Eve Ensler’s 1998 play *The Vagina Monologues* opens with a deceptively simple statement about her longing for a woman-centered community: “I was worried about my own vagina. It needed a context of other vaginas—a community, a culture of vaginas.”1 Surely the most successful of feminist-themed cultural products in recent memory, *The Vagina Monologues* has become a popular feminist ritual where women with little else in common beyond their vaginas come together and affirm their differences. The play and the nonprofit V-Day organization founded to channel audiences’ enthusiastic support of it represent the power of a popular form of US feminism or a form of feminism that has found a niche in the cultural marketplace since the 1970s. Other examples of commercially popular feminist-themed cultural products abound: Ntozake Shange, *For Colored Girls Who Have Contemplated Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975), and the one-woman stage show by Jane Wagner and Lily Tomlin, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* (1986); Alice Walker’s novel, *The Color Purple* (1982), made into a film in 1985, along with *9 to 5* (1980), *Tootsie* (1982), and *Thelma and Louise* (1991), as well as the chic literature-to-film/cable hybrids, Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’ Diary* (1996, 2001) and Candice Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* (1997, HBO 1998–2004, 2008). This popularized form of feminism has a history worth exploring, one
that sheds light on contemporary debates over the proper modifier—post, Third Wave, or simply “new”—for today’s feminism.2

To start assembling that history, it is necessary to challenge Ensler’s view that her longing for “a community, a culture of vaginas” is without historical precedent. In fact, the play’s special V-Day 2001 foreword by Gloria Steinem notes that she herself had a vagina awakening when “walking through Judy Chicago’s Woman House [sic] in Los Angeles, where each room was created by a different woman artist, and where I discovered female symbolism in my own culture for the first time.”3 Like Ensler’s play in the 1990s, Chicago’s work in the 1970s introduced thousands of nonactivist women to elements of feminism. And again anticipating Ensler, Chicago created literal and metaphorical communities around women’s commonalities through which people had an experience of feminism. In her classroom in 1970 to 1972, which resulted in the installation Womanhouse (1972), and in her studio between 1976 and 1979, which resulted in the monumental artwork The Dinner Party (1979), Chicago practiced feminist ideals of egalitarianism and personal empowerment. These literal communities generated temporary and discursive communities through a feminist art that articulated a belief in the commonality of all women. The feminist meanings of Womanhouse and The Dinner Party, clearly on display for audiences to see, were born as much from the practice of feminism in these literal communities as from the representation of women’s power in the art.

Examining Chicago’s classroom and studio illuminates the evolution of 1970s feminism as it moved from a period of intense, multifaceted, and often confrontational activism toward a more mainstream, diffuse, and individualist expression of women’s rights as the century ended. This shift away from activism, which took place in tandem with a growing conservative backlash in the 1980s and 1990s, set the stage for the popularity of cultural products such as The Vagina Monologues. A lens focused on the force of popular feminism allows us to explore the diversity of feminist expression as it reached ordinary women for whom it was often consumed as a cultural product rather than defended as an identity. The contours of that transformation, not simply a shift from politics to culture but to the politics of cultural production and consumption, can be seen in the community spaces and art produced by Chicago.
Toward a “Female Art History”
Chicago’s fascination with women’s history is one of the defining aspects of her feminism and one of the features that mark her as part of her generational cohort. For Chicago and others coming into feminist consciousness in the late 1960s, the pressing need for a usable women-centered past enlisted history as an element of their political practice. Feminists in the early 1970s also paid keen attention to women’s daily practices of resistance and strategies for renewal. For Chicago this focus on “ordinary” women would eventually translate into her attention to needlepoint, china painting, and other art forms dismissed by the art world as “craft” in *The Dinner Party*. But in 1970, the women’s history she was most interested in writing was what she called a “female art history.” This would involve an intense focus on the female body.

In the spring of 1970, Chicago took a position at Fresno State College, where she started the Women’s Art Program, one of the first in the nation. It was in this venue that Chicago began to think more critically about the contradictions between being a woman and being an artist. Enabling women to be artists involved, in her words, “moving away from the male-dominated art scene and being in an all-female environment where we could study our history separate from men’s and see ourselves in terms of our own needs and desires, not in terms of male stereotypes of women.”

In her first term of teaching, Chicago used her classes, in which both women and men enrolled, as laboratories for putting her feminism into practice. For example, she announced in one of her classes that “none of the men talk; only the women talk.” She was booed by some of the men who found her style abrasive and her politics absurd. Attrition rates were high. Yet, while some students dropped out, others pledged undying support, finding Chicago demanding and inspiring.

Whether her students loved or hated their professor, a buzz surrounded her. The buzz was only amplified when one of the nation’s foremost art journals, *Artforum*, ran a full page ad, placed by the Jack Glenn Gallery, for her show at the small and relatively new California State College at Fullerton, Orange County, in Los Angeles. The ad featured a headshot of Chicago wearing a headband and dark glasses and announced that “Judy Gerowitz hereby divests herself of all names imposed upon her through
male social dominance and freely chooses her own name: Judy Chicago.” A second full page ad, in the December issue of the same journal, showed Chicago in a boxing ring, an image that invoked the machismo that characterized the art world and against which the artist railed. The set of images and Chicago’s linkage of art and feminist politics secured her place as one of the leading figures of the emergent US feminist art movement. The catalog for the Fullerton show, written by gallery director Dextra Frankel, confirmed her buzz-worthiness, declaring that Chicago was a “leader in the vanguard West Coast art scene.” The movement in which Chicago participated included drawing attention to the reality that museums and galleries displayed very few works of art by women and that men were overrepresented on the faculties of art departments, fostering the deeply entrenched sexism in the institutional art world.

The fall semester of 1970 also marked the opening of Chicago’s art program for women at Fresno State College. Fifteen students signed up for her course, having first had to establish that they were not only committed to the arts but were also “aware of themselves as women” and “able to be emotionally honest with themselves and others.” Part consciousness-raising (CR), part group therapy, and part studio art, Chicago’s classroom practices took aim at the femininity that psychologically restrained her female students. Chicago cordoned off nothing as inappropriate for classroom discussions or, by extension, as inappropriate subjects for art, itself a radical departure from the dominant modernist aesthetics that emphasized form over content. From decisions to shave one’s legs and pluck eyebrows (viewed as internalized forms of sexual objectification) to job interviews and dating (deploying attractiveness to manipulate situations), the management of the female body came into focus as a source for a distinctively female art. Some students found the group process in the classroom brutal. One woman called the program “personality reconstruction” and explained she suffered from “post-traumatic shock syndrome” for years after. Others found Chicago demanding but supportive. One participant recalled the experience as “soul searching, gut wrenching, tumultuous, cleansing, exhausting, exhilarating” and the space as “suffocating and uncomfortable one moment and nurturing and comforting just a short time later.”
Chicago set a demanding course load. She required her students to take between three and twelve units of school credit. During the week, students were expected to put in long hours of work related directly and indirectly to the course. For Monday evening seminars, students read feminist theory by notables such as Ti-Grace Atkinson, Roxanne Dunbar, Simone de Beauvoir, and Anaïs Nin; they read the histories and biographies of well-known female artists such as Frida Kahlo and Mary Cassatt and researched lesser-known women artists. The following semester, Chicago assigned readings from what became *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women’s Health Collective, drawn to its ideologically trustworthy illustrations of the vulva and its positive account of female biology generally. In addition to a heavy reading load, the students were expected to log in four to eight hours in the studio daily, either on their own work or on constructing and maintaining their collective space. On Wednesday nights, they had group dinners in “the rap room” of the studio, where the group members scrutinized their behavior as women and as artists and critiqued each other’s work. Even more difficult than this grueling schedule was Chicago’s requirement that students financially support the building of their studio at a rate of $25 a month, a major commitment for many students.

Studying with Chicago was all encompassing. Even students who called in sick were not given permission to miss class. One recalled that after she did not show up to an evening meeting, Chicago issued her two choices: either the group would bring food to her or they would come pick her up and bring her to the studio. Withdrawing, even for a mental health day, was not an option. Chicago understood direct, honest, and confrontational speech as essential to the project of liberating her students from a debilitating femininity that had trained them to avoid conflict and withdraw from controversy.

Although her classes were personally transformative for students, Chicago found the Fresno State College Art Department reluctant to embrace her vision and the art scene in the small city too narrow for her grand plans to produce an entirely new kind of female art. In the midst of the heavy work schedule, Chicago began making plans with fellow artist Miriam Schapiro to move herself and her students to the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) to enjoy a more vibrant art scene and greater
institutional support. In a letter written to the CalArts admissions office, Chicago made the case for why her students ought to be admitted to the program as a group. The letter, surely unique in the annals of admissions in the heyday of educational reform, was an early articulation of her view of feminist essentialism:

We must unearth the buried and half-hidden treasures of our cunts and bring them into the light and let them shine and dazzle and become Art. We must recover our history, rebuild our humanity, and reconstruct our community. Only then will we make the art that we have the right to make. We need to come in to Cal-Arts together so that we can continue our beginning.9

CalArts hired Chicago and admitted her students.

The Feminist Art Program (FAP), slated to occupy a new building, found itself without adequate space as the school year began in 1971. The group decided to combine their problem of housing with an experimental group project designed to highlight the ideological and symbolic conflation of women and homes. The end result was Womanhouse, an art installation built by FAP students in an abandoned house just off campus. In the process of working on Womanhouse, Chicago developed many of the skills she would later use in The Dinner Party, particularly working with groups and the practice of feminist education, and pushed further into her vision of the materiality of femininity.

**Womanhouse**

Chicago explained the origins of Womanhouse as an exploration of women’s psychological enmeshment with domesticity.

Women had been embedded in houses for centuries and had quilted, sewed, baked, cooked, decorated, and nested their creative energies away. What would happen, we wondered, if women took those very same homemaking activities and carried them to fantasy proportions?

Posing a question that would animate The Dinner Party six years later, Chicago wondered if “the same activities women had used in life could be transformed into the means of making art?”10
Readying the house for use was a grueling job. The house was in poor shape and without working plumbing. It required long days and blistered hands as students learned how to glaze windows, sand floors, rebuild and paint walls. Practicing confrontational techniques and using power tools at the same time proved to be a heady mix. While EAP students repaired twenty-five broken windows and used fifty gallons of white paint, they also listened to Chicago explain to them that women, in this case privileged enough to attend college, neither had experience in pushing themselves hard nor the tolerance for the frustration and fatigue of doing demanding tasks. For Chicago, laborious struggle was proof of one’s passion.11

In her memoir, Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist, Chicago recalled that during the making of Womanhouse the students complained of being tired, of having aches and pains. Some women were extremely concerned about their bodies, in an overprotective way. They had been raised to see their bodies as an important aspect of their attractiveness. Whereas men generally see their bodies as objects to be built up, strengthened, used, and exercised, women are often horrified about developing muscles that will defeminize them, are afraid of strenuous activities, and are anxious about every little discomfort.12

Chicago’s critique of her students’ femininity as a form of mental crippling, coupled with readings that questioned women’s assigned social roles, made her classroom a challenging place. Chicago and her art students practiced a form of radical feminism that viewed role conditioning, not biology, as the primary factor shaping female subjectivity. This critique of social roles rendered femininity itself a problem to solve and characterized early radical feminist theory at its most unapologetic.

Anger and resentment on the part of her students boiled up at the seemingly endless work they faced, and accusations that Chicago was on a “power trip” surfaced. “I never do anything any more but work,” one woman complained. Another questioned the idea of sisterhood. “I thought that all women were equal. We’re not all equal. You and Mimi have more authority than we do. Why do you get to make all the decisions?” Chicago replied that the women ought not to be angry with them but at “a society that had never demanded that they push beyond their limits, that they reach their potential, that they achieve something.”13
In a brilliant turn of the tables, Chicago told the students that their complaints were expressions of their internalized sexism, unconscious manifestations of their difficulty dealing with female authority figures.

The students’ hard work resulted in the opening of Womanhouse on January 20, 1972, for women participating in a local art conference, and a week later, for the public. As visitors climbed the wide front steps of the old Victorian mansion on Mariposa Avenue, they walked into a space where the female body was literally embedded into the roles and duties of the home. The kitchen, the bedroom, the bathroom, the closet were rendered into extreme exposés of the violence, psychologically if not actually, done to women by social roles. As the visitor moved into the foyer, she would look up the grand staircase to see a bride, with flowing veils and lacy gown, literally embedded in the wall. Done by Kathy Huberland, Bridal Staircase captured “the bride’s failure to look clearly where she is going.”

The visitor might move to the kitchen, by Vicki Hodgett, titled Egg to Breasts, featuring a ceiling covered with sculptured fried eggs and walls covered with breasts, painted a uniform pink. The kitchen had been a difficult piece to work on. When the students working on the kitchen were at a loss for ideas, Schapiro suggested a cr session on their feelings about kitchens. This led them to focus on the kitchen as a psychological war zone between themselves and their mothers over the giving and receiving of food and the egg as a proxy for woman as a source of nourishment for her family. This process of searching for “content” for their art in their lives was a foundational aspect of Chicago’s feminist teaching. Insight alone, however, was not the goal. For FAP students, personal content mattered to the extent that it provided the student-artist with a vision she could translate into art. The eggs and breasts lining the kitchen resonated with viewers who could see the psychological meanings of food for daughters harnessed to political insight about repressive domesticity for mothers.

The visitor might finish her tour at one of the most confrontational rooms in the house, the Menstruation Bathroom, done by Chicago. One of three bathrooms in Womanhouse, this one emphasized women’s blood and puberty as moments of shame when, in the words of art historian Arlene Raven, “signs of womanhood appear and must be hidden behind a locked
bathroom door.” The room, painted pristine white, displayed feminine hygiene products neatly lined up on a shelf. The room had no color except for an overflowing trash basket filled with bloody sanitary products. *Menstruation Bathroom* recalled the artist’s earlier work, a photolithograph titled *Red Flag*, of a woman pulling a bloody tampon from her vagina. “That’s a big mess,” reported one man in Johanna Demetrakas’s 1972 documentary *Womanhouse*. “I don’t understand it. Is it supposed to be funny?”

*Womanhouse* grabbed the attention of the press. *Time* magazine, in an article called “Bad Dream House,” estimated that four thousand viewers came at its opening day to see the “mausoleum, in which the images and illusions of generations of women were embalmed along with their old nylons and spike-heeled shoes.” During the month it was open, over ten thousand visitors, women and men, visited the house. Critics of *Womanhouse* questioned its isolation of female artists, with one reporter suggesting that it was a “cop out” for Chicago and her students to avoid direct competition with men. In an interview in the local newspaper, Chicago responded that “women have been segregated from the human race for 2,000 years. We have to segregate now to strengthen ourselves because of the damage done by being segregated!”

Openly feminist reviewers saw *Womanhouse* as a place “to use this very female vocabulary to create a kind of art that has not been created by men.” To the *LA Free Press*, Chicago explained that the house was a way to change consciousness and external reality. “I want to change the world,” she said. Miriam Schapiro responded, “I want every woman strengthened.” After it closed on February 28, 1972, the house was demolished, as scheduled.

As the tsunami of process and publicity that was *Womanhouse* reached its end, Chicago savored her notoriosity. But she also reckoned with the very real limits to what she could accomplish at CalArts. Feminist art in the university setting, after all, still had to be evaluated by the predominantly male faculty and she herself deemed good enough to earn tenure. Such concerns, coupled with a breakdown in communications with Schapiro and tangible burnout from so much group process, made Chicago eager to leave the FAP that she had helped establish and return to the studio to work on a new project.
In letters to other feminists, in her personal journal, in her memoir, and in other published accounts, Chicago stressed that this new piece she envisioned would represent a suppressed tradition of female power in Western civilization. Using the model of “great men” embedded in histories of Western civilization, Chicago imagined a first/last supper of great women seated around three long tables, each person a woman of influence and power who both affected the age in which she lived and who could inspire contemporary women to greatness. As she soon discovered, the feminist meaning of The Dinner Party, like that of Womanhouse, was born as much from the practice of feminism at the studio as the representation of women’s power in the piece itself.

The Dinner Party Studio
The step from the critique of domesticity of Womanhouse to the celebration of women’s unique culture in The Dinner Party proved to be easy for Chicago to take. Her interest in the skills women applied in their homes, homes that in Womanhouse entrapped women, led her to china painting, a form of painting dismissed by the art world and practitioners alike as “craft” and hobby. In 1972, Chicago began formal training in china painting and found a teacher who shared Chicago’s interest in pushing the staid craft in new directions. Chicago recalled her fascination with the community of women drawn to china painting and the “excruciating experience” of watching “enormously gifted women squander their creative talents on teacups.” The china painters, untouched by the feminism percolating around the students of Womanhouse, nonetheless embodied a kind of sisterhood that appealed to Chicago, a female world that lovingly passed the techniques of china painting from mother to daughter. Reestablished in her studio, separated from interpersonal dramas of group process, Chicago turned in earnest to the tremendous task of making ceramic plates designed around female “central core imagery.” She worked alone for the first year, firing test plates and finalizing the guest list. However, the scope of the work ahead of her impressed on her the need to bring in assistants and collaborators.

As Chicago began her new project, feminism itself was changing. By 1974 the first burst of radical feminism, where naming sexism and
discrimination was itself a primary praxis, had evolved, and groups of feminists moved toward establishing women-centered institutions where they could enact feminist principles and lifestyles. The awareness of the limits in heterosocial political groups that had inspired the women's liberation movement in the 1960s was still at play in the mid-1970s, yet the answer to those limits became separation, rather than integration, for some feminists, including Chicago. This did not mean Chicago rejected men; she did not. Rather, she hoped to use new and autonomous male-free spaces to invent groups of liberated women who could bring about a more fair and equitable society. Toward that end, Chicago re-created her studio to be a space where women could encounter the insights of feminism, and experience a feminist lifestyle by living and working with other women, and where their sense of themselves could be transformed from girlfriends and wives to artists and feminists—goals very similar to those of her classroom. Yet this time, Chicago, not the university, was in charge.

Chicago’s studio, as it evolved in the years between 1974 and 1979, was unique among the feminist collectives of the 1970s such as the Boston Women’s Health Collective and the Combahee River Collective. These groups committed themselves to equitable group processes and joint decision making about projects, goals, and direction. Chicago, in contrast, never surrendered control over her art to the group of workers she gathered. Although she committed herself to creating a feminist group process in her studio, she had no interest in creating a feminist collective where all voices had equal weight in decision making. Diane Gelon, one of Chicago’s first volunteers, explained that the open studio “did not start as a feminist group. It started as ‘let’s help Judy’… more like a barn-raising” where people did what needed to be done because “it was important to do.”

Between 1974 and 1979, Chicago mobilized feminist and financial interest in the project by giving public lectures to women's groups, art groups, and any other venue that would pay her. While touring the country, she looked for contacts with people who could help her raise much-needed funds. Later, the publication of her first memoir, Through the Flower, won a number of converts to her project who were willing to move to California to help her. By the end of 1975, she had a core staff that took on more and more of the management of the project.
Three people stand out as exceptionally central to the success of *The Dinner Party*. Leonard Skuro, a ceramicist and one of a handful of men in the studio, helped Chicago work through the process of making plates, some of which rose six to eight inches and weighed upwards to thirty-five pounds. Despite bringing “all the difficulties of dealing with men,” he and Chicago worked diligently to solve the seemingly intractable problems three-dimensional plates posed. It took Chicago and Skuro nearly three years to be able to produce plates predictably. The second crucial person for the project was Susan Hill. Hill drove three hours to Los Angeles to hear Chicago lecture about *The Dinner Party* in 1975 and promptly offered her services. Hill came up with the idea of having each dinner party guest have her own runner, a personalized tablecloth done in the stitches of her day, a shift that enabled Chicago to enrich the design environment surrounding each plate. Hill became the head of needlework and supervised “the loft” in the studio where volunteers and staff worked on runners. The third person was Diane Gelon, an art history graduate student from UCLA who first met Chicago at the opening of the Woman’s Building in 1973. In 1975, Gelon started working on the project two days a week but then dropped out of graduate school to work full time as Chicago’s assistant. Eventually, she managed the daily administration of the project and took over fundraising.

With more people in her studio, Chicago made progress on solving the labor problem, yet this by no means signaled the end to her material challenges. Chicago had barely enough funds to keep herself in clay and thread. Gelon recalled that she and Chicago took out credit cards and alternated maxing them out to fund Gelon’s travel to potential donors. Gelon taught herself to become, in her words, “a feminist fundraiser”—doing research on the granting institution or person, looking for women in decision-making positions, drawing up contacts, following up, and learning in general how to navigate the nonprofit world. Over the next five years, she wove together a network of feminists out of disparate people in the art and publishing worlds in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles; wealthy women interested in the arts; and the emerging network of feminists that came out of the International Year of the
Woman conference in Houston in 1977 to bring whatever kind of support they could offer Chicago’s project.28

Absolutely central to solving the twin problems of funding and labor, however, was the recognition that the experience of working in a feminist environment such as Chicago’s studio was itself a potential asset they could sell. The decision to open her studio to volunteers expressed the complex reality of Chicago’s goals for The Dinner Party. Chicago enjoyed her time in the feminist classroom and drew energy from working with other people. Her students gave her a sense of mission when she felt overwhelmed and fed her keen desire to be a part of a feminist sisterhood and the grand sweep of women’s history. At the same time, Chicago needed help finishing what proved to be an ambitious undertaking. Pulling in people to help her became critical to completing the work. With no money with which to pay for help desperately needed, Chicago offered volunteers payment in the form of a feminist experience.

Chicago and her staff developed a two-tiered strategy to bring in and manage workers. The first involved a formal workshop structure where interested people paid to have a feminist group experience while working on a major feminist art project. The second involved creating an open studio where interested people could participate, where workshop participants could extend their stay or return for a summer or for any amount of time they could devote to the project. To all inspired enough to come, the studio emphasized that by working on The Dinner Party they would experience firsthand the techniques and benefits of feminism. Especially for women who did not join the hundreds of small feminist groups that sprang up across the country in the late 1960s, who did not take part in speak-outs on illegal abortions and rape, who had not joined the National Organization for Women or any other formal feminist group, who might feel too old or too married to join anything but who nonetheless found something compelling in the language of feminism, such an offer was appealing. Here was a chance to “do” feminism for a week or a month, to reap the benefits of CR, to experience sisterhood directly by living and working with other women, and to participate in the larger sweep of history by contributing to Chicago’s monument to women. A steady
stream of women and a handful of men, many of whom had no prior experience of feminist activism, came to Santa Monica to work on the project. By its opening in 1979, a total of four hundred volunteers had passed through the studio.

Workers came from Washington, DC, Kansas City, Cleveland, and Boston, but the majority came from California. The robust feminist art scene in California lent it distinctive networks of friends, former lovers, and formal and informal groups that pumped a steady stream of workers into Chicago's studio. Of the thirty-five volunteers who joined the studio in 1977 and who filled out information sheets, twenty-four of them arrived there through these networks. Twelve found their way to the studio after hearing Chicago lecture or reading about the project in the art press. When taken as a whole, the group of volunteers who moved in and out of the studio between 1976 and 1979 shared certain commonalities. From studio records, photographs, and personal accounts, the studio volunteers were overwhelmingly white and female, with the exception of one African American and one Native American volunteer. All had to have the financial resources to volunteer for at least eight hours a week. All were drawn to making art, first and foremost. Fifty-two of the 188 volunteers over the three-year period listed their occupation as “artist” or were in art-related fields such as graphics or art education. Of the twenty-two volunteers who described themselves as unemployed or as housewives, nearly all qualified those categories by noting that they occupied themselves through doing art without financial remuneration. Thirty-two volunteers were full-time students, many of whom were working in either art or women’s studies programs. One was a fourth-year medical student on “a summer vacation with time to kill.” The majority of volunteers—sixty-two—listed a range of female occupations, from waitressing and bookkeeping, to secretarial work and building management. One woman, Aurelia Morris, who was seventy-three, listed her occupation as “feminist.” The range of workers Chicago drew to the studio—the art student, the housewife, the secretary—testified to the broad appeal of The Dinner Party project itself.

In important ways, Chicago re-created the feminist boot camp atmosphere of the CalArts years at her Dinner Party studio. Workshop participants were expected to arrange for their own housing and meals on
top of the $175 fee they paid to the project. Their requirements varied from needing a room for a weekend to needing help in locating more permanent arrangements: “Is there a YWCA in Santa Monica? Is it within walking distance or easy bus line of the studio? Or is there someone I can room with for a reasonable rate? I can arrange child care with my folks for my son so there would only be me and I’m easy to get along with.” Another volunteer announced that “I will be bringing my pack and sleeping bag and will only need someone’s lawn or nearby campground to tent in…” Most wrote asking for advice as to where to look for apartments, what bus routes would bring them to the studio, and general orientation to Santa Monica.

Managing the volunteers regularly overwhelmed the core staff, most of whom juggled administrative duties with intense studio work schedules. During summer intensives, the core staff shuttled to the airport and bus terminal and managed the steady stream of requests for information. They pushed the responsibility for workers’ arrangements squarely back on their shoulders, underscoring the message that volunteers who came to work on the project were expected to fend for themselves and contribute what they could without requiring a lot of hand-holding.

The numerous workshops and regular calls for volunteers resulted in a studio that was filled with workers staying for various lengths of time, some participating in formal workshops and leaving, and others staying beyond the workshops for weeks, months, or years. The line between staff and long-term worker shifted continually, as did the numbers of volunteers at the studio at any given time. In the summer, between twenty and thirty volunteers converged on the studio; in the winter, the numbers dwindled to fewer than ten. These arrangements pushed Chicago further away from the ideal of the solo artist so prized by modernism and more into the role of medieval guild master, overseeing apprentices and issuing decisions. As more volunteers arrived, Chicago’s studio became as much a dense web of relationships as a literal workspace.

Group process at the studio became an important way for studio workers to practice female equality and empowerment. Since the late 1960s and early 1970s, radical feminists had defined their politics with the mantra “the personal is political.” Feminists focused on relationships—those between women and men and among women—as the medium through
which oppression could be studied and liberation practiced. However, feminist groups did not always attain the goals of equality and empowerment, and the experiences of disappointment and anger were as much a part of the experience of feminism in the 1970s as the admirable goals of sisterhood and female empowerment. The attention to personal relationships often made group processes difficult, tedious, and at times painful for participants. A deep ambivalence about power—who had it and who did not—crippled many groups. Feminist groups were notorious for creating, in the words of Jo Freeman, a “tyranny of structurelessness,” where consensus became a matter of endurance. The highs and lows of group processes riddled feminist groups and institutions throughout the history of the women’s liberation movement, often paralyzing groups and driving members away.

The blend of empowerment and disempowerment in feminist group dynamics played out in Chicago’s studio. However, the group processes in Chicago’s studio were never designed solely to empower its members, nor were group processes ever separated from the pressing requirement to keep workers on task. The studio was primarily a workspace devoted to producing The Dinner Party. Within that space, feminist group process was attended to without challenging the hierarchy of control, which remained with Chicago.

Although Chicago held onto her authority on studio-related work matters, volunteers actively created the meaning of the feminism practiced in the studio. Within the studio, workers experiencing group processes for the first time applied feminist insights to their lives in a variety of ways. Volunteers—some of whom left jobs, homes, and families to work on the piece for weeks, months, or years—claimed elements of feminism as their own and recast them to fit their personal circumstances. In their hands, feminism became personally empowering; it required no activism, no membership in any group, no support for any cause or commitment to structural change. For many of them, the experience was life transforming.

Practicing Feminism at the Studio
While neither workshop participants nor volunteers could expect their time at the studio to be a vacation, they could expect to encounter feminist experiences such as \( \text{cr} \) and a feeling of collaboration in a group
process. Orientation materials for the workers spelled out hours, routines, and expectations:

During your eight weeks with us you will be expected to work forty hours per week…. Part of your work time will also include feminist education sessions, group raps and exchange of knowledge…. In addition we have regular Thursday night meetings for everyone involved in the project. A tentative schedule of events is attached. You will also be involved in a Consciousness Raising Group with the members of the workshop— together you will decide on a time to meet…. These function independently of the studio and will be held outside of the studio in your homes/apartments, etc.34

CR became one of the most personally moving aspects of working on The Dinner Party. Chicago used CR with her students in the early 1970s, finding in it one of the only practices powerful enough to bring about feminist transformation. There was no question that once Chicago made the decision to open her studio she would institute CR groups. CR in the studio became a foundational practice and one of the experiences that left nonactivist volunteers with the feeling that they had truly encountered feminism.

Workshop participant L.A. Olson explained that CR groups were “one of the bonuses” of the work. Many women expressed how transformed they were by their participation in the practice. CR groups were workshop specific, and when those workshops ended, women who stayed on joined other CR groups. Olson found her participation in an eight-week intensive workshop so compelling that she took a leave from her full-time job, packed away her belongings, and moved, with her husband, to Santa Monica to devote herself to the project. Olson reported that it was through her experience of CR that she came to see elements of her personal relationship with her husband as connected to privilege and power. “I expect the privilege of being able to let our relationship suffer some neglect and of having Neil carry some of the nurturing burdens that a wife usually carries; but this is no more than many husbands (including mine) expect when they decide to pursue their goals and go to law school.” Dorothy Goodwill, a thirty-nine-year-old needleworker and mother of three from Cleveland who had no prior experience of feminism,
volunteered for a summer. She reported that “one of the most important reasons for coming out here for me was to get in touch with myself as an individual instead of myself as a daughter, wife, mother...” She returned twice more to the studio and went on to design her own line of clothing. Another woman who participated in an eight-week workshop without having any experience of feminism wrote to tell Chicago that upon returning home she had begun to apply “things which I have learned in the workshop ... I now feel the assertive strength to ask that my children rely on their own reasoning more and facilitate my family modeled after the workshop.”

Personal change did not happen without conflict and struggle. The tremendous workload at the studio made such gatherings times where Chicago and the staff confronted workers about their work habits. Volunteers reacted to such personal confrontations viscerally, with some finding it enormously helpful and others, terribly insulting. Elaine Ireland found the pressure to be more committed to the work unique and empowering. “I have rarely if ever experienced support from any other working environment to excel or be strong, serious or decisive... There was never anything to be responsible to other than filling someone’s glass or typing some else’s words.” The demands helped Shannon Hogan learn that she had the discipline to start her own graphics firm. She found the confidence to leave her unhappy marriage with her three sons and start a new life as the head of her own household. However, Terry Blecher, a recent college graduate who worked for two and a half years at the studio and a self-described feminist, found the pressure oppressive.

I had trouble sitting still and working for long periods of time. My eyes became strained from close work. Each day while I was packing up to leave, Susan Hill, the head of the needlework loft, tried to talk me into staying longer hours and setting higher goals for myself... I felt I was being pushed and pulled and was angry at their demands on my time.

Having her work scrutinized by Hill and her work habits made public in the group setting led Blecher to evaluate whether she was working as hard or as well as she might. She started therapy to resolve her inner turmoil but came to the conclusion that her individual therapy could not give her the larger framework of history in which to couch her experience.
Ultimately, she found that her studio "stick together" group helped her feel more confident giving her a way to confront her "role conditioning," and helped her to have greater control of her life than did therapy.36

At times "stick together" threatened to spill out of formal groups and disrupt the work environment the core staff cultivated. Chicago required that the studio be quiet, and orientation to newcomers stressed that no one was to talk to her during the workday. Work-related discussions happened: meetings took place, stitches in the runners were evaluated, questions were answered, and problems were addressed; but giggling, crying, lengthy personal storytelling, and social talk were actively discouraged.37

The loft, where most of the volunteers worked, was the space in the studio most prone to social talk. Hill, who supervised the needleworkers, found that the sociability of the volunteers often reflected their unexamined and deeply gendered attitudes about sewing as a form of women's work, and as such, unimportant. She saw that the ease with which women could put down their tasks to talk or do for others was a part of a set of behaviors culled from their historical experiences. "Deep in our heritage is the idea that people gathered around big sewing frames gossip, swap remedies, do ... while away the time with warm and sociable chatter." Expressing a crucial shift in emphasis from critique of social roles to celebration of women's difference, Hill reframed women's sociable chatter into a part of their "cultural heritage." Keeping the chatty workers on task fell to Hill. "I continually fight the whole tradition of the wonderfully soft work pace of women sitting and sewing together." She described her efforts and Chicago's to make the studio a "professional work environment," one set up to reward high levels of skill, concentration, and responsibility. However, "working in this way was new, and in many cases, threatening" to many women who were unused to working on schedule or enduring the physical demands of long hours with the needle.38

Workers wanted to be transformed by the studio, but the romance of feminist rhetoric quickly faded as the reality of deadlines and the stress of too much work set in. For The Dinner Party to be completed, the studio required people who would take ownership over the piece of it they worked on and finish it to Chicago's standards. The ease with which individual women could evade taking responsibility for their part of the
project made the whole idea of enacting feminist education challenging. According to Hill, some workers fell back on complaining that the work was too hard and just stopped. She noted that “women's culture” often supported weakness as much as it did strength.

We nurture each other in very self-destructive ways: we understand that it’s hard on the neck or the eyes to sew, it is hard not to be at home in the evening, not to have the groceries bought; it is hard to work when you have cramps; hard to work on art when you could be making money; hard to work on a feminist project when the very concept is threatening. Worse still than the permission given to women to quit or slow down or take a vacation under these circumstances is the real refusal to change. 39

The studio exacted a heavy price from the core staff. They were charged with seemingly impossible goals: to support personal transformation in volunteers while holding them to an ambitious work schedule and high artistic standards of excellence. Elaine Ireland felt that facilitating studio groups, while important, drained her. She reported feeling as if “I have lost myself in the abyss of Feminism and of The Dinner Party.” Easy sisterhood seemed to disappear when one sister appeared to be too bossy, bitchy, or demanding. “Being manipulated by men—well, it certainly has prepared me for this—to be so manipulated and dumped on by women.” 40

The staff managed group processes through weekly Thursday night meetings where everyone working on the project came together. Chicago designed these sessions to enact the goals of feminist process—to enhance everyone’s involvement by soliciting ideas and feedback from studio workers, to address group dynamics in an honest and direct manner, to explore the significance of women’s lives and women’s history, and the studio’s place in bringing that history to light. Thursday night meetings, referred to as “rap sessions,” connected the group to its mission and individuals to the larger group of “dinner partiers.” Thelma Brenner, an older member of the group, recalled that, “Thursday nights are a very vital part of the Project. That’s where everything comes together.” 41

When the dynamics were good and work went smoothly, Chicago felt strong and connected to her past and to the larger feminist movement. She took pride in creating an environment that enacted her
feminism. “The studio atmosphere is wonderful,” she wrote in the winter of 1977, “People are growing as a result of the permission the Project and the studio afford. It’s great to see.” However, Chicago was not always so able to enjoy the studio and its thick web of relationships. Chicago explained that “it’s nice, though sometimes tedious for me. I try and remind myself that all these people are working with me for nothing, and I try to be responsible for their growth and needs—but sometimes it’s hard.”

Chicago wasn’t the only person who found the studio or Thursday night rap sessions not a simple place of feminist solidarity or sisterhood. Needlework was physically difficult, the immersion in one part of one runner myopic, and tension among workers ever present. One woman wrote in the group journal, “I think I feel better each and every time I come in—despite the fact that I am always so totally guilt-ridden about not putting in enough time!” Feelings toward Chicago seesawed from admiration to rage and back again, creating rich fodder for Thursday night rap sessions. The staff and Chicago herself tried to contain these feelings by placing them in more abstract discussions about reactions to women in positions of authority. But on a less theoretical level, these feelings of love and resentment made the studio’s atmosphere charged. One woman wrote, “I love Judy for who she’s been, is, and what she is giving me”; another wrote, “When I first came to the studio I was afraid of Judy, then I was in awe of her, and now I love her.” One woman signed her name to one of the few written critical comments in the record of the studio’s collective mood: “Once more I feel oppressed by Judy Chicago. Laura Elkins.” An unsigned entry in the collective journal reported ominously that “people are starting to go crazy again.”

Thursday nights constituted an important staging ground for the practice of feminist group process, with its crisscrossing desires for group solidarity and individual recognition, longing for the drama of making history and for personal attention. Thursday night rap sessions provided moments to clear the air in the studio and often helped to restore the larger sense of mission to volunteers. Toward these ends, the group held a potluck dinner once a month devoted solely to socializing and relaxing. These late-night, wine-drenched parties helped keep the studio crew
bonded with each other. One worker, Fay Evans, recorded one particularly high-spirited dinner in the fall of 1976 when the group “started throwing spaghetti at one another, why not it was cold by now. Some were jumping on top of the table…. We’re getting to be more and more like a family.”

The family-like studio was both positive and problematic. Bonds of sisterhood, forged in relation to Chicago as mother/goddess, made feminism intimate and cozy at some points for some participants; but for others, the moments of confrontation between volunteers, between volunteers and staff, and with Chicago were too visceral to be easy or comfortable. Difficult and painful moments in the studio were as much a part of the feminist environment as were the joyful moments. Yet within the dominant narratives of feminism, with its emphasis on sisterly solidarity and appreciation for strong women, these ruptures in relationships were often hard to incorporate or appreciate.

The unavoidable reality was that group dynamics in Chicago’s studio had no simple feminist meaning. They were unstable and shifting, continually changing as women bonded with the process or felt alienated by it. Although volunteers who stayed found the studio’s messages of feminist empowerment motivating, the work itself was often tedious and difficult. For those who stayed, the content of *The Dinner Party* and process of making it merged and enabled them to see their work at the studio as historic. For Hill, the most articulate about this convergence of present and past, the meaning and the making of *The Dinner Party* became the same thing. The heroic efforts of the workers at Chicago’s studio were, in miniature, the same story of seeking to shape their societies as dinner party guests Christine de Pisan and Anne Hutchinson might have told. The volunteers’ psychological hurdles of not taking themselves seriously and of feeling unimportant paralleled the struggles of authors Mary Wollstonecraft and Virginia Woolf.

These points of convergence between past and present, along with the material details of houses, children, food, jobs, and time that workers had to arrange to simply get to the studio, became central to the feminist meaning of *The Dinner Party*. Hill explained that “the runners are very beautiful to me as physical objects, but if the runners are seen as the culmination of a work process that demands and supports change in women’s lives,
they are truly monuments to power and achievement." Transformed by the work, by the discipline of the studio, and by the expression of women's history in the piece, the workers became a central element of The Dinner Party's feminist meaning.

The Dinner Party and the Power of Popular Feminism

The Dinner Party opened to an eager crowd at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on March 14, 1979, with crowds waiting for hours in lines that stretched around the block. During the three months it was on view, one hundred thousand people came to see it. Even larger crowds visited the Brooklyn Museum of Art in New York the next year. What they saw was impressive and unprecedented for museum offerings. With three tables, each forty-eight feet in length, constituting a triangle, The Dinner Party sat thirty-nine notable female “guests” at a grand celebration of women's history. Each guest had a unique china plate shaped like a vagina and a runner depicting the woman and her accomplishments. Each wing of the table underscored Chicago’s view of the rise and fall, and rise again, of female power in Western civilization: the first table, the celebration of goddess worship; the second, the beginning of Christianity and the rise of patriarchy; and the third, the modern institutionalization of male power and rise of feminist movements. Moving around the table, viewers could find many access points into the meaning of history for women: in the plates, the runners done in the needlework of the time period the woman lived, and the Heritage Floor, on which 999 names of women in history streamed under related plates. Viewers could choose to refer to the catalog for more information about each woman or, after 1980, could rent an audiotape narrated by Chicago. It was precisely the variety of entry points into Chicago’s vision that made the piece as useful as it was to the thousands of viewers who saw it, many of whom wrote Chicago to tell her the impact the piece had on them.

The feminist message of The Dinner Party was hard to miss. Viewers encountered what Chicago saw as the fundamental essence of women literalized in the vagina plates. The runners gave viewers a sense of the woman’s historical context, as well as a sense of a transhistorical
patriarchal force against which all these outstanding women struggled. The staging of the exhibit created the feeling of entering into a religious sanctuary; the dimness of the gallery broken only by the brightly illuminated Heritage Floor and the altar-like tables. Taken together, these elements made *The Dinner Party* didactic, dramatic, and engaging and enabled viewers—even if only temporarily—to see the world through the prism of 1970s US feminism.

As with the making of *Womanhouse* in 1972, the process of making *The Dinner Party* from 1975 to 1979 enacted its own form of feminist practice. The processes established by Chicago and her staff, which brought the runners and plates into existence, expressed feminist values of cooperation, empowerment, and enlightenment. The studio, as a space and as a set of relationships, enacted the principles and goals of feminism and highlighted the ways in which those goals played out in women’s groups. The feminist message promoted by Chicago and practiced at the studio reflected the late 1970s emphasis on individual women and the centrality of self-perception to feminist empowerment. The terrain of the psychological, politicized by radical feminists in the late 1960s and early 1970s, continued in popular feminism as a focus on individual women’s transformation. Although socialization happened to women as a group, as the students making *Womanhouse* in 1972 noted, the emphasis in nonactivist feminism on individual women translated into new attention on personal growth, personal insight, and personal expression. This individualism did not mean political detachment. For Chicago and her studio workers, a woman changed by feminism was, among other things, an emboldened political actor, ready to speak her mind, cast the right vote, or confront the men in her life for underestimating her.

The move toward individualism in this more popular form of feminism charts the distance traveled from the early days of radical feminism to the 1980s. As expressed in Chicago’s feminist classrooms and in the message of *Womanhouse*, white radical feminists in the early 1970s interpreted female socialization as damaging and inauthentic. As such, they viewed femininity as a suspect constellation of traits and women’s liberation as requiring the overcoming of such crippling socialization. By decade’s end, popular forms of feminism such as *The Dinner Party* tipped the balance between the critique of femininity as a product of male
power over women toward femininity as a cultural heritage, a product of a unique history and an unjustly devalued way of being in the world. That shift in emphasis, deceptively small, from critique to celebration of difference, also helped to enact the shift from some forms of 1970s feminism as a confrontational activist movement to a more “user-friendly” way of seeing gender as a force in history.

The public proved it had an appetite for *The Dinner Party*, with the work shattering attendance records at both the San Francisco and Brooklyn shows. Yet despite its popularity, *The Dinner Party* met with considerable criticism from art professionals, who dismissed it as craft, and by feminists, who criticized it as essentialist and Eurocentric. Whereas *Womanhouse* caught the wave of a growing and enthusiastic feminist movement, the mixed reception of *The Dinner Party* in the 1980s demonstrated fissures and divides in a complex, multivocal, and increasingly embattled feminism. After 1982, no American museum agreed to show *The Dinner Party*. The installation was crated and stored from the late 1980s with the exception of one 1996 exhibit in Los Angeles, until it found a permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 2003.

Despite hostile reactions from the museum world and many feminists, Chicago believed she could reach audiences interested in feminist-themed art. In 1980, sitting alongside two other giants of the feminist art movement, Suzanne Lacy and Faith Wilding, both former FAP graduates, Chicago explained her view of socially engaged art:

> What I have been working on is developing an image base that is understandable beyond the art world. I believe that is what artists have to do if they really want their work to reach out and affect a wider audience — make images that are clearly about subjects that people care about, and find ways to make those images seen by more people than gallery-goers.

According to the hundreds of fan letters sent to the artist, enthusiastic response abroad, and the successful efforts by women’s groups in Atlanta, Boston, and Houston to bring *The Dinner Party* to their cities in non-museum settings, Chicago had succeeded in communicating her vision of empowered womanhood beyond the museum walls. Letters sent to the artist articulated the ways that *The Dinner Party* spoke to the interest of
audiences in seeing themselves in a longer history of women, which to many had remained invisible, despite the accomplishments of organized feminist activism. The consumption of feminist-inspired culture such as *The Dinner Party* captured the emergent interest in participating in temporary communities that celebrated women, or, in Ensler’s words, in being a part of “a community, a culture of vaginas.” This desire continues as an important, if ambivalent, expression of feminist sensibility and one of the enduring legacies of 1970s activism.

**Notes**

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3. Ibid., xiv.
6. Ibid., 145, 148.
13. Ibid., 108.
16. Judy Chicago, interview with the author, June 30, 2009, Belen, NM.
22. Juliet Myer, interview with the author, July 2, 2009, Santa Fe, NM.
23. Ibid., 215.
30. Jan Marie DuBois, interview with the author, July 2, 2009, Santa Fe, NM.
31. In Chicago “Papers,” see carton 18, file 31; Carolyn Taylor-Olson, files 32, 31–37, and 33.
32. Letter to Judy Chicago from Cherie Fraise, 1978; and letter to Judy Chicago from Bonita Boulio, 1978; both in Chicago “Papers,” carton 18, file 22.
34. Chicago “Papers,” carton 18, file 28.
36. Chicago “Papers,” carton 19, file 3; Shannon Hogan, interview with the author, 13 January 13, 2010, Los Angeles, CA; Chicago “Papers,” carton 18, file 27.
37. Susan Hill, interview with the author, January 12, 2010, Los Angeles, CA; Diane Gelon and Susan Hill, interview with the author, January 13, 2010, Los Angeles, CA.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid.
44. Ibid., Fay Evans, November 7, 1976.
46. Chicago “Papers,” carton 19, file 3.
47. To see The Dinner Party online, visit the Brooklyn Museum of Art Web page: http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party.
48. Levin, Becoming Judy Chicago, 313.
The following images do not appear in the printed version of this article.
Working on the *Petronilla de Meath* runner
Courtesy of Susan Hill (ca 1977-1978)
Working on the *Caroline Herschel* runner

Courtesy of Susan Hill (ca 1977–1978)
Nurturant Kitchen from Womanhouse, 1972.
Vicki Hodgett, Susan Fraser, and Robin Weltsch.
Courtesy of Through the Flower Archives.
Menstruation Bathroom. Judy Chicago, 1995
Reinstallation at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.
Photo: Donald Woodman.