

Collaboration and Conflict in the Fresno Feminist Art Program: An Experiment in Feminist Pedagogy

Laura Meyer with Faith Wilding

The first university-level art class designed to establish and enact feminist pedagogical principles was founded in 1970 at Fresno State College (now University), in California's San Joaquin Valley. Working under the direction of visiting artist Judy Chicago, fifteen female students pooled their resources to rent and refurbish an off-campus studio space in downtown Fresno, where they could make and discuss their work **'without male interference'**. In spring 1971 the class became a full-time fifteen-unit program, with participants spending most of their time together, frequently collaborating on artwork, taking turns leading reading groups and critiques, and even preparing and eating their meals in the feminist studio.

The Fresno Feminist Art Program (FAP) made a radical departure from traditional art pedagogy. Instead of pursuing assignments in a specified medium, such as oil painting or metal sculpture, students created artwork organized around a given concept or social issue. Performance artist and program alumna Faith Wilding recalls that ideas for class projects were often generated during group discussions organized along the lines of feminist consciousness-raising:

The procedure was to "go around the room" and hear

each woman speak from her personal experience about a key topic such as work, money, ambition, sexuality, parents, power, clothing, body image, or violence. As each woman spoke it became apparent that what had seemed to be purely "personal" experiences were actually shared by all the other women; we were discovering a common oppression based on our gender, which was defining our roles and [sense of] identity as women. Thus the unspoken curriculum of the program was "learning to contend with manifestations of power: female, male, political, and social."¹

The studio that housed the Fresno Feminist Art Program was the first in a historic lineage of California feminist art spaces: Womanhouse, Womanspace, The Woman's Building, The Feminist Studio Workshop. In contrast to feminist activism aimed at achieving more equitable representation of women in existing art institutions, the Fresno FAP and its successors strategically circumvented the centers of power. It seemed necessary, at least temporarily, to shut out the received wisdom of traditional male power to allow women to hear themselves, and each other, speak. As Wilding put it:

By taking ownership of the studio we demonstrated in real life Virginia Woolf's dictum that in order to be artists, women need to claim a space in which to think and work, locking the door against the domestic demands of the home and the patriarchal precepts of the university.²

In staking out a separate physical space, the Fresno FAP also laid claim to intellectual, emotional, and creative space for women.

In 2009 I (Laura Meyer) organized an exhibition and symposium at Fresno State University documenting the history of the Fresno FAP and analyzing its impact and ongoing relevance in contemporary art. Based on my conviction that the FAP's fundamental significance lay in its collaborative structure, I decided to highlight the students' contributions to the program, rather than the teacher's. Judy Chicago has written about the Fresno FAP in her autobiography, and her critical role as its visionary founder and teacher has also been documented by Faith Wilding and Gail Levin.³ It seems important to me, now that a new generation of art historians is engaged in writing the history of the 1970s feminist art movement, to make sure that the significance of the Fresno FAP as one of the earliest experimental testing grounds for feminist collaboration is established. Many art history textbooks currently trace the beginnings of feminist art pedagogy and an organized feminist art movement to the Feminist Art Program founded at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in 1971 and, especially, the month-long exhibition of Womanhouse (1972), a widely-publicized installation created by the CalArts group.⁴ But the pedagogical principles that drove the CalArts FAP and Womanhouse – i.e. conceptualizing and producing artwork collectively, and developing “*female*” imagery and production techniques to communicate female content, were established in Fresno by trial and error during the first year of the Fresno FAP. At the end of that year, Chicago relocated to CalArts and co-founded a new feminist program there with Miriam Schapiro. Ten of the fifteen original Fresno FAP students applied and were accepted at CalArts, bringing the Fresno FAP's working methods with them. The production and display of Womanhouse marked the public culmination of the Fresno FAP as much as it did the beginning of the program at CalArts.

The collaborative structure of the Fresno FAP was far from harmoniously democratic. As much as Chicago pushed the FAP students to take responsibility for teaching – and learning from – each other, she also demanded recognition

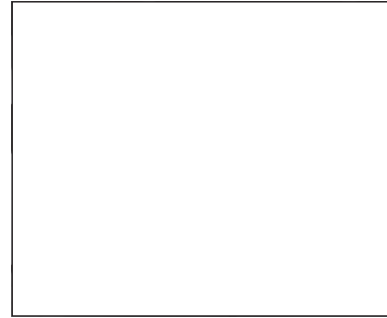
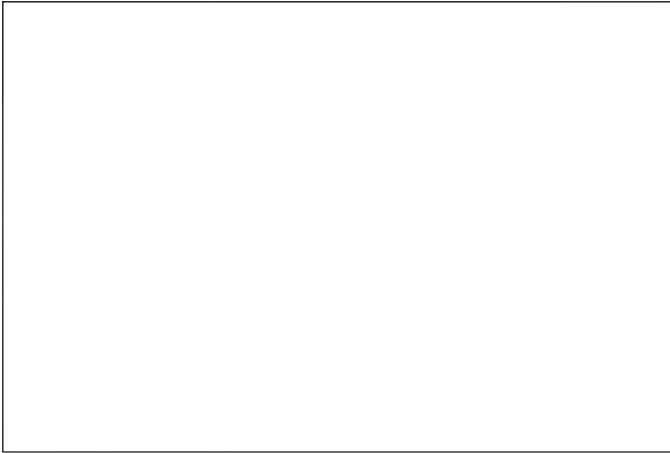
of her ultimate authority. Video artist and program alumna Vanalyne Green illustrates this contradiction with a memory of Chicago's response when she hung a painting at an unorthodox angle and ‘**Judy yelled, ‘It doesn't go that way.’ This was the paradox: to foster autonomy but under a particular set of terms. I was bewildered: if we were being allowed the freedom to learn in a progressive environment, why was Judy telling me how to hang my painting?’⁵**

Not only was there a power differential between teacher and students, power struggles also emerged among students. Group discussions in the studio “*rap room*” could be revelatory, but they could also turn into charged confrontations, with one or more members of the group criticizing another's attitudes or behavior. Sculptor and program alumna Karen LeCocq recalls:

I was always a little afraid as I entered this room. It meant that I was about to be confronted on something that was too uncomfortable to talk about or I would have to witness someone else's discomfort . . . We experienced . . . soul searching, gut wrenching, tumultuous, cleansing, exhausting, exhilarating, and enlightening times in that one small room. It was a tiny, intimate space that was suffocating and uncomfortable one moment and nurturing and comforting just a short time later.⁶

Chicago actively encouraged confrontation, justifying it as a path to growth: ‘**I was really pushing those girls. I was really demanding of them that they make rapid changes in personality . . . I gave the girls an environment in which they could grow.**’⁷ But confrontation must be tempered by humility, and respect for alternative perspectives, if it is to foster real growth and independence. These qualities were often absent in Chicago's interactions with students. Thus, by emphasizing the collaborative underpinnings of the pedagogical and artistic principles worked out in the Fresno FAP I am attempting, in part, to effect a ‘**return of the repressed**’.

This article draws freely from longer essays by Faith Wilding and myself in the exhibition catalogue, *A Studio of Their Own: the Legacy of The Fresno Feminist Experiment*.⁸ Tasked with preparing the piece myself, but wanting to include Faith's voice and vision, I use her words here as often as I do my own. Rather than setting apart lengthy passages from Faith's catalogue essay I include them in the main body of this text for the sake of narrative flow. Material from Faith's *Studio of Their Own* essay is indicated by ^{FW}. When quoting from Faith's publications other than the *Studio*



Above: Vanalyne Green *Still a Feminist* (2009) in *A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment*. Conley Art Gallery, Fresno State University, 26 Aug-9 Oct 2009

Left: installation view. Photo: Michael Karibian

of *Their Own* catalogue, I indicate the source in the notes.

I highlight here two main pedagogical/art-making strategies developed in the Fresno FAP: 1) the quest for new kinds of female body imagery, or so-called cunt art, and 2) the use of unorthodox “*female*” media including costume, performance, and video. Both became key strategies in the feminist art movement of the 1970s, and both came under heavy fire in the 1980s from critics who argued that they reinforced an essentialist view of women. I counter-argue here that these strategies were central to the collaborative basis of feminist pedagogy and activism and that they provided – and continue to provide – a valuable means of engaging multiple perspectives on women’s widely varied bodily and social experience, affect, and thought.

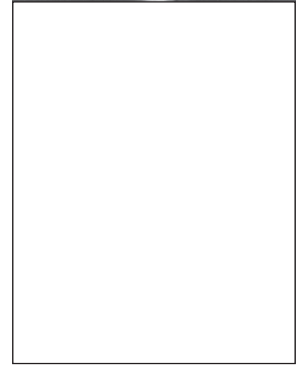
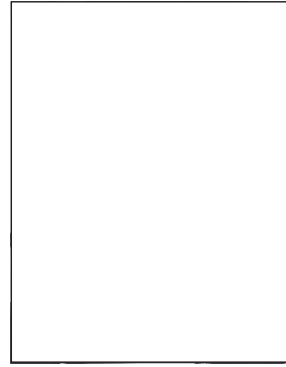
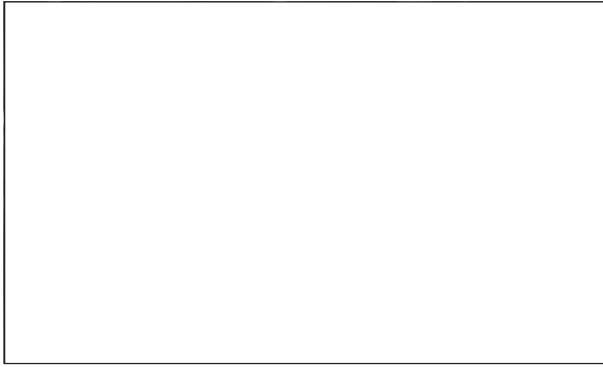
A Studio of Their Own

Judy Chicago arrived at Fresno State in spring 1970 as a sabbatical replacement for tenured professor Joyce Aiken.⁹ That spring she taught an innovative course on site-specific sculpture; then, for fall 1970, she proposed something even more radical. With the blessing of Art Department Chair Heinz Kusel, who deserves credit for his willingness to encourage experimentation, Chicago initiated an all-women’s class that would meet off-campus, at a spatial and ideological distance from the rest of the Art Department. Admission to the class was subject to permission from the instructor, who grilled interested applicants about their artistic ambitions and attitudes toward traditional sex roles. As students were accepted into the class, they were invited to participate in interviewing the remaining candidates. Ultimately, fourteen students joined the class first semester: Dori Atlantis, Susan Boud, Gail Escola, Vanalyne Green, Suzanne Lacy, Cay Lang, Jan Lester, Chris Rush, Judy Schaefer, Henrietta Sparkman,

Faith Wilding, Shawnee Wollenman, Nancy Youdelman, and Cheryl Zurilgen. Karen LeCocq joined the following semester, in spring 1971.

Several of the founding members of the women’s class, including graduate students Faith Wilding and Suzanne Lacy, were seasoned community organizers with considerable knowledge of Marxist and feminist theory. Wilding was a long-time member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), who had counselled young men, often minorities, on resisting the draft during her undergraduate years at the University of Iowa. Lacy had learned the non-violent resistance tactics practiced by the United Farm Workers movement in California. After earning a BA degree in zoology and chemistry at the University of California, Santa Barbara, she worked with Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) inner-city poverty programs in 1968 and 1969 in Washington DC. During her stint in VISTA, Lacy also met feminist organizers who introduced her to feminism and the politics of women’s liberation. Together, Wilding and Lacy had organized a feminist consciousness-raising (CR) group on campus in 1969, using the CR rules published in *Notes From the Second Year*.¹⁰

Wilding recalls that conditions at Fresno State were auspicious for change: ^{FW} **Our timing was obviously right because soon fifty eager women were meeting regularly in each other’s homes, and openly discussing such intimate matters as sex and orgasm, feelings about our mothers, our resentments about men, our insecurities as students or faculty wives, and our dissatisfaction with our educations. The success of the CR group, and the obvious interest in feminist issues and student-initiated education (a crucial legacy of the US student movement) spurred me to propose a course, ‘The Second Sex: On Women’s Liberation,’ to the**



Judy Chicago and members of the Fresno FAP on the front porch of the feminist studio on Maple Avenue, Fresno, 1970-71 Photo: Dori Atlantis Centre: Jan Lester with her sculpture *Pink Lady* in the feminist studio (1971) Photo: Dori Atlantis Right: Dori Atlantis *Legmenstr* (1971) black and white photograph with red paint. Courtesy of the artist

Experimental College for the spring of 1970. When the course – along with most others with any political content – was banned as part of the first crackdown on the Experimental College and the English Department by the Fresno State administration, we reorganized it as a student activity in the Student Union.¹¹ By the time Judy Chicago arrived on the Fresno campus in the spring semester of 1970, there was [already] a group of women at the College actively working towards a women’s studies department.^{FW}

Many Fresno State students had little experience of the world beyond the San Joaquin Valley, a largely rural, working-class region far removed from the cultural centers of Los Angeles and San Francisco. Yet widespread social activism in the 1960s had already begun to transform campus life. Founded as a teacher training and agricultural college, Fresno State had expanded rapidly during the early 1960s and, as Wilding observes, ^{FW} by 1969, was showing the full effects of the civil rights, student, and anti-war movements that had burned like wild-fire through the California state college and university campuses. The Fresno State Experimental College had been founded in 1966 in response to external and internal demands for a more relevant and contemporary curriculum. It stressed innovation and accepted proposals from both faculty and students. Courses were open to all students regardless of major or academic standing. Faculty and students pioneered many courses in black and Chicano studies, social and political movements, alternative psychology, ethnic studies, and women’s studies.^{FW 12}

Teacher and FAP alumna Chris Rush remembers her interview for the feminist class, capturing the mixture of personal naïveté and social upheaval that characterized many students’ lives at the time:

That day of the interview, we were having an anti-war

strike with bomb scares and tear-gas filling the hallways. It was scary and exciting. Dori and I were in the hallway together waiting to be interviewed by Judy, Faith, and Cherie. I went in first and told them about how much I hated my father and about my horrible sex life. They really responded positively to that and asked a lot of questions—seeming kind of tough and intimidating. I told Dori to do the same thing. She also got accepted.¹³

The “women’s class” began meeting in fall 1970 in the homes of the students; soon, however, the group determined to find a studio space, and this became the first major class project. Wilding recalls: ^{FW} Finding that space, learning to deal with realtors, and figuring out how to fund and renovate the building proved a highly instructive aspect of our venture. In October, we signed a 7-month lease for the old Fresno Community Theater, a defunct WWII barracks. It was in a derelict part of town across from the adult movie theatre and miles from the college – but a place of freedom, a space of our own. Each student paid the (at that time quite considerable) sum of \$25 a month toward rent, tools, and expenses.

We set to work to make it a professional art studio, with space for research, experimentation and sociality. First we built a grand, smooth, white wall about 40’ x 12’, learning construction skills in the process, and how to wield power tools, and mud, sand, and paint sheetrock. The “Wall” was as much symbolic as it was real; it defined our big exhibition/performance/studio space. Renovation of other rooms and spaces followed: a “rap” room, carpeted with samples from a carpet store, and furnished with oversize pillows on which we lolled for hours talking, crying, dreaming, holding “rap” groups, reading groups, and general meetings. There was an office with a telephone, a small library, and an art history research space where we began the first women’s art history

slide collection. Under Dori's direction a darkroom was built. Smaller spaces were partitioned off for site-specific installations and some individual studio spaces. Nancy set up a costume and 'dress-up' area, with an industrial sewing machine for making props and soft sculptures. A favorite hangout was the rickety old porch on which we gathered to smoke, sun ourselves, and talk endlessly.

We organized the big kitchen for studio dinners, and to sustain ourselves during the long days we spent in the studio. I loved the kitchen with its large central wooden table where our Wednesday night dinners were held. There was a wooden keg of wine we would take to a local winery for periodic refills, and always coffee and tea—there were always small groups of us hanging in the kitchen talking nineteen to the dozen. We took turns cooking dinner on a \$10 dollar budget limit for feeding about 17 people . . . Wednesday night dinners became an immediate tradition welcomed by some and feared by others. Dinner was usually followed by a "rap" session that sometimes turned into a harsh group critique of an individual and her work. Vanalyne remembers it this way: . . . [after the potluck dinner] we had a type of confrontational ritual, with a different person chosen each time for group criticism. Judy once threw a bottle of wine across the room when I said something that angered her. I dreaded those evenings and see them in my mind in solarized blues, browns, and blacks . . . Some of us . . . had less internal resources than others to withstand ego-shattering confrontations located around the dinner table or during a reading group or group critiques . . .¹⁴

Other nights we had lively discussions with guests such as Miriam Schapiro or Ti-Grace Atkinson who had given an impassioned speech on campus about marriage as legalized slavery.^{FW}

Initially, the women's class was planned as one course taught for four hours twice a week.

^{FW} But it soon became clear that most of us wanted and needed to spend much more time at the studio, and indeed, had already begun to do so. Fortunately, Judy was able to arrange with Heinz Kusel that for spring 1971 students could sign up for up to 15 semester credits in the women's class – these could be spread over sculpture, photography, painting, art history, and humanities core credits. Thus the class became a "Program" with all the implications attending that word. We were all required to sign contracts with Judy at the beginning of the semester, detailing our research plans, a reading list, and what visual art work we planned to accomplish for the amount of credit hours we were

completing for the studio – and Judy held us to it.^{FW}

The daily rhythm at the studio included regular individual and group critiques and work meetings with Judy.

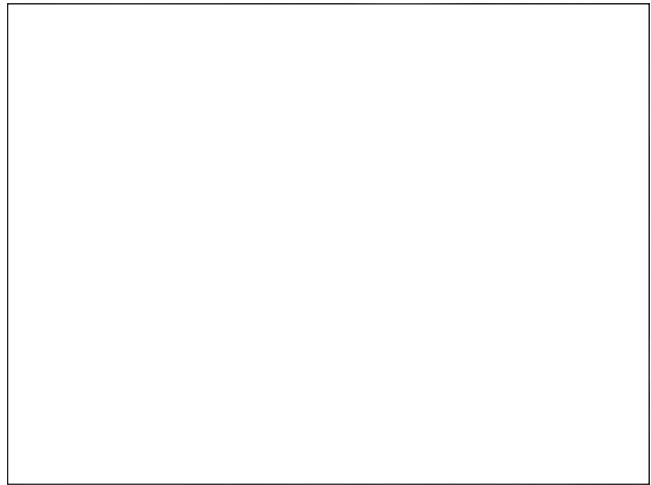
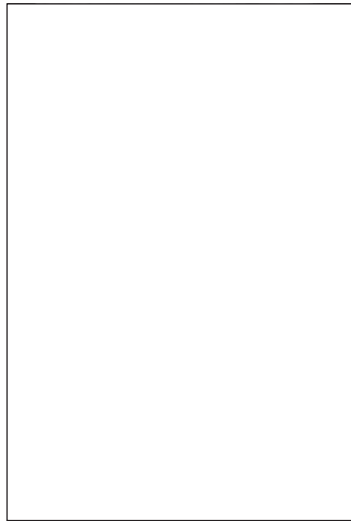
^{FW} There were several weekly production and study group meetings for performance, film-making, photography, environments, reading and autobiography writing, and art history research. The most transformative aspect of the studio was how we began to claim and use the space. Since most of us worked and hung out there daily for many hours, we were able to see each other's work as it developed, to give suggestions, encouragement and critique, and collaborate technically and conceptually. This organic process of becoming collaborators in a space of our own was one of the secrets of the Program's astonishing success.^{FW}

%*@ & Art

One of the most productive and controversial pedagogical strategies developed in the Fresno FAP involved a quest for new ways to represent the female body and, especially, women's sexual anatomy and feeling. The representation of female corporeality in any form has been criticized by some feminist thinkers for reinforcing the symbolic equation between female/body/debasement, as opposed to male/intellect/transcendence, in the binary terms of patriarchal culture. These criticisms, however, often fail to attend to the specific context in which such imagery was generated and consumed – by women and for women – in the Fresno FAP and other early feminist institutions. Creating and sharing their own iconography of women's bodily feeling and sexuality – in opposition to the dominant Western iconography of the female sex organs in medicalized or pornographic form – was a bold assertion of female agency.

Sexual imagery, dubbed "*cunt art*" by the Fresno students and later theorized as "central core imagery" by Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, was used to assert a wide range of powerful and often taboo feelings, from rage, to tenderness, desire, and humor.¹⁵ The collective brainstorming process, as Wilding recalls, combined research with personal exploration: ^{FW} in weekly reading discussions, and in the autobiography writing group, we explored our own and other women's bodily and social experiences, consciously looking for ways to use them in expressive visual forms. We studied the contrasting visual representations of women by both male and female artists. We experimented tactically with media that would best embody the "feel" of the content – groping toward a phenomenology and aesthetics of our cultural experience

Faith Wilding
Sacrifice (detail)
 (1971) mixed media
 installation
 Courtesy of the
 artist
 Karen LeCocq
 performing *Léa's
 Room* at the
 artists' reception,
 17 Sept 2009.
 Footage of LeCocq's
 original 1972
 performance at
Womanhouse plays
 on the video
 monitor to her
 right. Courtesy of
 the artist



of “*becoming women*”.^{FW}

Chris Rush remembers:

Our first assignment was to create something about “feeling invaded”. Judy was very open to our personal choice of how to express this. I think this was the beginning of many different art choices, like performance, film-making, and environments, etc. I wrote a poem about my trip to Mexico City, about how a gang of boys surrounded me and taunted me and tried to grab me . . . The sharing of our mutual, emotional experiences bound me to these women and awakened me to the Feminist Movement.¹⁶

Wilding worked for several months on a startling installation, *Sacrifice* (1971), that incorporated real animal guts heaped on an effigy of her body:

^{FW} I wanted to make a work that embodied some of the feelings of entrapment and sexual repression I experienced growing up on the Bruderhof (Society of Brothers), a patriarchal religious commune of German and European WWII refugees in Paraguay.¹⁷ After leaving the commune, I had tried to hide my past history, and to appear as a wild, liberated child of the 1960s. With the encouragement given by the FAP, I began to wrestle with the deeply ambivalent feelings about the contradictions between the sacrificial, self-denying life in the Christian commune, and the libidinal drives of my young, ambitious, pleasure-seeking, pagan self . . . *Sacrifice* was installed in an approximately 10’ x 15’ room. Its first iteration was a performance in which I lay like Sleeping Beauty as though dead or asleep on a low platform in front of an altar bearing a cross to which I had nailed the body of a road-kill pheasant. Candles burned on the altar. I was dressed in a lacy pinkish negligee, my long

hair spread out around me, my eyes closed. Trimming the edge of the ceiling all the way around the room were bloody Kotex pads. Viewers came in to the room to look at me.

After a group critique of this performance in which Judy and some of the students pointed out that the work was a cop-out as I had simply put a beautiful sleeping woman on view, I reworked the piece, making a sculpted figure of myself with a cast of my face, the bloodied mouth opened in a scream, and casts of my hands and feet. I dressed the life-size effigy in a white bridal gown, slit her torso open and peeled it back to form a wide, red velvet-lined wound or gash, which I filled with fresh cow guts fetched from the slaughterhouse every day—an image of disemboweling, or spilling my guts After only a few hours, the California heat raised an unbearable stench of rotting intestines mingled with the smell of burning candles and rose perfume, so that entering this environment all the senses were assaulted with sickening disgust.^{FW 18}

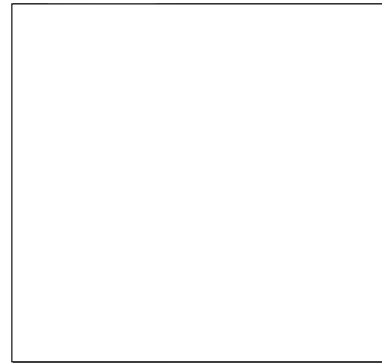
Karen LeCocq’s *Soft Environment*, by contrast, created an inviting, otherworldly, womb-like space that literally enveloped the bodies of viewers:

My environment consisted of a bare white room with a four-inch thick polyurethane foam floor and a canvas ceiling with small plastic disks hanging from transparent threads that moved when a small fan was turned on. The best part was the door. It was made of polyurethane foam. It was slit down the center. To enter, you had to push through it – very cunt-like. The concept behind the soft, spongy foam covering the floor, the liquid movement on the ceiling, and the push-in, expanding-contracting door all deal with my experience as a woman. I am allowing the viewer, in a sense, to enter

Ladies on the toilet
 Open that door,
 You don't have to hide yourselves
 anymore,
 Your cunt is a beauty,
 We know you always knew it
 So if you feel like pissing
 Just squat right down and do it!
 C U N T Cunt!

FAP Cunt Cheer

**Cunt Cheerleaders
 performance group (1971)
 Clockwise, from lower left:
 Vanalyne Green, Cay Lang,
 Susan Boud and Dori Atlantis
 Photo: Dori Atlantis**



**Nancy Youdelman *Rivalry Play* (1971)
 Installation view at the Conley Art
 Gallery. Photo: Genevieve Walker**

inside me, enjoying my softness, my liquidness, and my way of feeling.¹⁹

Wilding has aptly described the phenomenological experience of entering LeCocq's *Soft Environment* as an encounter with an active presence, ^{FW} **a welcoming space, a sensing, feeling space.**^{FW}

Other cunt art productions exploited the power of humor to de-stabilize cultural assumptions.²⁰ Shawnee Wollenman designed and sewed oversized plush female and male genitalia for a satirical performance piece written by Chicago, the *Cock and Cunt* play. In this theatrical critique of traditional gendered divisions of labor, a "*male*" and "*female*" couple, played by Wilding and Jan Lester, appear in identical black tights and leotards, differentiated only by their genitalia props. An argument over the dinner dishes ensues when the "*man*" demands that the "*woman*" must perform this chore since "[her] *cunt is round like a dish.*" The female character retorts that the dishes are just as much his as they are hers, and that she doesn't "*see where it says that [I have to wash dishes] on my cunt.*"²¹ Wollenman's soft sculpture *Cock and Cunt* props are precursors to the "central core" imagery of Chicago's *Dinner Party* plates.

Dori Atlantis, Susan Boud, Vanalyne Green, and Cay Lang formed a satiric performance group, the Cunt Cheerleaders. Shawnee Wollenman recalls the CUNT Cheerleaders' outrageousness as a source of pleasure for the whole group: **We were thoroughly enjoying being outrageous. Ti-Grace Atkinson came to Fresno to speak and we utterly shocked her by meeting her at the Fresno airport with a cheerleading squad, with letters on their pink T-shirts that spelled CUNT. We wondered if that offended her so badly, how radical could she really be?**²²

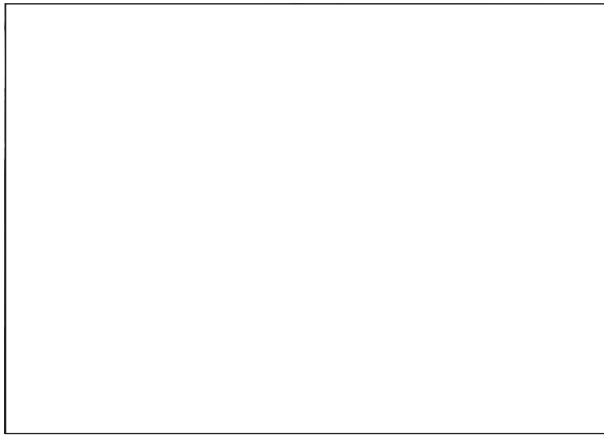
Wilding recalls the scene a bit differently, but with equal

pleasure: ^{FW} **I remember Ti-Grace calling us 'pretty ballsy' for doing this, especially since there was a large delegation of red-costumed Shriners coming off the same plane as Ti-Grace for a convention – it was probably Judy who was the most embarrassed about this event.**^{FW}

Looking back on the emergence of cunt art at the beginning of the feminist art movement, Wilding maintains its radical impact on feminist consciousness: ^{FW} **Although we did not fully theorize our attraction to cunt imagery at the time, we knew it was a catalyst for thinking about our bodies and about female representation. In current medical and biotechnological interventions into women's sexuality, reproduction and fertility, one still finds firmly in place antiquated ideas and language about the forms and functions of the female genitals. Meanwhile the feminist demands for excellent, free health and reproductive care are nowhere near achievement, and the women's health movement has been sadly eroded in the abortion battles of the 1980s.**²³

"*Cunt art*", made for the female gaze, aimed to reverse the negative connotations of a dirty word with a defiant challenge to traditional depictions of submissive female sexuality displayed for the male gaze. It was a form of body art that could not be absorbed by the (male) mainstream, for it questioned the definition of woman as a (mere) formless "hole" ("woman is the configuration of phallic lack, she is a hole" as Jane Gallop put it in *The Daughter's Seduction*). By laying claim to a juicy female sexuality expressed in an astonishing new lexicon of images, cunt art rejected the view of woman as a passive sexual object, all vagina willing to receive.²⁴

From our point of view in the FAP, the 'morphology of cunt' was a new (and BIG) idea—we were indeed investigating unknown territory, seeing for ourselves, and contributing to the production of new knowledge. Cunt art gave the female



Faith Wilding performing subRosa's *International Markets of Flesh* in the Conley Art Gallery at Fresno State, September 17, 2009. Photo: Genevieve Walker

organs a life of their own, the part stood in for the whole (desiring body). Our investigative art began to show that there was a lot more to 'cunt' than met the eye, for lo and behold, it turned out that cunt art was political, coming to the fore at the same time as the inception of the feminist women's health movement. The first issue of the *Boston Women's Health Collective's Our Bodies, Ourselves: A Book by and for Women* was published in 1971 and was already in our hands as required reading. It had unambiguous drawings of the vulva – including the hymen, the clitoris, the inner and outer lips, and the urinary, vaginal and anal openings. Female orgasm and how to achieve it was described in detail, and there were frank discussions of the many morphological differences between women's vulvas. Soon we were examining our own and other women's vulvas, vaginas, and cervixes, with mirrors and flashlights, and trying to depict – realistically, metaphorically, and poetically – what we saw and felt.^{EW}

Women's Work

A second key pedagogical and artistic strategy developed in the Fresno FAP, along with cunt art, was a search for new media that could effectively convey feminist content. Painting and sculpture, in 1970, carried the weight of millennia of male tradition. Vanalyne Green recalls that Chicago encouraged students to take up new media both because they represented the cutting edge of contemporary art and because they didn't carry the same cultural baggage as more traditional art forms.²⁵ The Fresno students made performance art, super-8 films, and installations more often than they did paintings or sculptures (although these, too, were explored). They also transformed traditionally feminine chores, including

needlework, costuming, and self-adornment, into vehicles for conceptually sophisticated artistic statements. In this article, I refer to a wide range of experimental media – from needlework to dress-up to film-making – as female media, or "*Women's Work*."

Along with others in the 1970s, Fresno FAP students challenged traditional distinctions between female "*craft*" and male "*art*." Before coming to Fresno, Faith Wilding had studied with the pioneering fibre artist, Walter Nottingham. She worked on a series of hanging fibre sculptures on a large home loom throughout the first year of the Fresno FAP. Eventually these experiments led to the production of a fully three-dimensional fibre installation, the *Crocheted Environment* (or Womb Room) created for Womanhouse. Like Karen LeCocq's *Soft Environment*, Wilding's *Crocheted Environment* was meant to be entered and experienced from both inside and out. With its free-form crochet webbing and multiple tube-like passageways, it was simultaneously cosy and crazy, totally unexpected and wonderfully inviting. It was, in fact, so coveted, apparently, that it was stolen on the last day of Womanhouse – and had to be re-created for inclusion in the *Division of Labor* exhibition in 1995. (Wilding's re-created *Crocheted Environment* was also included in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, 2007.)

Sculptor and program alumna Nancy Youdelman, who studied makeup and costume design before joining the Fresno FAP, established a costume room at the feminist studio that she kept stocked with hand-sewn garments and accessories. Delighting in the transformative power of clothing, Youdelman enjoyed dressing and making up other members of the FAP. At first she and friends collaborated on a series of invented personae in private at Youdelman's apartment, and took pictures with a cheap instamatic camera. She remembers worrying that Chicago might be angry and criticize the performances as sexist stereotypes. But Chicago was delighted with the work, and simply advised the artists to aim for the best possible production qualities by using more effective lighting, backdrop paper, and so forth. Dori Atlantis, who studied photography before joining the FAP, took over camera responsibilities. The resulting images, embodying historical female types including the Kewpie Doll, Victorian Whore, Las Vegas Whore, Bride, and Housewife, predate Cindy Sherman's *Film Stills* by nearly a decade.

These collaboratively produced *Costume Images* (or *Images of Women*) explore the tension between individual agency and the cultural limitations that inform the process of

identity formation. While they allow imaginative identification with a variety of behaviours and roles, they also emphasize the pervasive effects of a depersonalized male gaze that seeks to control the female subject/object of desire. The Kewpie Doll, for example, variously performed by Judy Schaefer and Cheryl Zurilgen, spotlights the infantilization of female sexuality in many popular representations of women. It is actually an amalgam of two popular culture icons – the infant Kewpie doll, named for Cupid by creator Rose O’Neill at the turn of the century – and the sexy animated cartoon character, Betty Boop, first popularized in the 1930s. Schaefer’s enactment of the role, with her crooked mouth and coarse artificial curls, poignantly shows the gap between her own flawed and profoundly human performance and the impossibly inhuman perfection of the model.

Performance art evolved organically in the Fresno FAP from many sources. Performance felt like a natural extension of role-playing, which Chicago introduced in consciousness-raising discussions as a means of examining and challenging traditional sex roles. In the reading group led by Wilding second semester, students also discussed Simone de Beauvoir’s groundbreaking text, *The Second Sex*, with its trenchant thesis that **‘a woman is made and not born’**.²⁶ Although it was not until years later that gender performance would be explicitly theorized by Judith Butler, Amelia Jones, Kate Linker, and others, the performative aspect of gender was already the implicit subject matter of many artworks created in the Fresno FAP.²⁷ **‘Film-making emerged, in part, as a logical extension of performance art. Interested students picked up skills from visiting film-maker Judith Dancoff, who decided to do her master’s thesis on the Fresno FAP after seeing Chicago speak at UCLA.’**²⁸ Dancoff spent several months filming day-to-day activities at the feminist studio. Karen LeCocq, Jan Lester, Shawnee Wollenman, and Nancy Youdelman, as well as Judy Chicago, produced super-8 films documenting their performance art or as stand-alone artworks.

Jan Lester’s film, *Steak* (1971), is an unapologetic celebration of physical appetites and pleasures. As the film begins we see a woman played by Youdelman reading in bed. Then the image of a steak appears in a thought bubble above her head. She springs up, hops on a bicycle, and swiftly pedals to the market, chased by a noisy dog. After carefully selecting and paying for a piece of steak, she pedals home and fries the meat with intense concentration. The film concludes with the woman enthusiastically devouring her meal, smiling, licking juice from her lips, and sighing with pleasure.

The Rivalry Play (1971) staged and shot by Nancy Youdelman, takes on the equally taboo topic of female aggression. It features two antagonists – an elegantly coiffed and dressed woman, perhaps a prostitute, played by Chris Rush, and a fat matron in a flowered housedress, played by Jan Lester – who find themselves together in a public place. Each attempts to assert superiority over the other by humiliating her rival (blowing smoke in her face, spilling food on her immaculate clothing). This battle of wills culminates in a physical fight that climaxes when the housewife chokes the prostitute who, meanwhile, stabs and kills the housewife before falling dead herself. In the film’s final frames, the camera pans to the women’s limp bodies lying inert amidst spilled popcorn and debris.

According to Youdelman, the fight scene in the *Rivalry Play* was based on memories of girl fights in elementary school and junior high. Girl fights could be vicious and frequently included spitting, hair pulling, and ripping off each other’s clothing. Youdelman remembers being warned by a sixth grade classmate not to wear showy clothing with ribbons or bows because the “mean girls” would rip them off. To avoid being singled out for attack she should **‘just fade into the woodwork.’**²⁹

The piece was also, in all likelihood, a response to simmering competition and aggression among the students in the Fresno FAP.³⁰ Several alumnae remember feeling painfully aware that there was an “in group” that enjoyed Chicago’s favor and an “out group” that did not.³¹ Designer and FAP alumna Jan Lester has characterized the class as **‘something almost cult-like . . . We had this sense that we were doing something important,’** adding, **‘Judy made everyone in the program believe that they could do whatever they wanted to do.’**³²

Chris Rush remembers feeling intimidated by Chicago **‘not to be too feminine, not to shave your legs’**.³³ In Green’s view, the program **‘encouraged a Darwinian fight for life among the women students, and [students] often abandoned each other to gain [Chicago’s] approval.’**³⁴

New female media developed in the Fresno FAP – ranging from needlework, costume, and make-up to performance and film – gave participants a shared visual vocabulary not previously determined by male tradition. Rather than reinforcing traditional expectations for gendered behavior, the Fresno FAP artists used female media to address previously taboo topics and illuminate the performative aspects of gender identity. However, the meaning of an

artwork is never fixed or final; depending on viewers' expectations and the context of reception, different responses may be evoked. Wilding recalls, for example, how powerful performance art felt, but also how different it was to perform for other women as opposed to a mixed-gender group:

^{FW}**Performance was a great way to work quickly and directly with the new content of performing femininity and gender. It aroused direct, powerful responses from audiences quite different from the ones evoked by our other visual work Performing for a women only group was a very different experience than performing for mixed gender groups. The performances implicated and involved different audiences in different ways, which taught us that performance could be a powerful tool for evoking intense affect and frank discussion By the time some of us left Fresno to found a Feminist Art Program at CalArts, we had established performance as an exciting and versatile pedagogical form for enacting feminist art's new content.**^{FW}

Collaboration Across Generations

The pedagogical strategies tested in the Fresno FAP were developed by trial and error through a process of (imperfect) collaboration. Judy Chicago initiated the FAP with the conviction that art pedagogy must change to provide an adequate education for women; but the shape of that change remained to be determined. Each participant in the Fresno FAP brought her own unique history, talents, interests, and desires to the group, and each helped shape the group dynamic. Pedagogy and art making were inextricably intertwined. Research, self-examination, and discussion fed the art making process, and making art was a means of producing and sharing knowledge.

Collaboration is an inherently conflictual process; for this reason it is vital to attend to its dangers as well as its benefits. Feminist pedagogy is increasingly attuned to difference based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and faith. It is striking, however, that the students in the original FAP, most of whom were white women from working-class and lower middle-class families, experienced varying degrees of trauma and conflict in the group process despite their superficial similarities. Chicago wanted her students to make “*great*” art as well as effecting social change. And she believed that greatness depended on developing a new “*personality structure*”. But her students had their own goals and their own personalities, which sometimes bristled


or bruised under Chicago's confrontational style. Chicago set the collaborative dynamic of the FAP in motion, but its ultimate success as a model for feminist collaboration was, to some extent, achieved in spite of her.

In September 2009 a symposium held at Fresno State in conjunction with the *Studio of Their Own* exhibition brought together most of the founding members of the Fresno FAP for the first time in nearly forty years. Art historian Moira Roth moderated a panel discussion at the Fresno Art Museum among ten program alumnae. Several artists gave presentations on their current work. Vanalyne Green discussed her video project, *The Lord and the Pork Barrel*, analyzing the ongoing role of prayer in US congressional proceedings. Suzanne Lacy traced the evolution of her community-based performance art, from early interventions in the mass media like the 1977 anti-rape piece, *In Mourning and in Rage*, to the 2009 community revitalization project, *Laton Live! REUNION/REUNIÓN*, carried out by her students in Public Practice at Otis College of Art and Design. Nancy Youdelman revealed her recent sculptures—made from vintage garments, old letters, and photographs – as descendants of the original Fresno FAP Costume Images.

The artists' reception featured live performance art by Fresno FAP alumnae and current Fresno State students. Karen LeCocq reprised the role of the aging courtesan, Léa, first created for LeCocq's and Youdelman's installation, *Léa's Room*, at Womanhouse in 1972. Performing the role anew at age sixty (as opposed to twenty-something), LeCocq infused Collette's stoic heroine with a heightened sense of poignancy.³⁵ Faith Wilding temporarily inducted Fresno State students Keni Hotta and Guadalupe Posada into the artists' collective, subRosa, for a public performance of *International Markets of Flesh*, an installation/performance aimed at provoking public discussion about legal and illegal commerce in human body parts and tissues.

The symposium gave a younger generation of students the opportunity to interact with a pioneering generation of feminists and, in Moira Roth's words, “**hear these once-young undergraduate artists [recall] the 1970 Fresno Feminist Program from the viewpoint of their long-established artistic careers. Many of my Mills College students came to the conference, and they were fascinated to see, literally, how canonical art history can be challenged and reworked in such a setting that combines art itself, the artists, and a formidable scholarly publication.**”³⁶

It also allowed the original Fresno FAP alumnae to re-



Professor Moira Roth celebrates with Consuelo Velasquez, Program Coordinator for Graduate Public Practice at Otis College of Art and Design, Symposium, Sept 2009.
Photo:Genevieve Walker.

evaluate their experience from a different vantage point. Green reflects that:

the series of events was healing. There were so many things I hadn't been able to comprehend while in the program, relating to how 'different' each of us was. By this, I mean in terms of economic background, education, class status, for example. I could ask many questions about this: why did I not grasp our differences? Many thoughts, nothing particularly coherent. I was afraid, we were being encouraged to find commonalities, not distinctions, we were young, peer group pressure?³⁷

Many of the original Fresno FAP alumnae are teachers now, themselves; and their experiences in the FAP, both positive and negative, continue to impact their pedagogical practices. Installation artist, photographer, and FAP alumnae Dori Atlantis reflects:

One of the unique things about the FAP (especially in the Fresno State setting) was that we were a community – we spent most of that year together constantly – learning from each other as well as from our mentors. We saw how others solved problems, we collaborated on projects, we discussed our life issues and situations. The rap sessions were painful but perhaps I grew into a more thoughtful person through them. We were forced to question some deep-seated beliefs.

As I teach and when I critique students' work, I try not to impose myself onto my students' work. I try to facilitate their growth as artists – for them to discover and/or nurture their unique voice.³⁸

And Vanalyne Green, in a recent interview John Reardon, states:

I've always thought that teaching and thinking about pedagogy, and about how people learn, is part of citizenship.

I don't think I'm a good teacher unless I'm doing my own work, and I don't think I can do my own work well unless I'm

being inspired by my students. There's a kind of back-and-forth. I'm humbled by a lot of work that my students do, and I learn a lot from what they do.³⁹

One of the biggest surprises of the exhibition and symposium, for me, was the tremendous interest generated among my current students in reviving a feminist art class along the lines of the original Fresno FAP. Next fall my graduate seminar on the legacy of the feminist art movement will, for the first time, experiment with “*consciousness-raising*” groups and combine readings with art making. In this post-feminist, post-colonial, post-post-modern era, which discussion topics will emerge as the “*points of urgency*”? How will we foster collaboration while respecting difference? Where am I taking my students, and where will they take me?

Notes

1. Faith Wilding 'The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970-75' in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (eds.) *The Power of Feminist Art, The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994) p. 35
2. Faith Wilding 'Gestations in A Studio of Their Own: The Feminist Art Program in Fresno, California, 1970-71' in Laura Meyer (ed.) *A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment (Fresno, Calif.: Fresno State Press, 2009)* p. 88
3. Judy Chicago *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (New York: Doubleday, 1975); Faith Wilding *By Our Own Hands: The Woman Artist's Movement in Southern California, 1970-76* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Double X, 1977); F. Wilding 'The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970-75' in Broude and Garrard, (eds.) *The Power of Feminist Art*; Gail Levin *Becoming Judy Chicago: A Biography of the Artist* (New York: Harmony Books, 2007)
4. See, for example, H.H. Arnason and Peter Kalb (revising author), *History of Modern Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture, Photography* 5th edition (Upper Saddle River: New Jersey, 2003) p. 600. See also Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (eds) *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism, Volume 2, 1945 to the Present* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004) pp 570-571
5. Vanalyne Green quoted in Levin *Becoming Judy Chicago* p. 149
6. Karen LeCocq *The Easiest Thing to Remember: My Life as an Artist, a Feminist, and a Manic Depressive* (Self-published memoir, 2002) p. 62
7. Judy Chicago cited in Gail Levin *Becoming Judy Chicago* p. 146
8. Wilding 'Gestations in a Studio of Our Own' and Laura Meyer 'A Studio of Their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment'

in Meyer (ed.) *A Studio of Their Own*

9. Aiken subsequently taught the feminist class at Fresno State from 1973 until her retirement in 1991. Aiken's students co-founded Gallery 25 in downtown Fresno as a women's cooperative exhibition space.

10. Wilding writes: ^{FW} **I still own a yellowed and tattered copy of Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt (eds.) *Notes From the Second Year Women's Liberation: Major Writings of the Radical Feminists* (New York: Radical Feminism, 1970). It includes the important articles: Pat Mainardi 'The Politics of Housework' Anne Koedt 'The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm', Kathie Sarahchild 'Consciousness Raising' and Carol Hanisch 'The Personal is Political'** ^{FW}

11. Wilding recalls ^{FW} **The booklet included Simone de Beauvoir, the women's liberation issue of *Motive* magazine (March-April 1969), some of the writings on women's orgasm by Masters and Johnson, and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. My memory is that Suzanne did this with me, but she says not as she was already teaching a course in women's psychology. Ingrid Wendt, a young poetry professor, was the faculty sponsor of the course** ^{FW}

12. For a history of the Experimental College and the campus firings see Kenneth Seib *The Slow Death of Fresno State: A California Campus under Reagan and Brown* (San Francisco: Ramparts Press, 1979)

13. Chris Rush, email to Faith Wilding, 7 July 2008

14. Vanalyne Green, email to Faith Wilding, 8 August 2008

15. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro 'Female Imagery' *Womanspace Journal* 1 (Summer 1973)

16. Chris Rush, email to Faith Wilding, July 7, 2008. This assignment was made after an intense "**rap**" group session in which the subject had been how it feels to be hassled on the street.

17. To learn more about the Society of Brothers see www.Churchcommunities.org/

18. Faith Wilding, Journal entry, 1971

19. Karen LeCocq, unpublished writings, 1971

20. Sigmund Freud argues that humour is an effective weapon against social controls of various kinds, breaking through listeners' resistance and inviting empathy instead of hostility. See Sigmund Freud *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* trans. and ed. by James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1963)

21. Chicago *Through the Flower* p. 209. Johanna Demetrakas' 1974 film, *Womanhouse*, includes documentation of the performance as it was enacted by Lester and Wilding during the exhibition of *Womanhouse*

22. Shawnee Wollenman, letter to Faith Wilding, 1993

23. Wilding writes ^{FW} **Almost forty years later, researching an**
n.paradoxa Vol.26

article about the aesthetic surgery of the vulva, I discovered that resculpting the vulva (female aesthetic surgery) is now the work of male plastic surgeons bent on using a scalpel to define an aesthetics of the vulva. See Faith Wilding, 'Vulvas with a Difference,' in Maria Fernandez, Faith Wilding, and Michelle M. Wright (eds.) *Domain Errors! Cyberfeminist Practices* (Autonomedia, 2003), 149–159. See also video *Vulva de/Re Constructa*, subRosa DVD www.cyberfeminism.net). I also found new research on the morphology of the clitoris by Dr. Helen E. O'Connell and colleagues, who point out that even the nomenclature used for the female genital parts is still incorrect. See Dr. Helen O'Connell's conference paper, 'Female Sexual Anatomy: Discovery and Re-discovery' 2003 at the International Society for the Study of Women's Sexual Health Conference, Amsterdam. ^{FW}

24. Some of this text is adapted from Faith Wilding and Miriam Schapiro 'Cunts, Quilts, Consciousness' *Heresies* 24 (1989)

25. Vanalyne Green to Laura Meyer, 30 July 2008

26. For more information about the reading group see Faith Wilding's 'Gestations in A Studio of Their Own' in Meyer (ed.) *A Studio of Their Own*

27. Kate Linker 'Representation and Sexuality' in Brian Wallis (ed.) *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984) pp. 391-416; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990) and Amelia Jones *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998)

28. Judith Dancoff to Laura Meyer, 21 November 2007

29. Nancy Youdelman to Laura Meyer, 1 July 2008

30. When I asked her about it, Youdelman confirmed this hunch.

31. This perception was repeatedly articulated to me in conversations with alumnae of the Fresno feminist experiment, both individually and in groups.

32. Jan Lester quoted in Levin *Becoming Judy Chicago* p. 148

33. Chris Rush quoted *ibid*

34. Vanalyne Green quoted *ibid* p.149

35. Léa's role is based on the heroine of Collette's novels *Chéri* and *The Last of Chéri*, trans. from French by Roger Senhouse (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2001)

36. Moira Roth, letter to Julia Bradshaw, 29 February 2010

37. Vanalyne Green, email to Laura Meyer, 6 May 2010

38. Dori Atlantis, email to Laura Meyer, 10 March 2010

39. Vanalyne Green, interview with John Reardon for his book *Ch-Ch-Changes: Artists Talk About Teaching* (London: Ridinghouse, 2008)