo El Espíritu, edited by Aleida Rodriguez, and Women for All Seasons, edited by Wanda Coleman and Joanne Leedom-Ackerman. In 1987, we launched a show on local public access cable stations, “The Woman’s Building Presents,” which screened women’s video art, both those tapes created by artists directly connected to the Woman’s Building, and other tapes submitted to us by artists. In order to engage in the critical dialogue about art, the Woman’s Building also sponsored two conferences, “The Way We Look/The Way We See: Art Criticism for Women in the Nineties,” which explored the various critical theories being utilized at the time (1988) and their implications for women’s art. In 1989, “Three Generations of Black Women Writers,” presented the evolution of concerns and literary styles in the work of African-American women writers. Both projects were co-sponsored with other institutions in an effort to broaden their impact.

Co-founder Sheila de Bretteville had always envisioned the Woman’s Building as a crossroads, a place in which women from different sectors of society could gather and meet—heterosexual and lesbian, trust-fund babies and welfare mothers, academics and politicians and artists. Ironically, perhaps it was in the eighties that this vision came closest to being fulfilled. Hmong weavers were exhibiting in the gallery, while poet-in-residence Gloria Alvarez coaxed Central American refugee women to write their stories in their native language. Later that night, a champagne donor reception would fill the potholed Aurora Street with Porsches and BMWs. And no, these groups did not necessarily rub elbows in the small café, or chat while standing in line for the bathroom, but they did walk through a common door, and stand under the same roof.

When, in 1991, the Woman’s Building closed its doors, there were many reasons. The vision of feminism had shifted so drastically. The funding climate for the arts had grown brutal. The revolution in personal computers had sunk the typesetting
business. And the women who did put so much hard work and passion into the organization for nearly two decades needed to direct their energies elsewhere: their careers as artists, their families, their individual lives. Yet each of them has carried the vision and the skills learned from their time in the feminist art movement into other arenas: as teachers, as activists, as artists, as parents. The vision of the Woman’s Building, the processes and practices and philosophies of the feminist art movement, have exploded beyond the walls of brick and mortar, have entered the very DNA of the future.

The essays that follow attempt to analyze the legacy of this eighteen-year experiment. The writings of Sondra Hale, Laura Meyer, Arlene Raven, Betty Ann Brown, and Michelle Moravec (with Sondra Hale) explore the theoretical foundations of feminist art as promoted at the Woman’s Building. The essays of Cecilia Dougherty, Jennie Klein, Sheila de Bretteville and Bia Lowe, Michele Kort, Kathleen Walkup, and myself address specific art forms and specific art communities (respectively, video, performance art, design, creative writing, book arts, and lesbian art) that were shaped or influenced by the practice of artists at the Woman’s Building. A final essay by Theresa Chavez examines the consciousness and beliefs about art and feminism as expressed by a group of young women art students at CalArts from 2001 to 2007.

The editors wish to thank each of the contributors who so generously devoted themselves to the research and articulation of these histories and interpretations, so that artists and researchers of subsequent generations might continue to learn about the legacy of the Woman’s Building.

Notes

1. Much of the historical information in this introduction draws heavily from three previously published works, each authored by me: The First Decade and Sweet Fifteen, two booklets written to commemorate the Woman’s Building’s tenth and fifteenth anniversaries, respectively, and Insurgent Muse: Life and Art at the Woman’s Building (San Francisco: City Lights, 2003). I spent thirteen years—from 1976 to 1989—at the Woman’s Building, beginning as a student in the FSW, then becoming a teacher, program director, exhibiting artist, publicist, typesetter, newsletter editor, grantwriter, board member development director, and eventually, executive director.

2. Reference to Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own (London: The Hogarth Press, 1929).

3. I am indebted to Faith Wilding’s By Our Own Hands (Santa Monica, CA: Double X, 1977) for this history of the early feminist art movement in California.

4. Consciousness-raising, or C-R, is a communication process in which women sit in a circle and each takes equal time to speak, uninterrupted, about her experience while the others listen attentively. C-R sessions are usually directed to a specific topic, such as body image, mothers, etc. The practice allows an individual to validate her experiences and to probe their meanings; it also encourages women to see the commonality of their experiences, to realize that some problems have social, not personal, causes. The slogan “The personal is political” is rooted in the C-R process. It is crucial to remember that in the early days of feminism, most women rarely considered the events of their lives to be worth mentioning, to have any significance at all. C-R was adapted by North American feminists from a practice called “speaking bitterness,” used by women in revolutionary China.

5. In addition to the three founders, other early FSW instructors included Edie Folbe, Ruth Iskin, Suzanne Lacy, Deena Metzger, and Helen Ahn Roth.
Woman’s Building on Grandview Boulevard, first location at the start of construction, September 1973. Woman’s Building Image Archive, Otis College of Art and Design.