It is clear that Chicago's decision to use many different techniques and styles of needlework as well as china painting to "call...attention to women's unrecognized heritage" challenged the prevailing modernist structures of critical judgment. For it is precisely its use of women's crafts, combined with its style and content, that aligned The Dinner Party with kitsch in the eyes of conservative critics. A photograph accompanying a People magazine article headlined "Sassy Judy Chicago Throws a Dinner Party but the Art World Mostly Sends regrets" (December 8, 1980) depicts the artist sitting in front of the piece and sticking out her tongue (presumably at Kramer, who is cited in the article); this is a particularly apt visualization of her self-defined, contradictory position—both at odds with and on top of the modernist critical system.

THE POPULISM OF THE DINNER PARTY: AN ART WORLD CONUNDRUM

As we have seen, The Dinner Party has provoked vehement responses, both pro and con. The very qualities for which the piece is lauded by the general public and by some populist feminists are largely those for which it is criticized by the majority of poststructuralist feminist art theorists and vilified by conservative modernist critics. Indeed, The Dinner Party's massive popularity has made it problematic for many within the art world. Arforum critic Hal Fischer, for example, condemned the piece for "playing down to the public." His comment says a great deal about his own elitism: his desire to speak for the "public" and to control the parameters of value within art exhibition structures and that of the critical establishment in general.

The unprecedented attendance figures for each of its fourteen showings from 1979 to 1988 testify to The Dinner Party's popularity. In San Francisco, for example, one hundred thousand people saw the exhibition, and twenty thousand hardcover copies of The Dinner Party: A Symbol of Our Heritage were sold in the first two weeks of its release. In addition to the hundreds of positive comments written in the guest books at each venue, hundreds of fan letters poured in to Judy Chicago from all over the world over the decade in which the piece was on view. The guest books and letters include rapturous statements describing the awe visitors (primarily women) felt on viewing the piece.

Many critics have seen some significance in The Dinner Party's appeal for the nonprofessional audience. For Kramer the piece's popularity was evidence of its degradation and lack of "quality," whereas Lucy Lippard saw it as an aspect of its indisputable success as a feminist monument. Kramer regarded the piece's ideological content as the source of its popular appeal and, by extension, its lack of artistic merit: "For the many followers of the Feminist art movement nothing more need be said [than that The Dinner Party is opening in Brooklyn], This is news—and indeed, review—enough. . . . For the rest of us—or for anyone more interested in art than in ideology . . . the aesthetic pleasure to be derived from The Dinner Party may prove to be more elusive." Maureen Mullarkey, whose description of the appreciative crowds drips with condescension, clearly found the popular acclaim of the piece an obstacle to her need to justify her own revision: "The women who file worshipfully past this cumulating-as-communication table see nothing askew in Chicago's decision to represent the stature and variety of women's accomplishments by genitals only." She snidely commented on the "litany of ecstatic manifestations" written by visitors in the comment book, which, she argued, simply "tells a tale about the gullibility, the insensitivity to nuances and the need of Chicago's audience." Perhaps even more disturbingly, feminist theorist Clara Weyergraf sneered at the "brash vulgarity of The Dinner Party," whose degradation is confirmed by its appeal "to the taste of the middle-class housewife." Mullarkey's description of Chicago's audience as "gullible," "insensitive," and "needy" and Weyergraf's dismissal of the (presumably helplessly seduced) "middle-class housewife" dovetail in a disconcerting way with both the elitism of Kramer, who clearly has contempt for the "followers of the Feminist art movement," and the antipleasure rhetoric of the sophisticated avant-garde theories of representation that characterize poststructuralist feminist the-
ory. Griselda Pollock, one of the key formulators of this body of theory, thus stated in 1988 that “feminist critical practice [in the visual arts] must resist . . . specularity especially when the visible object par excellence is the image of woman. It has to create an entirely new kind of spectator as part and parcel of its representational strategies.”26 The radical feminist artist must strive to resist visual pleasure, according to Pollock, by implementing Bertolt Brecht’s theories of “distanciation” to break the seductive bond between the spectator and the image, to “liberate the viewer from the state of being captured by illusions of art which encourages passive identification with fictional worlds.” In Marxism terms, distanciation, or “dis-identificatory practices,” erodes “the dominant structures of cultural consumption” that make the viewer a passive victim of capitalist ideologies.25

While Pollock’s model obviously comes from a vastly different (one might even say diametrically opposed) political basis from that of Kramer, in her privileging of the artwork that refuses spectatorial engagement while challenging the viewer to greater heights of self-awareness, she unwittingly parallels his antikritic, avant-gardist value system. She effectively sets up a new value system that privileges artwork that operates through “dis-identificatory” strategies over populist works such as The Dinner Party, denying that such populism can have any potential benefit. Yet Chicago’s recent recapitulation of her goals persuasively outlines the progressive aspect of work that reaches a broad audience: “The whole notion of feminist art, as I was trying to articulate it, is that the form-code of contemporary art has to be broken in order to broaden the audience base . . . . What I have been after from the beginning is a redefinition of the role of the artist, a reexamination of the relation of art and community, and a broadening of the definitions of who controls art and, in fact, an enlarged dialogue about art, with new and more diverse participants.”26

The point here, however, is not to privilege Chicago over Pollock, forcing the latter to play the role of scapegoat for contradictions within poststructuralist feminism; it is certainly thanks to the advances made both by Chicago and her colleagues and by Pollock and other “antessentialist” feminists that I can raise such questions. What is at issue, rather, are the ways in which The Dinner Party forces the question of address into the feminist debate. Since feminism has an interest in challenging exclusionary and elitist systems of value (which have conventionally worked to exclude the work of women artists), it behooves feminists to take seriously the impact this piece has had on a broad-based public. Today it is useful to ask what it means for feminism to promote a Brechtian theory of representation that—while clearly enabling for a specialized audience of feminist critics, historians, and theorists in the particular political context of the 1980s—ultimately forecloses the potential political effects of feminist artworks that are more accessible and enjoyable to a wider spectrum of viewers.

Lippard has insightfully noted that the art world’s negative responses to the populism of The Dinner Party had everything to do with its specificity of content, its explicit presentation of the kind of allusive (“literary” and “wholly interpretable”) imagery that is anathema to the ideology of the avant-garde (evident in both Kramer’s rejection of the piece for its “vulgar” accessibility and Pollock’s dismissal of feminist art that is “realist in an uncritical way”).27 What has made the debate even more highly charged is that the “wholly interpretable imagery” of The Dinner Party—that is, that aspect of the piece most frequently mentioned in discussions of its success or failure as an artwork—is clearly identifiable as a symbolic representation of a part of the body that is conventionally veiled: the female sex.

“What is female imagery?”

Feminist Responses to The Dinner Party and the Politics of “Cunt Art”

Criticism of The Dinner Party has often focused on the plates, the majority of which are constructed out of labial folds of clay and decorated with painted vulvar patterns (see fig. 21.2).28 This is certainly due at least in part to their transgression of the prohibition against such direct representation. The iconography of the plates developed out of Chicago’s extended experimentation with centralized imagery in her work from the late 1960s onward and her interest in using “butterfly,” “flower,” or “cunt” forms as metaphors for women’s experience.29 Kramer and Hughes thus reviled The Dinner Party not only because of its threat to the modernist system of determining aesthetic value but also because of, in Hughes’s words, its “relentless concentration on the pudenda,” which clearly threatened the (male) modernist critic’s belief in the propriety of the phallus as the proper symbol of creative impulse.

The use of what Kramer called “vulviform image(s)” on the plates also threatened the Western aesthetic conventions that privilege images of the female body as fetishes for male spectatorial pleasure but prohibit direct representation of the female genitalia. As I have noted elsewhere, by overtly representing the female sex, the artist endangers the system of aesthetic judgment, since the clearly “obscene” female body is that which must remain outside the realm of high art (since the obscene is that against which high art constructs its purity).30 Chicago’s “relentless” symbolization of the female sex threatens the masculinist modernist critic’s claims of “disinterestedness.” The fact that right-wing members of the United States Congress, debating the proposed gift of The Dinner Party to the federally supported University of the District of Columbia in 1991, hysterically denounced the piece for its obscenity only confirms this. Notably Robert K. Dornan derided the piece as “ceramic Y-D pornography,” and Dana Rohrbacher called it “weird sexual art” (both are Republicans from California).31 The convergence of these politicians’ reactions with that of Kramer suggests that, in fact, the piece has some very empowering feminist effects in challenging the modernist, masculinist boundaries between art and pornography.

Ironically, however, feminist criticism of The Dinner Party has also tended to focus on the plates, with
their vulvar, or "cunt," imagery. It was through its deployment of this imagery that The Dinner Party came to be seen by many feminists as paradigmatic of all that was problematic about certain strands of 1970s feminism. Although East Coast artists such as Hannah Wilke explored cunt imagery in the 1960s, historically it has been associated with Los Angeles-based feminism—and especially with the writings of Chicago, Arlene Raven, Miriam Schapiro, and Lucy Lippard (then from New York but sympathetic to the Los Angeles feminist art scene). The use of centralized "female" imagery was, from the beginning, challenged by other feminists. Thus, New York critic Cindy Nemser, in an essay published in the Feminist Art Journal in 1973–74, described Chicago as the originator of a notion of "cunt art," which "made a case for an intrinsic female imagery created out of round, pulsating, "womb-like" forms. This 'inner space' ideology," she concludes, "reduces the work of women artists to a simplistic biological formula."21

It is important to distinguish between Chicago’s use of centralized imagery in her own work and her notion that a "hidden content" could be found in the work of other women artists, many of whom predated feminism or were antagonistic to it.22 It was this "hidden content" theory that caused the most consternation among feminist critics, since it seemed to imply that women were biologically driven to produce imagery that mimicked the structure of their own sexual anatomy.

Around 1970 Chicago, motivated by her own developing identity as a woman artist, not only began producing overtly centralized imagery, often overlaid with explicitly feminist texts, but also began to recognize her own earlier works as subconsciously "female-oriented": "I began to realize," she wrote in her autobiography, "that my real sexual identity had been denied by my culture, and this somehow represented the entire sense of denial I had been experiencing as a woman artist. I felt that if I could symbolize my true sexual nature, I could open up the issue of the nature of my identity as a woman through that symbolic statement." Looking back at her 1968 Dome pieces, small acrylic mounds spray-painted with glowing layers of colored lacquer, Chicago described them as evidence of the return of "female body references . . . reminiscent of the Venus of Willendorf and other early goddesses."23

Chicago’s Atmospheres, environmental pieces begun in 1969 and continued into the early 1970s, oscillated between abstracted conceptual explorations of the interrelationship of "flesh and landscape" and specifically feminist interventions into the environment through the inclusion of goddess figures.24 She introduced women performers into the Atmospheres as signs of female power, to actualize her desire for the pieces "to transform and soften (i.e. feminize) the environment."25 Her interest in the goddess, which she shared with feminist artists such as Faith Wilding, Mary Beth Edelson, and Carolee Schneemann, extensively informed The Dinner Party—not only in its inclusion of a number of goddess place settings but also in its overall revisionist impulse toward history. Chicago’s belief in a matriarchal, utopian matriarchal culture, explicitly outlined in the first Dinner Party book and concretized in the idealizing, abstract representations of the goddess plates and runners, has been criticized as naive.26 But the idea of the mythical goddess was clearly powerfully enabling for these artists, serving as a site of projection that allowed them to actualize their own attempts to attain the kind of transcendence conventionally reserved for men (the "central core" image played the same empowering role).27

By 1973 Chicago had fully established in two and three dimensions this centralized imagery—radiating, pulsating rings and folds of brilliantly colored, airbrushed paint—which she would develop into the sculptural vulvar forms of the Dinner Party plates. Whereas her Domes "subconsciously" suggested the rounded, centralized forms of the breasts or womb, Chicago’s pictorial forays into the "central core" are much more literal. In Female Rejection Drawing #2 (fig. 21.1), also known as Peeling Back, a particularly dramatic and evocative image from the Rejection Quinset of 1974, she combined the formal structure of the central core, here a delicately colored series of tabloid folds emerging from a painfully torn containing surface, with an extensive handwritten text describing her feelings of exposure, fear, and anguish at being judged and rejected by the male-dominated art world.28

Female Rejection Drawing, one of Chicago’s most explicitly autobiographical images, seems to sum up in vibrant, material terms both her commitment to the notion of a centralized form as a means of reclaiming the female body from patriarchy in an empowering way and her insistence, common in the women’s movement in general at this time, on the importance of expressing personal issues in political terms. A central component of Chicago’s coming to consciousness as a feminist artist in the 1970s was her desire to “peel back” the repressed content of her work, to “put together the sophisticated formal language of contemporary art with the rather raw and unexpressed subject matter [I] wanted to begin to deal with. . . . I peeled
back my coded imagery and finally broke through to the beginning of new imagery and the reappearance of the butterfly. . . . This became pivotal in the imagery of *The Dinner Party*. Female Rejection Drawing exemplifies Chicago’s desire to transform the female sex from a locus of objectification to a powerful sign of subjectivity through imagery that visualized the “organistic throbbing [and . . .] highly focussed feeling of clitoral sensation” that signaled women as desiring subjects rather than mere objects of desire.

Chicago’s theory of the central-core image as the reflection of a “female sensibility” became more problematic when she extended this formal symbolism to the work of other artists. In *Female Imagery* Chicago and Schapiro solidified this theory, asking: “What does it feel like to be a woman? To be formed around a central core and have a secret place which can be entered and which is also a passageway from which life emerges?” They concluded by suggesting that “women artists have used the central cavity which defines them as women as the framework for an imagery which allows for the complete reversal of the way in which women are seen by the culture. That is, to be a woman is to be an object of contempt and the vagina, stamp of femalelessness, is devalued. The woman artists *sic* in seeing herself as loathed, takes that very mark of her otherness and by asserting it as the hallmark of her iconography, establishes a vehicle by which to state the truth and beauty of her identity.”

In the early essays on this subject, a hesitancy in defining the sources of this “female sensibility” is apparent. While they saw the crucial political importance of defining a particular female approach to artistic form, feminists such as Chicago and Schapiro were loath to fix this form, its sources or meanings, in any determinate way. Thus, they explicitly state that “the visual symbology we have been describing must not be seen in a simplistic sense as ‘vaginal or womb art’” and stress that it is “the way in which women are seen by the culture” that is at issue. Likewise, Raven insisted in 1975 that the “female experience . . . is socially defined and cultural rather than biological, innate, or personal.” In an earlier essay she also underlined the importance of the feminist insistence on content (that is, the representation or evocation of “female experience”) as an attack on modernist formalism and the capitalist structure it serves. She questioned the “very word *feminine*,” which, she argued, “refers to the characteristics of a biological female . . . [and] is a fluid term which is effected *sic* by the historical moment to which it is applied.” Feminine characteristics change according to the political, economic, and social needs of a world which demands a woman to display them.” Raven expanded this argument, which is clearly not biologically essentialist: “When we notice a tendency for women to construct forms in a circular manner, which is different from a man’s constructive sense, we cannot conclude that the female image is the circle, because women’s tendency toward circular construction can take any number of visual forms . . . . Female forms are not stationary in art unless the forms we know to be ‘female’ at this time are fixed into symbolic conventions, or signs. This is biological determinism—an idea to which feminism is opposed.”

Generally speaking, then, the goal of feminists exploring the notion of a “female imagery” in women’s art was to identify a positive mode of representing the female body in order to reclaim it from its patriarchal construction as passive object, fetishized through structures of male desire. While the question of whether this gesture was successful will always be open to debate, it has undoubtedly been productive in generating discussion about strategies of feminist production and modes of female subjectivity in general. The actual form this representation took was often complex and multidimensional, establishing such symbolism as ambiguous rather than secure or fixed. Even the forms of *The Dinner Party* plates are not the simple holes (or “vaginas”) they are usually described as elsewhere. In developing from the flat, centralized patterns symbolizing ancient goddesses to the sculptural folds, crevices, and thrusting lips emblematic of twentieth-century figures such as Virginia Woolf and Georgia O’Keeffe (see fig. 21.2), the plates also represent the relative restraint and containment of creative female subjects throughout history. Through the muscular three-dimensionality of the plates representing modern women, Chicago aimed to subvert the patriarchal obsession with phallic forms by developing an “active vaginal form.”

Revolution against the masculinist formalist doctrine of modernist criticism, which excluded content from discussions of art and thus placed issues of gender, sexual class, or racial politics outside the purview of the aesthetic, feminists such as Chicago insisted on returning explicit sexual content to artistic practice. Female sexuality became an obvious focus of exploration since sexuality has historically been the site of women’s oppression. As Wilding, who was a colleague of Chicago’s in the Feminist Art Program, has argued, the notion “cunt is beautiful,” “like the civil rights mantra ‘black is beautiful,’” was about “claiming what has been most derogated as your strength.”

The subtleties and complexities of the feminist debates of the 1970s are generally lost in accounts that regard feminist art of the period as simply and reductively essentialist. At the risk of oversimplifying “1980s feminism, I would like to define loosely a set of concerns that became dominant in feminist art criticism from this period. From the late 1970s on, a broad shift occurred in feminist art theory and practice. The emphasis on activism, collaboration, and the notion of feminist art as an articulation of female experience gave way to an examination of femininity as constructed through representation and a critique of the “male gaze” (the means through which images of women are structured—as objects of male desire to palliate male fear of symbolic castration—in patriarchal culture). While 1970s feminists had, as noted above, asserted that femininity was not biological but culturally constructed, this position was often viewed narrowly through Chicago’s work and criticized as essentialist; earlier feminists’ generally celebratory view of the female body and female experience and their highly personal approach to art-making were also frequently singled out for criticism in the 1980s. The differences of opinion among them were lost in this general move toward the promotion of feminist art that “deconstructed” the pleasure that men in patriarchal culture take in representations of the female body.

As noted above, Griselda Pollock has articulated a theory of feminist critical practice that demands resistance of visual pleasure, “especially when the visible object *par excellence* is the image of woman.” Following Brechtian strategies of distanciation, feminist art then must specifically avoid the representation of the female body and must resist the “realist myth,” that is, the notion that simply representing something transparently relates its essential meaning, that making something visible produces empowerment or ensures access to knowledge.

Typical of the poststructuralist feminist emphasis on critiquing patriarchal formations of viewing pleasure rather than presenting positive images of femininity is Pollock’s insistence that feminist art practice must resist the dominating scopophilic and fetishizing effects of the “male gaze.” For, as Lisa Tickner—also a British feminist art historian—who wrote in a 1984 essay, women “have an investment in the deconstruction of ‘femininity’ and compensatory pleasures.” Perhaps not surprisingly, Tickner ends this essay with an explicit reference to *The Dinner Party*, suggesting that the piece had come to epitomize for antessentialist feminist theorists all that they rejected in 1970s feminist art from the United States. Hence, she argues that its “deployment of the fixed signs of femininity produces a reverse discourse, a political/aesthetic strategy founded on the same terms in which ‘difference’ has already been laid down.” She opposes this diagnostically postmodern work, which “is rather an interrogation of an unixed femininity produced in specific systems of signification.”

Tickner’s argument makes clear that the development of a poststructuralist feminist art theory in the 1980s in some senses took place at the expense of the kind of feminist art from the 1970s that attempted to represent the female body in order to reclaim it from patriarchy, and that, furthermore, this vast range of body-oriented, utopian, transformative work was often collapsed into *The Dinner Party*, which was then cited as exemplary of its problems. The shift in paradigm, which entailed the reduction of 1970s feminism to a relatively narrow set of issues that could easily be
dismissed, seems to reflect a kind of generational (and even uncomfortably "Oedipal"-seeming) anxiety. As Mira Schor argued in her critique of this dismissal of 1970s feminism, "Essentialism in this context was a category created by its opposition"; it is an unfair label to the extent that women artists dealing with gender representation have always operated in a complex zone between "the polarities of 'essence and 'culture.' 170 Generational differences and the particularities of local cultural politics (most of the feminists who articulated the poststructuralist arguments dominant in the 1980s were from Britain) motivated the oppositional stance taken toward so-called 1970s essentialist feminism in the United States (with The Dinner Party viewed as paradigmatic). By identifying, defining, and rejecting earlier assumptions, a new generation of feminists moved the discussion in a new direction. At the same time such a strategy inevitably oversimplified and misrepresented certain aspects of feminist theory and practice from the 1970s.

In looking again at The Dinner Party, it may be useful to reexamine the context in which it developed, in particular, to look more closely at the political reasons for the formulation of a theory of a "female imagery" linked to female experience. While I do not wish to use Chicago's own statements simplistically to "prove" that this theory wasn't as naive and self-defeating as it was later accused of being, there seems to be a real need to open up the question of "female experience" again and to try to understand the role that it played for Chicago and her contemporaries. At the very least, this should provide a richer historical and theoretical context in which to view The Dinner Party.

"FEMALE IMAGERY": A POLITICAL STRATEGY

Poststructuralist feminist theorists have been responsible for radically reframing the ideological effects of representations of female bodies and for making feminism respectable within mainstream (that is, male-dominated) academic discourse. They have also, however, tended to oversimplify the theories and practices of the supposedly "essentialist" artists and writers of the 1970s and to narrow considerably the possible strategies for a feminist art practice by calling polemically for feminist art to resist the male gaze and to avoid at all costs an "essentializing" notion of femininity. In hindsight one sees clearly how prescriptive this antieffeminate feminist theory has often been. (Note, for example, Pollock's insistence that feminism "must" resist specificity and "fuss" to create an image of particular groups of people—is a crucial component of any "coalition politics" and must be accommodated within any politics of representation (certainly Pollock herself is assuming a particular coalition among women in general in her political critiques of essentialism). At the same time Fuss is careful to point out—in a comment that would apply to Pollock's theory as well as to Chicago's—that "the problem with positing the category of experience as the basis of a feminist pedagogy is that the very object of our inquiry, 'female experience,' is never as unified, as knowable, as universal, and as stable as we presume it to be . . . The appeal to experience, as the ultimate test of all knowledge, merely subverts the subject in its fantasy of autonomy and control. Belief in the truth of Experience is as much an ideological production as belief in the experience of Truth." Fuss's critique of essentialism is valuable for its insightful recognition of the inevitability of essentializing logic in any sexual or, for that matter, racial politics. Essentialism, she notes, is a key element of identity politics, allowing experience "to be politicized." The "determining factor in deciding essentialism's political or strategic value is," she argues, "dependent on who practices it"—and, I would add, when, where, and how they practice it and on what terms the foundational identity is defined."

Chicago's "essentialism," like that of her colleagues Ruth Ikiss, Lucy Lippard, Arlene Raven, Miriam Schapiro, and others, was a crucial component of 1970s identity politics; it enabled the development of a feminist politics of art and art history. As Broude and Garrard have argued, the "body based female aesthetic" of the early 1970s (what Lippard described at the time as the use of "gyno-sensuous imagery") was equally "an enabling myth." The use of centralist imagery and craft techniques of 1970s feminist art "was a political act, a defiance of the conventions that had made it death for earlier women artists to associate themselves with forms and iconography that had been stereotypically and pejoratively deemed "feminine." Using these forms and materials was a way, again, of reclaiming them and valuing the femininity with which they were associated. Thus, just as poststructuralist feminists have taken an extreme position in rejecting any artwork that does not resist specularity or forcefully deconstruct patriarchal notions of "femininity" in order to produce what Pollock terms a "feminist critical practice," so Chicago and other advocates of "centralized" or "gyno-sensuous" imagery had a specifically political goal in arguing—that at particular moment—for a "female imagery" (just as I have a particular agenda in rethinking these evaluations).

The definition of a female sensibility, furthermore, was necessary in order to counter, in Chicago's words, the art world's view that gender has nothing to do with art and to assert that "a woman might have a different point of view than a man." It was a crucial step for feminism to mark gender as informative of cultural practice, to refuse the masculinist notion of "universality" that guaranteed the privileging of male-invented forms and themes as neutrally aesthetic (as beyond race, gender, sexuality, and class). "Women's art" became a unifying factor, a means of binding together an infinitely variable group of practices. Michele Barrett, who was respectfully critical of The Dinner Party's "vaginal imagery," which she saw as indicative of Chicago's "somewhat biologicist approach to feminism," also recognized that "women's shared experience of oppression" is crucial to the construction of a feminist cultural politics. Ultimately it is in part the difficulty of, in Barrett's words, "arriving at a consensus among feminists as to what constitutes 'feminist' art" and the impossibility of ensuring an empowering rather than objectifying reading of centralized imagery that explained the mixed reception of The Dinner Party.

"FEMALE IMAGERY": UNIVERSALISM, RACISM, HETEROSEXISM

Perhaps the most compelling critiques of the notion of a "female imagery" so central to the work of
Chicago and others in the 1970s have been articulated by feminists of color and lesbian feminists who have taken issue with the tendency of those defining this imagery to assume that there is such a thing as a unified—implicitly heterosexual and white (not to mention middle-class)—female experience. For example, poet Audre Lorde, who described herself as a "Black lesbian feminist socialist mother of two," wrote succinctly that "white women ignore their built-in privilege of whiteness and define woman in terms of their own experience alone." Once the coalition of "oppressed women" had been formulated in a general way in the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was a crucial step for writers such as Lorde to intervene in this discourse and call into question the notion of a universal "female experience."

Two passionate and convincing critiques were made of The Dinner Party's perceived claim of narrating a comprehensive women's history. In 1978 a group of Hispanic women from the National Women's Political Caucus visited the Dinner Party studio; following their visit, a member of the group, Estelle Chacon, sent Chicago a rough draft of an article she had written that was to appear in a Hispanic magazine.49 In this article, which is an impassioned complaint about discrimination against Hispanics in Los Angeles, Chacon praised The Dinner Party as a "magnificent work of art and history of women," and an "original" forum for women's achievements. At the same time, however, she expressed her disappointment at finding that, while the 999 names of prominent women on the porcelain floor tiles included several Hispanics, no "pre-conquest New World heroines were honored guests" at the table itself. Chacon writes,

The Hispanas do not have a role model in this art project that through the genius of a Feminist Artist, combines art, history, and politics. . . . I am truly sad that like men historians that have constantly overlooked the achievements of our Chicano . . . Chicago, who claims to hurts about the omission of women in history, turns and hurts millions of Hispanics by not considering, not even one of us, to be an honored guest at her Dinner Party. Like most Anglos she thinks the New World ends at the Rio Grande . . . [and she believes that] Hispanas are not important enough to be considered in History or in art. Chacon concluded by calling for a boycott of the piece and a letter-writing campaign to protest its exclusion of "Hispanas."

In an essay originally published in Ms. magazine, Alice Walker also pointed to Chicago's ignorance of women of color in history (specifically black women painters), focusing in particular on The Dinner Party's representation of black female subjectivity in the one plate devoted to a black woman, the Sojourner Truth plate (fig. 31.4). Although she "loved Chicago's art and audacity," Walker was clear about her disapproval of Chicago's design for the Sojourner Truth plate: "All of the other plates are creatively imagined vaginas. . . . The Sojourner Truth plate is the only one in the collection that shows—instead of a vagina—a face. In fact, three faces. . . . It occurred to me that perhaps white women feminists, no less than white women generally, can not imagine black women have vaginas. Or if they can, where imagination leads them is too far to go." (Artist Lorraine O'Grady has elaborated upon Walker's critique, noting that "Sojourner Truth, the only black guest, must make it without a pussy.")46

Ironically Walker criticizes The Dinner Party for not producing an image of black female subjectivity through vulvar symbology. While certainly the obvious criticism—as per the general opprobrium heaped upon Chicago's so-called vaginal imagery—would have been of the sexualization and objectification of (white) femininity and the collapsing of difference into a unified symbol of femaleness, Walker brilliantly exposes the hesitancy white feminists tend to exhibit in relation to black female sexuality. Rather than acknowledging the threat of the sexuality and maternity of black women, the white woman prefers to "deny that the black woman has a vagina. Is capable of motherhood. Is a woman." Finally, Walker concludes, The Dinner Party exemplifies the fact that "white women feminists [have] revealed themselves as incapable of white and black women of comprehending blackness and feminism in the same body."

I count myself, a white feminist, among those Walker accuses of a certain blindness (and, in general, I think she is on the mark for white feminists, who have trouble comprehending the inevitability of race just as black men often seem to have trouble comprehending the inevitability of gender—as constituted in the oppression of nonmale, non-white people). Those of us who have benefited from being white—like Chicago, like myself—don't tend to see race as an aspect of our femininity. As Richard Dyer has written: "Black is always marked as a colour . . . and is always particularizing; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality. . . . White people's inability to see whiteness appears intractable." Just as gallery owners and museum curators have for years defended the lack of exhibitions of women's work through recourse to the naturalizing idea that they are "gender blind" and interested only in "quality" art (thus implying that women's art simply isn't as "good" as men's), so art world feminism (that is, the feminism that is dominated by white women artists, critics, and historians) has tended to naturalize race, failing to see its constitutive role in (sexual) identity.

The overall points that Walker and Chacon make about feminism's race blindness are crucial to the re-thinking of the notion of female imagery, with its supposed grounding in "female experience." Chicago's emphasis in The Dinner Party on (white) women's history at the expense of a broader, more complex vision of who makes up the coalition "women" epitomizes the general tendency of white feminists to focus on gender to the exclusion of other components of subjectivity. At the same time it should be stressed that the now commonly held assumption that 1970s feminism simply ignored issues of race is not accurate. While most historical narratives of the period suggest that feminists were oblivious to race (and, until recently, most feminist art historians have focused almost exclusively on white women artists), in fact, the 1970s feminist art community often debated issues of race, as Sheila de Bretteville's 1977 design for the cover of
the Los Angeles–based feminist journal _Chrysalis_ suggests. Black feminists have been central to the movement from the beginning; women such as Faith Ringgold and Betsey Saar were and continue to be extremely active and important figures in the art world.98

Just as it is incorrect to suggest that 1970s feminism ignored race entirely, so it is inaccurate to dismiss feminism from this period as having been blindly heterosexual. While issues of sexuality and sexual practice were certainly not understood in the way that we comprehend them today, they were central to consciousness-raising within the feminist art movement and, thus, to the bases of feminist art pratice. Sexual orientation was often discussed during consciousness-raising sessions. Panels, lectures, exhibitions, and articles considered the question of "lesbian sensibilities in art." All the same, although periodic expressions of frustration on the part of lesbians in consciousness-raising groups at the Feminist Art Program and in the Dinner Party project were discussed within these groups, sexual orientation was generally not regarded as a fundamental component of identity politics the way it came to be with the rise of queer theory in the 1980s.99 While creating a community of women was a goal of feminism in this period, the sexual implications of this were often veiled.102 The "female experience" that was so central to Chicago and her colleagues' development of a feminist art practice was clearly about the "common oppression [of women] based on . . . gender," and not about race or the sexual identification of the feminists involved.103

The Dinner Party, however, was open to being understood as a monument to lesbianism. In a homophobic 1979 review Kay Larson, oddly enough, identified the entire project as having a "gay woman theme," describing it acerbically as "a ritual of oral consumption, a communion of the spirit in the flesh, a cultural cannibalism in which we're invited to eat from the labia of mythical women and ingest their power." Jan Adams responded more appreciatively in _The Lesbian Tide_, noting that, while "a charge that lesbians are treated as tokens [in the piece] seems justified, I feel a lesbian sensibility in the imagery." Unifying lesbian politics with those of women in general, she concluded that the work "advances every woman's struggle against erasure in a woman-hating world" and noted the presence of lesbians in Chicago's "her-story"; "We are there, highlighted by Sappho's green and lavender floral plate and an exquisite lily motif portraying Natalie Barney."105

Names on the floor tiles and documentary panels grouped around Barney include a number of lesbian artists and writers: Romaine Brooks, Radclyffe Hall, and Gertrude Stein. At the same time neither Sappho nor Woolf, who are also represented at the table, are explicitly identified—either through the iconography of the place settings or in the biographical descriptions in the Dinner Party book—as lesbians. It is Barney who is explicitly identified there as a lesbian: "Lesbianism is—in the context of those grouped around Barney—presented not only as a sexual preference, but also as a political choice, one which refutes the heterosexual bias of the culture." The book explains the logic by which the project workers chose the names included around Barney: "In addition to avowed lesbians, other women in this section include those who chose women as companions, with or without a sexual relationship; women who refused to allow their identities to be submerged by the men with whom they were involved; and other women of the French salons."106

The pitfalls of identity politics, which have become increasingly evident to feminists since the mid-1980s, are exposed both in Adams's ambivalent and partially thwarted desire to identify with the labial forms of the plates and in Chicago's inevitably clumsy attempt to address lesbianism by seeking to name it—by labeling Barney, but not Woolf or Sappho, as a lesbian. Again, _The Dinner Party_ enables us to open up important questions about identity: What, after all, is a lesbian? Any woman who has sex with another woman? Or only a woman who identifies herself with the politics of lesbianism as they are constituted at a particular moment? Or a woman identified as such by Chicago and others? And how does one represent or symbolize in visual form a particular identity without implicitly fixing its signification, implying that lived identity is codifiable in formal terms?

In this light Chicago's painful attempt to name the lesbian can be seen as a valiant but perhaps doomed effort to expand the notion of "female experience" to include the experiences of lesbians ("or other women of the French salons"). This failure is endemic to a particular phase of feminist thought; through its very failure this attempt to name enabled feminists subsequently to rethink identity politics. Chicago's own later insights—"We cast the dialogue incorrectly in the seventies. We cast it around gender, and we were also simplistic about the nature of identity. Identity is multiple—"resonates with revisionist theories of identity informed by poststructuralism.107 Thus, in her important essay from the mid-1980s, "A Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway points out that "it has become difficult to name one's feminism by a single adjective. . . . Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic. . . . There is nothing about being 'female' that naturally binds women."108 In spite of Chicago's interest in including many kinds of women within the renovated historical narrative of _The Dinner Party_ (expressed in interviews, in the Dinner Party book, and through her inclusion of figures such as Barney and Sojourner Truth), the project has been interpreted by many as reinforcing traditional exclusions through its attempt at naming. It has in fact been seen as epitomizing the problematic logic of a particular stereotype of 1970s feminism, with its utopian and ultimately universalizing tendencies. One has to take seriously these interpretations of the piece, which inform its meanings within art history, while acknowledging that it is a product of a particular moment in feminist politics and of a particular person's negotiation of these politics.109

**Feminist Critiques of The Dinner Party: A "Collaborative" or "Cooperative" Project?**

At least in part because of Chicago's success in marketing her ideas and projects, especially _The Dinner Party_, they have come to be seen as paradigmatic of either the triumph or the failure of 1970s feminism, according to the evaluator's point of view. The alternative mode of production Chicago practiced in the Dinner Party studio, for example, has been judged a success or failure according to certain ideas regarding what feminist collaboration was about during the first decade of feminist art practice.

In the June 1979 issue of _Ms._ magazine, April Kingsley wrote a short essay on the piece that carefully but clearly distanced the magazine from Chicago's mode of production. _The Dinner Party_, Kingsley stated, was "completely one woman's conception, and therefore not typical of feminist collective projects."110 Her implicit disapproval indicates a discomfort with Chicago's methods that has been expressed more directly by feminist scholars and art critics. For example, Barrett noted that Chicago's work process entailed "principles of collective work . . . so much . . . one I might recognize as a feminist but an attempt to recreate the 'school' or studio of an 'Artistic Genius' like Michelangelo. Although hundreds of people gave much time and work to the project it is Judy Chicago personally who has, apparently not unwillingly, made an international reputation from it."111 Indeed, seemingly confirming this harsh judgment, in the _Dinner Party_ book Chicago explicitly identified herself with the Italian Renaissance master, remarking, "I can imagine how Michelangelo must have felt—twelve years at that ceiling."112 Clearly _The Dinner Party_ did not fulfill the utopian ideals of nonhierarchical collaboration that are understood as having been central to the mainstream women's movement in the 1970s. As all of the participants in the project have stressed (including Chicago herself), she controlled the studio, determined the design of the runners and banners, and designed and painted the plates. Although she scrupulously documented the contributions of participants in each portion of the project (and honored them through photographs on panels mounted during the exhibition of the piece as well as in the _Dinner Party_ book), Chicago clearly took full credit for the conception and creation of the piece. This is hardly hypocritical, however, since she has never subscribed to the notion,
often held to be common to all feminists, that feminism entails a complete abdication of authorial iden-
tity and authority in general.

It must, however, be stressed that Chicago has never made exorbitant claims for the "collaborative" or nonhierarchical nature of the project. She has in-
isted that it was never conceived or presented as a "collaborative" project as this notion is generally un-
derstood (although she has expressed hopes that the piece would "demonstrate another [alternative] mode of art-making for a woman artist"). Instead, she
proposed the notion of a "flexible" or "benevolent" hierarchy, "where people get recognized for their
work but one person is in charge." The Dinner Party project, she insisted throughout, was cooper-
avive, not collaborative, in the sense that it involved a clear hierarchy but cooperative effort to ensure its
successful completion.

Chicago was clear from the beginning about what was expected of participants in the project, and gen-
erally speaking, those who remained on a long-term basis have been positive or at worst ambivalently ap-
preciative in their accounts of their experiences. As weaver Elaine Ireland recalled, the project was "exciting and horrendous all the time. We could have
grown more easily, not been devastated so often, been
coddled as well as challenged, been given more explicit credit. But I have to admit that I would probably do it
again." While working on Chicago's project was clearly a challenge on both a personal and professional
level, everyone involved was there presumably be-
cause she or he wanted to be. But the situation in-
evitably created feelings of resentment and ambiva-
ience toward Chicago, who was empowered—within a
context that at least some of the participants inter-
preted as unsuccessfully "collaborative"—
to make all the rules and who ultimately received the authorial credit for the piece. The problem of Chicago's "au-
thority" (and, arguably, authoritarianism) remains a
sticking point in the reception of The Dinner Party and
consequently must continue to be negotiated in any at-
tempt to understand its position in feminist art history.

Finally it is difficult to ignore the seeming con-
tradictions apparent in the contrast between Chi-
cago's identification with Michelangelo (her desire to
be, in Maureen Mullarkey's words, "bound in mo-
rocco") and the critique, developed by poststruc-
turalist feminist art historians and seemingly implicit in The Dinner Party's subversive insistence on a fem-
inization of historical narrative and art production, of
masculist conceptions of greatness or genius. Beyond the question of its putative essentialism, then, it is
the contradiction between Chicago's critique of
masculist historical narrative and modernist for-
malism and her adherence to conventional notions of
greatness—her desire to be a great artist within terms that are structurally masculinist—that makes The
Dinner Party as controversial as it is in debates about feminist art. The Dinner Party aims to elevate
women—including, many have argued, Chicago herself—to a state of transcendence or genius usu-
ally reserved for male subjects but does not question the
exclusions that a belief in transcendence neces-
sarily implies.

BY WAY OF A PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION: FEMINISM AND HISTORY

The Dinner Party subverts mainstream modernism's proscription against symbolic allusion with a sexually
charged theme; it also bluntly feminizes historical narrative. The piece is, in Chicago's words, a re-
interpretation of the Last Supper from the point of view of
"the people who have done the cooking through-
out history." Like Mary Beth Edelson's 1972 version of
the Last Supper, titled Some Living American
Women Artists, in which the faces of the male pro-
tagonists of Leonardo's famous painting are replaced by
those of women artists, it is a feminized restag-
ing and expansion of the all-male club of Christ and
his twelve disciples—in Chicago's case, with three
groups of thirteen women. Presenting this "her-
story" in a populist form—one that is didactically and
decoratively accessible ("kitsch," in the terms of
modernist art criticism)—the piece attempts to reach
the largest possible audience with its utopian message of
women's greatness. By creating a monumental structure heroizing "great ladies," however, Chicago
both challenged and reinforced conventional patriar-
chial conceptions of history. The piece undermines
male historical narrative by insisting on reinserting
important women and yet reinforces the problematic,
masculist notion of "greatness." Moreover, as Mi-
chele Barrett has argued, it creates a hierarchical
structure of women that inevitably privileges some
(the 59 at the table) over others (the 999 on the floor,
as well as those left out entirely).

Chicago's investment in greatness informs The
Dinner Party—in its ambivalent attempt to raise craft
to high-art status; its modified, "cooperative" model of
authorship (which maintains Chicago as primary au-
thor); and its presentation as an isolated "master-
piece" within the museum setting. In the Dinner Party
book, Chicago published a journal entry from 1975
stating her desire to "make a piece so far beyond judg-
ment that it will enter the cultural pool and never be
erased from history, as women's work has been erased
before." The poignancy of this desire lies in its in-
evitable failure. The conflict between wanting to re-
verse history to include women and aspiring to trans-
scend it altogether has followed The Dinner Party
through its public existence so far, just as has the ten-
sion, identified by Judith Butler, between the desire
to represent female subjectivity in a positive way and the
need to avoid fixing it through limiting and uni-
versalizing bodily signifiers.

The burgeonning (or reburgeonning) of feminist interest in the body, women's sexualities, and female
desire in 1990s art practice and theory alerts us to the
fact that these conflicts—still unresolved and
problematic—still offer much to compel feminist
thought. While artists such as Mary Beth Edelson,
Harmony Hammond, Mira Schor, and Faith Wild-
ing have sustained their commitment to exploring fe-
nale sexual forms in their work since the 1970s, a new
generation of feminists—including Judie Bamber,
Lauren Lesko, and Millie Wilson—have turned with
a vengeance to the type of vulgar, libidinal, and orif-
cial forms that were so central to the explorations of
Chicago and other feminists in the 1970s. And yet,
as Susan Kandel points out, conditioned by the
critical awareness of poststructuralist feminist theory
(if unfortunately sometimes ignorant of 1970s fem-
inist art and theory), they approach these forms from
a different perspective.

Acknowledging the inevitable oversimplification
that such comparisons entail, it is nonetheless provoc-
ative to suggest that the difference between work
produced by feminists in the 1970s and that produced
today is one of both attitude and emphasis. No longer
utopian, feminist artists today tend to conceptualize
the female body—which they often render in frag-
mented form or through substitutes such as cloth-
ing—as radically polymorphous rather than repre-
senting it through the unified symbol of a definable
"female imagery." This body is not only and perhaps
not even primarily female: its "femaleness" (and what
that may be is open to question) is interrelated with its
ethnicity, its economic status, its sexuality.

Although Chicago and her colleagues recognized
these other aspects of identity, they emphasized fe-
maleness in an idealizing way; it was the constraining
factor of their coalition politics. As I have attempted
to make clear here, they were never committed to a
simplytenistic notion of "biological essentialism," al-
though they were clearly hopeful about the possibil-
ities of combating discrimination through the recu-
peration of women's bodies through representation.
Today such hopefulness, for better or for worse, holds
no authority and, in fact—as the fate of The Dinner Party
within art world discourse makes clear—
genders a certain amount of condescension and
even hostility.

With all of its shortcomings and contradictions,
however, the diverse, complex feminist art of the
1970s, its theory and practice, has been fundamental
to subsequent developments in feminist art and art
history (which themselves suffer from internal con-
tradictions). While feminism has moved to a new
place and has come to acknowledge and emphasize the
complexities of sexual politics and the conflicted vi-

cissitudes of identification, it has been able to do so
only because of the foundations laid by feminists such
as Chicago, Hammond, Schapiro, Wilding, and their
colleagues and through works as controversial as The
Dinner Party. Whether subsequent feminist theorists
and artists wish to continue within the utopian vein mined by Chicago and her colleagues or to react critically against it, in my view we would benefit from respecting these important "mother figures" for the chances they took at a time when no one took women artists or women's issues seriously and, perhaps especially, for the mistakes they weren't afraid of making.

NOTES

Epigraph from Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge, 1994), 188.
3. Following a five-month exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum that began in September 2002, The Dinner Party is now permanently housed at that museum in its own gallery, thanks to the generous support of Elizabeth A. Sackler.
5. As Lucy Lippard has pointed out, in much of the new feminist work from the 1970s, "it feels as though the wheel is being reinvented by those who don't know the feminist art history of 'transgression'" ("Moving Targets/Concentric Circles: Notes from the Radical Whirlwind," introduction to Lippard's The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art [New York: New Press, 1995], 3–28). I am indebted to Lippard, who has been the single most consistent champion of 1970s feminist art for decades, for sharing her thoughts on an early version of this text with me.
6. For Paglia's offensive "postfeminist" views (e.g., her dismissal of "endlessly complaining feminists" [9]), see her Sex, Art, and American Culture (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). Rolph most clearly demonstrates the dangers of losing this history in her excoration of "fashionable feminists" and "rape crisis feminists"; see her disturbing The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993). Given the striking parallels between their positions and those of traditional patriarchy, it is no surprise that both women have been given enormous media attention.
7. A perfect example of this erasure is the revisionist history of the California Institute of the Arts, Valencia (known as CalArts), as a site for the development of radical postmodern practice in the early 1970s—accounts that completely ignore the motivating presence of the Feminist Art Program run by Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in the early 1970s. For example, in the 1987 exhibition CalArts: Skeptical Beliefs (Chicago: Renaissance Society, University of Chicago; Newport, Calif.: Newport Harbor Art Museum, 1987). The needlework loft was run by Susan Hill, who cowrote (with Chicago) the second Dinner Party book, Embroidering Our Heritage: The Dinner Party Needlework (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1980).
12. On the use of craft to "feminize" art practice and subvert modernism, see Norma Broude, "Miriam Schapiro and 'Femmage': Reflections on the Conflict between Decoration and Abstraction in Twentieth-Century Art" (1980), in Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany, ed. Norma Broude and

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