

Thoughts on Returning to Teaching after Twenty-five Years

In 1999, after a twenty-five year absence, I returned to teaching. I did so in part because I was receiving letters from female art students who complained that they had few or no female professors, were learning little about women artists and almost nothing about the Feminist art movement of the nineteen seventies. In 1970, I had instituted the first Feminist art program at California State University in Fresno, California, with the goal of developing an art education that was more appropriate to women's needs than what was available in most university art programs. This program was a radical departure from the way in which university art education was structured. First, it was a year-long intensive immersion in which the students received enough credit so that they didn't have to take many other classes. Secondly, I took the students off campus to a space of their own. Last and most important, the program was content based.

My approach grew out of my dissatisfaction with my own college art education, which had required me to excise any female-centered subject matter from my work. Although my graduate studies helped me to develop formally, the fact that I was pressured to disconnect my forms from personal content meant that I could not openly draw upon my own experiences. This became less and less tenable as I tried to navigate the extremely male-dominated art world. My gender became a challenging barrier to my goals as an artist and I wanted to address this in my work. But I didn't know how because my art education had given me no preparation for incorporating my experiences as a woman into my art.

Also, at that time, though many young women started out in undergraduate art school, they were gradually weeded out until only a small number entered professional art practice. I wanted to address this problem as well, which is another reason why I instituted the Feminist art program. My program was so effective (9 out of the 15 students became practicing artists, some quite famous) that I was invited to bring it to the California Institute of the Arts, which was just beginning in southern California. The plan was that I would team-teach with the artist, Miriam Schapiro, and that we would have an art historian on board who could provide the students with a grounding in art history while also expanding the slide library of women artists my Fresno students and I had begun to accumulate.

We would also have our own space in the new Cal Arts building. But it wasn't ready yet,

so we decided to work off campus. Paula Harper, the art historian who had been hired to work with us, suggested doing a project on the subject of domesticity and the home. Out of this idea grew *Womanhouse*, the first female centered art installation. In addition to the various spaces devoted to an exploration of women's feelings about the home and the domestic expectations placed upon women, there were a number of performance pieces that developed out of the Performance workshop I had started in Fresno and continued at Cal-Arts. Although I did not have a lot of experience in performance, I had discovered that it was a very effective mode for facilitating subject matter, which could then be either developed into more finished performance pieces or translated into other artmaking modes.

Womanhouse was enormously successful, its influence pervasive and lasting. Nevertheless, within a year, I had decided to leave Cal-Arts in favor of starting an independent school, the Feminist Studio Workshop, which I founded with art historian and critic, Arlene Raven, and designer, Sheila De Bretteville (now Dean of Design at Yale University). The FSW was located in the Women's Building (which I also co-founded). The Women's Building - patterned after the 1893 Women's Building at the Chicago World's Fair - offered studio, exhibition and performance spaces to a variety of artists and feminist groups. Many important women artists were trained and nurtured during the twenty years the Women's Building existed. However, in 1974, I left, driven by a burning desire to devote myself entirely to studio practice.

Although I had continued making art throughout the years of teaching (1970-74), still, I felt divided and wanted to concentrate on my new project, *The Dinner Party*, a symbolic history of women in Western Civilization, that was eventually exhibited around the world to a viewing audience of over one million people. (In 2007, *The Dinner Party* will be permanently housed at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum). During the subsequent years, I lectured widely and from time to time, did workshops or seminars at universities. But generally, I remained in my studio, far away from academia.

Then in the late nineties, I started to make another foray into university art education though I only wanted to do short residencies as I had no interest in becoming embroiled in the types of political bickering that characterizes too many art departments. As I mentioned, I was upset about the complaints I was hearing from young women. They were so similar to those of

my own generation. How could it be that several decades later, there had been so little change?

One of my goals in creating *The Dinner Party* was to counter the erasure of women's achievements. And yet, the young women who had written to me exemplified the point made by pioneering women's historian, Gerda Lerner, that 'women do not know what women before them thought, taught' or, I might add, created. Certainly, it is not that there are no important women artists of the past to study; *The Dinner Party* makes this clear. Why were they not being taught? Nor was there an absence of accomplished contemporary women artists who could provide young women with the role models they lacked. Why were they not being hired? And the Feminist art movement had ushered in an historic change, not only in America but around the world. For the first time, women artists felt free to express themselves and their experiences as women. Why was this not being acknowledged?

I decided that it might be important to do a survey of university art education, to see what had happened and why the changes I had hoped for - and worked for - did not seem to have taken place. The first institution I taught at was Indiana University in Bloomington, the flagship school of the state university system. I was brought there for a semester by the President, Myles Brand, and his wife, Peg, who is a feminist philosopher originally trained in art. They invited me to do a project class in which the students would have their own studio and do an exhibition at the end of the course at the IU Museum, an I. M. Pei designed building on the campus.

Although I intended the class to be open to both men and women, only women enrolled. Their ages ranged from 18 to 62 and their art experience was equally diverse. A film was made about the project titled "No Compromise", which chronicled the pedagogical process I employed and documented the results. My approach was similar to what I had done in Fresno, Cal-Arts and the Feminist Studio Workshop - though I now brought far more wisdom to teaching than I had possessed earlier, when I was still in my thirties. The exhibition was a big hit and suggested that my teaching methods were as viable now as they had been when I first experimented with the radical form of teaching that I originally called Feminist art education.

My next adventure involved two institutions - Duke and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill - where I taught for one semester in 2000. At UNC, I did a graduate art seminar and in that class, there was an equal number of women and men. This did not prevent

the men from dominating the discussions, even when we were talking about the women's work. As this situation was completely unacceptable to me, I pondered what to do. At one point, during a break, the female students were all standing together. I went over to them and expressed my distress, asking them if they wanted me to segregate them from the men in order to counter their lack of participation. This threat served to interrupt the pattern and for the rest of the semester, everyone expressed themselves more equitably.

Nevertheless, with the exception of one woman, the work of the men in the class seemed more powerful, perhaps because by this point in their education, the women had learned the same lesson that had been forced upon me in graduate school, that is, to work against themselves. What I mean is that I had been made to feel ashamed of my own aesthetic impulses as a woman, pushed to make art that looked as if it had been made by a man. As a result, like my female students at UNC, my work had lacked affect. For how could it be truly powerful if I was not working out of my whole sense of self? But to do so would have involved claiming - and expressing - my womanhood, which was then a complete taboo. I was sad to see that this was something else that had not changed - or at least not enough.

Duke was another matter and quite a different type of class. Although Duke is an exceptionally fine university, like many Southern schools, the arts lag behind. But the Art History department is stellar and it was its chair, Rick Powell, who hired me to teach one class that met twice weekly for an hour and a quarter. We designed the class together - a survey of three of the subjects of my collaborative projects; women's history, birth and the Holocaust. The plan was for me to present what I had done on each of these subjects, briefly survey the work of other artists on the same themes, then guide the class through their own projects.

Because the art department was so limited and most of the students non-art majors, I never dreamed that this would turn into an art class but that is what happened. Most of the students wanted to do art projects and then, they wanted to have an exhibition. We found an unused space in the basement of one of the campus buildings and mounted a show that we planned on keeping open for only a weekend. But the administration was extremely impressed by the exhibit. They felt that the work exemplified the type of inter-disciplinary thinking they were trying to encourage and therefore, they extended the exhibition to give the campus

community time to see it. Subsequently, I was awarded an honorary doctorate (unusual for a non-Duke graduate or faculty member) in recognition of the impact of my short residency.

In 2001, I was invited to team-teach with my husband, photographer Donald Woodman, at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green. The idea was to re-visit the subject of the home thirty years after *Womanhouse* - but this time, men were to be included in the project. I was eager to try this because I wanted the opportunity to find out if my pedagogical methods could be applied to men. As I mentioned, although it was not my intention, the IU project class had only women and at Duke, there were only a few men in a class of 28. As mentioned, UNC, Chapel Hill, had been gender balanced in terms of numbers but was a more traditional graduate art seminar, focused on group critiques. Therefore, I had only limited opportunities to apply my pedagogical process, which involves a series of stages - from self-presentations to content search and finally, to the production of art.

The Kentucky class was given a small house in which to work with an exhibition planned at the end of the semester. The title of the project was “At Home” and it drew upon the deep ties residents of the area seemed to possess. Enrollment was based upon an application procedure and was open to both students of the university and local artists. As early as *Womanhouse*, I had found that mixing students and practicing artists benefitted both groups. The students gained the opportunity to learn something about the realities of professional art practice and the professional artists got an infusion of youthful enthusiasm. A few practicing artists actually moved to Bowling Green for the semester in order to participate.

The age range in this project was again wide - from eighteen to sixty-two - and there was about one-third men in the class. This seems to be the ideal number for my pedagogy, which involves participation by everyone, along with deep listening. For some men, listening to women is a new experience. Generally, men tend to dominate class discussions unless there is a concerted effort to counter this with an alternative mode, which is what I practice. And Donald’s presence provides a positive male role model that reinforces this more egalitarian approach.

My methodology is also intended to produce a strong group bond, something that has characterized my teaching projects as well as my four collaborative artmaking projects (*The Dinner Party*, 1974-1979; the *Birth Project*, 1980-1985; the *Holocaust Project*, 1985-1993;

and *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time*, 1994-2000). This is not an accident but rather, the result of my methodology. In addition to forging a sense of community, this bond provides considerable support to the group members, which allows them to achieve more than would be possible working alone. Moreover, the strong group bond lessens some of the demands upon the teacher (or facilitator) as participants learn to depend upon each other rather than expecting the teacher to have all the answers.

In the “At Home” project, the presence of men introduced a new element into the subject matter of the house. Generally, the work done by the women was in the tradition begun by *Womanhouse*, i.e. a critique of the construct of femininity that entraps so many women. But the men made art that was entirely new. Historically, male artists have tended to deal with the subject of the home through images of women (for example, Bonnard). But in this case, they took a more direct route, exploring such issues as sexual abuse of boys and men; murderous sibling rivalry between brothers; and racism, sexism and homophobia from a distinctly masculine perspective.

This project was also quite successful, at least in terms of the exhibition, which had more of an impact than one would have anticipated, given that Bowling Green is not exactly a center of culture. However, we had a number of problems with the administration, which would have preferred that the project be forgotten. Fortunately, John Oakes, a painter and member of the art faculty who had participated in the project, created a small-scale model of the “At Home” project that became the basis for a traveling exhibition. Also, an art historian named Vivien Green Fryd, who teaches at Vanderbilt, became interested in the project and began writing and lecturing about it, eventually devoting an entire chapter in her book about sexual abuse in art to the “Rape Garage”, which was created by four students, one of whom was male.

When I first started teaching again in 1999, Myles Brand (the president of IU) cautioned me to work only at high-level institutions. His words came back to haunt me, not only in terms of Kentucky but also, at our next venue, which was courtesy of Cal-Poly, located in Pomona, California, a small town located East of Los Angeles. Again, Donald and I were invited to team-teach, something we do easily, I might add.

There, we facilitated a really large project, too large in fact. Note that I again use the

term 'facilitate' rather than teach because that is what I and we do. This means that we try to guide each participant in terms of their own intentions and goals rather than imposing our ideas upon them. But in Pomona, instead of working directly with the participants, we were asked to train a group of facilitators who we would supervise.

Once again, we accepted both students and practicing artists into the project. In this instance, we received dozens of applications for the facilitator positions and hundreds from people who wanted to participate. From this pool, we selected nine facilitators and ninety participants who would work together in groups of ten. For some reason, we had a high percentage of drop-outs, ending up with only seventy participants - but still, that was too many. We also didn't have enough time to train the facilitators, realizing too late that this process takes far longer than the time we had, which was only one week.

Participants and facilitators were grouped based on media; painting, sculpture, installation, photography, video and performance. Even though we sometimes worked together with the various groups, generally, they were divided up between us. Donald and I have very different areas of expertise; I am especially adept at helping participants find personal subject matter and helping them to translate that into potent images, primarily in painting, sculpture and installation. Donald is experienced in a range of photo, video and film techniques and is also incredibly good at helping solve fabrication and installation problems. Together, we form a very effective team.

As in both the *Womanhouse* and "At Home" projects, there was an overriding theme, i.e. the future. The Pomona project, which was called "Envisioning the Future", culminated in a series of exhibitions at twelve different sites. And once again, we had trouble with the administration, which promised far more support than was delivered, making it extremely difficult to handle such a huge project. Fortunately, we had an excellent volunteer coordinator, Cheryl Bookout, without whom we could never have managed. We also had an experienced exhibition designer as part of our team, Dextra Frankel, an old friend of mine. In addition to students from Cal-Poly, there were students from nearby schools along with practicing artists from all over southern California. Cal-Poly's hope was that by training other facilitators, there would be a lasting effect on the area's art education but I am not sure to what degree this

worked.

As I mentioned, we didn't have enough time to provide adequate training, which produced mixed results in terms of the effectiveness of some of the facilitators. Some were clearly more successful than others, which was evidenced by the quality of art produced by their groups. Although the exhibitions were pretty exciting, the long-term effect of the project is unclear. Some of the groups have stayed in contact and continue to provide support to each other, even exhibiting together. Several of the facilitators seem to have incorporated some of what they learned from us in terms of methodology. But the idea of training others in my pedagogy is a good one and something that I plan do again, sometime in the future.

My most recent excursion in teaching took place in 2006 - at Vanderbilt, another stellar institution. Again, Donald and I were invited to team-teach, in part based upon the evidence of our successful collaborations in Kentucky and California. This time, we had considerably more administrative support, which made our job a lot easier. Vanderbilt only recently instituted an art major, but only on the undergraduate level. Consequently, there was only a small pool of art students from which to choose. But in terms of community artists, we had many applications.

We once again ended up with one-third men in a group comprised of twelve students and twelve practicing artists, also, Constance Gee (the wife of Gordon Gee, the Chancellor of Vanderbilt), who had received an MFA in studio art but had moved into art education. She was instrumental in convincing the Chancellor to invite us to the university as the first Artists in Residence. The art historian, Vivien Green Fryd, worked with us, providing a grounding in contemporary art and theory to the participants. Vanderbilt's art department had recently moved into a new building, vacating a wonderful 13,000 square foot neo-classical building that was turned over to us for the semester. Although the group had the option to work together, no single theme emerged. Rather, a range of subjects was chosen by the participants as a result of the intensive group process that took place during the first month of the class. These included family, religion and spirituality, gender and sexuality, sexual abuse and illness. At the end of that period, there was an exhibition that was a fabulous success.

Some people have asked if the educational process is more important than the outcome and I always say 'no'. My goal in teaching art is to help prepare students for professional art

practice, something university art education is not doing - or at least not sufficiently. I guide the class from finding their individual voices through image making and exhibition preparation in a process that is close to what they will go through when they get out of school. Even professional artists learn a lot from this process as it clears up some of the confusion many artists encounter as they try to navigate the art world. Above all, I am honest with the participants about what they will face.

Of all the teaching projects I've described, the Indiana and Vanderbilt undertakings probably produced the best exhibitions. One reason could be that at both institutions, I (or we in the case of Vanderbilt) were brought by the head of the university (Myles Brand and Gordon Gee). Consequently, there was more administrative and financial support of the project and at Vanderbilt, more personal support for Donald and me as well. There was also great exhibition space. All of these factors contributed to the results. But in all the projects, viewers were astounded by the quality and diversity of the art produced in such a short time, which was quite gratifying - but not surprising because my pedagogy can be inspiring (as is attested to by what many participants have said).

These recent residencies have allowed me to do a kind of personal survey of the quality of university art education in the early part of the twentieth century. I have found it terribly lacking, particularly for women. No wonder I was hearing the complaints I described at the beginning of this essay. One explanation is that the prevailing approach in university art education continues to privilege form over content, which - in my opinion - is a terrible mistake, especially for female students.

Although this is a generalization, it is one that I have found to be largely true in working with so many women over the course of three decades; in both teaching and my collaborative artmaking. Women often approach art from a content base whereas men seem to be more motivated by form and materials. Of course, in the teaching projects I've been describing, the men also responded to the opportunity to build their art from a base of personal subject matter so it might be that what I've perceived is more a function of university art education than gender tendencies.

Whatever the explanation, these recent teaching experiences have reinforced my

determination to forge ahead with the idea of strategically intervening in university art education by trying to document my own approach through writing and also, by formulating a method of training others in my pedagogy, one that is based upon both content and connection with the goal of educating young artists to create art that grows out of personal meaning; is accessible to an audience; and allows art to become reconnected to the fabric of society rather than being either a rich person's plaything or an alienated artist's incomprehensible self-expression.

Judy Chicago, 2006