



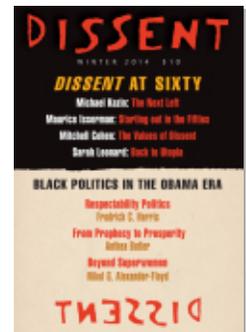
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Art Meets Politics

How Judy Chicago's Dinner Party Came to Brooklyn

Gail Levin

AN ICON OF American art, Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* is the focus of the new Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. The generous and elegant facility features 8,300 square feet dedicated to showing art reflecting "the core values of feminism—equality and justice." The story of how *The Dinner Party* came not once, but twice to Brooklyn, exemplifies the nexus of art and politics.

The Dinner Party made its debut to great fanfare at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on March 15, 1979. The museum's director, Henry Hopkins, praised the work, explaining that Chicago, with deliberate irony, had employed "women's techniques" in a woman's context "to create a major feminist statement." "The overall context is universal in its impact with no sexual or historical limitations," he added, calling it "an idea of consequence." What the public saw was not just art, but a work that promoted the then novel idea that women had played a significant role in the history of Western civilization.

The Dinner Party's monumental triangular table (forty-eight feet on each side) consists of three wings, the first of which runs from prehistory to Classical Rome, with place settings that begin with mythical and legendary female figures, such as Ishtar from Mesopotamia; Kali from India; the snake goddess from Crete; Sophia, whom the early Gnostic Christians worshipped as the female Holy Spirit; and the Amazon. Historical figures begin with Hatshepsut from ancient Egypt and continue through figures such as Judith from the He-

brew Bible; the lesbian poet Sappho; and Hypatia, who emulated her learned father and was brutally martyred by a Christian mob.

Wing two continues through the Reformation, including such figures as Marcella, an early Christian; the Byzantine Empress Theodora; Petronilla de Meath (persecuted as a witch); Christine de Pisan (author of *The Book of the City of Women*); Elizabeth I of England; and the Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi. The final wing stretches from the American Revolution to the women's revolution, featuring, among others, the Native American Sacajawea, the astronomer Caroline Herschel, the abolitionist Sojourner Truth, the feminist Susan B. Anthony, the physician Elizabeth Blackwell, the poet Emily Dickinson, the composer and suffragist Ethel Smyth, birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, novelist Virginia Woolf, and artist Georgia O'Keeffe.

On the heritage floor's porcelain tiles, are 999 more names of women, distributed in relationship to each of the thirty-nine women who had place settings of their own. The names on the floor were chosen with the criteria of whether a woman made "a mark on (male) history" and whether she made "a contribution to her own sex." Viewers walk around the table, looking at the plates and the pictorial runners beneath them. Each of the runners symbolizes its subject, some more representational than others. That of the eighteenth-century feminist theoretician Mary Wollstonecraft depicts her death in childbirth, bearing witness to the tragic loss of women's lives. The lighting of the table and the floor is dramatic in a darkened setting, creating a sense of awe at the recovery of a history once lost.

The Dinner Party at once challenged modernist notions of the sacrosanct, apolitical aesthetic object in "high art" and honored crafts, which are usually known as popular or "low art" and generally relegated to women and domes-

ticity. Equally radical, Chicago attempted to get her audience to reevaluate Western culture's omission of women's contributions. Thus, *The Dinner Party* threatened the status quo on several levels. Not surprisingly, the piece generated a lot of media attention and endless controversy.

The *New York Times* reported from San Francisco that the piece "is dominated by Miss Chicago's feminine imagery, or what she calls a 'butterfly symbol,' which can be seen on most of the 14 inch plates. Although the image suggests the vagina, Miss Chicago has in numerous interviews rejected that as simplistic and reductive. She said the imagery was symbolic of liberation and resurrection."

By April, a feature in the *New York Times* focused on the difficulty Chicago was having getting the piece shown: "Though it's caught the attention of the public, 'The Dinner Party' has not received rave notices from critics, some of whom have perceived in it more message than esthetics. But Miss Chicago, in New York last week on a promotion tour, insists that she seeks a wider audience than the 'elitist' art world, that hers is an art that is meant to 'encourage social change.'" This article also reported that the Seattle Art Museum had dropped out of the tour, claiming that the space had been preempted by another project, and quoted Chicago about *The Dinner Party* as a metaphor "for the way women's achievements are regarded in our society." The reporter commented upon the "crusading light in her eye" when Chicago asked, "Do you realize that the site in Seneca Falls, N.Y., where the first feminist convention was held in 1848, is now a laundromat?" Chicago feared that *The Dinner Party* would suffer the fate of erasure to which so many women's achievements had repeatedly succumbed.

ON A VISIT to the East Coast, Chicago not only gave interviews, but, as later reported in *Ms.* magazine, reached out to leaders in feminist politics. She spoke to the Thursday Caucus, a New York branch of the National Women's Political Caucus, coordinated by Lael Stegall and fund-raisers Sarah Kovner and Bobbie Handman, who ran Arts, Letters & Politics. Kovner, also chair of the

First Women's Bank, got together with Nanette Rainone, then communications director to Brooklyn Borough President Howard Golden, and agreed that *The Dinner Party* had to be seen in New York." Kovner brought in Nelson Rockefeller's daughter, Ann Rockefeller Roberts, who hosted a fund-raiser aimed at getting *The Dinner Party* to New York and worked together with Kovner, Rainone, the art critic Lucy Lippard, and others to strategize which museum might show the work.

The Museum of Modern Art was not a likely candidate, even though it had been founded in the late 1920s by Roberts's grandmother, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, together with her friends, Lillie P. Bliss and Mrs. Cornelius J. (Mary) Sullivan, who had declared the need to "challenge the conservative policies of traditional museums." Forgetting its mission, however, the Modern had since become rather conservative. Although MoMA purchased one of Chicago's abstract prints in 1965, it managed to ignore not only her subsequent feminist works but also the entire feminist art movement for more than thirty-five years.

Rainone convinced Golden, as borough president, to write to the Brooklyn Museum's director, Michael Botwinick, promoting the idea that *The Dinner Party* would be good for Brooklyn. But in the face of the museum's deficit and reported hostility by one of its top female curators, months went by and a lot of campaigning took place before the museum signed on. Roberts, Kovner, Rainone, and their co-conspirators came up with \$100,000, but it was not until November 30, 1979 that the exhibition was finally scheduled. Botwinick told the press, "We recognize that people very much want to see 'The Dinner Party.'"

The controversy over the piece clearly was political—especially whether art should convey political meaning—to which the feminist theologian Clare B. Fischer answered "most of western 'high' art has been commissioned by the rich and powerful and *that* is political art." Fischer took up the repeated charge that Chicago "gets all the credit for the work which was performed by apprentices," recommending the exhibit's photo documentation and that included in the book *The Dinner Party*. She noted

“the collaborative process is a tough one which feminists have not perfected.” She might have added that few male artists had ever credited their assistants. Some four hundred people, mostly volunteers, helped to realize Chicago’s vision. Many still testify to the value of their experience, and some have continued to work with Chicago.

WELL BEFORE *The Dinner Party* opened, Chicago told two interviewers what her ambitious vision for the piece was: “I wanted to make a piece that was beyond judgment. For example, if you go and you see the Sistine Chapel you don’t say, ‘Oh, I don’t like it.’ It’s irrelevant whether you like it or not. Whether it’s good or bad is irrelevant, it simply stands as a testament to human achievement. When I was in Europe traveling around I went to see the Léger Museum and the Matisse Chapel and Picasso’s house. And I so longed to see that kind of achievement having been made by a woman.” She sought to change consciousness through the power of her art and both her content and her huge ambition were sure to provoke.

The supportive San Francisco museum director was also quoted in the press: “The audience was overwhelmingly favorable and patient. Some raise the question: but is it art? ‘The Dinner Party’s’ appeal to me became even stronger as I watched during the 12 weeks the power it held. It remained in pristine condition; no one tried to touch it. The audience found it a real experience. That’s art.” He explained, “I was not upset by the sexual symbolism theme—if you want to call it that. This museum has no problem with that, although there are pockets in the country that do. We are more open in attitude than some institutions and people. That is good for us and sad for other areas.” The popularity of the piece in San Francisco, where ninety thousand people saw the work during the three months it was on view, was undeniable. It repaid all its costs to the museum and more and broke all records of attendance during the five and a half years of Hopkins’s directorship. Yet Chicago soon saw that she had miscalculated when she had imagined that the alternative structure she had built in order to survive and create her

work could function in the museum world. She recognized that she would have to deal with the mainstream on their terms.

On December 2, 1979, the Sarah Institute, a not-for-profit organization “established to give recognition to women in the arts and humanities who have been denied equal access and support of their talent” opened a benefit exhibition in New York for *The Dinner Party*. The invitation was issued by the painter Alice Neel, Gloria Steinem, the Sarah Institute, and the Through the Flower Corporation, which Chicago had created as a nonprofit support group. Patrons paid \$35 for the cocktail reception and \$75 for an autographed copy of the new book, *The Dinner Party*. Among those on the benefit committee’s long list were David Rockefeller, Jr., the poet Honor Moore, civic leader and activist Elinor Guggenheimer, and Lucy Lippard. Examples of Chicago’s work, mostly borrowed from New York City collections, were shown.

“American Formalism is toppling,” Chicago presciently declared in early 1980. “We are definitely seeing a new humanism, which is attributable to the women’s movement though we’re not getting the recognition.” A few critics were early to recognize that *The Dinner Party* epitomized the postmodern aesthetic, breaking down the barrier between art and craft, and turning away from the austerity of modernist art with its emphasis on form over content.

Diane Gelon, *The Dinner Party’s* administrator, recalled that she and Chicago had a fight after the show closed: “She was truly devastated and had no energy. She had poured everything into this work. And then the reviews and the canceled tour.” With *The Dinner Party* dismantled and crated, Chicago had to pay \$1,000 a month to store it in a warehouse, its future unknown. She raised money by selling posters after her lectures and even by passing the hat. Gelon refused to let *The Dinner Party* sit in storage. She shared Chicago’s anxiety about its being erased from history so went on the road, following leads, drumming up support and venues to show the piece, even working with community groups.

Because museums initially rejected showing *The Dinner Party*, it traveled to alternative

venues in Houston, Boston, Cleveland, and Atlanta, all sponsored by local grass roots groups composed mainly of women determined to see the work in their own communities. Although many critics rejected *The Dinner Party*, Chicago's book about it reached its own audience and generated additional media coverage. "We haven't seen anything like this in America for a long time," commented Calvin Cannon, then dean at the University of Houston's suburban campus at Clear Lake, where sixty thousand turned out to see *The Dinner Party* in 1980. "It had the same kind of feeling of human solidarity for me as the Civil Rights movement in the '60s." Passions were high: Elizabeth Stevens, the art critic for the *Baltimore Sun*, sent a note and the payment of \$100 that she had received for her review of *The Dinner Party* from her newspaper, explaining that she was turning it over as a donation to Judy Chicago "for future works." A supportive *Art in America* cover story by Lippard, who called the work "awesome" and "one of the most ambitious works of art made in the postwar period," fueled further controversy. Lippard argued that Chicago succeeded "as few others have in integrating a strong esthetic with political content. . . ."

But a sidebar explained that the financing behind the piece included \$35,500 from the National Endowment for the Arts (not including a \$5,000 grant to Chicago early in the project); \$10,000 from the Ford Foundation; \$6,000 from the Women's Fund Joint Foundation Support; \$1,800 from the National Organization for Women Legal Defense and Educational Fund; and more than \$100,000 from Chicago's earnings over six years and from the personal loans she took out. News of the NEA funding would fuel social conservatives' unrelenting campaign to end federal support for the arts.

Through the controversy, forty thousand people saw *The Dinner Party* at the cyclorama in Boston. After going to two nontraditional locations with substandard conditions, *The Dinner Party* finally returned to museum status. The Brooklyn Museum showed the piece from October 18, 1980, through January 18, 1981. Five thousand people turned out to see it during the members' preview alone. For the

first time, the museum had to institute a ticket system to accommodate the crowds. The press also turned out in force, but a few powerful New York critics managed to drown out previous and new positive media response. Years later Chicago attributed their fixation on the center of the plates to "a very deep seated attitude that women's sexuality is obscene."

AMONG THE FIRST to weigh in was Hilton Kramer, who had long denigrated any art with a discernible political content and continues to be consistently antifeminist and antipopulist. Despite his admission in the *New York Times* that he could not help but admire some of the runners, where he found "some details of real artistic interest," he attacked the variations of the "genital organs of the female body," claiming that they were "not without a certain ingenuity, to be sure, but it is the kind of ingenuity we associate with kitsch." He asked, "Is 'The Dinner Party' art? Well, I suppose so. After all, what isn't nowadays? But it is very bad art, it is failed art, it is art so mired in the pieties of a political cause that it quite fails to acquire any independent life of its own."

Ellen Willis responded directly to Kramer, whom she labeled a "Neanderthal," in the *Village Voice*: "Cunt phobia rides again. In a culture where female genitals are still widely regarded as ugly and/or dangerous—a deficiency no self-respecting woman would voluntarily call attention to, a mysterious, dank morass in which the unwary penis gets lost, or perhaps bitten off—it is inherently tasteless to presume to consider the vulva as legitimate a subject for formal and metaphorical elaboration as any other." A radical feminist, Willis regretted that there were "no cracks or chips in the dinner plates, no overturned goblets, no real recognition of the devastating human cost of a feminine domesticity," claiming that she wanted to see "women's rage and violence." No one, it seems, could view *The Dinner Party*, except through the prism of personal politics and psychology.

Sheryn Goldenhersh, the reviewer for the *St. Louis Jewish Light*, identified Chicago as a fighter who "feels the need to speak out and participate where she finds injustice. Descended on her father's side from a long line

of rabbis, although not emerging from a traditional background within her own household, her sense of community responsibility and respect for the intellect, continued by her father's activities as a union leader and political civil rights activist, is long and strong." When the work finally arrived in the artist's hometown of Chicago in late 1981, the show was so successful that it drew forty-seven thousand visitors in the first three months and was extended to February 7. Mayor Jane Byrne accompanied the artist on a personal tour, pronouncing the piece "very beautiful."

IN CONTRAST TO the United States, the Canadian venues for *The Dinner Party* were all museums, including four in Western Canada, as well as Toronto (where the Art Gallery of Ontario cleared \$65,000 for its art purchase fund) and Montreal. There, in the spring of 1982, the Museum of Contemporary Art drew seventy-five thousand, more than usually come in an entire year, an attendance record comparable only to those who turned out for King Tutankhamen. The critical response was generally quite positive, including Lawrence Sabbath, who expressed a "sense of awe" and noted, "Message art is always controversial, although unlike politicized art which relates to a specific time period and can lose contemporaneity, women's fight for equality goes on forever."

John Bently Mays, the critic for the *Globe and Mail* in Toronto, addressed Chicago's strange success with the popular public and failure to win support of most of the major critics across the United States, concluding, "The object itself has been executed with immense devotion to the least detail and with brilliant contemporary hand-craftsmanship. . . . Miss Chicago committed her first blasphemy by deciding to make a very large statement that was not about art, but about the world—and not merely about the world in general, but about the history and contribution of women to it. In an art world still dominated by formalist criticism, and narrowly materialistic art historians and museum curators, a vast narrative, eloquently personal work such as the Dinner Party had the chips stacked against it from the start."

Chicago struggled for years to find a per-

manent home for *The Dinner Party*. Finally, in 1990, she determined to give the work to the University of the District of Columbia, to be housed in its library. Because the school's student population is primarily African American, it seemed an apt location since the struggle for equal rights by both women and African Americans fit into Chicago's own history and values. The *Washington Times*, the media arm of the Unification Church of Reverend Sun Myung Moon, launched a fierce campaign, calling the piece "a dyke's eyed view of some of the tough broads of the past" and misrepresenting where the necessary funds to install the work would come from. The vilification, which provoked student demonstrations and accusations, caused Chicago to withdraw her gift, but not before the religious right flooded Congress with propaganda in a punitive effort to cut off funding for the school. Evangelist Pat Robertson accused Chicago of blasphemy, but Ron Dellums, an African American representative from Northern California, spoke up in the House debate: "We deal with pornography every day. I think that it is pornographic to see nuclear weapons standing erect. . . . phallic symbols capable of doing nothing but destroying human life on this planet."

Convinced that "the battle over what *The Dinner Party* reflects is that we are living in a time when more women and men than ever before are questioning the inevitability of a dominator model—specifically of the domination of man over woman and nature, of race over race, and of nation over nation," the author Riane Eisler argued. "But as long as this question remains a fringe phenomenon, it can simply be written out of what is 'significant' in both history and art."

As fortune would have it, Elizabeth A. Sackler, daughter of Arthur M. Sackler, the physician, art collector, and philanthropist, who endowed galleries at the Metropolitan Museum, the Smithsonian, and elsewhere, met Chicago in 1988 and helped her to fund a major project about the Holocaust on which Chicago was then working with her husband, photographer Donald Woodman. Some time after the *Holocaust Project* was first shown in the fall of 1993, Sackler took up the cause to find a permanent home for *The Dinner Party*.

Though privileged, Sackler, like Chicago, grew up a social activist. As a teen in the early 1960s, Sackler took part in the civil rights movement, demonstrating with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Congress on Racial Equality, dovetailing with Chicago's work for the NAACP during the late 1950s, while she attended college in Los Angeles.

Both women adored their fathers and each took to heart the lesson "to leave the world a better place." Sackler learned to use all her assets. In 1968, at the height of the Vietnam War, she won the title of Miss Vermont in order to make a political statement by dancing an antiwar statement in the Miss America Pageant. While feminists demonstrated outside, she performed to the spoken text of James Thurber's *The Last Flower*, a parable of man's aggressive and destructive tendencies, at once calling attention to the war's bloodshed and winning the best talent award. She went on to earn a Ph.D. in public history and to found the American Indian Ritual Object Repatriation Foundation, which raised ethical issues about the art market.

Sackler and Chicago share the belief that art can both teach and effect social change. Now president of the foundation her father founded, Sackler, who does not "collect" art,

determined that she would house *The Dinner Party* in a setting that would bear the Sackler name, launching "Feminist Art into the world of institutional, mainstream art." She only needed to settle on the right location and began considering building a museum of feminist art.

Then the Brooklyn Museum of Art caught Sackler's attention when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani threatened to cancel its show of contemporary art called *Sensation* before it opened in the fall of 1999 and to withhold the museum's annual seven-million-dollar municipal grant because he considered one of the art works "blasphemous." Sackler lent her support and soon joined the museum's board, serving on its collections committee.

Eventually, Sackler offered to give *The Dinner Party* to the Brooklyn Museum. The collections committee accepted it with the proviso that it could use her name on the gallery, to which she agreed—if it would be the "Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art." The center will be the first in a mainstream museum to focus on art by women. Its mission is "to raise awareness of feminism's cultural contributions; to educate new generations about the meaning of feminist art; to maintain a dynamic and welcoming learning facility; and to present feminism in an approachable and relevant way." In its elegant new setting, *The Dinner Party* is a long way from the laundromat scenario that Chicago feared.

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GAIL LEVIN's most recent books are *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist* (Harmony Books, 2007), the second expanded edition of *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography* (Rizzoli, 2007), and *Ethics and the Visual Arts* (Allworth, 2006), an anthology of which she is co-editor. See photos of *The Dinner Party* at www.dissentmagazine.org.