

n.paradoxa

online, issue 14

February 2001

Editor: Katy Deepwell

Published in English as an online edition
by KT press, www.ktpress.co.uk,
as issue 14, *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*
<http://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/nparodoxaissue14.pdf>
February 2001, republished in this form: January 2010
ISSN: 1462-0426

All articles are copyright to the author
All reproduction & distribution rights reserved to n.paradoxa and KT press.
No part of this publication may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or
by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying and recording,
information storage or retrieval, without permission in writing from the editor of
n.paradoxa.

Views expressed in the online journal are those of the contributors
and not necessarily those of the editor or publishers.

Editor: ktpress@ktpress.co.uk
International Editorial Board: Hilary Robinson, Renee Baert,
Janis Jefferies, Joanna Frueh, Hagiwara Hiroko, Olabisi Silva.
www.ktpress.co.uk

List of Contents

Meena Alexander Post-Colonial Theatre of Sense: The Art of Chila Kumari Burman	4
Katrin Kivimaa Introducing Sexual Difference into Estonian Art Feminist Tendencies during the 1990s	14
Reviewing 1970s and 1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s: Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler College Art Association Conference panel papers, February 2001 (14, Feb 2001)	
Lisa Bloom (chair) Opening Remarks and CV's of contributors (14, Feb 2001)	30
Alison Rowley Exhibiting Martha Rosler? A Feminist Response to martha rosler: positions in the life world (14, Feb 2001)	35
Catherine Caesar Martha Rosler's Critical Position within Feminist Conceptual Practices (14, Feb 2001)	43
Ruth Wallen The Legacy of 1970s Feminist Artistic Practices on Contemporary Activist Art (14, Feb 2001)	52
Lucy Soutter Community vs. Context in the Reception of Eleanor Antin's Retrospective (14, Feb 2001)	61
Alexander Alberro Discussant's closing remarks (14, Feb 2001)	67
Diary of an Ageing Art Slut	74

The Legacy of 1970s Feminist Artistic Practices on Contemporary Activist Art

Ruth Wallen

When the recent exhibition *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* opened at the Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles in 1996 it was greeted with a mixture of nostalgia and hostility.¹ Attention focused on *The Dinner Party* itself and not on the other 56 artists represented in the exhibition. Christopher Knight, *Los Angeles Times* art critic labelled the exhibition, 'the worst...I've seen in a Los Angeles museum in many a moon.' To Libby Lumpkin, writing for *Art Issues* it was 'ardent kitsch'. Betty Brown, in contrast, reviewing the show for *Art Scene*, recalled the original exhibition and was grateful that a younger generation could view the work.

When I first heard of the exhibition, I had my own moment of nostalgia. As a young artist, just beginning to show professionally, I remembered all of the excitement when *The Dinner Party* first opened at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1979. Though Chicago's imagery and working methods were the subject of heated debate even then, the exhibition opening was a time of celebration, with poetry readings, lectures, a benefit concert, and even a children's program. Museum attendance reached records highs. A day long symposium entitled 'Women's Art as a Vehicle for Social Change' was held to a packed audience. Suzanne Lacy organized a companion performance piece featuring a huge map in the center hallway of the museum filled with telegrams from women all over the world describing actual dinner parties they had organized. I personally co-coordinated a tour of women's artist studios and murals by Mujeres Muralists.

Almost twenty years later, I hoped that both the exhibition and accompanying catalogue, edited by curator Amelia Jones, would offer an opportunity for renewed

discussion both of the influence of Chicago's work and the development of feminist artistic practices. Unfortunately however, Jones' brave attempt to recontextualize the work was met with widespread skepticism, even disdain. Though I too had some comments about the way the exhibition was organized, (which have been published elsewhere) I would first like to sincerely thank Amelia Jones for her courage and foresight in bringing this important moment of feminist art history into reconsideration.² While one could contest the centrality of *The Dinner Party* to the development of feminist art, it was seen by more women than any other feminist artwork of the 1970s. Today, I would like to focus on the influence of project to the development of activist, community based work over the last two decades. *The Dinner Party* utilized, and given its scale, advanced, many strategies being developed by feminist artists of the time, including the recounting of women's experience, the valorization of women's work (needlework and China painting), the collaborative process, and the appeal to a large women's audience. To a large extent activist work gets lost in Jones' museum recontextualization and it is here that I think Chicago has made her most important, radical contribution.

A recent article by Helen Molesworth, published in *October* in the spring of 2000 recontextualizes the essentialism/ theory schism exemplified by comparisons of *The Dinner Party* to Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* by placing both works as well as those by Rosler and Ukeles in the interpretive field of domestic or maintenance labor.³ This new frame allows her to discuss the work in terms of political economy instead of focusing on the body. Molesworth points out the similarities between all of these projects in telling the stories of women's lives through the utilization of the most advanced formal practices of the day, the works problematize the division of public and private, and offer a critique of the 'institutional conditions of art'.⁴

But though it is refreshing to avoid debates about essentialism, I would like to focus directly on work that begins with the body and invites identification. For Chicago and many of her contemporaries in the Los Angeles feminist community, the slogan "the personal is political" was the rallying cry. The prevailing ideology was that through the sharing of the personal women could make connections and realize that their experience was the result of specific social/political conditions. While Griselda Pollock, while championing the work of Kelly and the like in her influential essay, 'Screening the 1970s: sexuality and representation in feminist practice - a Brechtian perspective' argues for Brechtian distancing, where the viewer is forced into an analytic mode of thought and not captured by the illusion of representation, most of the Los Angeles feminists instead opted for a strategy of empathy, urging the audience to bond with the performer.⁵

This discussion leads me back to the more recent work of Amelia Jones *Body Art: Performing the Subject* where she argues that body art illicitly 'intersubjective exchange.'⁶ Though many criticize the focus on the body as narcissistic, Jones argues in a lengthy discussion that I unfortunately can only reference here, that it is

precisely this narcissism that positions the self in relationship to others and allows for the politicization of personal experience. It is striking how many of the artists and critics associated with Chicago or the Los Angeles Women's Building, who began with an embodied art based on personal experience, including Suzanne Lacy, Arlene Raven, Sheila de Brettville, Sheri Gaulke, and Aviva Rahmani, are now creating various forms of community based public art. How do the strategies of radical embodiment developed by 1970s feminists inform contemporary public work? Given the low profile of much of this work, how can the visibility and critical discussion of community based public art be increased? ⁷

In this brief time, I rely principally on the work of two artists, Suzanne Lacy and Betsy Damon, that exemplifies the transition from an emphasis on story telling and strategies of identification to a more community based practice. Suzanne Lacy is an obvious choice, given her early association with Chicago while studying at the Feminist Studio Workshop at Cal Arts, to her work as teacher at the Women's Building, to her prolific career as a performance and public artist. Damon, on the other hand, worked in New York and was not included Jones' exhibition, though she credits Chicago's influence in her founding of a Feminist Art Studio at Cornell University in 1972-1973. Currently a successful eco-artist, Damon's work illustrates the range of feminist practices.

Lacy's early autobiographical work is appropriately criticized for its narrow evocation of identity politics. Lacy's performances where she dresses up as an old woman or bag lady raise additional issues, not unlike documentary photography.⁸ Where is the line between empathy and voyeurism? Does compassion lead to informed political struggle?⁹ The problematic nature of "uncritical realism," unexamined identification, is also illustrated in Kubitzka's discussion in the catalogue of matriarchal dances organized in conjunction of opening of *The Dinner Party* in Germany with perhaps unintended, but none the less clear references to the rituals of Nazi Germany.¹⁰

But other 1970s performances that address the violation of women's sexuality such as *Ablutions*, an early piece about rape using blood, eggs and raw beef kidneys performed with Chicago, Rahmani, Orgel, and Lacy, challenge the audience more directly. Many critics from Frueh, Isaak, and Russo, drawing from Bakhtin, cite ways that the portrayal of the feminine as grotesque, monstrous and disfigured evokes the rebellious potential of the carnivalesque.¹¹ When *The Dinner Party* itself, during the controversy surrounding the possibility of permanently housing the project at the University of the District of Columbia is perceived as obscene and pornographic, in the words of Representative Dornan, as 'ceramic three-D pornography' has it also been framed in a way that radically challenges the traditional docile role of women? ¹²

Lacy's most ambitious performances of this period, including *Three Weeks in May*, and *In Mourning and In Rage*, invoke the "monstrous feminine" and were

realized in collaboration with Leslie Labowitz who studied with Beuys, and was influenced by the Brechtian tradition. Unlike *Ablutions*, these collaborations move from private horror to public analysis. *Three Weeks in May* includes two large public maps with rape reports and women's support agencies, public press conferences and a more private visceral piece, *She Who Would Fly*, that included a winged lamb cadaver and a four blood stained women crouching on a high ledge. In other projects such as *The Incest Awareness Project*, directed by Labowitz and Angelo the unspeakable is spoken and private violation put in the public sphere. Significantly in these 1970s feminist performances, visceral emotional reactions--empathy, shock and outrage lead to rational response.¹³

Betsy Damon's work was also very concerned about creating an activist community through shared stories of women's experience. She often worked collectively with women creating participatory performances including *A Rape Memory and Meditation on Knives*. In other performances such as *Blind Beggar Women*, she collected stories. At international women's conferences in Copenhagen and Nairobi, she designed a place for participants to share stories and rituals.

Damon often cites as the pivotal point in her development her work her 1985 piece, *A Memory of Clean Water*, where she cast a 200 foot section of a dry river bed in hand-made paper.¹⁴ The strategy of embodiment is again central to this piece - through closeness, through touching and replicating the watercourse, empathy is established with the particular. Unlike Lacy or Chicago, this work evokes relationship rather than identification. From this relationship with the particular, Damon hopes to move the viewer to understanding the general importance of water. However as feminist performance, this understanding is not accomplished by Cartesian transcendent consciousness, but appreciation for immanent embodiment.

Let us now fast forward to contemporary community and public art. From this short introduction, let me briefly pose some questions about the relationship of 1970s feminist work to the contemporary scene.

Generally as the work has evolved, there has been a recognition of the limitations of 1970s identity politics, particularly the exclusion of people of color or members of the working class, and a greater emphasis on strategies of identification and embodiment that facilitate dialogue and communication. In an essay in *Charting the Terrain*, Lacy identifies four roles for the artist in the move from the private to the public, artist as experiencer, reporter, analyst, or activist.¹⁵ In some recent work, Lacy locates herself in the first role, as an artist experiencing something with which public can identify. For instance in a 1991 piece she sat in an abandoned hospital room at a cancer center in upstate New York and charted conversations that she had with patients, doctors, nurses, scientists and administrators. This piece is more reflexive than 1970s work, though Lacy is still physically present in the work, instead of role playing, through 'a report of her own interiority', she invites the viewer to reflect on their response.¹⁶

Where is the place for personal experience if the goal is to work with or form community? For the last ten years, Aviva Rahmani, one of the performers in *Ablutions* and student at the Feminist Art Workshop has been working on *Ghost Nets*, a project to restore a dump site on a island off the coast of Maine. Though as part of the piece she developed a detailed process for charting her personal experience, a pivotal moment into her acceptance into the local community was her decision to sing in the church choir, despite her Jewish heritage. She recognized that singing in the church was a major way to bond with the local community.

Co-founder of the Feminist Studio Workshop, Sheila de Brettville's public artwork, *Biddy Mason-Time and Place*, exemplifies a more distanced, reportorial strategy. Along with Betty Saar's interior work, this eighty-two foot sculpted time line records the contributions of Biddy Mason to the African-American community and the history of Los Angeles.¹⁷ A story is told, but it is generated in collaboration with the community and not from the artist's personal experience.

In many of Lacy's performances she goes one step further, taking the role that she defines as activist, with the goal of motivating change among both performers and audience. Lacy herself has offered three useful criteria for measuring the success of these performances: 'First, to examine the quality of the performance experience for participants and audience; second, to evaluate the potential of these networking performances as models that can be applied to other issues and circumstances; and third, to assess the life span of the processes set in motion by the performance'.¹⁸ In terms of creating a lasting activist community, I agree with Moira Roth's assessment that of Lacy's 1980s work only *The Crystal Quilt* begins to satisfy this criteria. Roth speculates that this success might be partly attributable the fact that the work was more rooted in existing community groups than previous projects, and was located in a state with a high level of support for the arts and "civic concerns".¹⁹ This discussion points to another crucial issue in the development of activist work--is it realistic or appropriate for an artist to generate a project around which a new community can coalesce or is it preferable to work through existing community structures?

Beginning in 1991, Lacy began a long term commitment to the Oakland community, as lead artist and executive producer of TEAM (TEENS +EDUCATION+ART+MEDIA). Performances, installations, classes and symposia produced by TEAM have emphasized giving voice to teens and promulgating a positive media image of youth. The performances move from story telling to dialogue. For instance a recent performance in 1999, *Code 33*, featured a dialogue between teens and police.²⁰ The audience first listened in on the conversations of groups of teens, police and a facilitator, who were assembled in circles between two police cars. Then the audience and performers broke up into groups, divided by the participants' neighborhoods, to continue the conversation.

This work begins the difficult task of moving the viewer of the work from passive

reception to involvement. Similarly Betsy Damon motivates her collaborators to become analysts and activists; the “audience” becomes community. Since 1990 she has created an organization, Keepers of the Waters, where participants, linked through their common identification of water quality as the crucial environmental problem, meet regularly to work on various projects.

Even *The Dinner Party* aimed for a more lasting impact. The work attracted huge audiences a substantial portion of whom were not regular museum goers, everywhere it was shown. Some of the many “dinner parties” held all of the world when the piece first opened, led to temporary communities or study groups. Annette Kubitzka reports that in Germany some of the groups that formed to develop work for the problematic opening celebration in Frankfurt, still meet to study women's history. Additionally the two catalogues from *The Dinner Party* are used in numerous educational contexts. Though it certainly could be argued that the work has a less coherent or radical political analysis than that of feminists informed by a Marxist perspective, is the result so different than that advocated by Brecht, where his intention is to educate the audience to make new sense of the world?

However, once art work proposes to create a process that extends beyond itself there is often tension between the originating artist's vision and the larger collaborative community. The role of the collaborators or the community in the creative process is a crucial issue. Chicago generally has a set vision before she begins the process. For *The Dinner Party* while Chicago saw herself as empowering women, by providing them with an experience where they could learn discipline and dedication to a great project, the work was basically the product of Chicago's vision. Volunteers were assigned tasks according to their abilities and had some input only into the design of the runners. In contrast, though Lacy is still sometimes accused of importing her vision into a community when she is invited as a guest artist, she divides her participants into zones of engagement and from there gives them a greater role in the creation of the work. By the nineties most of her performances arose from this community process and not a preset vision. In *Keepers of the Water*, Damon has created a structure that has a life of its own beyond her initial impetus. She also began ‘No Limits for Women Artists’, a national organization that directly addresses the issue of empowering women by inviting women's participation in groups around the country. In contrast, Judy Baca, who has worked closely with Lacy, argues that after years of using a collective decision making process in the design of murals, she needed to assert her leadership role, a role highly suspect in the Chicano community. As the one with the most responsibility for the project she felt that she should have primary control of the artistic vision.²¹ Other artists, perhaps not coincidentally often lesser known, design and execute their projects in collaboration with children. Only rare examples of these projects, for instance Cheri Gauke's *Los Angeles River Project* which became known because of its inclusion in the *Fragile Ecologies* exhibition, achieve notoriety.²² Even Lacy's ten year project

TEAM, is scarcely documented (see however, *n.paradoxa* Vol 4 1999). Can the conception of the artist be extended to include one who facilitates the creative process instead of one who creates an individual masterpiece?

I would also like to touch upon Lacy's second point, to highlight the significance of thinking of art as presenting a model for a new kind of networking. The impetus for this perspective can be traced back to Allan Kaprow, who challenged the division between art and life, but feminist artists furthered the development of this idea that artists can motivate a process or a new way of thinking that extends beyond the work itself.²³ Though Damon's Keepers of the Waters groups began by championing Damon's work, groups in Portland, Oregon and Duluth are now initiating proposals for urban water parks. Not coincidentally Anne Mavor, who heads the Oregon group, studied at the Women's Building and was a member of 'The Waitresses', a well known 1970s performance collective. Helen and Newton Harrison (Helen was also associated with the Women's Building) have made particularly notable contributions in this regard. For instance, in the *Green Heart of Holland*, the green heart is posited as a metaphor for a new way envisioning land use. Numerous community and governmental groups has been enlisted in support of this vision of limiting development to the periphery and preserving a green heart in the center of Holland.

Finally I would like to return to consideration of product. As opposed to the monumentality of *The Dinner Party*, much of the work I have discussed emphasizes process and temporary experience. Damon's recent *Living Water Park* in Chengdu, China offers a different model of artistic creation. After working on temporary installations and performances about water pollution with Chinese artists she was asked to design a park that would clean up the dirty water. The work, designed with landscape architect Maggie Ruddick was created with the help of numerous Chinese officials, entirely outside artwork construct, and in the Kaprowian sense mixes art and life. Though the project is still a vision of artist, it was created in a community context with a definite practical function.²⁴

The Los Angeles feminist movement of which *The Dinner Party* was a part challenged many of parameters of the modernist canon and the commercial art world. Chicago may be criticized that her later work hasn't followed the radical implications of her major project, but I hope that this discussion is only a beginning of consideration of the influence of 1970s feminist work to the development of community based activist art.

Notes

1. Amelia Jones (ed.) *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*. (Los Angeles: UCLA at the Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in Association with the University

of California Press, 1996).

2. Ruth Wallen 'Review of Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History' *Women's Studies* (1999) Vol. 28, pp.339-344.

3. Helen Molesworth 'House Work and Art Work' *October* 92 Spring 2000, pp.71-97.

4. *Ibid.* p.82.

5. Griselda Pollock 'Screening the seventies: sexuality and representation in feminist practice-a Brechtian perspective' in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art*. (London: Routledge, 1988).

6. Amelia Jones *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p.31.

7. Lacy argues that today that 'Activism is pitted against analysis, with a clear-cut art-world bias toward the latter, oddly similar to the art world's condescension to political and community-based art during the 1970s.' Suzanne Lacy, 'The Name of the Game' *Art Journal* Summer 1991, pp. 67.

8. Note that in contrast Lacy's *The Life and Times of Donaldina Cameron* does complicate process of identification and begin to address the often ignored issues of race. Lacy began work on this project by wanting to empathize with nineteenth century Chinese bartered brides in San Francisco, but she was pushed through conversations with the community to explore her identity and ended up embodying Donaldina Cameron, an actual missionary in 19th century Chinatown, while her collaborator, Kathleen Chang, resentful of Lacy's missionary zeal, challenged her role.

9. See Allan Sekula 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation)' in *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works 1973-1983* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984).

10. Annette Kubitzka, 'Rereading the Readings of The Dinner Party in Europe,' in Amelia Jones (ed) *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*.

11. Joanna Frueh *Erotic Faculties*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1996), Jo Anna Isaak *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*. (London: Routledge, 1996) and Mary Russo *The Female Grotesque: risk, excess and modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

12. Lucy R. Lippard 'Uninvited Guests: How Washington Lost "The Dinner Party" *Art in America*. 79, Dec. 1991, p. 41.

13. For more information on Lacy's performance work see: Moira Roth *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America 1970-1980*. (Los Angeles: Astro Arts, 1983) and Moira Roth 'Visions and Re-Visions: A Conversation with Suzanne Lacy' *Artforum* v.19 (Nov. 1980) pp. 36-39.

14. Gadon Elinor 'Betsy Damon's A Memory of Clean Water' *Arts Magazine* v.61 (June 1997) pp. 76-77.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. Dolores Hayden 'An American Sense of Place (with an afterward)' in Harriet F. Senie and Sally Webster (eds). *Critical Issues in Public Art: Content, Context, and Controversy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

18. Moira Roth 'Suzanne Lacy: Social Reformer and Witch' *The Drama Review*. p. 160.

19. Ibid. p.160-162.

20. Katy Deepwell 'Interview with Suzanne Lacy' *n.paradoxa:international feminist art journal* Vol 4, 1999, pp. 25-33.

21. Judith Francisca Baca 'Our People are the Internal Exiles' in Douglas Kahn and Diane Neumaier (eds) *Culture in Contention* (Seattle: The Real Comet Press, 1985) p.70.

22. Barbara Matilsky *Fragile Ecologies: Contemporary Artists Interpretations and Solutions* (New York, Rizzoli International, 1992).

23. See for instance, Allan Kaprow 'The Real Experiment' *Artforum* 12, no. 4 (December 1983)

24. See Betsy Damon 'Living Water Garden' *n.paradoxa* Vol 4, 1999 pp.49-54

This paper was presented at the 89th College Art Association conference in the panel 'Reviewing 1970s and 1980s Feminist Art Practices in the 1990s: Three Major Exhibitions on Judy Chicago, Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler' Chicago, February 28-March 3 2001.

Copyright © : Ruth Wallen, February 2001
n.paradoxa : Issue No. 14, 2001